

# The Great Serengeti Land Grab

How Maasai land became private hunting grounds for Dubai royals

By Stephanie McCrummen



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*The Atlantic*

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### **HER STORY**

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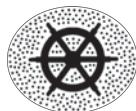
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## WILLIAM WHITWORTH

1937–2024

**WILLIAM WHITWORTH**, the editor of *The Atlantic* from 1980 to 1999, had a soft voice and an Arkansas accent that decades of living in New York and New England never much eroded. It was as much a part of him as his love of jazz, his understated sartorial consistency, and his deep dismay when encountering the misuse of *lie* and *lay*, a battle he knew he had lost but continued to fight. Bill, who greatly expanded *The Atlantic's* topical range and cultural presence, died in March in Conway, Arkansas, near his hometown of Little Rock, at the age of 87.

Bill was a mentor to two generations of writers. His editorial instincts were penetrating, but couched in a manner that was calm and grounded. James Fallows, a long-time contributor to *The Atlantic*, remembers their initial meeting:

"Mr. Fallows," he said softly, "I'm Bill Whitworth." Thus began an hour of his patiently asking me about how *The Atlantic* worked, and how much I was paid, and why I'd made this or that choice in the recent stories I'd done. Bill entirely directed our first conversation with seemingly simple questions: Did you think about this? Why did you write that? Can you explain what the experts are saying? What if they're all wrong? Who did you want to talk with who got left out? What do you still need to know?

Bill was born in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1937. He started as a reporter for the *Arkansas Gazette* and, in 1963, followed his

*Gazette* colleague and close friend Charles Portis to Manhattan to take a job at the *New York Herald Tribune*, where his newsroom colleagues included Tom Wolfe, Jimmy Breslin, Dick Schaap, and the photographer Jill Krementz. There, Bill covered Robert F. Kennedy's Senate race, the first Harlem riots, the free-speech movement at Berkeley, the Vietnam anti-war protests—he got tear-gassed a lot—and the Beatles' first trip to the United States. He was in the *Ed Sullivan Show* studio for their American-television debut.

One day Bill got a call from William Shawn, the editor of *The New Yorker*, asking him to come by for a conversation. As Bill later recalled, "We had several mysterious meetings—mysterious to me, because it was never specified why we were talking." Until Shawn offered him a job.

Starting in 1966, he wrote full-time for *The New Yorker*. A number of his articles would live in the magazine Hall of Fame, if such a place existed—among them his profiles of the Theocratic Party's recurring presidential candidate, Bishop Homer A. Tomlinson, and of the television-talk-show host Joe Franklin. In the early 1970s, Bill began to spend less time writing and more time editing. The writers he worked with included the film critic Pauline Kael and the biographer Robert Caro, whose first book, *The Power Broker*, about Robert Moses, Bill excerpted for the magazine. By the late '70s, he was Shawn's de facto deputy and heir apparent.

In 1980, the real-estate developer Mortimer B. Zuckerman bought *The Atlantic*.

He offered the job of editor to Bill. For his first issue as editor—April 1981—Bill featured a Philip Roth short story on the cover. The Whitworth-Roth friendship was briefly interrupted when, in the 1990s, after a scorching, two-sentence dismissal of one of his novels by *The Atlantic's* book reviewer Phoebe-Lou Adams, Roth boxed up his back issues of the magazine and mailed them to Bill, with a note saying that he would never speak to him again. A few years later, a postcard from Roth arrived in the mail. "Bill," it read, "let's kiss and make up."

Under Bill's editorship, writers such as A. S. Byatt, Seymour Hersh, Jane Jacobs, V. S. Naipaul, and Garry Wills soon began to appear in the magazine. But the roster of contributors did not consist only of big names; Bill avidly nurtured new talent. The writer Holly Brubach recalls her own experience when she first sought to contribute to *The Atlantic*:

I was in my 20s, and, for reasons I found hard to fathom, Bill believed in me—this was long before I believed in myself. The handful of writers I'd encountered claimed that they'd always felt destined for a life dedicated to the making of literature, that they'd begun keeping a journal in childhood; they never seemed to doubt that their ideas were worthy of the reader's attention. On that basis, I told Bill, I didn't think I was a writer. He asked me if I trusted his judgment. Of course I did. "Then why don't you just proceed on faith for a while?" he replied.

A major innovation that Bill brought to *The Atlantic* was a fact-checking department. His attitude toward its importance is hard to overstate. Once, on a galley proof, he reacted to a writer's statement that the sanctity of facts wasn't much, but was all we had: "I can't agree that the sanctity of facts isn't much. After Hitler, after the Moscow show trials and the other horrors of this century, facts are precious." He paused, continuing with his pencil on a new line: "On the other hand, the sanctity of facts *isn't* all we have. We also have kindness, decency, children, Bach, Beethoven, etc."

Bill was also eager to publish points of view he did not agree with, so long as they adhered to certain standards of

rigor, and to publish articles that he may not have cared for stylistically, noting that homogeneity of taste makes any publication feel stale. Nicholas Lemann, an *Atlantic* contributor during most of the Whitworth years, described one quality in writing that Bill always looked for:

He insisted that a piece, or at least a major piece, have a strong and original point to make, whatever its virtues were as a piece of writing. And he was completely, uncannily immune to whatever the liberal/media conventional take of the moment was. You had to say something that the rest of the world was not also saying.

**WRITERS REMEMBER** Bill's conversations about articles as shrewd, gentle, and patient. His comments on galley proofs, meant for a writer's editor alone, were more direct, sometimes requiring diplomatic translation before being passed along. He wrote in pencil in a tiny but perfect script, a sort of 20th-century Carolingian minuscule of his own devising. There was something sacramental about the way he worked: a single lamp illuminating a Thomas Moser desk, a galley before him on a brown blotter, retractable pencil in hand, jacket off, bow tie secure, door ajar.

His comments ranged from small corrections to magisterial anathemas to unexpected excursions into questions of culture and journalism. Encountering a usage that he simply would not allow—and there were many, such as using verbs like *quipped* and *chortled*, and using *convinced* when you meant *persuaded*—he would circle it and write in the margin, “Let’s don’t.” References to “the average American” were banned, on the grounds that there is no such thing.

Bill had his quirks. When taking a writer or an editor to lunch, he insisted on sitting side by side at the restaurant, rather than across a table. He would order catfish whenever he saw it on a menu in the Northeast, but seemingly only to confirm that it didn’t measure up to the bottom-feeding creatures found in Arkansas. He was particular about his deportment and was once discovered at his desk with a tailor’s tape, measuring the collar of a blue button-down shirt. He was convinced—not persuaded

but convinced—that Brooks Brothers, in a misguided bid for modishness, had slightly extended the point of the collar, resulting in a modest outward bulge when the collar was buttoned down. Bill described the result as a “midwestern roll” in his months-long correspondence with Brooks Brothers executives.

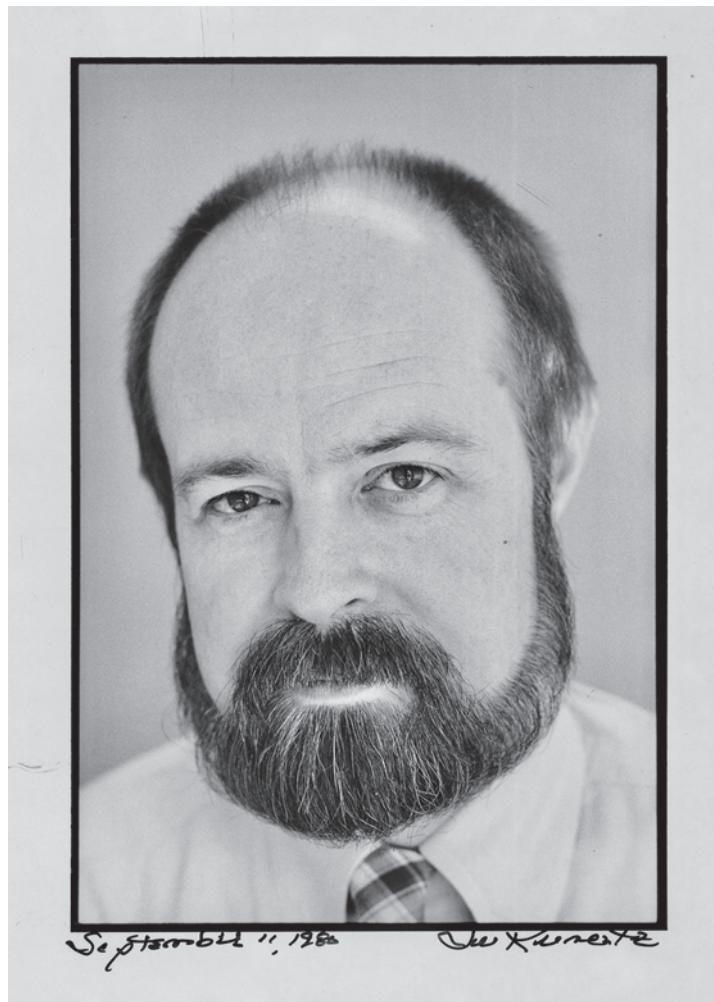
Bill’s knowledge of jazz was profound. He had learned to play the trumpet at a young age, and while at the *Gazette* he had invited the trumpeter and bandleader Dizzy Gillespie, whom he’d met at a performance in St. Louis, to come to Little Rock. Gillespie did, and stayed with Bill and his mother. They remained friends. Bill’s taste in decor might have run to beige walls and Shaker minimalism, but music for him was pure color. Terry Gross, the *Fresh Air* host, recalls that Bill would email

about interstitial music on the show that he enjoyed but couldn’t identify.

To be invited to “listen to some music” at Bill’s home wasn’t a casual experience—it wasn’t drinks, small talk, and something playing in the background. You sat next to him in a high-backed chair against an off-white wall, facing speakers that stood against the unadorned opposite wall. From time to time, after some inspired solo, Bill would turn his head to you briefly and nod.

When Bill liked an article, his praise was genuine but spare. The apogee of a joyful reaction was a penciled “Good piece” on the last page of a galley, words that editors sometimes cut out and sent to the writer in question. One editor, visiting a writer at home, found the words framed.

—Cullen Murphy and Scott Stossel



**Behind the Cover:** In this month's cover story, "The Great Serengeti Land Grab" (p. 20), Stephanie McCrummen investigates how the Maasai people were evicted from their ancestral lands. To illustrate her story, we asked the Nairobi-based photographer Nichole Sobecki to travel to Arusha, Tanzania, and photograph Maasai communities.

Our cover image depicts a Maasai *moran* grazing his cattle and sheep, an *embere* spear and *jimbo* staff resting on his shoulder. As McCrummen writes, the confiscation of land, ostensibly in the name of conservation, has left vanishingly few Maasai able to raise cattle, as had been their traditional way of life.  
—Bifen Xu, Senior Photo Editor

## American Cowardice

*Scot Peterson stood by as a slaughter unfolded at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Jamie Thompson wrote in the March 2024 issue. Does the blame lie with him, his training—or a society in denial about what it would take to stop mass shootings?*

### Letters

The American people relate to guns as addicts relate to drugs. Addicts change everything in their life to accommodate their drug use. They filter their relationships, alter their schedule, and change their living situation—all to facilitate their access to the substance. They blame everything and everyone for what goes wrong, but never the drug.

And so it is with guns in the United States. Law-enforcement officers should alter their techniques because of shootings. Teachers should carry weapons to protect themselves and their students.

Sixty-year-old men should be trained to run into the line of fire. Children should learn when to duck and when to run. Everyone attending a public event should know where the exits are. We are willing to put everything second to our need for guns.

The U.S. has a gun addiction. Until the American people wake up to the fact that our drug is killing us, until we stop enabling our addiction, we will continue to see tragedies like that at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

Victoria B. Damiani  
Malvern, Pa.

# THE

As the father of a member of law enforcement, I am keenly aware of how many local police departments are unprepared for an active-shooter situation. That said, there is no excuse for Scot Peterson's failure to respond at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. It was his duty to do what he could to protect those students, and he failed miserably. If his actions had saved even just one student, he would have performed his duties as required by the oath he took as a sworn officer. While a jury may have found him not guilty, I think he deserves the title "Coward of Broward." He will live to enjoy his retirement pension, but his inaction sent students to their death.

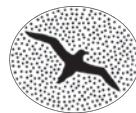
Gary Rog  
Buffalo, N.Y.

We seem to live in a society that has overlooked the fact that each of us is, by default, a "first responder" to any crime committed against us. One wonders how the outcome at Marjory Stoneman Douglas might have been different if at least three or four of the school employees who had a duty to care for students had been armed.

Steve Pawluk  
Wrightwood, Calif.

Jamie Thompson's "American Cowardice" proves, I think, that we can't expect even trained cops to rush in and save people from mass shootings. This being the case, can we as a country dispense with the fantasy that any

# COMMONS



DISCUSSION  
&  
DEBATE

random “good guy with a gun” can somehow protect us?

George Wiman  
*Normal, Ill.*

Jamie Thompson is correct to consider the psyche of the public servants we enlist to protect us. As a first responder with 40 years of experience working across diverse organizations, I have seen friends die or suffer grievous injuries while trying to effect bold rescues: of juveniles who ventured too far out onto the delicate ice of a deep alpine lake; of comrades who fell into a collapsed snow cavern.

Those who sign up for high-risk duties do so because they feel a call to serve. But attempting daring rescue operations is made easier by the knowledge that we are well equipped and regularly train as a team. We'll retrieve a kid from a burning building because we've got a breathing apparatus, fire-resistant gear, a charged hose, and a trusted team behind us. We'll drop onto unstable snowpack in a raging blizzard because we are equipped with state-of-the-art radios and avalanche airbags and probe poles, and we train constantly. We'll crawl out onto the ice in a dry rescue suit with a rope and board to snag a struggling hypothermic swimmer, knowing that the shore team will haul us in.

We answer the call because we want to be the person who

goes in, but also because we know we can do it safely and successfully. Without proper equipment, relevant training, a qualified team, and confidence in your abilities, you cannot go in.

Chris I. Lizza  
*Lee Vining, Calif.*

Like many Americans, I made a snap judgment about the “Coward of Broward” when the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas first made headlines. My judgment was twofold: First, Peterson was a coward, and second, the National Rifle Association's oft-repeated challenge to proposed gun restrictions, “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun,” was not true. Reading Thompson's story dispelled my first judgment. (As for the NRA's mantra about good guys with guns, I'd never believed that.)

As a father of three, I understand the desire on the part of the victims' parents to blame someone for their children's deaths. But if these parents want to find the real culprit, they should look at the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, passed in 2005. This law largely shields gun dealers and manufacturers from legal liability for crimes committed with weapons they produce or sell. That law and myriad others have made assault weapons

like the AR-15 ubiquitous; they are responsible, I think, for the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas. Once citizens can sue any gun manufacturer and dealer and possibly even put them out of business, incidents of mass gun violence will decline sharply. Why can I sue my neighbor if I'm attacked by their unleashed dog and not the gun dealer that puts an AR-15 into the hands of a teenager who shoots up my children's school?

Michael Hugo  
*Mundelein, Ill.*

I want to thank Jamie Thompson for a deeply researched and reported article. This is such a difficult topic to tackle—and it's been difficult for me to process. I worked for the Broward County Sheriff's Office for more than five years. I knew and worked with some of the people in this article; I was even a school resource officer from 1989 to 1990. The shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas happened not long after I retired from the Fort Lauderdale Police Department.

When I worked with FLPD, after having left Broward County, I received training in active-shooter response numerous times. (Michael DiMaggio, who, Thompson writes, believes

he was the first in the Broward County Sheriff's Office to see the footage of Scot Peterson standing outside Building 12, was once one of our trainers.) The department was exemplary in those days at providing training to its officers, and I believe it still is. I recall in particular one lecture with an officer who had responded to a shooting incident that had left him disabled. He stressed that it was imperative to take action immediately, whether you were confident or not. I took this message to heart; I believe it helped me survive more than one critical incident.

In the end, though, I have always believed that none of us knows what we will do in any given situation, and thus we must keep from judging others. As Stephen Willeford observes in the article, “How do you know you would be any better at it than he was?” Police are asked to do an incredible range of things; any given individual may excel at some tasks, but probably not all of them. We are, like everyone else, only human.

Barbara Barrett  
*Jasper, Fla.*

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

**Correction:** In the April 2024 issue, the “Behind the Cover” feature misidentified a photograph of Leonard Nimoy.

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# DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

## A STUDY IN SENATE COWARDICE

*Republicans like Rob Portman could have ended Donald Trump's political career. They chose not to.*

BY JEFFREY  
GOLDBERG

In late June of 2022, Cassidy Hutchinson, a former Trump-administration aide, provided testimony to the congressional committee investigating the January 6 attack on the Capitol. This testimony was unnerving, even compared with previous revelations concerning Donald Trump's malignant behavior that day. Hutchinson testified that the president, when told that some of his supporters were carrying weapons, said, "I don't fucking care that they have weapons. They're not here

to hurt me. Take the fucking mags away.” He was referring to the metal detectors meant to screen protesters joining his rally on the Ellipse, near the White House.

Hutchinson also testified that Trump became so frantic in his desire to join the march to the Capitol that at one point he tried to grab the steering wheel of his SUV. This assertion has subsequently been disputed by Secret Service agents, but what has not been disputed is an exchange, reported by Hutchinson, between White House Counsel Pat Cipollone and Mark Meadows, the president’s chief of staff. In this conversation, which took place as Trump supporters were breaching the Capitol, Cipollone told Meadows, “We need to do something more—they’re literally calling for [Vice President Mike Pence] to be fucking hung.” Hutchinson reported that Meadows answered: “You heard [Trump], Pat. He thinks Mike deserves it. He doesn’t think they’re doing anything wrong.”

Hutchinson seemed like a credible witness, and she was obviously quite brave for testifying. This very young person—she was 25 at the time of her testimony—went against the interests of her political tribe, and her own career advancement, to make a stand for truth and for the norms of democratic behavior. Washington is not overpopulated with such people, and so the discovery of a new one is always reassuring.

As it happened, I watched the hearing while waiting to interview then-Senator Rob Portman, a grandee of the pre-Trump Republican establishment, before an audience of

2,000 or so at the Aspen Ideas Festival. The session would also feature Mitch Landrieu, the former mayor of New Orleans, who was serving at the time as President Joe Biden’s infrastructure coordinator. Portman’s

IF 10  
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NOMINEE.

appearance was considered to be a coup for the festival (for which *The Atlantic* was once, but was by this time no longer, a sponsor).

Republican elected officials in the age of Trump don’t often show up at these sorts of events, and I found out later that the leaders of the Aspen Institute, the convener of this festival, hoped that I would give Portman, a two-term senator from Ohio, a stress-free ride. The declared subject of our discussion was national infrastructure spending, so the chance of comity-disturbing outbursts was low. But I did believe it to be my

professional responsibility to ask Portman about Hutchinson’s testimony, and, more broadly, about his current views of Donald Trump. In 2016, during Trump’s first campaign for president, Portman withdrew his support for him after the release of the *Access Hollywood* tape, in which Trump bragged about sexually assaulting women. But Portman endorsed Trump in 2020 and voted to acquit him in the second impeachment trial, and I wanted to ask him if Hutchinson’s testimony, or anything else he had heard in the 18 months since the violent attack on the Capitol, had made him regret his decision.

Portman was one of 43 Republican senators who voted against conviction. Sixty-seven votes were required to convict. If 10 additional Republican senators had joined the 50 Democrats and seven Republicans who voted for conviction, Trump would not today be the party’s presumptive nominee for president, and the country would not be one election away from a constitutional crisis and a possibly irreversible slide into authoritarianism. (Technically, a second vote after conviction would have been required to ban Trump from holding public office, but presumably this second vote would have followed naturally from the first.)

It would be unfair to blame Portman disproportionately for the devastating reality that Donald Trump, who is currently free on bail but could be a convicted felon by November, is once again a candidate for president. The Republican leader in the Senate, Mitch McConnell, denounced Trump for his actions on January 6, and yet still voted

to acquit him. Trump’s continued political viability is as much McConnell’s fault as anyone’s.

But I was interested in pressing Portman because, unlike some of his dimmer colleagues, he clearly understood the threat Trump posed to constitutional order, and he was clearly, by virtue of his sterling reputation, in a position to influence his colleagues. Some senators in the group of 43 are true believers, men like Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, who, in the words of Mitt Romney (as reported by the *Atlantic* staff writer McKay Coppins), never met a conspiracy theory he didn’t believe. But Portman wasn’t a know-nothing. He was one of the most accomplished and respected members of the Senate. He had been a high-ranking official in the White House of George H. W. Bush, then a hardworking member of the House of Representatives. In George W. Bush’s administration, he served as the U.S. trade representative and later as the director of the Office of Management and Budget. He was well known for his cerebral qualities and his mastery of the federal budget. He was also known to loathe Donald Trump. In other words, Portman knew better.

“I do want to ask you directly,” I said, when we sat onstage, “given what you know now about what happened on January 6, do you regret your vote to acquit in impeachment?”

Portman immediately expressed his unhappiness with what he took to be an outré question. “You have just surprised me,” he said, complaining that I hadn’t told him beforehand that I would ask him about Trump. (American journalists generally do not

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warn government officials of their questions ahead of time.) He went on to say, “You know that I spoke out in the strongest possible terms on January 6.”

Indeed he had. This is what Portman said on the Senate floor once the Capitol had been secured: “I want the American people, particularly my constituents in Ohio, to see that we will not be intimidated, that we will not be disrupted from our work, that here in the citadel of democracy, we will continue to do the work of the people. Mob rule is not going to prevail here.”

Onstage, Portman reminded me of his comments. “On the night it happened, I took to the Senate floor and gave an impassioned speech about democracy and the need to protect it. So that’s who I am.”

But this is incorrect. This is not who he is. Portman showed the people of Ohio who he is five weeks later, on February 13, when he voted to acquit Trump, the man he knew to have fomented a violent, antidemocratic insurrection meant to overturn the results of a fair election.

His argument during impeachment, and later, onstage with me, was that voting to convict an ex-president would have violated constitutional norms, and would have further politicized the impeachment process. “Do you think it would be a good idea for President Obama to be impeached by the new Republican Congress?” he asked. He went on, “Well, he’s a former president, and I think he should be out of reach. And Donald Trump was a former president. If you start that precedent, trust me, Republicans will do the same thing. They will.”

It was an interesting, and also pathetic, point to make: Portman was arguing that his Republican colleagues are so corrupt that they would impeach a president who had committed no impeachable offenses simply out of spite.

I eventually pivoted the discussion to the topic of bridges in Ohio, but Portman remained upset, rushing offstage at the end of the conversation to confront the leaders of the festival, who tried to placate him.

Initially, I found his defensive behavior odd. A senator should not be so flustered by a straightforward question about one of his most consequential and historic votes. But I surmised, from subsequent conversations with members of the Republican Senate caucus, that he, like others, felt a certain degree of shame about his continued excuse-making for the authoritarian hijacker of his beloved party.

*The Atlantic*'s Anne Applebaum, one of the world's leading experts on authoritarianism, wrote in 2020 that complicity, rather than dissent, is the norm for humans, and especially for status-and-relevance-seeking politicians. There are many explanations for complicity, Applebaum argued. A potent one is fear. Many Republican elected officials, she wrote, “don’t know that similar waves of fear have helped transform other democracies into dictatorships.”

None of the 43 senators who allowed Donald Trump to escape conviction made fear their argument, of course. Not publicly anyway. The excuses ranged widely. Here are the stirring and angry words of Dan Sullivan, the junior senator from Alaska, explaining

his vote to acquit: “Make no mistake: I condemn the horrific violence that engulfed the Capitol on January 6. I also condemn former President Trump’s poor judgment in calling a rally on that day, and his actions and inactions

I SURMISED  
THAT PORTMAN,  
LIKE OTHERS,  
FELT A CERTAIN  
DEGREE  
OF SHAME  
ABOUT HIS  
CONTINUED  
EXCUSE-MAKING  
FOR THE  
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HIS BELOVED  
PARTY.

vote, “Undoubtedly, then-President Trump displayed poor leadership in his words and actions. I do not defend those actions, and my vote should not be read as a defense of those actions.” He continued, “Just because President Trump did not meet the definition of inciting insurrection does not mean that I think he behaved well.”

Now contrast this run of greasy and sad excuse-making with Mitt Romney's explanation for his vote to convict: “The president’s conduct represented an unprecedented violation of his oath of office and of the public trust. There is a thin line that separates our democratic republic from an autocracy: It is a free and fair election and the peaceful transfer of power that follows it. President Trump attempted to breach that line, again. What he attempted is what was most feared by the Founders. It is the reason they invested Congress with the power to impeach. Accordingly, I voted to convict President Trump.”

On February 13, 2021, Romney was joined by six other Republicans—North Carolina's Richard Burr, Louisiana's Bill Cassidy, Alaska's Lisa Murkowski, Maine's Susan Collins, Nebraska's Ben Sasse, and Pennsylvania's Pat Toomey—in voting to convict. If the United States and its Constitution survive the coming challenge from Trump and Trumpism, statues will one day be raised to these seven. As for Rob Portman and his colleagues, they should hope that they will merely be forgotten. *A*

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Mom Relaxing  
My Hair (2005)



Grandma Ruby  
and Me (2005)



## Family Ties

*Photographs by LaToya Ruby Frazier*

The steel industry was already collapsing by the time the photographer and visual artist LaToya Ruby Frazier was born, in 1982. Like many Rust Belt communities, her hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania, has suffered both economic and environmental distress: Thousands

of manufacturing jobs have vanished, but chemicals from the steel plants still pollute Braddock's skies.

In *The Notion of Family*, a series she began as a teenager in 2001 and continued to work on for more than a decade, Frazier examines the physical and psychic

toll wrought by industrial decay. The series presents more than simple snapshots of devastation. *The Notion of Family* is an intimate, intergenerational exploration of the care that Black women show one another as corporations and public safety nets falter. It is also intensely



Mom and Me on  
Her Couch (2010)



U.S.S. Edgar Thomson  
Steel Works and  
Monongahela River  
(2013)

personal: Frazier photographed herself alongside her mother and grandmother, who helped guide her creative decisions. We see a young Frazier sitting on the living-room floor with her grandmother, surrounded by dolls and statuettes. In another photo, Frazier gazes into the

mirror while her mother applies a chemical relaxer to her hair.

The images are some of her earliest works on view this spring in “Monuments of Solidarity,” the first major-museum survey of Frazier’s career, at New York City’s Museum of Modern Art. In a body of work

that now spans multiple decades, Frazier has continued bearing witness to postindustrial landscapes—and the people left navigating them. Her aim, she has written, is to resist, through everything she creates, the forces of “historical erasure and historical amnesia.”

—Hannah Giorgis

# The Great Serengeti Land Grab

How Gulf princes, wealthy tourists, and conservation groups are displacing the Maasai people

By Stephanie McCrummen  
*Photographs by Nichole Sobecki*

J

It was high safari season in Tanzania, the long rains over, the grasses yellowing and dry. Land Cruisers were speeding toward the Serengeti Plain. Billionaires were flying into private hunting concessions. And at a crowded and dusty livestock market far away from all that, a man named Songoyo had decided not to hang himself, not today, and was instead pinching the skin of a sheep.

"Please!" he was saying to a potential buyer with thousands of animals to choose from on this morning. "You can see, he is so fat!"

The buyer moved on. Songoyo rubbed his eyes. He was tired. He'd spent the whole night walking, herding another man's sheep across miles of grass and scrub and pitted roads to reach this market by opening time. He hadn't slept. He hadn't eaten. He'd somehow fended off an





*A Maasai boy herds goats and sheep in the shadow of Ol Doinyo Lengai—known to the Maasai as the Mountain of God—in northern Tanzania. Government plans call for the removal of the Maasai from this region, the latest in a long series of evictions.*

elephant with a stick. What he needed to do was sell the sheep so their owner would pay him, so he could try to start a new life now that the old one was finished.

The old life: He'd had all the things that made a person such as him rich and respected. Three wives, 14 children, a large compound with 75 cows and enough land to graze them—"such sweet land," he would say when he could bear to think of it—and that was how things had been going until recently.

The new life: no cows, because the Tanzanian government had seized every single one of them. No compound, because the government had bulldozed it, along with hundreds of others. No land, because more and more of the finest, lushest land in northern Tanzania was being set aside for conservation, which turned out to mean for trophy hunters, and tourists on "bespoke expeditions," and cappuccino trucks in proximity to buffalo viewing—anything and anyone except the people who had lived there since the 17th century, the pastoralists known as the Maasai.

They were the ones tourists saw through their windshields selling beaded key chains at the gates of Serengeti National Park, or performing dances after dinner at safari lodges. They were famous for their red shawls and recycled-tire sandals. They grazed their cattle with zebras and giraffes, and built mud-and-dung houses encircled by stick fences barely distinguishable from the wild landscape. They were among the lightest-living people on the planet, and yet it was the Maasai who were being told that the biggest threat to conservation and national progress was them. Their whole way of life had to go.

And so Songoyo, after considering his alternatives, had devised a last-ditch plan for his own survival, one that had brought him to a town in Kenya called Aitong, where a cool wind was slapping sand and dung into his face as he scanned the market for buyers. He was far from home, roughly 65 miles north of the village in Tanzania where he had been tear-gassed and shot at for the first time in his life. He had seen elderly men beaten and guns fired at old women, and now it was down to this: He was a herder for hire, working for a distant relative, trying to make enough money to buy one single cow.

"Come!" he called to the buyers who kept passing his herd and weaving through the bleating mass. "You will not find any better!"

This was his plan: one cow, because that was the starting point of what it meant to be a Maasai man, which was what he still wanted to be.

**THE FORCES ARRAYED** against Songoyo, whom I met in the course of two long trips to Tanzania late last year, include some of the world's most powerful people and interests. (I have not used Songoyo's last name out of concern for his safety.) What these people and interests want is what the Maasai are trying to keep: the land they live on.

Global leaders are seeking what they consider to be undeveloped land to meet a stated goal of conserving 30 percent of the planet's surface by 2030. Corporations want undisturbed forests in order to offset pollution. Western conservation groups, which refer to the Maasai as "stakeholders" on their own land,

exert great influence, as does a booming safari industry that sells an old and destructive myth—casting the Serengeti as some primordial wilderness, with the Maasai as cultural relics obstructing a perfect view.

The reality is that the Maasai have been stewards, integral to creating that very ecosystem. The same can be said of Indigenous groups around the world, to whom conservation often feels like a land grab. In the past two decades, more than a quarter million Indigenous people have been evicted to make way for ecotourism, carbon-offset schemes, and other activities that fall under the banner of conservation. That figure is expected to soar.

For all its accomplishments, the cause of saving the planet has become a trillion-dollar business, a global scramble in which wealthy nations are looking to the developing world not just for natural resources, but for nature itself. The wealthy players include not only Europeans and Americans but Arabs and Chinese and others. On the African continent, political leaders are enthusiastic about what so-called green foreign investment might mean for their own economies (and, maybe, their bank accounts).

Such are the pressures being brought to bear on northern Tanzania, where the Maasai migrated with their cattle 400 years ago, settling in an area encompassing hundreds of thousands of square miles of grassy plains, acacia woodlands, rivers, lakes, snowcapped mountains, salt flats, forests, and some of the most spectacular wildlife on the planet. They called it Siringet, which in the Maa language means "the place where the land runs on forever." The Maasai see their recent history as a struggle to save that land from those who claimed it needed saving.

First came the British colonial authorities, who established the 5,700-square-mile Serengeti National Park, pushing the Maasai to an adjacent zone called the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, with its famous crater, where they were promised they could live. Then came UNESCO. It declared both Serengeti and Ngorongoro to be World Heritage Sites, which came with new restrictions. Western tourists began arriving, seeking an experience of Africa that a thousand movies promised—one of pristine beauty and big game, not people grazing cattle. Tanzanian authorities began leasing blocks of land to foreign hunting and safari companies, many of which promoted themselves as conservationists—a word the Maasai have come to associate with their own doom. Spread among the villages that dot the northern tourist zone, the Maasai have meanwhile been growing in number—their population has doubled in recent decades, to about 200,000. Inevitably, the clash of interests has led to bitter and occasionally violent conflict.

Still, the threat unfolding now is of greater magnitude. It emerged soon after President Samia Suluhu Hassan took office, in 2021. "Tourism in Ngorongoro is disappearing," she declared during one of her first major speeches. "We agreed that people and wildlife could cohabitate, but now people are overtaking the wildlife." The Maasai listened with alarm, realizing that the people she was referring to were them.

Not long after Hassan's speech, officials announced plans to resettle the roughly 100,000 Maasai who were living in and around Ngorongoro to "modern houses" in another part of the country. Meanwhile, in a region north of Ngorongoro, bordering Serengeti

National Park, government security forces began rolling into Maasai villages. They were carrying out another part of the plan: annexing 580 square miles of prime grazing land to create an exclusive game reserve for the Dubai royal family, which had long hunted in the area. The government characterized the move as necessary for conservation. Traditional Maasai compounds, known as *bomas*, were burned. Park rangers began seizing cattle by the tens of thousands.

And more was coming: a \$7.5 billion package with the United Arab Emirates, of which Dubai is a part, that included new plans for tourism and conservation. A \$9.5 million deal with the Chinese for a geological park that overlapped with additional Maasai villages. An offer from Tanzania to make Donald Trump Jr.—an avid trophy hunter—an official “tourism ambassador.” New maps and proposals from the government indicated that further tracts could soon be placed off-limits, including a sacred site that the Maasai call the Mountain of God.

“This is 80 percent of our land,” a Maasai elder told me one evening during a meeting with other leaders in northern Tanzania. “This will finish us.” They had tried protesting. They had filed

More and more of the finest, lushest land in northern Tanzania was being set aside for conservation, which turned out to mean for trophy hunters and tourists on “bespoke expeditions.”

lawsuits. They had appealed to the United Nations, the European Union, the East African Court of Justice, and Vice President Kamala Harris when she visited Tanzania in 2023. They’d unearthed old maps and village titles to prove that the land was theirs by law, not just by custom. They’d written a letter to John and Patrick McEnroe after hearing that the tennis stars were hosting a \$25,000-a-person safari-and-tennis expedition in the Serengeti. People made supportive statements, but no one was coming to help.

This is what Songoyo understood as he paced the market in Aitong. It was closing soon. Buyers were filtering out through the wire fence, and he still had 12 sheep left to sell, one of which was lame. A man tapped it with a stick.

“A cow stepped on his leg; that’s why he walks like that,” Songoyo said, bracing the animal with his knees.

The man walked away. Another came and tapped his stick on the lame sheep, and then on the rest of them. They agreed on a price, and the buyer pulled out a roll of bills.

“Please, can you add 500?” Songoyo said, asking for the equivalent of an extra \$3.60 in Kenyan shillings. “I need 500. Please.”

The man added 200, and Songoyo brought the day’s earnings to the relative who had hired him. They sat under a tree, and he counted out Songoyo’s share for a week of work, roughly \$10. One cow would cost about \$200.

“See you next week,” the man said.

“May God give you favor,” Songoyo replied, putting the money in the pocket of his blue track pants. His cellphone rang, a battered plastic burner.

“I am coming,” he told one of his wives, who was waiting for him at their home in Tanzania.

**H**E’D HAD OPTIONS other than this. There had always been Maasai who’d given up traditional ways to reinvent themselves, shedding their red shawls for all kinds of lives. Now many more of them, having lost their cattle, were moving to cities, where the Maasai reputation for bravery and rectitude meant there was always work as a security guard—I saw them everywhere in Arusha and Dar es Salaam, in front of shops and banks. Others had taken a government offer to resettle in a town called Msomera, far to the south, only to return home with stories of loneliness and conflict with locals. Still others were falling apart. Songoyo had seen them, drunk men hobbling along the road or passed out on their red shawls under trees in the daytime. That would not be him.

“Never,” he said, and began the long walk back to his village in Tanzania, a tall man wrapped in a pink-and-purple plaid shawl passing cinder-block taverns where he would not drink, and motorbikes he would not hire, because the point was to save money for the cow. *No cows, no life*, he told himself, picking up the pace along an orange dirt road stretching into the late afternoon.

