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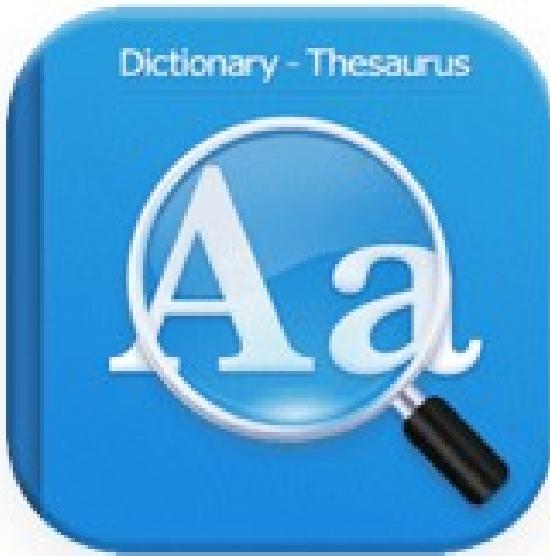
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Goings On

- [Kacey Musgraves, Offbeat Pageant Princess](#)
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Goings On

Kacey Musgraves, Offbeat Pageant Princess

Also: Hilton Als on theatrical magic from David Cromer and Zoë Winters, Ralph Lemon at MOMA PS1, “A Real Pain” reviewed, and more.

November 08, 2024



[Hilton Als](#)

Staff writer

It's hard to believe that it's been almost twenty years since I first saw the great director **David Cromer's** work. You don't notice time passing when you're in the presence of a bona-fide theatrical genius: you long for what's next while pondering what you've just seen. “Orson’s Shadow” was the first piece that I saw Cromer shape. That was in 2005. Up until then, I had only seen more or less conventional narratives conventionally directed; Richard Foreman and Elizabeth LeCompte of the Wooster Group were the only auteurs around, but they didn't stage standard narrative plays. But here, on that afternoon in 2005, was an artist who had taken a character-driven piece

and made it an atmosphere. The actors were lit dimly; it was like watching figures edge their way through fog to get at your dreams. After that, I kept my eyes peeled for what the director, who is now sixty, put on.

His early masterpiece was his 2009 interpretation of “Our Town,” in which he appeared as the Stage Manager. Whoever saw that production wasn’t likely to forget it. He took Thornton Wilder’s homespun tale about loss and created an elegy that made you mourn for all the living you’d eventually lose, including yourself. A year later, there was “When the Rain Stops Falling,” and there it was again, Cromer’s auteurlike influence on a spectacle that was only enhanced by his love of the lost. His dark lighting and his tendency to make a stage smaller promoted a degree of intimacy that made a version of “Rent” he did in 2012 the only version that felt true to the poverty and the poetry of those characters’ lives.

With “**The Counter**” (at the Laura Pels, through Nov. 17), Cromer’s gift for intimacy is in full flower. It’s fascinating to see how he makes the already small stage feel even smaller, by building it out toward the audience, so we’re sitting with the characters in that diner while they choose life over what’s been lost—and over the possibility of death. Now Cromer is slated to direct George Clooney in the stage adaptation of the 2005 movie “**Good Night, and Good Luck**” (beginning previews at the Winter Garden on March 12). Who better to show us the devastating effects of McCarthyism in a grim world than this true auteur of the stage, whose work is like an extra text on top of the script: gentle but probing, magical and real.



Another standout of the theatre right now is the actress **Zoë Winters**, who appears in Second Stage's production of "**Walden**" (at the Tony Kiser, through Nov. 24). Winters grew up in Santa Cruz, and graduated from SUNY Purchase in 2007. She is one of the great acting alumni from that school—Edie Falco is another—who are so astonishing in their natural gifts and command of the stage that you can't help but give yourself over to their reality, even when they are unreal, demanding, entirely too strange. Despite Winters's distinctive look—that long black hair and fringe, the generous mouth—when I covered theatre for this magazine, I often wrote about her as if I'd never seen her before. That's because I hadn't—not in this or that character, certainly. She was always different, and so fully immersed in each character's inner life, that she would perforce look different. And it made a certain amount of sense for her to be in shows like Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's "*An Octoroon*" (2014), or Lucas Hnath's "*Red Speedo*" (2016).

Because her acting was closely linked with these then emerging playwrights' work, she was an emerging voice in acting, too: bold and intellectual but intuitive and incredibly smart about scripts, and how to play a character. Just as Maureen Stapleton and Geraldine Page helped Tennessee Williams find his way as a playwright in the nineteen-fifties, so, too, I felt, did Winters help the playwrights she worked with. And when she was in a show by an older artist, such as "*White Noise*" (2019), by Suzan-Lori Parks, she became

the thing that you watched and listened to because she could find a reality even as the author searched for it herself. In “*Succession*,” I didn’t recognize Winters at first—she played the patriarch’s side piece—because, again, she was bringing another reality to the story, one in which mean common sense got mixed up with grief. In “*Walden*,” Winters plays a woman who is estranged from her twin sister; imagine what she’ll do in a role about familial alienation. She’ll turn the theatre inside out with rage, no doubt, but not without that emotion’s frequent underpinnings: longing, and grief, and understanding.

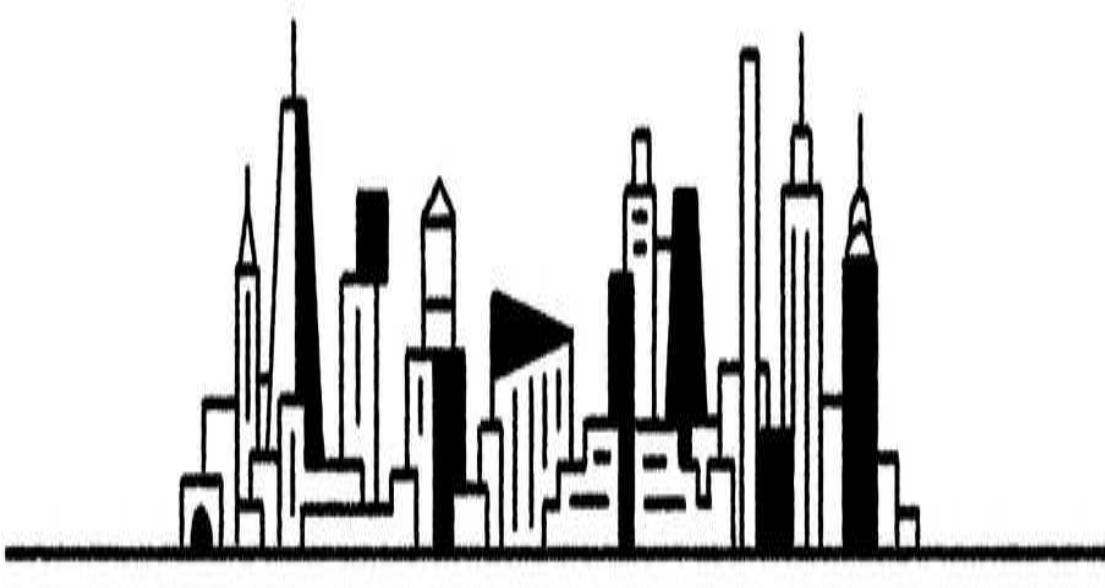
Spotlight



Country

By the time the singer-songwriter **Kacey Musgraves** won Album of the Year at the Grammys—for “Golden Hour,” from 2018—she had already established herself as a progressive force in country music. But, with that record, Musgraves, a native Texan turned offbeat pageant princess of Nashville, solidified her shift toward disco-bejewelled pop, with prismatic songs meditating on love in all its forms. In recent years, she has balanced

the personal with the universal: her electro-laden album from 2021, “Star-Crossed,” reckoned with the ache of divorce; “Deeper Well,” the folk-tinged record she released this year, considered more cosmic truths with a warmer palette of sounds. In any mode, Musgraves’s sweet voice and charming, infectious disposition are anchored by an open mind, an unshowy wit, and a steadfast curiosity.—[*Sheldon Pearce*](#) (*Barclays Center; Nov. 15-16.*)



About Town

Off Off Broadway

Julia May Jonas examines our cultural patrimony through a feminist lens—one so tightly focussed that it burns. In her superb novel “Vladimir,” she transformed Nabokov’s “Lolita” into a story of female lust; in her latest play, “**A Woman Among Women**,” she rewrites Arthur Miller’s “All My Sons” with daughters in mind. Dee Pelletier’s Cleo—a pillar of her community with a secret sin—echoes Miller’s war profiteer Joe Keller, but Jonas’s real target is Cleo’s loving, yet curiously airless, liberal Mecca. The director Sarah Hughes emphasizes a smiling, happy-clappy atmosphere with sing-alongs for the cast and, eventually, the audience; both she and Jonas are

interested in our ability to perceive coercion, even when there is no man to blame.—*[Helen Shaw](#)* (*Bushwick Starr; through Nov. 17.*)

Soul

In the mid-twenty-tens, as the U.K. soul scene was rapidly expanding in scope and vision, the Nottingham singer-songwriter NAO emerged as one of its key players, working with producers such as Disclosure and Mura Masa and writing for Ariana Grande. Her particular blend of groovy R. & B. and electronic sounds, which she dubbed “wonky funk,” seemed fully realized from the start, with her 2016 début, “For All We Know”—its vibrancy earning her a nomination for British Female Solo Artist at the Brit Awards. In advance of “Jupiter,” her first album in three years, NAO returns for what she’s dubbed an “intimate and stripped back” show, in a space befitting her celestial voice.—S.P. (*St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Church; Nov. 17.*)

Dance



Ralph Lemon is a highly thoughtful and meticulous artist fascinated by the unruly and by how things fall apart. He's a deceptively well-behaved rebel, whose discipline-spanning work eludes conventional classifications even as it addresses such conventional subjects as cultural memory and race. A major exhibition of his work at *MOMA PS1*, "Ceremonies Out of the Air," encompasses drawings, photographs, sculpture, paintings, and video. In "Rant redux," a four-channel video-and-sound installation, made with Kevin Beasley, dancers oscillate as if at a rave while Lemon screams texts by Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, Kathy Acker, and Angela Davis. A series of performances (Nov. 14 and Nov. 16) begins with the New York première of "Tell it anyway," an outgrowth of "Rant," with a typically powerful cast that includes Lemon, Okwui Okpokwasili, Paul Hamilton, and Darrell Jones.—*Brian Seibert* (Through March 24.)

Classical

The composer and conductor **John Adams** leads the New York Philharmonic in a timely, reflective program that projects—with the exception of Arvo Pärt's musical memoriam of the decidedly British Benjamin Britten—a theme of America. Adams conducts the New York première of Gabriella Smith's "Lost Coast," inspired by a backpacking trip through Northern California. Then comes Aaron Copland's "Quiet City," originally incidental music for the Irwin Shaw play of the same name. The concert closes with the jazz-infused Los Angeleno "City Noir," by Adams himself, a New Englander based in the Bay Area. For even more American discourse: across the river, on Nov. 16, at National Sawdust, is the world première of "The North American Indigenous Songbook," featuring Indigenous artists and composers.—*Jane Bua* (*David Geffen Hall; Nov. 14 and Nov. 16.*)

Movies

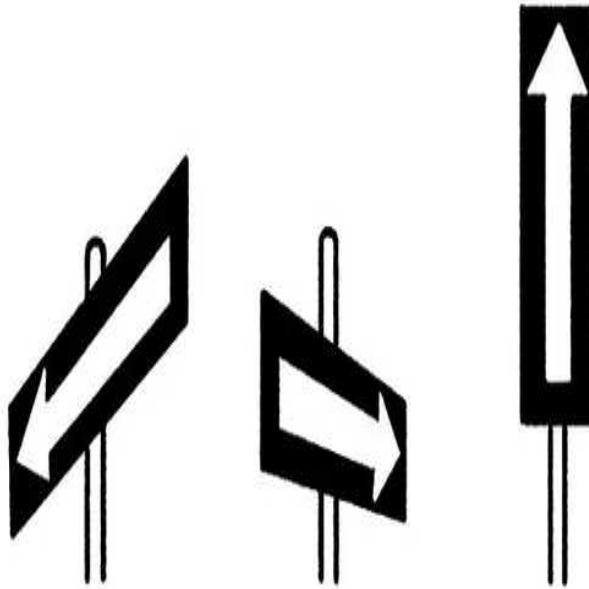


Jesse Eisenberg wrote, directed, and stars in “**A Real Pain**,” an unusual kind of road movie. He plays David, an orderly young New Yorker who travels to Poland with his unstrung cousin, Benji (Kieran Culkin), on a Jewish-heritage group tour. The trip is paid for with an inheritance earmarked by their late grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, so that they can see the house in which she grew up. During the tour, the free-spirited yet troubled Benji leads the inhibited David into wild adventures and embarrassing situations that, unsurprisingly, prove liberating. The characters are familiar and the comedy is incongruously goofy, but Eisenberg’s effort to evoke history in the present tense offers some powerful moments that suggest the stronger movie that could have been.—*[Richard Brody](#) (In theatrical release.)*

Dance

A few years back, an unexpected package arrived at the home of **Wally Cardona**. Inside was a tiny red ball. It seemed to match a small wooden mallet that the choreographer had acquired in Myanmar, during an earlier project involving study with master dancers around the world. Now he has created the piece “a plump single-color bulb, or a dance”: a kind of trio for himself and the two objects. Cardona is a quietly beautiful dancer who enjoys giving himself impossible assignments. This one seems relatively

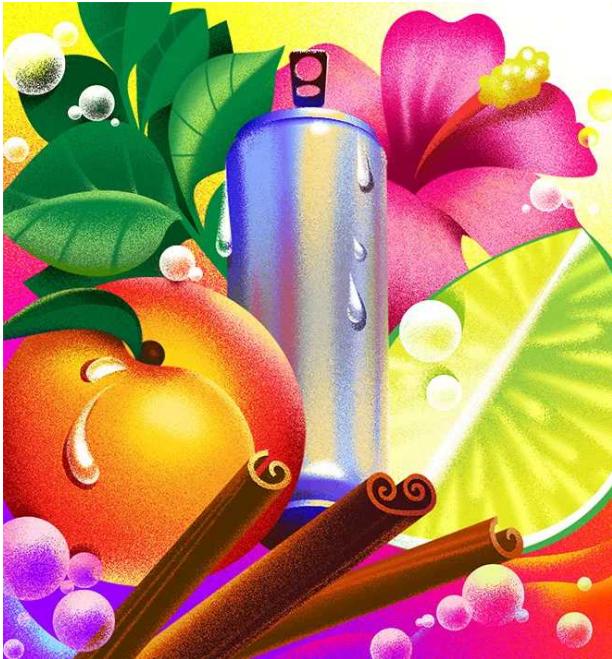
simple, suited to his gift for finding humor and warmth in the inanimate. His longtime colleague Jonathan Bepler adds live sounds.—B.S. (*New York Live Arts*; Nov. 14-16.)



Pick Three

[Rachel Syme](#) on little treats to drink.

The first time I heard about little-treat culture—the idea that, just for existing in the world at this particularly terrifying moment, everyone deserves a little treat, be it Swedish gummy candy or Sephora lip balm—I realized that I have been practicing it at bodegas since I arrived in New York nearly twenty years ago. I know of no greater mini-splurge than trying out an intriguing new beverage (or, as I like to call them, bevs). Lucky for potables enthusiasts, we are currently living through a Golden Age of Bevs—and most are available for home delivery.



1. My favorite seltzer brand, **Aura Bora**, releases new flavors nearly every month (this past month's: an apple-cinnamon varietal in collaboration with Magnolia Bakery), and it will mail a case directly to your front door. Standouts from the line include Olive Oil Martini, Blueberry Wildflower, and Cactus Rose.
2. I get most of my bev updates from a cult newsletter called [Snaxshot](#), which bills itself as a “product oracle,” reporting on the latest indie-food-and-drink trends. This was where I discovered **Ruby Sparkling Hibiscus**, a cheeky carbonated drink made from tart, tannic hibiscus flowers, in flavors such as Concord Grape and Blood Orange. It falls somewhere between a fizzy dessert and a palate-cleansing apéritif.
3. The most glamorous beverages I know of come from **Casamara Club**, whose bitter “amaro leisure sodas” come in long-necked amber bottles and taste like drinking a Negroni *sbagliato* (without the alcohol) on an Italian veranda. I try to keep a few in the fridge to have in the bathtub, when I want to mentally check out and travel somewhere else. We all deserve a little treat.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [Ruins in reverse](#)
- [Philipp Schupelius on cello](#)
- [The cosmic-void call to action](#)

The Food Scene

Quick, Affordable Sushi That's Still a Cut Above

At Sendo, a Tokyo-style *sushi-ya* in midtown, the food's level of sophistication well surpasses its price point.

By Helen Rosner

October 27, 2024



On the corner of Thirty-first Street and Sixth Avenue, at the lower edge of the charmless, taxi-choked scrum of Herald Square, behind a veil of seemingly permanent scaffolding, there is a small brick building whose ground floor is occupied by a decent, fairly generic slice shop, next to which is a street-facing door that leads to the building's upper floors. An unobtrusive little sign reads "Sendo," the name of a sushi restaurant that opened a few months ago. You proceed up a narrow flight of steps, but Sendo's door is unmarked; if you happen to overshoot, a hand-scrawled note taped to the wall of the fourth and final story helpfully reads "Sushi Bar 2nd Floor," with an arrow pointing down. The restaurant, which takes no reservations, opens to customers at 5 p.m.; by the time I arrived one recent

evening at 5:04, each of the counter's twelve seats was already filled, and a little line had formed at the host's podium.



