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# The Anti-Social Century

By Derek Thompson



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# The Army of God Comes Out of the Shadows

**Tens of millions of American Christians are embracing a charismatic movement known as the New Apostolic Reformation, which seeks to destroy the secular state.**

by Stephanie McCrummen



*This article was featured in the One Story to Read Today newsletter. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

On the Thursday night after Donald Trump won the presidential election, an obscure but telling celebration unfolded inside a converted barn off a highway stretching through the cornfields of Lancaster County,

Pennsylvania. The place was called Gateway House of Prayer, and it was not exactly a church, and did not exactly fit into the paradigms of what American Christianity has typically been. Inside, there were no hymnals, no images of Jesus Christ, no parables fixed in stained glass. Strings of lights hung from the rafters. A huge map of the world covered one wall. On the others were seven framed bulletin boards, each representing a theater of battle between the forces of God and Satan—government, business, education, family, arts, media, and religion itself. Gateway House of Prayer, it turned out, was a kind of war room. And if its patrons are to be believed, at least one person, and at peak times dozens, had been praying every single minute of every single day for more than 15 years for the victory that now seemed at hand. God was winning. The Kingdom was coming.

“Hallelujah!” said a woman arriving for the weekly 7 o’clock “government watch,” during which a group of 20 or so volunteers sits in a circle and prays for God’s dominion over the nation.

“Now the work begins!” a man said.

“We have to fight, fight, fight!” a grandmother said as they began talking about how a crowd at Trump’s election watch party had launched into the hymn “How Great Thou Art.”

“They were singing that!” another man said.

Yes, people replied; they had seen a video of the moment. As the mood in the barn became ever more jubilant, the grandmother pulled from her purse a shofar, a hollowed-out ram’s horn used during Jewish services. She blew, understanding that the sound would break through the atmosphere, penetrate the demonic realm, and scatter the forces of Satan, a supernatural strike for the Kingdom of God. A woman fell to the floor.

“Heaven and Earth are coming into alignment!” a man declared. “The will of heaven is being done on Earth.”

What was happening in the barn in Lancaster County did not represent some fringe of American Christianity, but rather what much of the faith is becoming. A shift is under way, one that scholars have been tracking for

years and that has become startlingly visible with the rise of Trumpism. At this point, tens of millions of believers—about 40 percent of American Christians, including Catholics, according to a recent Denison University survey—are embracing an alluring, charismatic movement that has little use for religious pluralism, individual rights, or constitutional democracy. It is mystical, emotional, and, in its way, wildly utopian. It is transnational, multiracial, and unapologetically political. Early leaders called it the New Apostolic Reformation, or NAR, although some of those same leaders are now engaged in a rebranding effort as the antidemocratic character of the movement has come to light. And people who have never heard the name are nonetheless adopting the movement’s central ideas. These include the belief that God speaks through modern-day apostles and prophets. That demonic forces can control not only individuals, but entire territories and institutions. That the Church is not so much a place as an active “army of God,” one with a holy mission to claim the Earth for the Kingdom as humanity barrels ever deeper into the End Times.

Although the secular establishment has struggled to take all of this seriously, Trump has harnessed this apocalyptic energy to win the presidency twice.

If you were curious why Tucker Carlson, who was raised Episcopalian, recently [spoke of being mauled in his sleep by a demon](#), it may be because he is absorbing the language and beliefs of this movement. If you were questioning why Elon Musk would bother [speaking at an NAR church called Life Center in Harrisburg](#), it is because Musk surely knows that a movement that wants less government and more God works well with his libertarian vision. If you wanted to know why there were news stories about House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Southern Baptist, [displaying a white flag with a green pine tree](#) and the words An Appeal to Heaven outside his office, or the [same flag being flown outside the vacation home of Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito](#), a Catholic, the reason is that the Revolutionary War-era banner has become the battle flag for a movement with ideological allies across the Christian right. The NAR is supplying the ground troops to dismantle the secular state.



And if you are wondering where all of this is heading now that Trump has won the presidency, I was wondering the same thing. That is why I was sitting in the circle at Gateway House of Prayer, where, about 20 minutes into the evening, I got my first clue. People had welcomed me warmly. I had introduced myself as a reporter for *The Atlantic*. I was taking notes on Earth-heaven alignment when a woman across from me said, “Your writers have called us Nazis.”

She seemed to be referring to an article that [had compared Trump's rhetoric to Hitler's](#). I said what I always say, which is that I was there to understand. I offered my spiritual bona fides—raised Southern Baptist, from Alabama. The woman continued: “It’s an editorial board that is severely to the left and despises the Trump movement.” A man sitting next to me came to my defense. “We welcome you,” he said, but it was clear something was off, and that something was me. The media had become a demonic stronghold. The people of God needed to figure out whether I was a tool of Satan, or possibly whether I had been sent by the Almighty.

“I personally feel like if you would like to stay with us, then I would ask if we could lay hands on you and pray,” a woman said.

“We won’t hurt you,” another woman said.

“We just take everything to God,” a woman sitting next to me said. “Don’t take it personally.”

The praying began, and I waited for the judgment.

How all of this came to be is a story with many starting points, the most immediate of which is Trump himself. In the lead-up to the 2016 election, establishment leaders on the Christian right were backing candidates with more pious pedigrees than Trump’s. He needed a way to rally evangelicals, so he turned to some of the most influential apostles and prophets of the NAR, a wilder world where he was cast as God’s “wrecking ball” and embraced by a fresh pool of so-called prophecy voters, people long regarded as the embarrassing riffraff of evangelical Christianity. But the DNA of that moment goes back further, to the Cold War, Latin America, and an iconoclastic seminary professor named C. Peter Wagner.

He grew up in New York City during the Great Depression, and embraced a conservative version of evangelical Christianity when he was courting his future wife. They became missionaries in Bolivia in the 1950s and ’60s, when a wave of Pentecostalism was sweeping South America, filling churches with people who claimed that they were being healed, and seeing signs and wonders that Wagner initially dismissed as heresy. Much of this fervor was being channeled into social-justice movements taking hold across

Latin America. Che Guevara was organizing in Bolivia. The civil-rights movement was under way in the United States. Ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches were embracing the theology of liberation, emphasizing ideas such as the social sin of inequality and the need for justice not in heaven but here and now.

In the great postwar competition for hearts and minds, conservative American evangelicals—and the CIA, which they sometimes collaborated with—needed an answer to ideas they saw as dangerously socialist. Wagner, by then the general director of the Andes Evangelical Mission, rose to the occasion. In 1969, he took part in a conference in Bogotá, Colombia, sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association that aimed to counter these trends. He wrote a book—*Latin American Theology: Radical or Evangelical?*—which was handed out to all participants, and which argued that concern with social issues “may easily lead to serving mammon rather than serving God.” Liberation theology was a slippery slope to hell.

After that, Wagner became a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, teaching in the relatively experimental field of church growth. He began revisiting his experience in Bolivia, deciding that the overflowing churches he’d seen were a sign that the Holy Spirit was working in the world. He was also living in the California of the 1970s, when new religions and cults and a more freewheeling, independent, charismatic Christianity were proliferating, a kind of counter-counterculture. Doves of former hippies were being baptized in the Pacific in what became known as the Jesus People movement. Preachers such as John Wimber, a singer in the band that turned into the Righteous Brothers, were casting out demons before huge crowds. In the ’80s, a group of men in Missouri known as the Kansas City Prophets believed they were restoring the gift of prophecy, understanding this to be God’s natural way of talking to people.

Wagner met a woman named Cindy Jacobs, who understood herself to be a prophet, and believed that the “principalities” and “powers” mentioned in the Book of Ephesians were actually “territorial spirits” that could be defeated through “spiritual warfare.” She and others formed prayer networks targeting the “10/40 window”—a geographic rectangle between the latitudes of 10 and 40 degrees north that included North Africa, the Middle East, and other parts of Asia that were predominantly Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu.



C. Peter Wagner (Alexandre Luu)

Wagner also became captivated by a concept called dominionism, a major conceptual shift that had been emerging in conservative theological circles.

At the time, the prevailing view was that God's mandate for Christians was simple evangelism, person by person; the Kingdom would come later, after the return of Jesus Christ, and meanwhile, the business of politics was, as the Bible verse goes, rendered unto Caesar. The new way of thinking was that God was calling his people to establish the Kingdom now. To put it another way, Christians had marching orders—a mandate for aggressive social and institutional transformation. The idea had deep roots in a movement called Christian Reconstructionism, whose serious thinkers—most prominently a Calvinist theologian named R. J. Rushdoony—were spending their lives working out the details of what a government grounded in biblical laws would look like, a model for a Christian theocracy.

By 1996, Wagner and a group of like-minded colleagues were rolling these ideas into what they were calling the New Apostolic Reformation, a term meant to evoke their conviction that a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit was moving around the globe, endowing believers with supernatural power and the authority to battle demonic forces and establish God's Kingdom on Earth. The NAR vision was not technically conservative but radical: Constructing the Kingdom meant destroying the secular state with equal rights for all, and replacing it with a system in which Christianity is supreme. As a practical matter, the movement put the full force of God on the side of free-market capitalism. In that sense, Wagner and his colleagues had found the answer to liberation theology that they'd been seeking for decades.

By last year, 42 percent of American Christians agreed with the statement “God wants Christians to stand atop the ‘7 Mountains of Society.’”

Wagner, who died in 2016, wrote dozens of additional books with titles such as *Dominion!* and *Churchquake!* The movement allowed Christianity to be changed and updated, embracing the idea that God was raising new apostles and prophets who could not only interpret ancient scripture but deliver “fresh words” and dreams from heaven on a rolling, even daily basis. One of Wagner’s most talented acolytes, a preacher named Lance Wallnau, repackaged the concept of dominionism into what he popularized as the “7 Mountain Mandate,” essentially an action plan for how Christians could dominate the seven spheres of life—government, education, media, and the four others posted on the walls like targets at Gateway House of Prayer.

What happened next is the story of these ideas spreading far and wide into an American culture primed to accept them. Churches interested in growing found that the NAR formula worked, delivering followers a sense of purpose and value in the Kingdom. Many started hosting “7M” seminars and offering coaching and webinars, which often drew wealthy businesspeople into the fold. After the 2016 election, a group of the nation’s ultra-wealthy conservative Christians organized as an invitation-only charity called Ziklag, a reference to the biblical city where David found refuge during his war against King Saul. According to an [investigation by ProPublica](#), the group stated in internal documents that its purpose was to “take dominion over the Seven Mountains.” Wallnau is an adviser.

By last year, 42 percent of American Christians agreed with the statement “God wants Christians to stand atop the ‘7 Mountains of Society,’” according to Paul Djupe, a Denison University political scientist who has been [developing new surveys to capture what he and others describe as a “fundamental shift” in American Christianity](#). Roughly 61 percent agreed with the statement that “there are modern-day apostles and prophets.” Roughly half agreed that “there are demonic ‘principalities’ and ‘powers’ who control physical territory,” and that the Church should “organize campaigns of spiritual warfare and prayer to displace high-level demons.”

Overall, Djupe told me, the nation continues to become more secular. In 1991, only 6 percent of Americans identified as nonreligious, a figure that is now about 30 percent. But the Christians who remain are becoming more radical.

“They are taking on these extreme beliefs that give them a sense of power—they believe they have the power to change the nature of the Earth,” Djupe said. “The adoption of these sort of beliefs is happening incredibly fast.”

The ideas have seeped into Trumpworld, influencing the agenda known as Project 2025, as well as proposals set forth by the America First Policy Institute. A new book called *Unhumans*, co-authored by the far-right conspiracy theorist Jack Posobiec and endorsed by J. D. Vance, describes political opponents as “unhumans” who want to “undo civilization itself” and who currently “run operations in media, government, education,

economy, family, religion, and arts and entertainment”—the seven mountains. The book argues that these “unhumans” must be “crushed.”

“Our study of history has brought us to this conclusion: Democracy has never worked to protect innocents from the unhumans,” the authors write. “It is time to stop playing by rules they won’t.”

my own frame of reference for what evangelical Christianity looked like was wooden pews, the ladies’ handbell choir, and chicken casseroles for the homebound. The Southern Baptists of my childhood had no immediate reason to behave like insurgents. They had dominated Alabama for decades, mostly blessing the status quo. When I got an assignment a few years ago to write about why evangelicals were still backing Trump, I mistakenly thought that the Baptists were where the action was on the Christian right. I was working for *The Washington Post* then, and like many journalists, commentators, and researchers who study religion, I was far behind.

Where I ended up one Sunday in 2021 was a [church in Fort Worth, Texas, called Mercy Culture](#). Roughly 1,500 people were streaming through the doors for one of four weekend services, one of which was in Spanish. Ushers offered earplugs. A store carried books about spiritual warfare. Inside the sanctuary, the people filling the seats were white, Black, and brown; they were working-class and professionals and unemployed; they were former drug addicts and porn addicts and social-media addicts; they were young men and women who believed their homosexual tendencies to be the work of Satan. I met a young woman who told me she was going to Montana to “prophesy over the land.” I met a young man contemplating a future as a missionary, who told me, “If I have any choice, I want to die like the disciples.” They had the drifty air of hippies, but their counterculture was pure Kingdom.

They faced a huge video screen showing swirling stars, crashing waves, and apocalyptic images, including a mushroom cloud. A digital clock was counting down, and when it hit zero, a band—keyboard, guitars, drums—began blasting music that reminded you of some pop song you couldn’t quite place, from some world you’d left behind when you came through the doors. Lights flashed. Machine-made fog drifted through the crowd. People waved colored flags, calling the Holy Spirit in for a landing. Cameras

swooped around, zooming in on a grown man crying and a woman lying prostrate, praying. Eventually, the pastor, a young man in skinny jeans, came onstage and demon-mapped the whole city of Fort Worth. The west side was controlled by the principality of Greed, the north by the demonic spirit of Rebellion; the south belonged to Lust. He spoke of surrendering to God's laws. And at one point, he endorsed a Church elder running for mayor, describing the campaign as "the beginning of a righteous movement."

Walking across the bleak, hot parking lot to my rental car afterward, I could understand how people were drawn into their realm. After that, I started seeing the futuristic world of the NAR all over the place. Sprawling megachurches outside Atlanta, Phoenix, and Harrisburg with Broadway-level production values; lower-budget operations in strip malls and the husks of defunct traditional churches. Lots of screens, lots of flags. Conferences with names like Open the Heavens. A training course called Vanquish Academy where people could learn "advanced prophetic weaponry" and "dream intelligence." Schools such as Kingdom University, in Tennessee, where students can learn their "Kingdom Assignment." In a way, the movement was a world with its own language. People spoke of convergence and alignment and demon portals and whether certain businesses were Kingdom or not.

In 2023, I met a woman who believed that her Kingdom assignment was to [buy an entire mountain for God](#), and did. It is in northwestern Pennsylvania, and she lives on top of it with her husband. They are always finding what she called "God signs," such as feathers on the porch. Like many in the movement, she didn't attend church very often. But every day, she followed online prophets and apostles such as Dutch Sheets, an acolyte of Wagner's who has hundreds of thousands of followers and is known for interpreting dreams.

### [Stephanie McCrummen: The woman who bought a mountain for God](#)

In 2016, Sheets began embracing prophecies that God was using Trump, telling fellow prophets and apostles that his victory would bring "new levels of demonic desperation." In the aftermath of the 2020 election, Sheets began releasing daily prophetic updates called Give Him 15, casting Trump's attempt to steal the election as a great spiritual battle against the forces of

darkness. In the days before the insurrection, Sheets described a dream in which he was charging on horseback to the U.S. Capitol to stand for the Kingdom. Although he was not in Washington, D.C., on January 6, many of his followers were, some carrying the APPEAL TO HEAVEN flag he'd popularized. Others from Wagner's old inner circle were there too. Wallnau streamed live from near the U.S. Capitol that day and, that night, from the Trump International Hotel. Cindy Jacobs conducted spiritual warfare just outside the Capitol as rioters were smashing their way inside, telling her followers that the Lord had given her a vision "that they would break through and go all the way to the top." In his most recent book, *The Violent Take It by Force*, the scholar Matthew Taylor details the role that major NAR leaders played that day, calling them "the principal theological architects" of the insurrection.



Faith leaders, including major figures in the New Apostolic Reformation movement, pray with Donald Trump at the White House in 2019. (Storms Media Group / Alamy)

At the Pennsylvania statehouse, I met an apostle named Abby Abildness, whom I came to understand as a kind of Kingdom diplomat. It was the spring of 2023, and she had recently returned from Iraqi Kurdistan, where she had met with Kurdish leaders she believed to be descended from King Solomon, and who she said wanted “holy governance to go forth.”

I watched YouTube videos of prophets broadcasting from their basements. I watched [a streaming show called \*FlashPoint\*](#), where apostles and prophets deliver news from God; guests have included Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, because another dimension of the NAR is that the movement is a prominent advocate of Christian Zionism.

I came to understand how the movement amounts to a sprawling political machine. The apostles and prophets, speaking for God, decide which candidates and policies advance the Kingdom. The movement’s prayer networks and newsletters amount to voter lists and voter guides. A growing ecosystem of podcasts and streaming shows such as *FlashPoint* amounts to a Kingdom media empire. And the overall vision of the movement means that people are not engaged just during election years but, like the people at Gateway House of Prayer, 24/7.

### [Read: This just in from heaven](#)

As November’s election neared, I watched the whole juggernaut crank into action to return Trump to the White House. Wallnau, in partnership with the Trump-aligned America First Policy Institute, promoted an effort called Project 19, targeting voters in 19 swing counties. He also launched something called the Courage Tour, which similarly targeted swing states, and I attended one event in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. It looked like an old-fashioned tent revival, except that it was also an aggressive pro-Trump mobilization effort. Wallnau dabbed frankincense oil onto foreheads, anointing voters into God’s army. Another speaker said that Kamala Harris would be a “devil in the White House.” Others cast Democrats as agents of Lucifer, and human history as a struggle between the godless forces of secular humanism and God’s will for humankind.

A march called “A Million Women” on the National Mall drew tens of thousands of people and culminated with the smashing of an altar

representing demonic strongholds in America. With the Capitol dome as their backdrop, people took turns bashing the altar as music surged and others prayed, and when it was rubble, the prophet Lou Engle declared, “We’re going to point to the north, south, and east, and west, and command America! The veil has been ripped!”

The NAR movement was a major source of the “[low-propensity voters](#)” who backed Trump. Frederick Clarkson, a senior research analyst with Political Research Associates, which tracks antidemocratic movements, has been documenting the rise of the NAR for years, and warning about its theocratic goals. He believes that a certain condescension, and perhaps failure of imagination, has kept outsiders from understanding what he has come to see as the most significant religious movement of the 21st century, and one that poses a profound threat to democracy.

“Certain segments of society have not been willing to understand where these people are coming from,” Clarkson told me. “For me, it’s part of the story of our times. It’s a movement that has continued to rise, gathered political strength, attracted money, built institutions. And the broad center-left doesn’t understand what’s happening.”

Which leaves the question of what happens now.

The movement certainly aligns with many goals of the Christian right: a total abortion ban, an end to gay marriage and LGBTQ rights. Traditional family is the fundamental unit of God’s perfect order. In theory, affirmative action, welfare programs, and other social-justice measures would be unnecessary because in the Kingdom, as Abildness, the Pennsylvania apostle, and her husband once explained to me, there is no racism and no identity other than child of God. “Those that oppose us think we are dangerous,” her husband told me, describing a vision of life governed by God’s will. “But this is better for everyone. There wouldn’t be homelessness. We’d be caring for each other.”

Matthew Taylor told me he sees the movement merging seamlessly into “the MAGA blob,” with the prophets and apostles casting whatever Trump does as part of God’s plan, and rebuking any dissent. “It’s the synchronization with Trump that is most alarming,” he said. “The agenda now is Trump. And

that's how populist authoritarianism works. It starts out as a coalition, as a shotgun marriage, and eventually the populism and authoritarianism takes over."

### Read: My father, my faith, and Donald Trump

In another sense, the movement has never been about policies or changes to the law; it's always been about the larger goal of dismantling the institutions of secular government to clear the way for the Kingdom. It is about God's total victory.

"Buckle up, buttercup!" Wallnau said on his podcast shortly after the election. "Because you're going to be watching a whole new redefinition of what the reformation looks like as Christians engage every sector of society. Christ is not quarantined any longer. We're going into all the world."

On the day after the election, I went to Life Center, the NAR church where Elon Musk had spoken a couple of weeks earlier. The mood was jubilant. A pastor spoke of "years of oppression" and said that "we are at a time on the other side of a victory for our nation that God alone—that God alone—orchestrated for us."

The music pounded, and people cheered, and after that, a prominent prophet named Joseph Garlington delivered a sermon. He was a guest speaker, and he offered what sounded like the first hint of dissent I'd heard in a long time. He talked about undocumented immigrants and asked people to consider whether it might be possible that God was sending them to the U.S. so they could build the Kingdom.

"What if they are part of the harvest?" he said. "He didn't send us to them; maybe he's sending *them* to *us*."

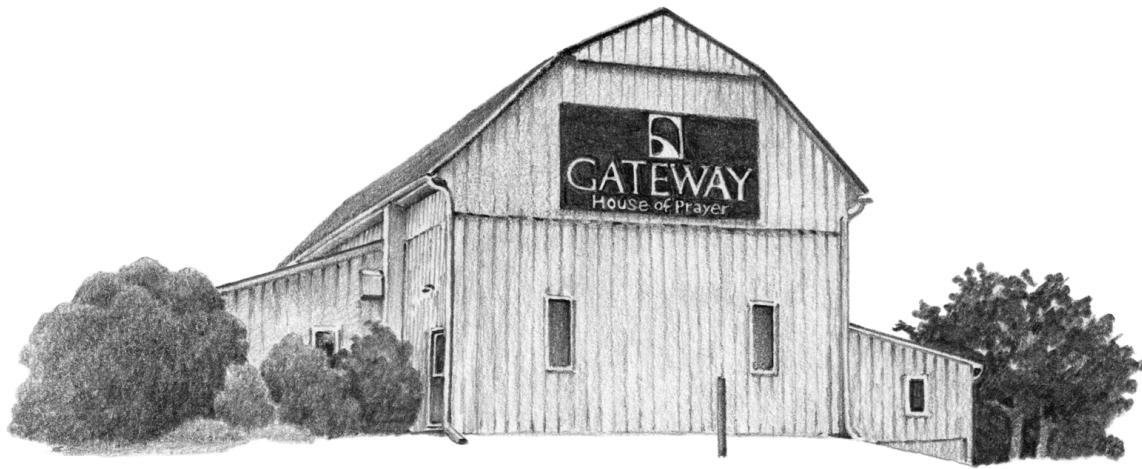
It was a striking moment. Life Center, Mercy Culture, and many other churches in the movement have large numbers of Latinos in their congregations. In 2020, Trump kicked off his outreach to evangelical voters at a Miami megachurch called El Rey Jesús, headed by a prominent Honduran American apostle named Guillermo Maldonado. I wondered how the apostles and prophets would react to the mass deportations Trump had

proposed. Garlington continued that Trump was “God’s choice,” but that the election was just one battle in the ultimate struggle. He told people that it’s “time for war,” language I kept hearing in other NAR circles even after the election. He told people to prepare to lose friends and family as the Kingdom of God marched on in the days ahead. He told them to separate from the wicked.

“You’ll be happy with the changes God brings,” a woman reassured me.  
“You’ll be happy.”

“If you’ve got a child and he says, ‘Come and let us go serve other gods,’ go tell on him. Tell them, ‘I’ve got a kid who is saying we need to serve other gods. Can you help me kill him?’” Garlington said he wasn’t being literal about the last part. “But you need to rebuke them,” he said. “You need to say, ‘Honey, if you keep on that path, there’s a place reserved in hell for you.’”