His earliest memories were of cows; he had never been without them. They were the huge, warm, brown beasts kept in the center of the boma. Their dung formed the walls of his home. Their milk and blood were what he drank as a child, when his father told him what Maasai children were traditionally told: that when the earth split from the sky and God left the world, he entrusted the Maasai with all the cattle, and by extension the land and the other animals that shared it. Songoyo learned how to herd with rocks, pushing them around in the dirt. He got his first calf when he was a small boy, herding it with a stick near the boma. When he was big enough, he followed his older brothers out into the wider grazing areas, including one the Maasai called *Osero*, a word that refers to lush grasslands—in this case, the 580 square miles of land adjacent to Serengeti National Park where Maasai had lived and kept cattle for generations.

It was in Osero that he learned about different kinds of grasses and trees: which ones had good branches for bows or good bark for tea that could ease a backache. He learned where to find natural salt and the coolest streams, and he learned certain rules: Never cut down a tree. Keep cattle away from wildebeests during calving season, because they carry a disease deadly to cows.

He listened to older boys tell stories, including one whose lesson he still lived by, about a group of Maasai heading out on a cattle raid when one of the warriors broke his sandal. The warrior turned to the man behind him and asked if he would

stay and help, but the man refused. He asked another, who also refused, and so on until the very last one agreed to stay, while the rest continued on to cattle-raiding glory. The stern moral was: Be prepared. Don't fall behind. Stay with the group. Struggle.

Songoyo had struggled. He held himself together after his father died, when he was still a boy, a moment when he might have turned delinquent but didn't. He endured his adolescent coming-of-age ceremonies with dignity, by all accounts managing not to cry or shake during his circumcision, when people scrutinize and taunt boys for any sign of weakness, and he was rewarded with cows. He learned how to shoot arrows and use a machete, and became a *moran*—entering a stage of life when young Maasai men bear responsibility for protecting their village—and was given more cows, each with a name, each with a certain character he came to know. In this way, the life he wanted became possible.

He married his first wife, then a second and a third, and eventually built a boma in the village where his children went to school, and a larger compound on the edge of Osero, where the cattle were kept, and where he'd had one of the happiest moments of his life. This was just before everything began to unravel, an otherwise ordinary day when the rains were full and the cows were fat and he'd walked out into the middle of them, their bells jangling, realizing how far he'd come and thinking, "Yes, I am a real Maasai."

Not that life was an idyll. In village after village that I visited, people described years of tensions with safari companies and conservation authorities. People who lived within the Ngorongoro Conservation Area—a vast zone that was almost like its own country—had complained about schools falling apart and poisoned salt licks and the indignity of their identity being checked as they came and went through the tourist gate. In other areas, people had accused certain safari companies of illegally acquiring leases and paying local police to beat herders off concessions. One company was notorious for using a helicopter to spray scalding water on cows.

In Osero, the problems went back to 1992, when an Emirati company called Otterlo Business Corporation (OBC) was first granted a hunting license for the Dubai royal family. They had their own private camp and a private airstrip and, for the emir himself, Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid Al Maktoum, a compound on a hill, guarded by a special unit of the Tanzanian military police. When the rains ended each year, cargo planes full of four-wheelers and tents and pallets of food would buzz low over villages before landing, followed by private jets delivering the royal family and their guests. A few weeks later, they'd buzz out with carcasses of zebras and antelope and other trophies. For a while, OBC had its own cellphone tower, and Maasai villagers noticed that when they were near it, a message would pop up on their phone screens: "Welcome to the U.A.E." The arrangement had been that the Maasai were supposed to keep away when the royals were in residence, but just about everyone had caught a glimpse. Songoyo had seen them speeding around, shooting animals from trucks with semiautomatic rifles. "Once, they pulled up in the middle of my cows and I saw them shooting so many antelope," he told me. "They just kill, kill, kill!"

There had been attempts at diplomacy. Sometimes the Arabs, as the Maasai called them, would give out bags of rice. They had hired Maasai men to work as guides and drivers and had flown some of their favorite employees to Dubai, buying them clothing and cars. One driver recalled being at the camp on a day when the emir arrived. The driver lined up with other staff, and the emir greeted each one of them while an assistant followed behind with a large bag of cash, inviting each worker to reach in. The driver said he pulled out \$1,060.

But a bitterness was always there. Maasai leaders had long claimed that Osero belonged to 14 adjacent villages, and that they had never consented to the OBC deal. Tanzanian officials asserted authority over not only Osero but a far larger expanse—Loliondo—citing its colonial-era designation as a game-controlled area; they often resorted to violence to enforce this view. Maasai villagers described to me how government security forces had collaborated with OBC at least twice in recent years to conduct a large-scale torching of bomas in the vicinity of the camp. Young men grazing cows had been beaten and shot at. One man described to me being shot in the face, then handcuffed to a hospital bed as he was bleeding through his ears and nose and eyes, slipping in and out of consciousness. He remembered a police officer shouting at a doctor to let him die, and the doctor refusing the order and saving his life. He lost his left eye, the socket now scarred over with skin, and had kept a thin blue hospital receipt all these years in the hope of receiving restitution that never came. Most villages have people who can tell such stories.

In 2017, amid rising complaints and lawsuits filed by Maasai leaders, Tanzanian authorities suspended OBC's license and accused the company's director of offering some \$2 million in bribes to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, which led to a court case that ended in a plea deal. Requests to interview OBC executives, representatives of the Dubai royal family, and officials of the U.A.E. government about their involvement in Tanzania went unanswered.

By the time Hassan became president, in 2021, the director was back on the job and the OBC flights had resumed.

**SAMIA SULUHU HASSAN** was widely embraced by West and East. Her predecessor, John Magufuli, who died in office, had been a populist with an authoritarian streak and became infamous for downplaying the dangers of COVID. He suspended media outlets, banned opposition rallies, and alienated foreign investors, even as many Maasai saw him as a hero for brushing back OBC.

Hassan eased his more repressive policies and embarked on an ambitious plan to bring foreign investment into the country, especially through tourism. She branded herself a forward-looking environmentalist.

And she found willing collaborators. The World Bank had been encouraging more tourism, arguing that it could help Tanzania achieve what official metrics define as middle-income status. One of the country's main conservation partners, UNESCO, had been pressing Tanzanian authorities for years to implement what it called "stringent policies to control population growth" in Ngorongoro, although UNESCO also says it has never supported

the displacement of people. A German conservation group called the Frankfurt Zoological Society, a major partner in managing Serengeti National Park, has expressed concern that traditional Maasai practices are becoming less tenable because of population growth. “There is a risk of overuse and overgrazing that should be addressed,” Dennis Rentsch, the deputy director of the society’s Africa department, told me. “I don’t want to vilify the Maasai. They are not enemies of conservation. But the challenge is when you reach a tipping point.”

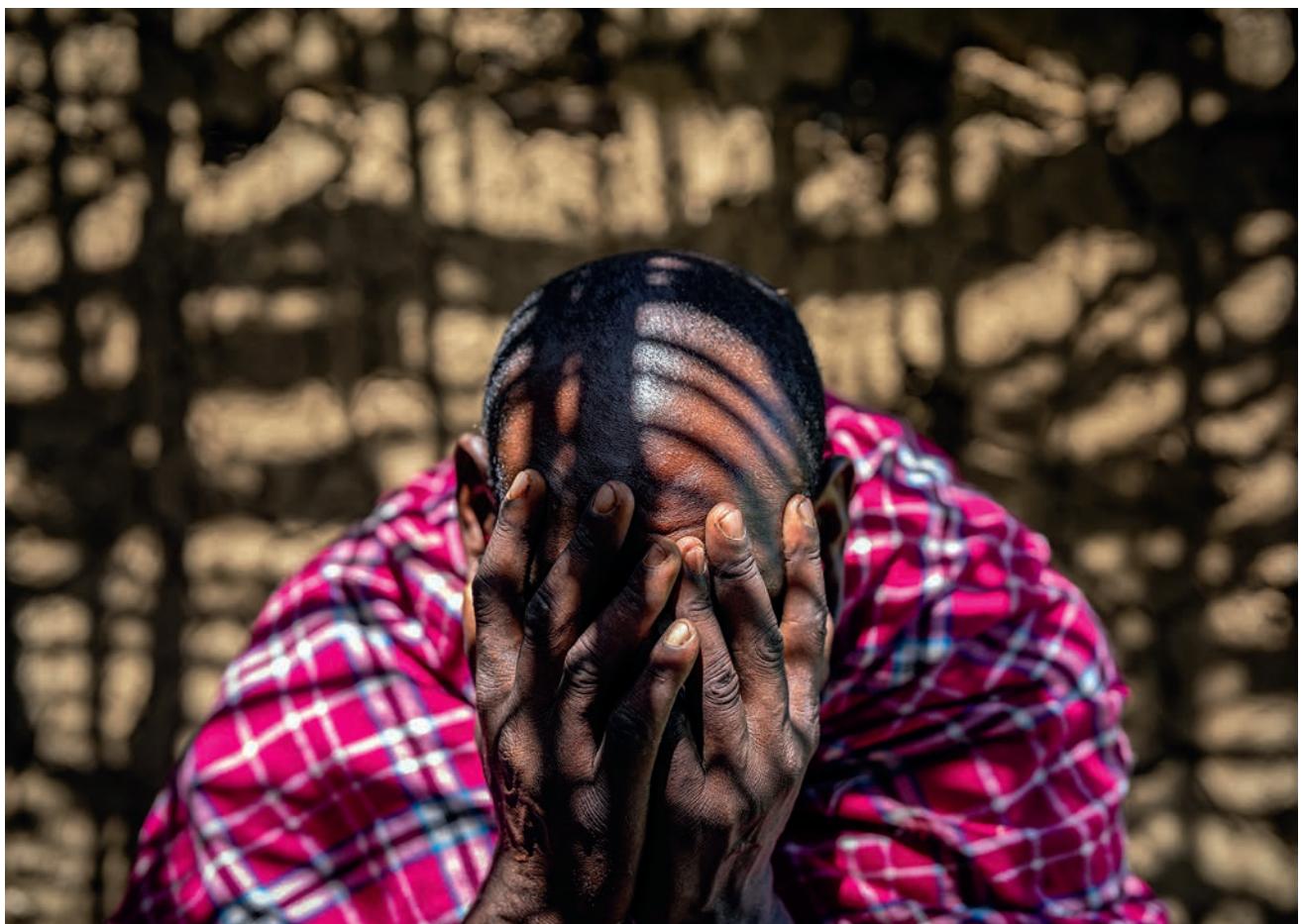
In response to these pressures, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism produced a report that blamed rising Maasai and livestock populations for “extensive habitat destruction” in conservation zones. It recommended resettling all of Ngorongoro’s Maasai. It also recommended designating the 580-square-mile Osero tract, farther away, as a more restrictive game reserve, describing the land as an important wildlife corridor and water-catchment area for the Serengeti ecosystem. The designation left the Dubai royal family with an exclusive hunting playground. But none of the Maasai who lived in the area would be allowed to graze their cattle or continue living there.

Maasai leaders countered with two reports of their own—more than 300 pages covering colonial history, constitutional law, land-use law, and international conventions, and providing copies of village titles, registration certificates, and old maps—to prove their

legal right to the land as citizens. They blamed habitat destruction on sprawling lodges, roads bisecting rangeland, trucks off-roading across savannas, and “huge tourist traffic.” Overgrazing was a result of being squeezed into ever smaller domains, which kept the Maasai from rotating grazing zones as they normally would. Citing their own surveys, they said the government had inflated livestock numbers, a claim supported by Pablo Manzano, a Spanish ecologist with the Basque Centre for Climate Change, who had conducted research in the region and found that the government was perpetuating a tragic misunderstanding.

Manzano and others pointed to a growing body of scholarly research demonstrating what the Maasai had long known: that their management of the land did not degrade the Serengeti ecosystem but had actually helped sustain and even create it—the grasslands the Maasai had cultivated for hundreds of years were the same grasslands that many wild animals needed to thrive. In that sense, the land had already been conserved before the Germans, the British, and various international groups decided that they needed to save it.

In their reports, Maasai leaders concluded that the government was engaged in “a calculated process to wipe out animals” and to “devastate their livelihood and culture.” They took a bus to the capital and delivered the two reports in person to government officials.



*Songoyo at an abandoned boma in the village of Ololosokwan. It lies within a tract now placed off-limits except for the use of the Dubai royal family.*

But there would be no debate, no discussion of complexities. Hassan moved forward with her agenda. She was finalizing the \$7.5 billion package with the United Arab Emirates, the fourth-largest (after China, the EU, and the U.S.) investor in Africa. One deal turned over management of roughly two-thirds of Dar es Salaam's port to DP World, a company owned by the U.A.E. government. Another deal turned over management of some 20 million acres of forest—roughly 8 percent of the nation's entire territory—to a company called Blue Carbon, which is run by a member of the royal family, Sheikh Ahmed Dalmoor Al Mak-toum, and uses conserved land to generate carbon credits that it sells to other companies. The package also included money for tourism.

Hassan invited travel agents to the country for a “tourism reboot.” She spoke of wanting more five-star hotels. She filmed a promotional documentary called *The Royal Tour*, which at one point involved helicoptering with a travel reporter over some Maasai villages near the Serengeti.

“All those round things down there are the Maasai bomas,” Hassan says in the film, as several villagers look up into the sky. The reporter then comments in a way that Maasai leaders found ominous: “Over the years, the Tanzanian government has tried to persuade the Maasai to become traditional farmers or ranchers, but they’ve persisted in clinging to their ancient ways. And yet, they may not have a choice now.”

Some 400 miles to the south, in the hotter, flatter farming area of Msomera, bulldozers broke ground on a new development. The military was building 5,000 cinder-block houses intended for Maasai families. Officials had been dispatched to villages in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area to present the government’s offer: a free house on 2.5 acres. Electricity. Piped water. New schools. A cash bonus of roughly \$4,000 for early takers. At one such presentation, a crowd pelted the officials with rocks.

I requested an interview with Hassan to better understand her decisions. In response, a government spokesperson arranged interviews with several other officials, one of whom was Albert Msando, a district commissioner, who told me, “Whatever I am answering is whatever the president would have answered.” We met in the town of Handeni, near Msomera. Msando’s office was inside a former British-colonial building, where a portrait of Julius Nyerere, Tanzania’s founding father, hung on one wall and a portrait of Hassan hung on another.

“For the public interest,” Msando said of the Maasai, “we have to relocate them.” A lawyer by training and demeanor, Msando emphasized that any relocation is voluntary, at least for now. He also made it clear that if persuasion fails, the government maintains the legal right to remove the Maasai from conservation areas, by force if necessary. “That’s why there are guys here with their shoulders decorated,” Msando said, pointing around the room to police and military officers.

He told me that anyone in Tanzania would be lucky to get what the Maasai were getting. “We are giving them nice houses, I believe, according to modern standards.” He said that the Maasai currently live in “filthy conditions” and should be helped to “live a better life.”

He and other officials I spoke with said that they disliked even using the term *Maasai*. They invoked the spirit of Nyerere, saying that Tanzania was supposed to have a national identity, not tribal ones. Msando said he could understand the Maasai’s concern about losing their culture, even if he had little sympathy for it. “Culture is a fluid thing,” he said. “I am Chaga—the Chaga were on the verge of having their own nation. Today look at me. People do not even know I’m Chaga. My kids don’t even speak Chaga.” He was unapologetic: “The Maasai are not exempted from acculturation or cultural acclimatization, or cultural extinction.”

THE GOVERNMENT’S PLANS moved forward. In June 2022, a convoy of trucks carrying hundreds of security personnel rolled into the 14 villages bordering Osero, a show of force that the Maasai had never seen before. Soldiers, police, and park rangers set up camps on the outskirts of each village, announcing their intention to demarcate the boundary of the new game reserve. What happened next unfolded sporadically over several days. It has been documented in reports by human-rights groups and was described to me by dozens of witnesses and victims.

First, village leaders summoned to what was billed as a routine ruling-party meeting were arrested after they refused to go along with the demarcation—27 of them in all. The security forces then began planting a long line of three-foot-high rectangular cement markers called beacons along the perimeter of Osero. Villagers came behind them, kicking the markers down before the concrete foundations had set; women hacked at them with machetes. “I felt like I was fighting for myself,” one woman told me later. “I knew if this land goes away, there is nowhere for my children to be, and that forced me to lose my fear.” But the security forces kept beating the villagers back. Elders called more than 1,000 moran to take up positions with bows and arrows in forested areas along a main road where government trucks were patrolling.

“How many are ready to die?” a leader said to the group, and at some point, one of them shot an arrow at a police officer, killing him.

After that, the security forces opened fire. They shot at the legs of elderly women waving grass as a sign of peace. They shot an elderly man, who fell and then was heaped onto a truck “like a sack of maize,” his son told me. He has not been found. The security forces shot at men and women trying to destroy the beacons, wounding them in their arms and legs and backs. They shot tear gas into bomas and burst into one where a traditional ceremony was being held, firing into the crowd. The moran waited for orders to retaliate, but the elders, seeing what the government was willing to do, called them off. “It’s only because we didn’t have guns,” a Maasai elder told me. “If someone helped us with guns, they cannot even fight with us, because they are very cowardly.” Another elder said, “You cannot fight a gun with arrows.”

Dozens of people with bullet and machete wounds, blocked by police from local clinics, limped their way across the border into Kenya for treatment. Several thousand more fled there for safety. Others hid in the forest. Then the burning and bulldozing began. For several days, security forces plowed through circles of stick fences. They crushed houses and corrals and lit the debris on fire,



Bumper-to-bumper in Serengeti National Park, the first enclave in northern Tanzania to be set aside for conservation and tourism

burning more than 300 bomas, including Songoyo's, and finishing the work before the start of high safari season. In a statement issued a few days after the violence, the Tanzanian government said the new game reserve had "no settlements as it is alleged and therefore there is no eviction" taking place. It described what had happened as "normal practice for all wildlife and forest protected areas in Tanzania"—a necessary step to keep the Serengeti ecosystem from being "disrupted and eventually erased from the face of the Earth."

**SONGOYO'S BOMA** had been by a hot spring. His father's and grandfather's graves were nearby. In the aftermath of the violence, he moved his family and cattle from Osero to a smaller boma nearer to his village, where he and others returned from hiding to find homes ransacked and skeletons of cows that had been eaten by wild animals.

Security forces roamed up and down the roads. Officials called people into immigration offices and accused them of being Kenyans, requiring them to show up in court for weeks on end, until judges threw out their cases for lack of evidence. Rangers patrolled Osero more heavily than ever, shooting at and beating herders who went anywhere near the new reserve, punishments that now came with a kind of psychological torture—forcing people to consent to the legitimacy of their own dispossession. One young man told me that rangers dragged him to their truck and beat

him on his back with a stick for hours, calling him "rubbish" and yelling, "You don't agree this land was taken? We will punish you until you agree!" They would feed him cornmeal, he said, and beat him some more. But he never did agree. Now he can barely walk.

The Maasai had other problems. One was grass: There was not enough. Everywhere I went, I saw bony cows picking at short clumps of weeds in dry patches of dirt. Out of desperation, some people were taking their cows to graze in Kenya, while others were sneaking into Osero at night. To avoid alerting rangers, cows went in without bells, making them harder to keep track of in the dark. Herders used cheap flashlights for safety, shining them fleetingly in the bush to detect the eyes of lions and other predators. They struggled to keep themselves awake, wearing small radios around their necks, playing tinny music at a low volume only they could hear.

Another problem was worse: Rangers were seizing cattle. Not just a few here and there, but huge herds of them, by the hundreds and then by the thousands. One day, Songoyo got a call from his brother, who had been grazing Songoyo's 75 cows near Osero with other herders.

He said rangers had chased them down and seized more than 700 cattle, including all of Songoyo's. He said the rangers had then crossed with the cattle into Serengeti National Park, and were holding them in a pen. Songoyo imagined them staying like that, not eating, not drinking. He imagined his favorite, Kiripa,



*A Maasai Moran with his family's livestock in one of the areas targeted by the Tanzanian government's latest plans*

NICHOLE SOBECKI FOR THE ATLANTIC

a brown heifer he could always count on to lead the other cattle to distant grasses and home again, slowly dying, and rushed with the other owners to the park gate.

"I tried to reason with the rangers, but I totally failed—it was like they were ready to shoot us," he recalled, and so the group contacted a Maasai lawyer, Melau Alais, whose practice had been overwhelmed by such emergency calls in the past year.

After several days, Songoyo learned that the rangers were alleging that the cattle had been illegally grazing inside Serengeti National Park, and that they would all be auctioned off unless the owners prevailed in court. The court was in a town called Mugumu, clear on the other side of the park, a two-hour drive away. The hearing was in a few days. So Songoyo and the other owners scrambled together the park fees and set off in the lawyer's car past lush green grass and fat, grazing zebras and Land Cruisers full of tourists enjoying the scenery. When they reached the courthouse, the owner whom they had elected to represent all of the owners in the case, a man named Soloi Toroge, was formally charged with illegal grazing and jailed until the hearing.

The next day, Songoyo and the others sat in the gallery as Toroge took the stand. Both Songoyo and Alais recalled for me the day in the courtroom.

"So what happened?" Alais asked Toroge, and as the defendant began telling the story of how the rangers had beaten the herders and taken the cattle, Songoyo said he felt his anger rising.

Alais asked Toroge how he knew the cows were his, and as he described their particular colors and markings, Songoyo thought about his own cows, and became more desperate.

At another point, Alais asked Toroge how many children he had, and as Songoyo thought about his own, he began to feel physically ill.

"So what other business do you do?" Alais continued.

Toroge said he depended only on livestock.

"This livestock, or others?" Alais asked him.

This livestock, he answered. There was no other.

"So if the court decides to auction the cattle, what will happen?" Alais asked.

"All of us will die of hunger," Toroge answered.

As he continued, Songoyo remembered thinking that this was it. That he really was about to lose everything he'd worked his whole life to achieve—not because of drought or his own foolishness, but because of his government, and the Arabs, and something called conservation. He said he began making noises, and felt himself becoming so disoriented, so altered, that he thought he could kill someone, or that someone might kill him, and soon people were surrounding him, court officers threatening to arrest him. Songoyo was saying, "Then let us die. There is no special death."

He did not return for the other days of testimony. He was back in his village when Alais called to tell him that the judge had ruled that the cows would be auctioned off unless the owners paid a fine, and that his share—calculated per head of cattle, per day, for more than 30 days and counting—would be roughly \$5,000.

He briefly considered what others had done, which was borrow money from a Somali loan shark who was doing a brisk business, but decided that was no solution.

"Let them sell them all," he told Alais.

He did not leave his boma for days.

Normally, relatives and neighbors would give someone in his position one of their cows to help him rebuild, but nothing was normal any longer. More than 50,000 head of cattle had been taken by rangers, according to a local tally. Between the seized cattle and the fines, a huge transfer of wealth was under way from the Maasai community to the government.

People came by Songoyo's boma to say they were sorry. They tried to encourage him. He considered what to do. He could be a security guard. He imagined standing still for hours in front of some building in Arusha. Then he began thinking that death would be preferable. Traditional Maasai cosmology includes no afterlife, no reward or punishment in the hereafter, so that would be that. Hanging or poison were the usual methods; hanging was more certain. Then he thought about his children. "And I said no," he recalled. He told himself what others had told him since his father had died. He was a hard worker. He knew how to struggle. He thought, "Maybe something good is ahead of me." He thought that if he just kept going, "God will bless me for that."

He tore down a large corral where he had kept his cattle and built a smaller one for the seven goats he still had, and for the one cow he hoped to buy. He remembered a distant relative, a businessman in Kenya; they got in touch, and the plan was set: Pick up the livestock at a market near his village. Herd them across the border to a market in Kenya, and if he didn't sell them there, go on to Aitong, a roughly 130-mile circuit every week. He had been doing this for months.

When he got home from Aitong, he would give half the money he'd earned to his wives for food. He would rest, and then start out again. He noticed himself becoming skinnier.

**SONGOYO HEADED NORTH** with his next herd of sheep, through a clearing with a seasonal stream and smooth rocks. He skirted Serengeti National Park, where he was not allowed to be, then crossed over a low mountain range that marked the Tanzania-Kenya border, his sandals splitting at the soles. At the gates of the park, some of the half a million people who visit every year were lining up in Land Cruisers, the bumpers displaying flag decals representing the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, the United States. And as the sun rose one morning, in they went, tourists with bucket lists, anniversaries, dreams, and romanticized images in mind.

They roamed the dirt roads through grassy plains that really did seem to stretch on forever—a rolling sea of greens and yellows and flat-topped trees. They slowed for herds of gazelles and elephants. They sped to a leopard sighting in trucks bearing the wishful names of various outfitters—Sense of Africa, Lion King Adventures, Peacemakers Expeditions—and soon they began gathering along one side of the Mara River.

On the other side, great black herds of wildebeests were massing, waiting for the right moment to dive off a small cliff and swim across. What the animals saw waiting for them was a long line of trucks, a metal fortification.

"I want a picture!" said a woman hoisting her camera.

"My God, I want them to come down!" said her companion.

An hour passed. Another hour. The wildebeests were not migrating. A Maasai driver grumbled that obviously there were too many trucks. A man pressed binoculars to his face.

"See, it looks fine to us, but to them, something's not right," he said.

He wondered if it was crocodiles. They waited. A woman took a nap. Then some wildebeests began moving downriver, opposite some gaps in the otherwise solid wall of trucks. And then one hurled itself over the cliff in heroic fashion, and soon they were all diving.

"They're flying!" someone said.

The animals were flailing, tumbling, and splashing down into the river, swimming for their lives, and now engines were cranking as trucks roared toward the crossing point, wedging into every open gap.

"We got 'em!" yelled a woman holding up a camera, and as far as anyone could see, the view was wildebeests, river, trees, and the grassy savanna beyond—no cows, no goats, no Maasai herders, no people at all, except the ones beholding the spectacle they'd been promised.

Songoyo walked along a dirt road as trucks blasted him with fumes. He felt so hungry. At times he knelt on the ground and said, "God, can you see this?" then got up and kept going.

What they could not see was a tall man in blue track pants and a pink-and-purple plaid shawl herding sheep across a rocky path, trying not to think about how his knees hurt, his ankles hurt; trying to forget about all that had come before now.

Songoyo reached the first market, where he did not sell the sheep but picked up some more animals for another client and kept going, heading for Aitong.

It was late afternoon when he began crossing the Maasai Mara—the Kenyan national park—with only a stick for protection because bows and arrows are not allowed in the park. He hustled the sheep through the bush, past thorns, under branches, over sharp rocks and soft grass. He saw zebras. He saw giraffes. At one point, he saw a lion, which began following him, then another, coming closer and closer, and as he began to think that this would be how his life ended, a tourist truck came speeding along the road and scared the lion away, and he took off running with the sheep until he came upon elephants—"So, so many elephants," he said—and managed to dodge those, too.

He kept walking, trying to stay alert. The night was moonless and very dark. After some hours, he reached the edge of the park and saw a boma—a cultural boma, as it turned out, the kind set up for tourists, where Maasai act out versions of the life now being extinguished—and asked if he could sleep there, but the people at the park said that was against the rules, even though welcoming him would have been the true Maasai way. So he waited outside a while and then entered anyway, lying down in a corner. It was cold, and he felt himself becoming sick.

He reached Aitong the next morning but still didn't sell the sheep, and this meant he would have to press on another 50 miles to a town called Kilgoris. By now he was so exhausted that he decided to sleep, and this was when, as he put it, "evil came during the night," in the form of a hyena that killed five of his sheep, two of which belonged to the new client. When Songoyo called to tell him, the man told Songoyo that he would have to repay him for the animals. Songoyo told him he didn't have any money. The man said in that case, he would have to work without pay. Songoyo set off for Kilgoris, now in debt.

He walked along a dirt road as trucks blasted him with fumes. He walked across one farm after another. He felt so hungry. At times he knelt on the ground and said, "God, can you see this?" then got up and kept going. Another farm. A man who gave him water. A man who yelled at him to get off his land. A tree where he took a nap. His dreams lately were of cows grazing in lush grass, and of dying. More hours crossing an area that belonged to a rival pastoralist tribe, sneaking along the edges and behind stands of trees, feeling like a thief, he said, feeling like he had no place to be in this world. He kept going like that, across more land that was not his.

THE LAND SONGOYO CONSIDERED HIS was now part of the new Pololeti Game Reserve. That was what Osero had become. The government had constructed a gate bearing the name along the main road into the area, not far from where Songoyo's boma had been, and when the Dubai royal family was not around, tourists could pay a fee and go inside.

"As far as you can see, all this is now Pololeti," said a Maasai driver who had grown up on the land and been away from it for a year, ever since the violence. "I feel like crying." The only reason he was able to go inside now was that I had hired him as a guide.

What he saw was miles and miles of a particular grass that was good for cattle, at the moment so tall and golden. "If your cows are weak and they eat this, in two days they will stand," he said, driving ahead.

He saw the yellowing tops of grasses that zebras favored, and thick, wetter grasses that wildebeests favored. He saw some impalas in the distance and said, "I wish to see my goats there," because they would usually graze together.

He saw wiry red oat grasses, and thick swirls of cattail grasses, and here was the kind of acacia with bark that helped with nausea and there was the tree with large, rough leaves useful for sanding down a staff. He saw lavender morning glories used for tissues, and a sacred stream whose water was used for ceremonies. He smelled the familiar scent of bush mint in the cool afternoon, and heard such a strange quiet without the bells of cows.



A boma at dawn, its days likely numbered, in a region bordering the Ngorongoro Conservation Area

"In this area, in the evening, you'd see so many cows," the driver said, and soon he reached a clearing where it was possible to see grass pressed into faint circles.

"Over here used to be houses," he said.

"Over here, there used to be more than 20 bomas," he said, continuing on.

"Here used to be a boma, because you can tell the difference between this grass and the other grass," he said. "We always have soft-soft."

He navigated by trees he remembered and small hills he knew by heart.

"Here was a very large boma—you can see the fence," he said, pointing to some scattered branches with thorns. He continued on.

"Over here was the Pyando family," he said, passing a certain spot in the grass.

"The Kairungs were here," he said, but it was hard to tell.

"Here were the Saing'eus," he said, pointing to black weeds that grew where cow dung had been.

Here lived the Purengeis and the Ngiyos. The Kutishos, the Oltinayos, the Kikanais, the Mungas. A whole world that would soon be gone with no trace.

The driver turned and headed back toward the gate, noting a road that led up to a compound on the mountain, where the emir could look down and enjoy one of the most magnificent landscapes on Earth, with no cows or bomas or red shawls obstructing the view.

"Just imagine," the driver said, and soon he was passing a line of white beacons.

"Oh, our land," he said, exiting through the gate, wondering what would become of all the life that had been here.

One answer was taking shape 5,000 miles to the north, in the United Arab Emirates, at a place called Sharjah Safari park. It had been open a year, a project sponsored by an Emirati royal who wished to re-create the experience of a real African safari. It was an hour's drive from the Dubai airport, out along a smooth, straight highway lined with green palms and bright-yellow marigolds, past mirrored skyscrapers, many mosques, discount strip malls, a crematorium, camels, and miles of desert.

At the entrance was a concrete elephant. The \$75 gold package entitled visitors to tour 12 distinct African landscapes with animals procured from Africa itself, and on a 70-degree December day, tourists climbed into a modified Land Cruiser that whisked them through a series of metal gates.

"Savanna," the tour guide said as the first gate slid open to reveal some fake termite mounds, some half-dead acacia trees, and a living waterbuck. "Ngorongoro," she said as another gate slid open, revealing a few gazelles and four white rhinos. "Serengeti," she said, and on it went.

Soon the tour arrived at the last exhibit: "Boma." At the end of a curved path lined with grass was a collection of round structures made of cement, not mud and dung, with wooden doors and thatched roofs. There was a corral with goats and donkeys. And here and there were signs with cartoons explaining life in this place. One of them included a drawing of a man. He was wearing a blue-plaid shawl. His features were simply drawn, and he stared blank-faced from the confines of a rectangular wood frame.

**WHEN HE SAW** the low mountain range, Songoyo felt a burst of energy, knowing he was near home, such as it was, the place where he was trying to start over. He crossed the clearing with the smooth rocks, and soon he arrived at a grassy slope, and there were the remnants of the larger corral he'd torn down, and there was the smaller one he'd built for the goats and the cow he still could not buy, a circle of sticks with jackets and plaid shawls drying on top. There was a mud-walled house, and a child running out of it.

His wife made him some tea. He gave her money for the market. He'd made roughly \$20 on this trip, but of course he was now

in debt for the sheep the hyena had killed. They discussed which neighbors were still around. So many had left. Then Songoyo went outside to check on his seven goats.

He looked inside the corral. Four, he counted. Another two were running around outside, so that made six. He kept looking. He walked to where the old corral used to be, then back to the new corral. No goat. He began walking faster, looking around the house. Still no goat. He walked farther out into the grass, seeing nothing, becoming more alarmed.

"Where's the other one?" he said. "There is one missing!"

His wife came outside and began looking too. He ran out beyond a thorn fence and into the taller grass, now frantic, scanning the landscape for all that he had left of a vanishing life he loved and still wanted.

He kept looking, and finally he spotted the goat. It was sitting in the grass. As he came nearer, he saw that it was injured. A back leg was bloody, and seemed to have gotten stuck in some thorns. Songoyo knelt down to examine the wound more closely. He was a Maasai man without a cow, in debt, getting skinnier, and now he was shaking his head.

"Who did this?" he shouted, expecting no answer. *A*

*Stephanie McCrummen is a staff writer at The Atlantic. She was previously the East Africa bureau chief for The Washington Post.*



*Maasai gather at a livestock market, one stop on Songoyo's 130-mile circuit from Tanzania to Kenya and back.*

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*Philip Shribman, in a college photo from around 1940; behind it, an excerpt from a wartime letter he sent to the sociology professor George F. Theriault*

*THE*

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**MAN WHO DIED FOR**

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*THE LIBERAL ARTS*

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In 1942, aboard ship and heading for war, a young sailor—my uncle—wrote a letter home, describing and defining the principles he was fighting for.

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*BY DAVID SHRIBMAN*

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Chugging through Pacific waters in February 1942, the USS Crescent City was ferrying construction equipment and Navy personnel to Pearl Harbor, dispatched there to assist in repairing the severely damaged naval base after the Japanese attack. A young ensign—"real eager to get off that ship and get into action," in the recollection of an enlisted Navy man who encountered him—sat down and wrote a letter to his younger brother, who one day would be my father.

Philip Alvan Shribman, a recent graduate of Dartmouth and just a month away from his 22nd birthday, was not worldly but understood that he had been thrust into a world conflict that was more than a contest of arms. At stake were the life, customs, and values that he knew. He was a quiet young man, taciturn in the old New England way, but he had much to say in this letter, written from the precipice of battle to a brother on the precipice of adulthood. His scrawl consumed five pages of Navy stationery.

"It's growing on me with increasing rapidity that you're about set to go to college," he wrote to his brother, Dick, then living with my grandparents in Salem, Massachusetts, "and tho I'm one hell of a guy to talk—and tho I hate preaching—let me just write this & we'll call it quits."

He acknowledged from the start that "this letter won't do much good"—a letter that, in the eight decades since it was written, has been read by three generations of my family. In it, Phil Shribman set out the virtues and values of the liberal arts at a time when universities from coast to coast were transitioning into training grounds for America's armed forces.

"What you'll learn in college won't be worth a God-damned," Phil told Dick. "But you'll learn a way of life perhaps—a way to get on with people—an appreciation perhaps for just one thing: music, art, a book—all of this is bound to be unconscious learning—it's part of a liberal education in the broad sense of the term."

But that wasn't the end of it, far from it. "If you went to a trade school you'd have one thing you could do & know—& you'd miss the whole world of beauty," he went on. "In a liberal school you know 'nothing'—& are 'fitted for nothing' when you get out. Yet you'll have a fortune of broad outlook—of appreciation for people & beauty that money won't buy—You can always learn to be a mechanic or a pill mixer etc., but it's only when you're of college age "that you can learn that life has beauty & finesse." Afterward, it's all "struggle, war: economic if not actual—Don't give up the idea & ideals of a liberal school—they're too precious—too rare—too important."

Roughly a month after Phil wrote this letter, the Crescent City saw its first action, off Efate, in New Hebrides, and before long the attack transport set off for Guadalcanal and the initial assault landings in August, on an insect-infested island that was destined to be the site of a brutal six-month jungle struggle in unforgiving heat against determined Japanese fighters.