All this secrecy and understatedness might make a person think she were in for something rarefied and, most likely, terribly expensive. Happily, Sendo offers something more reasonable. It bills itself as a “Tokyo-style” *sushi-ya*, which means that a meal there, if not quite fast and cheap, is certainly agile and inexpensive. The restaurant offers three omakase options, the priciest of which costs just forty-seven dollars and includes ten pieces of nigiri, two hand rolls, and a bowl of fish over rice. There are also prix-fixe sets of hand rolls, topping out at thirty-five dollars. Dinner might run as little as thirty minutes, but, with a few glasses of sake and an à-la-carte add-on or two, you could certainly stretch things out to a leisurely forty-five.



Sendo is the creation of Guy Allen, an American and a sushi obsessive, in partnership with a cohort of investors in Japan. The Tokyo restaurants on which Sendo is modelled tend to be standing counters, but here Allen has (thankfully) opted for bar-height chairs and a tight crew of waitstaff. The chefs are a seasoned team of *itamae* who have worked at such revered spots as Sushi Nakazawa, Bar Masa, and Sushi Ginza Onodera. The omakase begins with a hand roll, then moves through a brisk, well-considered progression of nigiri, including bites of *madai* (sea bream), mild and clean-tasting; Spanish mackerel, with sweet ponzu sauce counterbalancing the fish's gentle oiliness; two fat, shingled slices of scallop, with soy sauce marbling the creases; a firm, rosy-white piece of *kampachi* (a Japanese amberjack), with a big swash of wasabi; and a meltingly fatty piece of *o-toro* (tuna belly) as a climactic finish. A meal of such speed demands that the chefs move with conspicuous precision and efficiency. With minimal chitchat or dramatic flourish, they slice, they form, they assemble; then they place each finished bite on the large bamboo leaf that sits before each diner and serves as a plate, a lush slash of green against the dark countertop.



At a certain level of execution, sushi is very much an art of marginal differences: the precise angle to which one chef might hone the blade of his knife, or the particular way another vinegar his rice. These are variations that might be imperceptible to the casual sushi eater but which can send a connoisseur into raptures. Sendo, like those stand-up Tokyo joints, isn't operating at that haute-omakase calibre (in this sushi-obsessed city, that species of experience will run you many hundreds of dollars), but there are plenty of details here that indicate a level of sophistication that well surpasses the price point. The rice in the nigiri, imported from Hokkaido and seasoned with a house-made vinegar, is packed notably loosely, a high-end technique that maximizes surface area and therefore the flavor. *Unagi* (freshwater eel), too often served drowning in a syrupy sugar sauce, here is a large, creamy, smooth-fleshed fillet lightly basted with sweet tamari and broiled just to the edge of caramelization. Even the room feels a little bit rich, with dark walls, glossy wood panelling, and an austere display of sake bottles against the back of the sushi bar.

Helen, Help Me!

[E-mail your questions](#) about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

This high quality-to-cost ratio is, I have to assume, thanks to a number of logistical factors, including the no-reservations policy and speedy pace of service, which insure that the counter is always full. (My wait time was about half an hour, but as I ate my meal I overheard the host quoting estimates of ninety minutes and more.) There's also the relative savings that come from operating a restaurant above street level. In Japan, upstairs restaurants are so common as to be unremarkable, but it's still oddly underplayed here in New York—with notable exceptions, such as the nearby stretch of Thirty-second Street that serves as the heart of Manhattan's Koreatown, where bars and restaurants are stacked like pancakes. At Sendo, that single flight of stairs makes a world of difference, not only keeping the prices in check but also summoning a bit of the Tokyo experience and cultivating a sense of privacy, a bit of a clubhouse feel, a pleasing awareness that anyone who arrives at this unmarked door is a person unpretentiously in the know. A meal ends with *kaisendon*—mixed fish and a dollop of *ikura*, salmon roe, in a bowl with rice—followed by whatever à-la-carte nigiri or hand rolls you might want to add on from a supplemental list presented once the *kaisendon* is cleared away. All the classics are there, plus special cuts like *shima aji* (striped jack), which I especially loved for its citrus-bright flavor and almost al-dente firmness, and *ankimo* (monkfish liver), buttery and iodine. There's no dessert. Keep things moving. Someone's waiting for your seat. ♦

The Talk of the Town

- [It Can Happen Here](#)
- [The Morning After at the White House](#)
- [New York's Clock Master to City Hall: Time's Up!](#)
- [Eve's Memoir, "Who's That Girl?," and Other Questions](#)

Comment

It Can Happen Here

Everyone who realizes with proper alarm that Trump's reëlection is a deeply dangerous moment in American life must think hard about where we are.

By David Remnick

November 09, 2024



On the morning after Donald Trump was elected President for the first time, in 2016, the White House was a funereal place. For weeks, Barack Obama and his inner circle had worried about Hillary Clinton's campaign—the failure to visit crucial battleground states with sufficient frequency, the snooty crack about “deplorables,” James Comey’s last-minute letter to Congress about her e-mails. But, for all the troubling signs and missteps, they were optimistic that, in a tighter-than-expected race, America would elect the first woman to the Presidency. A legacy, a continuity, would prevail.

Trump’s shocking victory shattered those assumptions, and that day, as many young, stricken staffers crowded into the Oval Office, Obama tried to raise their morale and convince them that the election of an aspiring autocrat

did not spell the end of America's long, if profoundly imperfect, experiment in liberal democracy. History does not move in straight lines, he told them. Sometimes it goes sideways, sometimes it goes backward. It was a solemn, pastoral performance, and, on some level, Obama was also engaged in a form of self-soothing. Two days later, in an interview with *The New Yorker*, he again tried to keep despair at bay: "I think nothing is the end of the world until the end of the world."

Privately, Obama, the first Black man elected to the White House, allowed himself to wonder if he had "come along too soon." A generational political talent, he had deployed the resonant language and narrative of the civil-rights movement ("the fierce urgency of now") to promote broad-based reforms, particularly the Affordable Care Act. His residence in a house built by enslaved Black men and women seemed to suggest, if hardly an end to American racism, then surely a significant advance for the idea of a multiethnic democracy. But now he was being succeeded by a figure of unmistakable reaction—a poisonous demagogue, a bigot, who proposed a very different American story. The system was "rigged," Trump told his followers. Foreign leaders were "laughing at us." The country was a hellscape of ominous "illegal aliens," "rapists," gang members, and psychotics from faraway prisons and asylums. "American carnage" was his assessment of the country, and only he could set things right.

Shortly before the end of Obama's second term, the President was in Lima, Peru, being driven to an event with some of his aides. Along the way, he confided that he'd just read an opinion column implying that, in electing Trump, tens of millions had rejected liberal identity politics. "What if we were wrong?" Obama said. "Maybe we pushed too far," he went on, according to a memoir by one of his advisers, Benjamin Rhodes. "Maybe people just want to fall back into their tribe."

In 2016, Trump's election could be ascribed to many things, including a failure of the collective imagination. How had a figure who combined the traits of George Wallace, Hulk Hogan, and Father Charles Coughlin managed to win the Presidency? Just as Obama struggled to understand the social and political roots of Trumpism, many Americans failed to grasp fully his character, the dimensions of his malevolence. It was impossible for them to absorb just what a threat he posed to international alliances and domestic

institutions, how contemptuous he was of the truth, science, the press, and so many of his fellow-citizens. Surely, his most extreme rhetoric was an act. Surely, he would “grow into the office.”

Trump’s reëlection, his victory over Kamala Harris, can no longer be ascribed to a failure of the collective imagination. He is the least mysterious public figure alive; he has been announcing his every disquieting tendency, relentlessly, publicly, for decades. Who is left, supporter or detractor, who does not acknowledge, at least to some degree, his cynicism and divisiveness, his disrespect for selfless sacrifice? To him, fallen American soldiers are “suckers.” Many of his former closest advisers—Vice-President Mike Pence; his chief of staff John Kelly; Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—have described him as unfit, unstable, and, in the case of Kelly and Milley, a fascist. In the closing weeks of the campaign, Trump went out of his way to dismiss his consultants’ blandishments to moderate his tone. Instead, he pretended to fellate a microphone and threatened to direct the military against the “enemy from within.” He emphasized every rotten thing about himself, as if to say, “Forget the scripted stuff on the teleprompter. Listen to me when I go off-the-cuff. The conspiracy theories. The fury. The vengeance. The race-baiting. The embrace of Putin and Orbán and Xi. The wild stories. This is me, the real me. I’m a genius. I’m weaving!”

In the end, there was nothing Trump would not say, no invective or insult he would not hurl. At Madison Square Garden, he gave the platform over to supporters who spoke grotesquely about Puerto Rico, Jews, trans people—no indecency was impermissible. His most distinctive television ad was pure cruelty: “Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for you.” His disdain for women, which has been in evidence all his adult life, was only amplified in the last weeks of the campaign, when, in Michigan, he said of Nancy Pelosi, “She’s an evil, sick, crazy bi— It starts with a ‘B,’ but I won’t say it. I want to say it.”

Trump was equally brazen about policy. There is no longer any excuse for failing to see what a second Trump Administration may bring: The mass deportation of undocumented immigrants. A federal government stocked with mediocrities whose highest qualification is fealty to the Great Leader. A contempt for climate policy, human rights, and gun control. A weakening of

NATO. An even more reactionary Supreme Court and federal judiciary. An assault on the press. These are not the imaginings of a paranoiac. These are campaign promises announced from the podium.

The news of Trump's reëlection did not come with the same shock as his first victory did. Joe Biden, for all his virtues and legislative achievements, was a conspicuously unpopular President. At least fifty-five per cent of voters in the major swing states disapproved of his performance in office. And, by the time Biden came to terms with age and finally stepped aside, Harris, despite all her energy and appealing intelligence, had precious little time to run a campaign that could reasonably outdistance both that dissatisfaction and her opponent. Trapped between her loyalty to Biden and the need to separate herself from him, she played it safe and depended on the electorate's ability to distinguish between her manifest decency and the dark chaos represented by Trump.

Despite her thrashing of Trump in their one debate, and his campaigning at times as a disturbed man wandering from one rally to the next, the prospects of Harris winning were never more than episodically encouraging. When her aides were asked how they were feeling about the race, they would say, "Nauseously optimistic." In the end, Trump seems not only to have won the popular vote and all seven battleground states but to have made inroads with Latino and Black men wide enough to shatter the Democratic Party's long-standing and highly complacent understanding of its demographic advantages.

How you interpret and prioritize the cascade of reasons for Trump's reëlection is a kind of Rorschach test. It will require a long reckoning before anyone can conclude which of the leading factors—economic anxiety, cultural politics, racism, misogyny, Biden's decline, Harris's late start—was determinative. In no way did Trump win a mandate as commanding as, say, Ronald Reagan's victories over Jimmy Carter, in 1980, and Walter Mondale, in 1984, but, according to an early analysis by the *Times*, more than ninety per cent of the counties in the country appear to have shifted toward him since the last election. Both major political parties are broken. The Republicans, having given themselves over to a cultish obedience to an authoritarian, are morally broken. The Democrats, having failed to respond

convincingly to the economic troubles of working people, are politically broken.

Everyone who realizes with proper alarm that this is a deeply dangerous moment in American life must think hard about where we are. Rueful musings like Obama's in 2016—What if we were wrong?—hardly did the job then and will not suffice now. With self-critical rigor and modesty, the Democrats need to assess how to regain the inclusive kind of coalition that F.D.R. built in the teeth of the Depression or that Robert Kennedy (the father, not the unfortunate son) sought in 1968.

That is one imperative. There is another. After the tens of millions of Americans who feared Trump's return rise from the couch of gloom, it will be time to consider what must be done, assuming that Trump follows through on his most draconian pledges. One of the perils of life under authoritarian rule is that the leader seeks to drain people of their strength. A defeatism takes hold. There is an urge to pull back from civic life.

An American retreat from liberal democracy—a precious yet vulnerable inheritance—would be a calamity. Indifference is a form of surrender. Indifference to mass deportations would signal an abnegation of one of the nation's guiding promises. Vladimir Putin welcomes Trump's return not only because it makes his life immeasurably easier in his determination to subjugate a free and sovereign Ukraine but because it validates his assertion that American democracy is a sham—that there is no democracy. All that matters is power and self-interest. The rest is sanctimony and hypocrisy. Putin reminds us that liberal democracy is not a permanence; it can turn out to be an episode.

One of the great spirits of modern times, the Czech playwright and dissident Václav Havel, wrote in “Summer Meditations,” “There is only one thing I will not concede: that it might be meaningless to strive in a good cause.” During the long Soviet domination of his country, Havel fought valiantly for liberal democracy, inspiring in others acts of resilience and protest. He was imprisoned for that. Then came a time when things changed, when Havel was elected President and, in a Kafka tale turned on its head, inhabited the Castle, in Prague. Together with a people challenged by years of autocracy,

he helped lead his country out of a long, dark time. Our time is now dark, but that, too, can change. It happened elsewhere. It can happen here. ♦

Pep Talk Dept.

The Morning After at the White House

A teary voter tours the People's House and tries to find perspective in the relics of the "Honest and Wise Men" who came before.

By Sarah Larson

November 11, 2024



On the bright and beautiful Wednesday morning after Election Night, downtown Washington, D.C., seemed a bit out of sorts. Shops were boarded up; eight-foot temporary fencing surrounded the White House grounds; haggard commuters said things like "Not great!" into their phones. But the White House itself, despite an ungainly wooden construction project out front, looked as stately and gorgeous as ever. A group of visitors who had registered weeks earlier for a tour, perhaps hoping to bask in electoral glory, filed through security. In the windowed East Colonnade, a video kiosk welcomed them. "I'm Jill Biden, the First Lady of the United States," the video said. A man in a suit showing a couple around pointed toward the Jacqueline Kennedy Garden. Presumably referring to Melania Trump's renovation of the Rose Garden, in 2020, he said, "When she came in, they ripped out all the roses."

On the tour, which was self-guided, with Secret Service posted throughout, art and artifacts seemed charged with meaning. A bust of an exhausted-looking Abraham Lincoln. Aaron Shikler's posthumous portrait of John F. Kennedy, arms crossed, head down. ("I wanted to show him as a president who was a thinker," he said, in 1971. "A thinking president is a rare thing.") Photographs of Eleanor Roosevelt welcoming Marian Anderson to the White House, after Anderson's racist snubbing by the D.A.R.; Lyndon B. Johnson meeting with Martin Luther King, Jr.; a Vietnam protester with an "*EARTHA KITT SPEAKS FOR THE WOMEN OF AMERICA*" sign; Nixon and Elvis; the Bidens with Kamala Harris and Doug Emhoff; Barack Obama with the cast of "Hamilton." In one oil painting, Hillary Clinton looked youthful and joyous; in another, Jimmy Carter looked youthful and wise. In the State Dining Room, a crowd gathered around George Peter Alexander Healy's enormous portrait of Lincoln. A marble mantelpiece plaque featured a quote from John Adams, the first President to live in the White House, praying for heavenly blessings on the residence and its future inhabitants, and hoping that "none but Honest and Wise Men ever rule under This Roof." In a video, Joe Biden talked about the White House being "a living story of our nation," and said, "We're a great nation because we're a good people." Hearing him, a middle-aged visitor dabbed at her eyes, and a nearby stranger, a petite gray-haired woman from California, leaned toward her and whispered, "I'm sad, too." They hugged.

In the Green Room, a mysterious John Singer Sargent-style painting depicted a woman lounging on a bed, her face obscured by a cloud of black mosquito netting. "What is that?" the middle-aged woman asked.

"It's a painting by an artist named John Singer Sargent," a young Secret Service officer said. "It's a woman under a mosquito net."

"But why?" she asked.

He paused. "I don't know."



“She looks the way I feel,” a friend accompanying her said.

The tour ended in the Entrance Hall. The two women paused by the threshold, reluctant to leave. A Secret Service officer asked if there was anything else they’d like to know about. The woman teared up again. “Ma’am, are you all right?” he asked. “What’s wrong?”

He disappeared behind a door, reëmerging with a wad of tissues. “It’s going to be O.K.,” he said, handing it over. He had worked at the White House since Bush II, he went on—many Administrations’ worth of long hours, long shifts, different eras. “I remember when this guy”—he gestured at Robert McCurdy’s portrait of Obama—“had a science fair here for some pretty amazing kids,” he said, smiling. “They were doing robotics, going to places like Harvard and M.I.T.” The woman said that she’d seen Michelle Obama at the White House, giving arts awards to some other pretty amazing kids. “They were good at making it the people’s house,” she said.

The officer gave the pair a pep talk. “It’s four years,” he said. “Do something positive for someone else every day. Mentor a young person. Do good work. Be involved in your community. That makes a difference.” They thanked him. Outside, the women puzzled over the wooden structure being built on the lawn. “What *is* that?” one asked a young Secret Service agent.

“It’s for the Inauguration,” he said.

“*Boo!*” the teary woman said. The agent laughed. They all wished one another well, and the women headed down the driveway, back into the sun.♦

Lost Causes

New York's Clock Master to City Hall: Time's Up!

Eighty-five-year-old Marvin Schneider and his seventy-four-year-old apprentice have staged a five-year-long protest against the landmarks commission over a famous clock tower.