This was also a theme the next day at Gateway House of Prayer, where I waited to learn my own fate, as people began praying in tongues and free-forming in English as the Holy Spirit gave them words.



“We’re asking for a full overturning in the media,” a man said. “We’re asking for all the media to turn away from being propagandists to being truth

tellers.”

“Their eyes need to be opened,” a woman said. “They don’t know God at all. They think they know all these things because they’re so educated and worldly. But they do not see God … And that’s what we need. The harvest.”

“The reformation,” the grandmother added.

“The reformation,” the woman said.

At one point, a man questioned me: “The whole world knows *The Atlantic* is a left-wing, Marxist-type publication. Why would you choose to go and work there?” At another point, the group leader defended me: “I feel the Lord has called her to be a truth seeker.” At another point, the grandmother spoke of a prophecy she’d heard recently about punishment for the wicked. “There are millstones being made in Heaven,” she said. “Straight up. There’s millstones.” Another woman spoke of “God’s angry judgment” for the disobedient.

“There’s a lot of people that are going to change their minds,” a man said.

“You’ll be happy with the changes God brings,” a woman reassured me.  
“You’ll be happy.”

This went on for a while. I wasn’t sure where it was going until the leader of the group decided that I should leave. She could not have been nicer about it. She spoke of God’s absolute love, and absolute truth, and absolute justice, and then I headed for the door.

A few women followed me into the lobby, apologizing that it had come to this. They were sorry for me, as believers in the movement were sorry for all of the people who were lost and confused by this moment in America—the doubters, the atheists, the gay people, Muslims, Buddhists, Democrats, journalists, and all the godless who had not yet submitted to what they knew to be true. The Kingdom was here, and the only question was whether you were in, or out.

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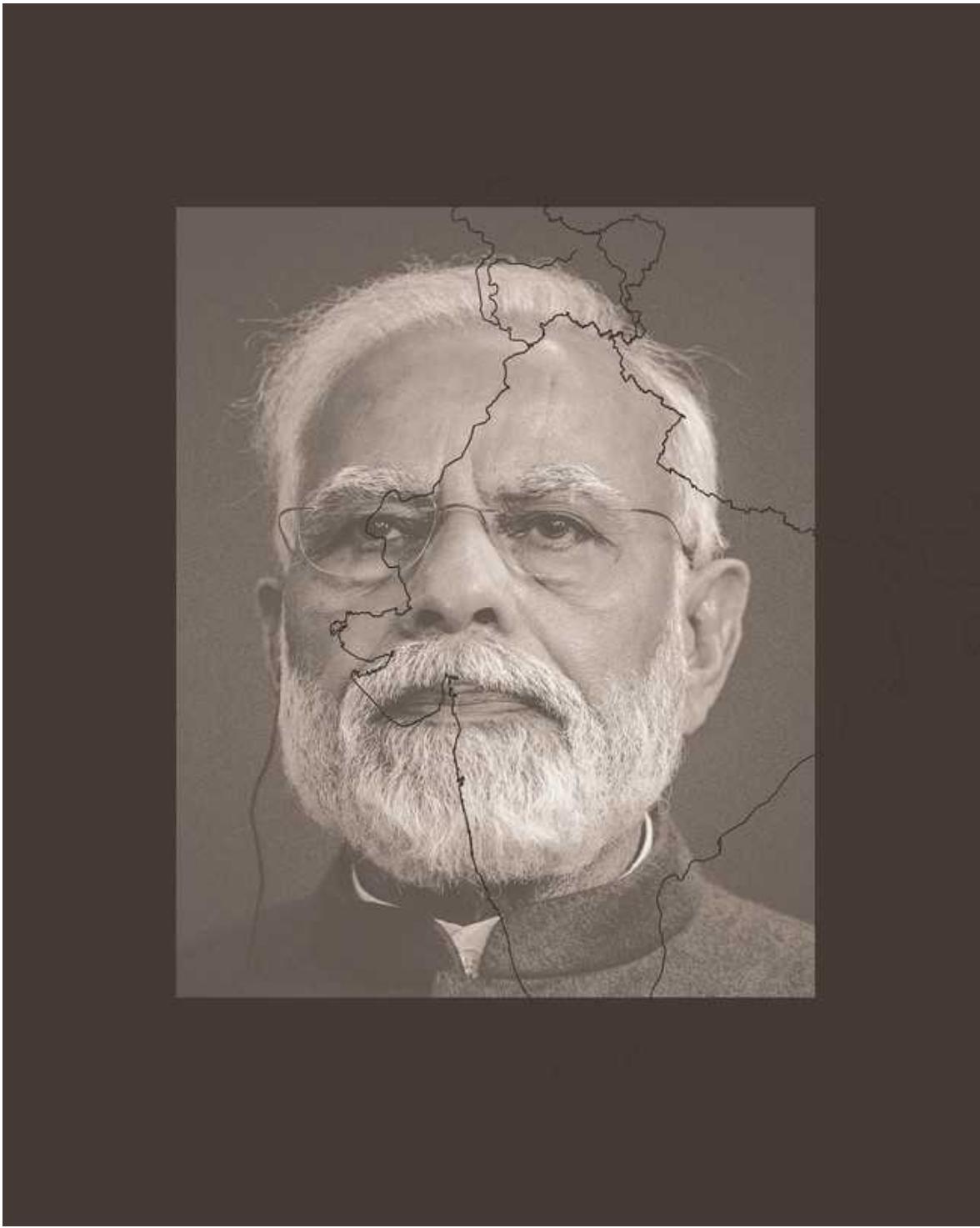
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# Narendra Modi's Populist Facade Is Cracking

**India is now a testing ground for whether demagoguery or deteriorating living conditions exert a greater sway on voters.**

by Robert F. Worth



Updated at 3:10 p.m. ET on January 6, 2025

On a winter afternoon in January 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stood before a podium, gazing out at a [handpicked audience](#) of the Indian elite: billionaires, Bollywood actors, cricket stars, nationalist politicians.

Modi had come to the north-central city of Ayodhya, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, to consecrate the [still-unfinished temple](#) behind him, with its seven shrines, 160-foot-high dome, and baby-faced statue of the Hindu god Ram, carved in black stone and covered in jewels. He did not mention the fact that the temple was being built on a contested site where Hindu radicals had torn down a 16th-century mosque three decades earlier, setting off years of protests and legal struggle.

Instead, Modi described the temple as an emblem of India's present and future greatness—its rising economic might, its growing navy, its moon missions, and, most of all, its immense human energy and potential. The temple signified India's historic triumph over the “mentality of slavery,” he said. This nation of nearly 1.5 billion was shedding its old secular creed and, despite the fact that 200 million of its citizens are Muslim, being reborn as a land of Hindu-nationalist ideals. “The generations after a thousand years will remember our nation-building efforts today,” he [told the crowd](#).

Among the tens of millions of Indians who watched that speech on TV was 42-year-old Luv Shukla, who lives on the edge of a small town about a three-hour drive from Ayodhya. I met him on a hot day in June, and we chatted while sitting in plastic chairs outside the tiny electronics shop he has run since he was 16.

Shukla has supported Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party since it rose to power in 2014. He was drawn to Modi's confidence and his talk of making India an explicitly Hindu country. But in 2024, for the first time in his life, he voted for the opposition, helping deliver an electoral setback late last spring that changed the narrative of Indian politics. Instead of the sweeping victory Modi had predicted, his party lost its majority in the lower house of India's Parliament—just a few months after that triumphant speech at the new Ayodhya temple. Modi had done everything he could to bend the system in his favor, and that made the reversal all the more surprising. His government had frozen bank accounts of the main opposition party—a tax-return issue, it was alleged—and launched prosecutions of many opposition candidates, turning India's justice system into a political tool.

Modi would remain prime minister, but with only 240 of the 543 seats in Parliament, he would be dependent on coalition partners. An especially

shocking loss for the BJP was Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state, long considered a bulwark for Modi and his party.

I asked Shukla why he had lost faith in Modi. One reason, he said, was “animals.” When I looked confused, he pointed helpfully to the street, where a huge cow was meandering down the middle of the road. “Look, here’s an animal coming now.” It took me a moment to realize what he was talking about. The BJP’s preoccupation with protecting cows—for Hindus, a symbol of divine beneficence—was driving people crazy. No one was allowed to touch them anymore, Shukla said. They wandered at will, eating crops and fodder. Cows had even [become a source of corruption](#), he claimed; funds have been set up to protect cows, Shukla said, but “the money disappears.” This is what Modi’s rhetoric about building a Hindu nation often amounts to at the local level, especially in villages that have no Muslims to blame.

Shukla moved on from cows to the government’s more basic failures. Small-business owners like him were most affected by the Modi government’s mistakes, such as the surprise decision in 2016 to cancel large-currency banknotes, a misguided effort to curtail money laundering that [left ordinary people desperate for cash](#). The mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic caused staggering losses of life and income. Many small firms folded, and others had to let go of workers. At the same time, Modi’s grand promises about being India’s “Development Man” remained unfulfilled. The schools were a mess. The local hospital was a joke.

Shukla was getting angrier. He stood up, saying he had something to show me. We walked across the street, past a brightly painted Hindu temple—by far the best-maintained building in the village—and approached an abandoned house with a rusted bed frame beside it. Nearby was a ruined ambulance, its tires rotting into the dust. The building was supposed to be a maternity hospital, Shukla said, but the government had never followed through. He kicked the building’s broken door. “Useless,” he said.

India has been living on hype. Its leaders manufacture bigger promises every year: India as an economic titan, a spiritual leader, a world power capable of standing alongside China, Russia, Europe, and America. Modi’s enablers describe him as a “civilizational figure”—someone who stands above politics, who will use his country’s demographic weight to rewrite the rules

of the global economy. This kind of chest-thumping is often picked up on in the West, where leaders such as President Joe Biden and France's Emmanuel Macron have expressed a desire for a reliable and prosperous Indian ally. Even Modi's abundant critics have focused mostly on his Muslim-baiting and his democratic backsliding, as if prepared to concede what they see as his managerial skill.

But the election results and their aftermath hint at a crack in Modi's populist facade and a spreading discontent with his economic and political record. India's growth has been heavily weighted toward the wealthy, who have become exponentially richer on Modi's watch. Those who have benefited most are [a small cadre of billionaire friends](#) to whom Modi has granted special access for years. That practice was cast in a new light in November, when American prosecutors indicted the industrialist Gautam Adani—India's second-richest man and a close Modi ally—for [his role in a multibillion-dollar bribery-and-fraud scheme](#). (His company has denied the charges, calling them baseless.) The accusation revived fears about opacity and cronyism—the specter of “India Inc.”—that Modi had promised to address a decade ago.

At the same time, eight in 10 Indians live in poverty. Extraordinary numbers are out of work; [one estimate](#) puts unemployment among those ages 15 to 24 at more than 45 percent (though other estimates run lower). Instead of moving from farms to seek employment in cities, as people in other developing countries have done, many Indians—unable to find factory or service jobs—are making the trek in reverse, even as farm income stagnates and drought turns fields into deserts. Modi often says he wants India to be a developed country by 2047, a century after it gained its independence from Britain. But by several key social measures, it is falling behind neighbors such as Bangladesh and Nepal.

The Modi years have made India into a testing ground for the following question: What, in the long run, exerts greater sway on the electorate—the lure of demagoguery, or the reality of deteriorating living conditions?

Saadat Hasan Manto, one of the Indian subcontinent's great literary figures in the first half of the 20th century, once wrote that India has “too few leaders and too many stuntmen.” Many Indians appear to be tiring of Modi's

showmanship and growing frustrated with his failures. They may be proud of India's fabled economic growth, but it hasn't reached them. During the weeks I spent traveling in India last year, I detected levels of frustration and anger that were noticeably different from what I'd heard on earlier visits—about lost jobs, failed schools, poisoned air and water.

India is—among many other things—an experiment, the largest such experiment in the world, and one with urgent relevance for many other countries. The Modi years have made India into a testing ground for the following question: What, in the long run, exerts greater sway on the electorate—the lure of demagoguery, or the reality of deteriorating living conditions?

Mahendra Tripathi remembers [the first time he saw](#) Narendra Modi. It was January 14, 1992, and the future prime minister was in Ayodhya with a group of young Hindu nationalists standing outside the mosque known as Babri Masjid. A movement had been gathering for years to remove the mosque, which was widely said to have been built on the site of an older Hindu temple. Energy was in the air, often charged with violence, and Tripathi—then a young news photographer—wanted to capture it.

Something about Modi attracted Tripathi's notice, even though "he was nobody at that time," he told me. Perhaps it was his dress or the way he carried himself. Modi has always been intensely conscious of the impression he makes. Even at the age of 6 or 7, he was deliberate about what he wore and "spent a lot of time in grooming," his uncle told a biographer. His [ego and charisma were evident early on](#); he liked acting in school plays but insisted on having the lead role.

[From the April 2009 issue: Robert D. Kaplan on Narendra Modi, India's new face](#)

Tripathi remembers taking Modi's picture and asking him when he would come back to Ayodhya. Modi replied that he would come back when the temple was built. "He kept his promise," Tripathi told me.

Back in 1992, Modi was a party worker in the RSS, India's first and most influential Hindu-nationalist group (the acronym stands for Hindi words

meaning “national volunteer association”). The RSS was founded in 1925 in an effort to overcome the Hindu weakness and disunity that had, its founders felt, allowed India to be colonized by the British and other invaders over the centuries. The RSS aimed to impose discipline and military rigor on a growing army of Hindu recruits, along with a uniform: black forage cap, white shirt, khaki shorts. It later gave birth to an array of linked groups—including the BJP—with the shared goal of spreading *Hindutva*, or Hinduness, as the glue of a new nation. A central part of that nationalist ideal was the exclusion of Muslims, who were tacitly cast as latecomers to and usurpers of a Hindu realm.

Less than a year after Modi’s first visit to Ayodhya, Tripathi was standing in the same spot when a crowd led by Hindu zealots climbed the dome of Babri Masjid and destroyed it with sledgehammers and axes. Tripathi sympathized, but the mob was seething with rage and thousands strong, and he was lucky to get out alive. His photography studio, not far away, was demolished. “Everything was being broken down,” he told me.

Modi wasn’t there on the big day, and he is said to have resented missing the Ayodhya moment. But he got his own moment 10 years later, on a day that would prove just as important to the transformation of Indian politics.

On February 27, 2002, a train carrying Hindu pilgrims home from Ayodhya caught fire in the western state of Gujarat. Fifty-nine pilgrims were killed, and [rumors quickly spread that Muslims had caused the fire](#). In the pogroms that followed, more than 1,000 people were butchered, most of them Muslim. Modi had just become the chief minister of Gujarat, and he was accused of telling the police to stand back and let the rioters teach the Muslims a lesson. Although he denied the allegations—and was ultimately cleared of wrongdoing after a decade of legal inquiries—[he never expressed regret](#) for what happened. His defiance in the face of pressure for his removal by opposition politicians made him a hero among many Hindus and gave him a national political profile.



Narendra Modi in Ahmadabad in 2007, after reelection as chief minister of Gujarat (Ajit Solanki / AP)

Modi’s timing was impeccable: India’s old order had been crumbling for years. Its founding ideology had been defined in the 1940s by Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s brilliant first prime minister, who famously called his country an “ancient palimpsest” of its many cultures and traditions. Nehru wanted an alternative to the tribal mindset that had led to the partition of the country along religious lines in 1947, when about 1 million people—estimates vary widely—were killed in sectarian violence as they fled across the new borders between India and Pakistan. Separating the two nations by religion served as a way out for the exhausted British. To Nehru, it was a betrayal of India’s greatest gift. His India would define itself through diversity; through a grand, maternal embrace of all its discordant parts. Even today, the Indian rupee note declares its value in 17 different languages. Nehru’s patriotism was the high-minded vision of a Cambridge graduate who hoped to set India on a unique path—benignly secular and socialist, proudly nonaligned in the binary world of the Cold War.

By the turn of the 21st century, this ideal was a relic. India's leaders had already begun appealing to either Hindu or Muslim communal feelings as a way to get votes. A new capitalist ethic was rising, a consequence of the 1991 decision to embrace the free market and abolish the "license Raj"—heavy-handed economic management by government bureaucrats that had stifled Indian business for decades. The elite had become richer and more isolated from the rest of the country, putting added strain on the old Gandhian ideals of austerity and simplicity.

"The truth is we were an effete, hopeless bunch," wrote Tavleen Singh, a columnist and an avowed member of what she herself called "the old, colonised ruling class," in a harsh self-assessment published in April. "We spoke no Indian language well, but this did not matter to us. We were proud of speaking English well. In our drawing rooms we sneered at those who dared enter without speaking good English. And at those whose table manners were not embellished with western refinement."

Modi was one of those unrefined outsiders. He had grown up poor, the son of a tea seller from one of the lower tiers of the country's hierarchical caste system, which still weighs heavily on the life chances of most Indians. That background gave him an unusual street credibility within the BJP, whose original support base lay with upper-caste Hindus. He presented himself as an ascetic figure who rose before dawn and worked until late at night, a man with no wife or children whose only loyalty was to India. (Modi does in fact have a wife—he was married as a teenager in a family-arranged ceremony—but he left her almost immediately afterward and has always described himself as single.)

It was a winning formula: Millions of poor and middle-class Indians greeted him like an avenging hero, and not just because of his lowly origins or his gifts as a speaker. The old BJP rallying cry—that Hindus were under attack—had a strong ring of truth in the 2000s, when Islamist terrorists carried out deadly bombings across India. Modi's immense and sustained popularity is partly about his ability to project a kind of Churchillian defiance in the face of these threats.

Modi became prime minister in 2014 amid a popular movement against corruption, saying he would clean house and fulfill India's great economic

promise. Many liberals were receptive, despite their unease with his triumphalist Hindu rhetoric. There was no denying that the Indian National Congress—the party of Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi, which had dominated Indian politics since independence—was corrupt. And Modi had gained a reputation for managerial competence in Gujarat, where he'd been chief minister for more than 10 years. He had streamlined regulations and worked to lure big-business owners with what he and his proxies advertised as the “Gujarat model.” He promised to do the same for the entire country.

Modi has some real achievements to his credit. His government's [road-building blitz](#) has transformed the landscape over the past decade, adding thousands of miles of highway every year; the figure for smaller roads is many times greater. I can remember the days when driving across India was a bit like heading out to sea: You'd stock the car with gas and provisions—uncertain when you'd find a gas station or a place to eat—and set off with a vague sense that you were taking your life into your hands. Nowadays, an Indian road trip is remarkable for its ordinariness.

The BJP has also taken steps to democratize information technology. In a small village in northern India, I saw people paying for produce by holding up their smartphone to [a QR code stuck on a vendor's wooden wagon](#). The payment system involves minimal merchant fees and has removed the middlemen who used to take a cut. Every Indian with a phone now has access to a virtual “DigiLocker” where their identity and tax documents can be stored, a useful innovation.

Some of Modi's defenders argue that he has renewed the country's politics. Swapan Dasgupta, a conservative journalist and former BJP lawmaker, told me that Modi had made use of *Hindutva* not just to demonize his enemies but to mobilize Indians politically and to deepen the country's democracy. “The gap between rulers and ruled has narrowed,” he said. “There is now a vernacular elite.”

Modi often gets credit for raising his country's profile and being an effective ambassador for what he and his allies call Brand India. There may be some truth in this, though it's hard to know what the term means. There was much talk of India as a leader of the global South when it hosted the G20 summit in 2023, a frenzy of publicity and Davos-style schmoozing with [a reported](#)

[budget of \\$100 million](#) Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has taken brand-building to a new level, having published two books full of vaporous cant about “civilizational resurgence” and “the message of the Indo-Pacific.” He and others talk up India’s role as a partner to the United States in its competition with China—though they never make clear what India can do to help. India is a nuclear power, but its weak military has been humiliated by Chinese troops on the two countries’ shared Himalayan border.

Modi’s determination to cut a bigger global figure has its [ugly and violent](#) side. In 2023, Indian-government officials allegedly organized the assassination of a Sikh-independence activist in Canada and [plotted to kill a Sikh leader in the United States](#), according to U.S. and Canadian officials. The boldness of the plot was a dark reflection of India’s rising economic weight in the West, despite the farcical denouement: An American informant had unwittingly been hired as a hit man. In mid-October of last year, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [expelled top Indian diplomats](#), including the ambassador, saying that the Indian government had orchestrated a campaign of violence inside his country. (India’s government, which regards the two Sikhs as terrorists, has denied the accusations; Canada has also said it [has no evidence that Modi was involved](#) in or aware of any plot.)

### [Read: How Modi made himself look weak](#)

Three years ago, India became the world’s fifth-largest economy, surpassing its former colonial master, the United Kingdom. Yet by early 2024, even as Modi was declaring the dawn of a glorious new era, unsettling rumbles could be heard. Foreign direct investment in India had dropped by an astonishing 43 percent in the preceding year, partly thanks to high borrowing costs and unease about the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. Out-of-work men could be seen trekking along the brand-new highways, part of the movement from cities to farms that began during the pandemic. The magnitude of the unemployment problem could not be hidden.

Much of this story arc would have been familiar to anyone who had taken a close look at the “Gujarat model.” Although the state’s GDP rose during Modi’s decade-long tenure, the number of people without jobs held steady.

Modi focused on big companies, but small and medium-size enterprises, which make up the backbone of India's economy, did not fare as well. The obsession with growth appears to have masked a neglect of health, literacy, and the environment. In his book *Price of the Modi Years*, the journalist Aakar Patel notes that Gujarat's rate of child malnutrition was one of the highest in India. While Modi was chief minister, the Central Pollution Control Board declared Gujarat to be the country's most polluted state. A [study of 18 Indian states and territories](#) placed the rate of school attendance for students in rural areas of Gujarat at the very bottom. The "Gujarat model" has indeed been applied to the entire country.

The school principal agreed to meet me at her home, in a small town in Uttar Pradesh. She was middle-aged, with an aura of faded glamour; she had been a model in her youth, and photographs of her as a young woman hung on the wall. She had spent her life in this same town, never marrying, devoting herself to teaching and to the care of her dead brother's children.

She had insisted that I not disclose her name, and I soon understood why. Her school district, she said, has nearly 700 teaching positions allocated to it by the government. But not even 200 are filled. Her own school, she said, has six teachers for 700 students. Many subjects do not get taught at all, and the school's internet doesn't work. Students, she said, lack phones or computers and must go to internet cafés to do their homework. She, too, is forced to go to internet cafés to handle the government's burdensome reporting requirements, which must be done online. "All this rests on my shoulders," she said. Little of this dysfunction is visible from the outside, because the school allows students to graduate despite the enormous gaps in their education.



Sacred cows block traffic in the holy city of Varanasi, on the Ganges, in Uttar Pradesh. (Mark Henley / Redux)

The endemic corruption of the school system is another obstacle. If a child makes a small mistake on an online form, “to get it fixed, you have to pay a bribe.”

According to India’s [Annual Status of Education Report](#), an independent analysis, most 14-to-18-year-olds in rural regions were still struggling with basic division in 2023, and about a quarter of them with basic reading. Some 30 percent of all students appear to drop out of high school.

“It’s a moral failure of the political leadership,” says Ashoka Mody, who spent decades with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and who published a polemic about India’s developmental gaps last year titled [\*India Is Broken\*](#). The book is densely documented and shot through with anger. One of its recurrent themes is the disparity between India and East Asian societies, which have seen mass primary education as a precondition to industrial growth and large-scale employment.

Last June, the government canceled the results of an exam that had been taken by 900,000 aspiring academics in more than 300 cities, citing suspicions that the answers had been leaked onto the dark web.