In September 1942, during the Guadalcanal campaign, Phil wrote another letter, this one to his favorite Dartmouth professor, the sociologist George F. Theriault. "I've had lots of time to think out here," he told Theriault, before adding, "A decent liberal arts education based on the Social Sciences is all a lot of us have left—and more and more becomes the only possible background on which to view all this"—the "all this" referring to the war and what it was about. He told Theriault, who was passionate about preserving the place of literature and the social sciences in Dartmouth's wartime curriculum, that "no greater mistake could be made than to shunt all the fellows off into 'war courses' and neglect the fine, decent, really important things we had a chance to come to know."

A little more than four months later, Phil was dead. He was on a PT boat by then, and on a night in early February, his boat—PT-111—ran into the searchlight of a Japanese destroyer off the northwest tip of Guadalcanal. Phil was gunned down. But before he died, he had made it clear that the conflict that would claim his life was a struggle for the values he'd learned in college—and, just as important, a struggle for the beauty and fineness he had discovered during his undergraduate years.

"And if at the end of college: if there are still people in the world, around, who'd like to deny experiences like it to others," he told my father, who would join the Navy before his own college years were completed, "why I hope that you—like me—think it's all worth while to get in & fight for. One always has to protect the valuable in this world before he can enjoy it."

Philip Alvan Shribman: the man who died for the liberal arts.

I HAVE BEEN PREOCCUPIED with Uncle Phil's life and death for five decades. The advice he gave to my father from the Pacific has provided the buoys of my own life. The values he prized have become my values. His guidance has shaped the passage of my two daughters through life. And his words take on urgency at a time when liberal education and American democracy are under threat.

During these five decades, I have searched for details of his life, sifting through letters and documents in my father's file cabinet, and seeking out his classmates and shipmates. In the course of all this, I met James MacPherson, a retired New York City transit worker who encountered Phil on Tulagi, a tiny island in the Solomons that served as home to a squadron of PT boats, and who remembered him as "an affectionate guy, like a Henry Fonda or a Gary Cooper." At a brewpub in Lawrence, Kansas, I bought lunch for Bertha Lou (Logan) Summers, who likely would have become Phil's wife if they'd had world enough and time.

I spoke with Robert R. Dockson, later the dean of the business school at the University of Southern California, who was Phil's roommate on the *Crescent City* and his tentmate on Tulagi. "We

were kids then," he told me, describing how the two of them would sit on the shore and watch sea battles from afar, all the while complaining about the mud that encircled them. "Those were pretty lonely days." I corresponded with John C. Everett, who went on to run a textile company and who glimpsed his Dartmouth classmate on the beach at Tulagi through his binoculars. Across 100 yards of water, they waved to each other and, by signal lamp, agreed to meet as soon as possible. Within days, Phil was dead.

And in my very first hours on the Dartmouth campus as a freshman myself—this was 52 years ago—I knocked on the door of George F. Theriault. It was answered by a lanky man with long gray hair and an emphatic cough.

"Professor Theriault," I said. "My name is David Shribman." He seemed astonished, for how could his former student, who had died 29 years earlier, have a child, the freshman at his door? "No, you could not be."

He'd had no idea that Phil's brother had a son. Now the son was standing in the very building, Silsby Hall, where Phil, as an undergraduate, would have taken courses. And so began a remarkable friendship, student and professor, conducted over lunches and dinners, on campus and off, and occasionally at his home, presided over by his wife, Ray Grant Theriault, who told me that one day, on a ski expedition, a student named Phil Shribman, unaware that the woman in the fetching ski outfit was his professor's wife, had asked her out on a date.

That freshman year, I typed out some of the words from Phil's letters, fastened them to a piece of cardboard with a squirt of Elmer's glue, and placed the primitive commemorative plaque on the bulletin board of my room. I kept it in sight until the day I graduated, and I have held on to it ever since.

**PHIL'S FATHER**—my grandfather Max Shribman—was a gentle Russian immigrant in Salem, where the family had washed ashore in 1896. He made a modest, small-city success for himself in real estate and insurance, comfort-

able enough to purchase the 51 volumes of the Harvard Classics that today sit on my bookshelves. To his sons he passed on his reverence—a pure, innocent love—for the idea of college, for the discipline and the leisure that campus life offers, for the chance to take a quiet breath of fresh air before joining life's struggles.

In the dozen years I knew my grandfather, I heard him talk of the past only a few times, and each of those reminiscences was about the old days, when his two boys were in college. He loved those years, and I came to love what they meant to him.

The three Dartmouth alumni who interviewed Phil in the winter of 1937 told the admissions office that he was "a good, all around boy, bright, alert and a pleasant personality." His formal college application was a simple affair. He said he thought about becoming a chemist or a doctor and was interested in current affairs and scientific matters. The form contained this sentence, in his own handwriting: "I am of Hebrew descent."

The college where he matriculated in the fall of 1937 had no foreign-study programs, no battery of psychologists, no course-evaluation forms—just classrooms with chairs bolted to the floor and, in winter, duckboards fastened to the steps of classroom buildings to fend off the snow and ice. The freshman class had 680 students, a little more than half the current size. Freshmen wore beanies. The year Phil arrived, the football team finished the season with an unbeaten record and was invited to play in the Rose Bowl—but declined the offer because, as President Ernest Martin Hopkins would explain, "if one held to the fundamental philosophy of college men incidentally playing football as against football players incidentally going to college, most of the evils of intercollegiate competition would be avoided." This was a long time ago.

The theme of the convocation address that Hopkins delivered at the beginning of Phil's freshman year dealt with the aims of a liberal-arts education; he spoke of "what a liberal college is, what its objectives are, what its ideals are, why its procedures exist." That day, sitting with his new classmates in Webster Hall, Phil heard Hopkins say that the purpose of a liberal-arts education was not to make someone a better banker or lawyer but rather to foster a "mental enlargement which shall enable you to be a bigger man, wherever the path of life leads you."

Phil's own liberal-arts education was demanding, and broad. He took courses in English, French, philosophy, astronomy, economics, psychology, music, and sociology (which eventually became his major). His grades were varied: C's in freshman English, lots of A's in sociology, on one occasion a D in French.

He was a member of Pi Lambda Phi, the first fraternity at Dartmouth to accept Jewish students. He was in the debate club. He went to football games, joining the annual migration to the Dartmouth-Harvard contest, which in those days was always played in Boston. He was one of the Dartmouth boys who in October 1940 toppled the wooden goalposts after Earl "Red" Blaik's last Dartmouth team prevailed against Harvard, 7–6. (Blaik would decamp to West Point the next year, a sign of impending war.) The shard of wood Phil snared after the final whistle now is nailed on my wall, just feet from where I am writing this.

The young man who on his application said he was "of Hebrew descent" took as his honors thesis topic "American anti-Semitism." The thesis was submitted in January 1941, as the Nazi regime pursued the wholesale destruction of Jewish communities and refined the techniques of murdering Europe's Jews. Later that year, the aviator Charles Lindbergh would deliver his infamous anti-Semitic speech in Des Moines, Iowa.

THE UNITED STATES issued a draft-registration order in September 1940, only days before classes commenced in Phil's senior year; a month earlier, Phil had enlisted as an apprentice seaman in the Naval Reserve. President Hopkins had assured the Army and Navy that Dartmouth would be responsive to any needs the two services expressed. In the spring of 1941, a student wrote an open letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt ("Now we have waited long enough . . .") that was published on the front page of the campus newspaper. It was read into the Congressional Record. The United States wasn't yet at war, but the campus almost was.

Dartmouth's Class Day, which takes place in a sylvan amphitheater just before commencement, ordinarily is a joyous occasion. Class Day 1941 was unlike any before or since. Charles B. McLane—the captain of the ski team, who became a member of the fabled 10th Mountain Division before returning to Dartmouth as a professor—delivered the Address to the College (an assignment that 35 years later would come to me). He said that "the strength and assurance of democracy" lies in his classmates' "being able to believe in and being willing to fight for" the "uncomplicated things we know and believe in today." That weekend, Hopkins delivered his commencement address:

Men of 1941, sons of this fostering mother of the north-country which we call Dartmouth, it is your generation that will determine, not in middle life but tomorrow, next year, or at the latest within a few brief years, whether the preconceptions you impose upon facts, the faults you visualize in democracy, and the ruthlessness you ignore in totalitarianism shall paralyze your will to defend the one and to defeat the other or whether with eyes wide open to reality, you accept freedom as an obligation as well as a privilege and accept the role for yourself of defenders of the faith.

Shortly after the class of 1941 dispersed, Hopkins would write that "the liberal arts college now has a clear duty to do all it can to aid in national defense; at the same time it would be derelict in its most important obligation if it lost sight of the purposes for which it primarily exists and the coming generation's need for college-trained men."

By the time Phil died, a Naval Training School had opened on campus with a staff of about 100, and headquarters in College Hall. Alumni Gymnasium became the site of instruction in seamanship, ordnance, and navigation. Dartmouth eventually added to its curriculum such courses as nautical astronomy, naval history and elementary strategy, and naval organization.

It was that precarious balance between preparing men for war and preserving the liberal arts that Phil sought to defend.

DEATH CAME TO MY UNCLE with suddenness but not with surprise. His Dartmouth contemporary John Manley once told me that Phil had had a premonition that he would die in the conflict.

After graduation, Phil was assigned to the Crescent City and appointed lieutenant (junior grade). "I can see him today—tall & slender, with reddish brown hair and some freckles, a smile always, irreverent behavior," his shipmate William Trippet, who would become a real-estate agent in Sacramento, California, wrote me 30 years ago.

During the Guadalcanal campaign, the Crescent City made 14 trips bringing men and supplies to the island. Phil wrote to his parents in September, a month into the fighting, to assure them that he was doing fine. He was, of course, thinner, and yet he had grown. He recalled that he was reminded continually of a letter printed in the newspaper during the last war from a serviceman to his family; it had been sitting around somewhere at

home, back in Salem. "Little then," he wrote, "did I think I would ever sit down in the midst of a war and ... put down a little of what a person thinks." His own letter was spare, meant only as a "personal sort of thing, like I was back in our living room telling it to you." He spoke of being in close quarters for 60 days; of seeing men die; of settling down someday with the right girl. Here was a boy who had grown up.

"They say that the Navy, esp. in wartime, either makes a man or shows that no man will be made," he wrote. "As to what the outcome on my part will be I will have to leave that to someone else and until it's over."

On January 5, 1943, he was transferred to the PT-boat squadron, an assignment he had wanted. PT boats have an audacious aura because of the experience of John F. Kennedy, who commanded one—PT-109. They were perhaps the flimsiest element of the American naval force—usually a mere 80 feet long, outfitted with machine guns and four 21-inch-diameter torpedoes, and capable of zipping through the sea at more than 40 knots. The Navy's approximately 600 PT boats were designed to be the seaborne equivalent of guerrilla warriors, able to ambush and scoot away quickly. But they were no match for what became known as the Tokyo Express, the Japanese warships that bore down on Guadalcanal.

On the island of Tulagi, an American staging area for the Guadalcanal battle, Phil lived in a bamboo-and-banana-leaf shack measuring about 12 by 15 feet and sitting some four feet off the ground. "Sweat rolls freely in January," he reported in a letter to Theriault. Among his neighbors in the shack were a nest of hornets, one of spiders, and two of ants—"companionable," he wrote, "so we let them be." Little else is known of his life on Tulagi in those last few months. A single photograph survives, showing Phil standing tall among a group of Solomon Islanders.

On February 1, 1943, an Allied coast watcher reported seeing as many as 20 Japanese destroyers in the Slot, the name given to the maritime route used by the Japanese for the resupply of Guadalcanal. That night, American PT boats set out as part of a larger effort to intercept the destroyers. PT-111 was among them. John Clagett, the commander, steered his craft away from the base. The boat was jarred by an exploding bomb nearby. Eventually he found a target, a Japanese destroyer moving on a southeasterly course, three miles east of Cape Esperance. PT-111 fired all four of its torpedoes from close quarters and then maneuvered away. Whether the torpedoes did any damage is unknown. But shellfire from a destroyer hit Clagett's boat, which exploded in flames. Ten members of the 12-man crew survived, some rescued the next morning after nine hours

Foreground: *A PT boat in the North Pacific*. Inset: *Phil (center) among Solomon Islanders, shortly before his death*. Background: *Dartmouth College*.



in the water. One member, legs broken, likely was taken by sharks. Phil himself seems to have been killed outright in the attack. PT-111 sank into Iron Bottom Sound.

**BACK IN SALEM**, a telegram arrived at 5 Savoy Road. "The Navy Department deeply regrets to inform you that your son Lieutenant Junior Grade Philip Alvan Shribman United States Naval Reserve is missing following action in the performance of his duty in the service of his country."

I can only imagine the scene when this message arrived. Did the Western Union man drive down the street, stop at the white house on the left, climb the concrete stairs, and deliver the telegram? Did someone from the Navy visit? My father was away, at Dartmouth. I know only this: That moment was the hinge of my grandparents' lives.

A few blocks away from their house, an obelisk erected to honor the 2,105 veterans from St. Joseph's Parish who served in the two world wars stands on a median between Washington and Lafayette Streets. When I was a cub reporter for the *Salem Evening News*, I would pass the monument and see the inscription on one side: TIME WILL NOT DIM. I think about that legend constantly. Time did not dim the force of that loss.

Senator Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. sent a note saluting Phil for having "gone to join the heroes who have built America." That may have been a form letter, but the note from Phil's Crescent City shipmate Zalmon Garfield, later the executive assistant to Milton Shapp, Pennsylvania's first Jewish governor, was not. Garfield wrote on behalf of his shipmates about the respect and admiration they had for Phil:

Some of these men are ignorant, some of them callous; en masse, however, their judgment of their officers is uncannily unerring ... It is a strange day in which we live, watching the gods toss their



Bertha Lou Logan; a letter from Philip to his brother, Dick Shribman, written aboard the USS Crescent City in 1942

finest works into a chasm of their own building. We can only wonder, mourn briefly and work very hard to replace the loss.

Republican Representative George J. Bates of Salem was visiting injured American combatants in West Coast hospitals shortly after the delivery of that fateful telegram and, in a remarkable coincidence, encountered John Clagett, Phil's commander on PT-111, recuperating from his injuries. "Tell Philip's father that his son was one of the most courageous men I have ever seen in action," the commander told the congressman.

With the news of Phil's death, Bertha Lou Logan entered my grandparents' lives. Her father, a football coach and high-school principal, had raised her alone after her mother died in childbirth. She had met Phil at the Grand Canyon in July 1939. He was traveling with Dartmouth classmates; she was there with family. As the two parties moved west, Phil and Bertha Lou left notes for each other at post offices. Eventually Bertha Lou took a waitressing job at Loch Lyme Lodge, near Dartmouth. Later, in Chicago, when Phil was in midshipmen's school, he and Bertha Lou would walk by the lake. She was the girl he wanted. He was the boy soon to be rendered unattainable.

After Phil died, Bertha Lou wrote Max and Anna Shribman, whom she had never met. She took the train to Salem, and my dad picked her up at the station. She lived in my grandparents' house for some while, the three of them united in a triangle of grief. "It took me a long time to get over him," Bertha Lou told me when I met her in Kansas decades later.

IN 1958, JOHN CLAGETT wrote a novel titled *The Slot* about life aboard a PT boat during World War II. He was by then an English professor at Middlebury College. "These days are dead," he wrote in an author's note. "We hated them then, we would not have them come again; but after fifteen years may we not look back at them for a few hours and say—Those were days that counted in our lives." And, in a different way, in mine.

For three-quarters of a century, historians have sorted through the "war aims" of Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Hideki Tojo, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin. In college and graduate school, and in a lifetime of reading, I have examined much of that scholarship. But for Americans, the war was also about

more than carefully stated aims—it was about far simpler things, really, but no less grand. Texaco had it right in a 1942 magazine advertisement that depicted a man carrying Army gear and saying, "I'm fighting for my right to boo the Dodgers." Phil might have added that it was also about the right to feel joy pulling down a goalpost in a dreaded rival's home stadium; the right to struggle with explaining in what respects Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert were realists; the right to get a C in English and a D in French.

"Look around you—keep your eyes open—try to see what's what—hold onto the things that you know to be right," Phil wrote to my father in what could be a user's guide to the liberal arts. "They'll shake your faith in a lot of the things you now think are right—That's good—& part of education—but look around & try to make up your own ideas on life & its values."

In 1947, five years after that letter was written, my grandfather sent some money to Dartmouth to establish a scholarship in his son's name—specifically, to support a student from the Salem area. The scholarship continues, and every year the family receives a letter about the person awarded the scholarship. I have a pile of them.

One of the recipients of that scholarship was Paul Andrews. He took the classic liberal-arts route that Phil would have endorsed—psychology, meteorology, music—and today is a school superintendent in central Oregon. Another was Matthew Kimble—history, religion, biology—who would chair the psychology department at Middlebury. A third is Christine Finn—drama, economics, organic chemistry. She is now a psychiatry professor at Dartmouth's medical school. Another is Jeffrey Coots—astronomy, mythology, American literature—who specializes in public health and safety at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. You could say that Phil won World War II after all.

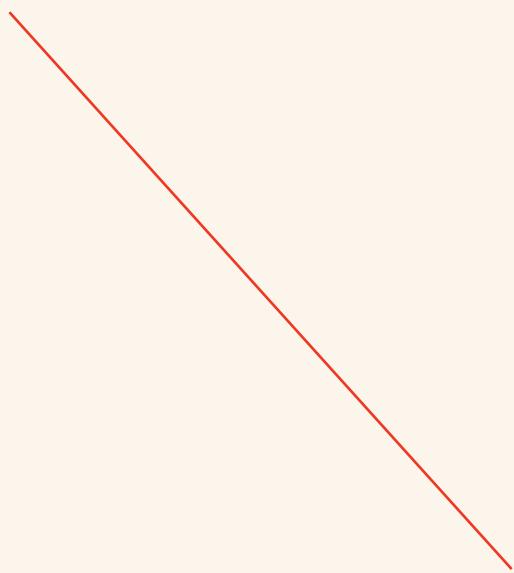
I have been delving into Uncle Phil's life for years. Some of the very sentences in this account I wrote more than half a century ago, the product of an 18-year-old's effort to repay a debt to an uncle he never knew. Those sentences stood up well. So has my faith. And so, too, has my belief that, as Uncle Phil put it from the Pacific War 80 years ago, "you know actually it's

the things I (and everyone else) always took for granted that are the things the country is now fighting to keep—and it's going to be hard to do." *A*

*David Shribman was for many years the executive editor of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. He was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1995 for his writing on American political culture.*



# C L A S H   O F T H E   P A T R I A R C H S



*A hard-line Russian bishop backed by the political might of the Kremlin could split the Orthodox Church in two.*

BY ROBERT F. WORTH

*Photo-illustrations by Cristiana Couceiro*

**In late August of 2018**, Patriarch Kirill, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, flew from Moscow to Istanbul on an urgent mission. He brought with him an entourage—a dozen clerics, diplomats, and bodyguards—that made its way in a convoy to the Phanar, the Orthodox world's equivalent of the Vatican, housed in a complex of buildings just off the Golden Horn waterway, on Istanbul's European side.

Kirill was on his way to meet Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the archbishop of Constantinople and the most senior figure in the Orthodox Christian world. Kirill had heard that Bartholomew was preparing to cut Moscow's ancient religious ties to Ukraine by recognizing a new and independent Orthodox Church in Kyiv. For Kirill and his de facto boss, Russian President Vladimir Putin, this posed an almost existential threat. Ukraine and its monasteries are the birthplace of the Russian Orthodox Church; both nations trace their spiritual and national origins to the Kyiv-based kingdom that was converted from paganism to Christianity about 1,000 years ago. If the Church in Ukraine succeeded in breaking away from the Russian Church, it would seriously weaken efforts to maintain what Putin has called a "Russian world" of influence in the old Soviet sphere. And the decision was in the hands of Bartholomew, the sole figure with the canonical authority to issue a "tomos of autocephaly" and thereby bless Ukraine's declaration of religious independence.

When Kirill arrived outside the Phanar, a crowd of Ukrainian protesters had already gathered around the compound's beige stone walls. Kirill's support for Russia's brutal behavior—the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the bloody proxy war in eastern Ukraine—had made him a hated figure, and had helped boost support in Kyiv for an independent Church.

Kirill and his men cleared a path and ascended the marble steps. Black-clad priests led them to Bartholomew, who was waiting in a wood-paneled throne room. The two white-bearded patriarchs both wore formal robes and headdresses, but they cut strikingly different figures. Bartholomew, then 78, was all in black, a round-shouldered man with a ruddy face and a humble demeanor; Kirill, 71, looked austere and reserved, his head draped regally in an embroidered white *koukoulion* with a small golden cross at the top.

The tone of the meeting was set just after the two sides sat down at a table laden with sweets and beverages. Kirill reached for a glass of mineral water, but before he could take a drink, one of his bodyguards snatched the glass from his hand, put it aside, and brought out a plastic bottle of water from his bag. "As if we would try to poison the patriarch of Moscow," I was told by Archbishop Elpidophoros, one of the Phanar's senior clerics. The two sides disagreed on a wide range of issues, but when they reached the meeting's real subject—Ukraine—the mood shifted from chilly politeness to open hostility. Bartholomew recited a list of grievances, all but accusing Kirill of trying to displace him and become the new arbiter of the Orthodox faith.

Kirill deflected the accusations and drove home his central demand: Ukraine must not be allowed to separate its Church from Moscow's. The issue was "a ticking time bomb," he said, according to a leaked transcript of the meeting. "We have never abandoned the notion that we are one country and one people.

It is impossible for us to separate Kyiv from our country, because this is where our history began."

Bartholomew explained that "the Ukrainians don't feel comfortable under the control of Russia and desire full ecclesiastical independence just as they have political independence." He added that he had been receiving petitions and pleas for years from Ukrainians at all levels, including members of Parliament and the country's then-president and prime minister. Kirill replied that those pleas were meaningless because Ukraine's political class was illegitimate. The people, he said with a disquieting certainty, "will overthrow them and expel them." Bartholomew, shocked by the implied violence in Kirill's words, called on the Russians "not to issue such threats, neither for schism nor for bloodshed in Ukraine." When the meeting concluded, Kirill and his men were so angry that they skipped lunch and headed straight back to their private plane, I was told by an adviser to Bartholomew.

In the end, the threats proved unavailing: Bartholomew approved the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and Kirill issued an order to cut the Russian Church's ties with the Phanar. (Confusingly, the Moscow-linked Church is called the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.) The clash of the patriarchs—they have not spoken since—now looks a lot like a prelude to the Russian war in Ukraine. Just after Bartholomew announced his decision, Putin convened a meeting of his security council to discuss it. Putin later cited the Church schism as part of his justification for the 2022 invasion, and he and Kirill continue to speak of the breakaway Church as an assault on Russia's national identity.

But the struggle between Bartholomew and Kirill is bigger than Ukraine. It is a battle for the soul of Orthodox Christianity, a faith with 300 million believers around the world. The divide has drawn comparisons to the Great Schism, which a millennium ago separated the Orthodox East and the Catholic West.

On one side, Bartholomew has spent three decades trying to make Orthodoxy more compatible with the modern liberal world. He openly urges the faithful to accept evolution and other scientific tenets. He has been a passionate advocate for environmental protection. And, like Pope Francis, he has quietly promoted a more accepting attitude toward homosexuality. But Bartholomew's power is more limited than the pope's. There are eight other Orthodox patriarchs, each of whom presides over a national or regional Church, and Bartholomew's role is that of "first among equals."

Kirill, who heads by far the largest national Church, has made it into a bastion of militancy. He has given the war against Ukraine his full-throated support, and some of his priests go further, preaching about the glory of firing Grad rockets and dying in battle for Russia. Kirill's tediously Manichaean tirades—about saintly Russia defending "traditional values" against the gay-pride parades of the decadent West—are much more than a justification for Putin's autocracy. His anti-modern ideology has become an instrument of soft power that is eagerly consumed by conservatives across the Orthodox world as well as by right-wing figures in Europe (such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán). It has even won adherents in the United States, where some evangelicals and right-wing Catholics seek a stronger hand in the culture wars.

Kirill has also launched an aggressive effort to capture Orthodox parishes allied with Bartholomew, allegedly with the help of the FSB, Russia's intelligence apparatus, and of the Wagner Group, Russia's mercenary arm. The Russian Orthodox Church has used bribery and blackmail, threatening to undermine churches that do not adopt its policies and requiring newly converted (and well-paid) clerics to sign documents renouncing all ties with Bartholomew's Church. The goal of this campaign is a very old one. Five centuries ago, after Constantinople had fallen to the Ottomans, a Russian monk famously wrote that Moscow was now the world's great Christian capital: "Two Romes have fallen, but the third stands, and there shall not be a fourth." Kirill and Putin seem determined to make this declaration of a "third Rome"—Moscow—come true.

THE SPIRITUAL HEART of Orthodox Christianity is on Mount Athos, a densely forested peninsula in northern Greece. It is a community of 20 ancient monasteries, and pilgrims must receive written permission to visit. No women are allowed, and the peninsula—sealed from the mainland by fences—can be reached only by boat, as if it were an island. I got my entry paper stamped just after dawn at a waterside kiosk in Ouranoupoli, a Greek beach town full of restaurants and bars that is the main gateway to Athos. The waitress who had brought my coffee would be the last woman I saw for three days. At the pier, I climbed onto

a battered old ferry that gradually filled with bearded monks, construction workers, and a smattering of pilgrims. A heavy funk of unwashed male bodies mingled with the sea breeze. As I looked out at the gorgeous blue-green water, I pitied the monks, who must also renounce swimming here.

Not much has changed on Athos since the monks first arrived, more than 1,000 years ago. They have followed the same candlelit rituals of prayer and chanting even as the Christian world around them—once contained in a single empire—split and transformed over the centuries like a slow detonation. The Great Schism occurred in 1054. Around that same time, Mount Athos saw the arrival of Slavic monks, recently converted from paganism, who became an important presence on the peninsula and remain so today.

The ferry trawled alongside the western coast of Athos. After half an hour, we saw a cluster of buildings topped by the distinctive onion domes of the Russian Orthodox Church: the St. Pantaleimon Monastery. It is the most Russia-friendly monastery on Athos, and its monks have posted a video of one of their priests chanting a prayer for "President Vladimir Vladimirovich, the government, and army of our God-protected fatherland." After the Ukraine invasion in 2022, the monastery's abbot sent Putin a birthday letter expressing the belief that "Russia under your wise guidance will overcome all difficulties and become a world power." The monastery had not responded to my request for a

*The Monastery of Simonopetra, on Mount Athos*



YVES GELLIE / GAMMA-RAPHO / GETTY

visit. Still, my translator—a Macedonian named Goran who speaks fluent Russian as well as Greek—and I were hoping to persuade the monks to chat.

As we walked uphill from the pier, it became apparent that some of the monastery's buildings were brand-new. Others were still under construction or being renovated, tall cranes hovering above them. Starting in the late 1990s, wealthy Russians, including a coterie of oligarchs close to Putin, began investing huge amounts of money in St. Panteleimon. It is now the largest and most opulent compound in all of Athos. The finances of the monasteries are opaque, and little supervision was introduced even after an abbot with ties to Russian oligarchs was jailed in Greece for embezzlement and fraud in 2011 over a lucrative land deal. (He was acquitted six years later.)

For all the new buildings, I found St. Panteleimon almost empty. Near the main sanctuary, we tried to have a word with a monk who was hurrying past. The man grimaced and brushed us off. We spotted a second monk, and he, too, refused to speak. Goran, who has been to Athos many times, seemed amazed by this rudeness. There is an ancient tradition on Athos of hospitality for pilgrims, and Goran told me he had been warmly received at St. Panteleimon before the war in Ukraine. Not anymore.

Our next stop was the Monastery of Simonopetra, a little farther down the coast. The reception could not have been more different. In the main building, a young monk from Syria named Seraphim escorted us into an anteroom with a magnificent view over the sea. He vanished, reappearing a minute later with a silver tray bearing coffee, water, and tiny glasses of cherry liqueur made by the monks. When we described our experience at St. Panteleimon, Seraphim nodded sadly. He then began telling us about a Russian plot to capture and annex Athos. It took me a moment to realize that he was talking about something that had occurred in the 19th century.

The past is very close on Athos. Clocks there still run on Byzantine time, with the day starting at sunset rather than midnight. The monks live surrounded by frescoes depicting events that happened centuries or even a millennium ago. Most of the clerics have little contact with the outside world, and must seek approval from their superiors to use the internet. Some current events do penetrate. The Ukraine war has had a profound impact, and not just for the Russian monks who gave me the silent treatment; it has begun to erode what the monks call a shared "Athonite consciousness."

"It's like a huge scar, this war between two Orthodox nations," I was told by Elder Elissaios, the abbot of Simonopetra, who met with me the morning after our arrival. "Even if the war ends, the scars will still be painful ... We cannot protect against this kind of thing." I asked him what he meant. He paused for a moment, sipping his coffee and looking out at the blue expanse of the Aegean. "We don't know how to separate the Church from the nation," he said. "This is a problem of the Orthodox tradition."

That problem has its origins in the fourth century C.E., when Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and then imposed it on his subjects. For more than 1,000 years afterward, Church and state in Constantinople "were seen as parts of a single organism," according to the historian Timothy Ware, under a

doctrine called *sinfonia*, or "harmony." The echoes of this fusion can be seen today in many of the symbols of Orthodox authority, including the crown worn by Bartholomew on formal occasions and the throne on which he sits.

One of the paradoxes of modern Orthodoxy is that its rigidity has become a selling point in the West. Many conservatives complain that mainstream churches—Catholic and Protestant alike—have grown soft and spineless. Some in Europe and the United States openly yearn for a more explicitly Christian political sphere. Conversions to Orthodoxy are on the rise, and most of the converts are not looking for a tolerant message like Patriarch Bartholomew's. According to Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, a scholar of Orthodoxy who teaches at Northeastern University, in Boston, the new converts tend to be right-wing and Russophile, and some speak freely of their admiration for Putin's "kingly" role. In the U.S., converts are concentrated in the South and Midwest, and some have become ardent online evangelists for the idea that "Dixie," with its beleaguered patriarchal traditions, is a natural home for Russian Orthodoxy. Some of them adorn their websites with a mash-up of Confederate nostalgia and icons of Russian saints.

Patriarch Kirill is keenly aware of his rising status among American religious conservatives, and he and his deputies have been welcomed warmly during visits to the U.S. (These visits took place before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.) During a visit to Moscow in 2015, Franklin Graham—the son of the late Southern Baptist leader Billy Graham—told Kirill that many Americans wished that someone like Putin could be their president.

Russian Orthodoxy looks very different to many who grew up inside it. On my last day on Mount Athos, I had a conversation with a young man named Mykola Kosytskyy, a Ukrainian linguistics student and a frequent visitor to Athos. He had brought with him this time a group of 40 Ukrainian pilgrims. Kosytskyy talked about the war—the friends he'd lost, the shattered lives, the role of Russian propaganda. I asked him about the Moscow-linked Church that he'd known all his life, and he said something that surprised me: "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church"—meaning the Church of Kirill and Putin—"is *the* weapon in this war."

All through his childhood, he explained, he had heard priests speaking of Russia in language that mixed the sacred and the secular—"this concept of saint Russia, the saviors of this world." He went on: "You hear this every Sunday from your priest—that this nation fights against evil, that it's the third Rome, yes, the new Rome. They truly believe this." That is why, Kosytskyy said, many Ukrainians have such difficulty detaching themselves from the message, even when they see Kirill speaking of their own national leaders as the anti-Christ. Kosytskyy told me it had taken years for him to separate the truth from the lies. His entire family joined the new Ukrainian Church right after Bartholomew recognized it, in 2018. So have millions of other Ukrainians.

But religious ideas die hard, Kosytskyy said. The Russian message lives on in the minds of many Ukrainians, especially older ones. Among the hardest messages to unlearn is that the West represents a threat to Christian values, and that the vehicle for this threat is the humble-looking patriarch in Istanbul.

## “Kirill is allowing himself to be a tool, to be an instrument of Putin,” Bartholomew told me.

**I FIRST GLIMPSED** Bartholomew on a rainy evening in late November. From where I stood, in the dim and damp recesses of St. George’s cathedral, in Istanbul, the patriarch appeared as a distant figure in a red-and-gold cape, framed by a high wall inset with a dense golden filigree of angels and dragons and foliage. Bartholomew walked forward, clutching a staff, and ascended his patriarchal throne. To anyone who was raised, as I was, on threadbare Protestant rituals, Orthodox services are a bit like dropping acid at the opera. The cathedral was as deep and shadowed as a canyon, full of drifting incense and the thrilling sound of low choral chanting. Sparkling eyes gazed down from icons on the sanctuary walls.

That evening, the church was packed with people who had come from all corners of the Orthodox world for the annual Feast of Saint Andrew, the Phanar’s patron saint. I heard shreds of multiple languages in the crowd—Greek, Serbian, French—and saw three East African priests in brown robes that were cinched with a rope at the waist. As the service came to an end, Bartholomew delivered the traditional blessing for a new archon, a layperson being honored for service to the Church. “*Axios!*” he called out three times (“He is worthy”), and each time the faithful repeated after him in unison: “*Axios!*”

When the service ended, we filed out into a small flagstone courtyard that underscores the peculiar status of the Phanar. It is revered as the ecclesiastical capital of the Orthodox world, but it is crammed into a space no bigger than a midsize hotel, and surrounded by a Muslim society that has treated it with undisguised hostility. The compound is overshadowed by the minaret of a neighboring mosque, whose PA system loudly proclaims the Islamic call to prayer five times a day. The clergy must change out of their clerical garb every time they leave the compound, lest they offend Muslim sensibilities.

I had a chance to speak with Bartholomew at an evening reception after an electric-violin concert in his honor at a Greek school in Istanbul. It was surprisingly easy to thread my way through a thicket of fawning diplomats, visiting Catholic bishops, and waiters balancing trays of wine and hors d’oeuvres—and there he was, seated in an armchair. He beckoned to me, and as I sat down he gave my forearm a paternal squeeze. Up close, Bartholomew has a rosy, patchy complexion, and his white beard looks almost like a rectangle of smoke spreading south from his chin. He spoke excellent English; when we were interrupted a few times by well-wishers, he conversed with them in French, Greek, and Turkish. He seemed very much at ease, answering my questions about the Church and its traditions as well as about his two highest priorities as patriarch—fostering greater openness to other sects and

religions, and protecting the environment. As for the Ukraine war, he said bluntly that “Kirill is allowing himself to be a tool, to be an instrument of Putin.”

I asked him about the political inconvenience of being based in Istanbul. Bartholomew conceded that the Turks were difficult hosts, but added: “It’s better for us to be in a non-Orthodox country. If we were in Greece, we would be a Greek Church. If we were in Bulgaria, we would be a Bulgarian Church. Being here, we can be a supranational Church.” This larger role is the reason the Istanbul Church is known as the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Broadening the Church’s mission has been a hallmark of Bartholomew’s career. He was born Demetrios Archondonis on the Aegean island of Imvros in 1940, just two decades after Turkey’s Greek Christian population had been decimated by violence and forced exile in the aftermath of the First World War. A local bishop saw his potential and paid for him to go to secondary school. He continued on to seminary and then to study in Rome, where he arrived in 1963 amid the theological ferment of the Second Vatican Council. Bartholomew had a front-row seat, meeting with council delegates, theologians, and other prominent Catholic figures. The Orthodox Church was, if anything, more rigidly traditional than the Roman Church, and Bartholomew seems to have been inspired by the Vatican reformers’ efforts to clear away the cobwebs.

He was no firebrand. But he spoke consistently in favor of modernizing the Church and fostering greater openness. Despite the Church’s overall conservatism, he had a few role models in this, including his godfather, Archbishop Iakovos, who was the Phanar’s representative in North and South America from 1959 to 1996—and one of the only non-Black clerics to accompany Martin Luther King Jr. on his march from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery in 1965.

Bartholomew’s most distinctive effort to “update” the Church is his commitment to environmentalism. In the press, he is sometimes called the Green Patriarch. When, in 1997, he declared that abusing the natural environment was a sin against God, he became the first major religious leader to articulate such a position. Perhaps more controversial—at least to some Orthodox Christians—is Bartholomew’s emphatic call for believers to accept unreservedly the findings of modern science and medicine. He believes in evolution, and regularly reminds his followers that the first life forms emerged on the planet some 4 billion years ago.