By Jake Offenhartz

November 11, 2024



So, you've suffered a political defeat with no practical recourse. What to do? Logic would say: accept it and move on. Another option is to hold on to it forever. What better opportunity to discover reserves of pettiness, of grudge-holding, of curmudgeonly endurance? New York has long been a haven for the champions of lost causes: the retired cop who has been smoking in parks and airports for twenty years to protest a Bloomberg-era cigarette ban; the bodega-association president who refuses to move on from plastic bags, despite a citywide prohibition. Recently, a group of old men assembled outside the Trump hotel on Central Park West to agitate for more public

toilets. (Among their chants: “Two, four, six, eight, we just want to urinate!”)

Or take a case of intra-governmental resistance. Every Wednesday, Marvin Schneider, the city’s eighty-five-year-old municipal clock master, and Forest Markowitz, his seventy-four-year-old apprentice, visit Tribeca to protest a faulty clock. In 2014, the Landmarks Preservation Commission issued a ruling that effectively banned them from servicing the Clock Tower Building, on lower Broadway, whose enormous mechanical timepiece was considered a horological treasure. The city had sold the building to private developers, who were turning it into condos. Schneider, along with a small but zealous set of supporters, sued to restore his jurisdiction. The case took years, and eventually reached New York’s highest court. Schneider lost. Then the developers had the clock face electrified.

“It was an act of treason, basically,” Schneider, who wore rimless glasses and dark slacks hiked high above his waist by suspenders, explained not long ago, on the street in front of the building. As he has done every week for five years, he was logging the precise time error of the clock. The findings are then shared with the landmarks commission, as evidence of neglect.

Schneider, a portly Sheepshead Bay resident who speaks with a gravelly Brooklyn accent, craned his neck and consulted a stainless-steel wristwatch. “Two minutes slow,” he said. Markowitz, in khakis and a pink polo, shook his head.

The Clock Tower Building is the reason Schneider got into the business. The clock hadn’t run in twenty years by the nineteen-seventies, when he was working as a city bookkeeper. He became fixated. “It seemed to be publicizing that the city was broke,” he said. He and a friend wanted to give it a look. “This fella and I always used to talk about how we repaired our cars,” Schneider said. “We came to the conclusion that, if we could get access to that clock, maybe we could get it going.” Eventually, they got permission to attempt a repair. It was a complex piece of machinery, powered by a multistory pendulum with a thousand-pound weight. They fixed it within a month.

In 1992, Mayor David Dinkins formalized Schneider's role as clock master. Around that time, Schneider and Markowitz became friendly while spending lunch breaks at downtown watch shops. For decades, they made weekly trips to wind the clock, oil its gears, and offer tours of the tower.

After the developers took over, both noticed that the four faces on the electrified clock were frequently wrong, and occasionally busted entirely. "Those hands are heavy," Markowitz said. "In order to generate enough power to keep time, you need something fairly big." The landmarks commission has been unmoved, so the pair has considered undercover operations. "There's an art gallery on the ground level, so we'd pretend we're artists and sneak in, go up there, and have a look," Markowitz said.

Schneider, who is also an ordained rabbi, has other responsibilities. He fields maintenance requests for busted clocks across the city: at Brooklyn Borough Hall, the Harlem Courthouse, the Bell Ringer's monument in Herald Square. Each week, he and Markowitz wind the grand timepieces scattered throughout City Hall.

They have learned how different mayors value time. Markowitz recalled that Giuliani, a clock enthusiast, would show off impressive timepieces to visiting dignitaries. (He was recently ordered to surrender twenty-six of his own watches in a defamation lawsuit brought by two Georgia election workers.) Bloomberg was demanding. "He was obsessive about his computer's relationship to the wall clock in his room," Schneider said. De Blasio, known for his chronic tardiness, took a hands-off approach, which has continued under the Adams administration. "They're not as responsive as they have been in the past," Markowitz said.

A few blocks south, at City Hall, the pair had another job: tending to the century-old clock in the building's domed tower. Schneider climbed a ladder to the cupola, where he approached a baroque array of brass gears and levers that were turning and pumping. Flashlight in hand, he prodded at the instruments. From a catwalk on the roof, Markowitz checked his watch against the adjustment. "That went smoothly," he said. "It doesn't always go smoothly."

Back at ground level, Schneider said that he has begun to entertain the idea of retirement. “It’s theoretical,” he said. Markowitz is the presumed successor. “We will proceed at a reasonable pace,” Schneider said. “He wouldn’t be ready right now.”

Markowitz has displayed a willingness to carry on his mentor’s cause. Of the broken clock, he said, “It’s like a symbol saying, ‘Nobody cares.’” ♦

The Musical Life

Eve's Memoir, "Who's That Girl?," and Other Questions

The Philadelphia-born rapper on stage clothes ("Jumpsuit, bitch!"), the Diddy situation, and her run-ins with Questlove and Jay-Z. It's a Philly thing.

By Jennifer Wilson

November 11, 2024



The rapper Eve, who has just published a memoir, stopped at Uncle Bobbie's Coffee & Books, in Philadelphia, for a caffeine boost the other day. While she waited for a matcha latte, she nearly bumped into a large in-store display of the book's cover, which features a sultry picture of her in a low-cut black blouse that reveals her famous paw-print chest tattoos. In the late nineteen-nineties and early two-thousands, Eve was a member of the Ruff Ryders, a hip-hop ensemble, led by DMX, whose music videos were full of motorbikes and pit bulls. In her hit with the group "What Ya Want," she declared herself "the illest, vicious pit bull in a skirt (grrrr)."

At the bookstore, Eve, who is now forty-six, scanned more corgi than pit bull, wearing a Madewell denim jumpsuit. She was bubbly and spoke with Philly vowels and occasionally slipped into a posh English accent. (She grew up in Philadelphia and now lives in West London with her husband, the British race-car driver Maximillion Cooper.) She still has some bark in her, though. On how she settled on that morning's ensemble: "I got tired of putting together all these outfits for the book tour. I can't think about a fucking shirt and a different thing. So I was, like, 'Jumpsuit, bitch!'" The night before, she had done a book talk with the owner of Uncle Bobbie's, the writer and professor Marc Lamont Hill, at the nearby Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church. "It was a huge church!" Eve exclaimed. "Seven hundred people came. I was trying not to curse a lot, because I curse a lot."

A few days earlier, she had done an interview for the hip-hop radio show "The Breakfast Club" in which she was asked about a phone call with Jay-Z in 1999, on the day that her début album went on sale. According to Eve, Jay-Z congratulated and then consoled her. "Don't be too upset, because female hip-hop albums don't do that well," she recalled him saying. Following the radio appearance, she started getting irate text messages. "I guess some blog tried to make it, like, 'Jay tried to discourage Eve.' It was so not like that," she explained. She thought it was a fair prediction: "For me, it just gave me that extra bit of 'Oh, I'm gonna show you.' And not 'you' meaning Jay. 'You' meaning the industry. It's a Philly thing. We like to be the underdogs." The album, "Let There Be Eve . . . Ruff Ryders' First Lady," hit No. 1 on the *Billboard* charts, making Eve the third female rapper to take the top spot, after Lauryn Hill and Foxy Brown.

She said that she was used to being counted out, and sometimes left out. Early in her career, she attended the popular jam sessions held in the Philly living room of Ahmir Khalib Thompson—Questlove, of the Roots. She recorded a verse on the group's Grammy-winning song "You Got Me." Her name didn't appear in the credits. "I was just the girl Eve that hung out in the studio," she said. (Questlove later expressed regret at the oversight, and wrote, "My bad, this was pre-computer days," in the liner notes of a Roots compilation in which Eve got her due.) Even after she found success, she tended to get written off as just a pretty face: "I would walk into the studio by myself, and the producers would ask me, 'Do you want to wait for your writer?' People were surprised I wrote my own rhymes."

She went on, “I’m so happy that, when you look out now, there are more female voices. Because, for a time, there was nothing, or there was, like, the one or two.” After a period in which Nicki Minaj reigned supreme, but atop a lonely throne, Cardi B, Doja Cat, Megan Thee Stallion, Ice Spice, Flo Milli, Lizzo, and others have shared the airwaves. “Back when I was out, there was a lot of moaning about ‘Oh, women are so expensive,’ ” she said. “Like, the budgets for hair and makeup will be too big. Now, with the Internet, female rappers come with an audience.”

Eve has advised young female rappers on how to deal with labels and launch a brand. In her book, which she co-wrote with the music journalist Kathy Iandoli, she recounts asking Sean (Diddy) Combs out for lunch to pick his brain about starting a clothing line. “I think he thought it was an air-quotes ‘business meeting,’ ” she elaborated at Uncle Bobbie’s. On the sex-trafficking charges brought against Diddy, she said, “I think that it is a time of illumination, reckoning, truth, karma. A friend texted—we’re so woo—that we’re in a time where the moon says all truths will be revealed. I believe that. This shit cannot continue.”

Eve’s musical tastes have shifted since moving to London. “I’ve started listening to a lot of Afrobeat and Amapiano,” she said. She didn’t snag tickets to one of the Taylor Swift concerts at Wembley Stadium, even though Swift is her compatriot. (Swift, who hails from Berks County, recently called Philadelphia her home town.) “I love her songs, but you have to be a Swiftie to be in that environment,” she said. “I’m a fan of her as a woman.” She continued, “Someone stole her shit, basically, and she was, like, ‘O.K., I’m gonna show you.’ ” It’s a Philly thing. ♦

Donald Trump, Reprised

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- [How America Embraced Gender War](#)
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Dispatches

2016 and 2024

We will be a fundamentally different country by the end of the next Administration. Indeed, we already are.

By Jelani Cobb

November 08, 2024



Eight years ago on Election Night, as the returns came in from North Carolina, where I was reporting, I made a panicked phone call to a friend. I told him that I feared the country was sliding into the hands of a demifascist, and that it might even be time to start considering an exit plan. My life, like those of many Black people of my generation, was shaped not by the brutality of segregation, as my parents' lives had been, but by the success of the battles of the nineteen-fifties and sixties to uproot it. The prospect that a Presidential candidate could be embraced not only by white supremacists but also by one of the two major political parties and almost half the electorate triggered an enduring dread that the progress we had made was fragile and impermanent—and that, with the right incentives, the old order could resurrect itself in the present.

By the end of that late-night phone call, though, we had sorted through the “guardrails” theory of the various checks and precedents that would constrain Donald Trump. The advantage of the sprawling bureaucracy of the federal government is that it takes a brilliant level of orchestra-conducting to achieve anything significant—a skill set that a mercurial, chronically uninformed career real-estate developer did not likely possess. It was to be presumed that the Republican establishment, craven and increasingly reactionary but on the whole more sound than its presumptive leader, would curb Trump’s impulses, or at least dangle enough distractions in front of him to keep him from focussing for too long on any truly destructive goal. The press and the courts would be the redoubt of democracy; they were designed precisely for such a moment.

Conversations like ours took place across the country in the shocked first days and weeks after the 2016 election. The difference between those conversations and the ones that began on Tuesday night is that we can no longer rely on the guardrails theory. Unlike Trump’s first election, this one cannot be rationalized as the product of an overconfident Democratic campaign and the nihilistic pivot of around a hundred thousand voters in a handful of swing states. This time, voters in state after state decisively chose Trump, who has become more autocratic and belligerent, building a popular-vote advantage for a man now wholly unfit to hold office. He has grown more maniacal over the years, and now he is a maniac with a mandate. It is chilling to observe the landscape of possibilities before him—and us.

Journalism is as eager as it ever was to perform its essential accountability function, but it is also impaired by financial struggles, declining trust, and disruptive new technologies. More ominously, the decisions of the billionaire owners of the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* to cancel their papers’ planned Presidential endorsements suggest that journalists may face complicated impediments even within these news organizations. The courts represent a more consequential and compromised situation: unlike in 2016, the federal judiciary is now stocked with more than two hundred Trump appointees, whom he selected in overtly politicized ways. And any semblance of restraint within the ranks of the G.O.P. establishment vanished long ago. In the coming Administration, the executive branch will likely be staffed by acolytes who will co-sign Trump’s worst and most random pursuits. The decision of Kamala Harris’s campaign

to invest heavily in appealing to anti-Trump Republicans and to showcase Liz Cheney's support was a product of bright-side thinking—of an optimistic belief that the ranks of the G.O.P. were not entirely lost and that at least a meaningful minority of the Party sees and understands the danger that Trump represents. That thinking was wrong.



There are other equally challenging concerns. In the years since Trump lost the last election, he launched a coup attempt, became a defendant in four criminal cases, and was convicted (so far) of thirty-four felonies. In the past few months, he has spread increasingly unhinged misinformation and racist lies, made lewd comments and gestures, and spewed offensive and obscene language. None of these actions prevented his popularity from expanding in multiple electorates across the country; they may even have facilitated it. Stunningly, Trump fared better in New York City this year than he did in 2020. The questions that confront the Democratic Party are gigantic and existential. Following the election of Barack Obama in 2008, strategists hypothesized that a new electorate was emerging, one that was forward-looking and egalitarian, comfortable with people from backgrounds different than their own. The catastrophic losses in 2016 and 2024 call this idealism into question and also highlight how wildly unlikely Obama's success actually was. Both Hillary Clinton and Harris were eminently qualified for the Presidency, and neither ran flawless campaigns—no one does. But it is

also inescapable that some portion of the blame for those losses is tied to the identities of the candidates.

The outcome of the election has also turned a new spotlight on crucial moments in the past. At the conclusion of the last election, Trump incited an attack on Congress to prevent the certification of the results, which led to him being impeached for the second time. The cowardice of Senate Republicans—who, having been evacuated from the Capitol building as a Trumpist mob advanced, nonetheless refused to convict Trump—was a catastrophic abdication that directly enabled this moment. It never should have come to this.

We will be a fundamentally different country by the end of the next Administration; indeed, we already are. Vice-President Harris, in her concession speech at Howard University on Wednesday, said, “I know many people feel like we are entering a dark time, but, for the benefit of us all, I hope that is not the case.” Given what we already know about Donald Trump, it is all but certain that it will be. I awoke the morning after the election thinking not of the battles that supplanted segregation but of what people must have felt at the time of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 Supreme Court decision that enshrined it. The difficult lesson in that history is that, although further progress is possible, we should not underestimate how arduous it will be to achieve, or how long it will take. We believed that we had broken with history, but it is apparent that history has, in fact, broken some part of us. ♦

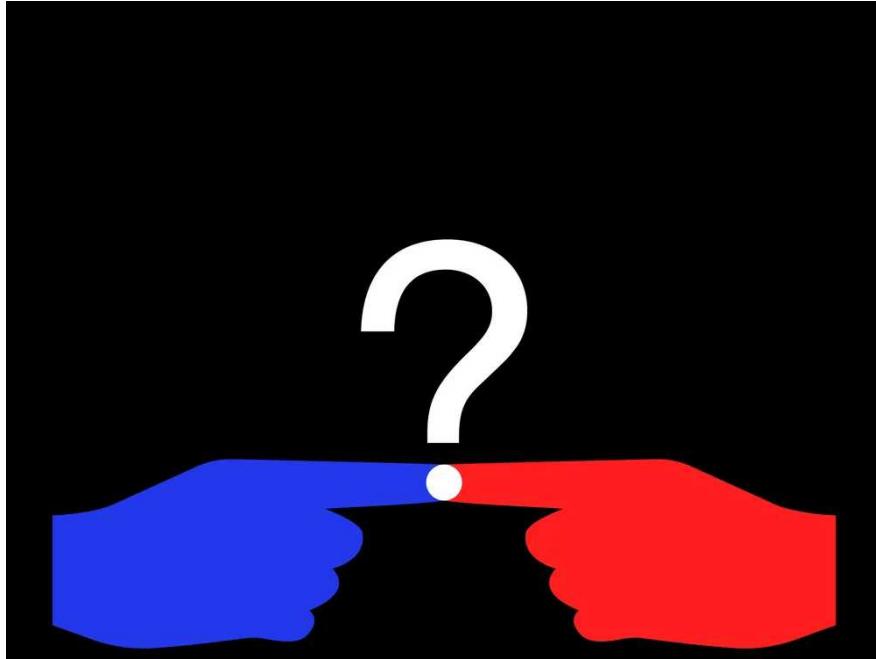
Dispatches

Five Thought Experiments Concerning the Underlying Disease

Our civic wells are poisoned. Why?

By George Saunders

November 07, 2024



Thought Experiment No. 1

Imagine a baseball stadium. Fill it with twenty thousand Americans. Require Democrats to wear blue and Republicans red. At a podium at second base, have a person make a speech about, say, immigration.

Soon enough, fights break out.

Rewind.

Same twenty thousand people. Let them dress however they like. Instead of the speechmaking guy, put two baseball teams out there. Instantly, it's a

different energy. Among the fans for Team One will be both liberals and conservatives, suddenly united in common cause. Ditto Team Two. There will be disagreements, sure, but because we've been taught about acceptable baseball-game discourse, these will tend to be relatively good-natured.

Questions for Discussion:

Regarding the first example:

Who put out the order to wear red or blue?

Who dragged that podium out there?