Narendra Modi has been in power for a decade, with his BJP allies running many of India's state governments. The schools have only gotten worse. Modi's educational priorities appear to be [mostly ideological](#). History textbooks have been [rewritten to include more Hindu-nationalist figures](#), praise Modi's own initiatives, and minimize contributions by Indian Muslims. In 2023, India cut a number of science topics from tenth-grade textbooks. You won't find Darwin's theory of evolution, the periodic table of elements, or the Pythagorean theorem.

Even when Indian students attend a decent school, the system often fails them. In a tiny rural village called Bhushari, in Uttar Pradesh, I met a 19-year-old man who said he was spending two to three years studying full-time for civil-service exams. "I'm trying to get a government job," he said, as we sat sipping cool drinks on the earthen floor of his family's reception room. "The youth of India—we all want a government job. Families prefer their kids to get a government job; they think this is more reliable, because you cannot get fired." You are also more likely to be able to get married if you have a government job.

For those who pass the exam, the relative dearth of government jobs can make new-hiring calls look like a crumb thrown into a lake full of starving fish. As *Foreign Affairs* has reported, in early 2023, the state government in Madhya Pradesh [posted 6,000 low-level government jobs](#) and quickly received more than 1.2 million applications. The volume hinted at the inflation of academic pedigree in India: There were 1,000 people with Ph.D.s, 85,000 graduates of college engineering programs, 100,000 people with business degrees, and about 180,000 people with other graduate degrees. The civil-service bottleneck puts enormous pressure on exams, and it's hardly surprising that cheating has become an issue. Last June, the government canceled the results of an exam that had been taken by 900,000 aspiring academics in more than 300 cities, citing suspicions that the answers had been leaked onto the dark web.

Those who fail the test or don't get the job have few options, and many end up in what economists call "the informal sector"—as vendors, day laborers, *tuk-tuk* drivers, and an endless array of other ill-paid roles. There aren't many manufacturing jobs, because China drained them away decades ago.

The young man I met in Bhushari had been, in one sense, lucky. His father is the village *sarpanch*, or headman, and the family owns valuable farmland. If not for that, he would not have had the freedom to study for so long. He had spent his entire life in a village of some 2,900 people. He didn't want to be a farmer in a place where drought is a constant threat, and where temperatures get hotter every year.

As my car thumped out of Bhushari on a pitted road, I saw cracked brown fields spreading to the horizon in all directions. People talked about the year's record-breaking heat wave everywhere I went. Farmers told me the local wells and aquifers were drying up. The annual monsoons have become more erratic. Temperatures reached 121 degrees Fahrenheit when I was in Delhi, and there were frequent news reports about water shortages and people dying of heat exposure. Sometimes it was hard to tell which was worse, the heat or the smog. Of the world's 100 most polluted cities, 83 are in India, according to [2023 data from the environmental group IQAir](#).

India's environmental problems are among the most serious on the planet, but they have not been high priorities during Modi's decade in power. He has shown occasional interest in the condition of the Ganges, India's most famous river, which is sacred to Hindus. It is also one of the most polluted rivers on Earth, with stretches that are ecological dead zones. Modi's electoral district includes Varanasi, a riverside city and an ancient pilgrimage site. Last spring, the BJP mounted elaborate campaign spectacles over the river, with 1,000 drones performing a light show to spell out, in Hindi, the slogan "Modi Government, Once Again." During a trip to Varanasi in late May, Modi made a surprise visit to an electronics engineer named Vishwambhar Nath Mishra, who has led efforts for decades [to clean up the Ganges](#). The visit did not go well.

Mishra told me about the encounter when I went to see him, about a week later. It was night when I arrived in Varanasi, and I walked a mile along the darkened Ganges, past burning funeral pyres, Hindu priests performing

rituals, and scattered children and dogs. Mishra's air-conditioned office was a relief. He runs an environmental NGO founded by his father and is also the *mahant*, or head priest, of one of Varanasi's best-known Hindu temples, a title that has been passed down from father to eldest son in an unbroken line stretching back 400 years. This blend of sacred and secular authority is unusual, and earns him wide respect.

On the day of Modi's visit, Mishra complained to him about the government's failure to prevent cities and towns from dumping raw sewage into the Ganges. The river absorbs close to 100 million gallons of it a day. Its waters are a greenish toxic brew. Mishra reminded Modi that he'd given him the same lecture in 2013, shortly before Modi first took office as prime minister, and that nothing had been done. Modi does not like to be chastised. He told Mishra he would come back after the election, and then went on his way.

Mishra, meanwhile, continues to monitor the river like a doctor with a dying patient. He told me that around the time of Modi's visit, samples from one spot contained 88 million fecal coliform bacteria per 100 milliliters of water —176,000 times the maximum amount that India allows for a Class B river, which is considered safe for bathing.

But as many as 50,000 people bathe daily in the river, Mishra told me. I myself saw hundreds of people swimming in it. Many Indians drink from the Ganges, including Mishra himself: It is one of his duties as a priest.

The city of Ayodhya—where Modi inaugurated the new Hindu temple—is a near-perfect emblem of Modi's rule: It has been reshaped into an advertisement at the expense of its residents. The government wants to make Ayodhya into a tourism and pilgrimage site for Hindus worldwide and has thrown enormous sums of money at the project, building wide roads, an airport, a train station. But in the city's old neighborhoods, nothing seems to have changed apart from new street signs that have been posted incongruously on decaying buildings and market stalls. Tens of thousands of locals have seen their [homes and workplaces demolished](#). Many are furious at the Modi government. One of them is Mahendra Tripathi, the man who photographed Modi in Ayodhya back in 1992. He is now jobless at the age of 65, having lost his office to the urban renovations last year.

“My livelihood was destroyed twice,” he told me, first by the rioters who destroyed Babri Masjid, in 1992, and a second time by the government that replaced it with the temple. “Now I’m old and don’t have the energy to start again.”

On a boulevard that leads to the city’s Lucknow gate, I met a middle-aged man selling snacks in front of a one-room shop. He told me the shop was all that was left of his family’s four-story house, which had included a much larger grocery store and upstairs rooms for his children and their families. The road needed to be widened, government officials had told him. The demolition had left him and his family with nowhere to live and no livelihood until they’d managed to reopen a shrunken version of their shop. “Not a single BJP worker came to check on us since the demolition,” he said. His wife stood alongside him, misery stamped on her face.

A few doors down, a man was sitting on the floor of a tiny apartment. He was cutting and folding newspapers, to be sold to vendors as food wrappers. At his feet was a little bowl of homemade glue that he used to dab each folded paper before pressing its side together. He told me he had been making his living this way for 25 years. He was 60 years old, he said. Before the demolition, he’d had enough space to live with his family; now there was barely enough room for him to sit down. It was about 110 degrees outside, and the apartment’s metal door was half open. “My house used to go all the way to that white strip,” he said, pointing to the middle of the road. “Now this is all I have.”

Later that day, I drove past another side effect of Modi’s big temple: a vast, improvised landfill, built to accommodate the construction and demolition debris. Clouds of dust and pale smoke hung in the air above its lumpy surface. As we drove toward the landfill, the dust enveloped us, seeming almost to create its own weather system. In the dim landscape, I saw shacks where families were living, and a mill where people were grinding wheat. During monsoon season, the whole area becomes a flood zone. It seemed to go on for miles.



A flooded street in Vijayawada, in southern India, in 2024. Annual monsoons have become more erratic, and India's environmental problems are among the most serious on the planet. (Vijaya Bhaskar / AFP / Getty)

Modi's reputation is built partly on stage presence. His rallies have drawn as many as 800,000 people. On giant screens, his magnified image towers over the crowd. People who have been in a room with him sometime speak of an overpowering aura, as if he were a rock star or the pope.

Almost as impressive is Modi's ability to deploy—or inspire—an entire industry of social-media fans and public-relations professionals who get the message out on a daily basis, telling Indians how Modi has made them respected in the world and defended their Hindu faith from attack by Muslims, “sickularists,” and “anti-nationals.” Some of these people are television personalities, such as Arnab Goswami, a kind of Indian Tucker Carlson. Others are anonymous warriors in a campaign to label the Muslim film stars of Bollywood as terrorists. Many of them work as trolls on social media, where the BJP has aggressively promoted its message even as it censors its critics. (India's significant market share—it has more Facebook

and YouTube users than any other country—has allowed the Modi government to bully tech companies into removing oppositional content.) Others make movies or sing songs.

Kavi Singh is a star of the genre known as *Hindutva* pop, a mixture of jingoism and danceable beats. Her signature style is unusually androgynous for India: a man’s Nehru-style jacket and tunic, with a multicolored turban wrapped around her head. Her long hair flows over her shoulders.

Singh made her debut during a moment of national crisis. In early 2019, a suicide bomber in a car rammed a convoy of Indian paramilitary police in the northern district of Pulwama, killing more than 40 people. An Islamist terrorist group based in Pakistan claimed responsibility. The attack—followed by accusations of intelligence failures—was a humiliation for Modi, who had cast himself as a more aggressive protector of India than his predecessors. The next day, while the country was still overcome by grief and anger, a song appeared on Indian WhatsApp groups, sung by a strident female voice. The lyrics put the blame not on Pakistani terrorists but on India’s own Muslims:

The enemies are among us but we blame the neighbor  
The one who is secretly carrying a knife; finish off that traitor  
If our own hadn’t helped carry this attack  
Pulwama wouldn’t have seen the blood of our bravehearts spilled

The song went viral, and was followed by a video version in which Singh performs at a studio microphone, her singing interspersed with footage of gun-toting Indian soldiers and grieving families. She began churning out new songs with impressive regularity.

I met Singh at a guesthouse in the state of Haryana, about two hours north of Delhi. She wore her trademark outfit in shades of saffron, the color worn by Hindu saints and ascetics. Singh said she believes that the Hindu god Ram gives her signs. She seemed to claim credit for one of Modi’s most controversial acts—the 2019 decision to revoke Kashmir’s semiautonomous status and lay claim to the Muslim-majority province, an old source of conflict between India and Pakistan. “Everybody listens to me,” she said. “I know that Prime Minister Modi listens to my songs.”



A rice paddy in the state of Haryana. Lack of work has driven many Indians from cities to farms, even as farm income stagnates and drought turns fields into deserts. (Prakash Singh / Bloomberg / Getty)

It was hard to tell whether Singh was naive about the ways her music has been used, or just preferred to shrug it off. After the Pulwama suicide bombing, [Kashmiri Muslims were attacked all over the country.](#)

When I met Singh, she was making final preparations for a long journey on foot—known as a *yatra*—to help unify Hindus in the aftermath of Modi’s election setback. Her plan was to start in the northern pilgrimage town of Haridwar and walk southward for six months or a year with her entourage, blasting her music from loudspeakers every step of the way. Did she expect her *yatra* to meet with protests and critics? “Absolutely” there would be protests, she said. “They will try to assault us as well.” The way she said it made me wonder if that was exactly the point.

Modi’s defenders sometimes note that large-scale communal violence has declined since the 2002 Gujarat riots. But one type of violence that has not declined is the lynching of ordinary Muslims.

One morning, after driving from the smog of Delhi into the great belt of farmland to the east, I met a man who narrowly survived a lynch mob in 2018. He is a Muslim farmer named Samayadeen who has spent his entire life—nearly 70 years, he reckons—in the same settlement, a tiny cluster of mud-and-brick houses surrounded by green fields of mustard, wheat, and sugarcane. After we shook hands, he led the way, limping visibly, into the open-air courtyard of his house, where he lay down on a string bed and apologized for his slowness. A buffalo dozed comfortably in the mud on the far side of the little enclosure.

What is most striking about the lynchings of Muslims in the past decade is not so much the scale as the government's attitude. In some cases, local officials have treated suspected murderers as heroes.

Six years ago, Samayadeen was gathering fodder with another man on his farm when they heard noises in the distance. A lone figure was running toward them, chased by a crowd of about two dozen men. As Samayadeen watched, the mob caught up to its prey and started beating him mercilessly with sticks.

Samayadeen's companion ran off in terror. But Samayadeen recognized the victim, a fellow Muslim named Qasim. He hurried over and tried to stop the attackers. They turned on Samayadeen as well, accusing both men of killing cows.

Eventually, the attackers dragged the men to their own village, where other men arrived to continue the beating in front of a Hindu temple. Samayadeen recognized some of them. When the police finally showed up, they had to fight off the mob before they could drive the injured men to a hospital. It was too late for Qasim, who died soon afterward of his injuries.

What is most striking about the lynchings of the past decade is not so much their scale—several dozen people—as the government's attitude. Modi and many of his BJP allies have spent years [demonizing cow-killers](#) while at the same time downplaying lynching reports. In some cases, local officials have treated suspected murderers as heroes.

Samayadeen's case might have gone nowhere, even with a good lawyer on his side, if not for the help of a journalist who went undercover to record video footage of a man who admitted that he'd incited the mob to kill Muslims. After that tape was admitted as evidence, a number of the attackers were indicted and ultimately convicted.

As he told me this story, Samayadeen emphasized repeatedly that all the people who had made his case a success—the man who'd helped him bring it, the lawyer who'd represented him, the judge who'd handed down the decision—were Hindus. "What I'm trying to say is that all the Hindu mentality is not like that," he said, referring to the mob that tried to kill him.

Samayadeen's comment about varieties of the Hindu mentality came to mind as I flew to Tamil Nadu, at the bottom of the subcontinent, 1,000 miles south of Delhi. Tamil Nadu's leaders have long been openly contemptuous of Hindu nationalism, and their governing philosophy represents a powerful alternative to Modi's worldview. They have put much greater emphasis on mass education and health care, and the south is today the most prosperous part of India. Bangalore and Hyderabad—two of its largest cities—host the country's IT hubs.

Modi has been trying for years to make political inroads in the south. In May, as the election campaign came to an end, Indian news channels began broadcasting a striking image over a chyron that read *Breaking News*. It was Modi, eyes closed, sitting on a stone floor with his legs crossed and his palms pressed together. He had traveled to a seaside sanctuary on the southern tip of Tamil Nadu to spend 45 hours in *ekantvas*, or solitary retreat. The images showed him in saffron robes, subsisting (as the news channels reported) only on coconut water. But Modi's meditation wasn't actually solitary; he was being filmed from multiple angles.

This stunt was the culmination of a campaign during which Modi hinted more than once that he had attained divine status. "When my mother was alive, I used to think I was born biologically," he told a TV news interviewer in May. "After her demise, when I look at my experiences, I am convinced that I was sent by God." Later that month, he said that he received commands from God, though he admitted that "I cannot dial him directly to ask what's next."

But the south has not been receptive terrain for Brand Modi. In Chennai, the city once called Madras, I met with one of Modi's most eloquent adversaries —Palanivel Thiaga Rajan, known to everyone as PTR. Now 58, he holds a degree from MIT and worked as a banker in New York and Singapore before returning to his native Tamil Nadu. He made his name running the state's finance ministry, and now leads the state's IT efforts. PTR met me at his office, in a gated compound that possessed an air of faded colonial grandeur. His family has been prominent in Tamil Nadu for hundreds of years.

### [Read: India is starting to see through Modi's nationalist myth](#)

The south's priorities are the inverse of Modi's, PTR told me. They are rooted in decisions made a century ago, when southern leaders—even before India's independence—began passing progressive reforms including compulsory education for both sexes, women's right to vote and hold office, and affirmative action for members of historically disadvantaged castes. The motives for those reforms may have been political, but the effect was to create a springboard for greater prosperity, as in Singapore and other East Asian countries. While northern India has pursued a zero-sum model of growth, the southern states have tried to ensure that “the pie grows because everybody is vested in the system,” PTR said. “Everybody's got access to the basic things,” such as jobs, decent schools, and health care.

When I asked about Modi's economic stewardship, PTR was withering. He walked me through all the mistakes Modi has made, starting with his much-lamented decision in 2016 to “demonetize” the country's highest-currency banknotes. PTR's eyes rolled as he considered the effects of this blunder, calling it “one of the staggering catastrophes of economic policy in the history of the world.”

PTR also deplored the way Modi has personalized his office and concentrated power in Delhi at the expense of the states. India was already more centralized than other large democracies such as the United States, thanks to the authors of its 1949 constitution. Modi's brand of nationalism is rooted in the idea that India's size and diversity call for an even stronger hand and a more unifying creed, but in practical terms that has made the task of government much harder: The average member in India's 543-seat Parliament now has about 2.6 million constituents. It would make more

sense, PTR said, to acknowledge regional differences and delegate more authority to the states.

Listening to PTR, one can easily get the sense of a road not taken—a way to steer all of India on a less divisive course. Unfortunately, the south is less an alternative than a rival. Its economic philosophy goes alongside a distinctly southern religious and cultural identity that is almost as aggressive as Modi's. The two visions are so divergent that it is easy to see why there were calls for a separate southern nation called Dravidistan when India became independent.

This cultural rift became apparent when I asked PTR about Modi's promotion of *Hindutva*. The subject makes him visibly angry. "I believe that Tamil Nadu is the most Hindu-practicing state in the country," he said, noting that the state government alone manages some 35,000 temples. All told, he went on, "there are probably 600,000 temples of noticeable size and maybe a million temples of all sizes." PTR gestured at the red *pottu* on his forehead, a symbol of Hindu devotion. But the south's version of Hinduism, he said, is "antithetical to the notion of a muscular *Hindutva*." The southern tradition is rooted partly in a century-old revolt against the privileges granted to Brahmins, the priestly caste that sits at the top of Hinduism's ancient social hierarchy.

Modi's challenges in winning over the south are not just about Hinduism. The people of Tamil Nadu are mostly ethnic Tamils, and many see themselves as the original inhabitants of a region that has faced discrimination from the north. The BJP did not win a single parliamentary seat in Tamil Nadu last year, despite Modi's efforts.

When I arrived in India, the election was still under way. The BJP platform was ostensibly that of a political party with hundreds of parliamentary candidates, but its title was "Modi's Guarantee." From the moment I arrived in India, at the Delhi airport, I couldn't avoid Modi's image—in life-size cardboard cutouts, in huge murals on city walls, in stickers on doors and windows, on roadside billboards. BJP supporters walked around with paper Modi masks wrapped over their face, giving the eerie impression of an army of clones.

Even when you looked at your phone you'd see him, asking for your vote in Hindi, in Urdu, in half a dozen other languages he doesn't even speak; his voice had been copied and transfigured by AI programming. The opposition talked constantly about him too, adding to the widespread sense that the entire election was a referendum on the 10-year reign of Narendra Modi.

The election took place over six weeks, like a slow-moving tsunami, and the results started coming in on the morning of June 4. Modi was already doing far worse than he and his party had expected. Projections were giving the BJP fewer than 200 seats, a steep drop from its previous total of 303, and a result that would spell the end of its parliamentary majority. Modi's continued rule would depend on the cooperation of coalition allies.

At about noon, I sat in on an editorial meeting in Delhi of *The Hindu*, one of India's few remaining independent newspapers. The mood was buoyant. There had been a betting pool on the election, and as one editor read out the names of the winners, there was laughter and cheering. I heard a flurry of hot takes: "It's about hubris; he'll have to tone it down." "It's a huge sigh of relief for India's Muslims." "Coalition politics is back." The political editor said she wanted a story on what the BJP got wrong, and someone joked that it would be too long to fit in the paper.

A little later, I made my way over to the headquarters of the Congress Party, on Akbar Road. A raucous outdoor party was under way, with a thick crowd of members and guests milling around in a state of bliss. The Congress Party and its opposition allies had lost, but were behaving as if they'd won a historic victory. Partly, this was because Modi and his party had done everything they could to tilt the election in their favor, and everyone knew it. Opposition politicians had faced a wildly disproportionate number of investigations. In some cases, political figures who switched to the BJP saw their charges abruptly dropped.

To some extent, Modi had himself to blame for the way the election results were interpreted. He had said early on that he expected to win 400 seats, a supermajority that could grant him the power to change the constitution. Had this happened, *Hindutva* might well have been enshrined as the country's new ruling ideology.

## [Read: The humbling of Narendra Modi](#)

Modi's [narrow victory felt like a rebuke](#). But opinion varied on what it meant. Caste seems to have played a role, especially in northern India. Modi's party has always been vulnerable to defections by low-caste Hindus, who feel the party is still wedded to upper-caste privilege, and many Dalits, once more commonly known as untouchables, appear to have shifted their votes to the opposition.

Another prevalent view was that Modi had taken his [divisive, anti-Muslim religious rhetoric too far](#). He may also have overplayed the god-man role. During the initiation of the Ayodhya temple last January, he'd violated protocol by performing religious rites himself.



Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, where Modi last year consecrated a Hindu temple on the site of a mosque destroyed in 1992 (Biplov Bhuyan / Sopa Images / Getty)

In the days and weeks after the election, many Indians were too overwhelmed by happiness and relief to worry about the details. Modi was

no longer invulnerable. He would have to compromise, people said, if he wanted to keep his job.

### [Read: Many Indians don't trust their elections anymore](#)

But Modi is not used to compromise. He is very good at dividing Indians to suit his political needs, and he is probably too old to change. In some ways, he is a more authentic product of India's democracy than any of his Congress Party predecessors, with their patrician pedigrees. His departure—he will be 78 during the next general election, and is not expected to run again—will not change the country's structural vulnerability to populist strongmen. India may be more susceptible to the politics of identity and division than other countries precisely because, as PTR told me, it is so immense and so diverse. It is more a continent than a country, as the British liked to say—a self-serving point, but one that has grown even more apt since their departure.

Modi's legacy may be decided by those who no longer chant his name. Indian democracy will face its most important test in the small towns and villages where the bulk of the population still lives. One of the people I met in Uttar Pradesh, a 51-year-old farmer, told me that he'd voted for Modi, but a decade of BJP rule had soured him on politics. The party had “played the drums of zero tolerance for corruption,” he said, but had not paid attention to the people’s needs, and corruption had only grown worse.

“*Hindutva*,” he said, “stands for a religion with the most humbleness, the most virtues, the best upbringing, the good culture we have that doesn’t exist anywhere else.” He paused a moment. “There is no party that really stands for that,” he said, “and there won’t be one.”

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*This article originally misstated Narendra Modi's title in the Gujarat government. This article appears in the [February 2025](#) print edition with the headline “Modi’s Failure.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.*

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# Fiction

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# American Realism

## A short story

by Brandon Taylor



The dinner was to be at Galina's apartment, in the East 70s. She had been watching a lot of Visconti and wanted to re-create the salons and dinners of *The Innocent*, *Ludwig*, and *Death in Venice*.

For approximately a decade, her husband, Igor, had been dying from a series of treatable cancers in nonessential tissues. "Dying is so boring after a while," he said. In the spring, his doctors had told them that nothing more could be done and the time had come to transition to hospice care. Galina and Igor were astonished by the surprise they felt at being told that Igor's dying had turned acute.

“It’s just been such a reversal,” Galina said to her friends. It was like Icelandic villages and their volcanoes: You somehow feel betrayed when the lava sweeps down the rock face and takes everything with it. Galina and Igor had then retreated into their favorite films and novels, which was what had made her throw the party that night. One final note of beauty.

Caspar arrived late—he’d had trouble getting across town. Protests cut a diagonal through the city, disrupting the trains and traffic. Even as he stepped into the lobby of Galina’s building, he could hear the beat of the choppers circling above, making a net of slashing light over the blocks between Park and Fifth. Galina met him just off the elevator and kissed his cheeks in greeting.

“You’re cold,” she said.

The apartment was warm with gold light and the murmur of conversation under music. Someone was playing Schubert on the piano.

“The weather finally changed,” he said. She squeezed his fingers. Galina had let her hair go gray during the pandemic, and he was not entirely sure it suited her. She had a round but not kind face with mischievous eyes. She wore a gold dress with a modest neck but a sharp slit.

“I’m glad you could come.”

In the living room, people sat in their evening finery on lovely antique chairs and velvet chaises. Galina left him at the doorway to join Igor, seated on a chaise at the front by the window. Caspar watched the back of his head, sallow under the chemo fuzz. Igor’s shoulders, once broad, were quite skinny now. His oxygen tank sat at his knees like an obedient mastiff.