**BARTHOLOMEW AND KIRILL** have at least one thing in common: Both grew up as Christians in the shadow of rigidly secular rulers. But the Turkish republic was mild compared with the Bolshevik

## As Putin sought to revive his country's lost status, the Orthodox Church was a superb way to spread propaganda and influence.

regime, whose Marxist faith decreed that religion was illusory and backward—the “opium of the people.” The Bolsheviks were especially keen on destroying the Orthodox Church, because of its deep ties to czarist tradition. In the decade following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the new rulers imprisoned and executed thousands of Orthodox priests and bishops.

By the time Kirill was born, in 1946, Joseph Stalin had changed tack, feeling that he needed religion to shore up popular support. He revived the Church in zombified form, an instrument of the state that was massively surveilled and controlled by the security services. When some of the KGB’s archives were exposed in 2014—thanks in part to the brave efforts of the late Gleb Yakunin, a dissident Russian priest who spent years in prison—the collusion of the Church’s leaders was revealed. One of the collaborating clerics, whose code name in the files is Drodov (“The Thrush”), is alleged to be Patriarch Alexy II, Kirill’s immediate predecessor. Kirill’s name did not come up in the files, but he was the product of a system in which advancement was impossible without the approval of the regime.

As the Soviet Union collapsed, the Church faced a crisis of identity. Kirill was one of its most visible and charismatic leaders, and for a brief moment, he seemed to urge a new and more democratic direction for the Church. But as Russian society descended into chaos and gangsterism, Kirill staked out much more conservative and autocratic views.

By the time Putin came to power, in 1999, some of his old KGB friends had already started getting religion. It made a certain kind of sense that the most devout and pitiless Communists were those who most needed a new faith, and many of them had already spent years collaborating with Church figures. Putin made his first visit to Mount Athos in 2005, attending services at St. Panteleimon and climbing the monastery’s bell tower. A year later, one of his old confidants from the KGB helped found the Russian Athos Society to organize donations to the monasteries there. Putin’s own religious feelings are hard to discern, though he is rumored to have been brought into the Orthodox faith in the ’90s by a priest named Tikhon Shevkunov, who ran a monastery not far from the FSB’s Moscow headquarters.

In 2008, a documentary called *The Fall of an Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium* was broadcast on Russian state television, not once but three times. The director and star was the same Tikhon Shevkunov. The movie’s thesis was that Byzantium had been irreversibly undermined even before Ottoman armies conquered it in 1453, its religious culture and resolve eroded by the individualism of the encroaching West. Russia was held up as Byzantium’s heir, the natural vehicle of its holy mission. Historians pilloried the

show as historically illiterate, but they were missing the point. It wasn’t really about the past. It was a blueprint for the future.

Kirill became patriarch in 2009. Soon afterward, Putin began invoking Orthodoxy when talking about Russia and its role in the world. Thousands of churches have since been built throughout the country, and Putin has made very public visits to Church elders. Kirill “inspired Putin to a great extent, to make him think in civilizational terms,” I was told by Cyril Hovorun, a Ukrainian-born theologian who spent 10 years as a personal assistant and speechwriter to Kirill before resigning in 2012, unhappy with the Church’s direction. Putin’s loyalists quickly began aping their president’s talk of “Holy Russia” and her “satanic” enemies.

Putin’s decision to restore Orthodoxy to its old public role was a shrewd one, whatever his personal religious feelings. The Russian empire had collapsed, but its outlines could still be seen in the Russian Orthodox religious sphere, which extended beyond Russia’s borders and as far afield as Mount Athos and even Jerusalem. For a ruler seeking to revive his country’s lost status, the Church was a superb way to spread propaganda and influence.

If Kirill had any illusions about who stood higher in the new *sinfonia* between Church and state, they were quickly snuffed out. In 2011, he endorsed criticism of corrupt parliamentary elections in Russia. Reports soon appeared in the state-controlled media about luxury apartments belonging to Kirill and his relatives. Other stories began to circulate about billions of dollars in secret bank accounts. One website published a photograph from 2009 in which Kirill could be seen wearing a Breguet watch worth about \$30,000. Kirill denied ever wearing it, but after a bungled effort to airbrush it out of the photo, the Church had to admit that the watch was his and make a humiliating apology. Kirill has shown abject loyalty ever since. At a celebration in honor of his first decade as head of the Russian Church, in 2019, he appeared alongside Putin and thanked God and “especially you, Vladimir Vladimirovich.” (My request for comment from Kirill and the Moscow Patriarchate went unanswered.)

**FOR KIRILL AND PUTIN,** it was not enough to restore the Church’s status in Russia. To reclaim the “Russian world,” they had to wage a much wider battle for influence and prestige, one that would include tarring Bartholomew.

The Russian campaign started in Greece, where there is a natural well of sympathy formed by ancient religious ties and shared enemies. In the mid-2000s, Russian oligarchs began building churches and doling out cash for favors. Bishops who lent holy relics for tours in Russia could make a tidy profit for themselves or their parishes. The Russian investments were followed by a

systematic effort to denigrate Patriarch Bartholomew on hundreds of new Greek-language websites, blogs, and Facebook groups, an online offensive documented by Alexandros Massavetas, a Greek journalist, in his 2019 book, *The Third Rome*. “The message was that Bartholomew is being manipulated by the Turks or the U.S. or the Vatican,” Massavetas told me, “and that only Russia represents the true Orthodox spirit, with Putin as its protector.”

The Phanar overlooked these attacks for years. Bartholomew was working hard to maintain unity at all costs, because he was planning to convene a historic pan-Orthodox gathering that he saw as the crowning achievement of his tenure. The Church had not held a Holy and Great Council for more than 1,000 years, and the planning for this one had begun in 1961. Bartholomew was so keen on making the synod succeed that he accommodated the Russians at every turn. During a preparatory meeting, the Russians objected to proposed language about the Church’s opposition to discrimination and insisted that all references to racial and sexual minorities be deleted. (Kirill seems to see the language of human rights as a tacit endorsement of homosexuality and other supposed sins.) They also demanded that Ukraine’s calls for religious independence be kept off the agenda. Bartholomew caved on it all, even the seating plan.

Then, just a week before the synod’s start date, in 2016—with all the villas booked and ready at a Cretan resort town—the Russians pulled out. They defended their decision by pointing to three much smaller Orthodox bodies (Bulgaria, Georgia, and Antioch) that had withdrawn just beforehand. Although there appear to have been some genuine disagreements about the documents prepared for the meeting, the three smaller Churches have close ties with Moscow, and the Russian move came off as yet another effort to humiliate Bartholomew.

Kirill, though, appears to have miscalculated. His public snub laid bare the divisions in the Church and removed Bartholomew’s incentive to compromise. Archbishop Elpidophoros, who is now the Phanar’s senior bishop in the United States, spoke with me about this episode during a conversation in his Manhattan office, on the Upper East Side. Perhaps the most important consequence of Kirill’s move, he explained, was that it opened the door to giving the Ukrainians what they wanted. “That was the green light,” he said.

THE MOVEMENT for religious independence in Ukraine had been stirring for decades, and it had grown in tandem with

the country’s political confrontations with Moscow. As early as 2008, the head of Ukraine’s Moscow-linked Church at the time, Metropolitan Volodymyr, was declaring that the Church and state should be separate—a position that would be unthinkable in Russia. When Viktor Yanukovych, an instrument of the Kremlin, became president of Ukraine in 2010, he made clear that he wanted the Orthodox Church—the faith of 72 percent of Ukraine’s people—back in its cage. A Ukrainian bishop, Oleksandr Drabynko, told me he was called into the ministry of internal affairs one morning in 2013 for a meeting. One of Yanukovych’s officials delivered a blunt message, Drabynko said:

*In early 2019, Patriarch Bartholomew signed a “tomos of autocephaly” blessing the religious independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.*





*St. Panteleimon Monastery; monks of Mount Athos*

"We must push out Volodymyr because we need someone loyal to us." The official added that with the next Ukrainian election approaching in 2015, "the Church must support our candidate."

The landmark events of 2014, known in Ukraine as the Revolution of Dignity, were more than just a civilian movement to overthrow a corrupt autocrat. The uprising bred a new sense of independence among Ukrainians, thanks in part to the role played by the Orthodox Church. Though some priests supported Yanukovych and his government, many others openly backed the revolt. When police attacked protesters in Kyiv's central square, one bishop allowed them to shelter from the police in his nearby cathedral.

Russia's brazenly neocolonial response to the 2014 revolution—the seizure of Crimea—infuriated Ukrainians and supercharged the movement for a religious divorce from Moscow. In October 2018, just weeks after his tense meeting with Kirill in Istanbul, Bartholomew dissolved the 1686 edict that had given Moscow religious control over Ukraine. He also set in motion the process that would lead to recognition of a new Ukrainian Church, one that would be under Bartholomew's—not Moscow's—jurisdiction.

The Russians were furious, and Kirill severed ties with the Phanar. Worldwide, Moscow began behaving as if it had already become the third Rome. A vivid illustration was provided by events in Africa, where one of the most ancient Orthodox patriarchates is based (in Alexandria, Egypt). Kirill founded a new branch of the Russian Orthodox Church and began targeting the existing Orthodox parishes there, whose leader had

aligned himself with Bartholomew. "Through Facebook and Instagram they approach our followers," Metropolitan Gregorios, a Greek bishop who has been based in Cameroon since 2004, told me. "They begin by sending money. They attach everyone to them, show that Russia is rich, show that they can get more money."

Gregorios, who is 62, spent two hours with me in the lobby of an Athens hotel as he described Russia's religious efforts across Africa, which he said are funded by the Wagner mercenary force. Orthodox priests are more vulnerable to bribery than their Roman Catholic peers, Gregorios explained, because they are allowed to marry, and

many have large families to provide for. "So the Russians say, 'We'll give education for your kids.' They bring a motorcycle, a car. They say, 'The Greeks just give bicycles.' And they double the salaries we pay." Last year, he said, he lost six priests in his jurisdiction: "They got approached by the Russians and offered 300 euros a month." Gregorios later shared with me some of the documents that priests under Russia's thumb must sign, swearing loyalty to the patriarch of Moscow "to my dying day."

The Russian Church has made similarly aggressive moves in Turkey, the Balkans, and elsewhere. Russia's secret services appear to be involved in some of these operations. In September, the North Macedonian government expelled a high-ranking Russian priest and three Russian diplomats, accusing them of spying. A week later, the same priest, Vassian Zmeev, was expelled from Bulgaria. According to Nikolay Krastev, a journalist in Sofia, Zmeev appears to have been organizing efforts to divide the Balkan Orthodox Churches and shore up opposition to the new Ukrainian Church. All of this bullying has had its effect: Only four Orthodox branches (out of about 17, depending on how you count) have recognized the new Ukrainian Church approved by Bartholomew.

In late 2021, weary of the conflict and worried that it was damaging all of Orthodoxy, Bartholomew reached out to the Russians—and was rebuffed. The Moscow Patriarchate "sent us a message saying that there is no way we will engage in any dialogue," Archbishop Elpidophoros recalled. The Russians, he went on, declared that "the wound is so deep that we will need

at least two generations to overcome.” The message may not have been entirely sincere. Russia was already planning what it believed would be a much quicker resolution to its Ukraine problems, one that did not include dialogue.

**THE MONASTERY OF THE CAVES**, in Kyiv, may be the most important Christian site in the Slavic world. Founded around 1050 C.E. by a monk from Mount Athos, it is a large complex of golden-domed churches, bell towers, and underground tunnels, ringed by stone walls and set on a hill overlooking the Dnieper River, in the center of the city. In the early days of the Russian invasion, in February 2022, there were rumors of a plan to parachute Russian special forces into the monastery grounds. Welcomed by friendly Orthodox priests, the invaders would quickly move on to the government buildings nearby and gain control of the capital.

The rumors were false, but they sounded plausible to many Ukrainian ears. The Russian military and its proxies had begun using Orthodox monasteries and churches as bases as soon as they arrived in eastern Ukraine in 2014, and have continued to do so over the past two years in occupied areas. They have even publicized the fact, in an apparent effort to show that the Church is on their side. Many priests, including prominent figures, did support Russia. The senior cleric at the Monastery of the Caves, Metropolitan Pavel, was well known for his pro-Moscow sympathies.

But the violence of the 2022 invasion united Ukrainians, and Kirill’s efforts to sprinkle it with holy water—describing those who opposed the Russians as “evil forces” and praising the “metaphysical significance” of the Russian advance—made him a widely hated figure. Many Ukrainians now view the Moscow-linked branch, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, with deep suspicion. The Ukrainian security services have carried out regular raids on its churches and monasteries over the past two years, including the Monastery of the Caves. Dozens of priests have been arrested and charged with espionage and other crimes. This past October, Ukraine’s Parliament approved a measure that could ban the Russia-backed Church altogether. That Church still has more parishes in Ukraine than its newer, independent rival, but its long-term prospects appear grim.

The loss of all of Ukrainian Orthodoxy would be a serious blow for Kirill. At its peak, Ukraine accounted for about a third of the parishes claimed by the Russian Orthodox Church. Ukraine also has a much higher rate of churchgoing than Russia, where actual piety seems to be rare—a fact that sits awkwardly with Kirill’s broadsides against the moral depravity of the West. Barely two months after the invasion, a well-known Russian priest and blogger named Pavel Ostrovsky—who was not ordinarily a regime critic—unleashed a tirade on Telegram: “Some argue that Russia is a stronghold of everything noble and good, which is fighting against world evil, satanism, and paganism,” he wrote. “What is all this nonsense? How can one be a noble stronghold with a 73 percent rate of divorce in families, where drunkenness and drug addiction are rampant, while theft and outright godlessness flourish?”

IT IS TEMPTING to conclude that Russia’s efforts to capture world Orthodoxy will prove to be a losing bet. Religious leaders

of all kinds have denounced Kirill’s embrace of the war, including Pope Francis, who famously told him not to be “Putin’s altar boy.” It may even be, as Archbishop Elpidophoros told me, that “the Patriarchate of Moscow is not a Church” so much as a convenient vehicle for nationalist ideology. The Russian people, he assured me, are the foremost victims of this religious tyranny.

The archbishop may be right about the Moscow Patriarchate: that it’s not a Church, not in the sense that we have long accepted in the West. That said, it’s not just an arm of the Kremlin. It is something more dangerous, a two-headed beast that can summon ancient religious loyalty even as it draws on all the resources of a 21st-century police state: internet trolls, abundant cash, the tacit threat of violence. Perhaps the most troubling possibility is that Kirill’s Church, with its canny blend of politics and faith, turns out to be better adapted to survival in our century than mainstream Churches are.

There are certainly dissenters from Kirill’s jingoistic line among the 40,000 Orthodox priests in Russia. But most clerics are pliant, and a vocal minority are even more extreme than their patriarch. Andrei Tkachev, an archpriest who was born in Ukraine and now lives in Moscow, has become notorious for sermons in which he asserts that “a warrior’s death is best of all.” He has millions of followers on social media. Other priests have reinterpreted Christian doctrine in ways that recall the Crusades. Online, you can easily find videos of Igor Cheremnykh, another well-known priest, asserting that the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” is meant to apply to the behavior only of civilians, not of soldiers. Cyril Hovorun, Kirill’s former assistant, knows many of these priests personally. He calls them “turbo-Z Orthodox.” (Z is used as a symbol of Russia’s war.) Some of them were aligned with or even personally close to Yevgeny Prigozhin, the late oligarch and leader of the Wagner Group. “This monster has outgrown its creators,” Hovorun told me. “It’s a Frankenstein.”

The day after I met Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul, I went for a walk near the Phanar. The Feast of Saint Andrew was over, and the ancient streets were no longer full of pilgrims. A cold drizzle fell. As I walked past the relics of dead civilizations—Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman—I found myself wondering if Orthodoxy would ultimately split into two religions, or just weaken itself through bickering, like the Christians who once ruled Constantinople.

It may be that Kirill and his angry zealots represent the last sparks of a dying flame. This is what Bartholomew has been assuring his flock: that he is bringing the Church into the future, while Kirill is holding on to the past. But as a patriarch in Istanbul, he must also know that the arc of history doesn’t always bend the way we want it to. *A*

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# A Meatball By Gary





# at Sea Shteyngart

Seven nights  
aboard the  
biggest cruise  
ship that has  
ever sailed

# My first glimpse

Day 1

of Royal Caribbean's Icon of the Seas, from the window of an approaching Miami cab, brings on a feeling of vertigo, nausea, amazement, and distress. I shut my eyes in defense, as my brain tells my optical nerve to try again.

The ship makes no sense, vertically or horizontally. It makes no sense on sea, or on land, or in outer space. It looks like a hodgepodge of domes and minarets, tubes and canopies, like Istanbul had it been designed by idiots. Vibrant, oversignifying colors are stacked upon other such colors, decks perched over still more decks; the only comfort is a row of lifeboats ringing its perimeter. There is no imposed order, no cogent thought, and, for those who do not harbor a totalitarian sense of gigantomania, no visual mercy. This is the biggest cruise ship ever built, and I have been tasked with witnessing its inaugural voyage.

"Author embarks on their first cruise-ship voyage" has been a staple of American essay writing for almost three decades, beginning with David Foster Wallace's "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," which was first published in 1996 under the title "Shipping Out." Since then, many admirable writers have widened and diversified the genre. Usually the essayist commissioned to take to the sea is in their first or second flush of youth and is ready to sharpen their wit against the hull of the offending vessel. I am 51, old and tired, having seen much of the world as a former travel journalist, and mostly what I do in both life and prose is shrug while muttering to my imaginary dachshund, "This too shall pass." But the Icon of the Seas will not countenance a shrug. The Icon of the Seas is the Linda Loman of cruise ships,



The author tries to make friends at the world's largest swim-up bar at sea.

exclaiming that attention must be paid. And here I am in late January with my one piece of luggage and useless gray winter jacket and passport, zipping through the Port of Miami en route to the gangway that will separate me from the bulk of North America for more than seven days, ready to pay it in full.

The aforementioned gangway opens up directly onto a thriving mall (I will soon learn it is imperiously called the “Royal Promenade”), presently filled with yapping passengers beneath a ceiling studded with balloons ready to drop. Crew members from every part of the global South, as well as a few Balkans, are shepherding us along while pressing flutes of champagne into our hands. By a humming Starbucks, I drink as many of these as I can and prepare to find my cabin. I show my blue Suite Sky SeaPass Card (more on this later, much more) to a smiling woman from the Philippines, and she tells me to go “aft.” Which is where, now? As someone who has rarely sailed on a vessel grander than the Staten Island Ferry, I am confused. It

turns out that the aft is the stern of the ship, or, for those of us who don’t know what a stern or an aft are, its ass. The

a dedicated Suite Deck lounge; access to Coastal Kitchen, a superior restaurant for Suites passengers; complimentary VOOM<sup>SM</sup> Surf & Stream (“the fastest Internet at Sea”) “for one device per person for the whole cruise duration”; a pair of bathrobes (one of which comes prestained with what looks like a large expectoration by the greenest lizard on Earth); and use of the Grove Suite Sun, an area on Decks 18 and 19 with food and deck chairs reserved exclusively for Suite passengers. I also get reserved seating for a performance of *The Wizard of Oz*, an ice-skating tribute to the periodic table, and similar provocations. The very color of my Suite Sky SeaPass Card, an oceanic blue as opposed to the cloying royal purple of the standard non-Suite passenger, will soon provoke envy and admiration. But as high as my status may be, there are those on board who have much higher status still, and I will soon learn to bow before them.

In preparation for sailing, I have “priced in,” as they say on Wall Street, the possibility that I may come from a somewhat different *monde* than many of the other cruisers. Without falling into stereotypes or preconceptions, I prepare myself for a friendly outspokenness on the part of my fellow seafarers that may not comply with modern DEI standards. I believe in meeting people halfway, and so the day before flying down to Miami,

I visited what remains

## *I naively thought that my meatball T-shirt would be suitable for conversation-starting.*

nose of the ship, responsible for separating the waves before it, is also called a bow, and is marked for passengers as the FWD, or forward. The part of the contemporary sailing vessel where the malls are clustered is called the midship. I trust that you have enjoyed this nautical lesson.

I ascend via elevator to my suite on Deck 11. This is where I encounter my first terrible surprise. My suite windows and balcony do not face the ocean. Instead, they look out onto another shopping mall. This mall is the one that’s called Central Park, perhaps in homage to the Olmsted-designed bit of greenery in the middle of my hometown. Although on land I would be delighted to own a suite with Central Park views, here I am deeply depressed. To sail on a ship and not wake up to a vast blue carpet of ocean? Unthinkable.

Allow me a brief preamble here. The story you are reading was commissioned at a moment when most staterooms on the Icon were sold out. In fact, so enthralled by the prospect of this voyage were hard-core mariners that the ship’s entire inventory of guest rooms (the Icon can accommodate up to 7,600 passengers, but its inaugural journey was reduced to 5,000 or so for a less crowded experience) was almost immediately sold out. Hence, this publication was faced with the shocking prospect of paying nearly \$19,000 to procure for this solitary passenger an entire suite—not including drinking expenses—all for the privilege of bringing you this article. But the suite in question doesn’t even have a view of the ocean! I sit down hard on my soft bed. Nineteen thousand dollars for *this*.

The viewless suite does have its pluses. In addition to all the Malin+Goetz products in my dual bathrooms, I am granted use of

of Little Italy to purchase a popular T-shirt that reads DADDY’S LITTLE MEAT-BALL across the breast in the colors of the Italian flag. My wife recommended that I bring one of my many T-shirts featuring Snoopy and the *Peanuts* gang, as all Americans love the beagle and his friends. But I naively thought that my meatball T-shirt would be more suitable for conversation-starting. “Oh, and who is your ‘daddy?’” some might ask upon seeing it. “And how long have you been his ‘little meatball?’” And so on.

I put on my meatball T-shirt and head for one of the dining rooms to get a late lunch. In the elevator, I stick out my chest for all to read the funny legend upon it, but soon I realize that despite its burnished tricolor letters, no one takes note. More to the point, no one takes note of me. Despite my attempts at bridge building, the very sight of me (small, ethnic, without a cap bearing the name of a football team) elicits no reaction from other passengers. Most often, they will small-talk over me as if I don’t exist. This brings to mind the travails of David Foster Wallace, who felt so ostracized by his fellow passengers that he retreated to his cabin for much of his voyage. And Wallace was raised primarily in the Midwest and was a much larger, more American-looking meatball than I am. If he couldn’t talk to these people, how will I? What if I leave this ship without making any friends at all, despite my T-shirt? I am a social creature, and the prospect of seven days alone and apart is saddening. Wallace’s stateroom, at least, had a view of the ocean, a kind of cheap eternity.

Worse awaits me in the dining room. This is a large, multi-chandeliered room where I attended my safety training (I was shown how to put on a flotation vest; it is a very simple procedure). But the maître d' politely refuses me entry in an English that seems to verge on another language. "I'm sorry, this is only for *pendejos*," he seems to be saying. I push back politely and he repeats himself. *Pendejos?* Piranhas? There's some kind of P-word to which I am not attuned. Meanwhile elderly passengers stream right past, powered by their limbs, walkers, and electric wheelchairs. "It is only *pendejo* dining today, sir." "But I have a suite!" I say, already starting to catch on to the ship's class system. He examines my card again. "But you are not a *pendejo*," he confirms. I am wearing a DADDY'S LITTLE MEATBALL T-shirt, I want to say to him. I am the essence of *pendejo*.

Eventually, I give up and head to the plebeian buffet on Deck 15, which has an aquatic-styled name I have now forgotten. Before gaining entry to this endless cornucopia of reheated food, one passes a washing station of many sinks and soap dispensers, and perhaps the most intriguing character on the entire ship. He is Mr. Washy Washy—or, according to his name tag, Nielbert of the Philippines—and he is dressed as a taco (on other occasions, I'll see him dressed as a burger). Mr. Washy Washy performs an eponymous song in spirited, indeed flamboyant English: "Washy, washy, wash your hands, WASHY WASHY!" The dangers of norovirus and COVID on a cruise ship this size (a giant fellow ship was stricken with the former right after my voyage) makes Mr. Washy Washy an essential member of the crew. The problem lies with the food at the end of Washy's rainbow. The buffet is groaning with what sounds like sophisticated dishes—marinated octopus, boiled egg with anchovy, chorizo, lobster claws—but every animal tastes tragically the same, as if there was only one creature available at the market, a "cruisipus" bred specifically for Royal Caribbean dining. The "vegetables" are no better. I pick up a tomato slice and look right through it. It tastes like cellophane. I sit alone, apart from the couples and parents with gaggles of children, as "We Are Family" echoes across the buffet space.



The aquatic rides remind the author of his latest colonoscopy.

I may have failed to mention that all this time, the Icon of the Seas has not left port. As the fiery mango of the subtropical setting sun makes Miami's condo skyline even more apocalyptic, the ship shoves off beneath a perfunctory display of fireworks. After the sun sets, in the far, dark distance, another circus-lit cruise ship ruptures the waves before us. We glance at it with pity, because it is by definition a smaller ship than our own. I am on Deck 15, outside the buffet and overlooking a bunch of pools (the Icon has seven of them), drinking a frilly drink that I got from one of the bars (the Icon has 15 of them), still too shy to speak to anyone, despite Sister Sledge's assertion that all on the ship are somehow related.

“Ayn Rand, she  
came here with  
nothing.”

The ship's passage away from Ron DeSantis's Florida provides no frisson, no sense of developing "sea legs," as the ship is too large to register the presence of waves unless a mighty wind adds significant chop. It is time for me to register the presence of the 5,000 passengers around me, even if they refuse to register mine. My fellow travelers have prepared for this trip with personally decorated T-shirts celebrating the importance of this voyage. The simplest ones say ICON INAUGURAL '24 on the back and the family name on the front. Others attest to an over-the-top love of cruise ships: WARNING! MAY START TALKING ABOUT CRUISING. Still others are artisanally designed and celebrate lifetimes spent married while cruising (on ships, of course). A couple possibly in their 90s are wearing shirts whose backs feature a drawing of a cruise liner, two flamingos with ostensibly male and female characteristics, and the legend "HUSBAND AND WIFE *Cruising Partners for Life* WE MAY NOT HAVE IT All Together BUT TOGETHER WE HAVE IT ALL." (The words not in all caps have been written in cursive.) A real journalist or a more intrepid conversationalist would have gone up to the couple and asked them to explain the longevity of their marriage vis-à-vis their love of cruising. But instead I head to my mall suite, take off my meatball T-shirt, and allow the first tears of the cruise to roll down my cheeks slowly enough that I briefly fall asleep amid the moisture and salt.

# I wake up with a hangover.

Day 2

Oh God. Right. I cannot believe all of *that* happened last night. A name floats into my cobwebbed, nauseated brain: “Ayn Rand.” Jesus Christ.

I breakfast alone at the Coastal Kitchen. The coffee tastes fine and the eggs came out of a bird. The ship rolls slightly this morning; I can feel it in my thighs and my schlong, the parts of me that are most receptive to danger.

I had a dangerous conversation last night. After the sun set and we were at least 50 miles from shore (most modern cruise ships sail at about 23 miles an hour), I lay in bed softly hiccupping, my arms stretched out exactly like Jesus on the cross, the sound of the distant waves missing from my mall-facing suite, replaced by the hum of air-conditioning and children shouting in Spanish through the vents of my two bathrooms. I decided this passivity was unacceptable. As an immigrant, I feel duty-bound to complete the tasks I am paid for, which means reaching out and trying to understand my fellow cruisers. So I put on a normal James Perse T-shirt and headed for one of the bars on the Royal Promenade—the Schooner Bar, it was called, if memory serves correctly.

I sat at the bar for a martini and two Negronis. An old man with thick, hairy forearms drank next to me, very silent and Hemingwaylike, while a dreadlocked piano player tinkled out a series of excellent Elton John covers. To my right, a young white couple—he in floral shorts, she in a light, summery miniskirt with a fearsome diamond ring, neither of them in football regalia—chatted with an elderly couple. *Do it, I commanded myself. Open your mouth. Speak! Speak without being spoken to. Initiate.* A sentence fragment caught my ear from the young woman, “Cherry Hill.” This is a suburb of Philadelphia in New Jersey, and I had once been there for a reading at a synagogue. “Excuse me,” I said gently to her. “Did you just mention Cherry Hill? It’s a lovely place.”

As it turned out, the couple now lived in Fort Lauderdale (the number of Floridians on the cruise surprised me, given that Southern Florida is itself a kind of cruise ship, albeit one slowly sinking), but soon they were talking with me exclusively—the man potbellied, with a chin like a hard-boiled egg; the woman as svelte as if she were one of the many Ukrainian members of the crew—the elderly couple next to them forgotten. This felt as groundbreaking as the first time I dared to address an American in his native tongue, as a child on a bus in Queens (“On my foot you are standing, Mister”).

“I don’t want to talk politics,” the man said. “But they’re going to eighty-six Biden and put Michelle in.”

I considered the contradictions of his opening conversational gambit, but decided to play along. “People like Michelle,” I said, testing the waters. The husband sneered, but the wife charitably put forward that the former first lady was “more personable” than Joe Biden. “They’re gonna eighty-six Biden,” the husband repeated. “He can’t put a sentence together.”

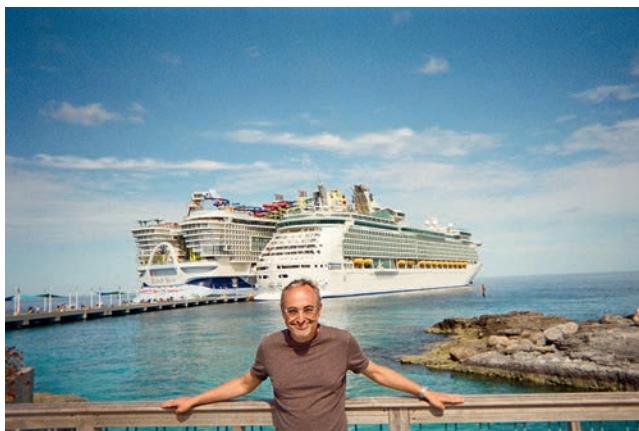
After I mentioned that I was a writer—though I presented myself as a writer of teleplays instead of novels and articles such as this one—the husband told me his favorite writer was Ayn Rand. “Ayn Rand, she came here with nothing,” the husband said. “I work with a lot of Cubans, so …” I wondered if I should mention what I usually do to ingratiate myself with Republicans or libertarians: the fact that my finances improved after pass-through corporations were taxed differently under Donald Trump. Instead, I ordered another drink and the couple did the same, and I told him that Rand and I were born in the same city, St. Petersburg/Leningrad, and that my family also came here with nothing. Now the bonding and drinking began in earnest, and several more rounds appeared. Until it all fell apart.

My new friend, whom I will refer to as Ayn, called out to a buddy of his across the bar, and suddenly a young couple, both covered in tattoos, appeared next to us. “He fucking punked me,” Ayn’s frat-boy-like friend called out as he put his arm around Ayn, while his sizable partner sizzled up to Mrs. Rand. Both of them had a look I have never seen on land—their eyes projecting absence and enmity in equal measure. In the ’90s, I drank with Russian soldiers fresh from Chechnya and wandered the streets of wartime Zagreb, but I have never seen such undisguised hostility toward both me and perhaps the universe at large. I was briefly introduced to this psychopathic pair, but neither of them wanted to have anything to do with me, and the tattooed woman would not even reveal her Christian name to me (she pretended to have the same first name as Mrs. Rand). To impress his tattooed friends, Ayn made fun of the fact that as a television writer, I’d worked on the series *Succession* (which, it would turn out, practically nobody on the ship had watched), instead of the far more palatable, in his eyes, zombie drama of last year. And then my new friends drifted away from me into an angry private conversation—“He punked me!”—as I ordered another drink for myself, scared of the dead-eyed arrivals whose gaze never registered in the dim wattage of the Schooner Bar, whose terrifying voices and hollow laughs grated like unoiled gears against the crooning of “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road.”

But today is a new day for me and my hangover. After breakfast, I explore the ship's so-called neighborhoods. There's the AquaDome, where one can find a food hall and an acrobatic sound-and-light aquatic show. Central Park has a premium steak house, a sushi joint, and a used Rolex that can be bought for \$8,000 on land here proudly offered at \$17,000. There's the aforementioned Royal Promenade, where I had drunk with the Rands, and where a pair of dueling pianos duel well into the night. There's Surfside, a kids' neighborhood full of sugary garbage, which looks out onto the frothy trail that the behemoth leaves behind itself. Thrill Island refers to the collection of tubes that clutter the ass of the ship and offer passengers six waterslides and a surfing simulation. There's the Hideaway, an adult zone that plays music from a vomit-slathered, Brit-filled Alicante nightclub circa 1996 and proves a big favorite with groups of young Latin American customers. And, most hurtfully, there's the Suite Neighborhood.

I say hurtfully because as a Suite passenger I should be here, though my particular suite is far from the others. Whereas I am stuck amid the riffraff of Deck 11, this section is on the high-born Decks 16 and 17, and in passing, I peek into the spacious, tall-ceilinged staterooms from the hallway, dazzled by the glint

of the waves and sun. For \$75,000, one multifloor suite even comes with its own slide between floors, so that a family may enjoy this particular terror in private. There is a quiet splendor to the Suite Neighborhood. I see fewer stickers and signs and drawings than in my own neighborhood—for example, MIKE AND DIANA PROUDLY SERVED U.S. MARINE CORPS RETIRED. No one here needs to announce their branch of service or rank; they are simply Suites, and this is where they belong. Once again, despite my hard work and perseverance, I have been disallowed from the true American elite. Once again, I am "Not our class, dear." I am reminded of watching *The Love Boat* on my grandmother's Zenith, which either was given to her or we found in the trash (I get our many malfunctioning Zeniths confused) and whose tube got so hot, I would put little chunks of government cheese on a thin tissue atop it to give our welfare treat a pleasant, Reagan-era gooeyness. I could not understand English well enough then to catch the nuances of that seafaring program, but I knew that there were differences in the status of the passengers, and that sometimes those differences made them sad. Still, this ship, this plenty—every few steps, there are complimentary nachos or milkshakes or gyros on offer—was the fatty fuel of my childhood dreams. If only I had remained a child.



*Clockwise from top left:* Docked at Royal Caribbean's own Bahamian island, known as the Perfect Day at CocoCay; seafood pizza; the author's special T-shirt; the Icon leaves a giant wake in its path.

I walk around the outdoor decks looking for company. There is a middle-aged African American couple who always seem to be asleep in each other's arms, probably exhausted from the late capitalism they regularly encounter on land. There is far more diversity on this ship than I expected. Many couples are a testament to *Loving v. Virginia*, and there is a large group of folks whose T-shirts read MELANIN AT SEA / IT'S THE MELANIN FOR ME. I smile when I see them, but then some young kids from the group makes Mr. Washy Washy do a cruel, caricatured "Burger Dance" (today he is in his burger getup), and I think, *Well, so much for intersectionality.*

At the infinity pool on Deck 17, I spot some elderly women who could be ethnic and from my part of the world, and so I jump in. I am proved correct! Many of them seem to be originally from Queens ("Corona was still great when it was all Italian"), though they are now spread across the tristate area. We bond over the way "Ron-kon-koma" sounds when announced in Penn Station.

"Everyone is here for a different reason," one of them tells me. She and her ex-husband last sailed together four years ago to prove to themselves that their marriage was truly over. Her 15-year-old son lost his virginity to "an Irish young lady" while their ship was moored in Ravenna, Italy. The gaggle of old-timers competes to tell me their favorite cruising stories and tips. "A guy proposed in Central Park a couple of years ago"—many Royal Caribbean ships apparently have this ridiculous communal area—"and she ran away screaming!" "If you're diamond-class, you get four drinks for free." "A different kind of passenger sails out of Bayonne." (This, perhaps, is racially coded.) "Sometimes, if you tip the bartender \$5, your next drink will be free."

"Everyone's here for a different reason," the woman whose marriage ended on a cruise tells me again. "Some people are here for bad reasons—the drinkers and the gamblers. Some people are here for medical reasons." I have seen more than a few oxygen tanks and at least one woman clearly undergoing very serious chemo. Some T-shirts celebrate good news about a cancer diagnosis. This might be someone's last cruise or week on Earth. For these women, who have spent months, if not years, at sea, cruising is a ritual as well as a life cycle: first love, last love, marriage, divorce, death.