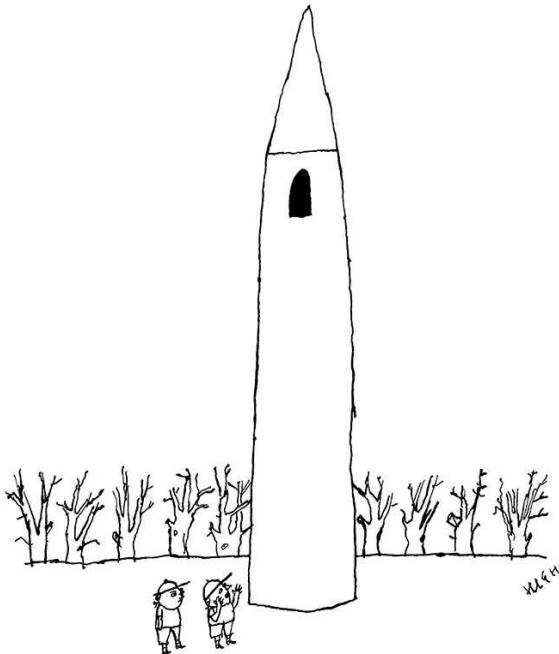
Who selected the topic? And from what list?

Is it possible that “politics” has come to mean arguing percussively about a short list of pre-approved topics (immigration, abortion, cancel culture, etc.), these topics having been provided, somehow, by (let’s say) certain distant powers, who have also provided a rigid framework within which to discuss them, a framework designed not to solve anything but to insure perpetual disagreement, with agitation as the goal, agitation being, let’s face it, a big money-maker?

Thought Experiment No. 2

Seat four Democrats and four Republicans around a charming local conference table somewhere in the heart of the heart of the country. (Put one of those golden American maples out the window, and every now and then have an autumn leaf fall off it.) They are a town council. Their topic is potholes. There are five thousand dollars’ worth of potholes in town, but the council has only three thousand in the pothole-repair budget.

Those eight people are trying to solve a specific problem. Which potholes can be left unfilled? Well, which are the biggest? Shouldn’t we take care of that one in front of the hospital? These three, on that road on the outskirts of town, where nobody ever goes, are going to have to wait.



The discussion is not theoretical but practical. (What is the leftist opinion on potholes, anyway, or the *MAGA* view?) This is *problem-solving*, something we Americans are good at (or at least think we are). Most people, of either party, know a pragmatic solution when they see one, especially if they've been working on the problem and have some idea of the costs, choices, and sacrifices required to solve it.

What may result among this group of people is something like fondness.

We, the Pothole Eight, will have come through the wars together. We'll enjoy scoffing together re the laughable critiques of our work coming in from the ill-informed populace. Maybe we'll feel a little proud of what we've accomplished. Sometimes, when driving, I'll spot a big new pothole and I'll call Murray, my friend from the council, who may be a Republican, but, honestly, I don't care. I just want to tell him about that big honker pothole.

Questions for Discussion:

What, or who, is making us dislike one another so much?

Might it be that one reason we're feeling sick right now is that our natural desire to be fond of one another is being thwarted by distant, profit-based

forces?

Thought Experiment No. 3

Imagine you are about to have a political argument with a close friend or family member. You are on opposing sides of the left-right rift. You have had this discussion many times before.

Many times.

Questions for Discussion:

Doesn't it sometimes feel that it would be simpler if you each just brought over a small TV and left it running in the kitchen, tuned to your respective network, while the two of you went into the yard and talked about something about which you possess some original knowledge? Once you're out there, talking like that, won't it be nice to feel your pre-formed "political" carapaces drop away? And won't it be discouraging and alarming when, as soon as one of you slips up and utters a triggering word or phrase ("immigrant" or "Trump" or "politically correct" or "eating cats and dogs," for example), you veer back into your canned "political" jargon, like actors suddenly aware that the scripts you've been given must, at all costs, be honored?

In that moment, as the two of you stand there like Rock 'Em Sock 'Em robots, beating up on each other with someone else's phrases, looking, often, a little sad, even ashamed, who is speaking through you?

Thought Experiment No. 4

Imagine a simple, pastoral predecessor of ours, walking around, club in hand, smelling the flowers.

That caveman's ability to construct opinions on the basis of mental projection is what allows him to survive. This is true for us, too.

But we're getting a lot more information than he was, information of a peculiar sort, information that is powerful, and has been constructed far away, by people with agendas. It's being delivered invisibly, in a way that gives us a deep sense of belonging. It's addictive. It's overwhelming. It comes pouring unmediated into the brain, essentially the same brain that Mr. Flower Sniffer walked around with, and, like a stomach designed for nuts and fruit suddenly faced with a TripleFlame Macaroni & Lard Burger, that brain starts having, well, digestive issues, but gives it a good try anyway.

Questions for Discussion:

Is it possible that, these days, heavily agenda-laced ideas from afar glow within each of us with such power that we mistake them for our own? Possible that the way we receive information, and the form in which it arrives, is causing certain issues to assume an exaggerated importance in our lives, out of proportion to 1) the extent to which these issues actually affect us and 2) what we might be able to do about them? Isn't this frustrating, because it makes us feel that our influence ought to be vast, but it isn't? Is it possible that we have come to feel responsible for too much, for everything, even things outside of our control, and that this makes us feel like gods who have been unfairly disempowered? Isn't it depressing, feeling like a demoted god? Doesn't it fill us with despair, which might make us less effective if a time comes when we actually *can* do something, and might also mess with the enjoyment we should be feeling re the rest of our lives?

Thought Experiment No. 5

There's a parable, recounted in Paulo Coelho's novel "Veronika Decides to Die," among other places, about a kingdom whose well was poisoned by a wizard, such that a person drinking from the well would be driven insane. Everyone in the kingdom drank from the well, except the king and queen, who had a separate well for their use. Alarmed by the madness of the people, the king tried to issue edicts to control their behavior. To the insane populace, these edicts sounded like nonsense. The king's problem was this: If he refused to drink from the poisoned well, which would make him insane, the people, believing he was insane, would dethrone him.

Questions for Discussion:

Is it possible that, in our culture, we each have our own customized, algorithm-enforced poisoned well? And that certain “wizards” have learned that lies are an especially potent form of poison? And that, therefore, the wells to which those “wizards” have access are more full of lies than others? And that even the wells that are full of truths aren’t great, since the method of delivery tends to enlarge one truth (one way of seeing) at the expense of others, thereby making it difficult to sustain such fragile things as ambiguity, doubt, sympathy, complexity, or genuine curiosity?

Might we then consider ourselves a culture being actively poisoned, a poisoning to which we are enthusiastically consenting?

What might we do about this?

Provide specific examples. ♦

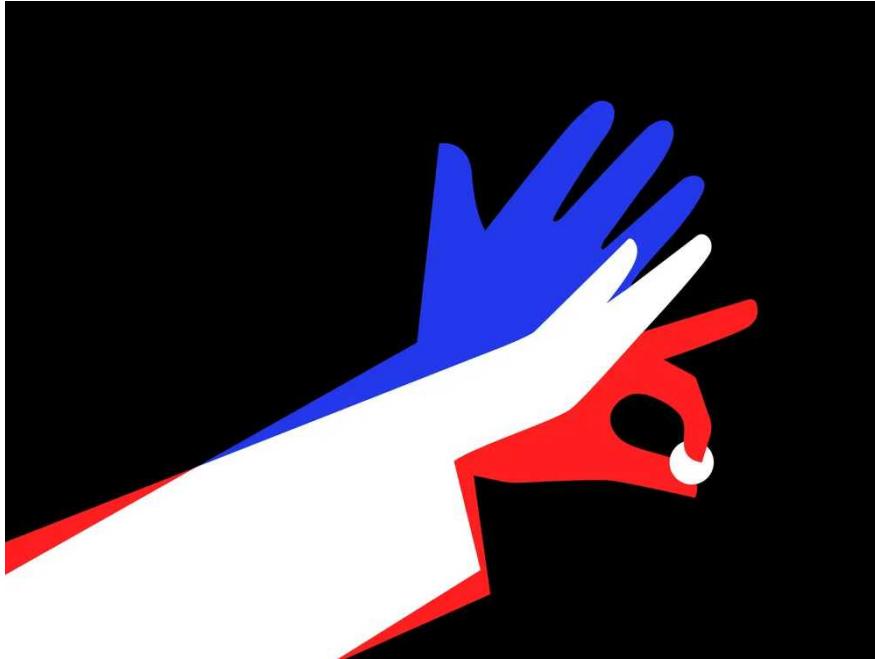
Dispatches

Dead Last

Authoritarian rule always entails corruption. With Donald Trump in office, watch your wallet.

By Rachel Maddow

November 10, 2024



If nothing else, it was an insult to historians.

At the change of each Administration, C-SPAN conducts a broad survey of Presidential scholars, asking them to rank every Commander-in-Chief across ten aspects of leadership. The 2021 survey, published less than six months after the January 6th mob attack on Congress, ranked Donald Trump among the worst Presidents in U.S. history. Never before had a modern President had his name down in the dregs among feckless forgotten Whigs (poor William Henry Harrison's term lasted only thirty-two days) and impeached scoundrels like Andrew Johnson.

Given the shocking, violent end of Trump's first term, that scalding snap judgment in 2021 was no surprise. The following year, the Siena College

survey of Presidential scholars also listed Trump among the worst Presidents ever. In this past June's debate between Trump and President Joe Biden, Biden cited another academic survey—the 2024 “Presidential Greatness Project”—in which a hundred and fifty-four scholars and historians ranked Trump dead last, even below James Buchanan, whose disastrous Presidency dragged the nation into the bloody maw of the Civil War.

Two hundred and forty-eight years is a long throw for a constitutional republic, and throughout the course of it we've had our share of stinkers in the Oval Office. Still, when hundreds of experts in multiple surveys put a man in strong contention for the title of the Worst President in the Nation's History, it says something about our respect for expertise that we decided to give the man another go.

Even if history hasn't been a guiding light for voters in this election, it may yet offer some hints about what to expect next: in short, watch your wallet. If history is a guide, it might be worth remembering that America's most ambitious and accomplished demagogues have also all been crooks.

In 1939, the U.S. Justice Department sent prosecutors to Louisiana to clean up the Huey Long political machine, which was still chugging along four years after Long's murder. Part of Long's legacy in the state was a magnificent Louisiana graft that became known as the “hot oil” scam. Long's puppet governor and the bagman who used to collect Long's cash bribes from state contractors each took a personal financial cut of every barrel of off-the-books (so-called “hot”) oil produced in the state.

One middleman testified about sending an express-mail package of forty-eight thousand dollars in one-thousand-dollar bills to Long's bribe collector. The governor admitted that in his one term in office he pocketed almost five hundred thousand dollars (more than ten million in today's dollars). The governor and the bagman went to prison, but the judge hearing the hot-oil case expressed doubt about whether any of the lower-level functionaries who had been press-ganged into the scheme really had a choice. “It is a matter of general and common knowledge that the state of Louisiana was more or less under a dictatorship,” he said.

If there was a rival for Long's oratorical skill and demagogic power in the nineteen-thirties, it was Father Charles E. Coughlin, whose tens of millions of weekly radio listeners were treated to his frequent harangues against the “filthy gold standard,” which he ascribed to Jews and communists. Coughlin instead preached the virtues of what he called “Gentile silver.”

Although Coughlin never betrayed any personal stake in this line of pseudo-theological monetary invective, a U.S. Treasury audit in 1934 found that, alongside entities like Chase National Bank of Manhattan, one of the largest single holders of silver in the United States was an unmarried secretary in Royal Oak, Michigan: Miss Amy Collins. Collins turned out to be Coughlin's secretary.

Coughlin's office soon released a letter in Collins's name, insisting that the purchase of those half a million ounces of silver was her own idea, pursued at her own initiative, and that “Neither Father Coughlin nor any other officer except myself” had anything to do with it.

One of the underappreciated demagogues of the second half of the twentieth century was Vice-President Spiro Agnew, whose meteoric rise from local Maryland politics to the White House was aided more than anything by admiration, among Nixon's advisers, for his relentless invective against protesters and civil-rights groups. As Nixon's Vice-President, Agnew developed his own zealous national following by training rhetorical fire on the press and, when he fell under criminal investigation, on the legal system.

In 1973, Agnew, facing the prospect of a forty-count felony indictment, was allowed to plead nolo contendere to a single count and escaped all the other charges in exchange for his resignation. Because Agnew's nolo count was a tax-related charge, it's sometimes forgotten that the bill of particulars against him described not run-of-the-mill tax fiddling but the sitting Vice-President of the United States literally taking envelopes full of cash at the White House and stuffing them into his desk.

In our own time, Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation has done more than anyone, anywhere, to remind us that authoritarian rule always entails thievery. Three years ago, as Navalny voluntarily returned to Russia after surviving an assassination attempt, he released a film titled “Putin's

Palace,” revealing evidence that the Russian leader had a secret billion-dollar Black Sea lair, which Navalny called “the biggest bribe in history.” (The Kremlin denied that the palace belonged to Putin.)

After Navalny’s death in an arctic Russian prison earlier this year, his foundation released a follow-up video, which showed hidden-camera footage of the inside of the palace, including plush bedrooms, a gaudy chapel, and a dirty construction trailer used by workers at the site. On a wall above a filthy toilet, someone had scrawled, “Lyokha [Alexei], you were right!”

The banner headline of Navalny’s leadership was his insistence that opponents of Putin’s regime must not be afraid. If Navalny himself could deny the regime his fear, as their persecution of him relentlessly escalated, then surely no one else should lend the regime their fear either. But the core of Navalny’s work against Putin was exposing his thievery from the Russian people.

Dictators and demagogues are thieves—here, there, always, and everywhere.

If history is allowed a word in this moment, let it be informed by the visionary antifascist and anti-authoritarian leaders of our time, but also by our own squalid experience with this kind of guy, the guy we’ve just put back in the White House. He starts the new gig while being legally barred from serving as an officer or a director in any New York corporation or from taking out loans with New York banks, and while the longtime C.F.O. of his company, convicted of tax fraud and perjury, is still adjusting to life outside jail. Here is a man who took time out of his Presidential campaign to launch not only a line of watches and sneakers and commemorative coins but also a new cryptocurrency scheme in which his partners are the self-proclaimed “dirtbag of the internet” and the entrepreneur behind Date Hotter Girls, L.L.C.

Let’s not be surprised about where this is heading.

We’ll shout down our own fear, yes. But we’ll also expose and humiliate thieves. History is here to help. Historians may or may not have the ear of

the electorate, but the history of this era, at least, will be told. And, if past is prologue, it's likely to be lurid. ♦

Dispatches

What Does It Mean That Donald Trump Is a Fascist?

Trump takes the tools of dictators and adapts them for the Internet. We should expect him to try to cling to power until death, and create a cult of January 6th martyrs.

By Timothy Snyder

November 08, 2024



It was wrong to treat Donald Trump as a series of absences. The standard critique has always been that he lacks something that we imagine to be a prerequisite for high office: breeding, or grammar, or diplomacy, or business acumen, or love of country. And he does lack all those things, as well as pretty much any conventional bourgeois virtue you can name.

Trump's skills and talents go unrecognized when we see him as a conventional candidate—a person who seeks to explain policies that might improve lives, or who works to create the appearance of empathy. Yet this is

our shortcoming more than his. Trump has always been a presence, not an absence: the presence of fascism. What does this mean?

When the Soviets called their enemies “fascists,” they turned the word into a meaningless insult. [Putinist Russia](#) has preserved the habit: a “fascist” is anyone who opposes the wishes of a Russian dictator. So Ukrainians defending their country from Russian invaders are “fascists.” This is a trick that Trump has copied. He, like Vladimir Putin, refers to his enemies as “fascists,” with no ideological significance at all. It is simply a term of opprobrium.

Putin and Trump are both, in fact, fascists. And their use of the word, though meant to confuse, reminds us of one of fascism’s essential characteristics. A fascist is unconcerned with the connection between words and meanings. He does not serve the language; the language serves him. When a fascist calls a liberal a “fascist,” the term begins to work in a different way, as the servant of a particular person, rather than as a bearer of meaning.

That is quite a fascist achievement. Faced with the complexity of history, liberals struggle with the overwhelming volume of questions to be asked, answers to be offered. Like communism, fascism is an answer to all questions, but a different kind of answer. Communism assures us that we can, thanks to science, find an underlying direction in all events, toward a better future. This is (or was) seductive. Fascism reduces the imbroglio of sensation to what the Leader says.

A liberal has to tell a hundred stories, or a thousand. A communist has one story, which might not turn out to be true. A fascist just has to be a storyteller. Because words do not attach to meanings, the stories don’t need to be consistent. They don’t need to accord with external reality. A fascist storyteller just has to find a pulse and hold it. This can proceed through rehearsal, as with Hitler, or by way of trial and error, as with Trump.

That requires presence, which Trump has always had. His charisma need not resonate with you: probably, Hitler’s and Mussolini’s would not have reached you, either. But it is nevertheless a talent. To be a fascist and to call someone else a fascist requires a cunning that is natural to Trump. And in

that naming of the enemy, absurd as it is, we see the second major element of fascism.

A Leader (“*Duce*” and “*Führer*” mean just that) initiates politics by choosing an enemy. As the Nazi legal thinker Carl Schmitt maintained, the choice is arbitrary. It has little or no basis in reality. It takes its force from the decisive will of the Leader. The people who watched Trump’s television ads during sporting events had not been harmed by a transgender person, or by an immigrant, or by a woman of color. The magic lies in the daring it takes to declare a weaker group to be part of an overwhelming conspiracy.