The pianist was young and blond, which made Caspar realize that he hadn’t seen a blond adult man in a long time. He played the Schubert well, in a lovely though condescending way. He wasn’t really trying. Caspar stood at the back of the room and watched him lilt his way through the piece, going through the motions. This sarcastic attitude made the playing uglier as it went on, and in the end, Caspar retracted his previous judgment—it hadn’t been lovely at all. Everyone clapped. Over the heads of the crowd, Caspar’s

eyes met the young man's. Something poisonously sarcastic in his expression made Caspar want to leave.

"Well, look who's finally here!"

It was Nina. She had just come from the bathroom.

"Traffic," he said.

"Oh yes," Nina replied, but did not elaborate. She knew about the protests, of course. Her husband was a senior attorney for the city.

"How is he?" Caspar asked.

Nina looked out over the room at the others gathered, who had turned at her greeting. She smiled at them and said to him, quietly, "Not here. Not now."

She put her arm through Caspar's and ushered him forward.

Nina and Caspar had both been Galina's students as undergraduates. They had registered for a graduate course on Faulkner, been intimidated at first, then stayed because of Galina. Together, they made diagrams and charts to take apart *The Sound and the Fury*, and they ate lunches in Washington Square Park while committing lines of Faulkner's prose to memory to recite for Galina's lightning-round verbal interrogations. During that strangely warm fall, they became friends and, for just a couple of confused, painful weeks, nearly more than friends. But Caspar, no matter how hard he tried, was incurably gay, and Nina was, unfortunately, not willing to make herself a martyr.

It was for the best, Galina told them later. Because they might have married each other and ruined a lifelong friendship.

They stopped by the chaise so that Caspar could say hello. Igor's eyes were cloudy, and his chest rattled with effortful breathing. The cannula pressed against Caspar's cheek when he bent to kiss him.

"Sorry I'm late," he said.

“No one is ever late in New York,” Igor said. He tried to laugh, but his chest seized up and he had to cough violently into his handkerchief. Galina gave him a glass of water. When Igor recovered, a wild, dazed look in his eyes made Caspar feel cold, as if some winged thing were passing over his soul.

“You’ve just seen it, haven’t you?” Igor whispered. He gripped Caspar’s wrist.

“Seen what, Igor?”

“I know you have.”

“No, I haven’t seen anything. I promise.”

Igor stared at him as Galina tried to pry his grip loose.

“He gets like this in the evenings.” She leaned in to say something in Igor’s ear. His expression grew focused and then softened. When Igor released him, Caspar flexed his hand and looked around to find that people were trying politely not to stare in their direction. About 20 guests had arrived, too few to be truly anonymous.

Nina came to the front to help Galina with Igor, first getting him to stand and then escorting him out of the room. As they passed, people touched his shoulder and his back. They squeezed his arm and said quiet, comforting things. The three of them and the little tank on its cart reached the doorway and turned the corner.

All that anyone else seemed to know was that he was a distant relative of Igor’s, from Prague, and that his name was Radek.

Several guests approached Caspar—Simon and Richard, two of Galina’s former colleagues in the English department, and Elaine, a literary critic. Their smeary glasses turned their eyes large and owl-like as they blinked at him wordlessly, as though the mere act of looking were enough of a prompt.

“He didn’t say anything to me, not really,” Caspar said.

“It’s just very strange,” Richard said. “I’ve known him a long time. I never thought he’d go batty.”

“Has he been saying strange things to you?” Caspar asked.

“Yes,” Richard said, “though nothing very interesting. I was sitting with him the other day, had been for an hour or so, just reading to him—Galina was out, but reading calms him when she’s not around. And he just kept ... asking for her. Even though he knew she was out for the day.”

“But maybe he didn’t *know* it,” Simon replied. “That’s how it is. They don’t *know*. They are prisoners of their present. They have no recourse to the past and therefore no recourse to knowledge.”

Elaine’s eyes widened, and she made a low hum of disagreement.

“Oh, don’t start,” Richard said.

Caspar laughed. Elaine’s area of expertise was modernism.

“I’m going to make my rounds,” Caspar said. As he left, Elaine was puffing up her chest.

After that Faulkner class, he had gone on to study mathematics and physics. Now he was an adjunct, trying to find a postdoc that might lead to a material change in his life. Nothing had been forthcoming.

Aside from various former students of Igor’s, no one looked familiar, including the pianist, who now lurked near the window, staring down onto the city. All that anyone else seemed to know was that he was a distant relative of Igor’s, from Prague, and that his name was Radek. He wore a casual suit, slightly boxy, in dark gray, with elegant shoes, and standing there at the window, he was clearly tall, which hadn’t been obvious when he was sitting.

“You are the relative,” Caspar said by way of hello. He offered Radek a glass of white wine. Radek refused but smiled.

“I am. He is my uncle’s uncle,” he said.

Radek had dull-blue eyes, thick brows, and a fullness to his face that might fall away in the coming years. He was younger than Caspar initially thought.

“Come to say hello, then?”

Radek laughed quietly. “Yes, something like that. It is actually very funny. Two weeks ago, I was walking into rehearsal, and I saw a poster for a talk. And it was strange, because the talk, the series, is named after Igor. And we have the same last name. So I thought, *Oh, who is this?* I looked it up, thinking, *Is this someone from a long time ago?* And I found out, no! It is Igor! I call my mom and I say, ‘Mom, Mom, I found this poster! With our name!’ Then she told me that, ‘Aha! That is your uncle’s uncle!’”

“This is your first time meeting them?”

“Yes,” Radek said. “It’s very funny.”

Then he grew more contemplative. “I suppose it’s not very funny. It’s very sad.”

“Yes,” Caspar said. “He’s a wonderful man.”

“Was he your teacher? So many of his students are here.”

“No,” Caspar said. “Galina was my teacher. But I have known them for a long time, ever since.”

Radek nodded. Then he took the wine from Caspar and gulped it down.

“They do seem really wonderful. They must have been great teachers for so many people to have come to say goodbye.”

Caspar nodded. It was getting sadder.

Outside, over the dark city, the choppers were spreading wide their net of light. Radek turned to watch.

“Why are they out there? Do you know? I tried to look it up.” Radek showed him the blank screen of his phone. “There was nothing on the transit apps.”

“Protests,” Caspar said.

“For what?” Radek frowned.

“You don’t remember? This summer, a boy was pushed onto the tracks by a woman. She said that he was attacking her. But it came out that she had just felt unsafe because he was standing near her and talking to himself. He was unhoused. And possibly off his medication. Anyway, they reviewed some footage and the city prosecutor declined to take up the case, and people were very upset.”

“Unhoused?”

“Homeless,” Caspar said.

“Ah.”

“He was 17, I think? He’d run away from a group home. Anyway, it was very sad.”

“She pushed him because she *felt* scared?”

“Yes,” Caspar said.

“And no charges?”

“No. And there was a shooting in Brooklyn,” Caspar said.

“God, this place.”

Caspar laughed. “Yeah, sometimes it really does seem like misfortune piles up here. But I’m not sure the ledger looks any better anywhere else.”

“No,” Radek said. “Probably not.”

Nina returned, looking tired and pale. Caspar introduced her to Radek.

“You’re the nephew,” she said. “Pleasure.”

Radek’s eyes glinted as he admired her. He did a silly little bow.

“Don’t be patronizing,” she said.

“How are they?” Caspar asked.

Nina sighed. “I need a cigarette. But they’re fine.”

“Should we go down?”

“Isn’t it cold?” she asked.

“Yes, but since when has that stopped us?”

Nina laughed.

“Mind if I tag along? I don’t know anyone else,” Radek said.

Caspar almost said that he didn’t know the two of them either, but Nina shrugged.

“Sure,” she said.

They put on their coats and took the elevator down. They stood under the green awning. Radek lit Nina’s cigarette first. Then Caspar lit Radek’s and Nina lit his, a funny game of formality. The chopper blades were audible, but moving into the distance. They could hear the barest whine of sirens and a dull roar from downtown. Nina gazed up the street into the wind, westward. The sharp chill brought tears to her eyes, but she would not look away.

“My husband,” she said to Radek, “is a prosecutor for the city. Right now, right this moment in fact, he is holed up in a building somewhere, under siege.”

“That’s a bit dramatic,” Caspar said. His fingers were getting numb already. It was mid-November.

“No,” she said, flicking ashes to the side. “Not at all. Those were Valeri’s words. Under siege, can’t make it tonight, eye-roll emoji.”

“Is he safe?” Radek asked. They both looked at him, his boyish exuberance. His flashing eyes. Nina took a long pull on her cigarette.

“Very,” Caspar said. “He’ll be fine.”

“This whole case is such a nightmare,” she said.

Caspar looked away. They had very nearly gotten into an argument several times because Nina believed the woman’s fear was sufficient cause to defend herself. Caspar did not agree, at least not entirely, that the woman was without blame or culpability. You couldn’t go around in the world weaponizing your fear against other people. Did others not also have an equal claim to safety? They couldn’t come to an agreement. Caspar didn’t want to say that Nina’s judgment was impaired by the fact that she was also a white woman. Nina obviously felt the same way about Caspar being Black.

“I feel for the girl,” she said.

Caspar suppressed his urge to respond. He walked to the other side of the awning and gazed eastward down the street.

“Still,” Radek said. “She did cause a boy to die.”

“Boy,” Nina said, but then, catching herself, “I’m just worried about my husband.”

“Understandable,” Radek said.

Caspar watched a Lyft pull to a stop and let passengers out across the street. Two drunk women, their voices high and brittle, laughed as they helped each other into the lobby of their building. The car pulled away. Caspar looked up at Galina’s building. The doorman stood at the ready to let them back inside. Nina and Radek were whispering about something. Nina had a bad habit of collecting strays. Caspar dropped his cigarette and put it out with his heel.

“Should we go back up?”

Radek was laughing, looking in Caspar’s direction. Nina smiled. “Of course, my love.” She took Caspar’s arm.

“Your coat will smell like smoke. Aren’t you supposed to be quitting?”

“I’ll just blame your bad influence,” she said. Radek lagged behind as they went inside. Nina glanced back at him and murmured, “What do you make of our new puppy?”

Caspar pressed the call button for the elevator. Radek stood awkwardly off to the side. He was good-looking, though Caspar couldn’t get rid of the impression from earlier, the sarcastic Schubert.

“I think he’s a child,” he said.

“That’s the problem with New York,” Nina pouted. “There are no men anymore.”

“Were there ever?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” she said, loud enough for Radek to hear. “But now they’re all eunuchs.”

Back in the apartment, they hung their coats in the closet. Galina had returned from the bedroom and was standing just outside the kitchen. The other guests had gone to sit in the dining room. Nina made Radek pour her another glass of wine. Caspar joined Galina.

“Smoking? How bad,” she said. “Where is Nina?”

“With your nephew,” he said.

Galina turned her head just slightly so that she could take in the sight of Nina and Radek. Her expression conveyed something that Caspar could not read, but he assumed it was a form of displeasure.

“None of my business,” he said.

“Awful.” But Galina was now smiling with barely contained amusement.

“Shall we go in?” Galina asked. “Nina, you sit with me.”

“Of course,” Nina said. “I wouldn’t dream of anything else.”

Radek sat on Caspar’s right. They were pretty far down the table from Galina. She and Nina were in close conversation. Galina had hired caterers for the evening, who were setting out the cold soup course.

Voices rose and fell. Ben the surgeon was talking to Ben the poet about something Caspar couldn’t quite make out. Someone said, “The pandemic has changed everything—what does and doesn’t make sense, on the money side. It’s all a mess.”

Caspar could tell that Radek was following bits and pieces of conversation but not really committing to anything in particular. He seemed content with just being at the table.

“Your Schubert earlier was good,” Caspar said.

“You thought so?”

“But it was not very nice.”

“So you could tell,” he said. “I wasn’t supposed to play. I was asked last minute.”

“Yes, I thought it was sarcastic,” Caspar said. “A little mean-spirited.”

Radek nodded, though he did not look chastened. “Sometimes, I can’t help myself. I have a bad nature—I’m rather spiteful.”

“I can tell.”

“But is it so bad, to be spiteful?”

“Yes,” Caspar said, but then, thinking for a moment, “Maybe not. I don’t know. But tonight it seemed bad.”

“Why? I don’t know anyone here.”

“But the occasion,” he said. “You had to know that at least. And so, to choose to play a sarcastic Schubert?”

“Yes, but didn’t you see Igor’s face?”

“No, not at first,” Caspar said.

Radek leaned toward him. His breath was sweet from the wine, warm.

“He loved it,” Radek said. “I think it made him happy.”

Radek’s lips brushed Caspar’s neck, and there was a flash of damp heat.

“Well, you’re the one who had the view of his face—I defer to you,” Caspar said.

“But you didn’t care for it,” Radek said, and paused. “Don’t you think it’s rather sarcastic to ask someone to play Schubert for a dying man?”

Caspar laughed. “You’ve got me there.” They were quiet for a moment. Nina was watching them.

“What would you have played if you’d had your pick?” Caspar asked.

“For myself or for Igor?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Caspar said. “What would you have picked for yourself?”

“And just piano, or any music?”

“Let’s start with just piano.”

Radek folded his arms across his chest and hummed in thought.



“On a night like this,” he said, turning it over. The fish course had arrived, and Caspar picked at his dorado. A gorgeous, delicate seared white skin. A pale sauce.

“Brahms,” Radek said. “His three intermezzi, opus 117.”

“I don’t know them,” Caspar said.

“He told a friend as he was writing them that they were a lullaby for his grief,” Radek said. “I find them very beautiful. No one really thinks of them. They are overshadowed by opus 118. But Glenn Gould did a recording of opus 117 and it is my favorite of all of his work.”

“That’s nice,” Caspar said. “I’ll have to listen to it sometime.”

“But listen to the Gould version first. Before you listen to anyone else. His is the best. It’s melancholy, yes, maybe even sad sometimes, but I find it very beautiful and oddly hopeful. Like, *Life, it goes on*. He understands it the deepest. Everyone else just follows.”

“I will,” Caspar said.

Radek put his arm around Caspar’s shoulders and squeezed him. The suddenness of the contact, the immediacy, was startling, but also, it had been a long time since someone had truly hugged him.

“It’s a promise,” Radek said. “You have to email me or call me when you listen.” Radek’s eyes were very serious. Caspar nodded.

“I promise,” he said.

Two weeks later, Caspar was walking with Nina in Central Park. Igor had died at the house upstate, near Hudson. There had been no funeral. There had been no memorial. He would not have wanted them to stand around sniffling and crying over him, Galina said. Caspar agreed.

The wind was sharp and damp. It was a miserable day for a walk.

“How is Valeri?” he asked.

“Better,” she said.

“Good. I’m glad it worked out.”

“Me too,” she sighed. “It was so hard on him. Hard on all of us. Just a sad mistake.”

Caspar did not reply right away.

“I know you don’t agree,” she said. “But I really do feel sorry for her. And for the man who died, obviously.”

“Yes, of course,” he said. “We all feel sorry.”

“And poor Igor, too.”

They sat on a bench and watched children climb and play. They drank coffee from a cart and talked about what they had been doing for the past two

weeks. Nina was in the midst of writing a very long article about a recently rediscovered Italian author whose work had Marxist undertones.

“She’s like an Italian Grace Paley,” she said. “But totally sick in the head. Like, deranged body horror. Headless dogs. It’s great.”

“I’ll look for it. Where will it be?”

“The *London Review of Books*, if I can meet my deadline,” she said. “What about you? What are you doing? Still wasting yourself on undergraduates?”

“I help run a lecture course for a couple of faculty, do some tutoring,” he said. “It’s a life.”

“Sounds terrible.”

“It’s not,” he said. “Don’t be elitist.”

“You should be at MIT,” she said.

“No, I shouldn’t. I probably should have just gone into industry.”

Nina looked horrified.

“You should write. You’re a beautiful writer.”

Caspar laughed. “No, that was always you.”

“You are. Galina always said so. Your writing is beautiful, sensitive. You are a prime noticer.”

“But all the rejection,” he said. “All the bad ideas before you get a good idea. I don’t have the courage.”

A group of screaming children threw themselves around in fits of delight and rage. A group of them ran from one end of the playground to another, and they went on that way, until the group grew long and stringy and folded back on itself. All the children, made chubby by their coats and jackets, their hats and scarves, the pitch of their glee rising and falling like a siren.

“Have you heard much from Galina?”

“She’s still upstate,” Nina said. “That’s all I know. You?”

“About the same.”

“I hope she’s okay.”

“Have you spoken to the nephew?” he asked.

Nina flushed and looked down.

“No,” she said. “Not a lot.”

“Which is it—no or not a lot?”

“Don’t be a morality cop,” she said. “It’s nothing.”

“Why do I not feel like it’s nothing?”

Nina poured the rest of her coffee onto the brown, scraggly lawn. It steamed.

“I’ll take that as a sign to shut up,” he said.

“Next time, it’s your lap.”

They walked back to Columbus Circle. Everything was crusted in Christmas cheer, but neither of them felt very cheerful.

“You have a bad habit,” he said.

“I know,” she said.

She was going uptown. He was going downtown. They parted and took different trains.

On the platform, vendors were selling mango and churros and boxes of candy. A man was playing Celine Dion’s greatest power ballads on an electric violin. Caspar stood among the throng waiting for the first compartment on a downtown C. When the train arrived, he read while

standing, letting an old woman take the seat he wanted. In between stations, when their train came close to another, he looked into the adjacent car and watched the people there as they, too, went length by length through the dark.

In February, Caspar was browsing cards at a downtown stationery store when he heard his name from an unfamiliar voice.

He looked up and there was Radek. They had not seen each other since Galina's party. But as sometimes happened in the city, meeting just the one time charged both people with the potential of meeting again. They hugged, and Radek asked what had brought Caspar to this particular store.

"Oh, I live around here," he said.

"No, you can't."

"Why can't I?" he asked.

"Because I live around here."

"Since when?"

"Since two years ago," Radek said.

"I've never seen you!"

"You wouldn't have known if you had seen me. You didn't know me then."

"I guess that's true," Caspar said.

"I bet I know who that's for," Radek said. He pointed to the card in Caspar's hand, a delicately made watercolor on high-quality stock. Amid softly blooming whorls of earth-toned color was a gorgeous calligraphic rendering of *Congratulations!*

"I bet you do," he said. Nina had told him three weeks ago about her pregnancy. Valeri was thrilled, but anxious. "You've got one too."

Radek had picked out a bright-orange card with happy cats on it, painted in muted watercolor. His eyes darkened just a little.

They paid for their cards and stepped out into the cold. Radek asked if he wanted to go to a café. It turned out they had the same favorite spot, near the IFC theater.

His music app was a mess of Fauré and Debussy. Not having enough pop divas of any era in his queue made him feel older than he was.

“I was just here a couple days ago,” Caspar said. “I saw a documentary about Nan Goldin.”

“No,” Radek said. “Because I was here a couple nights ago seeing a documentary about Nan Goldin.”

They each took out the tickets they’d left in their coat pockets and discovered that they had indeed gone to the same showing.

“What did you think?” Radek asked.

“I found it very moving,” he said. “A little scattered, but very moving.”

Radek ordered an espresso. Caspar ordered a black coffee. The café was busy, so they squeezed in at the bar by the window, sitting on two rickety stools.

They talked about the documentary. Radek also found it moving. But less so than Caspar.

“It felt like two movies somehow brought together—it also seemed rather dubious on the start of the addiction,” Radek said.

“I suppose,” Caspar agreed. “But it’s slippery, with addiction. There’s no definitive hard start. It comes on slowly sometimes.”

“But there was a hard start. When that man beat her up and left her. She got deep into heroin. It feels very clear when there’s someone else to blame, but for her own accountability, I don’t know. And the activism stuff, forget it.”

“You didn’t like that part?”

“I thought it was so boring. So mushy. So *good*.”

“That’s true,” Caspar said. “That part had less scrutiny in it.”

“But I did like the part about New York. That era. That would be fun to do again.”

“That part really flattened me,” Caspar said. “They were so young and so free. They were broke, yeah, and struggling in a lot of ways, but they seemed so … I don’t know, it’s like they had a different kind of freedom than we have now. A freedom from language for that sort of stuff.”

“You mean being gay?”

“Yeah, or trans even. It’s like, they all had this space to just exist. I bet that was nice.” Radek hummed in agreement. Neither of them said anything for a few moments. Then he said, “I guess you know.”

“That could mean anything,” Caspar said. “What do I know?”

“About me and Nina,” he said. “After the party, we met a couple of times. But she told me I wasn’t serious.”

“That sounds like her,” Caspar said. Radek had begun turning his cup slowly, and it scraped the fake marble of the tabletop.

“It was dumb,” he said.

“Yes,” Caspar agreed.

Radek looked at him from the side, an appraising stare.

“You don’t think I’m bad? You won’t judge me?”

“No,” Caspar said. “I was in love with Nina once.”

Radek gaped at him. Caspar laughed.

“A long time ago—when we were *almost* young enough to do something stupid about it. But thankfully, Galina stopped us.”

“How did she stop you?”

“Well, she just let us see that making ourselves unhappy because we thought it would make the other person happier was actually a deeply stupid choice to make.”

“Is that why you’re so devoted to her?”

Were they devoted to Galina? Caspar wasn’t sure. He hadn’t spoken with her in months. This in itself was not unusual; they sometimes went a whole year without speaking. But yes, he would do almost anything for Galina.

“I suppose when someone prevents you from making the greatest mistake of your life, you feel a little loyalty to them.”

“Just a little? Americans are so brutal.”

“We keep score like no one else,” Caspar said.

Radek had stopped turning his cup. The crema had settled in the bottom amid the sooty remnants of the coffee.

“Still,” Caspar said. “She must have liked you if she invited you to her baby shower.”

Radek showed a confused expression until it clicked. “Oh, Nina. Yes.”

They were quiet a bit longer.

“And how are you keeping busy?” Caspar asked.

“I played a concert,” he said. “A very small one—in a friend’s father’s loft. Me and three others. There is so much money in this place.”

“What did you play?”

“I played some Philip Glass, actually. I’ve not played a lot of his work. But the show was meant to be a medley of contemporary masters. And I got Glass.”

“I love Glass,” Caspar said.

“Yeah, people do.” Radek’s eyes flashed.

“Don’t be condescending.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Radek said. “It was nice. People enjoyed it.”

Their time had come to an end. Caspar finished his coffee, and they went back out onto the sidewalk. They hugged goodbye, and as Radek was turning to leave, he stopped.

“Did you ever listen to that Brahms?”

Caspar paused a moment, searching his memory, and then, alighting upon the relevant facts, he said, “Ah. No, I never did.”

“Just as well. I realized I didn’t give you my number, so you couldn’t tell me what you thought.”

“Here, give me your phone,” Caspar said. He typed his name and number into Radek’s phone and then called himself. Then he saved Radek’s information. “Now we are in touch.”

Radek laughed.

They hugged again. Though they lived in the same neighborhood, they lived in opposite directions from the IFC, so they each set off into the cold wind.

When Caspar got home, he looked up the Glenn Gould album of the Brahms intermezzi. His music app was a mess of Fauré and Debussy from having let it run long into the night the previous evening, when he’d been grading. Not having enough pop divas of any era in his queue made him feel older than he was.

The Gould version of the intermezzi, particularly the three from opus 117, did have what Radek had described. A certain unpretentious lightness, a stirring belief—hope, even. When the melancholy came in the middle of the first intermezzo, it was as if someone had drawn a cool, dark shade across a sunny afternoon. The music changed after that, still progressing, but somehow inflected with a new sadness, so that in its steady forward motion, it became a perfect expression of seeking happiness in dire straits. Caspar could understand why a person would choose this for their last party. The second intermezzo had the underlying character of a waltz, both less wistful and more playful than the first. There were brassier accents as well, and the melody felt more intricate. Yet, here, too, was a theme of nostalgia and recollection, a long backward glance.