I have talked with these women for so long, tonight I promise myself that after a sad solitary dinner I will not try to seek out company at the bars in the mall or the adult-themed Hideaway. I have enough material to fulfill my duties to this publication. As I approach my orphaned suite, I run into the aggro young people who stole Mr. and Mrs. Rand away from me the night before. The tattooed apparitions pass me without a glance. She is singing something violent about "Stuttering Stanley" (a character in a popular horror movie, as I discover with my complimentary VOOM<sup>SM</sup> Surf & Stream Internet at Sea) and he's loudly shouting about "all the money I've lost," presumably at the casino in the bowels of the ship.

So these bent psychos out of a Cormac McCarthy novel are angrily inhabiting my deck. As I mewl myself to sleep, I envision a limited series for HBO or some other streamer, a kind of low-rent

*White Lotus*, where several aggressive couples conspire to throw a shy intellectual interloper overboard. I type the scenario into my phone. As I fall asleep, I think of what the woman who recently divorced her husband and whose son became a man through the good offices of the Irish Republic told me while I was hoisting myself out of the infinity pool. "I'm here because I'm an explorer. I'm here because I'm trying something new." What if I allowed myself to believe in her fantasy?

# “You really started at the top,”

Day 3

they tell me. I'm at the Coastal Kitchen for my eggs and corned-beef hash, and the maître d' has slotted me in between two couples. Fueled by coffee or perhaps intrigued by my relative youth, they strike up a conversation with me. As always, people are shocked that this is my first cruise. They contrast the Icon favorably with all the preceding liners in the Royal Caribbean fleet, usually commenting on the efficiency of the elevators that hurl us from deck to deck (as in many large corporate buildings, the elevators ask you to choose a floor and then direct you to one of many lifts). The couple to my right, from Palo Alto—he refers to his "porn mustache" and calls his wife "my cougar" because she is two years older—tell me they are "Pandemic Pinnacles."

This is the day that my eyes will be opened. Pinnacles, it is explained to me over translucent cantaloupe, have sailed with Royal Caribbean for 700 ungodly nights. Pandemic Pinnacles took advantage of the two-for-one accrual rate of Pinnacle points during the pandemic, when sailing on a cruise ship was even more ill-advised, to catapult themselves into Pinnacle status.

Because of the importance of the inaugural voyage of the world's largest cruise liner, more than 200 Pinnacles are on this ship, a startling number, it seems. Mrs. Palo Alto takes out a golden badge that I have seen affixed over many a breast, which reads CROWN AND ANCHOR SOCIETY along with her name. This is the coveted badge of the Pinnacle. "You should hear all the whining in Guest Services," her husband tells me. Apparently, the Pinnacles who are not also Suites like us are all trying to use their status to get into Coastal Kitchen, our elite restaurant. Even a Pinnacle needs to be a Suite to access this level of corned-beef hash.

"We're just baby Pinnacles," Mrs. Palo Alto tells me, describing a kind of internal class struggle among the Pinnacle elite for ever higher status.

And now I understand what the maître d' was saying to me on the first day of my cruise. He wasn't saying "*pendejo*." He was saying "Pinnacle." The dining room was for Pinnacles only, all those older people rolling in like the tide on their motorized scooters.

And now I understand something else: *This whole thing is a cult*. And like most cults, it can't help but mirror the endless American fight for status. Like Keith Raniere's NXIVM, where different-colored sashes were given out to connote rank among Raniere's branded acolytes, this is an endless competition among Pinnacles, Suites, Diamond-Plusers, and facing-the-mall, no-balcony purple SeaPass Card peasants, not to mention the many distinctions within each category. The more you cruise, the higher your status. No wonder a section of the Royal Promenade is devoted to getting passengers to book their *next* cruise during the one they should be enjoying now. No wonder desperate Royal Caribbean offers ("FINAL HOURS") crowded my email account weeks before I set sail. No wonder the ship's jewelry store, the Royal Bling, is selling a \$100,000 golden chalice that will entitle its owner to drink free on Royal Caribbean cruises for life. (One passenger was already gaming out whether her 28-year-old son was young enough to

"just about earn out" on the chalice or if that ship had sailed.) No wonder this ship was sold out months before departure, and we had to pay \$19,000 for a horrid suite away from the Suite Neighborhood. No wonder the most mythical hero of Royal Caribbean lore is someone named Super Mario, who has cruised so often, he now has his own working desk on many ships. This whole experience is part cult, part nautical pyramid scheme.

"The toilets are amazing," the Palo Altos are telling me. "One flush and you're done." "They don't understand how energy-efficient these ships are," the husband of the other couple is telling me. "They got the LNG"—liquefied natural gas, which is supposed to make the Icon a boon to the environment (a concept widely disputed and sometimes ridiculed by environmentalists).

But I'm thinking along a different line of attack as I spear my last pallid slice of melon. For my streaming limited series, a Pinnacle would have to get killed by either an outright peasant or a Suite without an ocean view. I tell my breakfast companions my idea.

"Oh, for sure a Pinnacle would have to be killed," Mr. Palo Alto, the Pandemic Pinnacle, says, touching his porn mustache thoughtfully as his wife nods.

"**THAT'S RIGHT**, it's your time, buddy!" Hubert, my fun-loving Panamanian cabin attendant, shouts as I step out of my suite in a robe. "Take it easy, buddy!"

Two enormous cruise ships at the Perfect Day at CocoCay, a private island with many of the same amenities as the ship itself



I have come up with a new dressing strategy. Instead of trying to impress with my choice of T-shirts, I have decided to start wearing a robe, as one does at a resort property on land, with a proper spa and hammam. The response among my fellow cruisers has been ecstatic. “Look at you in the robe!” Mr. Rand cries out as we pass each other by the Thrill Island aqua park. “You’re living the cruise life! You know, you really drank me under the table that night.” I laugh as we part ways, but my soul cries out, *Please spend more time with me, Mr. and Mrs. Rand; I so need the company.*

In my white robe, I am a stately presence, a refugee from a better limited series, a one-man crossover episode. (Only Suites are granted these robes to begin with.) Today, I will try many of the activities these ships have on offer to provide their clientele with a sense of never-ceasing motion. Because I am already at Thrill Island, I decide to climb the staircase to what looks like a mast on an old-fashioned ship (terrified, because I am afraid of heights) to try a ride called “Storm Chasers,” which is part of the “Category 6” water park, named in honor of one of the storms that may someday do away with the Port of Miami entirely. Storm Chasers consists of falling from the “mast” down a long, twisting neon tube filled with water, like being the camera inside your own colonoscopy, as you hold on to the handles of a mat, hoping not to die. The tube then flops you down headfirst into a trough of water, a Royal Caribbean baptism. It both knocks my breath out and makes me sad.

In keeping with the aquatic theme, I attend a show at the AquaDome. To the sound of “Live and Let Die,” a man in a harness gyrates to and fro in the sultry air. I saw something very similar in the back rooms of the famed Berghain club in early-aughts Berlin. Soon another harnessed man is gyrating next to the first. *Ja, I think to myself, I know how this ends. Now will come the fisting, natürlich.* But the show soon devolves into the usual Marvel-film-grade nonsense, with too much light and sound signifying *nichts*. If any fisting is happening, it is probably in the Suite Neighborhood, inside a cabin marked with an upside-down pineapple, which I understand means a couple are ready to swing, and I will see none of it.

I go to the ice show, which is a kind of homage—if that’s possible—to the periodic table, done with the style and pomp and masterful precision that would please the likes of Kim Jong Un, if only he could afford Royal Caribbean talent. At one point, the dancers skate to the theme song of *Succession*. “See that!” I want to say to my fellow Suites—at “cultural” events, we have a special section reserved for us away from the commoners—“*Succession!* It’s even better than the zombie show! Open your minds!”

Finally, I visit a comedy revue in an enormous and too brightly lit version of an “intimate,” per Royal Caribbean literature, “Manhattan comedy club.” Many of the jokes are about the cruising life. “I’ve lived on ships for 20 years,” one of the middle-aged comedians says. “I can only see so many Filipino homosexuals dressed as a taco.” He pauses while the audience laughs. “I am so fired tonight,” he says. He segues into a Trump impression and then Biden falling asleep at the microphone, which gets the most laughs. “Anyone here from Fort Leonard Wood?” another

comedian asks. Half the crowd seems to cheer. As I fall asleep that night, I realize another connection I have failed to make, and one that may explain some of the diversity on this vessel—many of its passengers have served in the military.

As a coddled passenger with a suite, I feel like I am starting to understand what it means to have a rank and be constantly reminded of it. *There are many espresso makers,* I think as I look across the expanse of my officer-grade quarters before closing my eyes, *but this one is mine.*

# A shocking sight

greets me beyond the pools of Deck 17 as I saunter over to the Coastal Kitchen for my morning intake of slightly sour Americanos. A tiny city beneath a series of perfectly pressed green mountains. Land! We have docked for a brief respite in Basseterre, the capital of St. Kitts and Nevis. I wolf down my egg scramble to be one of the first passengers off the ship. Once past the gangway, I barely refrain from kissing the ground. I rush into the sights

and sounds of this scruffy island city, sampling incredible conch curry and buckets of non-Starbucks coffee. How wonderful it is to be where God intended humans to be: on land. After all, I am neither a fish nor a mall rat. This is my natural environment. Basseterre may not be Havana, but there are signs of human ingenuity and desire everywhere you look. THE BLACK TABLE GRILL HAS BEEN RELOCATED TO SOHO VILLAGE, MARKET STREET, DIRECTLY BEHIND OF, GARY’S FRUITS AND FLOWER SHOP. SIGNED. THE PORK MAN reads a sign stuck to a wall. Now, *that* is how you write a sign. A real sign, not the come-ons for overpriced Rolexes that blink across the screens of the Royal Promenade.

“Hey, tie your shoestring!” a pair of laughing ladies shout to me across the street.

“Thank you!” I shout back. *Shoestring!* “Thank you very much.”

A man in Independence Square Park comes by and asks if I want to play with his monkey. I haven’t heard that pickup line since the Penn Station of the 1980s. But then he pulls a real monkey out of a bag. The monkey is wearing a diaper and looks insane. *Wonderful, I think, just wonderful!* There is so much life here. I email my editor asking if I can remain on St. Kitts and allow the Icon to sail off into the horizon without me. I have even



priced a flight home at less than \$300, and I have enough material from the first four days on the cruise to write the entire story. "It would be funny ..." my editor replies. "Now get on the boat."

As I slink back to the ship after my brief jailbreak, the locals stand under umbrellas to gaze at and photograph the boat that towers over their small capital city. The limousines of the prime minister and his lackeys are parked beside the gangway. St. Kitts, I've been told, is one of the few islands that would allow a ship of this size to dock.

"We hear about all the waterslides," a sweet young server in one of the cafés told me. "We wish we could go on the ship, but we have to work."

"I want to stay on your island," I replied. "I love it here."

But she didn't understand how I could possibly mean that.

Day 5

# "Washy, washy,

so you don't get stinky, stinky!" kids are singing outside the AquaDome, while their adult minders look on in disapproval, perhaps worried that Mr. Washy Washy is grooming them into a life of gayness. I heard a southern couple skip the buffet entirely out of fear of Mr. Washy Washy.

Meanwhile, I have found a new watering hole for myself, the Swim & Tonic, the biggest swim-up bar on any cruise ship in the world. Drinking next to full-size, nearly naked Americans takes away one's own self-consciousness. The men have curvaceous mom bodies. The women are equally un-shy about their sprawling physiques.

Today I've befriended a bald man with many children who tells me that all of the little trinkets that Royal Caribbean has left us in our staterooms and suites are worth a fortune on eBay. "Eighty dollars for the water bottle, 60 for the lanyard," the man says. "This is a cult."

"Tell me about it," I say. There is, however, a clientele for whom this cruise makes perfect sense. For a large middle-class family (he works in "supply chains"), seven days in a lower-tier cabin—which starts at \$1,800 a person—allow the parents to drop off their children in Surfside, where I imagine many young Filipina crew members will take care of them, while the parents are free to get drunk at a swim-up bar and maybe even get intimate in their cabin. Cruise ships have become, for a certain kind of hardworking family, a form of subsidized child care.

There is another man I would like to befriend at the Swim & Tonic, a tall, bald fellow who is perpetually inebriated and who wears a necklace studded with little rubber duckies in sunglasses, which, I am told, is a sort of secret handshake for cruise aficionados. Tomorrow, I will spend more time with him, but first the

ship docks at St. Thomas, in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Charlotte Amalie, the capital, is more charming in name than in presence, but I still all but jump off the ship to score a juicy oxtail and plantains at the well-known Petite Pump Room, overlooking the harbor. From one of the highest points in the small city, the Icon of the Seas appears bigger than the surrounding hills.

I usually tan very evenly, but something about the discombobulation of life at sea makes me forget the regular application of sunscreen. As I walk down the streets of Charlotte Amalie in my fluorescent Icon of the Seas cap, an old Rastafarian stares me down. "Redneck," he hisses.

"No," I want to tell him, as I bring a hand up to my red neck, "that's not who I am at all. On my island, Mannahatta, as Whitman would have it, I am an interesting person living within an engaging artistic milieu. I do not wish to use the Caribbean as a dumping ground for the cruise-ship industry. I love the work of Derek Walcott. You don't understand. I am not a redneck. And if I am, they did this to me." *They* meaning Royal Caribbean? Its passengers? The Rands?

"They did this to me!"

Back on the Icon, some older matrons are muttering about a run-in with passengers from the Celebrity cruise ship docked next to us, the Celebrity Apex. Although Celebrity Cruises is also owned by Royal Caribbean, I am made to understand that there is a deep fratricidal beef between passengers of the two lines. "We met a woman from the Apex," one matron says, "and she says it was a small ship and there was nothing to do. Her face was as tight as a 19-year-old's, she had so much surgery." With those words, and beneath a cloudy sky, humidity shrouding our weathered faces and red necks, we set sail once again, hopefully in the direction of home.

I overhear the male member of a young couple whisper, "There goes that freak" as I saunter by in my robe.



Inside the AquaDome, one can find a food hall and an acrobatic sound-and-light aquatic show.

Day 6

# There are barely 48 hours left

to the cruise, and the Icon of the Seas' passengers are salty. They know how to work the elevators. They know the Washy Washy song by heart. They understand that the chicken gyro at "Feta Mediterranean," in the AquaDome Market, is the least problematic form of chicken on the ship.

The passengers have shed their INAUGURAL CRUISE T-shirts and are now starting to evince political opinions. There are caps pledging to make America great again and T-shirts that celebrate words sometimes attributed to Patrick Henry: "The Constitution

is not an instrument for the government to restrain the people; it is an instrument for the people to restrain the government." With their preponderance of FAMILY FLAG FAITH FRIENDS FIREARMS T-shirts, the tables by the crepe station sometimes resemble the Capitol Rotunda on January 6. *The Real Anthony Fauci*, by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., appears to be a popular form of literature, especially among young men with very complicated versions of the American flag on their T-shirts. Other opinions blend the personal and the political. "Someone needs to kill Washy guy, right?" a well-dressed man in the elevator tells me, his gray eyes radiating nothing. "Just beat him to death. Am I right?" I overhear the male member of a young couple whisper, "There goes that freak" as I saunter by in my white spa robe, and I decide to retire it for the rest of the cruise.

I visit the Royal Bling to see up close the \$100,000 golden chalice that entitles you to free drinks on Royal Caribbean forever. The pleasant Serbian saleslady explains that the chalice is actually gold-plated and covered in white zirconia instead of diamonds, as it would otherwise cost \$1 million. "If you already have everything," she explains, "this is one more thing you can get."

I believe that anyone who works for Royal Caribbean should be entitled to immediate American citizenship. They already speak English better than most of the passengers and, per the Serbian lady's sales pitch above, better understand what America *is* as well.

Crew members like my Panamanian cabin attendant seem to work 24 hours a day. A waiter from New Delhi tells me that his contract is six months and three weeks long. After a cruise ends, he says, “in a few hours, we start again for the next cruise.” At the end of the half a year at sea, he is allowed a two-to-three-month stay at home with his family. As of 2019, the median income for crew members was somewhere in the vicinity of \$20,000, according to a major business publication. Royal Caribbean would not share the current median salary for its crew members, but I am certain that it amounts to a fraction of the cost of a Royal Bling gold-plated, zirconia-studded chalice.

And because most of the Icon’s hyper-sanitized spaces are just a frittata away from being a Delta lounge, one forgets that there are actual sailors on this ship, charged with the herculean task of docking it in port. “Having driven 100,000-ton aircraft carriers throughout my career,” retired Admiral James G. Stavridis, the former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, writes to me, “I’m not sure I would even know where to begin with trying to control a sea monster like this one nearly three times the size.” (I first met Stavridis while touring Army bases in Germany more than a decade ago.)

Today, I decide to head to the hot tub near Swim & Tonic, where some of the ship’s drunkest reprobates seem to gather (the other tubs are filled with families and couples). The talk here, like everywhere else on the ship, concerns football, a sport about which I know nothing. It is apparent that four teams have recently competed in some kind of finals for the year, and that two of them will now face off in the championship. Often when people on the Icon speak, I will try to repeat the last thing they said with a laugh or a nod of disbelief. “Yes, 20-yard line! Ha!” “Oh my God, of course, scrimmage.”

Soon we are joined in the hot tub by the late-middle-age drunk guy with the duck necklace. He is wearing a bucket hat with the legend HAWKES, which, I soon gather, is yet another football team. “All right, who turned me in?” Duck Necklace says as he plops into the tub beside us. “I get a call in the morning,” he says. “It’s security. Can you come down to the dining room by 10 a.m.? You need to stay away from the members of this religious family.” Apparently, the gregarious Duck Necklace had photobombed the wrong people. There are several families who present as evangelical Christians or practicing Muslims on the ship. One man, evidently, was not happy that Duck Necklace had made contact with his relatives. “It’s because of religious stuff; he was offended. I put my arm around 20 people a day.”

Everyone laughs. “They asked me three times if I needed meditation,” he says of the security people who apparently interrogated him in full view of others having breakfast.

Another hot-tub denizen suggests that he should have asked for fentanyl. After a few more drinks, Duck Necklace begins to muse about what it would be like to fall off the ship. “I’m 62 and I’m ready to go,” he says. “I just don’t want a shark to eat me. I’m a huge God guy. I’m a Bible guy. There’s some Mayan theory squaring science stuff with religion. There is so much more to life on Earth.” We all nod into our Red Stripes.

“I never get off the ship when we dock,” he says. He tells us he lost \$6,000 in the casino the other day. Later, I look him up, and it appears that on land, he’s a financial adviser in a crisp gray suit, probably a pillar of his North Chicago community.

# The ocean is teeming



with fascinating life, but on the surface it has little to teach us. The waves come and go. The horizon remains ever far away.

I am constantly told by my fellow passengers that “everybody here has a story.” Yes, I want to reply, but everybody *everywhere* has a story. You, the reader of this essay, have a story, and yet you’re not inclined to jump on a cruise ship and, like Duck Necklace, tell your story to others at great pitch and volume. Maybe what they’re saying is that everybody on this ship wants to have a bigger, more coherent, more interesting story than the one they’ve been given. Maybe that’s why there’s so much signage on the doors around me attesting to marriages spent on the sea. Maybe that’s why the Royal Caribbean newsletter slipped under my door tells me that “this isn’t a vacation day spent—it’s bragging rights earned.” Maybe that’s why I’m so lonely.

Today is a big day for Icon passengers. Today the ship docks at Royal Caribbean’s own Bahamian island, the Perfect Day at CocoCay. (This appears to be the actual name of the island.) A comedian at the nightclub opined on what his perfect day at CocoCay would look like—receiving oral sex while learning that his ex-wife had been killed in a car crash (big laughter). But the reality of the island is far less humorous than that.

One of the ethnic tristate ladies in the infinity pool told me that she loved CocoCay because it had exactly the same things that could be found on the ship itself. This proves to be correct. It is like the Icon, but with sand. The same tired burgers, the same colorful tubes conveying children and water from Point A to B. The same swim-up bar at its Hideaway (\$140 for admittance, no children allowed; Royal Caribbean must be printing money off its clientele). “There was almost a fight at *The Wizard of Oz*,” I overhear an elderly woman tell her companion on a chaise lounge. Apparently one of the passengers began recording Royal Caribbean’s intellectual property and “three guys came after him.”

I walk down a pathway to the center of the island, where a sign reads DO NOT ENTER: YOU HAVE REACHED THE BOUNDARY OF ADVENTURE. I hear an animal scampering in the bushes. A Royal Caribbean worker in an enormous golf cart soon chases me down and takes me back to the Hideaway, where I run into Mrs. Rand in a bikini. She becomes livid telling me about an altercation she

# The maiden voyage of the Titanic

had the other day with a woman over a towel and a deck chair. We Suites have special towel privileges; we do not have to hand over our SeaPass Card to score a towel. But the Rands are not Suites. “People are so entitled here,” Mrs. Rand says. “It’s like the airport with all its classes.” “You see,” I want to say, “this is where your husband’s love of Ayn Rand runs into the cruelties and arbitrary indignities of unbridled capitalism.” Instead we make plans to meet for a final drink in the Schooner Bar tonight (the Rands will stand me up).

Back on the ship, I try to do laps, but the pool (the largest on any cruise ship, naturally) is fully trashed with the detritus of American life: candy wrappers, a slowly dissolving tortilla chip, napkins. I take an extra-long shower in my suite, then walk around the perimeter of the ship on a kind of exercise track, past all the alluring lifeboats in their yellow-and-white livery. Maybe there is a dystopian angle to the HBO series that I will surely end up pitching, one with shades of *WALL-E* or *Snowpiercer*. In a collapsed world, a Royal Caribbean–like cruise liner sails from port to port, collecting new shipmates and supplies in exchange for the precious energy it has on board. (The actual Icon features a new technology that converts passengers’ poop into enough energy to power the waterslides. In the series, this shitty technology would be greatly expanded.) A very young woman (18? 19?), smart and lonely, who has only known life on the ship, walks along the same track as I do now, contemplating jumping off into the surf left by its wake. I picture reusing Duck Necklace’s words in the opening shot of the pilot. The girl is walking around the track, her eyes on the horizon; maybe she’s highborn—a Suite—and we hear the voice-over: “I’m 19 and I’m ready to go. I just don’t want a shark to eat me.”

Before the cruise is finished, I talk to Mr. Washy Washy, or Nielbert of the Philippines. He is a sweet, gentle man, and I thank him for the earworm of a song he has given me and for keeping us safe from the dreaded norovirus. “This is very important to me, getting people to wash their hands,” he tells me in his burger getup. He has dreams, as an artist and a performer, but they are limited in scope. One day he wants to dress up as a piece of bacon for the morning shift.



Despite the prevalence of ice cream, the author lost two pounds on the cruise.

GARY SHTEYNGART

(the Icon of the Seas is five times as large as that doomed vessel) at least offered its passengers an exciting ending to their cruise, but when I wake up on the eighth day, all I see are the gray ghosts that populate Miami’s condo skyline. Throughout my voyage, my writer friends wrote in to commiserate with me. Sloane Crosley, who once covered a three-day spa mini-cruise for *Vogue*, tells me she felt “so very alone … I found it very untethering.” Gideon Lewis-Kraus writes in an Instagram comment: “When Gary is done I think it’s time this genre was taken out back and shot.” And he is right. To badly paraphrase Adorno: After this, no more cruise stories. It is unfair to put a thinking person on a cruise ship. Writers typically have difficult childhoods, and it is cruel to remind them of the inherent loneliness that drove them to writing in the first place. It is also unseemly to write about the kind of people who go on cruises. Our country does not provide the education and upbringing that allow its citizens an interior life. For the creative class to point fingers at the large, busty gentlemen adrift in tortilla-chip-laden pools of water is to gather a sour harvest of low-hanging fruit.

A day or two before I got off the ship, I decided to make use of my balcony, which I had avoided because I thought the view would only depress me further. What I found shocked me. My suite did not look out on Central Park after all. This entire time, I had been living in the ship’s Disneyland, Surfside, the neighborhood full of screaming toddlers consuming milkshakes and candy. And as I leaned out over my balcony, I beheld a slight vista of the sea and surf that I thought I had been missing. It had been there all along. The sea was frothy and infinite and blue-green beneath the span of a seagull’s wing. And though it had been trod hard by the world’s largest cruise ship, it remained. *A*

*Gary Shteyngart is the author, most recently, of Our Country Friends.*

# BlackPlanet

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Location: <http://www.BlackPlanet.com>



ILLUSTRATIONS BY FRANK DORREY

Start

BlackPlanet

An  
alternative  
history of  
the social  
web

By  
Hannah  
Giorgis



BEFORE  
FACEBOOK,  
THERE WAS

BlackPlanet

Username:

Password:

# A

A few years ago, Stephanie Williams and her husband fielded a question from their son: How had they met?

So they told him. They'd first encountered each other on a website called BlackPlanet.

To the 5-year-old, the answer seemed fantastical. "He clearly didn't hear 'website,'" Williams, a writer and comic creator, told me. "He was like, 'Wait, you all met on Black Planet? Like, there's a planet that's full of Black people? Why did you leave?'"

Williams had to explain that they'd actually been right here on "regular Earth." But in some ways, their son's wide-eyed response wasn't so off base: From the perspective of the 2020s, there is something otherworldly about the mid-aughts internet that brought his parents together. In a social-media era dominated by the provocation and vitriol of billionaire-owned mega-platforms, it can be hard to imagine a time when the concept of using the internet to connect with people felt novel, full of possibility—and when a site billed as the homepage of the Black internet had millions of active users.

BlackPlanet went live in 1999, nearly three years before Friendster, four years before MySpace, five years before Facebook, and seven years before Twitter. In those early years, the internet was still seen by many as a giant library—a place where you went to find things out. Sure, the web had chat rooms, bulletin boards, and

listservs. But BlackPlanet expanded what it meant to commune—and express oneself—online.

The site offered its users the opportunity to create profiles, join large group conversations about topics such as politics and pop culture, apply to jobs, send instant messages, and, yes, even date. It provided a space for them to hone their voice and find their people. A visit to someone's customizable BlackPlanet page would probably tell you where they grew up, which musicians they idolized, and what they looked like. "That now seems like the most obvious thing in the world," Omar Wasow, one of the site's co-founders, told me, "but at the time reflected a real break from the dominant ideas about how this technology was meant to be used."

BlackPlanet is often overlooked in mainstream coverage of social-media history. But at its peak, it wasn't just some niche forum. Despite skepticism within the tech industry that a social-networking site geared toward African Americans could be successful, about 1 million users joined BlackPlanet within a year of its launch. By 2008, it had about 15 million members. The site's cultural reach extended beyond what numbers can capture: BlackPlanet amplified the work of emerging artists, served as a powerful voter-outreach hub for Barack Obama's first presidential campaign, and fostered now-prominent voices in contemporary media. Gene Demby, a co-host of NPR's *Code Switch* podcast, told me he joined BlackPlanet while attending a predominantly white college as a way to make connections beyond his campus. "It was sort of like, 'Give me all the Black people I can find!'"

The site and its users helped establish visual-grammar and technical frameworks—such as streaming songs on personal pages and live, one-on-one chatting—that were later widely imitated. BlackPlanet arguably laid the foundation for social media as we know it, including, of course, Black Twitter.

Now, nearly 25 years after its launch, looking back at BlackPlanet's glory days can be more than just an exercise in nostalgia. Today's social-media platforms often seem designed to reward the worst in humanity, subjecting their users to rampant hate speech and misinformation. Perhaps by revisiting BlackPlanet and the story of its rise, we can start to envision a different future for the social web—this time, one with the potential to be kinder, less dangerous, and more fun than what the past two decades have given us.

**OMAR WASOW MET** Benjamin Sun in the late 1990s, when they were among the few people of color working in New York City's tech scene. After graduating from Stanford University in 1992, Wasow had moved back to his hometown and started a hyperlocal community hub and internet-service provider, New York Online, which he operated out of his Brooklyn apartment. The service had only about 1,000 users; Wasow made his actual living by building websites for magazines. So he was excited when he met Sun, then the president and CEO of the social-networking firm Community Connect, which in 1997 launched an online forum for Asian Americans called AsianAvenue.

Wasow, the son of a Jewish economist and a Black American educator, had been thinking about how to build community on the internet for years. Like many early tech enthusiasts, he frequented the bulletin-board systems (BBSes) that proliferated in the late '80s and early '90s. Spending time on those primarily text-based, hobbyist-run dial-up services helped him anticipate how popular social technologies could be. Many of the BBSes were standard technerd fare—chats where users would discuss pirating software or gossip about buzzy new product releases. But two sites in particular, ECHO (East Coast Hang Out) and the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), modeled a more salonlike online experience that piqued

Wasow's interest. He realized that people didn't necessarily want the internet to be just an information superhighway. They wanted connection; they wanted to socialize.

Wasow admired the cultural cachet that AsianAvenue had already amassed—enough, by 1999, to compel Skyy Spirits to discontinue a print ad for vodka that featured a racist image of an Asian woman after the site's users protested. Sun, for his part, wanted to expand Community Connect to new forums for other people of color. They decided to work together to build a new site that would allow users to participate in forum-style group discussions, create personal profile pages, and communicate one-on-one.

But Wasow, Sun, and the rest of the Community Connect team faced a major challenge in launching BlackPlanet: the perception that Black people simply didn't use the internet. It was true, around the turn of the millennium, that white households were significantly more likely to have internet access than Black ones. At the same time, reports of this "digital divide" had helped foster a myth of what the media historian Anna Everett has termed "Black technophobia." Well into the aughts, much of the coverage of Black American tech usage had a tone of incredulity or outright condescension. As a result, advertisers and investors were hesitant to back Wasow and Sun's site. Would it really attract enough users to be viable?

Wasow felt confident that it would. The very first week it went live, in September 1999, a friend teased Wasow about the ticker on BlackPlanet's homepage, which showed how many people were logged on at any given moment: "I logged in, and it said there were, like, 15 people online," Wasow remembered him saying. "You sure you want to leave that up? Because it sort of feels like an empty dance floor." By the next week, the ticker showed closer to 150 people. Every day, the number climbed higher.

Within a few months, BlackPlanet had so many users that they couldn't possibly have squeezed onto any dance floor in New York City. Wasow began to spend much of his time speaking at marketing conferences and advertising events. Still, he and Sun struggled to attract significant capital. "Even as the site was showing real evidence of just incredible numbers, people had this story that was like, in some ways, 'That couldn't be!'" Wasow recalled. "Because the digital divide was the narrative in their heads ... It wasn't enough just to show success. We had to be *insanely* successful."

By May 2001, less than two years into its run, BlackPlanet had more than 2.5 million registered users. Wasow himself had taught Oprah Winfrey and Gayle King how to surf the Net on national television (after learning how to use a mouse, the women responded on air to emails from Diane Sawyer, Hillary Clinton, and Bill Gates). BlackPlanet had secured advertising deals with the likes of Hewlett-Packard, *Time* magazine, and Microsoft. In the last quarter of 2002, BlackPlanet recorded its first profit. (Facebook, by contrast, did not turn a profit until 2009, five years after its launch, and Twitter didn't until 2017, 11 years after its founding.) By then, it was the most popular Black-oriented website in America.

**WASOW NEVER FORGOT** one seemingly trivial detail from BlackPlanet's fledgling days. When the site went live, "the first person who logged in was 'TastyTanya,'" he said, laughing. "For whatever reason, it's now more than 20 years later and I still remember that screen name."

I tracked down the woman once known as TastyTanya, who was 20 when she joined the site. Today, she's a married mother of two young children who works in accounting; she prefers not to have her real name attached to her old handle. When we spoke, she recounted how strangers on the site would strike up conversations with her because someone called TastyTanya just seemed approachable. One man she met on the site even emblazoned her BlackPlanet profile picture onto a CD he burned for her and sent her in the mail, which didn't seem creepy at the time. As quaint as that might sound now, TastyTanya's experience perfectly illustrates what made BlackPlanet so fun. In its heyday, the site was largely populated by users just like her, people in their teens and 20s who were doing online what people in their teens and 20s have always done: figuring out who they want to be, expressing their feelings, and, of course, flirting.

Like many early users, Shanita Hubbard came to BlackPlanet in the early

**LESS THAN TWO YEARS INTO ITS RUN, BLACKPLANET HAD MORE THAN 2.5 MILLION REGISTERED USERS.**

2000s as a college student, eager to take advantage of the dial-up internet in her dorm room. A member of the Zeta Phi Beta sorority at a historically Black college in South Carolina, Hubbard had heard about a cool-sounding site that would help her meet Zetas on other campuses. She chose the screen name NaturalBeauty79 and peppered her profile with references to her sorority, natural hair, and the music she loved. BlackPlanet soon became a fixture of her undergraduate experience.

Hubbard is now a freelance journalist and the author of *Ride or Die: A Feminist Manifesto for the Well-Being of Black Women*. When I asked her how she'd describe those days on BlackPlanet to a hypothetical Gen Zer, she laughed: "I feel like I'm trying to explain a rotary phone."

In retrospect, she told me, it was her first experience understanding how technology could broaden her universe not just intellectually, but socially. On BlackPlanet, Hubbard befriended Black people from all walks of life, including Zetas as far away as California. "What we think Black Twitter is today is actually what BlackPlanet was eons ago in terms of connecting and building authentic community," Hubbard said. "Except there was levels of protection within BlackPlanet that we never got on Twitter."

Some of the insulation was a product of the site's scale and user makeup: BlackPlanet was both smaller and more racially homogeneous than today's major social-media networks. Its infrastructure played a role too. Users could see who else was online or recently active, send private messages, and sign one another's digital "guest book," but group discussions of contentious topics tended to happen within specific forums dedicated to those issues, not on a centralized feed where bad-faith actors would be likely to jockey for the public's attention. There was no obvious equivalent to the "Retweet" button, no feature that encouraged users to chase virality over dialogue.

BlackPlanet users talked candidly about politics, debated sports, and engaged in conversations about what it meant to be Black across the diaspora. A 2008 study found that the "Heritage and Identity" forum on BlackPlanet (as well as its equivalents on AsianAvenue and another sister site, MiGente), where users started threads such as "I'm Black and I Voted for Bush," consistently attracted the highest engagement rate. The conversation wasn't always friendly, but it was rarely hostile in the ways that many Black social-media users now take for granted as part of our digital lives. "There was never a time ... where racists found us on BlackPlanet and infiltrated our sorority parties or flooded our little BlackPlanet pages with racist nonsense," Hubbard said. "It's almost like the white gaze was just not even a factor for us."

Eventually, Hubbard began using the site for more than friendly banter. "Everyone likes to pretend it was all about formulating a digital family reunion," she said. "That's true. But that doesn't tell the full story."

In 2001, when online-dating services such as eHarmony were still in their infancy, BlackPlanet launched a dating service that cost \$19.99 a month and helped members screen their would-be love interests. The site offered its members something that is still rare in online romance: Everyone who signed up for BlackPlanet's dating service wanted to be paired with other Black people.

Soon enough, BlackPlanet romances were referenced in hip-hop lyrics and on other message boards, becoming a kind of shorthand for casual dating among young people. As Hubbard put it, BlackPlanet was "Tinder before there was swiping right, honey."

**IF YOU WANTED** your BlackPlanet page to look fly—and of course you did—you had to learn how to change the background colors, add music, and incorporate flashing GIFs. At the height of the site's popularity, the competition led some users to protect their pages by

disabling the right-click function that allowed others to access their HTML codes. Giving users the opportunity to digitally render themselves made the site feel less like a staid old-school forum and more like a video game. That's how BlackPlanet sneakily taught a generation of Black internet users basic coding skills, an accomplishment that remains among Wasow's proudest.