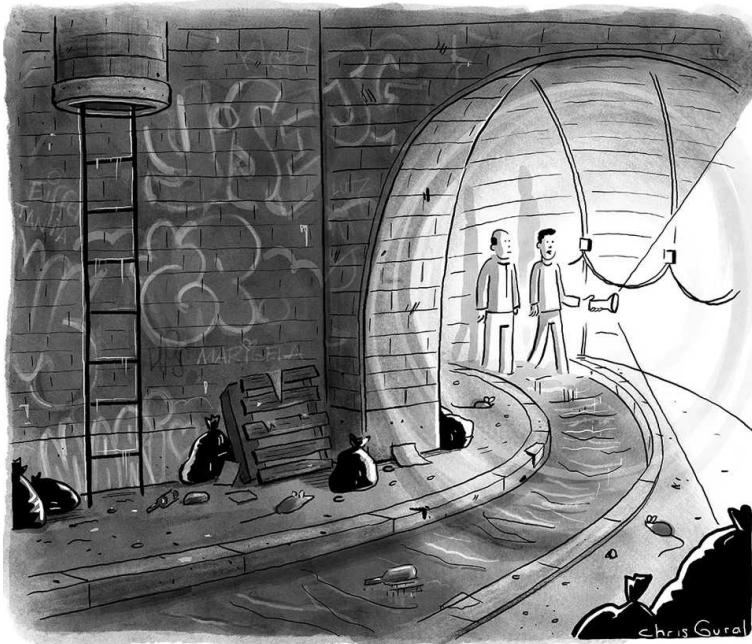
The one thing that is not arbitrary about the choice of an enemy is that it must exploit vulnerabilities. The Trump ads projected a fantasy of Kamala Harris allowing millions of sex-changed foreigners to take jobs from Americans. This touches, all at once, on gender, economic, and sexual vulnerability. We are unprotected and impoverished and will be replaced by something alien. And this is all orchestrated by a shadowy enemy in the background—in this case, a woman of color who knows how to laugh.

The “great replacement” theory is an example of an unoriginal fascist lie: conspirators will make you impotent and bring others to take your place in the world. The apparent complexity of the world resolves itself as a conspiracy, just as the attendant anxiety is resolved by hatred. This works with almost any combination of enemies. It can be a conspiracy of deep-state politicians to kidnap babies, or a conspiracy of Jews to corrupt women. Fascism wins when the enmity summoned begins to tell the story itself.

A fascist marries conspiracy and necessity. Not everyone can tell a spontaneous Big Lie, as Trump did, when he lost the 2020 election. And the Republicans around him did not challenge him. The Big Lie came to life when his followers stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Crucially, he paid no price for that. That made the Big Lie true, in a fascist sense. His de-facto impunity and then de-jure immunity also generated a sense of the untouchable, the heroic.

Trump’s presence has always been a co-creation: his and ours. From the moment when he first came down the Trump Tower escalator in 2015, he was treated as a source of spectacle. Because he was good for television, he

was accepted as a legitimate candidate. In the print media, he grew through the doctrine of [both-sides-ism](#): no matter how awful his deeds, his opponent had to be presented as equally bad. This empowered him to be both wicked and normal. During every campaign's final months, polling had a [similar effect](#). By displacing policy differences and reducing politics to two faces or two colors, polls reinforce the notion that Trump belonged where he was, and that politics was just a matter of us or them.



What amplifies Trump's presence more than any other medium is the Internet. He is a natural with its quirky rhythms. And its algorithms make the rest of us open to exactly his sort of talky fascism. On [social media](#), we are drawn away from people of complexity and toward blunt stereotypes. We ourselves are categorized, and are then fed content that brings out, in Václav Havel's term, our "most probable states." The Internet does not just spread specific conspiracy theories; [it primes our minds](#) for them. This was already true before Elon Musk [reshaped Twitter](#) in Trump's image.

Our engagement with the machine illuminates a difference between the fascists of the twenty-twenties and the fascists of the nineteen-twenties. Back then, the machine was seen as bold and beautiful, a brutal instrument that would return us to our nature by wrenching us from the hold of soft civilization. The Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti had an epiphany

after an automobile accident in 1908, which led him to Futurism and then to fascism. For Hitler, the internal-combustion engine hastened a “*Blitzsieg*,” a lightning victory. The superior race with the superior technology exterminates other races, takes other peoples’ land, and thrives.

We are still driving around using internal-combustion engines, as we were a century ago; what has changed more than our means of locomotion is our means of staying put. When the Nazis dreamed of a radio in every home or a newsreel before every film, they did not imagine Germans motionlessly staring at screens for most of the day, as we all do now. Fascists a hundred years ago liked the male body, physical fitness, and marching around outside. Fascism today involves a masculinity softened by screen time. In both eras of fascism, women were explicitly deemed inferior. If the old fascism depended on a fantasy of accelerated male prowess, today’s rests on the anxiety of mechanical inability.

The fascist fantasy traditionally involved a return to nature. The Leader’s voice guided us into a competition with other races for habitat. Hitler was obsessed with coming ecological catastrophe, and he argued, in “*Mein Kampf*,” that Germans had to seize land or starve. That was incorrect. But, a hundred years later, those internal-combustion engines and other archaic technologies actually have changed the climate to the point of causing droughts and storms, as we saw during this electoral season. When such disasters occur, today’s fascists react as Trump and J. D. Vance did: they blame the victims and the immigrants, and invent conspiracy theories. If the old fascism killed for the sake of a dream of uniting with nature, the new fascism will kill by a politics of catastrophe, a deliberate acceleration of global warming, and its exploitation in the service of the politics of us and them.

A century ago, socialists wanted to believe that fascism was just another sign of the decay of capitalism. And they were right, at least insofar as businessmen then didn’t understand that fascism would reshape all of politics and society, and not just suppress labor unions and undermine democracy. Today, though, the point would be much sharper. Trump does not actually have a lot of money, but he pretends to—getting away with that lie is part of his presence. And his close fascist allies, Musk and Putin, are probably the two wealthiest people in the world. The fascism of today is

nestled between the digital oligarchy (Musk) and the hydrocarbon oligarchy (Putin). Trump has pledged himself to America's own hydrocarbon oligarchs, thereby insuring climate disaster, suffering, immigration, and even more occasions for division.

The oligarchs bring to our fascism its libertarian entry point: they preach that government is the source of all evil. As we yield to that logic, the hydrocarbon oligarchs drill away at the earth and the digital oligarchs at our minds. A weakened government can control neither, nor can it promise sound infrastructure or the welfare state. In these conditions, freedom is viewed not only as a struggle against the government but also as a struggle against one's own neighbors. The people who claim to want individual freedom are the same people who clamor for mass deportations. America's hydrocarbon and digital oligarchs support this kind of libertarianism; it is social media that guides men (and it is usually men) away from the idea that they are solitary heroes to the conviction that other groups must be punished.

Fascism is now in the algorithms, the neural pathways, the social interactions. How did we fail to see all this? Part of it was our belief that history is over, that the great rivals to liberalism were dead or exhausted. Part of it was American exceptionalism: "[it can't happen here](#)" and so on. But most of it was simple self-absorption: we wanted to see Trump in terms of his absences, so that our way of seeing the world would go unchallenged. So we failed to see his fascist presence. And, because we ignored the fascism, we were unable to make the easy predictions of what he would do next. Or, worse, we learned to thrill at our own mistakes, because he always did something more outrageous than we expected.

It was predictable that Trump [would deny](#) the results of the 2020 election. It was predictable that his Big Lie [would change](#) American politics. It is predictable, today, that he will give free rein to the oligarchs who, he knows, will continue to generate the social and digital bases of a politics of us and them. It is predictable that, in returning to power, he will seek to change the system so that he can remain in power until death. It is predictable that he will use deportations to divide us, to accustom us to violence, and to make accomplices of us. It is predictable that he will create a cult out of the martyrs of January 6th. It is predictable that he will coöperate with similarly minded rulers abroad.

When the historian Robert Paxton [was asked](#) about Trump and fascism a few weeks ago, he made an important point. Of course, Trump is a fascist, Paxton concluded. It was fine to compare him to Mussolini and Hitler, but there was a larger point. It took some luck for those two to come to power. “The Trump phenomenon looks like it has a much more solid social base,” Paxton said, “which neither Hitler nor Mussolini would have had.”

Fascism is a phenomenon, not a person. Just as Trump was always a presence, so is the movement he has created. It is not just a matter of the actual fascists in his movement, who are [scarcely hiding](#), nor of his own friendly references to Hitler or his use of [Hitlerian language](#) (“vermin,” “enemy within”). He bears responsibility for what comes next, as do his allies and supporters.

Yet some, and probably more, of the blame rests with our actions and analysis. Again and again, our major institutions, from the media to the judiciary, have amplified Trump’s presence; again and again, we have failed to name the consequences. Fascism can be defeated, but not when we are on its side. ♦

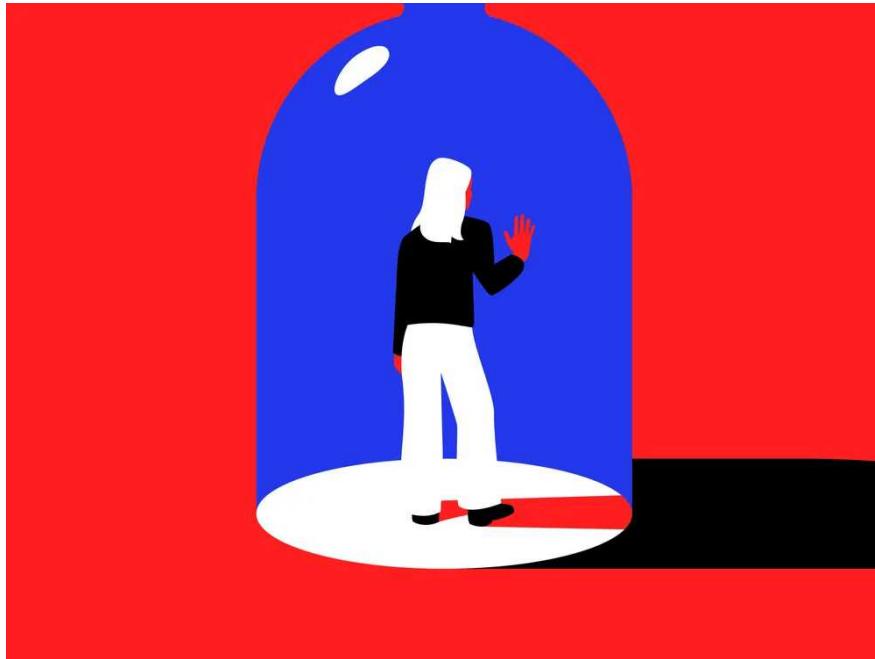
Dispatches

How America Embraced Gender War

Both Trump's and Harris's campaigns framed the Presidential election as a contest between men and women. Did the results prove them right?

By Jia Tolentino

November 07, 2024



The big two genders are said to be at war. The results of the Presidential election can hardly be read otherwise: in preliminary exit-poll data out of Pennsylvania, women aged eighteen to twenty-nine swung forty points for Kamala Harris, while their male counterparts swung twenty-four points for Donald Trump. The conflict—the dark, snarling, many-headed beast of indifference and contempt that emerges from these numbers—has been building for decades. Women in America, as in nearly all industrialized democracies, used to be more conservative than men; in the nineteen-seventies, they began to shift leftward, then closed the partisan gap by the eighties, and during the nineties became firmly more liberal than American men. The simplest explanation for this is the most plausible one: women, acquiring education and workplace power and economic independence, drew closer to a party that valorized equality and away from a party that

valorized hierarchy. With birth control, with safe and legal abortion, the story went, women gained control over their lives.

In the twenty-tens, women gained control over culture, too. A slick, corporatized feminism—the mugs about male tears, the Ruth Bader Ginsburg bobbleheads—occupied the public sphere. Girls were brash and confident and eager to call out bad male behavior; it was no longer O.K. to kiss a girl if she didn’t want you to (even if she was slutty!). All of this made a certain cohort of men lose their grip. Over time, their numbers grew, fermenting in corners of the Internet that indulged their feelings of being left behind. Women were graduating from high school and college in greater numbers than men; they were suddenly wanted in places where they had been unwanted almost forever. Around ten years ago came a Presidential candidate who promised to reverse the shifts that had transformed American life toward equality—to put men, white people, white men, back on top. It was war then, too: Trump won despite and because of the fact that he’d bragged about sexually assaulting women; the fact that his wife was hot, silent, and seemingly miserable; the fact that he had so many accusers no one could keep track.

Trump did what he promised, and installed a Supreme Court that overturned *Roe v. Wade* during a Democratic Presidency that ostensibly rebuked him. At least twenty states made abortion more or less illegal. I.V.F. was restricted in Alabama; doctors in states like Oklahoma, Texas, and Florida stopped treating women in mortal danger because of active miscarriages; a woman with a cancerous and nonviable pregnancy was told to bleed in a hospital parking lot until she was sick enough to qualify for care. A thirteen-year-old girl in Mississippi who’d been raped in her front yard couldn’t afford to get to Chicago for an abortion and thus became a mother before starting the seventh grade. The 2024 election was framed, optimistically, by Democrats, as a referendum on this suffering, as the midterms had been. After Harris entered the race, almost four in ten women under the age of thirty cited abortion as the most important issue to their vote. Abortion was the second most important issue among all Harris voters, the most important being “democracy.” For Trump voters, the economy was the top issue. The funny thing is the pretense that we can separate these concepts. Without the right to choose, women are not full participants in a democracy or an economy.

Both campaigns leaned into the gender war. Trump turned his focus away from the suburban white women who'd supported him in 2016, and he courted young men, attending U.F.C. matches, cozying up to Elon Musk, and going on podcasts recommended by his eighteen-year-old son. He led with vibes of absurdist aggression, a miasma of crypto and YouTube testosterone, allowing the policy architecture of actual, brutal, gender-based subjugation to follow easily behind. Trump was among the many G.O.P. candidates who collectively poured tens of millions into anti-trans political ads, showing his commitment not to women but to the institution of gender itself. Harris went on "Call Her Daddy," a podcast where young women dish about sex and kvetch about men, and got Julia Roberts to narrate an ad about how wives don't have to disclose their liberal votes to their conservative husbands. The strategy reflected a reality that has since been unveiled by the results—a gendered battle intensified by young people, who are fighting for a sense of individual purchase on a world they have barely begun to properly live in. Those Pennsylvania exit polls. The ones in North Carolina, where young female voters went for Harris by thirty-three points and young male voters went for Trump by twenty-three. The fact that the entire nation, more or less, is shifting rightward at least a little, but that men aged eighteen to twenty-nine have moved almost *thirty points rightward since 2020*. If the 2016 election illuminated the shocking state of white women's loyalties, the 2024 election has instantly done the same for young men.

The gender war, as pitched by politicians, revolves around two competing visions of a woman's life. Each side thinks it understands what the other wants. The Trumpists—embodied by J. D. Vance and his repulsive, sneering childless-cat-lady comments, by Tucker Carlson and his portrayal of Kamala Harris as a "Samoan Malaysian, low-I.Q." diversity hire—believe that the left wants women to be Plan B-gobbling dilettantes in their youth; dick-stomping corporate drones in early adulthood; lonely, angry spinsters who approach forty in a mania for egg-freezing or emasculation. (Soon afterward, the woman problem becomes neutralized by the relative invisibility of the "postmenopausal female.") The libs believe that conservatives want women to spend their youth in training to attract, submit to, and please men, suppressing all other forms of human potential for one that revolves around dress-up, smiling self-imprisonment, and wiping asses, both literally and emotionally.

The chasm between young men and women in this year's vote is the chasm between these two stories. It's men fearing women's enthrallment to independence at the expense of their own centrality, and women fearing their subjugation to men at the expense of their lives. The difference—and this is always the difference—is about volition. Men who voted for Trump fear what women might actually want; women who voted for Harris fear what will be done to them against their will. In the imaginary world ruled by angry lesbian socialist girlbosses, there is absolutely nothing to stop you from being a barefoot, pregnant homemaker at twenty-four if you'd like to be one. In the increasingly non-hypothetical world ruled by far-right Trumpists, the blissful servitude of women must be insured by removing their control over their bodies, and ideally, actually, by removing them from the public sphere altogether. In a recent video, the former Trump aide and Project 2025 adviser John McEntee quipped while cheerfully eating chili-cheese fries, "So I guess they misunderstood when we said we wanted mail-only voting. We meant 'male,' m-a-l-e." Dale Partridge, the pastor of an "anti-woke" church and the author of a book called "The Manliness of Christ"—always a funny argument, given that Jesus famously bled to death to give new life, as many girls and women in conservative states will over the next four years—posted, "In a Christian marriage, a wife should vote according to her husband's direction. He is the head and they are one."

What baffles me about this supposed contest between ideas of womanhood, both of them invented by men for political purposes, is its distance from the reality of living as a woman. The conflict that exists between work and parenting, between childlessness and child rearing—even between wanting power over men and willingly giving them power over you—flares not in the gap between a liberal woman and a conservative woman but within each of their individual lives. Two-thirds of Republican mothers work outside the home; the percentage is only three per cent higher for Democratic mothers. Democratic women have their first child at twenty-five, on average, just one year later than Republican women. Eighty-six per cent of Democratic parents and eighty-eight per cent of Republican parents think of parenting as one of the most important parts of their identity. Women on the left want children; women on the right get abortions.