Caspar played the whole album as he reheated soup for dinner. When it ended, he started it over and sat on his sofa to listen again. Then he wrote Radek a long text message explaining his feelings about the music. But he deleted that. Instead he texted, *Listened. Very good. Love the second one especially.*

Radek texted back, *Gould?*

*Yes,* Caspar texted.

*!!! he is the best!*

*I agree.*

*Next time, I will play it for you.*

Here Caspar paused. The insinuation of a next time.

Caspar typed *Like you did for Nina?* But this seemed needlessly cruel. Instead he sent, *Yeah, yeah, sure.*

*No, really, I will.*

*Ok.*

*I will. Come over right now. I will play.*

Caspar did not know what to say. He felt bad that he had accidentally gotten them on this course of proving something. Or needing to prove something. Then it occurred to him that Radek was being sarcastic again, and that this needling, bratty behavior was somehow part of the charm that had gotten Nina to sleep with him.

*No, next time is fine,* Caspar texted.

Radek sent an annoyed emoji.

In the spring, Galina had another party. She was selling the apartment and wanted to have a salon to celebrate. Or to close an era. She was in a long black skirt and a gray cashmere sweater. Her face had become keen and smooth. Something had been blasted away from her.

She kissed Caspar in greeting and took his arm. The salon was in the afternoon this time. The room was flushed gold with sunlight. Radek and Nina were speaking near the window. Her belly was big now. She wore a gray jersey-knit dress. She looked radiant.

Elaine and Richard and Simon were there. The others were not. In honor of Nina's pregnancy, they were all drinking cider and coffee, tea. There had been a warm soup course and a chicory and fennel salad. The food was good, tart, enlivening. Elaine and Simon were arguing about Woolf and Forster. Elaine thought Forster was a misogynist, and Simon thought Woolf was a homophobe.

Richard stood between them looking beleaguered.

Galina and Caspar sat on the chaise overlooking the city. Where she and Igor had sat many months ago.

"I have been thinking," she said, "of what he said to you that night."

Caspar had forgotten that moment, but it made itself available to him at this mention. Igor's wide eyes. The desperation in his grip.

"What did you see?" she asked. A long segment of light fell over her lap. They were warm there, the sun striking their knees and thighs. The fabric of

the chaise had slowly faded from this light. Every day, soaked in sunshine.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Except, that moment, when he choked. I thought I ... It wasn’t sight. But I had this feeling of, I don’t know. Like something was going.”

Galina nodded.

“And I guess he saw me see that? I don’t know. It makes me sad that he got scared because I panicked when he choked.”

“His last weeks were very difficult,” she said. “We knew they would be, of course, but to live them? That was excruciating.”

Caspar didn’t know what to say. Instead, he put his arm around Galina and let her rest her head on his shoulder. She closed her eyes.

Nina sat on the arm of the chaise. She smelled like Radek’s cologne. Radek sat at the piano. He and Caspar shared a look. Then Radek began to play the second intermezzo. The others joined them near the chaise, and Radek played on. Caspar’s chest felt tight. The last notes hung in the air, and then that was it. That was it.

Caspar and Radek took the train together. They sat on facing benches. Sometimes, people stood between them and they couldn’t see each other except when the train rocked and opened a space. Radek’s face did not change during the whole ride. He looked as peaceful as when he’d been playing the Brahms.

At their stop, they climbed the steps, Radek in front, Caspar behind, and when they emerged, there was a moment when they might have gone in either direction, apart or together. But Caspar did not feel equal to that. They went on standing near the top of the subway-station stairs, which was the worst place to stand. And after a few moments of getting annoyed looks, Radek nodded. Then he put his arm through Caspar’s and led him to the café, where they sat for an hour, not really speaking, not really doing anything, just passing the time together, until the light was gone, and they had to go home.

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*This story appears in the [February 2025](#) print edition.*

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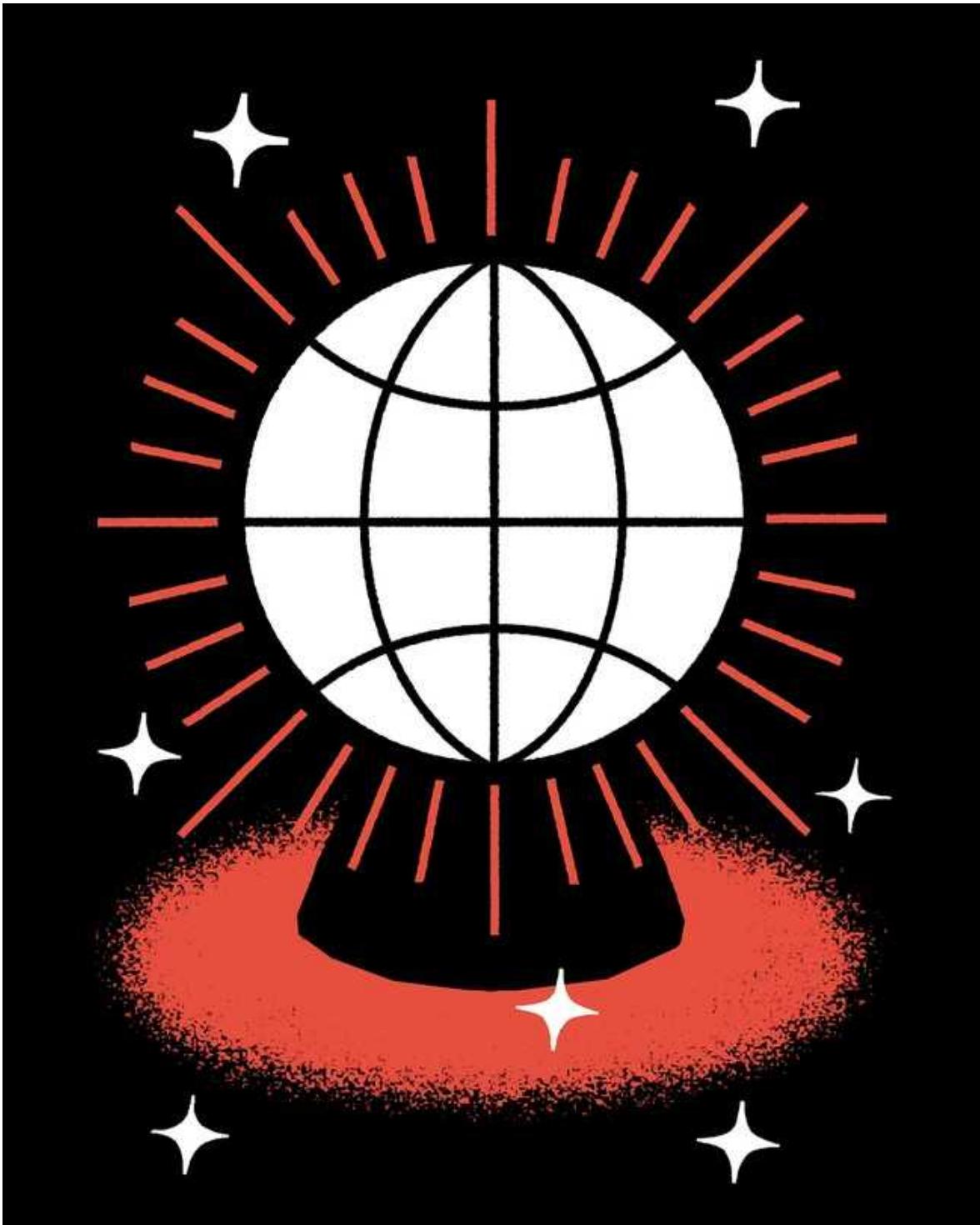
# Dispatches

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# The New Rasputins

**Anti-science mysticism is enabling  
autocracy around the globe.**

by Anne Applebaum



This article was featured in the One Story to Read Today newsletter. [Sign up for it here.](#)

Frosty pine trees rim the edge of an icy lake. Snow is falling; spa music plays in the background. A gray-haired man with a pleasant face stands beside the lake. He begins to undress. He is going swimming, he explains, to

demonstrate his faith, and his opposition to science, to technology, to modernity. “I don’t need Facebook; I don’t need the internet; I don’t need anybody. I just need my heart,” he says. As he swims across the lake, seemingly unbothered by the cold, he continues: “I trust my immune system because I have complete trust and faith in its creator, in God. My immunity is part of the sovereignty of my being.”

This is Călin Georgescu, the man who shocked his countrymen when he won the first round of the Romanian presidential election on November 24, despite hardly registering in opinion polls and conducting his campaign almost entirely on TikTok, where the platform’s rules, ostensibly designed to limit or regulate political messages, appear not to have constrained him. On the contrary, he used the tactics that many social-media influencers deploy to appeal to the TikTok algorithm. Sometimes he added soft, melancholic piano music, imploring people to “vote with your souls.” Sometimes he used pop-up subtitles, harsh lighting, fluorescent colors, and electronic music, calling for a “national renaissance” and criticizing the secret forces that have allegedly sought to harm Romanians. “The order to destroy our jobs came from the outside,” he says in one video. In another, he speaks of “subliminal messages” and thought control, his voice accompanied by images of a hand holding puppet strings. In the months leading up to the election, these videos amassed more than 1 million views.

Elsewhere, this gentle-seeming New Age mystic has praised Ion Antonescu, the Romanian wartime dictator who conspired with Hitler and was sentenced to death for war crimes, including his role in the Romanian Holocaust. He has called both Antonescu and the prewar leader of the Iron Guard, a violent anti-Semitic movement, national heroes. He twice met with Alexander Dugin, the Russian fascist ideologue, who posted on X a (subsequently deleted) statement that “Romania will be part of Russia.” And at the same time, Georgescu praises the spiritual qualities of water. “We don’t know what water is,” he has said; “*H<sub>2</sub>O* means nothing.” Also, “Water has a memory, and we destroy its soul through pollution,” and “Water is alive and sends us messages, but we don’t know how to listen to them.” He believes that carbonated drinks contain nanochips that “enter into you like a laptop.” His wife, Cristela, produces YouTube videos on healing, using terms such as *lymphatic acidosis* and *calcium metabolism* to make her points.

In its new incarnation, the far right began to resemble the old far left. In some places, the two began to merge.

Both of them also promote “peace,” a vague goal that seems to mean that Romania, which borders Ukraine and Moldova, should stop helping Ukraine defend itself against Russian invaders. “War cannot be won by war,” Cristela Georgescu wrote on Instagram a few weeks before voting began. “War destroys not only physically, it destroys HEARTS.” Neither she nor her husband mentions the security threats to Romania that would grow exponentially following a Russian victory in Ukraine, nor the economic costs, refugee crisis, and political instability that would follow. It is noteworthy that although Călin Georgescu claimed to have spent no money on this campaign, the Romanian government says someone illegally paid TikTok users hundreds of thousands of dollars to promote Georgescu and that unknown outsiders coordinated the activity of tens of thousands of fake accounts, including some impersonating state institutions, that supported him. Hackers, suspected to be Russian, carried out more than 85,000 cyberattacks on Romanian election infrastructure as well. On December 6, in response to the Romanian government’s findings about “aggressive” Russian attacks and violations of Romanian electoral law, Romania’s Constitutional Court canceled the election and annulled the results of the first round.

Given this strange combination—Iron Guard nostalgia and Russian trolls plus the sort of wellness gibberish more commonly associated with Gwyneth Paltrow—who exactly are the Georgescus? How to classify them? Tempting though it is to describe them as “far right,” this old-fashioned terminology doesn’t quite capture whom or what they represent. The terms *right-wing* and *left-wing* come from the French Revolution, when the nobility, who sought to preserve the status quo, sat on the right side of the National Assembly, and the revolutionaries, who wanted democratic change, sat on the left. Those definitions began to fail us a decade ago, when a part of the right, in both Europe and North America, began advocating not caution and conservatism but the destruction of existing democratic institutions. In its new incarnation, the far right began to resemble the old far left. In some places, the two began to merge.

When conspiracy theories and nonsense cures are widely accepted, the evidence-based concepts of guilt and criminality vanish quickly too.

When I first wrote about the need for new political terminology, in 2017, I struggled to come up with better terms. But now the outlines of a popular political movement are becoming clearer, and this movement has no relation at all to the right or the left as we know them. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, whose belief in the possibility of law-based democratic states gave us both the American and French Revolutions, railed against what they called obscurantism: darkness, obfuscation, irrationality. But the prophets of what we might now call the New Obscurantism offer exactly those things: magical solutions, an aura of spirituality, superstition, and the cultivation of fear. Among their number are health quacks and influencers who have developed political ambitions; fans of the quasi-religious QAnon movement and its Pizzagate-esque spin-offs; and members of various political parties, all over Europe, that are pro-Russia and anti-vaccine and, in some cases, promoters of mystical nationalism as well. Strange overlaps are everywhere. Both the left-wing German politician Sahra Wagenknecht and the right-wing Alternative for Germany party promote vaccine and climate-change skepticism, blood-and-soil nationalism, and withdrawal of German support for Ukraine. All across Central Europe, a fascination with runes and folk magic aligns with both right-wing xenophobia and left-wing paganism. Spiritual leaders are becoming political, and political actors have veered into the occult. Tucker Carlson, the former Fox News host who has become an apologist for Russian aggression, has claimed that he was attacked by a demon that left “claw marks” on his body.

This New Obscurantism has now affected the highest levels of U.S. politics. Foreigners and Americans alike have been hard-pressed to explain the ideology represented by some of Donald Trump’s initial Cabinet nominations, and for good reason. Although Trump won reelection as a Republican, there was nothing traditionally “Republican” about proposing Tulsi Gabbard as director of national intelligence. Gabbard is a former progressive Democrat with lifelong ties to the Science of Identity Foundation, a Hare Krishna breakaway sect. Like Carlson, she is also an apologist for the brutal Russian dictator Vladimir Putin and for the recently deposed dictator of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, both of whose fantastical lies she has sometimes repeated. Nor is there anything “conservative” about [Kash Patel, Trump’s nominee for FBI director](#), who has suggested that he intends to target a long list of current and former government officials, including many who served in the first Trump administration. In keeping with the

spirit of the New Obscurantists, Patel has also promoted Warrior Essentials, a business selling antidotes both to COVID and to COVID vaccines. But then, no one who took seriously the philosophy of Edmund Burke or William F. Buckley Jr. would put a conspiracy theorist like Robert F. Kennedy Jr.—another Putin apologist, former Democrat (indeed, from the most famous Democratic family in America), and enemy of vaccines, as well as fluoride—in charge of American health care. No “conservative” defender of traditional family values would propose, as ambassador to France, a convicted felon who sent a prostitute to seduce his sister’s husband in order to create a compromising tape—especially if that convicted felon happened to be the father of the president’s son-in-law.

#### [From the October 2024 issue: Kash Patel will do anything for Trump](#)

Rather than conservatism as conventionally understood, this crowd and its international counterparts represent the fusion of several trends that have been coalescing for some time. The hawkers of vitamin supplements and unproven COVID cures now mingle—not by accident—with open admirers of Putin’s Russia, especially those who mistakenly believe that Putin leads a “white Christian nation.” (In reality, Russia is multicultural, multiracial, and generally irreligious; its trolls promote vaccine skepticism as well as lies about Ukraine.) Fans of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán—a small-time autocrat who has impoverished his country, now one of the poorest in Europe, while enriching his family and friends—make common cause with Americans who have broken the law, gone to jail, stolen from their own charities, or harassed women. And no wonder: In a world where conspiracy theories and nonsense cures are widely accepted, the evidence-based concepts of guilt and criminality vanish quickly too.

Among the followers of this new political movement are some of the least wealthy Americans. Among its backers are some of the most wealthy. George O’Neill Jr., a Rockefeller heir who is a board member of *The American Conservative* magazine, turned up at Mar-a-Lago after the election; O’Neill, who was a close contact of Maria Butina, the Russian agent deported in 2019, has promoted Gabbard since at least 2017, donating to her presidential campaign in 2020, as well as to Kennedy’s in 2024. Elon Musk, the billionaire inventor who has used his social-media platform, X, to give an algorithmic boost to stories he surely knows are false, has managed

to carve out a government role for himself. Are O'Neill, Musk, and the cryptocurrency dealers who have flocked to Trump in this for the money? Or do they actually believe the conspiratorial and sometimes anti-American ideas they're promulgating? Maybe one, maybe the other, possibly both. Whether their motivations are cynical or sincere matters less than their impact, not just in the U.S. but around the world. For better or for worse, America sets examples that others follow. Merely by announcing his intention to nominate Kennedy to his Cabinet, Trump has ensured that skepticism of childhood vaccines will spread around the world, possibly followed by the diseases themselves. And epidemics, as we've recently learned, tend to make people frightened, and more willing to embrace magical solutions.

Other civilizations have experienced moments like this one. As their empire began to decline in the 16th century, the Venetians began turning to magic and looking for fast ways to get rich. Mysticism and occultism spread rapidly in the dying days of the Russian empire. Peasant sects promoted exotic beliefs and practices, including anti-materialism, self-flagellation, and self-castration. Aristocrats in Moscow and St. Petersburg turned to theosophy, a mishmash of world religions whose Russian-born inventor, Helena Blavatsky, brought her Hindu-Buddhist-Christian-Neoplatonic creed to the United States. The same feverish, emotional atmosphere that produced these movements eventually propelled Rasputin, a peasant holy man who claimed that he had magical healing powers, into the imperial palace. After convincing Empress Alexandra that he could cure her son's hemophilia, he eventually became a political adviser to the czar.

Rasputin's influence produced, in turn, a kind of broader hysteria. By the time the First World War broke out, many Russians were convinced that dark forces—*tyomnye sily*—were secretly in control of the country. “They could be different things to different people—Jews, Germans, Freemasons, Alexandra, Rasputin, and the court camarilla,” writes Douglas Smith, one of Rasputin’s biographers. “But it was taken on faith that they were the true masters of Russia.” As one Russian theosophist put it, “*Enemies* really do exist who are poisoning Russia with negative emanations.”

Replace *dark forces* with *the deep state*, and how different is that story from ours? Like the Russians in 1917, we live in an era of rapid, sometimes

unacknowledged, change: economic, political, demographic, educational, social, and, above all, informational. We, too, exist in a permanent cacophony, where conflicting messages, right and left, true and false, flash across our screens all the time. Traditional religions are in long-term decline. Trusted institutions seem to be failing. Techno-optimism has given way to techno-pessimism, a fear that technology now controls us in ways we can't understand. And in the hands of the New Obscurantists—who actively promote fear of illness, fear of nuclear war, fear of death—dread and anxiety are powerful weapons.

### *Autocracy in America: The end of democracy has already begun*

For Americans, the merging of pseudo-spirituality with politics represents a departure from some of our deepest principles: that logic and reason lead to good government; that fact-based debate leads to good policy; that governance prospers in sunlight; and that the political order inheres in rules and laws and processes, not mystical charisma. The supporters of the New Obscurantism have also broken with the ideals of America's Founders, all of whom considered themselves to be men of the Enlightenment. Benjamin Franklin was not only a political thinker but a scientist and a brave advocate of smallpox inoculation. George Washington was fastidious about rejecting monarchy, restricting the power of the executive, and establishing the rule of law. Later American leaders—Lincoln, Roosevelt, King—quoted the Constitution and its authors to bolster their own arguments.

By contrast, this rising international elite is creating something very different: a society in which superstition defeats reason and logic, transparency vanishes, and the nefarious actions of political leaders are obscured behind a cloud of nonsense and distraction. There are no checks and balances in a world where only charisma matters, no rule of law in a world where emotion defeats reason—only a void that anyone with a shocking and compelling story can fill.

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*This article appears in the [February 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The New Rasputins.”*

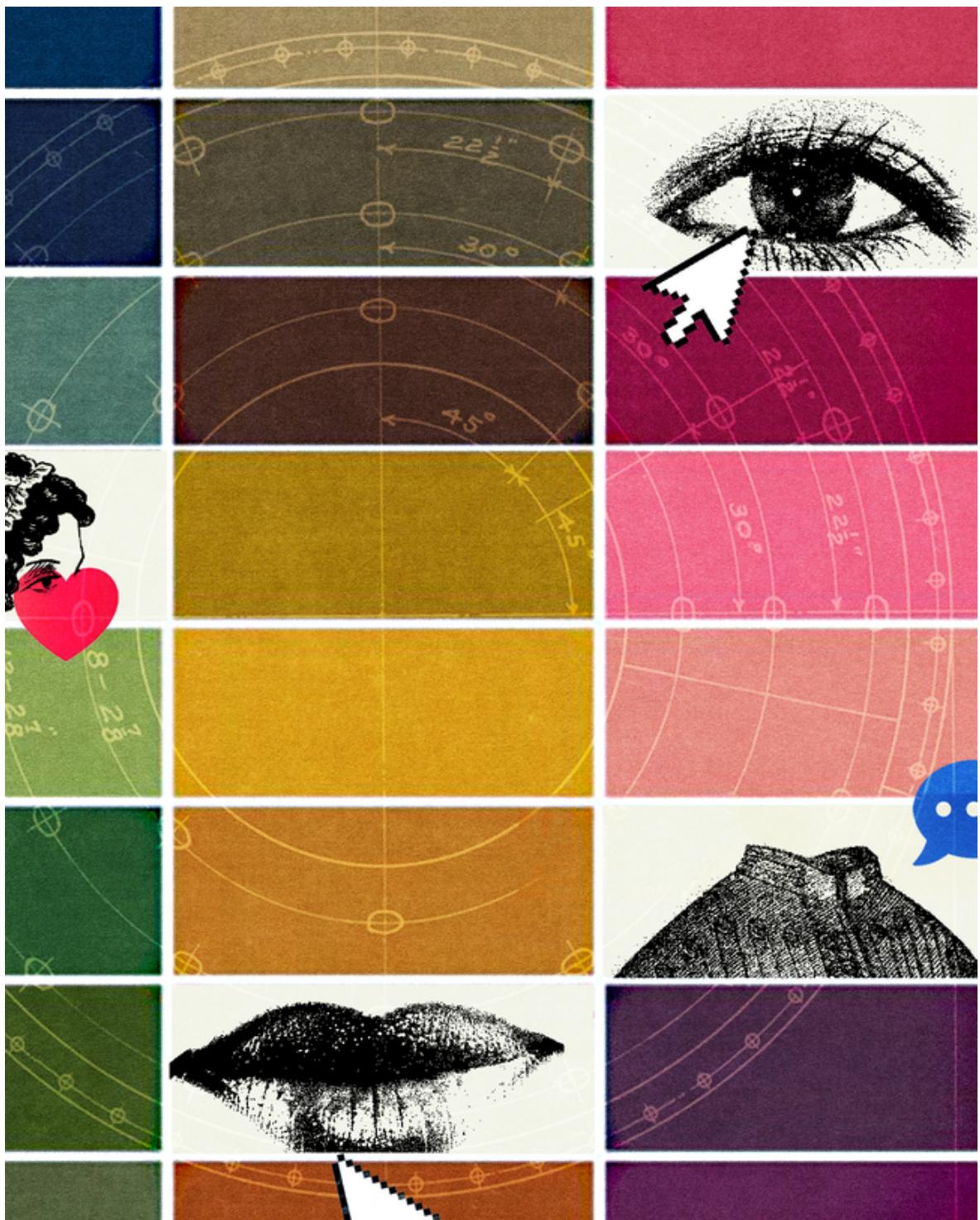
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# What Not to Wear

## The false promise of seasonal-color analysis

by Ellen Cushing



As long as people have been able to dress in color, we've been desperate to do it better. In the mid-19th century, advances in dyeing technology and synthetic organic chemistry allowed the textile industry, previously limited to what was available in nature, to mass-produce a rainbow's worth of new

shades. The problem was, people began wearing some truly awful outfits, driven to clashy maximalism by [this revolution in color](#).