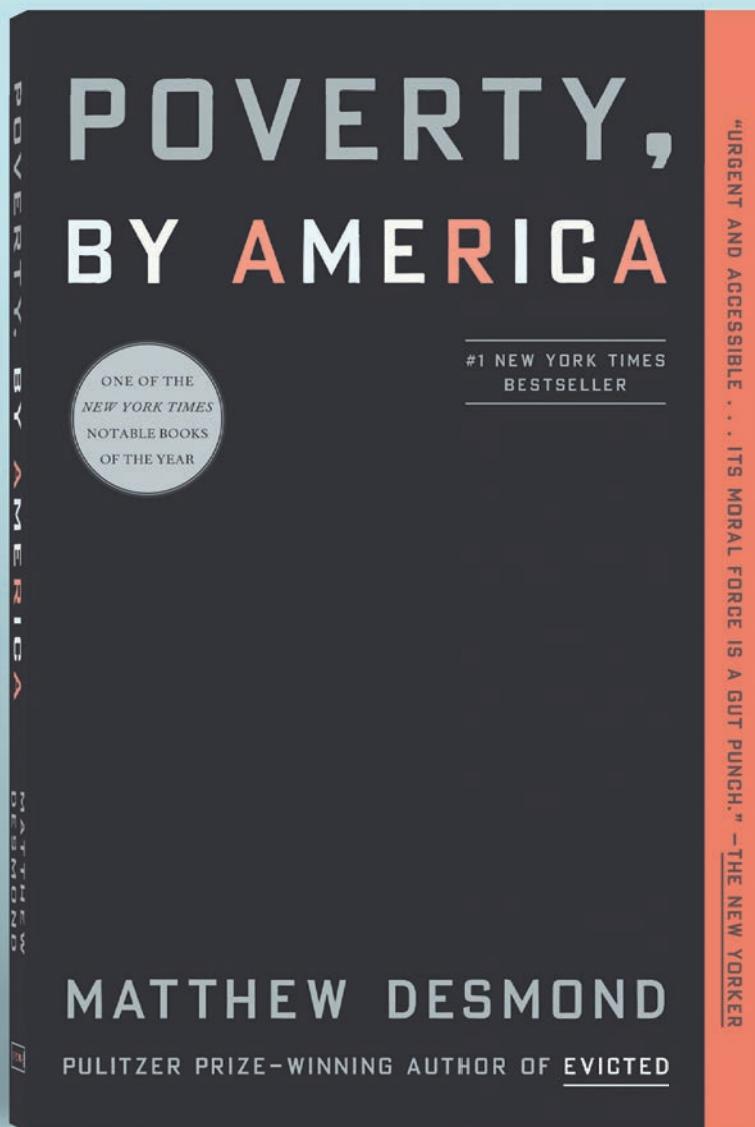
Every former BlackPlanet user I spoke with for this story recalled doing at least a little coding, though most didn't know to call it that at the time. Some told me they continued building those skills and went on to work in tech or media, at companies such as Meta and *Slate*. For others, though, learning HTML was just a way to express personal style. "We were our own webmaster, our own designer, our own developer," Hubbard said. "We were maintaining it and then we would switch it up every couple of weeks to keep it fresh and poppin'."

It wasn't just BlackPlanet users who took note of how much fun customizing one's own webpage could be. In late 2002, a man named Tom Anderson decided that he and his business partner should start a new social network.

When MySpace launched in 2003, the site included several features that were similar to the ones BlackPlanet had offered for years. But where BlackPlanet and the other Community Connect sites emphasized the value of shared heritage and experiences, MySpace billed itself as the universal social network. "I had looked at dating sites and niche communities like BlackPlanet, AsianAvenue, and MiGente, as well as Friendster," Anderson told *Fortune* in 2006 (by then, he was better known as "MySpace Tom"). "And I thought, 'They're thinking way too small.'"

MySpace didn't immediately cut into BlackPlanet's user base. It would take at least five years and the advent of three more major social networks before BlackPlanet saw a significant downturn in its numbers. Even as late as

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October 2007, when then-presidential candidate Obama joined BlackPlanet, he quickly acquired a large following.

Still, as time went on, some BlackPlanet users found themselves visiting the site less frequently. Mikki Kendall, a cultural commentator and the author of *Hood Feminism: Notes From the Women That a Movement Forgot*, told me she didn't spend as much time on BlackPlanet as some of her friends did in part because she thought of it primarily as a meeting space for singles. Also, its interface didn't appeal to her. "BlackPlanet was both ahead of its time and unfortunately not far enough ahead of its time," she said. The site was full of delays, and the mobile option seemed all but unusable. "I always felt like it was the bootleg social-media network, even though it wasn't," she added. "But it was run like somebody was in the back with a hammer just knocking things together and hoping it came through."

Some observers I spoke with attributed BlackPlanet's decline partly to the difficulty its founders had attracting capital. Wasow remembered Community Connect bringing in a total of \$22 million by 2004. In 2007, Facebook received \$240 million in investment funds just from Microsoft. "What does it take financially to get Facebook to where it is? How much money?" Charlton McIlwain, a professor at NYU and the author of *Black Software: The Internet & Racial Justice, From the AfroNet to Black Lives Matter*, told me. How far into "the millions and into the billions

of dollars has it taken for a Google to experiment and succeed at some things and fail at a lot of things, but then be a dominant player in that ecosystem?" Black American culture has always been a powerful engine of innovation, but this has too rarely translated into actual financial rewards for Black people.

**I**N 2008, THREE YEARS after Wasow left BlackPlanet to attend graduate school at Harvard, the Maryland-based urban-media network Radio One (now Urban One) purchased Community Connect for \$38 million. At the time, BlackPlanet still had about 15 million users. But with Twitter slowly gaining attention outside Silicon Valley and Facebook beginning to overshadow MySpace, BlackPlanet simply didn't have the resources to continue attracting the same mass of users that it once had. The rise of these social-media giants—and the industry-wide shift to prioritizing mobile experiences—decimated BlackPlanet's numbers in the years after it was acquired.

Still, the site held on. In February 2019, BlackPlanet got a notable boost. That month, Solange Knowles released the visuals for *When I Get Home*, her fourth studio album, exclusively on the site. The project arose after Solange tweeted about wanting to release a project on BlackPlanet and caught the attention of Lula Dualeh, a political and digital strategist who had just started in a new role there.

"A lot of people were asking themselves the question *What's next outside of Facebook and Twitter and Instagram?*" Dualeh told me. Maybe the answer could be a return to BlackPlanet. In the days following the rollout of the *When I Get Home* visuals—a collection of art and music videos—BlackPlanet saw more traffic than it had in about a decade, as old and new visitors alike flocked to the site. Black Twitter was abuzz. "What I didn't realize is that there was just this underbelly of nostalgia around BlackPlanet," Dualeh said.

Despite the success of the Solange rollout, BlackPlanet hasn't seen a significant, lasting bump in numbers. Nostalgia alone won't be enough to keep users engaged—no matter how much worse Twitter (now X) has gotten. The BlackPlanet interface feels dated, with an early-2010s-Facebook quality to it, even as the posts crawling across the main feed reference music or events from 2024. Alfred Liggins, Urban One's CEO, acknowledges that there's work to be done on the technical side. But he argues that the site is still relevant. And although today's BlackPlanet does often seem like a repository for WhatsApp memes, YouTube links, and conversation prompts copied over from other platforms, some users do continue to use it to share photos and reflections from their real life.

In the current internet landscape, talk of eliminating hostility from large, multiracial platforms feels idealistic at best—particularly when those platforms are owned by egotistical billionaires such as Elon Musk, who has used Twitter to endorse racist claims and alienate parts of its user base. Still, there's reason to hope that we may be entering a new era of social networking that prioritizes real connection over conflict-fueled engagement. Several new microblogging platforms have launched in recent years. Spill, a Black-owned Twitter alternative co-founded by two of the app's former employees, joins networks such as Mastodon and Bluesky in offering

**"BLACKPLANET WAS BOTH AHEAD OF ITS TIME AND UNFORTUNATELY NOT FAR ENOUGH AHEAD OF ITS TIME."**



users a space that isn't subject to the whims of provocateurs like Musk.

Wasow, for his part, is cautiously optimistic. The emergence of smaller, more dedicated digital spaces, he said, could "take us back to some of that thriving, 'Let a thousand flowers bloom' version of online community." It's not that he expects people to stop using the huge social networks, Wasow said, just that he can see a

world where they log on to Facebook and Snapchat and Instagram *less*.

The emergence of these new outlets also serves as a useful reminder: The social web can take many forms, and bigger is not always better. The thrill of the early internet derived, in part, from the specificity of its meeting places and the possibility they offered of finding like-minded people even across great distances (or of learning from people

whose differing perspectives might broaden your own). Not everyone is lucky enough to meet a future spouse on their web planet of choice. But the rest of us still have the capacity to be transformed for the better by the online worlds we inhabit. *A*

*Hannah Giorgis is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

# *Miranda's Last Gift*

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When our daughter died  
suddenly, she left us with grief,  
memories—and Ringo.

*By David Frum*



# I

was at the kitchen counter making coffee when my daughter Miranda's dog approached. Ringo stands about 10 inches high at the shoulder, but he carries himself with supreme confidence. He fixed his lustrous black eyes on mine. Staring straight at me, he lifted his leg and urinated on the oven door.

After the mess was cleaned up, I complained to Miranda, "I don't think Ringo likes me."

Miranda replied, "Ringo loves you. He just doesn't respect you."

Theoretically, Ringo is a Cavalier King Charles spaniel. You may have seen depictions of the breed peeking at you from portraits of monarchs and aristocrats. But the spaniels in the paintings are almost always the cinnamon-and-white variety known as a Blenheim spaniel. My wife, Danielle, has a Blenheim. The Blenheim Cavalier is a true lapdog: easygoing, obedient, insinuating. Ringo is very different. He is exactly the color of a cup of espresso, mostly black-haired with a little brownish tinge at his extremities. He's commonly mistaken for a miniature Rottweiler. That confusion is less absurd than it sounds. If an unwelcome stranger steps in his way, 18-pound Ringo will stiffen and growl, murder in his eyes.

Ringo came into my life in the spring of 2018. Miranda had returned to the United States after four years living in Israel. She had thought seriously about staying there, but then the romantic relationship that had kept her in the country ended. Miranda was cast alone upon the open world. She relocated to Los Angeles to start over.

She chose L.A. because the landscape reminded her of Israel, even if the people were as different as could be. "My Israeli friends criticize Los Angeles as so fake," she told me. "But let me tell you, fake nice is a lot better than authentic rude."

Los Angeles, however, is not a good place to recover from a broken heart. The huge distances that must be traveled to see a friend, the cultural obsession with the surface of things—they can reinforce loneliness. Normally so cheerful and optimistic, Miranda was slowly succumbing to depression. So Danielle and I bought her a dog.

The dog we meant to buy was a Blenheim. Miranda had grown up with one and dearly loved him. But the breeder Miranda selected had no Blenheims for sale, only a single black-and-tan male. Miranda brought him home.

The friend who drove Miranda and Ringo back to L.A. took some photographs of the two of them in the car. Miranda—this glamorous and sophisticated young woman, who had earned her living as a model in Tokyo, Milan, and Tel Aviv—suddenly looked like her 11-year-old self again. She and Ringo writhed together in mutual delight, Miranda smiling in perfect happiness.

"Ringo is the best gift you and Mom ever gave me," she said, "including the gift of life."

I happened to visit Los Angeles a few days later, so I was the first member of the family apart from Miranda to meet Ringo.



New York City, 2021

He worried me. I had imagined a dog that would curl up in Miranda's lap when she needed an understanding companion, who would gently lick the tip of her nose if she was sad. This dog was a lot—what's the word?—*livelier* than that. He was ferociously energetic, utterly inexhaustible. *Oh well*, I thought, *he's still just a puppy*.

Ringo's energy proved good for Miranda. If there was to be any living with him, he needed a long hike every day, preferably much of it uphill. His infectious spirit got him into situations where Miranda rapidly made new friends. They adapted each to the other. They did almost everything together. Men who sought Miranda's favor learned to bring treats for Ringo. She once took Ringo with her to Paris, where she charmed waiters into allowing him to sit on bistro chairs and eat cheese off his own plate at the table.

The Miranda-Ringo relationship recalled her favorite fairy tale, "Beauty and the Beast." So long as his beautiful mistress stood near, Ringo behaved with exemplary propriety. He would cooperate when Miranda maneuvered his strong paws into party costumes: an elf at Christmastime, a hot dog at Halloween. She even taught him to pose for photos. At her word, he would look at the camera and tilt his head fetchingly.

Remove her for even a minute, however, and the beast reappeared. Only Miranda could then calm him. She would scoop him up, squeeze him, and hold him in what she termed "cuddle jail." His head would drop. His eyelids would close. He would fall asleep, snoring noisily, his furry cheek against her smooth one.

My family inherited a property on Lake Ontario from my wife's parents. Danielle and I have spent summers there since the early '90s. The scenery is lovely, but until recently the region offered few amusements other than nature itself. Miranda thought the place dull. But Ringo enjoyed the open spaces and the opportunity to hunt his most detested enemy: birds.

He'd awaken before dawn to bark at them through the sliding glass doors. I'd sleepily fumble with the handle, trying to grab Ringo first, because otherwise he

would bite the door so hard that his teeth left marks. He would race out, pausing only to savage a plastic bucket or sink his fangs into a rubber boot—or even my leg, if I got in his way. He would rampage after the birds for half an hour, then return to gulp down his breakfast.

I once confronted Miranda about controlling his behavior. “He’s trying to warn us that we are surrounded by small flying dinosaurs,” she protested.

“Okay,” I said, “but why must he bark so much?”

“Why do you tweet?” she retorted.

At the time, Danielle and I owned two Labrador retrievers. In the summer, we would exercise them by hitting tennis balls into the lake for them to chase. Our stretch of shoreline is stony. Where lake and land meet, the water can be whipped by the wind into crashing surf. That’s no problem for an 80-pound, hard-muscled Labrador. You might expect it to daunt a little spaniel. Yet Ringo joined the game and soon became its champion. He could not swim very far, but he charged into the waves all the same, sometimes biting the rocks on his way. He would wait for one of the Labs to bring a ball closer to the shore, then seize it from them and carry it the rest of the way.

On dry ground, too, he would insist on playing fetch virtually all the long daylight hours of a Canadian summer. I would try to lock away every stray tennis ball in the place, yet Ringo would find one more, drop it at my feet, and bark at my face to demand: “Throw.”

“He won’t leave me alone,” I complained to Miranda.

“He thinks of you as his assistant,” she said.

“Well, that’s a relationship of trust at least.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. He’s a Hollywood dog; he has a lot of assistants. Mom is Assistant No. 1. You’re Assistant No. 2.”

Assistant No. 2 became my family nickname ever after.

**MIRANDA WAS ALWAYS** nearsighted, but over the course of 2018, her vision deteriorated to the point where she could



Stanford University Medical Center, 2019

no longer read even her phone. My wife joked that she was like Marilyn Monroe’s character in *How to Marry a Millionaire*, the bombshell who needed glasses. But we were worried. We sent Miranda to specialists. The problem was diagnosed: a large brain tumor that was squeezing her optic nerves.

Untreated, the tumor would first blind her, then slowly kill her. But treating it would be no easy matter.

The tumor was a highly unusual kind. It was not cancerous, but it had developed its own network of blood vessels. If the tumor were excised with anything less than perfect precision, with every vessel meticulously cauterized, catastrophic bleeding into the brain could result.

My wife identified the doctor in the United States best qualified to operate on this rare and deadly threat. But how to get on his schedule? When Miranda returned from Israel, she had signed up with the least-expensive HMO she could find in California. She was only 26; how much medicine could she possibly need?

The inexpensive HMO had no intention of allowing access to the right doctor. It insisted on assigning Miranda to its in-house team. That team proposed slicing off the top of Miranda’s skull and then groping down to her brain stem. The doctors candidly confessed that the chances of success were meager.

When Danielle protested that she had found a doctor who promised a less invasive technique with a better hope of success, the HMO’s chief brain surgeon pooh-poohed her. I could have advised him that patronizing Danielle was unlikely to go well, but he kept at it. Then he addressed her as “dear.” The room exploded. “I know why you think this operation cannot be done,” Danielle said. “Since this variety of tumor was first identified in [I forgot the year, but Danielle knew it], there have been [again, Danielle knew the number] successful operations in the United States. You’ve performed none of them. Maybe that’s why you misdiagnosed the tumor in the first place. The doctor we want is the only one who has even recognized it for what it is.”

The HMO never relented. Mercifully, we found an opportunity under the Affordable Care Act to shift Miranda to a different insurer that had the right doctor in its network. Miranda’s surgery was scheduled for April 2019 at Stanford University Medical Center. In the meantime, she and Ringo came to live with us in Washington, D.C.

Miranda fatigued easily that winter. It typically fell to my wife and me to walk Ringo together with the big dogs. Ringo would sprint up and down hills, plunge into muddy streams, and generally dismiss commands to “come” or “heel” as

impertinent and stupid suggestions. “If Ringo was a human being,” Danielle said, “I’m not sure we’d like him very much.”

My wife and I rented an apartment in Palo Alto to be with Miranda during the preparation for the operation and the convalescence afterward. We ensured that the building was dog-friendly, so that Ringo could stay with us. The last thing Miranda needed during this period of stress and fear was responsibility for a dog ready to pick a fight with every stray leaf in his path.

But Ringo intuited that something unusual was happening in his world. This dog that normally put the *high* in *high-maintenance* abruptly reinvented himself as a wholly different animal. He quietly accompanied Miranda through every frightening minute. He attended all of her preoperative appointments, right up until the final seconds before she went in for surgery. I’d never imagined a hospital could be so sensitive to a stricken dog owner. But Stanford was, and we still feel grateful.

The doctor had warned us that the operation might take as long as eight hours. It extended to 12. No information or explanation reached us in the waiting room. Terrible thoughts crowded our minds. Our only comfort was to rub our faces in Ringo’s woolly black fur.

Then, at last, the doctor emerged. He carried a celebratory can of Coca-Cola. All had gone well. We glimpsed Miranda’s reddish-gold hair as she was pushed to the recovery room. The surgeon’s microscopic tools had traveled into the brain via Miranda’s nose. There had been no need to shave her head or crack open her skull.

We asked if we could bring Ringo into the intensive-care unit to greet Miranda when she regained consciousness. The doctor consented, but cautioned that it was very important that Miranda’s head remain in exactly the correct elevated position. There must be no disturbance, no motion. Ringo, for once in his life, complied. He lay in Miranda’s lap or on her legs. Ringo lived in the recovery room until Miranda’s release a few days later,



*The author and Ringo, 2021*

his vigil broken only when my wife and I took him out for walks and meals.

When Miranda’s surgeon met with her before her discharge, he declared: “Now go and lead a normal life.” This was a deeply gratifying sentiment, but also not quite the truth. The tumor and the operation had ravaged Miranda’s endocrine system. She was prescribed a complex and ever-changing array of hormones for an array of needs: managing her thirst, regulating her sleep, sustaining her immune system. When COVID-19 struck, we airlifted Miranda out of Los Angeles for good. She came east wrapped in masks, scarves, and gloves. We collected her and Ringo at the airport to live with us. The year 2020 was one of the most difficult in American history for many people: lockdowns, school closures, riots, and everywhere the pall of disease. For Danielle and me, I’m a little ashamed to admit, it was one of the best times in our lives. The fledglings returned to the nest: Miranda and our son, Nathaniel, rejoined their high-school-senior sister, Beatrice.

Miranda was fiercely independent and stoic, often too independent and stoic for her own good. She had braved dangers all her life. In Israel, she smiled her way through photo sessions as Hamas rockets flew overhead. In France, when

anti-Semitic thugs tried to intimidate her and some Israeli friends on the Paris subway, Miranda defiantly spoke Hebrew extra loudly. She urged self-doubting friends, “You need to say ‘fuck you’ to more people more often.” Always ready to listen to the troubles of others, she adamantly refused to discuss her own. But for those months, Miranda, for once in her life, let us take care of her as she preferred to take care of others.

Beatrice postponed college for a year and remained with us through the fall. Ten years older, Miranda regarded Beatrice as something of a daughter, as well as a sister. The two of them spent hours in each other’s rooms, laughing and gossiping and planning future adventures, watching movies together long after Danielle and I fell asleep.

The bird life in our wooded part of Washington, D.C., may be even more active than in the open fields of Ontario. Years ago, Danielle and I added a second-story balcony off our bedroom. A sparrow family built a nest in the eaves above. Ringo interpreted that domestic act as a personal affront and a violent intrusion. He would leap into the air to snap and bark at the nest, either on the balcony deck or, when restrained, through the bedroom’s glass door. Then, at last, Ringo’s hour of triumph: In one of his lunges, he caught a young bird as it lifted from its nest and killed it. Miranda pretended to share the family horror, not very convincingly.

**THE PANDEMIC PASSED.** Miranda rented an apartment in New York, on the sixth floor of a building in SoHo where the ancient elevator had long ago stopped working. Every time she went in or out, Ringo also had to climb all six floors, each step almost as tall as he was. The exercise bulked up his muscles and sinews. Picking him up to stop him from attacking things became even more challenging than before. He could wriggle and twist with all the power of an athlete who executes hundreds of push-ups a day.

On a visit to that apartment, Nathaniel observed another side of Ringo’s character.

Miranda inflated an air mattress for Nat to use as a bed. Early one morning, Nat awoke to see Ringo engaged in passionate motion with the edge of the mattress. "Maybe we should get Ringo a real girlfriend?" Nat asked Miranda.

The dream of normality seemed to have come true. We celebrated family milestones: birthdays, holidays, Nat's wedding. Miranda and Ringo moved again, to Brooklyn, this time to a building with an elevator. Ringo befriended all the doormen. One day, he bolted into the elevator ahead of Miranda—and the doors closed. Miranda was frantic, imagining the elevator opening in the lobby and Ringo darting into the street. But within moments, the elevator returned. There stood a doorman, grinning, Ringo in his arms.

Miranda and Ringo explored their new borough together. In her neighborhood, America's worsening drug-addiction problem could be witnessed on every sidewalk, unconscious bodies slumped on curbs and benches. Beautiful, clever, and privileged as she was, Miranda always identified with society's misfits and outcasts. She habitually carried an extra water bottle with her to tuck under a street sleeper's arm to be discovered when he awoke. Ringo would glare disapprovingly, but this was one circumstance in which his wishes did not prevail.

The day after Valentine's Day this year, my wife had big news for Miranda. She knew that Miranda had always wanted to take Ringo to London, but had been deterred by the British embargo on bringing in pets without lengthy and costly quarantining. Danielle had discovered a work-around and wanted to share it with Miranda. But the conversation never took place. Through the winter, Miranda had suffered a series of bad colds; getting her on the phone had become hard. I texted her, but unusually for her, no swift answer came.

The next morning, February 16, we received the devastating news that Miranda had been found dead in her Brooklyn apartment. Illness overwhelmed her depleted immune system and stopped her heart. She collapsed at

about three in the morning. When she was found, Ringo was lying beside her.

For me, the thought of my own death has never been a distressing subject. We live, we love, we yield the stage to our children. I hoped that when the time arrived, I would have the chance for farewells. If that wish were granted, I could with total content ride the train to my final destination. It never occurred to me that one of my children might board the train first, pulling away as her parents wept on the platform.

But so it happened. All the end-of-life decisions that my wife and I had expected to deliberate for ourselves now had to be made at breakneck speed for our cherished daughter. We would bury her at a small, rural Jewish cemetery a short distance from our Ontario home. That way, we could be near her for the rest of our lives, then beside her ever afterward.

Transporting a body from one country to another is never an easy matter. Everything about the process becomes more difficult when the person has died at the beginning of a three-day weekend. My brother-in-law Howard, a successful businessman, stepped in with an enormously generous act of assistance: He chartered a plane to carry Miranda from New York to Toronto.

Wrapped in a blanketed body bag, Miranda was laid on a bench in the aircraft, then buckled in. My wife and I sat opposite her, with Ringo on a leash. As the plane gained altitude, Ringo jumped

*All the end-of-life decisions that my wife and I had expected to deliberate for ourselves now had to be made at breakneck speed.*

on Miranda's chest. He lay there for a long time, then sidled toward her legs, then to her feet. As the flight came to an end, Ringo hopped off Miranda and into my wife's lap, as if to say, "I belong with you now." He posted himself beside Miranda's coffin at the funeral in Toronto. He gazed into the grave as Miranda was lowered into the ground. Then he meekly departed with us.

When a parent loses a child, the nights are the worst. Thoughts come crashing into the mind: every missed medical clue, every pleasure needlessly denied, every word of impatience, every failure of insight and understanding. Like seasickness, the grief ebbs and surges, intervals of comparative calm punctuated by spasms of racking pain. I don't want to wake my wife, who has a grief schedule of her own, so I slip out of our bed and into the one Miranda used when she stayed with us in Washington. When I do that, Ringo will climb up to sleep at my feet, just as he slept on Miranda's that one last time.

Immediately after Miranda died, Ringo did not like anyone else to hold him. At first, I deferred to his resistance. Then I remembered something my sister, Linda, said during the most difficult phase of Miranda's never-easy adolescence: "Sometimes the kid who seems to want the hug the least is the kid who needs the hug the most." I experimented with my own version of "cuddle jail." After a few attempts, Ringo accepted the embrace, then welcomed it.

And I think: Over 32 years of life, Miranda gave me many gifts. She gave me joy, and pride, and the wisdom that can be learned only from loving another being more than one loves oneself. Then, at the end, she gave me one last gift, the most immediately necessary of them all. She left me the means to expiate all those sins of omission and commission that crowd my mind at three in the morning. She left me Ringo. For better or worse, I will be Assistant No. 2 to the very end of his days, or mine. *A*

*David Frum is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

# Culture & Critics

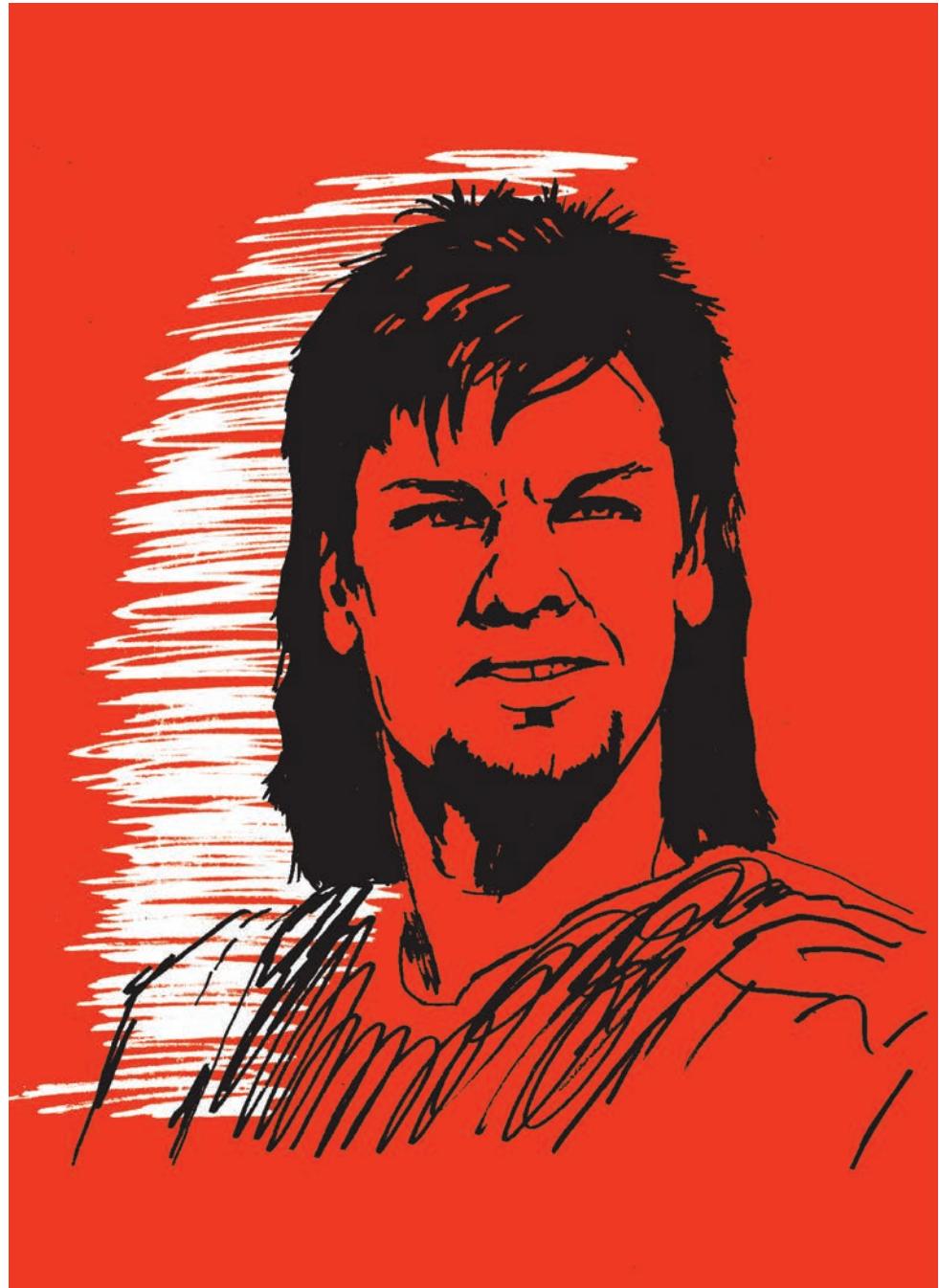
OMNIVORE

## Is Theo Von the Next Joe Rogan?

*Or is he something  
else entirely?*

By James Parker

Someone is talking to you. Or is he talking to himself? A deep, spacey voice with pondering pauses and a resinous Louisiana accent. "There's this trick," the voice says. "That's the devil out there ... That's Satan, baby. That's Lucifer, bruh. That's Lucifer, that darkness sniffer." Your whole life, it goes on; "you think, *Oh, I'll, I'll just keep judging, keeping*



DANIELE VENTURELLI / WIREIMAGE / GETTY

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*people at a distance ... But then I get to the end of my life and I'll realize, You know what? I didn't win anything by doing that. That was a trick.* And the only thing I won was being alone."

Theo Von is not a preacher. Not officially. Officially, he's a comedian with a podcast. But unofficially, he'll take you right there, into that biblical light, into the hell-chasm and the soul in its solitude and the benevolent rays of the divine. "The Lord lurks where the devil jerks," Von says. And if he could get the devil onto his podcast—if he could land a two-hour download with Lucifer, that darkness sniffer, that snorter of lines of uncut night—he probably would.

Von's *This Past Weekend* is huge. It's currently the eighth-most-popular podcast in America, sandwiched between *This American Life* and *The Ben Shapiro Show*. No. 1 is of course *The Joe Rogan Experience*, where the bros burble for hours on end. Where cigars are smoked and theories are floated. Von has been on Rogan's show multiple times, and while *This Past Weekend* is fully inside the Rogan algorithm—partaking of the same vibe of heady masculinity and unsanctioned speech; tapping the same world of canceled professors, polar plungers, hungover stand-ups, supplement salesmen, moonlighting mystics, grifting neuroscientists, and gleaming mixed-martial-arts warriors (and wouldn't the ultimate Rogan guest be all of the above?)—it's also ... different.

Theodor Capitani von Kurnatowski III grew up in Covington, Louisiana, and showbiz-wise he came up the hard way: multiple seasons on MTV's reality series *Road Rules* and its spin-offs, acting roles here and there, gigs hosting an online TV-recap show and a hidden-camera show, and a lot of stand-up, including an appearance on *Last Comic Standing*. Plenty of time to hone a character, or a persona. Plenty of time to screw it up completely. But although authenticity is the biggest shtick of all, Von, at 44—mulleted, surreally affable—does seem to have grown into himself. Kevin Nealon, on his YouTube show, *Hiking With Kevin*, asked Von back in 2019 about his Louisiana accent. "For a long time I tried to pretend like I didn't have one," Von replied, "'cause I was trying to fit in ... That was the devil's decoy right there."

*This Past Weekend* is different from *The Joe Rogan Experience* because Von is different. For a start, he also interviews quote-unquote regular people—a mortician, a plumber, a female truck driver. Then there's the religion thing: a spirituality, freely accessed in his conversations and monologues, that mixes the gospel of Alcoholics Anonymous (he's struggled with addiction himself) with his background in southern Christianity. He responds to calls from on-the-ropes alcoholics, and from someone worried that

his friend is doing too much meth. He offers them, by and large, thoughtful advice and—much more important—the sensation of brotherhood. "Man, I know that tiredness, brother. I'm tired, I'm tired of feeling alone ... I'm tired of also not even being there for myself. I mean, that's the loneliest, bro, when you don't even have yourself."

And then there's Von's brain, which is *very* different. Von muses beatifically. He has little visions. How to describe the experience of listening to him riff? It's fast and slow: You're caught in a sort of languidly blooming stoner-y revelation, but with brilliant scintillas of poetry zipping around at light speed in the foreground. "Like somebody in the fuckin', like, great beyond pressed a fuckin' doorbell that you didn't know was connected to you." That, according to Von, is how it feels to get Tasered. And this is how it feels to be on the hallucinogenic drug DMT: "It's like God hit you with a mirror. But he hit you hard and he hit you fast. And the cops showed up."

With Von, I went on a bit of a journey. His two Netflix comedy specials—*Regular People* and *No Offense*—left me cold. Stalking around with that twangy stand-up energy, overdoing his accent and making jokes about Denny's waitresses being ugly: I wasn't into it. I didn't laugh.

Then, as I got deeper into *This Past Weekend* and his hazy backwoods conservatism swam into view—his hazy backwoods conservatism that sharpens now and again into early-onset Trumpism—I had a political panic. Von chats with Tucker Carlson, Putin's ass-kisser. With Jordan Peterson, he laments the loss of national pride ("There's some infection in America"). To the rapper-producer Logic, he says this: "I think there's a lot of men out there who are gay not even because they wanna be; it's 'cause they—all the straightness got jerked out of 'em over time by looking at pornography." ("Wait, what?" Logic yelps. "Wait, what?! ... Bro, if somebody wants to be fucking gay, they're just gay!") UFC President Dana White comes on the podcast, talking about his friendship with Donald Trump ("I'm having breakfast with him tomorrow!"). And the endless jokes about homeless people, and the endless hang-on-was-that-racist? ... *Goddammit*, I said to myself. *Theo's a shill. He's a sinister vector of reactionary bullshit. He's a licensed fool in the court of Steve Bannon.*

But this, I decided, is a category error. Von's speculations exist in a weightless comedic space—and it's kind of a Trumpty space, carnivalesque, semi-appalling, in poor taste, but that's just where we're at right now. The joke has hollowed us out. Von's got a bit, a reverie—it's like an early George Saunders story—about how pretty soon we'll all be Uber

*Von offers callers, by and large, thoughtful advice and—much more important—the sensation of brotherhood.*

drivers, and the only way we'll be able to get a fare is to force another Uber driver, at gunpoint, to become our passenger. "Do you feel like we could really end up in our lifetime as heading to a revolution?" he asked the comedian Shane Gillis on *This Past Weekend*. "Or some sort of a place where ... it all topples over ... We're kinda gettin' there, it feels like." The baseline of Von's humor is catastrophic—or post-catastrophic, like the crack-up's already happened and all we have are these damaged thought processes, these whirling daydreams and one-liners.

Interviewing Wayne Owen, a retired sanitation worker from Staten Island, Von becomes fixated on the Fresh Kills Landfill—closed in 2001, and now greened-over—and on an official whose job it is to control the local deer population. "So they're doing animal vasectomy out there on the landfill?" he asks wonderingly. And you hear a faint chiming in his brain, the sound of comedy starting to happen, Theo Von poetry. "That fuckin' nut Grinch," he says. "Sperm Dexter. That dude's out there fuckin' clippin' bucks."

When Von is on, he's unstoppable: His recent conversation/two-hour improv jag with the comedian Tim Dillon is so brutally hilarious, such a flaming, atrocious summit of the American Absurd, I had to pull my car over and sit there, weeping with laughter and relief.

So Von's a man of the Now. Mentally, he's in his own place, but his powers of connection are considerable. People open up to him. And like America, he's on the cusp: In one future, I can see him doing bits at a right-wing rally, getting big laughs from the goons with his nonwokery—at which point he ceases, obviously, to be funny. In another, he carries his strange (but massive) constituency of fiends, seekers, truthers, strugglers, and comedy nuts—the strange planet that is his audience—to somewhere new, somewhere genius, somewhere out there beyond the current paradigm. In that scenario, we hear his voice, and we begin to heal ourselves. *A*

*James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

## Ponies

By Daniel Halpern

For James Wright

There were three, a marmalade of ponies,  
just in the field, feeding on grass—  
one roan, one buckskin, and a chestnut.

I put my arms on the fence to wait  
and watched them, without a carrot  
or motive for being there.

In a while they came gladly to the fence, a ways  
from where I stood, and hung their long, lovely heads  
over the wire barrier and looked at me.