DRIVE-THRU MOM



There are many millions of women, mostly white—forty-five per cent of them voted for Trump in this election—who are drawn to the archetypal conservative vision of motherhood. But the gendered gulf in the youth vote suggests that the fight is changing, as women in the middle of the political spectrum begin to vote, post-Roe, on the basis of their actual lives. The possibility of a national abortion ban is looming. The lawyer behind Senate Bill 8, Texas's abortion-bounty law, is closely allied with Trump and recently represented him before the Supreme Court. Project 2025 outlines a plan for formal federal surveillance of pregnancy. This is what so many young men, straight men who want women to bear their children, voted for. The fight is now peer-to-peer, between men in favor of reproductive servitude and women who refuse.

Trump's return to power—his imminent control over the Supreme Court and the federal judiciary, the coming dissolution of the very idea of the government providing any sort of guardrail against corporate power, carceral violence, and environmental destruction—is the beginning of a political era that will likely last decades. So much of it will be worked out on a level that the ordinary person mostly cannot touch. But this particular part—the politics of abortion, the struggle of who gets to determine when and why and how a person has a child, the question of who and what a woman works for—will also be negotiated at home. In her study of marriage “Parallel Lives,”

the critic Phyllis Rose argues that “marriage is the primary political experience in which most of us engage as adults.” There is a reason that both campaigns have, in different ways, embraced the framing of their political fights as marital dramas.

For those of us whom God made heterosexual, the intimate realm is politicized now more than ever. But it’s from this foundation that we find a way out. It’s from here, in the arena of flesh and friction and surprise and transcendence—an arena that may be increasingly foreign to screen-bound, isolated, radicalized young men, and rightfully unappealing to their female counterparts—that we learn not just when to take up arms against another person but when to try harder to see them, or allow them to change us. It’s here that we learn how badly we need one another, in the end. ♦

Dispatches

After Trump's Reëlection, How Can Americans Rebuild a Common Life?

Visiting the site where the Civil War began, for clues on how the cold war of the present may end.

By Adam Gopnik

November 07, 2024



Last weekend, with the testing of liberal democracy days away, I found myself in Charleston, South Carolina, and decided to go out to Fort Sumter, where the Civil War began, and the last greatest threat to the possibility of something recognizably like a free country took place. Charleston is a city with a double consciousness, even more acute than most American places: it is among the prettiest and most welcoming of cities, with a unique density of charming houses—antebellum in appearance, though almost all postbellum in creation—that makes even the nicest parts of Beacon Hill, in Boston, or Society Hill, in Philadelphia, seem meagre. The houses turn shyly away from the street, their verandas or porches facing sideways, as though keeping a secret. It was also, of course, the commercial center of the slave trade, a

business so fierce and so brutal—at least one of the markets where people were bought and sold remains—that it still beggars the imagination. Charleston is one of my favorite places in America; it was also the site of the first declaration of secession from the Union, on the principle of permanent enslavement.

I was there for a literary festival—an event at which authors meet to assure one another that they have, in fact, read all of one another’s books and forgiven all of one another’s reviews—but I wanted badly to see Fort Sumter, which stands on an island in Charleston Harbor. I have written often about Lincoln and the Civil War, and there was something about visiting the cradle of the last great conflagration that seemed essential at this time.

We took a ferry out in fine company: families pushing babies in those giant strollers that are an appurtenance of our times; retired people walking with canes; Clemson college kids out for a getaway; and, of course, baseball-capped men. None were explicitly *MAGA* caps—most bore the names of local college-football teams. But if the polls and the past were to be believed, and if their soft Southern accents were to be trusted, I had to assume that the majority of them would vote for a person who seemed to so many of us to be a crazed, enraged tribune from, bizarrely, our own home town, New York—a demagogue who is a pure product of eighties tabloid New York and who would spend no time in “red” America, Mar-a-Lago aside, if he could help it. How could Americans be such nice and decent people and support someone so debasing, so deranged, so hate-filled?

It was the same question, of course, that people were asking in 1861—although theirs had a more toxic immediate cause. Slavery is a different question than submission to a mad king, but the fulcrum is the same: What do we do when what half the country wants seems so utterly at odds with what the other half believes—and when the most minimally decent shared view, not just of what our country might be but of what it is, seems so impossible to arrive at? No compromise, no acceptance, no shrug-and-walk-away seems possible. A breaking point, a firing line, seems to have been reached, some fundamental belief breached. This was why Lincoln fought so hard for an understanding in 1861—his over-quoted lines about the mystic chords of memory and the better angels of our nature were one last wistful wheedle, trying to bring into line those committed to a program of

permanent injustice and a brutal contempt for decency. It was also why Lincoln made the war-assuring decision to keep troops at Fort Sumter, with the flag flying. If the Confederates wanted to take the fort, they would have to choose to fire at it. If they wanted war, war they would have. General Beauregard, of the brand-new Confederacy, negotiated with the Union's Major Anderson, who had been one of his teachers at West Point, and then bombarded the fort—first shots fired.



The Union forces negotiated an orderly retreat from the fort after the bombardment, including even an artillery salute, and the war began. And then the Confederates held it for the duration of the war, until they, in turn, were driven out in 1865. “Fort” Wagner, the Confederate earthwork that was built to protect Sumter, a fort to protect a fort, lay just behind. It has now vanished into the water, but it was the place where Robert Shaw’s Black regiment fought its blazing battle, ending in a common grave for Shaw and his men together.

Fort Sumter now seems, like any legendary place, a little lost to time, diminished and rather chapel-like in feeling. The upper walls that withstood the brunt of the Confederate bombardment collapsed long ago and were only partly rebuilt—the fort, amazingly, stayed in operation until the nineteen-forties. The flag that flies over it today is the flag of thirty-three stars that

flew over it in 1861. (Three more stars appeared during the course of the war, and the park ranger supervising our visit asked if anyone knew which states they were. The answers came back with surprising, Civil War-buff readiness: Kansas, West Virginia, and Nevada.)

When the flag was brought down at around four-thirty, the ranger invited twenty visitors, volunteers at random, to go about the business of folding it. He explained that the triangular folding of the flag that we see so often in ceremonies is a relatively new thing; in the Civil War era, people just folded up the flag. And so twenty men and women, unified briefly in purpose though surely radically unlike in politics, went to work, coöperatively, in docile obedience. We folded the flag together.

None of us today has any idea of what the next few years will bring. Pessimists (I have been a loud one) may see this as a hinge moment in history, when the liberal-democratic consensus that began in the Western world right after the Civil War—a time when the British Liberal Party, the American Unionists, and the French Republicans all began to take shape—broke down for good. Those of us who believe in its values will seek refuge where we can. Political epochs end—our age of reason as much as any age of faith. More positive-minded people may feel today that the work needing to be done is remedial and incremental: a thousand small sanities ridding ourselves of the thousand small insanities that have brought us here (including some of our own encumbering progressive pieties, which have dominated liberalism in recent years and clearly alarmed more Americans than they delighted).

More than anything, we need to rebuild a common life. We are strangers, still trying to accept our common humanity while recognizing the profundity of our differences. The work of flag folding turns out to be solemn and coöperative, a business of collapsing the flag in half, then handing your half over to the folders facing you, then getting it back from them, to fold it again. In the end, everyone took turns holding the flag and took pictures of the ceremony on their phones. When, at last, I held the flag, stars out, and posed for a photograph, I felt at once united with my solemn folding fellows, and alone.

If there was moral to be found—or at least a caption—to that image, it is that the flag comes down and goes up with mysterious grace, and we fold it with strangers as easily as with our friends. We invest the past with meaning as much as we find it there. American history is stained, violent, inspiring, complicated, and long. There's still a flag to fold, and to follow. ♦

Dispatches

Donald Trump's Supreme Court Majority Could Easily Rule Through 2045

Democrats failed to make the Court itself a major campaign issue, but what comes after the Dobbs decision could very well be worse, and more far-reaching.

By Jane Mayer

November 08, 2024



Two and a half years after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, which for nearly fifty years had guaranteed Americans' right to make their own decisions about abortion, voters reëlected Donald Trump—the President who had packed the Court with the Justices who took that right away. Many observers expected women voters to lead a defeat of Trump, in what some had called the “Hell hath no fury” election. But although there was a sizable Democratic advantage with women on November 5th, it appears to have been smaller than it was for either Joe Biden, four years

earlier, or Hillary Clinton, in 2016. Exit polls indicate that the majority of voters, including fifty-three per cent of white women, spurned Kamala Harris, a female candidate who had made the restoration of reproductive freedom a passionate centerpiece of her campaign.

It might be tempting to conclude that most Americans approve of the Supreme Court’s 2022 Dobbs decision, which declared Roe “egregiously wrong.” But poll after poll shows that isn’t the case. In fact, the election provided additional evidence that a majority of voters, even in red states, ardently support abortion rights. Seven states—Arizona, Colorado, Maryland, Montana, Missouri, New York, and Nevada—passed a variety of ballot measures safeguarding abortion. Voters in an eighth state, Florida, approved a similar measure by more than fifty-seven per cent, and it failed to pass only because of a required threshold of sixty per cent. Similar ballot initiatives failed in two other states, Nebraska and South Dakota.

Yet all but three of the states that passed ballot measures protecting abortion rights appear to have voted to return Trump to the White House. This contradictory outcome suggests that, though a majority of American voters support abortion rights, they didn’t blame Trump, or the Supreme Court that he built, for eviscerating those rights. Although the Democrats made abortion an issue—one that ranked first in importance for fourteen per cent of voters, according to exit polls—they failed to make the Supreme Court itself an issue, despite the increasing extremism of the decisions handed down by its 6–3 conservative super-majority, and despite a [series](#) of [shocking revelations](#) documenting ethical lapses by several of the Justices, all of which have caused public faith in the Court to crater.

Mary Ziegler, a law professor at the University of California, Davis, who focusses on reproductive issues, told me, “It seems clear that voters who support abortion rights didn’t think the election would make much difference.” Nothing could be further from the truth, Ziegler warned: “Although the Democrats didn’t talk about it much, this is *not* the furthest the Court can go on abortion.” Trump, she said, “did a good job of dodging and confusing” the issue, by saying that he had simply returned the matter to the states. In contrast, when Harris talked about it, Ziegler believes, “her message was too backward-looking. She said that ‘Trump brought you the abortion bans.’ But that happened in the past. She didn’t show how it would

affect them in the *future*.” Legal issues are complicated, and they often don’t test well in focus groups. But, Ziegler told me, “I don’t think people understood what could happen in a second Trump term.”

The Harris campaign’s failure to explain just how much more extreme the Supreme Court could become under a second Trump Administration may turn out to be a major political blunder. There are numerous ways the Justices could impose even more draconian restrictions on reproductive rights. For example, the Court could permit the Justice Department to enforce the Comstock Act, an 1873 law criminalizing the distribution of abortion-related paraphernalia by mail, in a way that would allow it to be used to prosecute doctors or drug companies sending abortion pills to patients. Both J. D. Vance, Trump’s running mate, and Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation’s policy blueprint for a second Trump term, have endorsed this idea, and Ziegler believes that the current Supreme Court might well sign off on it. It’s also possible, she noted, that the Drug Enforcement Administration under Trump could withdraw medical-abortion drugs from the market. “If it set off a legal battle, it’s not unthinkable that the Court would support the Administration,” Ziegler said.

Meanwhile, at the state level, Republican attorneys general have already begun exploring novel approaches to further criminalizing abortion care. In Alabama, a legal challenge has been mounted over potential prosecutions of people who help patients travel out of state for abortions. Anti-abortion legislators in red states also aspire to pass “fetal personhood” laws declaring that, from the instant an egg is fertilized, it is a person with all the protections of the Constitution. Such laws would set up court challenges for any legislation legalizing abortion. If a state law permitting abortion reached the current Supreme Court, it wouldn’t necessarily be struck down, but, Ziegler said, “I don’t think you can rule out the possibility that it might come later. That’s the endgame for the anti-abortion movement.”



Leaders of the conservative legal movement, meanwhile, see Trump's election as a tremendous opportunity to push the Court further to the right, breaking through old guardrails, and to appoint a new generation of right-wing Justices who can cement conservative control of the Court for decades. In Trump's first term, he had the extraordinary opportunity to appoint three of the nine Supreme Court Justices: Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett. In his second term, if the two oldest conservative Justices—Clarence Thomas, seventy-six, and Samuel Alito, seventy-four—can be nudged into retirement, Trump could name even more extreme Justices as their replacements.

Ed Whelan, a conservative lawyer and a former law clerk to Antonin Scalia, wasted no time in sending out a smoke signal to the elder Justices that it was time for them to go. Right after Election Day, Whelan posted an essay on the *National Review*'s Bench Memos blog which basically handed Thomas and Alito gold watches—whether they want them or not. Whelan wrote, "I expect Alito to announce his retirement in the spring of 2025." As for Thomas, Whelan said that he expected him to retire "in the spring of 2026." Whelan acknowledged that many have doubted Thomas, who is famously stubborn, would step down voluntarily. But Whelan, sounding like a stern parent, wrote that "it would be foolish of him to risk repeating Ruth Bader Ginsburg's mistake—hanging on only to die in office and be replaced by

someone with a very different judicial philosophy. He will recognize that the best way to entrench his jurisprudential legacy is to enable a strong originalist to fill his seat and secure an originalist majority for the coming decades.” Whelan noted that, if the two oldest conservatives were replaced by much younger ones, five Trump-appointed Justices could easily serve until 2045.

Josh Blackman, a conservative professor at the South Texas College of Law Houston, believes that Alito may in fact be happy to retire. “He can hang out at the Jersey Shore, and go to the opera, and enjoy himself without the media trying to destroy him,” he told me. “What more is there after writing the Dobbs decision? Dobbs was the big one. It was the white whale, and he got it.”

But in the short term, Blackman said, leaders of the conservative legal movement have more immediate concerns, such as the reversal of the Biden Administration’s position on several current Supreme Court cases. For instance, Blackman expects to see a Trump-appointed Solicitor General reverse sides on the pending Supreme Court case *United States v. Skrmetti*, which challenges Tennessee’s 2023 ban on gender-affirming medical care for transgender minors. Biden’s Solicitor General has taken the side of three transgender teen-agers and their parents, who argued that the law violated their constitutional rights. A Trump Solicitor General could support the ban, making the case moot.

As Blackman puts it, abortion may now “fade away” as a priority as the Supreme Court’s conservative super-majority moves on to even more ambitious issues. Gloria Steinem, the longtime feminist leader, told me that the right’s restrictions on abortion might just have been the beginning of a larger assault on personal freedoms, and not for the first time in history. She noted, “We should remember one of the first things that Hitler did when he was elected—and he did get elected—was to declare abortion a crime against the state.” ♦

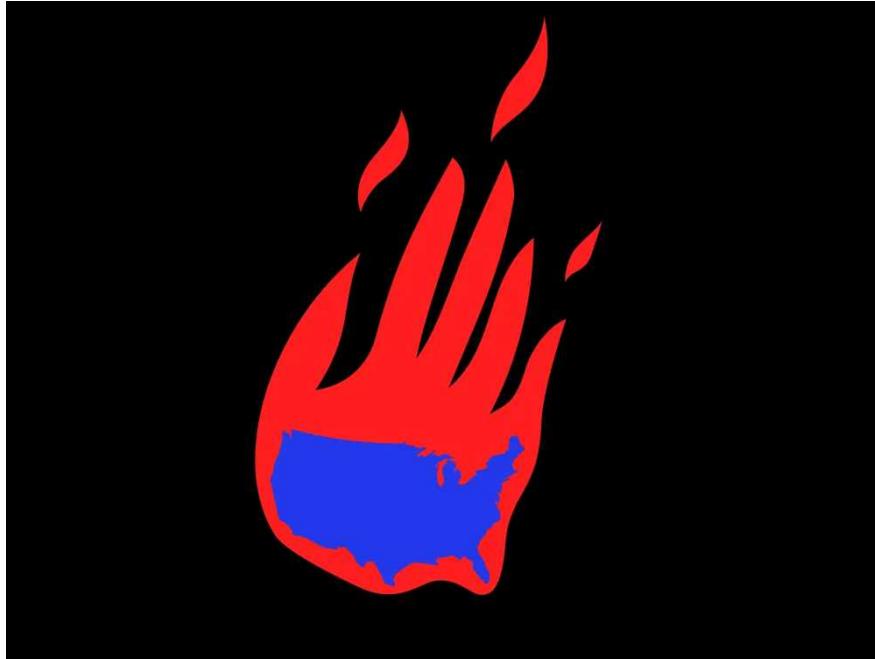
Dispatches

A Dark Reminder of What American Society Has Been and Could Be Again

How an obsessive hatred of immigrants and people of color and deep-seated fears about the empowerment of women led to the Klan's rule in Indiana.

By Annette Gordon-Reed

November 09, 2024



It is common, when some atrocious statement or action born of hatred comes to the fore, to hear people solemnly intone, “This is not who we”—meaning Americans—“are.” That sentiment leans heavily on the most idealistic vision of the United States, expressed most familiarly in our Declaration of Independence—the truths that “we hold” about equality and “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Of course, aspirations are necessary to strengthen the characters of individuals and societies. But it is equally important to face reality about weaknesses and flaws that contend with the will to be a better person or a better society. One of the best things about studying history is that it allows

us to see examples of both tendencies, and to be vigilant about the choices we make.