The press created a minor moral panic (“*un scandale optique*,” a French journal called it), which it then attempted to solve. An 1859 issue of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, the most widely read American women’s magazine of the antebellum era, promised to help “ill-dressed and gaudy-looking women” by invoking a prominent color theorist, the French chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul, and his ideas about which colors were most “becoming” on various (presumably white) women. Chevreul advocated “delicate green” for those with fair skin “deficient in rose”; yellow for brunettes; and “lustreless white” for those with a “fresh complexion,” whatever that means.

Bright winters tend to have sparkling eyes and dark hair and look great in jewel tones.

Chevreul died in 1889, 121 years before Instagram was invented, but had the platform been available to him, I think he would have done very well on it. There, and elsewhere on the social web, millions of people are still trying to figure out which shades look best on them. They are doing it via seasonal-color analysis, a quasi-scientific, quasi-philosophical discipline that holds that we all have a set of colors that naturally suit us, and a set that do not—that wash us out, make us look ruddy or green, emphasize our flaws, and minimize our beauty.

According to this method, everyone belongs to a “season,” and a “subseason,” determined by the coloring of their skin and features. Bright winters, for example, tend to have sparkling eyes and dark hair and look great in jewel tones; true autumns are defined by their golden undertones and should wear earthy colors.

The theory first became popular in the U.S. in the 1980s, only to resurface in South Korea and then [surge on the English-speaking internet over the past few years](#). Today, Reddit’s seasonal-color-analysis community has 167,000 members, putting it in the site’s top 1 percent. Search *seasonal-color analysis* on Instagram, TikTok, or Pinterest, and you will find seemingly endless results: posts that “type” celebrities such as Mindy Kaling (a dark winter) and Sabrina Carpenter (a light summer); offer advice for people who

are autumns but wish they were winters; and present the ideal jewelry, eye-shadow palettes, prom dresses, Halloween costumes, and just about every other item of clothing imaginable for each color season. Seasonal-color consultants, credentialed and otherwise, are racking up hundreds of thousands of followers and charging hundreds of dollars for in-person sessions.

### Read: How color shapes our lives

The savviest among them film their sessions for social media. In a typical video, a client sits, makeupless, facing the camera, an adorable white bonnet covering her hair. A color consultant drapes her in a succession of colored fabrics, and evaluates each for its ability to make her complexion pop. In one TikTok, a young woman with high cheekbones and gray eyes is identified as a summer and shown a series of shades that make her look, as the color consultant [Tatum Schwerin says approvingly](#), “like a baby doll.” (The difference was, to my eyes, noticeable but underwhelming. The video has more than 32 million views.) In another video, a young woman [describes her experience flying to South Korea for color analysis](#), the results of which were, she says, “shocking”—vivid spring.

This seasons-based approach traces back to Carole Jackson’s 1980 book, [\*Color Me Beautiful\*](#). In it, Jackson promised that “color is magic” and asserted that “women—and men—have discovered its power to make the world regard them with awe.” She used seasons to describe her readers:

For just as nature has divided herself into four distinct seasons, Autumn, Spring, Winter, and Summer, each with its unique and harmonious colors, your genes have given you a type of coloring that is most complemented by one of these seasonal palettes.

(Like Chevreul, Jackson was writing primarily with white readers in mind.)

The book was a sensation. It spent seven years on the *New York Times* best-seller list and spawned what we now might call a lifestyle brand: Jackson published a sequel specifically for men, and began licensing the Color Me Beautiful system and name to other consultants. Across the country, people would congregate to get their colors done at events [described by the Times](#)

as “halfway between a Tupperware party and group therapy.” Women kept color swatches in their pocketbook, in case of a shopping emergency. *Reader’s Digest* subsidized the cost of consultations for employees, under a benefits policy that covered self-improvement.

Color analysis is diverting and narcissistic, and it promises an immutable, essential self-knowledge.

More than four decades later, Color Me Beautiful still exists, and still sells certification for consultants, though it has added AI color analysis to its suite of products. And its wisdom has escaped onto social media, where teenagers and 20-somethings are discovering it. The modern version of color analysis is, like so many modern versions of so many things, both more sophisticated —color analysis now acknowledges the existence of a wide range of skin tones—and more complicated. Jackson’s four seasons have been cleaved into 12 and sometimes 16 subseasons, depending on one’s philosophy. The nuances are detailed in long blog posts filled with pictures of color wheels and terms such as *chroma*.

The appeal to contemporary audiences is obvious. First of all, draping videos are eminently watchable, in the same way a cooking video is: simple process, observable result. But the concept also fills, I think, a genuine need brought on by the collision of technology and the fashion and beauty industries. Today’s young women are probably photographed more than any other cohort in history—but they live on the internet, which is a firehose of quick-moving trends, targeted advertising, cheap fashion, conflicting advice, and color-correcting software. It has never been more important to know what looks good on you, and never have there been more sources of information to sort through in order to find out.

Much like astrology memes and internet quizzes—two of the most enduring online products of the past decade—color analysis is diverting and narcissistic, and it promises an immutable, essential self-knowledge that can be put into action. It offers a small sense of belonging in a tribal society (online, you can find groups for people who identify with each of the subseasons) and guarantees simplicity in a complex world.

The fashion and beauty industries seem to be embracing a kind of faux empiricism these days. A person's hair can be classified into one of 12 types, based on texture, density, and thickness. If a decade ago your average bottle of skin goo advertised itself using vague terms such as *hydrating*, today's skin-care products foreground their formulas and invite customers to "cosplay as cosmetic chemists," as the beauty reporter [Jessica DeFino has written](#). Canny seasonal-color-analysis influencers play into this; some even wear lab coats in their videos. Jenny Mahoney opened a seasonal-color consulting firm in New York in 2023 and has already expanded to Orange County, California, and the Washington, D.C., area. The first thing she told me about color analysis is that it's "logical, it is systematic, and it's based on science."

Sure, sort of. Color theory really is a science, in that it is an organized approach to observing the natural world. Color can be measured, categorized, and studied; Chevreul was onto something when he proposed that the eye reacts in specific and sometimes surprising ways to certain color combinations. The color-consultation industry, though, is "scientific" in the way the wellness industry is—some of its principles may be based in truth, but the marketplace that has sprung up around them is trading in something else. Often, it feels less like a solution than part of the problem: more vocabulary, more rules, more ways to be led astray, more reasons not to trust your own eyes. Winter is a cool-toned season, but so is summer—in defiance, perhaps, of what you might think the word *cool* means. Yellow like a marigold is warm, but yellow like a daffodil is cool, or at least suitable for people who are cool seasons. According to one website, if you are a soft autumn, like Tyra Banks, you should wear "lots of nuts, rose and wheat colours," and if you are a true spring, like Blake Lively, you should dress in shades "reminiscent of colouring pencils."

Online, people talk about avoiding colors they love, or throwing away favorite articles of clothing. One Reddit user, who said she'd spent 26 years and almost \$1,000 on color analysis, recently posted that she was close to quitting the enterprise altogether. She had, over the years, been identified as several different types and had replaced all her clothes, jewelry, and makeup each time, but "I've never felt 100% comfortable in any of them," she wrote. It's enough to drive a person a little crazy.

I know this because seasonal-color analysis drove me a little crazy. Though I hate being told what to do, I am always searching for ways to look hot with little sustained effort. But I can't seem to find myself in any of the seasons. My hair could fairly be described as blond, red, or brown, depending on the light and the time of year, and because of a benign genetic abnormality, my left eye is the muddy color of a New England pond, while my right is a bright, cool blue. I have read tens of thousands of words about what this might mean, and paid for two different color-analysis apps. They declared me, variously, a soft autumn, a warm autumn, a cool winter, a bright spring, and a soft summer, which means black is either one of my power colors or the express lane to looking pallid, maybe even very ill. And so I walk this Earth knowing that every day is another wasted opportunity to make my features pop. I sleep okay, most of the time.

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*\*Lead-image sources: Plume Creative / Getty; Belterz / Getty; Reading Room 2020 / Alamy; Historic Illustrations / Alamy*

*This article appears in the [February 2025](#) print edition with the headline “What Not to Wear.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.*

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# Georgia O'Keeffe at Home

## Inside the painter's life in New Mexico

by Roxana Robinson



Georgia O'Keeffe, left, and the photographer Todd Webb, right, in the Abiquiu house salita door, 1956 (Todd Webb Archive)

The photographer Todd Webb met Georgia O'Keeffe in the 1940s, at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery An American Place. O'Keeffe liked Webb and his work, and [they became friends for life](#). Partly at O'Keeffe's urging, Webb moved to New Mexico in the early 1960s, and he was a frequent guest at [O'Keeffe's home in Abiquiu](#). He often brought his camera.



Driving, 1959 (Todd Webb Archive)



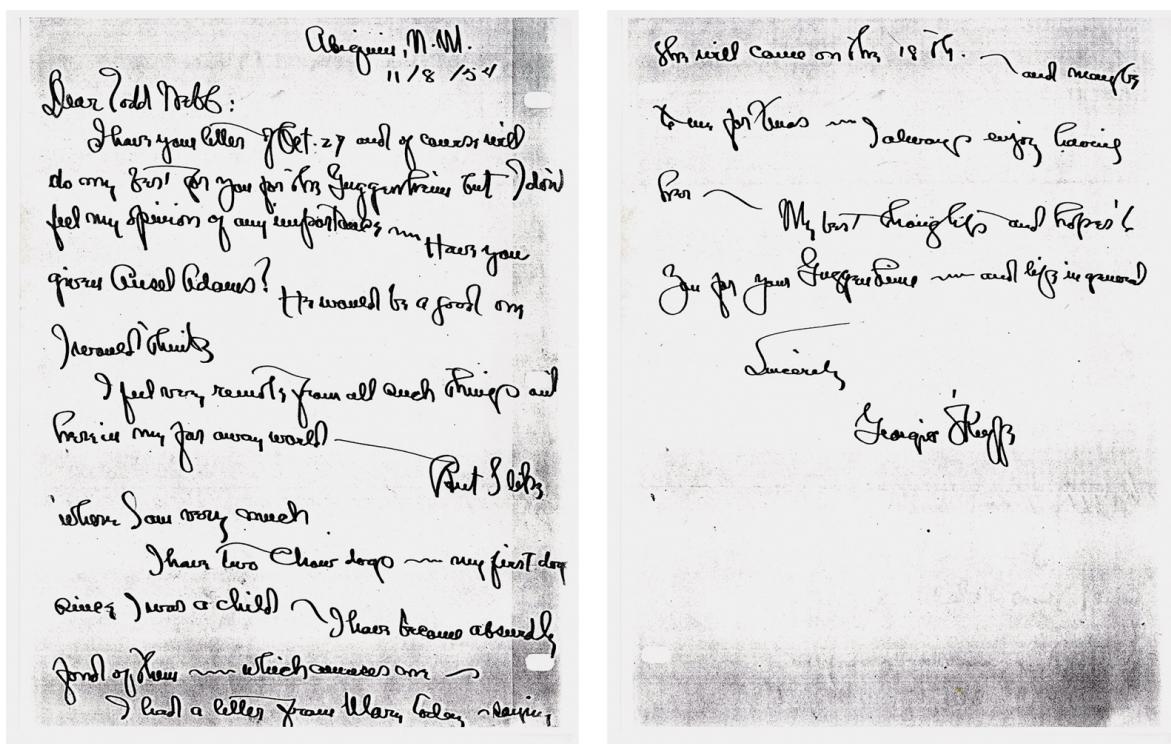
Dogs in the Abiquiu garden, ca. 1962 (Todd Webb Archive)



Ghost Ranch kitchen, 1962 (Todd Webb Archive)

Webb's images from those visits provide a window into the painter's daily life. O'Keeffe wore hats to protect her face, and scarves to protect her long, lustrous hair; she said you should never let your hair get sunburned. She wore crisp white collars, which turned whatever else she wore—black linen, blue denim—chic. She liked to make “Tiger’s Milk” for breakfast, a concoction of banana, skim milk, powdered milk, wheat germ, and brewer’s yeast, recommended by the nutritionist Adelle Davis. O’Keeffe kept a series of Chow dogs, which she loved for their loyalty and dignity, their massive

beauty. Their coats were so thick that she had a shawl made from the sheddings. When her favorite dog, Bo, died, she buried him at the White Place, her name for the pale, majestic hills near Abiquiu that appear in many of her paintings. Years later, she wrote to Webb that she liked to think of Bo at night, still "running and leaping" through the hills.



A letter from O'Keeffe to Webb, 1954 (Todd Webb Archive / Collection Center for Creative Photography)



Twilight Canyon, New Mexico, 1964 (Todd Webb Archive)

Webb taught O'Keeffe how to use a camera. They photographed each other standing in the doorway at her house in Abiquiu. She once said that she'd bought the house because she was transfixed by that door, which she depicted in her paintings over and over, always empty. The images are austere and abstract: It's hard to find the magic in the blank black rectangles. But O'Keeffe and Webb, each standing alone in the frame, reveal the doorway's unearthly proportions: It was too wide for humans, too high for animals, too narrow for carriages. Who was it for? The gods.

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# The Saint America Needs Now

**Kindness has become  
countercultural. Perhaps Saint  
Francis can help.**

by James Parker



It's a peculiar symptom of where we're at—caught between phases of consciousness, between the ruins of one world and the unknown shape of the next—to be seeing two things at the same time. Or to be seeing the same thing in two ways simultaneously. Stuck in the transition, we're condemned

to a species of double vision: cross-eyed, as it were, in the cross-fade. And sometimes, sometimes, this can be quite useful. When you meet a guy, for example, like Francis of Assisi.

Genius or crackpot? Both. Sensuous embracer of life or self-mortifying freak? Both. Exhibitionist or recluse? Anarchist or company man? Runaway rich kid or true voice of the rejected? Both, both, and both. And when God spoke to him in 1206, his voice issuing from a crucifix and saying, “Francis, do you not see that my house is falling into ruin? Go, therefore, and repair the house,” did God mean the dilapidated, bat-flitted, holes-in-the-roof church in which Francis, at that moment, happened to be kneeling? Or did he mean the whole of medieval Christendom? He meant, of course—are you getting the idea?—both.

Volker Leppin’s *[Francis of Assisi](#)*, newly translated from the German by Rhys S. Bezzant, is subtitled *The Life of a Restless Saint*, and the restlessness of the subject is shared by the author. His book, Leppin writes, “does not present itself as a biography in the classic sense.” Which is not to suggest that Leppin, a professor of historical theology at Yale, has written some kind of jazzy meta-book. But *Francis of Assisi* does have double vision, maneuvering constantly between hagiography and history, legend and fact, heaven and Earth, miracles and—what’s the opposite of miracles? Leppin comes not to debunk but rather to discover in what fashion those early, physics-defying accounts of Francis, the tales told within the blast radius of his actual presence, might be understood as true.

Francis was born around 1181, in Assisi in central Italy, the son of a well-to-do merchant named Pietro di Bernardone. After that, the story gets hazy. Some versions would have him quite a nicely behaved youth; in others, the more fun ones, he’s a profligate, a sybarite, a tearaway. Seeking honors on the battlefield, he signs up for one of the [endless local town-on-town skirmishes](#), only to be swiftly captured and imprisoned. When he gets out, a year or so later, the changes begin: conversion.

### [From the August 2000 issue: Being St. Francis](#)

Francis tears off his fancy clothes; he kisses lepers; he starts begging. It’s all a bit unbalanced. He turns his back on privilege and plunges madly

downward. (Perhaps this is the point in the story at which Francis—were he trying something similar today, here in America—would find himself scooped up by psychiatry and institutionalized, or at the very least heavily medicated, at the behest of his family maybe, or he'd go rattling unattended into the tunnels of the justice system.)

What he's doing is pretty straightforward. He's living—actually *living*—by the words of Jesus.

Desperate to impoverish himself, he tries to donate a large amount of his father's money to a local church; the priest, afraid of Bernardone Sr., refuses it, whereupon Francis—the anti-alchemist, King Midas in reverse, turning gold back to base metal—casts the money scornfully aside, “valuing it,” as Saint Bonaventure wrote in his 13th-century *[Life of Saint Francis](#)*, “no more than dust that is trodden under foot.”

But gradually, via great humiliations, a stint in a cave, and a complete rupture with his father, these lungings and impetuosities resolve themselves into the properly achieved Franciscan humor, a kind of continual outrageous sanctity. Francis becomes Francis, and he begins to attract followers. What he's doing is pretty straightforward. He's living—actually *living*—by the words of Jesus: Love your neighbor, give it all away, praise God, and don't worry about tomorrow.

#### [From the June 2022 issue: How politics poisoned the evangelical Church](#)

Pretty straightforward, and a head-on challenge to the world. It is no longer enough, for example, to give alms to the lepers and walk off feeling pious: Now, like Francis and his brothers, you have to accompany the lepers. You have to stand with them in what Leppin calls “the world of the excluded,” of the lowest in society, which in the cosmic reversal effected by the Gospels turns out to be the highest place on Earth.

To get in touch with the miraculous Francis, the folkloric Francis, read the *Florentine Tales*, or *[The Little Flowers of St. Francis](#)*, a 14th-century collection of tales about the saint and his friars. It's a beautiful book. Here we find Francis “raising his face to heaven” like a solar panel, taming wolves and preaching to the birds and subsisting for weeks on half a loaf of bread to “cast the

venom of vainglory from him.” We see him healing a leper, and then, when that leper dies (“of another infirmity”) a couple of weeks later, encountering the man’s heaven-bound soul whooshing past him in a wood.

We see him—in a typically self-condemning mood, regarding himself as the vilest of sinners and the basest of men—earnestly instruct Brother Leo to tell him, “Truly thou dost merit the deepest hell.” And Leo tries to say it—he tries his best—but when he opens his mouth, what comes bulbing out instead, Jim Carrey-style, is, “God will perform so many good works through thee that thou shalt go to paradise.” Francis, peeved, renews the effort, enjoining Leo this time to tell him, “Verily thou art worthy of being numbered among the accursed.” Again Leo assents, but the words that come through him, rebelliously, are, “O Friar Francis, God will do in such wise that among the blessed thou shalt be singularly blessed.” And repeat. It has the rhythm of an *SNL* sketch. We also meet the amazing, [more-Francis-than-Francis Brother Juniper](#), a figure of such affronting innocence that Francis himself, when he’s wrangling a particularly tenacious demon, simply has to mention Juniper’s name to make the demon flee.

G. K. Chesterton [wrote very beautifully](#) about Francis. For him, the saint’s jangling polarities resolve themselves quite naturally if we imagine him as a lover: Francis was in love with God, so he did all the crazy zigzag things that lovers do. The feats, the ecstasies, the prostrations and abnegations. And he loved the Church too. “Francis,” Leppin notes, “certainly did not engage in any polemic against the clergy.” It never occurred to him to question directly the institutions and practices of Catholicism: The polemic, so to speak, was himself. The story goes that when he [went to Rome to get Pope Innocent III’s blessing](#), and Innocent said something waspish about him looking like a swineherd, Francis left the papal court, found a couple of pigs in the street, rolled around companionably in their pig-mess, and then came back.

Did that really happen? Does it matter? A story like that, we need it to be true. And right now we need Saint Francis. Now that kindness is countercultural, we need his extremes of wild charity to pull us back toward it. And we need his asceticism: His self-denial, his merry disdain of health and comfort and security, is a rebuke to our self-care. There are no safe spaces, and no guarantees—the only stability is the bottomlessness of divine

love. The trapdoor held open by grace. So we take the hand of Francis, and down we go.

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# A Palestinian Story Unlike Any Other

**In her debut novel, *<em>Too Soon</em>*, Betty Shamieh isn't trying to educate or enlighten.**

by Gal Beckerman



My local independent bookstore has a corner devoted to what it calls “Palestinian Stories.” The small display of books, which went up in October 2023, is a grim collection of mostly nonfiction titles, such as Rashid Khalidi’s [\*The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler\*](#)

[Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017](#) and Ben Ehrenreich’s [The Way to the Spring: Life and Death in Palestine](#). The smattering of novels are largely by Palestinian American writers, among them Susan Abulhawa’s [Mornings in Jenin](#) and Hala Alyan’s [Salt Houses](#), both bleak multigenerational epics of exile and grief.

You can feel [the weight that these books have to carry](#), each bearing the “pressure” to tell “the human story that will educate and enlighten others,” as the British Palestinian novelist Isabella Hammad recently wrote in her book [Recognizing the Stranger: On Palestine and Narrative](#). Because Palestinians are a people frequently reduced to a problem, the impulse to testify on their behalf is natural. But art that begins with such a mission is not art that is likely to surprise or entertain. Didacticism often results in fiction mostly inhabited by heroes and beautifully tragic figures: the Palestinian grandmother who tightly grips the key to the ancestral home that she lost; the young Palestinian American woman who returns to the occupied lands and feels, for the first time, her people’s struggle; the deracinated doctor in Beirut or Kuwait or Paris, unmoored and overwhelmed by longing.

Especially in this past year of mass death in Gaza, writers want to humanize Palestinians. They *need* to humanize Palestinians. And maybe hoping, as a reader, to also encounter occasions to laugh is obscene. But a new debut novel by a celebrated Palestinian American playwright responds in a startling way to the burden that Hammad described—by shrugging it off. In [Too Soon](#), Betty Shamieh isn’t trying to educate or enlighten. I was taken aback when, as we talked, she described herself as essentially writing “fan fiction.”

What Shamieh meant is that she creates stories to entertain herself, as a kind of wish fulfillment. Her plays—she has written 16—have something of this quality too. In [Malvolio](#), produced by the Classical Theatre of Harlem in 2023, she took the tragic fool of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*—who is tricked into thinking that the noble lady he serves, Olivia, is in love with him—and gave him a sequel that ends in marriage and triumph over his tormentors. Shamieh has rejiggered Palestinian characters in a similar spirit in other plays, making them irreverent and flawed instead of avatars of victimhood, carnal where they tend to be portrayed as saintly. In fan-fiction

mode, she plays with genre, which gives her a structure to complicate. With *Too Soon*, she told me, “More than anything, I wanted to create a Palestinian American *Sex and the City*.”

### [Read: Everyone should be reading Palestinian poetry](#)

The novel, which opens in 2012, has all the beats (and some of the cliché and cringe) of a romantic comedy—one that unfolds partly in the West Bank. In Shamieh’s classic marriage plot, an indecisive woman is approaching her 40s and trying to pick between two men, each of whom represents a distinct path for her. Yet the protagonist, a theater director named Arabella who shares much of her biography with Shamieh, is an antihero. The daughter of Palestinian immigrants to America, Arabella is both confused and demanding. She wants to pursue Aziz, a man descended from her clan who is volunteering as a medic in Gaza and who offers her the prospect of being the good Palestinian, making babies for her people—a life decision that would also be politically sound. But she discovers that she has feelings for Yoav, an Israeli American theater friend she has known for nearly 20 years, who represents the independent life she has made for herself in New York City; he doesn’t want kids at all. Arabella is not an emblem of anything—she can be self-righteous, self-deprecating, petty, lustful. And she’s funny. I’m not sure how she would feel about being tucked among the other “Palestinian Stories.”

“Don’t we all know that we’re kind of terrible?” Shamieh asked me, as a Palestinian American Carrie Bradshaw might. “I’m just in touch with the fact that I’m that way.” But she wondered aloud whether other people know this about themselves too. “Sometimes I feel like I’m playing truth or dare, and nobody’s really actually telling the truth.”