I was waiting for a friend who was late.  
There was a café up the road with good food.  
I had walked from the motel, she was meeting me

here, by the fence with the ponies in the field,  
who had joined me, looking for something  
with their heads still over the fence, maybe a carrot

or a human hand rubbing them in a kindly way,  
their soft muzzles, the hard, flat nasal bone, their mouths  
now nibbling my palm for something beyond their field.

I'm not sure, I was outside a town in Montana,  
a day in early fall, summer still warm on the ponies' hides.  
I'm from the city, the air here had good vegetal in it,

with the essence of ponies. The darkness of their eyes,  
the soft ears like furred flags in the currents of air,  
their legs pawing the fading, bronzing grass.

The three were good company, waiting for my friend.  
The sky was darkening, there was a slight wind  
with the scent of damp horse in the air.

She was late, the day was expiring, the evening  
coming on. Another scent floated, whitebark pine,  
loved by Clark's nutcrackers, grizzlies, and red squirrels.

Could this trio of ponies be off soon, into whatever  
the setting sun might hold for the yet to come?  
What we call, when we can think of nothing else, the future.

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*Daniel Halpern has written nine books of poetry. He is the founder of Ecco, and is an executive editor at Knopf.*



BOOKS

## Christine Blasey Ford Testifies Again

*Her new memoir doubles as a modern-day horror story.*

By Megan Garber

ZUMA PRESS / ALAMY

"I am here today not because I want to be. I am terrified," Christine Blasey Ford said in the fall of 2018, introducing herself to the Senate Judiciary Committee and a television audience of millions. Early in *One Way Back*, the memoir Ford has written about her testimony, its origin, and its aftermath, she repeats the line. She feels that terror again, she writes. She is afraid of having her words taken out of context, of being a public figure, of being misunderstood. "Stepping back into the spotlight comes with an infinite number of things to worry about," Ford notes, before returning to the story at hand. The moment is brief, but remarkable all the same: Rare is the writer who will confess to fearing her own book.

Memoirs like *One Way Back* are sometimes treated as justice by another means: books that step in where accountability has proved elusive—correcting the record, filling in the blanks, and restoring a narrative to its rightful owner. *One Way Back*, more than five years in the making, is partly that kind of reclamation. Ford's story, for many Americans, began and ended on the day of her testimony: the day when she shared details of an attack at a house party in 1982—an assault committed, she alleged, by Brett Kavanaugh, then a Supreme Court nominee. The memoir corrects the story by expanding it, placing the testimony in the broader context of Ford's life and detailing what came later. And it rescues its author, in the process, from the confines of iconography. Ford the narrator is quirky and insightful and prone to interrupting herself with long digressions (into psychological theories, the radness of Metallica, the mechanics of surfing, the ecosystemic importance of kelp forests). She lets her idiosyncrasy loose on the page. But Ford knows better than most the toll that telling one's story can take.

Kavanaugh, who denied Ford's allegations, was confirmed to the Supreme Court by a two-vote margin on October 6, 2018—a year and a day after *The New York Times* published the investigation about Harvey Weinstein that helped inspire #MeToo's growth into a mass movement. This was a resonant coincidence. Over the course of that year, countless people had put their wounds into words, trusting that the stories they told could be tools of justice. They wanted to be heard. They asked to be believed. They practiced a civic form of faith. What they did not anticipate—what they should not

have needed to anticipate—was the caveat that has revealed itself in the long years since: Stories may be believed, and still ignored.

Ford's own story, in many ways, was an exception to #MeToo's rule. She was listened to. She was, to a lesser extent, heard. Half a decade later, though, her claim rests in the same in-between space where the claims of many others do: It lingers, alleged but never litigated—its airing cut short when Kavanaugh was confirmed. *One Way Back* channels the frustrations of that abridgment. But the book also details Ford's life after the confirmation: the death threats, the upheaval, the backlash. As her story goes on, its testimony comes to read as an indictment—not of one person, but of a form of politics that sees stories as weapons in an endless war. For her, the personal unexpectedly became political, and then the political proved to be inescapable. Ford, who has a Ph.D. in psychology, is used to making sense of her experience by naming it. The intervening years, though, have resisted that kind of therapeutic clarity. So does, to its credit, the memoir itself. Closure, in Ford's story as in so many others, is a relief that never comes.

**FORD GREW UP** near Washington, D.C., among gated houses and country clubs and people who treated politics as their business and their birthright. She left as soon as she could (college in North Carolina, grad school in Southern California, then family and home and work in Northern California). She taught at Stanford. She spent her free time surfing. She followed politics in the generalized way that most Americans do. In the summer of 2018, though, Justice Anthony Kennedy retired, and Kavanaugh's name was in the news, and the night lodged somewhere in her memory—receding and recurring and receding again over the years—returned. Ford realized, to her surprise, that her childhood field trips to marbled monuments had stayed with her: She had retained a sense of civic duty.

"Let me be clear: This is not a political book," Ford writes early in the memoir, and you could read the disclaimer in many ways—as an attempt to distinguish between partisan politics and a broader form of civic engagement; as a defense against long-standing charges that she is a pawn of the Democratic Party; as an effort to set *One Way Back* apart from other Trump-era memoirs. But that disclaimer, its phrasing right out of the career politician's playbook, also distills one of the book's core tensions: Politics, in the memoir, encroaches on everything else. Ford does not want it to encroach on her story. Ford came forward in the first place, she suggests, not as an activist, or even necessarily as a feminist. She came forward as a scientist. She had a piece of evidence to share, and believed that those assessing Kavanaugh's fitness for office would be

glad to have it. "I thought that if the people on the committee had taken this very esteemed job in public service, they wanted to do the right thing," Ford writes. "I thought I could save Trump the embarrassment of choosing an unviable candidate."

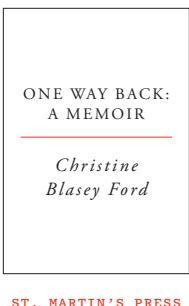
"Hold for laughs," she writes, referring to the woman who believed politics to be public service and Donald Trump to be capable of embarrassment. But Ford also conveys pride in the woman she was—an idealist who, in her idealism, was both mistaken and correct.

Ford decided to relay her claim in July 2018, and spent the dizzying weeks until late September trying, and failing, to be heard. She reached out to politicians and journalists, telling them what she could remember of the party that night 36 years earlier: the scene in the house; the boy on top of her, groping, laughing, so drunk that she feared he might kill her by accident; the bathing suit she wore under her clothes. She was not raped, she repeatedly clarified, but assaulted. Ford describes the politicians she confided in, on the whole, as sympathetic but hesitant. They listened, and their aides took very good notes, and Ford wasn't quite sure what they did after that.

She was not fully aware of the politics of the matter: Her story was a grenade that nobody wanted to be holding when it exploded. She simply knew that her story was not turning into action, and she was slightly baffled by the delay. And the politicians, she implies, didn't know what to do with her. They wanted to know why she was coming forward—why now, why at all. "Civic duty," in partisan politics, is an explanation that raises doubts.

In relating all of this, Ford is asking readers to accept what the politicians, in her description, could not: that she would do something simply because she considered it the right thing. Authorship may have an authoritarian edge—the writer includes and excludes, edits and spins, creating a story that is an act of will—but it brings vulnerability, too. Every testimony, whether delivered to the Senate or to readers, will confront audiences that double as judges. And American audiences tend to treat earnestness itself as cause for suspicion.

Ford the memoirist faces the same challenges that Ford the witness did. To tell her story—to have that story believed—she has to sell herself as the storyteller. She has to deliver a testimony that serves, inevitably, as self-defense too. No wonder Ford regards her book with fear. Even before she testified, *One Way Back* suggests, Ford lost hold of her story. She had planned to stay anonymous; instead, in September, her name became public. (Five years later, she remains unsure of who leaked her identity and changed her life.) Then the smear campaign started, and the death threats began. She did not realize that her testimony would be televised, she



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writes, half-acknowledging her naivete, until she was making her way to the Senate chamber.

And she did not realize that, in the testimony itself, she had brought data to a gunfight. The professor had prepared for the occasion as if it was a lecture, marshaling details and context, aiming for clarity. Kavanaugh spoke after Ford, and the gulf between the two testimonies was, in retrospect, an omen. She offered evidence. He offered grievance. She spoke science. He spoke politics. She was piecing together fragments of a story, parts of which she had forgotten. He was controlling the narrative.

**WITH KAVANAUGH'S** confirmation, Ford expected to move on as the news cycle did. But although coverage tapered off, the smears continued. In mid-September, after her name had become widely known, Ford—along with her husband, Russell, and their two adolescent sons—had moved out of their house. “Hotel arrest,” as Ford calls it, was a safety precaution made necessary by the threats, and made possible, in part, by a GoFundMe campaign that an anonymous donor started. It was a surreal blend of luxury and fear: extreme isolation, ongoing uncertainty, days’ worth of room-service cheeseburgers.

And the strangeness extended beyond the Senate vote. Ford could not return home. She could not return to work. She could not go out in public without protection. The media attention trained on her friends and family in the lead-up to the testimony—and the partisan cast of the event—had strained some of her relationships, and cost her some others. The fear that had been acute became chronic. She entered another phase, “hibernation.”

By this point, the reader has learned enough about Ford to understand why the precautions would have seemed like punishments. She is rebellious by nature. She is curious by profession. She is prone to overthinking. And there she was, surviving but not fully living, in a confinement made more confusing because it was punctuated with kindness—and made more frustrating because it refused to end. Earlier in the memoir, Ford describes the relief she felt when she assumed that the whistleblower chapter of her life was behind her. “I did it,” she thought to herself, after her testimony’s opening statement. “Hardest part is over.” The book is full of lines like that—false endings, further evidence of Ford’s naivete—and they do not merely foreshadow the hardship to come. They turn a memoir, at junctures, into a horror story. Just when the heroine thinks she has escaped, she hears the thudding footsteps once more.

As Ford’s story goes on, those moments of revoked catharsis condition the reader to do what Ford started to do: treat the promise of resolution with suspicion.

Soon the scientist was struggling to diagnose her own situation. She spent a stretch in a fog that she calls her “gray blanket era.” She talks about life in the “abyss.” She considered moving (to a small town where she could “teach at a community college, and listen to grunge music all day”). She flailed for a time, and her book flails with her.

Ford is aware, she notes, that people would prefer a tidier story, a more hopeful one. Audiences are happy to consume accounts of other people’s pain; they tend to expect, though, that the storytellers will consider it their role to guide them to an end. But Ford cannot. *One Way Back* is a title derived from surfing—a sport that begins in freedom and ends in a foreclosure of options. Once you’ve paddled out past the break—once you’ve fought to reach the calm of the open ocean—you have only one way to get back to land: through the waves, either riding them or caught within them. We watch as Ford, for a period, gets pummeled so regularly that she seems to lose her bearings. She is getting sadder. She is, perhaps worse, becoming cynical. Whether she can even believe in a way back isn’t clear.

Ford the former idealist finds respite, briefly, in the formulaic, accusatory stories of partisan discourse. The scientist explains the other side as “evil.” She toggles between anger and despair, wanting to hope that things will get better, but suspecting all the while that hope might be a delusion. She talks the endemic talk of memoir as a way to control the narrative. The woman who always looked for the biggest waves—and who once dared to briefly try piloting a small plane (despite a deep fear of flying)—seems, in those moments, to be unmoored. Many people she encountered earlier in the memoir saw idealism as a form of weakness. Now she seems at risk of believing them.

*One Way Back* is proof that Ford has emerged from the abyss, but what makes her account unusual and valuable is the way it refuses the comfort of firm ground. The psychologist, by the end of the book, might offer closure. The scientist might offer conclusions. The author might offer catharsis. But Ford can offer none of those. Instead, she offers a model of resilience.

Her predicament is singular, but has become a familiar one. Readers, too, might have struggled against cynicism. Readers, too, might have believed that their optimism was a virtue—only to be left wondering whether they had been foolish or betrayed. The waves keep coming. They have their own small currents. They can force you forward; they can pull you back. They can propel and impede you at the same time. The only thing to do in the tumult, Ford suggests, is keep aiming for the shore. *A*

Megan Garber is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



CHRISTOPHE LEHENAFF / GETTY; XIA YUAN / GETTY

## What's So Bad About Asking Where Humans Came From?

*Human origin stories have often been used for nefarious purposes. That doesn't mean they are worthless.*

By William Deresiewicz

Here is an origin story about origin stories. Once upon a time, we knew where we came from: Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, the Fall. Then came modern science, modern doubt. Geology, paleontology: The world grew older very fast. Skulls were discovered, and stone tools. Human origins became a problem and a fascination. Who are we? How did we emerge? And given who we think we may be, how should we live?

In *The Invention of Prehistory: Empire, Violence, and Our Obsession With Human Origins*, the intellectual historian Stefanos Geroulanos, who teaches at NYU, offers a compendium of the ideas—speculative, scientific, and somewhere in between—that have arisen in response to these and other questions. Beginning with Rousseau and his idyllic state of nature, we learn the genealogy of a familiar set of tropes: the “noble savage,” the “lizard brain,” the “killer ape,” the goddess-worshipping matriarchy. Other concepts may be less familiar: the “primitive communism” of Engels and others, which allegedly existed prior to the rise of patriarchy, private property, and class struggle; Freud’s “primal horde,” commanded by a father whose murder (and ingestion) by his sons, the original band of brothers, inaugurated civilization and its discontents.

We learn about “stadial” schema, theories about the stages (usually three) through which humanity has passed: Stone/Bronze/Iron, savage/barbarian/civilized, magic/religion/science. About disputes as to where *Homo sapiens* emerged (China? Egypt?) and

where the Indo-European peoples did (Germany? The Caucasus? Somewhere between Iran and India?). About the impact of the unearthing of the dinosaurs and other fossils, of Darwinian evolution, of geology’s discovery of deep time. About questions that continue to engross us. Who were the Neanderthals? What do the cave paintings mean? Were early humans violent or peaceful?

All of this is fascinating—or would be, but for major problems. For one thing, Geroulanos is not a congenial companion. Like a professor who’s trying too hard to be cool, he sprinkles his language with clumsily modish locutions. “His prose was straight-up goth.” “Rousseau amped up the device of ‘nature’ to the max.” “Bataille vaporized history so as to teleport back to the very beginning.” Worse is the snark, which is relentless, and mostly aimed at nothing worse than the routine careerism of intellectual life. “Jumped at the chance to take credit”; “did his best to show himself to be a good schoolboy”; “had the bad taste to go over his mentors’ head”; “exudes an ambition worthy of Darwin.” Some of it is aimed at exactly the kind of work that scholars are supposed to do. Darwin used “masses of tedious evidence to establish a position others would find hard to assail.” “Other linguists insisted that thanks to their mind-numbingly dry comparative analysis of phonemes they could explain all these bigger issues.” It’s almost as if these people cared about the truth.

All of this points to deeper problems, ones that typify the drift of the contemporary academy. Geroulanos is the executive director of NYU’s Remarque Institute, a prominent center for research on Europe; an executive editor of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*; the author or co-author of four previous books; and the co-editor or co-translator of a dozen—in short, a major figure in the history of thought. Yet instead of coming to his subject with a scholar’s open-mindedness—this, alas, is no surprise these days—he does so with self-righteousness and an agenda. His purpose is to argue that the study of humanity’s beginnings is and always must be evil. “The Euromodern search for origins began in and then contributed to a long, brutal history of conquest and empire,” he writes. “It has been drunk on hierarchy. It is rooted in illusions—often murderous ones … Its beautiful ideas have justified force against those deemed weak, different, ugly.”

THIS IS, of course, to a great extent true. It is also not surprising. We are well aware by now that scientific concepts—or, more often, pseudo- or at best proto-scientific ones—have been used to rationalize violence and domination (so, for that matter, have nonscientific concepts). That doesn’t mean we don’t still need to talk about this fact. To pronounce Indigenous people “savage,”

as Geroulanos explains, was to license one's attempts to "civilize" them. To designate them "fossil men," vestiges of ancient times, was to declare them fit to be displaced. Germany was the birthplace of Indo-European culture, the Nazis believed, so Germans really were the master race.

But can we have all this without the attitude, the knowing, smug superiority? This so often seems to be the way now on the left—in academia, in media. We are better than the past. Or the rest of you aren't better, but *we* are, my allies and I. But you aren't better than the past; you're just lucky enough not to live there. Nor are you better than everyone else; you're just readier to claim you are. Exposing the sources of Western prosperity does not in itself make you virtuous.

Besides, the picture, on Geroulanos's own evidence, is much more complicated than his politics will allow him to acknowledge. The study of human origins has not invariably been "rooted in illusions," nor has it always "served ferocious power," "justified force," or "rationalized colonial domination." Sometimes quite the opposite. Geroulanos shows this himself, yet he tends to downplay it, and in any case conveniently forgets it when making his general claims. Indeed, there is an entire through line in his book of figures who employed prehistory to criticize colonialism, capitalism, modern warfare, and modernity more broadly. Rousseau used his state of nature to attack the inequality and artificiality of 18th-century European society. Engels's primitive communism "offered a model ... for true socialist kinship." The year after *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding came out with *The Inheritors*, a book in which he "asked his reader to identify with Neanderthals" against their aggressive, deceitful rivals, the *sapiens*.

Concepts developed to promote the idea of Western superiority could be turned in the other direction, and were. It is not "they" who are savages, but we: we who exterminate entire populations, slaughter one another in the trenches, bomb cities from the air. Cultural diffusionism, the idea that civilization spread from a single source, often identified as white—Mesopotamia, Northern Europe—"also contributed to an opposing set of political claims: Pan-Africanism and decolonization."

Geroulanos presents these counterexamples as exceptions, never pausing to consider that, once you have enough of them, exceptions aren't exceptions so much as a new rule (the study of prehistory: sometimes good), one whose tension with his old rule (the study of prehistory: evil) needs to be worked through into a broader one (prehistory: It's complicated). So when he does mention someone who played a more positive role in Western relations with the nonwhite world, he often makes sure to undercut them, typically with little or no evidence.

Lewis Henry Morgan, a lawyer and an early ethnographer, advocated on behalf of Native Americans

in the years before the Civil War. "The Seneca had adopted him in thanks for his legal and political activism," Geroulanos tells us, "though today we would see Morgan's role as much more problematic." He doesn't say why. Claude Lévi-Strauss, the great anthropologist, was relentless in his wholesale condemnation of the Western impact on Indigenous societies. Yet his arguments, Geroulanos insists, "had the peculiar quality of diminishing the effects of specific acts of colonial violence." No reason is given. Other anthropologists are blamed for having tried to preserve what they could of disappearing cultures, if only in the form of artifacts and records of traditions. For this, Geroulanos refers to them as "drivers of colonial violence," not bothering to explain what they were supposed to have done to stop the real drivers of colonial violence, the companies and states and armies.

THIS IS the opposite of history, if the discipline of history is meant to help us better understand how people saw the world they lived in and the reasons they acted as they did. Instead of strutting through the past, wagging his finger and clucking his tongue, Geroulanos might have exercised a bit of generosity toward people who were trying to make sense of what they had, with the tools that they had. The theories he so gleefully belittles were responding, many of them, to developments that we've become accustomed to but that must have been incredibly destabilizing. What did it feel like to learn that the Earth was thousands of times older than we had ever suspected? That it contained remains of creatures more alien than anything we had ever dreamed? That among those creatures were some who looked remarkably like us, yet were somehow not us? There are flashes of this kind of sympathy, but, like the more progressive attitudes that Geroulanos keeps stumbling over, they are quickly overridden and forgotten.

Again, it's easy to mock the humanitarian impulses of a supposedly benighted past—the belief, for example, that we are all one human family, sharing similar sorrows and joys, which displaced ideas of racial hierarchy after World War II but which Geroulanos condemns for minimizing "difference" (that postmodern holy word). But not only did this represent a real advance; it was a step toward our more enlightened understanding. Yes, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, we know more than those who came before us, and what we know is them.

But the worst of *The Invention of Prehistory* is right there in the title. "Invention," not investigation. Doesn't it matter if this or that theory is true: about where human beings first evolved, or our historical and genetic relationship to Neanderthals, or the degree of violence in ancient hunter-gatherer societies, or how patriarchy emerged? Apparently, it doesn't. "I do not much care if

THE  
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*Stefanos  
Geroulanos*

LIVERIGHT

particular theories are true,” Geroulanos writes. “I ask what work they do.” It isn’t clear, in fact, if he thinks that there is such a thing as truth. This is someone who can write about “the invention of deep time” and “the ‘discovery’ of the earth’s past”—the scare quotes meaning not that the past was there all along, but that it isn’t there at all, not in any external, empirically observable way. The nascent science of geology, he writes, “played midwife to the birth … of a whole swarm of ostensibly ancient creatures” (that is, the dinosaurs). Ostensibly? So there’s no reality beneath the theories? Geroulanos ducks the question. “The story of human origins has never really been about the past. It has never really been concerned with an accurate, precise depiction of humanity’s emergence out of nature.”

I wonder what his colleagues—the geneticists and archaeologists, the linguists and the neuroscientists—would say to that. This is social constructionism, the idea that there is no truth outside our agreed interpretations, taken to its logical, inane conclusion. And it points to a crucial distinction that Geroulanos’s project denies: the difference between science and pseudo- or proto-science. We have theories about human origins now, and we had theories about them in the 19th century, but they are not the same kinds of theories. Yes, scientists can still have social biases, but contemporary scientific protocols, such as peer review, are meant to root them out. Is the system perfect? Of course not. But there is a qualitative difference between believing that humanity originated in China because (or in order to argue that) the Chinese are “backwards” and deducing that it originated in Africa because that is what genetics and paleontology suggest.

SO IF truth is irrelevant, what about that “work,” as Geroulanos puts it, that contemporary theories “do”? Well, that’s just the thing. For all his talk of “the new scientific ideologies,” he doesn’t turn up much, in recent decades, that’s indictable. These hypotheses include the notion that the cave paintings show evidence of shamanism; that tools and human bodies shaped each other in a “feedback loop” akin to those we know from the world of computers; that we all descend from a single genetic ancestor, popularly dubbed “Mitochondrial Eve.” All of this is pretty harmless, and certainly a distant cry from the “empire, violence” of his subtitle. Much of it, indeed, comes down on the progressive side of the ledger: goddesses and matriarchies, relatively peaceful tribes that existed before the invention of war, preagricultural egalitarianism. There are still plenty of ideologies running around that justify racism, militarism, and other evils, but they are not drawn from science, for the most part.

And insofar as they are, whose fault is that? “The archaeologists who dig up old bones and the biologists who study hominid genes,” Geroulanos writes, “are seldom the vectors of violence.” Seldom indeed.

*I do not  
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They also aren’t responsible, to name some of his targets, for Yuval Noah Harari (the “reigning prophet of prehistory’s future”), or *2001: A Space Odyssey* (which popularized the idea of the “killer ape,” our supposedly brutal australopithecine ancestor, a notion that Geroulanos presents as having been designed to create an image of violent Indigenous Africans and thus to serve as an argument against decolonization). Nor should they be blamed for the far right’s appropriation of Neanderthals as the original white Europeans. If scientific findings are sensationalized by journalists, oversimplified by authors, and misused by political actors, what are scientists supposed to do? Stop doing science?

Geroulanos seems to imply that the answer is yes, at least for those who study human origins. The world of early humans, he insists, is “inconceivable,” inaccessible. Almost anything we say about it is “a narcissistic fantasy,” a myth. So he openly promotes the myths he likes, which are the ones that announce themselves as such. “I prefer [Georges] Bataille’s and [Annette] Laming-Emperaire’s myths” about the cave paintings—respectively, that the images reflect the moment at which humans became conscious of themselves as separate from nature (and thus conscious of death) and that they embody a complex symbolic system structured around gender (which Laming-Emperaire actually did not regard as a myth). Geroulanos writes admiringly about feminist imaginings that place the female at the center of human evolution. Elaine Morgan’s popularization, in *The Descent of Woman*, of the “aquatic ape” hypothesis—the theory that hominins developed not on the savanna but in the shallow sea, where mothers could protect their babies from feline predators—was “proudly speculative.” Susan Brownmiller’s assertion, in *Against Our Will*, that hominin social organization began in fear of rape, was “a primal fiction” that refused to “be judged by crude verification.” He even puts a word in for Wakanda as the “fluorescent triumph” of the Afrocentric view of human history.

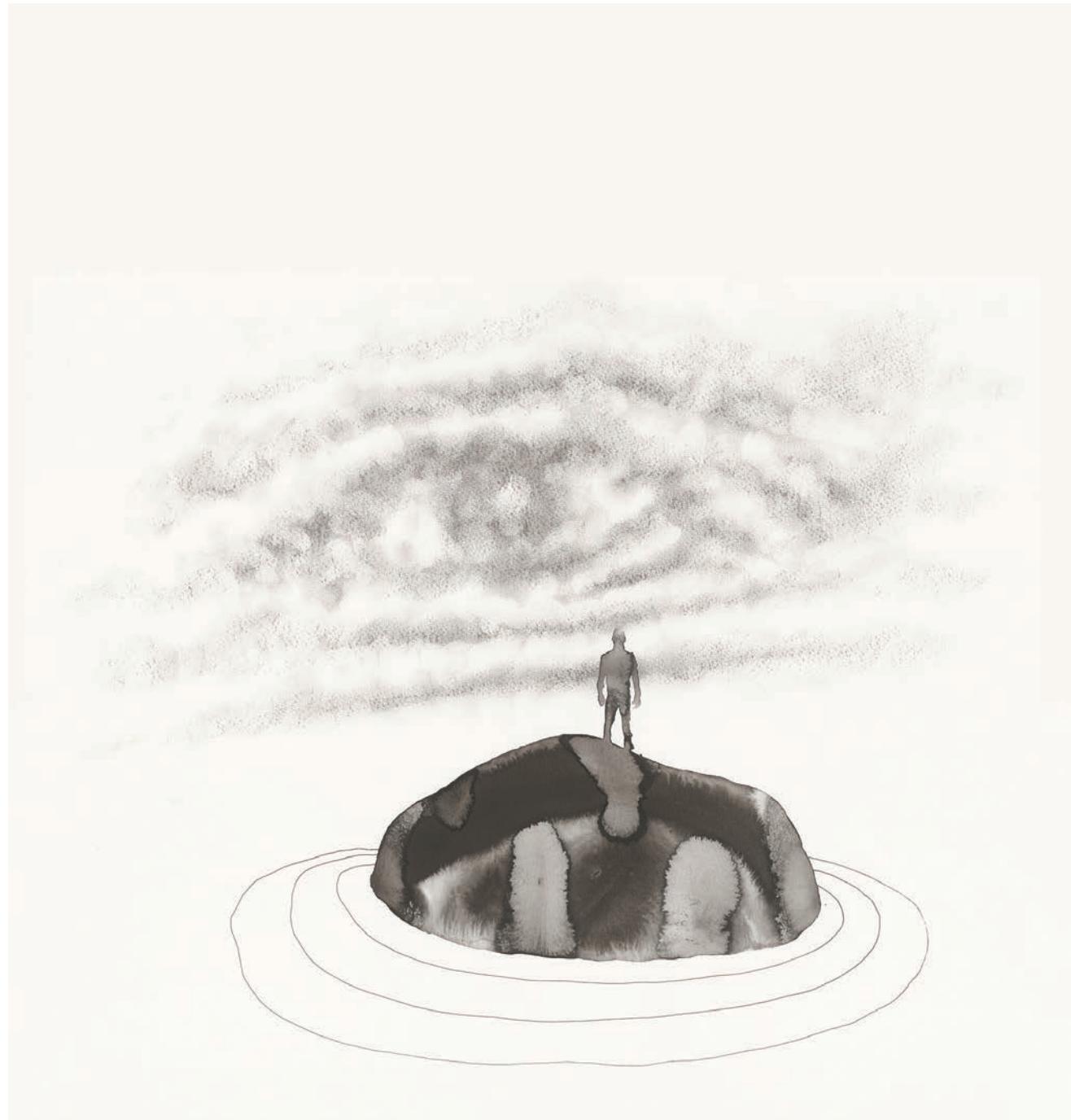
This is what constructionism gets you. Geroulanos’s ultimate targets are “humanism, which has always hidden violence,” and the idea of human nature, along with the associated notion that studying the origin of the species can get us closer to understanding it. “In reality,” he writes (reality?), “humans have almost nothing in common with our paleolithic forefathers.” This is also a belief, an ideology, a myth. Human nature may be too, and so may humanism. But I’ll take them over what Geroulanos is offering. *A*

William Deresiewicz is the author of *The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech*.

# Orwell's Escape

*Why the author repaired to the remote  
Isle of Jura to write his masterpiece, 1984*

By Stephen Metcalf



The Isle of Jura is a patchwork of bogs and moorland laid across a quartzite slab in Scotland's Inner Hebrides. Nearly 400 miles from London, rain-lashed, more deer than people: All the reasons not to move there were the reasons George Orwell moved there. Directions to houseguests ran several paragraphs and could include a plane, trains, taxis, a ferry, another ferry, then miles and miles on foot down a decrepit, often impassable rural lane. It's safe to say the man wanted to get away. From what?

Orwell himself could be sentimental about his longing to escape ("Thinking always of my island in the Hebrides," he'd once written in his wartime diary) or wonderfully blunt. In the aftermath of Hiroshima, he wrote to a friend:

This stupid war is coming off in abt 10–20 years, & this country will be blown off the map whatever else happens. The only hope is to have a home with a few animals in some place not worth a bomb.

It helps also to remember Orwell's immediate state of mind when he finally fully moved to Jura, in May 1946. Four months before Hiroshima, his wife, Eileen, had died; shortly after the atomic bomb was dropped, *Animal Farm* was published.

Almost at once, in other words, Orwell became a widower, terrified by the coming postwar reality, and famous—the latter a condition he seems to have regarded as nothing but a bother. His newfound sense of dread was only adding to one he'd felt since 1943, when news of the Tehran Conference broke. The meeting had been ominous to Orwell: It placed in his head the idea of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin divvying up the postwar world, leading to a global triopoly of super-states. The man can be forgiven for pouring every ounce of his grief, self-pity, paranoia (literary lore had it that he thought Stalin might have an ice pick with his name on it), and embittered egotism into the predicament of his latest protagonist, Winston Smith.

Unsurprisingly, given that it culminated in both his masterpiece and his death, Orwell's time on the island has been picked over by biographers, but *Orwell's Island: George, Jura and 1984*, by Les Wilson, treats it as a subject worthy of stand-alone attention. The book is at odds with our sense of Orwell as an intrepid journalist. It is a portrait of a man jealously guarding his sense of himself as a creature elementally apart, even as he depicts the horrors of a world in which the human capacity for apartness is being hunted down and destroyed.

Wilson is a former political journalist, not a critic, who lives on neighboring Islay, famous for its whiskies. He is at pains to show how Orwell, on Jura,

overcame one of his laziest prejudices: The author went from taking every opportunity to laugh at the Scots for their "burns, braes, kilts, sporrans, claymores, bagpipes" (who is better at the derisive list than Orwell?) to complaining about the relative lack of Gaelic-language radio programming.

*Scottish* had come to mean something more to him than kailyard kitsch. These were a people holding out against a fully amalgamated identity, beginning with the Kingdom of Great Britain and extending to modernity itself. On Jura at least, crofters and fishermen still lived at a village scale. As to whether Jura represented, as has been suggested, suicide by other means—Orwell was chronically ill, and Barnhill, his cottage, was 25 miles from the island's one doctor—Wilson brushes this aside. In fact, he argues that Jura was "kinder to Orwell's ravaged lungs than smog-smothered London," where inhabitants were burning scavenged wood to stay warm.

At Barnhill, Orwell set up almost a society in miniature, devoting his 16-acre homestead to his ideal of self-sufficiency. Soon after moving there, he was joined by his sister, his 2-year-old adopted son, and a nanny. Amid the general, often biting, austerity of postwar Europe, they enjoyed a private cornucopia, subsisting on, as Wilson says, a diet of "fish, lobster, rabbit, venison and fresh milk and eggs," and were often warmed by peat that Orwell himself had cut. He intended to live there for the rest of his life, raising his son and relishing an existence as a non-cog in a noncapitalist machine.

He lived without electricity or phone; shot rabbits "for the pot," as Wilson says; raised geese to be slaughtered and plucked; and fished the surrounding waters in a dinghy. He fashioned a tobacco pouch from animal skin and a mustard spoon out of deer bone, and served his aghast guests a seaweed blanc-mange. Over time, absconding to Jura and writing *1984* became aspects of a single premonition: a coming world of perpetual engulfment by the forces of bigness. As Orwell's latest biographer, D. J. Taylor, has pointed out in *Orwell: The New Life*, Orwell's novels before *Animal Farm* followed a common template of a sensitive young person going up against a heartless society, destined to lose. Eileen is the one who helped him—either by suggesting that *Animal Farm* be told as a fable or by lightening his touch, depending on whom you talk to—find a newly engaging, even playful (in its way), register.

The loss of Eileen and return of the self-pitying Orwell alter ego are certainly linked. And indeed, in *1984* he produces his most Orwellian novel, in both senses—only now both protagonist and situation are presented in the absolute extreme: The young man is the bearer (if we believe his tormentor, O'Brien) of

*He lived without electricity or phone, shot rabbits "for the pot," raised geese to be slaughtered and plucked, and fished the surrounding waters in a dinghy.*

the last shred of human autonomy, in a society both totally corrupt and laying total claim to his being.

What this absolutism produced, of course, was not another fusty neo-Edwardian novel à la Orwell's earlier *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, but a wild, aggrieved tour de force of dystopian erotica. Odd though it may sound, given the novel's unremitting torments, *1984* quickly became a best seller, in no small part because its first readers, especially in America, found it comforting—a source of the release you might feel, in a darkened theater, when you remember that you yourself are not being chased by a man with a chain saw. The reader could glance up, notice no limitless police powers or kangaroo inquisitions, and say: *We are not them.*

Such complacency is hard to come by in 2024. Thinking of Orwell, famous though he is for his windowpane prose and the prescience of his essays, as the ultimate sane human being is not so easy either. Rereading *1984* in light of the Jura episode suggests that Orwell was an altogether weirder person, and his last novel an altogether weirder book, than we've appreciated.

**CONVENTIONALLY SPEAKING**, *1984* is not a good novel; it couldn't be. Novels are about the conflict between an individual's inner-generated aims and a prevailing social reality that denies or thwarts them. *1984* is the depiction of the collapse of this paradigm—the collapse of inner and outer in all possible iterations. Of course its protagonist is thinly drawn: Winston's self lacks a social landscape to give it dimensionality.

In place of anything like a novel proper, we get a would-be bildungsroman breaking through to the surface in disparate fragments. These scraps are Winston's yearnings, memories, sensual instincts, which have, as yet, somehow gone unmurdered by the regime. The entire state-sponsored enterprise of Pavlovian sadism in Oceania is devoted to snuffing out this remnant interiority.

The facsimile of a life that Winston does enact comes courtesy of a series of private spaces—a derelict church, a clearing in the woods, a room above a junk shop—the last of which is revealed to have been a regime-staged contrivance. The inexorable momentum of the novel is toward the final such private space, Winston's last line of defense, and the last line of defense in any totalitarian society: the hidden compartment of his mind.

When all else fails, there is the inaccessibility of human mentality to others, a black box in every respect. Uncoincidentally, Winston's final defense—hiding out in his head—had been Orwell's first. While he struggled on Jura to finish *1984*, Orwell apparently returned to “Such, Such Were the Joys,” his long and excoriating

essay about his miserable years at St. Cyprian's boarding school. He'd been sent there at the age of 8, one of the shabby-genteel boys with brains in what was otherwise a class snob's paradise. He was a bed wetter to boot, for which, Orwell writes, he was brutally punished. No wonder he found dignity in apartness. Taylor's biography is brilliant about the connection between Orwell's childhood reminiscence and *1984*.

In the essay, Orwell portrays his alma mater as an environment that invaded every cranny of its pupils' lives. Against this, he formed his sense of bearing “at the middle of one's heart,” as he writes, “an incorruptible inner self” holding out against an autocratic headmistress. As a cop in Burma, a scullion in Paris, an amateur ethnographer in northern England, he was a man who kept his own company, even when in company, and whom others, as a consequence, found by and large inscrutable.