This year, I served as a judge for the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award. Timothy Egan's "[A Fever in the Heartland: The Ku Klux Klan's Plot to Take Over America, and the Woman Who Stopped Them](#)" received an honorable mention in recognition of its over-all excellence and timeliness. Why is it especially timely? Because it tells the story of how an obsessive hatred of immigrants and people of color and deep-seated fears about the empowerment of women led to the rise of a form of fascism in Indiana.

I knew this story from a class I took in college. Back then, I saw it as a fantastical tale from a never-to-be-repeated past. Now, at a moment when hostility toward immigrants has reached a fever pitch in some quarters—"A caravan from Mexico is coming," "They're eating people's pets"—and when disrespect for women's bodily autonomy is driving policy proposals, what happened in Indiana back in the Jazz Age is a sobering reminder of just what American society has been and could be again.

The book recounts the harrowing story of the Ku Klux Klan's dominance of nineteen-twenties Indiana. The Klan controlled the entire state, largely through the machinations of one man: David C. (D. C.) Stephenson. A grifter originally from Texas, Stephenson became the Grand Dragon of the Indiana chapter. Although he never held an official government position, at the apex of his power he could proclaim, without irony, "I am the law." And many of the freeborn citizens of the American republic had no problem living under his dictates, even as he blighted the lives of their fellow-citizens.

The Klan had a strong presence in other states, too. Egan notes that the group "was the largest and most powerful of the secret societies among American men—bigger by far than the Odd Fellows, the Elks, or the Freemasons, and vastly greater in number than the original Klan born in violence just after the Civil War." In 1925, in a show of force, thousands of Klansmen marched in Washington. But the situation in Indiana was notable for having a single charismatic figurehead to whom many people eagerly pledged their allegiance.

Stephenson helped put the governor of the state, the Klansman Ed Jackson, in office. He controlled police departments, judges, and politicians, and he allied with them to promote the Klan's interests, which included terrorizing people whom he considered insufficiently American. He insisted that none of this was about hate; it was simply a matter of promoting Americanism. The presumptive outsiders included all nonwhite people, immigrants, Catholics, and Jews. Stephenson had his own private police force of thirty thousand men, who were given the authority to enforce the Klan's "law" by means of physical intimidation.

I venture that when most people today think of the Klan they imagine a relatively small and distinct cadre of men who emerged in the night to burn crosses in the woods or, occasionally, to drag Black people from their homes for lynching. The notion that the Klan could operate as openly and as brazenly as its members did in Indiana, using the government as an arm of the so-called Invisible Empire without significant opposition, says a lot about what is possible in this country.

I found myself wondering about the role of the press during Stephenson's ascendancy: Did the Fourth Estate do its job in exposing the extralegal control over Indiana? For the most part, it did not, except for one journalist, who, after writing about the state's shadow government, was assaulted by Stephenson's henchmen and jailed. (In truth, many members of the press didn't report on the Klan because they were sympathetic to the organization.)

What broke the spell that Stephenson held over so many Indianans? It's not that people came to their senses about the threat that he posed. It turns out that, in addition to being a grifter and an authoritarian, he was a murderer. In 1925, with the aid of his followers, he kidnapped a young woman named Madge Oberholtzer. According to Egan's book, he sexually assaulted Oberholtzer and savagely bit her body, creating wounds that became infected. Some combination of those lacerations, and the poison she took in an attempted suicide when left alone by her kidnappers, led to her death. She lived long enough to give a statement about what had happened to her. The sensational trial and the public airing of details about the Klan destroyed Stephenson, who was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. In the coming years, the system under which the Klan operated unravelled.

There's no reason to think that the animosity toward immigrants and the determination to control women that sustained the Klan and Stephenson ever dissipated. Instead, in the years after Oberholtzer's murder, people hid evidence of their association with the Klan and their enthusiasm for the man whom the law exposed as a monster. It is no surprise that the sentiments stoked during that period are still present, waiting to be aroused by the next authoritarian with a vision of "Americanism." What happened in Indiana could happen again, on a national scale. ♦

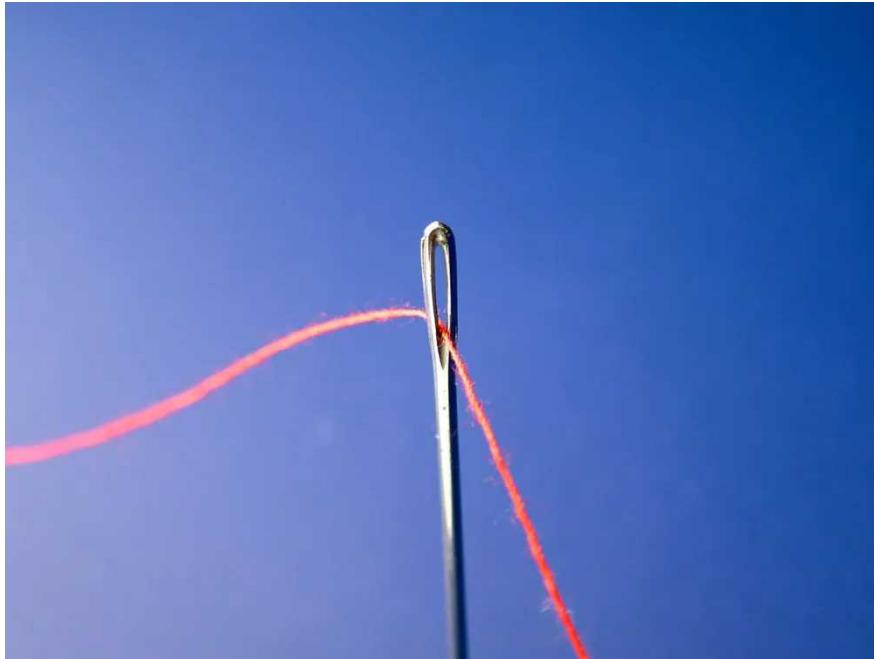
Dispatches

Democrats Tried to Counter Donald Trump's Viciousness Toward Women with Condescension

The Harris campaign felt the need to remind women voters that they can vote for whomever they want. Women understood this. The campaign failed to.

By Jill Lepore

November 10, 2024



On Election Night, my mother used to bring out her Singer skirt marker and plonk it on the coffee table in front of the television while we were watching the returns. Then she'd take off her shoes and climb on top of the table. Hemlines change about every four years, and taking up or letting down skirts is such a boring chore that it's the kind of thing best done while watching television. But it also requires a fair bit of attention—squinting to thread a needle, tying a knot and tucking its tail into a seam—so it's even better done while watching something on television that you have no real

interest in watching. My mother liked the idea of not having to keep track of time, liked the indexing of hemming every four years, but, as for what could best serve as that calendar reminder, she figured it was either the Presidential election or the Olympics, and the Olympics she would not have wanted to miss.

My mother died during Barack Obama's first term in the White House, but her views of the American Presidency have been on my mind this week because she was an original secret voter, the woman who keeps her views to herself, the voter the Kamala Harris campaign had been hoping would come out in droves and carry the Vice-President to a surprise victory. Everyone from Liz Cheney to Michelle Obama had been reminding women that their votes are secret.

My mother was a registered independent, and she made a point of never telling anyone how she planned to vote, or how she voted, and that most definitely included my father. He was an Eisenhower Republican who never kept his suffrage to himself. He voted for Kennedy, out of Catholic fellow-feeling. Aside from that, he never voted for a Democrat. But my mother? She was a mystery.

Still, my mother was not, as Democratic messaging this year seemed to suggest about women voters, a battered woman, too timid to speak her mind, afraid of my father. Abortion, not party loyalty, divided my parents: he supported it, and she did not. Before and after Roe v. Wade, my father, a high-school guidance counsellor, took students to get abortions, even when he was breaking the law. My mother, a devout Catholic, was deeply opposed. They found this unbearably painful to talk about.

“You women are doing a lot of thinking about a lot of important things,” a woman who looked uncannily like my mother said, in the first television ad aimed at women voters, in 1956. It’s a real question whether the ads aimed at women in 2024 were less condescending. “In the one place in America where women still have a right to choose,” Julia Roberts said in a pro-Harris ad, “you can vote any way you want, and no one will ever know.” I don’t think women, no matter who they were likely to vote for, needed anyone to tell them that. They didn’t need the Post-it notes on the doors of bathroom

stalls in public restrooms. And they didn't need the Democratic campaign ads that treated them as if they required rescue from their own marriages.

The Singer skirt marker is a twenty-four-inch wooden ruler that you can stick into a weighted base, something like a paperweight. Attached to the ruler is a little plastic pot that you fill with powdered chalk. When you want to mark a skirt or dress for hemming, you slide the pot up or down the ruler to the desired hem length and press a squeeze bulb on the top of the pot. Out poofs a chalk line. My mother, standing on the table, would inch her stocking feet around in a circle, twirling, in slow motion, while I puffed the chalk. We'd begin right after an early dinner, when the six-o'clock poll closings were announced. She'd twirl. I'd puff, and then I'd pin up the hems, pulling pins from a red pincushion meant to look like an apple, or a tomato. Sam Donaldson or Peter Jennings would announce the seven-o'clock results. My mother would disappear and come back in a new outfit, and we'd start again. Puff, turn, puff, pin.



"It's idiotic," my mother would say, about the tyranny of the hem. "But some things you just have to do."

Donald Trump has been more vicious toward women in 2024 than he was in 2020, when he was more vicious than he was in 2016. Liberal democratic

states make citizens, I [argued](#) earlier this week; the artificial state in which Americans now live makes trolls. If Trump had called Harris a “cunt” on live television on Election Day, it would scarcely have qualified as news. But the Democrats’ hoped-for pink wave—a game-changing double-digit gender gap in favor of Harris—seems to have been washed out in a red sea.

Between 1920, when American women got the right to vote, and 1980, when Ronald Reagan was elected, [women were more likely to vote](#) for Republicans than for Democrats, but only slightly. That changed with Reagan’s G.O.P., which abandoned the Equal Rights Amendment and committed itself to overturning Roe v. Wade. The Equal Rights Amendment failed in 1982 because college-educated feminists underestimated the sincerity of the political commitment of women who opposed it. Democrats reduced a much broader campaign for women’s rights to the fight to defend abortion; in 2022, they lost that fight, too. The premise of the Democratic strategy in 2024 was that abortion would get women to the polls and somehow, miraculously, that would translate into a vote for Harris. It did not. Abortion-protection measures passed in seven states and lost in three. As has been the case in opinion surveys since the early nineteen-seventies, Americans voting in 2024 favor abortion in the first trimester but not afterward. About half of Trump voters, like about half of Harris voters, believe that abortion should be “legal in most cases,” according to a CNN exit poll. Women went to the polls and voted to protect the right to abortion, within limits, and then, owing to a thousand other concerns, two in five of them voted for Trump.

Democratic campaign strategists condescended to women, which is what both parties have been doing for a century now. But the parties are now also divided by class and on abortion, and a great deal of Democratic messaging has involved college-educated women telling women who never went to college how to think about their own bodies, or their own very real American dreams. Trump liked to say that he will, as President, protect women, whether they want him to or not. The Harris campaign said the same thing, only with more celebrity endorsements. None of this is good for women or for children or for men. The Dobbs-era patchwork of unequal reproductive rights is a disaster, a public-health crisis that is sure only to worsen in a second Trump term.

On Election Night, I thought about my mother, but I also thought about a friend who had been in Alabama for work last year when she started to miscarry. She raced to an emergency room, but doctors there told her that there was nothing they could do for her: she was given an adult diaper and advised to get on a plane and fly the thousand miles home, to a state where she could get proper medical treatment. She lost the baby. This year, she went to the polls with a new baby, seven months old. “He tried to eat my ballot,” she told me on the phone. She sent me a selfie of them coming out of the polls, the baby with a sticker on his sweater: “Future Voter.” She was not wearing a skirt. ♦

Dispatches

How Donald Trump, the Leader of White Grievance, Gained Among Hispanic Voters

In 2016, the idea that Trump was a cloaked white supremacist made him seem like a fringe character. What does it mean that his popularity has increased?

By Kelefa Sanneh

November 07, 2024



Eight years ago, at the dawn of the Donald Trump era, Toni Morrison spoke for many liberals when she described his election as a reaction to the “collapse of white privilege.” In an essay called “[Making America White Again](#),” published in this magazine, Morrison argued that in the aftermath of Barack Obama’s Presidency many white people felt driven to “keep alive the perception of white superiority.” And she lamented “how eagerly so many white voters—both the poorly educated and the well educated—embraced the shame and fear sowed by Donald Trump.”

This vision of Trump as the leader of an aggrieved white America took hold broadly during the early years of his term, boosted by the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, scarcely six months after he took office. Some of the marchers, who objected to [the removal of a monument to Robert E. Lee](#), were carrying Confederate flags, and some were wearing “Make America Great Again” hats. After a counter-protester was run over and killed by a man who had praised both Trump and Adolf Hitler, Trump delivered remarks that helped define his Presidency. “You had some very bad people in that group, but you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides,” he said. (He also added a qualifying follow-up: “I’m not talking about the neo-Nazis and the white nationalists—because they should be condemned totally.”)

The idea that Trump was a white nationalist in disguise was horrifying to his opponents, but it was also seductive, because it made him seem like a fringe character, the kind of politician who might inspire a multiracial coalition of decent folks to rise up against him. Especially, perhaps, Latinos, since invective against Hispanic immigration was so central to [Trump’s 2016 campaign](#). Instead, in his second run for the Presidency, Trump improved his performance among Hispanic voters: according to a [Pew study](#), he lost that group by thirty-eight points in 2016, but only twenty-one points in 2020. The data seem to suggest that Joe Biden was elected President that year only because Trump underperformed among one group in particular: non-Hispanic whites.

This week, the notion of Trump as the leader of a distinctively white movement became harder to defend. Although exit-poll data can be unreliable, there are signs that, in his extraordinary comeback, he continued to assemble a coalition that is not unusually white but, rather, unusually nonwhite, by the standards of the recent Republican Party. For instance, Trump became the first Republican in more than a century to win Starr County, along the Mexican border in Texas, which is almost entirely Hispanic; he did similarly well throughout the state’s majority-Hispanic border counties. It is [possible](#) that Trump also made gains among Black voters, who remain a much more reliable Democratic constituency, but we don’t yet have dispositive data. One theory is that Trump does better among non-college-educated voters over all, including nonwhite ones; this argument is consistent with both his popularity among some traditionally

non-Republican constituencies and his unpopularity among members of the cultural élite, including [some former Republicans](#).



As the results rolled in on Tuesday night, the racial diversity of the Trump coalition was discussed across the cable-news spectrum. “What we’ve heard from both campaigns is that Donald Trump is doing a little bit better with African Americans, especially African American men, than he did last time,” Jake Tapper said on CNN, a little after ten o’clock, as Democrats were starting to fret. “It’s clear now that Donald Trump has picked up key support among Hispanic voters,” Michele Norris, of MSNBC, said about an hour later, as the camera showed grave-looking Harris supporters at Howard University. “Long term, Democrats are going to have to think about—they’re losing their coalition,” Katie Pavlich said on Fox News, at eleven-thirty-seven, by which point Trump’s supporters were ready to celebrate.

Considering the tumult of the past four years, it was striking how little the Presidential candidates talked about race this year, at least explicitly. In this abbreviated campaign, [unlike in 2020](#), Kamala Harris seemed intent on avoiding the subject. And although, in campaigns past, political arguments about crime have often been interpreted as [veiled appeals to racial identity](#), Trump tends to talk as if most American crime is the fault of immigrant groups—Haitian migrants, perhaps, or Venezuelan gangs. Claims like these

are insulting to those immigrant groups, but they are also flattering to a broad range of Americans, who can imagine themselves as part of a diverse country where all the locals are basically well behaved.

Late in the campaign, during a Trump rally at Madison Square Garden, one of his opening acts, the antagonistic comedian Tony Hinchcliffe, threatened to disrupt this state of affairs. He made a joke about Puerto Rico being a “floating island of garbage,” which for a time became the campaign’s top story. Nicky Jam, a reggaetón star from the island, un-endorsed Trump (“*Puerto Rico se respeta*,” he said—“Respect Puerto Rico”), and Democrats traded hopeful stories about Puerto Rican voters on the mainland who were angrily turning against Trump. But, like so many things that happened during the campaign, this didn’t seem to matter much: Osceola, a majority-Hispanic county in Florida with a large Puerto Rican population, swung from a fourteen-point Biden victory in 2020 to a narrow Trump victory this year.

It’s possible, maybe likely, that Trump’s second term will bring a new series of statements or policies that reinvigorates our old arguments about racism in America, and that gives fresh ammunition to critics who view him as a white supremacist in disguise, or perhaps not in disguise. It is true, too, that what it means to be white in America has changed over time; perhaps Trump’s coalition will help Americans rethink the assumption that “white” and “Hispanic” are mutually exclusive categories, and will boost a new version of the old white identity. But, as far as we can tell, Trump’s America is a place that is more polarized by education than it used to be and less polarized by whiteness and non-whiteness—by race, broadly understood. This switch, if it holds, may be bad for Democrats, at least in the short term. But if one party no longer represents whiteness so specifically, isn’t that good for America? ♦

Dispatches

A Fourth-Rate Entertainer, a Third-Rate Businessman, and a Two-Time President

The 2024 election, like the one in 2016, had the same nutty and vapid Donald Trump, the same retrograde gender politics, and the same result.