I met Shamieh one day in early November at a French brasserie called Marseille in New York’s theater district, a favorite spot of hers where she had many post-performance glasses of wine during the two decades she spent working Off and Off-Off-Broadway after graduating from the Yale School of Drama in 2000. I expected her to be as brash in person as Arabella is on the page. “If you were thinking about hating me already, don’t worry. You’re in great company,” Arabella assures the reader in the very first paragraph. “Also, try as you might, you can’t hate me as much as I hate

myself.” But Shamieh, a curtain of long black hair sweeping down one side of her face, conveyed calm and even a little shyness, explaining, “I’m older, and I’m a mother.” In her 40s, she has a 10-year-old son and now lives in San Francisco.

From the novel’s start, Arabella resists her Palestinian identity. She’s not one to sign petitions. She’d rather be recognized for her unique productions of Shakespeare: “I staged comedies as if they were tragedies and vice versa” (a good summary of Shamieh’s work as a playwright as well). When she is featured on the cover of *American Theatre* magazine and later learns that this was purely because the editor was looking for a way to honor [Edward Said](#), the Palestinian American intellectual, Arabella is furious: “I was chosen not for the art I made but for the art I made while being Palestinian. I had done everything in my life to never feel I got a leg up because magnanimous liberal white people felt sorry for me.”

What propels her is the idea of creating characters and stories that confound expectations—including, occasionally, her own.

Asked to direct a production of *Hamlet* in the West Bank city of Ramallah, Arabella hesitates at first. “I have zero desire to return to Palestine,” she tells Aziz the first time they speak, after their grandmothers have set them up. She finally takes the job because she hopes to impress the British theater company sponsoring the project. And because she wants to test the chemistry with Aziz.

Arabella’s identity crisis is one that Shamieh understands. She was the first Palestinian American playwright to have a production premiere Off Broadway, and the responsibility of representing the Palestinian or Arab perspective on the New York stage felt daunting, she told me, especially as she worked throughout the War on Terror years. She certainly was not interested in producing “agitprop,” she said; instead she studied Neil Simon’s comedies so she could emulate them. Just before she started writing *Too Soon*, she had made a decision to try writing for television, like many of her playwright friends. She was ready to go for the money—until, that is, she found herself caught up in the story of Arabella, a single woman in her mid-30s who wants to settle down but can’t figure out who she is.

“The only way I could deal with my fear of being pigeonholed and limited and diminished by my ethnicity was to write about my fear of it,” Shamieh told me. “That’s the only way I can process it and laugh at it.”

### Read: I am building an archive to prove that Palestine exists

The ribald humor, the over-the-top-ness that she brings to describing this struggle, reminded me—surprisingly—of mid-century Jewish American writers, especially [Philip Roth](#), navigating between the poles of Jewishness and Americanness with a lecherous grin. I thought back to a hotel-room encounter at the end of [\*Portnoy's Complaint\*](#). Alexander Portnoy is in Israel, wrestling on the floor with a hearty young woman from a kibbutz. He is attracted to her strength and repelled by it, wanting to conquer her but also to be her—and, to make things even more Freudian, he realizes with a jolt that she reminds him of his mother. The scene, in all its violence and absurdity, reveals the subterranean tensions between Diaspora Jews and Israelis. In *Too Soon*, Arabella spends days in hotel rooms in Jerusalem and Ramallah with Aziz, having sex and eating takeout hummus and skewers of shrimp. At one point, mid-fellatio, she discovers scars from bullet wounds on both of his legs—the work, it turns out, of Israeli snipers. She wants to talk about what happened; he doesn’t want her to stop.

The novel is full of such moments, when Arabella’s own urges collide with a sense of obligation to something greater. She is drawn to the idea of Aziz, as he is to the idea of her—propagating and making their grandmothers happy. Shamieh told me how familiar this aspect of tribalism felt. Her family is descended from Christian Palestinian clans that lived for centuries in a village that eventually became Ramallah. During the decade leading up to the Six-Day War, in 1967, most of the members of her family scattered to a few different cities in the United States, including San Francisco, where Shamieh was born and grew up. But the descendants remained in a kind of “time warp,” Shamieh said, gathering annually at an enormous convention, in part for the purposes of pairing up young descendants. “I would say maybe 95 percent of my cousins married people who cannot speak Arabic and have names like Betty and are completely American, but are from our clans,” Shamieh said. She went too because “it seemed easier than dating.”

But she felt an inner conflict, which makes its way into the novel. “I lived in the space—that stasis—between being pushed and being pulled,” Arabella explains. It leaves an opening for self-aware scrutiny of the narratives that prop up a person’s sense of identity and community. One Manhattan scene, in which Arabella secretly seeks out the mother of Yoav, her Israeli American love interest, lands in an unexpected place. The mother, Indji, is an Egyptian Jew who was exiled from Egypt in the 1950s and found refuge in Israel before coming to the United States. To gain her confidence, Arabella pretends to be Jewish (a hokey contrivance that Shakespeare would have approved of), and Indji shares the story of her banishment. The tale tilts Arabella’s perspective. “I fretted over the plight of Palestinians only because I was one,” she reflects. “Had I been born Jewish, I would have been a Zionist, perhaps a militant one. I would have insisted we had a homeland. I would have wanted it secure. By any means necessary.”

It’s a vertiginous moment for Arabella—and for the reader, too, in a post–October 7 world in which both Palestinians and Israelis have rewound the tape on their own stories all the way back to their most elemental and least accommodating versions: the *Nakba* versus the Holocaust. “Inviting a competing history into your worldview is disorienting,” Arabella says. “It flips a switch in your brain and your vision suddenly becomes kaleidoscopic. The shards of your people’s history are true and clear, but they don’t coalesce into a neat picture of saints and sinners.”

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said famously revealed the ways that Western literature had depicted Arabs as exotic, backward, irrational, and in need of guidance—portrayals that served, consciously or not, to justify a colonial mindset toward them. But Said’s analysis also posed an implicit question that it didn’t answer: If these writers robbed Arabs of their full humanity, how can literature restore it—without, that is, simply creating characters who are the noble inverse of the ones Western writers invented?

Shamieh’s novel would be comfortable on romance-fiction shelves, but the longer trajectory of her dramatic work points to her deep concern with this question. She came of age in the 1990s, during the optimistic period of the Oslo Accords—a time, she told me, when Said and the conductor Daniel Barenboim could create an Israeli-Arab youth orchestra, for example. In 2003, Shamieh herself helped found a Jewish and Arab American theater

collective called the Semitic Root. The defeatism that has come to define the way that many young people today perceive the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis is not really part of her vocabulary. And as we sat and talked, I sensed an unwillingness to delve too deeply into the mess that is the region's politics; that's not what has motivated her.

[Read: Stop doomscrolling about Israel and Palestine—read these books instead](#)

What propels her instead is the idea of creating characters and stories that confound expectations—including, occasionally, her own. Early in her work on *Too Soon*, Shamieh realized that her marriage plot needed to be multigenerational, pulling her back toward what she had resisted as a fusty Palestinian genre. Interspersed between Arabella's sections are the first-person narratives of her lively grandmother Zoya (who on the boat to America manages to steal a moment of transgression with a man named Aziz, actually the grandfather of the Aziz whom Arabella will meet—again, Shakespeare would approve) and then of her mother, Naya (who bridles at an arranged marriage, immerses herself in African American culture, and grows an afro). “I thought I was writing *Sex and the City*,” Shamieh told me, and then “it was as if Carrie Bradshaw’s grandmother shows up, and she’s like, ‘I survived the potato famine and I didn’t have a great time on the boat to Ellis Island being a single woman, and that’s why you like shoes and are obsessed with men.’”

These women are all antiheroes of a sort, especially when set against figures in other Palestinian works. Shamieh mentioned one largely overlooked 1974 novel by the Palestinian Israeli writer Emile Habiby, which she looked to as a rare precedent for its profanity and satire. [The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist](#) is a picaresque story of a Palestinian man stumbling through the wreckage of the 1948 war out of which Israel emerged. He finds himself in surreal situations (including an encounter with an alien from outer space), always trying to make the best of them—and somehow always falling deeper into a hole. “He’s trying so hard and doing everything and still failing,” Shamieh said.

This uphill-battle swashbuckling is what animates Shamieh in her dramatic work too, which pretty consistently features norm-breaking women who

cause havoc. One of her most successful plays, *Roar*, appeared Off Broadway in 2004, starring Annabella Sciorra as a Palestinian woman named Hala. Like Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, she incites quarrels and betrayals among family members who are driven, and often defeated, by unabashed sexual desire and a hunger to assimilate in bold ways (the teenage protagonist of the play, Hala's niece, is a blues singer). “*Roar* has these women who are in your face,” Samer Al-Saber, a theater professor at Williams College who is compiling a selection of Shamieh’s plays into a book set to be published next year, told me. “They are funny. They are constantly discussing what potentially could be considered dirty laundry. They are fighting with each other, against each other, and for each other. And in that way, it is not the typical minority story.” By bucking conventions, Al-Saber added, Shamieh is also resisting the demands of the market.

Shamieh told me that in writing such characters—her “crazy women,” as she put it—she also managed to avoid the traps set for her by the wider culture’s perception of Arab Americans. She could have done the expected, she said, and written plays about, for example, honor killings, a persistent problem in certain Arab communities. But she worried that she would be reinforcing stereotypes; by not creating submissive and oppressed women, she could upend them. At the same time, she was writing characters whom she not only knew—women like those in her own family—but was more comfortable sharing with a non-Arab audience.

Arabella also chooses a third way at the end of *Too Soon*, and (spoiler alert) her rejection of Aziz was particularly striking to read, because her rationale sounded like something Shamieh herself would say. “Unlike Aziz, I wasn’t searching for a point to life,” Arabella says. “I was looking to feel enthralled by it.” Shamieh actually did say something like this to me, though it was more grounded in the challenge and opportunity of being Palestinian. “I feel like my bent as a human being is towards joy, towards connection, towards optimism,” she told me. “But I happen to have been born to people who don’t have much at this point to be optimistic about.”

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*This article appears in the [February 2025](#) print edition with the headline “A Palestinian American Sex and the City.”*

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# Apocalypse, Constantly

## Humans love to imagine their own demise.

by Adam Kirsch



In 1985, when I was 9 years old, I watched the first episode of the new *Twilight Zone*, a reboot of the classic early-1960s TV series. People rarely talk about the '80s version, which ran for just three seasons. But there must be other viewers around my age who have never forgotten "A Little Peace and Quiet," the second story in that debut episode. It's about a woman who discovers a magic pendant in the shape of a sundial that gives her the power to stop time. Whenever she says "Shut up," everyone and everything in the world except her comes to a halt, resuming only when she says, "Start talking."

At first she uses the device to give herself a break from her irritating husband and chattering children. But at the end of the episode, she hears an announcement that the Soviets have launched a nuclear attack on the United States, and she deploys the magic phrase to arrest time. In the last scene, she walks out of her house and looks up to see ICBMs frozen in midair, leaving her with an impossible choice: to unfreeze time and be destroyed along with all of humanity, or to spend eternity as the sole living person in the world.

I remember that TV image better than most of the things I saw in real life as a child. It was the perfect symbol of an understanding of history that Generation X couldn't help but absorb—if not from *The Twilight Zone*, then from movies such as *The Day After* and *WarGames*. The nuclear-arms race meant that humanity's destruction was imminent, even though no one actually wanted it, because we were collectively too stupid and frivolous to prevent it. We were terrified of the future, like the woman in the TV show—yet we also secretly longed for the arrival of the catastrophe because only it could release us from the anxiety of waiting.

The dread of extinction has always been with us; only the mechanism changes.

Four years after that broadcast, the Cold War ended in an American victory with the fall of the Berlin Wall. In [an influential essay](#) published in the euphoric year of 1989, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama proclaimed “the end of history.” But it felt more like the resumption of history. Throughout four decades of nuclear brinkmanship, humanity had been living in fearful expectation, like Brutus in *Julius Caesar* : “Between the acting of a dreadful thing / And the first motion, all the interim is / Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.” Now the doomsday weapons had been, if not abolished, at least holstered, and the passage of time could mean progress, rather than a countdown to annihilation.

Somehow, things haven't turned out that way. Young people today are no less obsessed with climate disasters than Gen X was with nuclear war. Where we had nightmares about missiles, theirs feature mass extinctions and climate refugees, wildfires and water wars. And that's just the beginning. As Dorian Lynskey, a British journalist and critic, writes in [Everything Must Go: The Stories We Tell About the End of the World](#), wherever you look in

contemporary pop culture, humanity is getting wiped out—if not by pollution and extreme weather (as in *Wall-E* and *The Day After Tomorrow*), then by a meteor or comet (*Armageddon*, *Deep Impact*), a virus (*Station Eleven*, *The Walking Dead*), or sudden, inexplicable infertility (*Children of Men*).

### Adrienne LaFrance: Humanity's enduring obsession with the apocalypse

These are more than just Hollywood tropes. Lynskey cites surveys showing that 56 percent of people ages 16 to 25 agree with the statement “Humanity is doomed,” while nearly a third of Americans expect an apocalyptic event to take place in their lifetime. Logically enough, people who believe that the world is about to end are much less inclined to bring children into it.

According to a [2024 Pew Research Center survey](#) of unmarried Americans ages 18 to 34, 69 percent say they want to get married one day, but only 51 percent say they want to have children. Around the world, [birth rates are falling rapidly](#); one South Korean online retailer reported that [more strollers are now being sold for dogs](#) than for babies in that country. Perhaps this is how the world will end—“not with a bang but a whimper,” as T. S. Eliot wrote in his 1925 poem, “The Hollow Men.”

But the fact that Eliot was already fantasizing about the end of the world a century ago suggests that the dread of extinction has always been with us; only the mechanism changes. Thirty years before “The Hollow Men,” H. G. Wells’s 1895 novel [The Time Machine](#) imagined the ultimate extinction of life on Earth, as the universe settles into entropy and heat death. Nearly 70 years before that, Mary Shelley’s novel [The Last Man](#) imagined the destruction of the human race in an epidemic. And even then, the subject was considered old hat. One reason *The Last Man* failed to make the same impression as Shelley’s [Frankenstein](#), Lynskey shows, is that two other works titled “The Last Man” were published in Britain the same year, as well as a poem called “The Death of the World.”

In these modern fables, human extinction is imagined in scientific terms, as the result of natural causes. But the fears they express are much older than science. The term *apocalypse* comes from an ancient Greek word meaning “unveiling,” and it was used in a literary sense to describe biblical books such as Daniel and Revelation, which offer obscure but highly dramatic

predictions about the end of days. “A river of fire streamed forth before Him; / Thousands upon thousands served Him; / Myriads upon myriads attended Him; / The court sat and the books were opened,” Daniel says about the Day of Judgment.

*Everything Must Go* takes note of these early predecessors, but Lynskey mostly focuses on books and movies produced in the U.S. and the U.K. in the past 200 years, after the Christian apocalypse had begun “to lose its monopoly over the concept of the end of the world.” He divides this material into sections to show how the favorite methods of annihilation have evolved over time, in tandem with scientific progress.

[From the January/February 2023 issue: Adam Kirsch on the people cheering for humanity’s end](#)

In the mid-19th century, as astronomers were starting to understand the true nature of comets and meteors, writers began to imagine what might happen if one of these celestial wanderers collided with our planet. Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Destruction of the World,” published in 1843, was perhaps the first to evoke the initial moment of impact:

For a moment there was a wild lurid light alone, visiting and penetrating all things ... then, there came a great pervading sound, as if from the very mouth of HIM; while the whole circumambient mass of ether in which we existed, burst at once into a species of intense flame.

This kind of cataclysmic fantasy hasn’t disappeared—in the 2021 movie *Don’t Look Up*, astronomers discover a new comet months before it’s due to strike Earth. But whereas 19th-century stories emphasized humanity’s helplessness in the face of external threats, the technological advances of the 20th century created a new fear: that we would destroy ourselves, either on purpose or accidentally.

Hiroshima demonstrated that a global nuclear war could not be won. Radioactive fallout and nuclear winter, in which dust and smoke blot out the sun, would mean the extinction of most life on Earth. This scenario could be played for eerie tragedy: In the 1959 film *On the Beach*, Australians go about their ordinary lives while waiting for the fallout of a nuclear war to

arrive and complete humanity's erasure. Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) staged the end of the world as an absurdist comedy, the accidental result of ideological mania and sheer idiocy. The film closes with the terrifying yet preposterous image of an American airman riding a falling bomb like a rodeo steer.

Technology didn't just enable us to annihilate ourselves. More unsettling, it raised the possibility that we would make ourselves obsolete. Today this fear is often expressed in terms of AI, but it first surfaced more than a century ago in the 1920 play *R.U.R.*, by the Czech playwright Karel Čapek. Čapek invented both the word *robot* (adapted from a Czech word meaning "forced labor") and the first robot uprising; at the end of the play, only one human is left on Earth, an engineer spared by the robots to help them reproduce. Isaac Asimov's classic collection of sci-fi stories, *I, Robot* (1950), envisioned a more benevolent scenario, in which robots become so intelligent so quickly that they simply take over the management of the world, turning humanity into their wards—whether we like it or not.

All of these stories can be seen as variations on the theme of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," a tale told in ballad form by Goethe in 1797, at the dawn of the age of technology. Because our tools have become too powerful for us to manage, the future never unfolds the way we expect it to; our utopias always lurch into dystopia.

This element of self-accusation is what makes an apocalypse story distinctively modern. When human beings imagined that the world would end as a result of a divine decree or a celestial collision, they might rend their garments and tear their hair, but they could do nothing about it. When we imagine the end of the world in a nuclear war or an AI takeover, we are not just the victims but also the culprits. Like Charlton Heston at the end of *Planet of the Apes*, we have no one to curse but ourselves: "You maniacs! You blew it up! Ah, damn you! God damn you all to hell!"

In *A Century of Tomorrows: How Imagining the Future Shapes the Present*, the historian and museum curator Glenn Adamson surveys a different genre of stories about the future—the ones told by 20th-century "futurologists." Where Lynskey's writers and filmmakers envision the future as an inevitable

disaster, these modern seers believed that we can control our destiny—if we only have the good sense to follow their advice.

Adamson applies the term *futurologist* to a wide range of figures in business, science, politics, and the arts, most of whom would not have described themselves that way. For the designer Norman Bel Geddes, shaping the future meant sketching “cars, buses, and trains that swelled dramatically toward their front ends, as if they could scarcely wait to get where they were going.” For the feminist Shulamith Firestone, it meant calling for the abolition of the nuclear family. We also encounter Marcus Garvey, who led a Black nationalist movement in the early 20th century, and Stewart Brand, the author of the [hippie bible \*The Whole Earth Catalog\*](#). The assortment of visionaries is odd, but Adamson accords them all a place in his book because they expanded America’s sense of the possible, its expectations about what the future could bring.

The villains of Adamson’s book, by contrast, are the technocrats of futurism —think-tank experts, business executives, and government officials who believed that they could dictate the future by collecting enough data and applying the right theories. A classic example is Robert McNamara, who serves as a parable of “the rise and fall of technocratic futurology’s unchallenged dominance” in Cold War America.

McNamara became a Harvard Business School professor in the 1940s, and demonstrated a talent “for planning, for forecasting, for quantitatively analyzing, for segregating the trouble spots and identifying the upcoming trends, for abstracting and projecting and predicting.” During World War II, he was recruited by the Air Force to study production methods and eliminate inefficiencies. After the war, he did the same at Ford Motor Company, rising to become its head.

When John F. Kennedy named McNamara as his secretary of defense, the choice seemed like a perfect fit. Who better than a master planner to plan America’s Cold War victory? Instead, McNamara spent the next seven years presiding over the ever-deepening catastrophe in Vietnam, where America’s strategic failure was camouflaged by framing the situation, Adamson writes, as “a series of data points, treating ‘kill ratio’ and ‘body count’ as predictive measures in the war’s progress.”

The conclusion that Adamson draws from his illuminating forays into cultural history is that any claim to be able to control the future is an illusion; the more scientific it sounds, the more dangerous it can be. Yet he ends up admitting to “a certain admiration” for futurologists, despite their mistakes, because “they help us feel the future, the thrilling, frightening, awesome responsibility that it is.”

The future can be our responsibility only if we have the power—and the will—to change it. Otherwise it becomes our fate, a basilisk that turns us to stone as we gaze at it. For a long time, that monster was nuclear war, but today’s focus on worst-case scenarios arising from climate change is not as well suited to storytelling. Lynskey quotes the environmentalist Bill McKibben’s complaint that “global warming has still to produce an Orwell or a Huxley, a Verne or a Wells … or in film any equivalent of *On the Beach* or *Doctor Strangelove*. ”

### Read: For how much longer can life continue on this troubled planet?

Climate change is hard to dramatize for the same reason that it is hard to solve: It happens slowly and in the background, until it doesn’t. Compared with that TV image of Russian missiles suspended overhead, our current fears for the future are as intangible and omnipresent as the weather. Confronted with melting glaciers and vanishing species, our promises to use paper straws or shut off the faucet while we brush our teeth feel less like solutions than superstitious gestures.

In a curious way, reading *Everything Must Go* can serve as therapy for this kind of fatalism. “The unrealized fears of the past can be a comfort,” Lynskey writes, “because the conviction that one is living in the worst of times is evergreen.” There is a difference, of course, between living in fear of the Last Judgment and living in fear of nuclear war or global warming. The former is a matter of faith; the latter are empirical realities. But when impending catastrophes are real, it is all the more important that we not frighten ourselves into seeing them as inevitable. As Edgar points out in *King Lear*, “The worst is not / So long as we can say, ‘This is the worst.’ ”

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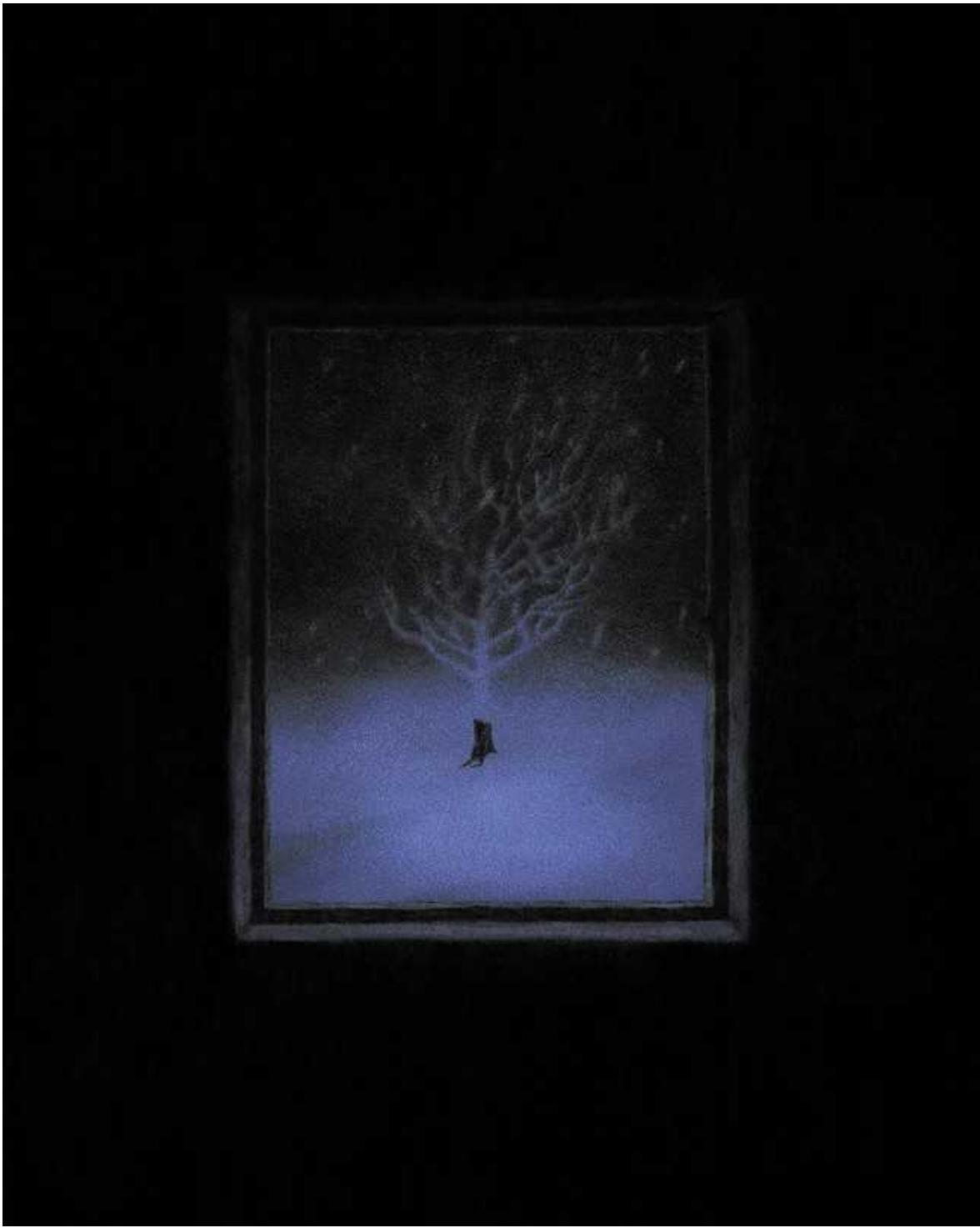
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# Where Han Kang's Nightmares Come From

**In her novels, the South Korean Nobel laureate returns again and again to her country's bloody past.**

by Judith Shulevitz



In 2016, the South Korean novelist Han Kang [won the International Booker Prize](#) for [\*The Vegetarian\*](#), the first of her novels to be translated into English. The novel, in which a woman who suddenly refuses to eat meat is treated as if she were mad, was read as a parable of the modern condition, Kafka's *The*

*Metamorphosis* or “A Hunger Artist,” updated for the age of feminism and ecopolitics. In October, with three more of her novels now available in English and at least 20 other languages, the Swedish Academy awarded Han the Nobel Prize, elevating her to the empyrean realm reserved for writers of what is sometimes called world literature.