What was this man's genius, if not taking the petty anxieties of Eric Blair, his given name, and converting them into the moral clarity of George Orwell? Fearful that his own cherished apartness was being co-opted into nonexistence, he projected his fear for himself onto something he called the “autonomous individual,” who, as he said in his 1940 essay “Inside the Whale,” “is going to be stamped out of existence.” To this he added:

ORWELL'S  
ISLAND: GEORGE,  
JURA AND 1984

*Les Wilson*

SARABAND

The literature of liberalism is coming to an end and the literature of totalitarianism has not yet appeared and is barely imaginable. As for the writer, he is sitting on a melting iceberg; he is merely an anachronism, a hangover from the bourgeois age, as surely doomed as the hippopotamus.

The fate of the autonomous individual, “the writer,” the literature of liberalism—he carried all of it to Jura, where he dumped it onto the head of poor Winston Smith.

Orwell typed for hours upstairs, sitting on his iron bedstead in a tatty dressing gown, chain-smoking shag tobacco. In May 1947, he felt he had a third of a draft, and in November, a completed one. In December, he was in a hospital outside Glasgow, diagnosed with “chronic” tuberculosis—not a death sentence, maybe, but his landlord on Jura suspected that Orwell now knew he was dying.

The following July, after grueling treatments and a stint in a sanatorium, he returned to Jura fitter but by no means cured, and under strict orders to take it easy. His rough draft, however, was a riot of scrawled-over pages. To produce a clean manuscript for the publisher, he would need to hire and closely supervise a typist, but no candidate was willing to trek to Jura, and Orwell was unwilling to leave it. He typed *1984* on his own, having all but spent himself writing it.

"He should have been in bed," Wilson says, and instead sat "propped up on a sofa" banging out 5,000 words a day. Among all of its gruesome set pieces, culminating in Room 101 in the Ministry of Love, the novel's most decisive act of torment is a simple glance in the mirror. Winston is sure—it is one of his last consolations, before breaking completely—that some inherent principle exists in the universe to prevent a system based on nothing but cruelty and self-perpetuation from triumphing forever. O'Brien calmly assures Winston that he's wrong, that he is "the last man," and to prove it, and the obvious nonexistence of "the human spirit," he forces Winston to look at himself:

A bowed, greycoloured, skeleton-like thing was coming towards him. Its actual appearance was frightening, and not merely the fact that he knew it to be himself. He moved closer to the glass. The creature's face seemed to be protruded, because of its bent carriage. A forlorn, jailbird's face with a nobby forehead running back into a bald scalp, a crooked nose, and battered-looking cheekbones above which his eyes were fierce and watchful. The cheeks were seamed, the mouth had a drawn-in look. Certainly it was his own face, but it seemed to him that it had changed more than he had changed inside. The emotions it registered would be different from the ones he felt.

The final membrane between inner and outer is dissolving. *1984* can read like Orwell's reverse autobiography, in which, rather than a life being built up, it gets disassembled down to its foundational unit. The body is now wasting; the voice is losing expressive competence. Worse, the face will soon enough have nothing left to express, as the last of his adaptive neurocircuitry becomes property of Oceania.

*1984* is Orwell saying goodbye to himself, and an improbably convincing portrait of the erasure of the autonomous individual. He finished typing the novel by early December 1948. His final diary entry on Jura—dated that Christmas Eve—gave the weight of the Christmas goose "before drawing & plucking," then concluded: "Snowdrops up all over the place. A few tulips showing. Some wall-flowers still trying to flower." The next month, he was back in a sanatorium; the next year, he was dead. He was 46 years old.

**1984** WAS PUBLISHED 75 years ago. Surprisingly, it immediately surpassed *Animal Farm* as a critical and commercial success. One by one, Orwell's contemporaries—V. S. Pritchett, Rebecca West, Bertrand Russell—acknowledged its triumph. A rare dissenter was Evelyn Waugh, who wrote to Orwell to say that he'd found the book morally inert. "You deny

the soul's existence (at least Winston does) and can only contrast matter with reason & will." The trials of its protagonist consequently failed to make Waugh's "flesh creep." What, he implied, was at stake here?

Talk about missing the point. Nowhere in Orwell's work can one find evidence of anything essential, much less eternal, that makes us human. That's why Winston, our meager proxy, is available for a thoroughgoing reboot. As the book implies, we're creatures of contingency all the way down. Even a memory of a memory of freedom, autonomy, self-making, consciousness, and agency—in a word, of ourselves—can disappear, until no loss is felt whatsoever. Hence the terror of being "the last man": You're the living terminus, the lone bearer of what will be, soon enough, a dead language.

A precious language, indicating a way of being in the world worth keeping—if you're George Orwell. From the evidence of Jura and *1984*, persisting as his own catawampus self—askew to the world—was a habit he needed to prove he couldn't possibly kick. He could be the far-off yet rooted man who loved being a father; performing what he deemed "sane" tasks, such as building a henhouse; indulging his grim compulsions (smoking tobacco and writing books). The soul, eternal fabric of God, had no place in that equation.

Waugh wasn't the only muddled reader of the book. In the aftermath of the Berlin blockade and the creation of NATO, followed by the Soviets' detonation of their first atomic weapon, readers—Americans, especially—might have been eager for an anti-Stalinist bedtime story. But Orwell had already written an anti-Stalinist bedtime story. If his time on Jura tells us anything, it's that in *1984*, he was exhorting us to beware of concentrated power and pay attention to public language, yes, but above all, guard your solitude against interlopers, Stalinist or otherwise.

In addition to the book's top-down anxieties about the coming managerial overclass, a bottom-up anxiety about how fragile solitude is—irreducible to an abstract right or a material good—permeates *1984*. Paradoxically, Winston's efforts to hold fast to the bliss of separateness are what give the book its unexpected turns of beauty and humanity. ("The sweet summer air played against his cheek. From somewhere far away there floated the faint shouts of children: in the room itself there was no sound except the insect voice of the clock.") For all of Orwell's intrepidity, his physical courage, his clarity of expression, his most resolutely anti-fascist instinct lay here: in his terror at the thought of never being alone. *A*

Stephen Metcalf is the host of *Slate's Culture Gabfest* podcast.

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## ESSAY

### The Speechwriter

*My husband, Richard Goodwin, wrote landmark speeches for JFK and LBJ. Late in life, we dived into his archives, looking for vivid traces of our hopeful youth.*

By  
Doris Kearns  
Goodwin

One summer morning, seven months after he had turned 80, my husband, Dick Goodwin, came down the stairs, clumps of shaving cream on his earlobes, singing, “The corn is as high as an elephant’s eye,” from the musical *Oklahoma!* ¶ “Why so chipper?” I asked. ¶ “I had a flash,” he said, looking over the headlines of the three newspapers I had laid out for him on the breakfast table in our home in



Concord, Massachusetts. Putting them aside, he started writing down numbers. "Three times eight is 24. Three times 80 is 240."

"Is that your revelation?" I asked.

"Look, my 80-year life span occupies more than a third of our republic's history. That means that our democracy is merely three 'Goodwins' long."

I tried to suppress a smile.

"Doris, one Goodwin ago, when I was born, we were in the midst of the Great Depression. Pearl Harbor happened on December 7, 1941, my 10th birthday. It ruined my whole party! If we go back two Goodwins, we find our Concord Village roiled in furor over the Fugitive Slave Act. A third Goodwin will bring us back to the point that, if we went out our front door, took a left, and walked down the road, we might just see those embattled farmers and witness the commencement of the Revolutionary War."

He glanced at the newspapers and went to his study, on the far side of the house. An hour later, he was back to read aloud a paragraph he had just written:

Three spans of one long life traverse the whole of our short national history. One certain thing that a look backward at the vicissitudes of our country's story suggests is that massive and sweeping change will come. And it can come swiftly. Whether or not it is healing and inclusive change depends on us. As ever, such change will generally percolate from the ground up, as in the days of the American Revolution, the anti-slavery movement, the progressive movement, the civil-rights movement, the women's movement, the gay-rights movement, the environmental movement. From the long view of my life, I see how history turns and veers. The end of our country has loomed many times before. America is not as fragile as it seems.

"It's now or never," he said, announcing that the time had finally come to unpack and examine the 300 boxes of material he had dragged along with us during 40 years of marriage. Dick had saved everything relating to his time in public service in the 1960s as a speechwriter for and adviser to John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson,

Robert F. Kennedy, and Eugene McCarthy: reams of White House memos, diaries, initial drafts of speeches annotated by presidents and presidential hopefuls, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, photographs, menus—a mass that would prove to contain a unique and comprehensive archive of a pivotal era. Dick had been involved in a remarkable number of defining moments.

He was the junior speechwriter, working under Ted Sorenson, during JFK's 1960 presidential campaign. He was in the room to help the candidate prepare for his first televised debate with Richard Nixon. In the box labeled DEBATE were pages torn

during the mayhem of the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago.

For years, however, Dick had resisted opening these boxes. They were from a time he recalled with both elation and a crushing sense of loss. The assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy; the war in Vietnam; the riots in the cities; the violence on college campuses—all the turmoil had drawn a dark curtain on the entire decade. He had wanted only to look ahead.

Now he had resolved to go back in time. "I'm an old guy," he said. "If I have any wisdom to dispense, I'd better start dispensing." A friend, Deb Colby, became his research assistant, and together they began the slow process of arranging the boxes in chronological order. Once that preliminary task had been completed, Dick was hopeful that there might be something of a book in the material he had uncovered. He wanted me to go back with him to the very first box and work our way through all of them. I was not only his wife but a historian.

"I need your help," he said. "Jog my memory, ask me questions, see what we can learn." I joined him in his study, and we started on the first group of boxes. We made a deal to try to spend time on this project every weekend to see what might come of it.

Our last great adventure together was about to begin.

## FALL 1960

from a yellow pad upon which Kennedy had scrawled requests for information or clarification. Dick was in the White House when the president's coffin returned from Dallas, and he was responsible for making arrangements to install an eternal flame at the grave site. He was at LBJ's side during the summit of his historic achievements in civil rights and the Great Society. He was in New Hampshire during McCarthy's crusade against the Vietnam War, and in the hospital room when Robert Kennedy died in Los Angeles. He was a central figure in the debate over the peace plank

Some 30 boxes contained materials relating to JFK's 1960 presidential campaign. From September 4 to November 8, 1960, Dick was a member of the small entourage that flew across the country with Kennedy for more than two months of nonstop campaigning. The first-ever private plane used by a presidential candidate during a campaign, the Caroline (named for Kennedy's daughter) had been modified into a luxurious executive office. It had plush couches and four chairs that could be converted into small beds—two of them for Dick and Ted Sorenson. Kennedy had his own suite of bedrooms farther aft.

"You were all so young," I marveled to Dick after looking up the ages of the team.

The candidate was 43; Bobby Kennedy, 34; Ted Sorenson, 32. "And you—"

"Twenty-eight," he interrupted, adding, "Youngest of the lot."

After midnight on October 14, 1960, the Caroline landed at Willow Run Airport, near Ypsilanti, Michigan. Three weeks remained until Election Day. Everyone was bone-tired as the caravan set out for Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan.

As they approached the Michigan campus, there was little to suggest that one of the most enduring moments of the campaign was about to occur. It was nearly 2 a.m. by the time the caravan reached the Michigan Union, where Kennedy was scheduled to catch a few hours of sleep before starting on a whistle-stop tour of the state. No one in the campaign had expected to find as many as 10,000 students waiting in the streets to greet the candidate. Neither Ted nor Dick had prepared remarks for the occasion.

As Kennedy ascended the steps of the union, the crowd chanted his name. He turned around, smiled, and introduced himself as "a graduate of the Michigan of the East—Harvard University." He then began speaking extemporaneously, falling back on his familiar argument that the 1960 campaign presaged the outcome of the race between communism and the free world. But suddenly, he caught a second wind and swerved from his stock stump speech. He asked the crowd of young people what they might be willing to contribute for the sake of the country.

How many of you who are going to be doctors are willing to spend your days in Ghana? Technicians or engineers, how many of you are willing to work in the Foreign Service and spend your lives traveling around the world? On your willingness to do that, not merely to serve one year or two in the service, but on your willingness to contribute part of your life to this country, I think will depend the answer whether a free society can compete.

What stirred Kennedy to these spontaneous questions is not clear. Weariness, intuition, or—most likely, I suspect—because they had lingered in his mind

after the third debate with Nixon, which had taken place only hours before and had been focused on whether America's prestige in the world was rising or falling relative to that of Communist nations. The concept of students volunteering for public service in Africa and Asia might well bolster goodwill for America in countries wavering (as Kennedy had put it) "on the razor edge of decision" between the free world and the Communist system.

Drawing his impromptu speech to a close, Kennedy confessed that he had come to the union on this cold and early morning simply to go to bed. The words elicited raucous laughter and applause that continued to mount when he threw down a final challenge: "May I just say in conclusion that this university is not maintained by its alumni, by the state, merely to help its graduates have an economic advantage in the life struggle. There is certainly a greater purpose, and I'm sure you recognize it."

Kennedy's remarks lasted only three minutes—"the longest short speech," he called it. Yet something extraordinary transpired: The students took up the challenge he posed. Led by two graduate students, Alan and Judith Guskin, they organized, they held meetings, they sent letters and telegrams to the campaign asking Kennedy to develop plans for a corps of American volunteers overseas. Within a week, 1,000 students had signed petitions pledging to give two years of their lives to help people in developing countries.

When Dick and Ted learned of the student petitions, they redrafted an upcoming Kennedy speech on foreign policy to be delivered at the Cow Palace, in San Francisco, working in a formal proposal for "a peace corps of talented young men and women." We pulled the speech from one of the boxes. Dick's hand can be readily detected in the closing lines, which used a favorite quote of his from the Greek philosopher Archimedes. "Give me a fulcrum," Archimedes said, "and I will move the world." Dick would later invoke the same line in a historic speech by Robert Kennedy in South Africa.

Two days after JFK's speech at the Cow Palace, the candidate was flying to Toledo, Ohio. He sent word to the Guskins that he would like to meet them

and see their petitions, crammed with names. A photo captures the moment when an eager Judy Guskin clutches the petitions before she presents them to the weary-eyed Kennedy, who is reaching out in anticipation.

Later, Dick and Ted had coffee with Judy and Alan. They talked of the Peace Corps and the election, by then only five days away. Nixon had immediately denounced the idea of a Peace Corps—"a Kiddie Corps," he and others called it—warning that it would become a haven for draft dodgers. But for Judy and Alan, as for nearly a quarter of a million others, the Peace Corps would prove a transformative experience. The Guskins were in the first group to travel to Thailand, where Judy taught English and organized a teacher-training program. Alan set up a program at the same school in psychology and educational research. Returning home, they served as founders of the VISTA program, LBJ's domestic version of the Peace Corps.

For Dick, the Peace Corps, more than any other venture of the Kennedy years, represented the essence of the administration's New Frontier vision. After JFK's inauguration, as a member of the White House staff, Dick joined the task force that formally launched the Peace Corps. He was barely older than the typical volunteer.

## S U M M E R 1 9 6 3

Dick and I often talked, half-jokingly, half-seriously, about the various occasions when we were in the same place at the same time before we finally met—in the summer of 1972, when he arrived at the Harvard building where I had my office as an assistant professor. I knew who he was. I had heard that he was brilliant, brash, mercurial, arrogant, a fascinating figure. He was more than a decade older than me. His appearance was intriguing: curly, disheveled black hair; thick, unruly eyebrows; a pockmarked face; and several large cigars in the pocket of his casual shirt. We began a conversation that day about LBJ, literature, philosophy, astronomy, sex, gossip, and the Red Sox that would continue for 46 years.

The first occasion when we could have crossed paths but didn't was the March

on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, on August 28, 1963. It was not surprising that we didn't meet, given that some 250,000 people had gathered for the event.

I was spending the summer before my senior year at Colby College as an intern at the State Department. All government employees had been given the day off and been cautioned to stay home, warned that it wasn't safe. I was 20 years old—I had

no intention of staying home. But I still remember the nervous excitement I felt that morning as I walked with a group of friends toward the Washington Monument. We had been planning to attend the march for weeks.

A state of emergency had been declared as people descended on the capital from all over the country. Marchers arriving by bus and train on Wednesday morning were

encouraged to depart the city proper by that night. Hospitals canceled elective surgery to make space in the event of mass casualties. The Washington Senators baseball game was postponed. Liquor stores and bars were closed. We learned that thousands of National Guardsmen had been mobilized to bolster the D.C. police force. Thousands of additional soldiers stood ready across the Potomac, in Virginia.



*The presidential aides Richard Goodwin (left) and Bill Moyers discuss a speech with Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH PALMER FOR THE ATLANTIC;  
YOUCHI OKAMOTO / COURTESY OF LBJ LIBRARY

I asked Dick if these precautions had seemed a bit much. He explained that Kennedy was worried that if things got out of hand, the civil-rights bill he had introduced in June could unravel, and “take his administration with it.” Though government workers were discouraged from attending the march, Dick grabbed Bill Moyers, the deputy Peace Corps director, and headed toward the National Mall.

So there Dick and I were, unknown to each other, both moving along with what seemed to be all of humanity toward the Reflecting Pool and the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, where the march would culminate. I carried a poster stapled to a stick: CATHOLICS, PROTESTANTS AND JEWS UNITE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS. A sense that I was connected to something larger than myself took hold.

It's easy to cast a cynical eye upon this youthful exultation, to view it in retrospect as sentimental idealism, but the feelings were genuine, and they were profound. At the start of the march, I had wondered what proportion of the vast throng was white (it was later estimated at 25 percent). By the time I returned to my rooming house in Foggy Bottom, I had forgotten all about calculations and proportions. I had set out that morning apprehensive, yet had been lifted up by the most joyful day of public unity and community I had ever experienced.

Facing the Lincoln Memorial, with Martin Luther King's soaring “I Have a Dream” speech still ahead, we all held hands, our voices rising as we sang “We Shall Overcome”—the hymn that had long instilled purpose and courage in the foot soldiers of the civil-rights movement. That moment made as deep an impression on Dick as it did on me.

#### SPRING 1964

During our years of archival sifting, Dick and I, like two nosy neighbors on a party line, tracked down transcripts of conversations recorded by Lyndon Johnson's secret taping system.

“How splendid to be flies on the wall, to eavesdrop across the decades!” That was Dick's gleeful response after I read him a transcript of a telephone call between

the president and Bill Moyers—by then a special assistant to Johnson—on the evening of March 9, 1964. Here Dick and I were, he in his 80s and I in my 70s, finally privy to the very conversation that, previously unbeknownst to Dick, had led him from the nucleus of the Kennedy camp, through a period of confusion and drift in the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination, to the highest circles of the Johnson administration.

The phone call began with Johnson grousing about the dreary language in the poverty message that he soon planned to deliver to Congress. Passionately invested in the poverty program, he was dissatisfied with the drafts he had seen and was now pressing Moyers to find “whoever's the best explainer of this that you can get.”

**JOHNSON:** Since [Ted] Sorensen left, we've got no one that can be phonetic, and get rhythm ...

**MOYERS:** The only person I know who can—and I'm reluctant to ask him to get involved in this, because right now it's in our little circle—is Goodwin.

**JOHNSON:** Why not just ask him if he can't put some sex in it? I'd ask him if he couldn't put some rhyme in it and some beautiful Churchillian phrases and take it and turn it out for us tomorrow ... If he will, then we'll use it. But ask him if he can do it in confidence. Call him tonight and say, “I want to bring it to you now. I've got it ready to go, but he wants you to work on it if you can do it without getting it into a column.”

**MOYERS:** All right, I'll call him right now.

**JOHNSON:** Tell him that I'm pretty impressed with him. He's working on Latin America already; see how he's getting along. But can he put the music to it?

As we reached the end of the conversation, Dick swore that he could hear Johnson's voice clearly in his mind's ear. “Lyndon's a kind of poet,” Dick said. “What a unique recipe for high oratory: rhyme, sex, music, phonetics, and beautiful Churchillian phrases.”

We both knew him so well: Dick because he worked with him intimately in the White House and on the 1964 campaign, and I because, after a time as

a White House fellow, I'd joined a small team in Texas to help him go through his papers, conduct research, and draft his memoir. From the time Dick and I met, we often referred to the president simply as “Lyndon” when speaking with each other. There are a lot of Johnsons, but there was only one Lyndon.

#### SPRING 1965

A year and a half after the March on Washington, the memory of its transcendent finale returned to become the heart of the most important speech Dick ever drafted. We pulled a copy of the draft, some notes, the final speech, and newspaper clippings from one of the Johnson boxes.

The moment Dick stepped into the West Wing on the morning of March 15, 1965, he sensed an unusual hubbub and tension. Pacing back and forth in a dither outside Dick's second-floor office was the White House special assistant Jack Valenti. Normally full of glossy good cheer, Valenti pounced on Dick before he could even open his office door.

The night before, Johnson had decided to give a televised address to a joint session of Congress calling for a voting-rights bill. He believed that the conscience of America had been fired by the events at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, a week earlier, when peaceful marchers had been attacked by Alabama state troopers wielding clubs, nightsticks, and whips.

“He needs the speech from you right away,” Valenti said.

“From me! Why didn't you tell me yesterday? I've lost the entire night,” Dick responded.

“It was a mistake, my mistake,” Valenti acknowledged. He explained that the first words out of the president's mouth that morning had been “How is Goodwin doing on the speech?” and Valenti had told him he'd assigned it to another aide, Horace Busby. Johnson had erupted, “The hell you did! Get Dick to do it, and *now!*”

The speech had to be finished before 6 p.m., Valenti told Dick, in order to be loaded onto the teleprompter. Dick looked at his watch. Nine hours away. Valenti asked Dick if there was anything—anything at all—he could get for him.

"Serenity," Dick replied, "a globe of serenity. I can't be disturbed. If you want to know how it's coming, ask my secretary."

"I didn't want to think about time passing," Dick recalled to me. "I lit a cigar, looked at my watch, took the watch off my wrist, and put it on the desk beside my typewriter. Another puff of my cigar, and I took the watch and put it away in my desk drawer."

"The pressure would have short-circuited me," I said. "I never had the makings of a good speechwriter or journalist. History is more patient."

"Well," Dick said, laughing, "miss the speech deadline and those pages are only scraps of paper."

Dick examined the folder of notes Valenti had given him. Johnson wanted no uncertainty about where he stood. To deny fellow Americans the right to vote was simply and unequivocally wrong. He wanted the speech to be affirmative and hopeful. He would be sending a bill to Congress to protect the right to vote for all Americans, and he wanted this speech to speed public sentiment along.

In the year since Dick had started working at the White House, he had listened to Johnson talk for hundreds of hours—on planes and in cars, during meals in the mansion and at his ranch, in the swimming pool and over late-night drinks. He understood Johnson's deeply held convictions about civil rights, and he had the cadences of his speech in his ear. The speechwriter's job, Dick knew, was to clarify, heighten, and polish a speaker's convictions in the speaker's own language and natural rhythms. Without that authenticity, the emotional current of the speech would never hit home.

I knew that Dick often searched for a short, arresting sentence to begin every speech or article he wrote. On this day, he surely found it:

I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy ...

At times, history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama.

No sooner would Dick pull a page out of his typewriter and give it to his secretary than Valenti would somehow materialize, a nerve-worn courier, eager to express pages from Dick's secretary into the president's anxious hands. Johnson's edits and penciled notations were incorporated into the text while he awaited the next installment, lashing out at everyone within range—everyone except Dick.

The speech was no lawyer's brief debating the merits of the bill to be sent to Congress. It was a credo, a declaration of what we are as a nation and who we are as a people—a redefining moment in our history brought forth by the civil-rights movement.

The real hero of this struggle is the American Negro. His actions and protests, his courage to risk safety and even to risk his life, have awakened the conscience of this nation ...

He has called upon us to make good the promise of America. And who among us can say that we would have made the same progress were it not for his persistent bravery, and his faith in American democracy?

As the light shifted across his office, Dick became aware that the day suddenly seemed to be rushing by. He opened the desk drawer, peered at the face of his watch, took a deep breath, and slammed the drawer shut. He walked outside to get air and refresh his mind.

In the distance, Dick heard demonstrators demanding that Johnson send federal troops to Selma. Dick hurried back to his office. Something seemed forlorn about the receding voices—such a great contrast to the spirited resolve of the March on Washington. Loud and clear, the words *We shall overcome* sounded in his head.

It was after the 6-o'clock deadline when the phone in Dick's office rang for the first time that day. The voice at the other end was so relaxed and soothing that Dick hardly recognized it as the president's.

"Far and away," Dick told me, "the gentlest tones I ever heard from Lyndon."

"You remember, Dick," Johnson said, "that one of my first jobs after college was teaching young Mexican Americans in Cotulla. I told you about that down at

the ranch. I thought you might want to put in a reference to that." Then he ended the call: "Well, I won't keep you, Dick. It's getting late."

"When I finished the draft," Dick recalled, "I felt perfectly blank. It was done. It was beyond revision. It was dark outside, and I checked my wrist to see what time it was, remembered I had hidden my watch away from my sight, retrieved it from the drawer, and put it back on."

There was nothing left to do but shave, grab a sandwich, and stroll over to the mansion. There, greeted by an exorbitantly grateful Valenti, Dick hardly had the energy to talk. Before he knew it, he was sitting with the president in his limousine on the way to the Capitol.

A hush filled the chamber as the president began to speak. Watching from the well of the House, an exhausted Dick marveled at Johnson's emotional gravity. The president's somber, urgent, relentlessly driving delivery demonstrated a conviction and exposed a vulnerability that surpassed anything Dick had seen in him before.

There is no constitutional issue here. The command of the Constitution is plain. There is no moral issue. It is wrong—deadly wrong—to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote in this country. There is no issue of states' rights or national rights. There is only the struggle for human rights ...

This time, on this issue, there must be no delay, or no hesitation or no compromise with our purpose ...

But even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches in every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life.

Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.

*And—we—shall—overcome.*

The words came staccato, each hammered and sharply distinct from the others. In Selma, Alabama, Martin Luther King had gathered with friends and

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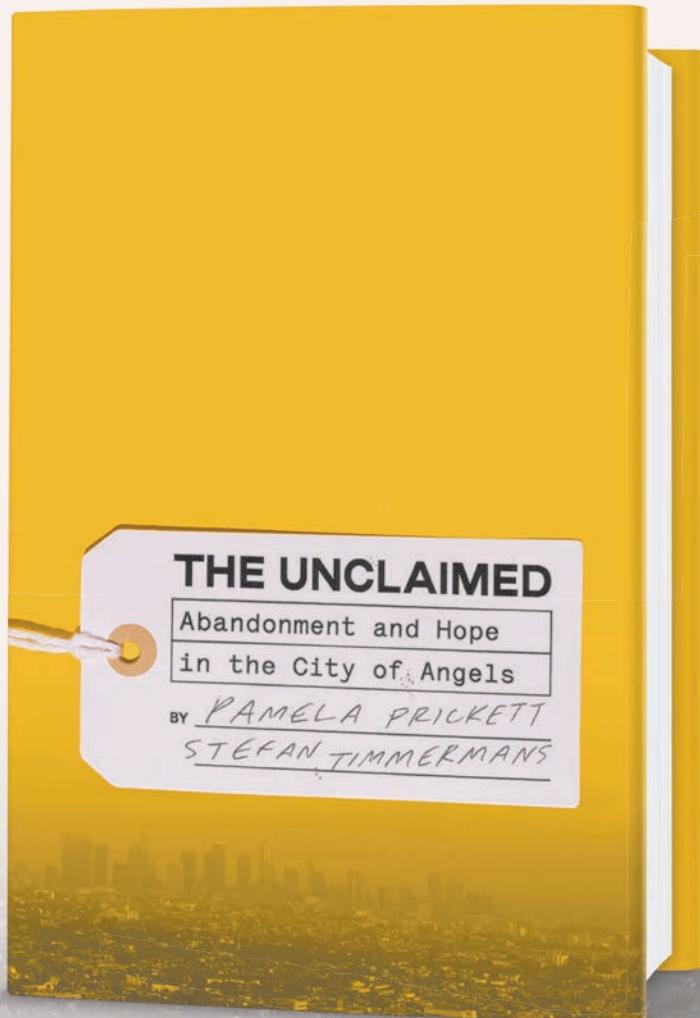
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CROWN

colleagues to watch the president's speech. At this climactic moment when Johnson took up the banner of the civil-rights movement, John Lewis witnessed tears rolling down King's cheeks.

The time had come for the president to draw on his own experience, to tell the formative story he had mentioned to Dick on the phone.

My first job after college was as a teacher in Cotulla, Texas, in a small Mexican American school. Few of them could speak English, and I couldn't speak much Spanish. My students were poor, and they often came to class without breakfast, hungry. And they knew, even in their youth, the pain of prejudice. They never seemed to know why people disliked them. But they knew it was so, because I saw it in their eyes. I often walked home late in the afternoon, after the classes were finished, wishing there was more that I could do ...

Somewhere you never forget what poverty and hatred can do when you see its scars on the hopeful face of a young child. I never thought then, in 1928, that I would be standing here in 1965. It never even occurred to me in my fondest dreams that I might have the chance to help the sons and daughters of those students and to help people like them all over this country.

But now I do have that chance—and I'll let you in on a secret: *I mean to use it.*

The audience stood to deliver perhaps the largest ovation of the night.

I told Dick that I had read an account that when Johnson was later asked who had written the speech, he pulled out a photo of his 20-year-old self surrounded by a cluster of kids, his former students in Cotulla. "They did," he said, indicating the whole lot of them.

"You know," Dick said with a smile, "in the deepest sense, that might just be the truth."

"God, how I loved Lyndon Johnson that night," Dick remembered. He long treasured a pen that Johnson gave him after signing the Voting Rights Act. "How unimaginable it would have been to think that in two years' time I would, like many others who listened that night, go into the streets against him."

two-tiered row of archival containers. "Look how many boxes we have left!" he exclaimed. "See Jackie and Bobby here, more Lyndon, riots and protests, McCarthy, anti-war marches, assassinations. Look at them!"

"I guess we better pick up our pace," I offered.

"You're a lot younger than me. Shovel more coal into our old train and let's go."

This determination to steam ahead had only increased as Dick approached his mid-80s. A pacemaker regulated his heart, he needed a hearing aid, his balance was compromised. One afternoon, he tripped on the way to feeding the fish in our backyard. He sat down on a bench, a pensive expression on his face. I asked if he was okay.

"I heard time's winged chariot hurrying near," he said, quoting Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," but then added, "Maybe it was only the hiss of my hearing aid."

"Who would you bet on?" he asked me one night at bedtime. "Who will be finished first—me or the boxes?"

Our work on the boxes kept him anchored with a purpose even after he was diagnosed with the cancer that took his life in 2018.

I realize now that we were both in the grip of an enchanted thought—that so long as we had more boxes to unpack, more work to do, his life, my life, our life together would not be finished. So long as we were learning, laughing, discussing the boxes, we were alive. If a talisman is an object thought to have magical powers and to bring luck, the boxes and the future book they held had become ours. *A*

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Nor could I have imagined, as I talked excitedly with my graduate-school friends at Harvard after listening to the speech—certain that a new tide was rising in our country—that only a few years later I would work directly for the president who delivered it. Or that 10 years later, I would marry the man who drafted it.

#### SPRING 2015

One morning, two years into our project, I found Dick mumbling and grumbling as he worked his way along the

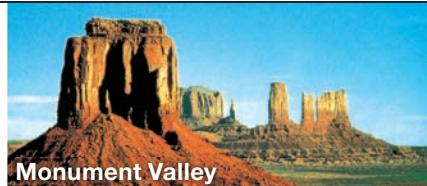
Doris Kearns Goodwin is a historian whose books include *No Ordinary Time*, *Team of Rivals*, and *Leadership in Turbulent Times*. This essay has been adapted from her latest book, *An Unfinished Love Story: A Personal History of the 1960s*.



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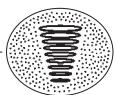
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# CALEB'S INFERNO

By Caleb  
Madison

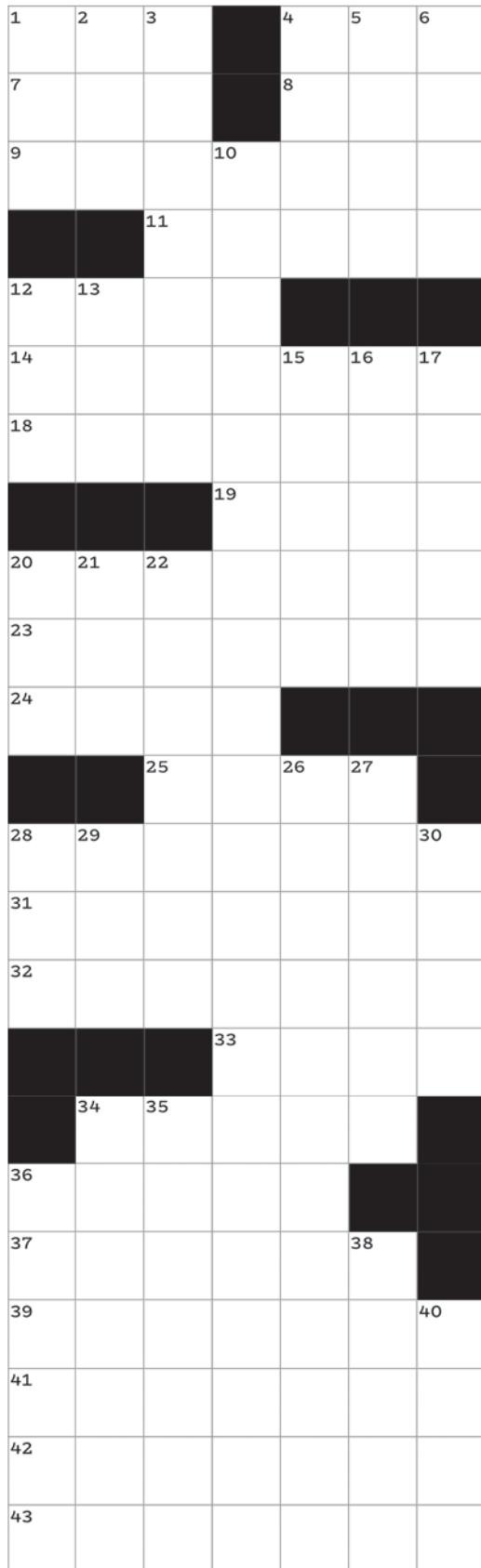
*Warning: This crossword puzzle starts easy, but gets devilishly hard as you descend into its depths. See which circle you can reach before you abandon all hope.*

## ACROSS

- 1 The first three letters
- 4 Tech utilized to create Thanos in the *Avengers* movies
- 7 Darjeeling or oolong, e.g.
- 8 Part of a journey or body
- 9 Becoming one, as two companies
- 11 Like some bottomless brunches
- 12 No longer relevant
- 14 Stable job dealing with coats?
- 18 Dangerously flammable greenhouse gas
- 19 Make the cut in Hollywood?
- 20 Hazy
- 23 False equivalence, e.g.
- 24 It might be served in a *kulhar*
- 25 Prefix geographically associated with 24-Across
- 28 Bret's partner in an early-2000s musical-comedy duo
- 31 Like a waltz
- 32 2005 Grammy-nominated song that begins "I backed my car into a cop car the other day"
- 33 It contains MSG
- 34 Mother of Leia
- 36 Captor of Leia
- 37 Stark played by Sean
- 39 Foundational figure?
- 41 Ring pursuit
- 42 Compact
- 43 Quicker to snap

## DOWN

- 1 Machine you punch your PIN into
- 2 Bug with a buzz
- 3 Wheel attachment that prevents someone from driving away
- 4 Award for advertising excellence
- 5 Demographic associated with TikTok and *Euphoria*
- 6 Azalea of pop or Pop of rock
- 10 Take a dramatic nosedive in quality
- 12 Employer of Leo the Lion
- 13 Material smelted into refinement
- 15 Comedy-franchise title character based on the performer's aunt and mother
- 16 The first problem it was assigned had to do with calculations about the H-bomb
- 17 Do over
- 20 Its first event was held at Denver's McNichols Sports Arena in 1993
- 21 "I'm good"
- 22 Assert that
- 26 Olive-based sauce?
- 27 Slim tie?
- 28 Rival of Peter Pan
- 29 Blow up, briefly
- 30 Minute
- 34 Italian innkeeper
- 35 Carries into space, say
- 36 Flight crew?
- 38 *Perizia per Sant'Apollonia*
- 40 Hungarian city defended by István Dobó



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