Internationally famous authors need no pity, but the status comes with vulnerabilities. Having been turned into global ambassadors for their culture, they are often accused of becoming deracinated and defanged. Han has dodged the charge so far. But [suspicion fell on the English-language translator](#) of *The Vegetarian*, Deborah Smith, when the novel was propelled into the spotlight. Smith mistranslated some words, but her harsher detractors accused her of betraying Han’s limpid, understated style, torquing it so as to hold the attention of Western readers.

Works transposed into foreign languages—and cultures—inevitably suffer omissions and distortion. That doesn’t make them less authentic. But if you’re trying to understand what Han is up to, adjudicating the stylistic accuracy of the translation is less important than deepening your knowledge of the work’s context, which, like South Korea itself, is at once decidedly Korean and very cosmopolitan.

The national repression of trauma even affects the weather. The pathetic fallacy hasn’t been put to such good use in fiction since *Wuthering Heights*.

In [The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century](#), Adam Kirsch argues that “globalism is not just a fate thrust upon writers, but a theme that writers see it as a duty and an opportunity to explore.” What makes a novel global is not that its author has become a worldwide brand, but that it originates in a consciousness of living and writing in a world with permeable borders, and a desire to make sense of that experience. By Kirsch’s definition, Han writes global novels. Most of them deal—some more obliquely than others—with South Korea’s bloody past as a pawn in great-power politics and the war against Communism.

Perhaps that sounds didactic; rest assured that her novels foreground richly specific narratives about individual characters. History still seeps in, and all the more so when the details have largely been forgotten or obscured.

Memories of horrors that younger South Koreans can no longer name produce uncanny symptoms in their bodies and dreams. Han, who is also a poet, commands an impressive arsenal of literary devices, and in her hands, the national repression of trauma—what Milan Kundera called “organized forgetting”—even affects the weather. The pathetic fallacy hasn’t been put to such good use in fiction since *Wuthering Heights*.

Weather plays a major role in, and may in fact be the main character of, Han’s latest novel, [\*We Do Not Part\*](#), translated by e. yaewon and Paige Aniyah Morris. Much of the action takes place during a massive blizzard, and the wind and precipitation and skies all have an eerie salience. The snow, though, is most saturated with meaning. It exhibits both agency and pathos, as if possessed by ghosts. Snow blocks the narrator’s way during an urgent journey. It effaces the features of people and landscapes the way amnesia erases memories, and yet it also awakens recollections, many of them unbearable, in those it falls upon. Snow clings desolately to eyelashes and noses. It even weeps, blowing into eyes and melting into tears.

*We Do Not Part* opens with a nightmare that torments the narrator, Kyungha, night after night, and always makes her wake up in a panic. She is standing before a plain containing vast numbers of ink-black lopped-off tree trunks. Suddenly the sea rises and starts to flood the plain. She knows, with the certainty of a dream, that the mutilated trees mark graves, and that she must stop the water, right now, from dredging up and desecrating the bones. But how?

Kyungha is a writer who published a book about a massacre that took place in a city referred to as G—. As it happens, Han wrote a novel [\*Human Acts\*](#), about a pro-democracy movement led by students and activists in Gwangju in 1980 that was put down with extreme violence. [Possibly as many as 2,000 protesters](#) (the exact number is not known), most of them young and all deemed to be Communists, were murdered. The novel describes, among other barbaric acts, how soldiers and police threw bodies carelessly into trucks that carted them off to be hidden or burned. Kyungha’s research into G— has left her in a suicidal fugue. She has lost touch with friends; her husband has abandoned her and seems to have taken their daughter with him. Now she lives alone in a tiny rental apartment just outside Seoul, if

endlessly rewriting her will and not eating or sleeping can be called living. She is as helpless in life as she is in the nightmare.

### [Read: Han Kang's transgressive art](#)

Kyungha comes up with a project that she thinks will exorcize it. She will collaborate with a friend, Inseon, a documentary filmmaker, on an art film. The plan is to re-create the dream, setting up dozens of tree trunks on a large piece of land, and then wait for winter and shoot the snow falling over the trunks, “as white as cloth to drape down from the skies and blanket them all.” Han doesn’t interpret the dream or its remedy for us, but we understand that the trunks and bones are meant to stand in for the unburied dead of G—, and that the snow is to serve as their shroud.

Han’s novels vary in style, but they form an unusually interconnected whole —in an interview, a member of the Nobel Prize committee noted “a continuity as to themes that is quite remarkable”—and the color white is a motif in all of them. It is mostly associated with birth and death. Han’s brief, lyrical novel *The White Book*, about an older sister of the narrator who died a few hours after she was born, begins with a list of “white things,” each of which then becomes the subject of a short meditation. Included on the list are “shroud” and “snow,” as well as “white bird”; along with the enshrouding snow, white birds play a role in *We Do Not Part*.

The temptation to read the white things of this novel as metaphors or omens is hard to resist. They do function figuratively. Looking through the window of an airplane at an approaching blizzard, for instance, Kyungha mistakes the swirling snow for “tens of thousands of white-feathered birds flying right along the horizon.” They could be albatrosses hovering over the Ancient Mariner.

But the white things do more than symbolize. Like the snow, white birds participate in the action as full-fledged characters. Inseon, who lives alone on Jeju Island, off the coast of the Korean peninsula, is devoted to a pair of white budgerigars—a kind of parakeet—that are nominally pets, but really companions; they speak in words because that’s what parakeets do, but maybe there’s more to it than that. Kyungha is flying into a storm because Inseon, who has been evacuated to a mainland hospital after a horrible

accident, has asked her to travel to her remote mountain home to rescue one of the budgies (the other died earlier). Kyungha is incredulous that she agreed to undertake such a dangerous expedition just to save a bird. As she transfers from the plane to a bus, from which she will transfer to another bus and then walk to Inseon's house, the wind picks up and the snow falls ever more heavily.

Kyungha's trip to Jeju Island turns out to be merely a frame narrative for a much more terrifying journey, which is into history: Inseon's history is bound up with the history of the island, which in turn recapitulates the history of South Korea itself. Over the course of the novel, Inseon tells Kyungha how she pieced together a past that her mother had shielded her from. Han's ability to drop references to momentous events offhandedly, as if they were part of everyday life, is on full display here. As an angry teenager who develops a passionate hatred for everything about her life, particularly her stooped, seemingly subservient mother, Inseon runs away to Seoul, falls through a snowbank into a pit, and nearly dies. When she wakes up in a hospital several days later, her mother is by her side. She had known that something had happened to Inseon, she tells her daughter, because she'd dreamed that she saw her with snow on her face.

A little later, Inseon explains why her mother would have had that dream: "*When she was young, soldiers and police had murdered everyone in her village.*" (Most of Inseon's stories are in italics, at least in the translation.) Inseon's mother and her older sister had been away visiting cousins in another village; when they came home, snow had fallen on the corpses heaped on the grounds of the elementary school, covering their faces, and the sisters couldn't figure out which were the bodies of family members. So the older sister took out her handkerchief and told Inseon's mother that she'd wipe the faces, and "*you get a good look at them.*" And that, Inseon says, is how her mother, as a child, learned that when people died, "*snow remained on their cheeks, and a thin layer of bloody ice set over their faces.*"

### [Read: A novel in which language hits its limit—and keeps on going](#)

As Inseon follows clues left by her mother, whom she cared for during the last years of her life, *We Do Not Part* turns into a mystery and a ghost story. It's a mystery because what happened on Jeju Island—in reality, not just in

this novel—is not well known in South Korea, any more than it was to Inseon: In the run-up to the Korean War, the authorities suppressed an uprising there with shocking brutality, in the name of anti-Communism. Historians still aren’t sure whether the death toll was 30,000 or upwards of 80,000, out of a population of about 300,000—far more deadly than the outcome in Gwangju. For half a century afterward, well into the 1990s, [few people talked about the slaughter](#) on Jeju Island or dared to search for the dead and missing, because to do so was a crime punishable by torture and imprisonment. In the novel, Inseon learns that her quiet mother had, over the course of decades and in the face of real danger, been active in the movement to recover the remains, inspired by the disappearance of her brother, whom Inseon had never even heard of.

The novel is also a ghost story because hauntings are involved, both the usual kind and others that are the product of Han’s singular imagination. Once Kyungha makes it to Inseon’s home, the place turns out to be suspended between life and death. Neither Kyungha nor the reader is sure whether she is being visited by the revenants of the house’s previous occupants or has already joined them in the afterlife. Outside the house, the wind howls and the snow falls and, having fallen, muffles all sound, and we grasp that the elements are animated by the restless spirits of the tens of thousands who were never accounted for or given a proper burial.

Beyond that, a very large specter broods, palpable even though it never quite comes into view. You could call it the ghost of global history. The proximate cause of the war crimes chronicled in Han’s novels is South Korea’s succession of authoritarian governments, their soldiers and police; on Jeju Island, these were joined by gangs of right-wing thugs. But some of us in the West may have forgotten who the occupying power was at the time, and those who have not forgotten may never have known the extent to which it propped up those regimes and participated in anti-Communist counterinsurgency campaigns—[including on Jeju Island](#). I knew very little of this history when I began to read Han’s novels, nor was I aware that during the Vietnam War, the same foreign government used more than 300,000 Korean troops, essentially as mercenaries, among them soldiers later accused of committing [atrocities against Vietnamese civilians](#). Some Korean veterans of that war were also involved in suppressing uprisings

such as the one in Gwangju. These discoveries came as a shock, because the occupier I'm talking about is, of course, the United States.

With her characteristically light touch, Han alludes to American culpability only in passing. In *The Vegetarian*, we learn that the protagonist's abusive father earned a medal for his service in Vietnam, but the significance of that fact is not explained. In *Human Acts*, a character recounts a story about Korean soldiers burning Vietnamese villagers alive and adds, "Some of those who came to slaughter us did so with the memory of those previous times." A line in *We Do Not Part* informs us that American military planes released propaganda leaflets over Jeju Island promising amnesty to rebels who turned themselves in; they were arrested anyway.

People in one country often fail to realize how implicated they are in the personal histories of people in countries halfway around the world. Han's novels never make direct accusations, but her very tact makes the implied indictment all the more devastating. She draws American readers into foreign calamities that their own forebears had a hand in creating, and then offers a very limited kind of redemption—the chance to discover, for themselves, that legacy of shame. Better yet, we do so from the edges of the drama, not the center, where so many American movies about interventions in places like Vietnam seem determined to put us. Globalization is responsible for many bad things, but as Han demonstrates, the global novel is not one of them.

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# Harvard Didn't Break America

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*The meritocracy isn't working, [David Brooks argued](#) in the December 2024 issue. We need something new.*

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It is a very Ivy League thing to try to take credit for breaking America. I share David Brooks's criticisms of a system that ranks and sorts based on test results. But standardized testing had taken hold in the United States long before James Conant's presidency at Harvard. The danger of blaming the Ivy League for today's overreliance on blunt ranking-and-sorting instruments is

that we may be tempted to wait for the Ivy League to fix it. Instead, let's agree that we also need leaders who flourished in local community colleges, regional universities, apprenticeships. The talent is out there—I saw it every day as a high-school teacher. But our current system sends the message that if you do not score well on standardized multiple-choice tests delivered in English, you are not capable.

**Erin Crisp**

*Knoxville, Tenn.*

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Most of the elite schools David Brooks criticizes already evaluate “the whole person.” Cognitive metrics are only a small part of getting in. These institutions have invested heavily in evaluating applicants’ noncognitive skills, and arguably, the result is worse.

Families seeking to secure a spot at a top college must strategically position their child as a well-rounded applicant. They choose extracurricular activities and write admissions essays that demonstrate empathy, curiosity, the ability to overcome hardship—all things that Brooks wishes these institutions would evaluate. This approach has further advantaged families with the financial means to afford educational consultants, private coaching, and enrichment activities. We do need an alternative to the meritocratic system. Unfortunately, Brooks’s solution has already been swallowed by the meritocratic machine.

**Pete Marshall**

*St. Louis Park, Minn.*

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Why is the central force controlling our economy and society today Ivy League admissions offices and not, say, the demands of global capitalism, the transition to a services-based economy, or the increasing value of symbolic thinking in those contexts? The world has changed in ways that reward a certain kind of intelligence. That may be good or bad, but it's not primarily the fault of a small number of elite schools—it's true in every developed economy.

**Andrew Bartholomew**  
*New York, N.Y.*

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It's not utopian to imagine an American public-school system and society that recognize the skills and contributions of both the mechanic and the debater. They do it in Europe: Set into the bronze plaques on London's Tower Bridge are the names of a plater, a rivet boy, a cook. In America, such a prestigious public placement on an iconic structure would honor only big corporate donors.

The people who pursue vocational education ought to be treated as a core constituency in arguments about the meritocracy, not as afterthoughts.

**Sheela Clary**  
*West Stockbridge, Mass.*

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David Brooks is right that America is broken, but he points his finger at the wrong culprit. Universities aren't wrong to evaluate academic merit and select the students who will most benefit from the education they offer. The societal problem is an economic system that gives almost all of the benefits of growth to the already wealthy and not the working class. The economic elites are the real predators savaging the American dream—not the cultural elites.

**Stuart J. Kaufman**  
*Bear, Del.*

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Much of what David Brooks described resonated with me. I attended community college on a full Pell Grant; both of my parents were blue-collar workers. I loved school and I loved learning, but my parents could never afford to pay for extracurricular activities, Advanced Placement exams—I never even took the SAT. I always felt that there was an elite class of learning that I would never access.

And in many ways, I was right. I was rejected from hundreds of jobs, only to find out later that the successful candidate was from an elite school. This instilled in me what Brooks calls the sixth “deadly sin” of the meritocracy —“contempt for the entire system.” I now teach as an adjunct, and my students are generally much more well-off than I ever was. I fear my anger has made me less inclined to understand the very real stresses they face.

I voted for Donald Trump in 2016 and for Kamala Harris in 2024. It was during this span of eight years that I attended college and then graduate school—I am a living example of the way education influences opinions and beliefs. Yet I empathize with the working-class voters of Texas, my home state, far more than I empathize with the elite voters of New York City.

**Katherine A. Chase**

*Brooklyn, N.Y.*

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I am 92 years old. I attended a public high school in Cincinnati. When I told my principal I wanted to go to one of the best liberal-arts colleges, he recommended Harvard—he told me that Harvard would take up to seven students from my class. Looking through my records, he noticed that I was Jewish and qualified his statement, saying that Harvard would never take more than three Jews. Harvard accepted seven students from my class, including me, and six of us were Jewish. When I arrived in the fall of 1950, it was obvious that the quota system was gone—Jews made up a significant portion of my class. At a meeting with incoming students, the dean of freshmen proudly told us that our class had the highest average SAT score of any incoming college class in the country. I frequently saw James Conant walking in Harvard Yard, not knowing that he had made it possible for me to be there.

**John J. Frank Jr.**

*Cincinnati, Ohio*

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David Brooks replies:

*I'm grateful for the thoughtful responses. I'd like to highlight one area of disagreement and one area for further exploration. Pete Marshall says that "cognitive metrics are only a small part of getting" accepted to an elite school. I'd say they are the foundational part—the average Harvard freshman has an SAT score of about 1520. You have to meet those metrics before any other qualities are considered. Andrew Bartholomew suggests that the real problem is global capitalism in the Information Age. There's a lot of truth to that. I do think universities churn out "knowledge workers" because intellectual life has been commodified. Students and workers are caught in the same system that wants us to live lives of total work. But my argument is that our system doesn't even turn out ideal capitalists: Large numbers of new employees have to leave their firms because companies don't know what to look for in applicants. They select for the qualities that the meritocracy can quantify—but those aren't the qualities that matter. Intelligence is overrated, and temperament and desire are underrated.*

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### A Note from the Editor in Chief

More than two decades ago, *The Atlantic* decided to reduce the number of print issues published each year, dropping from 12 to 10, thus ending the run of what had been previously called *The Atlantic Monthly*. The rise of the internet made this seem at the time, I'm sure, like an obvious and unavoidable choice. But the history of our magazine is filled with improbabilities, and today, more people subscribe to our print magazine than at any time since its birth, in 1857. Which is why we've decided to restore *The Atlantic* to monthly print publication, beginning with the issue you are currently reading.

The broader trends in the magazine business, and across journalism generally, are not promising. But *The Atlantic* continues to grow, because (I believe) our editorial team produces the highest-quality journalism, and because readers like you continue to find what we do useful, and even illuminating.

Last year was a very good year for *The Atlantic*. We crossed the million-subscription threshold; we became profitable again after running in the red for several years; and we won our third consecutive National Magazine

Award for General Excellence, something no other magazine has done in this century. But mainly what we've tried to do is make important journalism. I hope, by your lights, that we are succeeding, and that you join me in finding the return of a monthly *Atlantic* a very happy thing.

— **Jeffrey Goldberg**

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### Behind the Cover

In this month's cover story, “[The Anti-Social Century](#),” Derek Thompson explores how Americans came to spend so much time alone, and what that solitude means for our personalities, our politics, and even our relationship to reality. For the cover, the illustrator Max Guther created a series of figures engaged in solitary activities. Arrayed across an otherwise blank field, Guther’s figures evoke a nation in which people have come to prefer their own company to that of others.

— **Liz Hart**, *Art Director*

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*The Atlantic*  
EST. 1857

# The Anti-Social Century

By Derek Thompson



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This article appears in the [February 2025](#) print edition with the headline “The Commons.”

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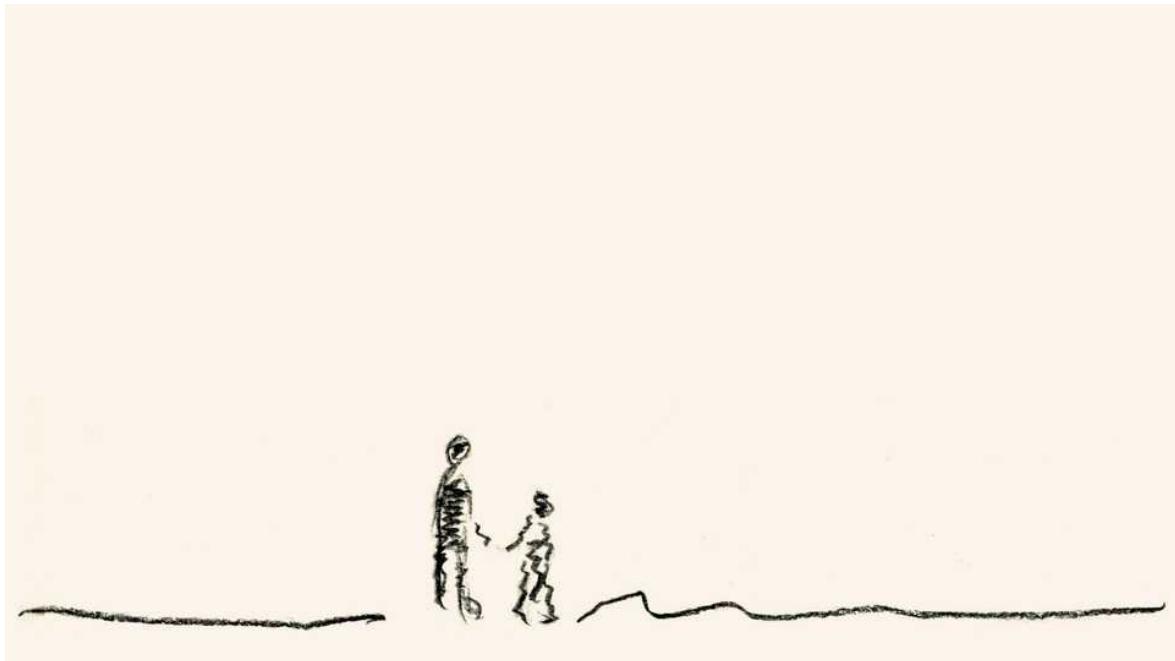
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# Poetry

- [\*\*Or \(For Isaac\)\*\*](#)

# Or (For Isaac)

by Daniel Borzutzky



And he took his father to the flame and his father said  
I am not a goat  
And the boy said no you are not a goat  
And the father said where are the goats  
And the boy said you are a goat today or you will be a goat  
The father thought about hybrid beasts and said nothing  
He looked with love at the strange child he created  
He thought about how hard it had been to keep the boy alive  
And when the boy led him down the death path he kept thinking  
I should be in charge  
But I am tired and I can't do anything to gain control  
I am crinkled, worn-out, sick of seeing  
Things get destroyed in my name  
Do I mind that I might be turned into someone else's burden?

Also, I admire my son's determination  
Someone, the voice of X, told him to take me to the flame  
Someone serious, a credible character,  
Told him to take me to the flame  
It would have been perfectly reasonable to resist  
To say look, son, this is not the kind of thing you should do to your father  
But I was tired and the child was persistent and I wondered  
How long will this thing go on?  
It's true, I am old now  
I don't actually want to live that much longer  
But there are a few more things I have to do  
Is it presumptuous to say there is a future that depends on me?  
The Earth has its own ideas  
The sea has other ideas  
And the sky has ideas  
There are just a few bodies falling from the sky today  
I think I recognize some of them  
They are my children and one of them whispers to me  
This is not the right way to live  
And to live in the wrong way is to die in the wrong way  
Who said that and what did they mean?  
Before he takes me to the flame I tell my son  
There is nothing left to do here on Earth  
I welcome the pain and I welcome my son's audacity  
I admire his fingers as they grip my shirtsleeve  
In those fingers I feel sadness, tenacity, anger, hope  
I feel the violence of the centuries filling up in his blood  
I know how lonely it is in his body  
The expectations of our people are extraordinary

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*This poem appears in the [February 2025](#) print edition.*

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