By Lorrie Moore

November 07, 2024



I voted at a Quaker meetinghouse in a swing state on Tuesday, Election Day. A poster in the window read “*WAR IS NOT HEALTHY FOR CHILDREN AND OTHER LIVING THINGS*,” but I would have had to reject the ballot’s main items and write in Bernie Sanders or vote for Cornel West if I wanted to support the candidate who was the best embodiment of this sentiment. The poster was not considered politicking, I guess. Someone had also put in the window a lawn sign from twenty years ago that read “*WAR IS NOT THE ANSWER*.” That particular lawn sign was from the early two-thousands and was widely put out to protest the Bush-Cheney Administration’s incursion

into Iraq. Quakers have a keen sense of recycling. As does the American voter.

I was disappointed that there were no cupcakes for sale, as there had been in years past. I felt my blood sugar drop. I was alarmed by the number of white men who had shown up to vote. The night before, strangely dressed young people had gathered in the street on my block, creating much noise and some litter, until, around midnight, someone called the police, and the interlopers got in their cars and drove away. Would voting be safe? I wanted things to be sweet and easy, but I had a hunch that even the foregone-conclusion states might be close. It was mid-morning: shouldn't there be a few exit polls by now? These were my thoughts and they gave me a headache.

If the Presidential campaign is a national sporting event designed to distract us from the lack of real democracy in our system—the marring and enfeebling of it by the Electoral College, gerrymandering, the disenfranchisement of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, the lack of a national holiday for mandatory voting, various decisions of the Supreme Court—it mostly works. We cheer from the stands and become eager for percentages, yardage, bases, and scores. Was democracy really on the ballot? I do sometimes like games. As I write, the popular vote is still being counted, even as Donald Trump has been declared the winner.

What is the source of his continued appeal? Trump's animal intelligence has slightly diminished and become a little more deranged. But his unique and inscrutable charisma is still apparently there, though its precise nature is hard to anatomize. Eye contact, ease, insouciance, a unique sort of ordinariness. The voice that in a large body goes intimately soft then intimately loud, Brando style. He is a third-rate businessman and fourth-rate entertainer, a husband to fashion models, a wannabe standup comedian who cannot land a punch line but floats language out into the air, hoping it will cohere, then flare, though it usually wanders into vapor and fog. As with much current standup, it can get raunchy and crass, but the *MAGA* people accept this lack of dignity. I was struck with puzzled admiration at his forty minutes of quiet swaying to “Ave Maria.” It was like performance art. He also did a skit at McDonald’s and one in a garbage truck. He will do most anything to avoid talking about actual governing, which he does not know that much about. He perhaps understands that most voters don’t want to

discuss that and want to just leave it to their elected officials. We are a country that is about money and entertainment. Trump was running as the embodiment of these. One PBS commentator used a Hollywood metaphor to explain him: Trump is a franchise blockbuster, familiar and splashy; Harris is an independent art-house film with subtitles.



The Monday-morning quarterbacking will take us through the next few years. But it's clear that the Democrats failed to learn that they shouldn't make the entire campaign a referendum on Trump, as Hillary Clinton did. Trump offered himself as a peace candidate in 2016 and once again in 2024, and, as we watched faraway cities laid to waste in this last year of the Biden Administration, the peace assertion was sometimes difficult for Democrats to counter. When Trump says he wants to nuke hurricanes, his true believers know not to believe him. They have accepted his whatever-pops-into-his-brain way of communicating and have labelled it "unscripted" rather than nuts.

Then, of course, there is gender. In the nineteenth century, women often published books under masculine pen names. It was assumed that even women did not want to read novels by women—femininity somehow lacked authority. So there was George Sand and George Eliot. The Brontës published their novels under male pseudonyms as well. Even as late as the

nineteen-eighties, female authors sometimes abbreviated their names to initials and were told not to use an author photo that was too pretty; readers would not buy that book. In 1984, a hit literary novel titled “Elbowing the Seducer” was published by a young woman named “T. Gertler” with no author photo at all. This was considered commercially savvy.

Viewed through this kind of warping and retrograde lens, Kamala Harris might have seemed too conventionally feminine for the central-casting inclinations of American voters. Could someone so petite and beautiful be Commander-in-Chief? Did she laugh too much? (Harris was mesmerizing when gracefully fierce, questioning Brett Kavanaugh at his confirmation hearing, or defending Joe Biden to Anderson Cooper, or debating an addled, bellowing Trump.) Would that she looked more like Christine Lagarde, a kind of French Valkyrie. Harris spoke about owning a Glock, which reminded me of the Vice-Presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro’s embarrassing moment during Walter Mondale’s campaign, when she spoke of her willingness and ease with the nuclear codes—just in case people thought she was a timid little lady. The nineteenth century was not over in the twentieth, nor in the twenty-first. “We will not go back” was Harris’s rallying cry. But the back came for us.

Nonetheless, let us hope that the Secret Service is on top of things for Trump, since J. D. Vance, a religious zealot, opportunist, and toxic product of debate-team culture, is even worse. He has got a head start on his sociopathy, slickly telling public whoppers at an even younger age than Trump did. He is more like a figure from Margaret Atwood’s dark imagination; may she not win the Crystal Ball Award, just the Nobel Prize.

Despite the sea of red on the electoral maps, it shouldn’t be forgotten that this election was close. A swing-state bright spot: Wisconsin’s beloved Tammy Baldwin, who has never lost an election in her life, squeaked through. Still, millions fewer people voted this year than in 2020. That alone tells a story of lack of enthusiasm, or perhaps of other disenfranchising conditions in our ostensible democracy. ♦

Dispatches

Canvassing for Kamala

Going door-to-door in Pennsylvania felt intense and hopeful, but after Trump's victory in the state a few encounters kept floating back.

By Jennifer Egan

November 09, 2024



As several friends and I knocked on the front doors of registered Democrats' homes around Allentown, Pennsylvania, the weekend before the election, and in Northeast Philadelphia on Election Day, there were moments that felt emblematic. The white couple whose toddler, wearing a rainbow "Girl Power" T-shirt, blew kisses to us from her doorway before the family headed out to vote for Kamala Harris. The middle-aged Latino man who turned away from the Eagles game on his TV to inform us that he was looking forward to having a female President, because "men can't get anything done." The woman of Central American descent who said that she'd never felt like an outsider until Donald Trump was elected in 2016, at which point people began making pointed comments, in her presence, about immigrants. Or the tall, silver-haired white man in his eighties who told me he'd never voted before the 2020 election, when he took a day off work to do so. "Not

to get Biden in,” he clarified. “To get Trump *out*. I don’t know how anyone can support him,” he added, glancing up his quiet street.

That conversation took place in Emmaus, the first area I visited south of Allentown, a municipality that includes blocks of modest, carefully tended homes tucked against a hillside ablaze with fall colors. An actual blaze was also taking place nearby—the East Coast is in the grip of a drought—producing a strange, amorphous cloud shape that hung over the region that Sunday. There were signs of economic distress in Emmaus (one apartment I visited had an eviction sign pasted to its door) but also an abundance of garden statuary, Halloween decorations, fall wreaths, and, above all, welcome signs—on doors, doormats, banners, placards, and wire structures. “Welcome Fall!” “Welcome to our home.” “Welcome, family and friends.” I’ve never read the word “Welcome” as many times as I did during my three days of canvassing in Pennsylvania.

I went to Allentown four years ago, too, on Election Day in 2020. I recall at that time there was more in-your-face signage for both parties, sometimes duelling across the attached porches of pairs of homes. This year, the political signifying felt lower-key, as if the majority of voters had agreed to tone it down. You might go a whole block without seeing any signs of political affiliation, except in the form of canvassers like us—and we were many. Outreach by Democrats was intense, well organized, and hopeful. Busloads of canvassers arrived from other states on all three days that I was in Pennsylvania, reminding people to vote for Harris-Walz. We saw a group of teen-age boys hanging door tags in Philadelphia on Election Day, and, for a while, we joined up with another canvasser, a local man in a yellow reflective vest, whose list overlapped with ours. At no point did we encounter Republican canvassers—a fact that felt significant, and buoyed us.



On Election Day, the sun bore down mercilessly on parched miniature lawns in Northeast Philadelphia; the occasional oak or maple trees were vastly outnumbered by elaborate stumps and depressions where trees had once stood. It was a freakish seventy degrees outside. The blocks of identical small freestanding homes, many with aluminum awnings shading their windows, reminded me viscerally of the Chicago neighborhood where my grandfather, a policeman and a lifelong Democrat, lived in his retirement. Here we encountered voters with Slavic surnames who had “We Stand with Ukraine” signs outside their houses, and an elderly Albanian couple who spoke no English and whose family members, two registered Democrats, were not at home.

At one point, a man who appeared to be Southeast Asian informed us that neither he nor his wife, the Democrat we were seeking (but never actually saw), planned to vote. “We will not be voting,” he repeated firmly, before shutting the door. It was an odd moment, but one that has returned to me since I heard the news that Pennsylvania had gone to Trump. That encounter, along with others that felt like outliers in the moment, keep floating back. We met a white man who looked to be in his late sixties. His wife, a registered Democrat, was not at home, but he seemed open to conversation. He was a lifelong Republican, he told us. The price of gas was intolerable. The Democrats’ claims that the economy was improving were “bullshit.”

Smiling, he told the two of us, both women, “I would never vote for a Black, and I would never vote for a woman.” We thanked him for his time, shook our heads, and moved on.

Directly across the street, in a house not more than eight feet wide, we encountered our only undecided Democrat: a woman in her early thirties who said that she’d spent ten years in the military. Like her neighbor, she was friendly and game for discussion, and joined us outdoors in a hooded pink bathrobe while her dog barked furiously from behind her front window. She loathed Trump, she said, but was deeply unhappy with the process that had led to Harris’s presence on the ballot. She called the pressure on Biden to leave the race “elder abuse,” and had planned to vote for Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., until he dropped out. We argued for Harris from every angle, but she appeared unconvinced. She hated the system, she said. Hated her choices. Hated the atmosphere of isolation that she felt right here in her own neighborhood. We were startled to hear this; several homes we’d visited on her block had stickers on their windows indicating that veterans lived there. The houses were cheek by jowl; the polling place was a church a few doors down. There was no traffic, and hardly any noise at all apart from barking dogs. With its phalanx of silent welcomes imploring us from every side, her street looked like the very picture of American community. And yet, she told us, she didn’t know a single one of her neighbors. ♦

Reporting & Essays

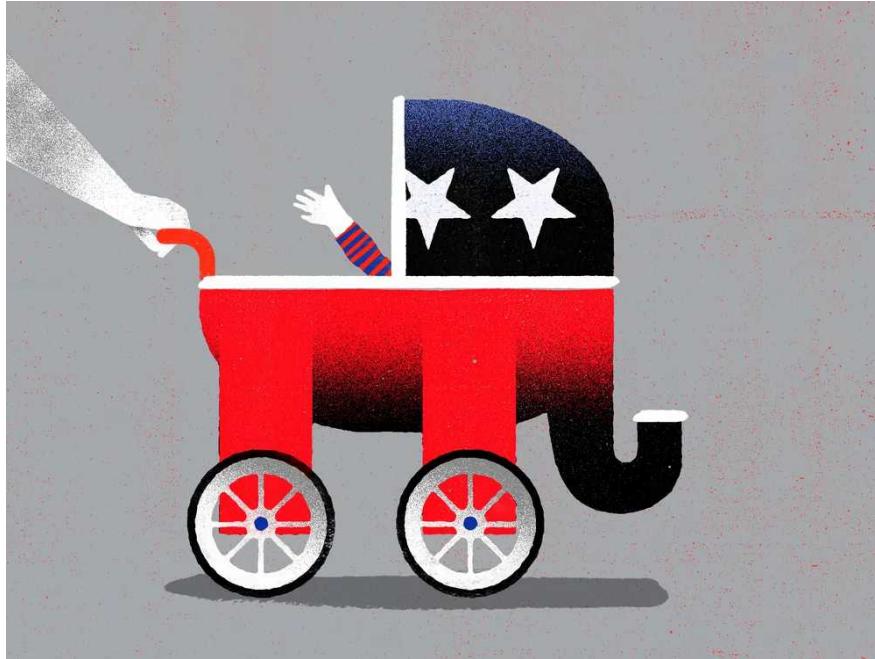
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The New Pro-Life Playbook

Under Trump, a new vision of conservative family policy is ascendant.

By Emma Green

November 11, 2024



When Donald Trump ran for President in 2016, the pro-life movement helped carry him to victory. He promised to appoint Justices who would overturn the constitutional right to an abortion established in *Roe v. Wade*. He followed through, and they delivered, with the Supreme Court's ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. But the decision was politically toxic for Republicans. After the Party performed poorly in the 2022 midterms, Trump blamed the losses on pro-life candidates. According to Gallup, six in ten Americans describe *Dobbs* as a "bad thing," and the percentage of people who say they're pro-choice is the highest it's been in decades. In order to win the election in 2024, Trump sidelined the pro-life movement.

At the Republican National Convention, Trump's allies all but removed abortion from the Party's platform, stating opposition only to abortions late

in pregnancy; there was also some muddled language about the Fourteenth Amendment which even conservative legal scholars had trouble parsing. A group of pro-life advocates, led by the former Vice-President Mike Pence's policy shop, Advancing American Freedom, published a letter saying that "pro-life Americans are rightly outraged and gravely concerned." Some pro-lifers went so far as to call on voters to withhold their support from Trump. Ultimately, though, the desire to stay in the *MAGA* fold won out. Other heavyweights in the movement, including Marjorie Dannenfelser, the head of Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America, called the platform "a set of common-sense promises." John Shelton, the policy director of Advancing American Freedom, told me, "The pro-life groups got rolled. And then they were asked to praise this thing that they got rolled on."

Trump assured voters that he would veto a national ban. His running mate, J. D. Vance, a Catholic convert who once said that he would like to see abortion be illegal nationwide, voiced support for access to abortion pills. Down-ballot Republicans got the message: in two dozen closely contested House races, almost all the G.O.P. candidates said that abortion was an issue for the states, not the federal government. Trump's electoral wins include states where voters also supported ballot measures to reinstate or reaffirm abortion rights.

Republicans have just spent an election cycle promising that they won't ban abortion at the federal level. Now that they've won, they will be tested on whether they meant it. In the Senate, it's unlikely that pro-life lawmakers will have the votes necessary for a ban, especially with the filibuster in place. Senator Marco Rubio, of Florida, who has supported federal abortion restrictions in the past, said that Trump has made it "pretty clear" what his stance is: "I don't think the Senate is going to be in a position to work on bills that you can't get sixty votes on, much less have a President sign." Trump appears to see the abortion issue in purely transactional terms—and the pro-life movement has little to offer him right now. Yuval Levin, a conservative scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, told me, "There's not a strategy where they can say, 'If you do this, you're with us, and therefore we're with you.' " Patrick T. Brown, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative think tank, said that a national ban "would require Trump to do something that he doesn't want to do. It would

be seen as him capitulating to the wing of the Party that he is not interested in kowtowing to.”

“The thing I’m worried about is the apathy on our side,” John Seago, the president of Texas Right to Life, told me. “The false narrative is that red states have stopped abortion. Some Republican legislators have leaned into that, patting themselves on the back.” In 2023, there were more abortions reported in the U.S. than there had been in a decade, with many women ordering abortion pills online, or travelling to nearby states to terminate their pregnancies. For half a century, Seago told me, the pro-life movement “had a very clear target,” which was to overturn Roe. “Now the target is more nebulous. We’re kind of in the early days of what the pro-life movement was after Roe. We knew there was work to be done, but we didn’t know how to get there.”

Social conservatives within Trump’s coalition have been workshopping a new playbook. They have a much broader social-policy agenda in mind for his next term: overhauling the way Republicans think and talk about family. The campaign offered a preview during Vance’s debate with the Minnesota governor Tim Walz. Vance pitched a sunny vision for families: parents should be able to choose whether to stay home with their kids, send them to day care, or make another arrangement, like getting help from their church, all with government support. There should be paid leave for parents who work. Child-care providers—some of the country’s most underpaid workers—should have incentives to stay in the industry. “We’re going to have to spend more money,” Vance said.

Although conservatives have long emphasized the importance of family, they’ve also fought aggressively against the kind of expanded government spending that Vance was suggesting. Even Walz seemed taken aback. “I don’t think Senator Vance and I are that far apart,” he said. Vance’s ideas are part of a tectonic shift that has been under way for a while in certain conservative circles—an intellectual vanguard that has variously been called the New Right, national conservatism, or the realignment. Players in this scene, such as Vance and the Missouri senator Josh Hawley, have advanced a vision for economic policy—raising tariffs, cracking down on overly powerful corporations—that puts them largely at odds with the G.O.P. establishment. Their underlying motivation, however, is deeply

conservative: they believe that these policies serve the traditional family, and will make it easier for parents to afford a house, hold down a middle-class job, have lots of kids, go to church, and not get divorced. A former Trump Administration official called it “the family turn”: an attempt to reorient Republican politics around what’s good for parents and their children, even if that requires the Party to embrace some policies it once considered anathema.“My party—we’ve got to do so much better of a job at earning the American people’s trust back on this issue, where they frankly just don’t trust us,” Vance said in the debate.

BAD FRIEND CARDS



For two generations, members of the pro-life movement were oriented around the political and legal goal of overturning Roe. Along the way, they lost the culture. The next Trump Administration will be staffed with people who wish to change that. “In 2025, there is a far more disciplined, organized, and politically and intellectually equipped cadre of people who are attuned to the realignment moment who are going to be going in,” another former Trump official told me. As Brown, the Ethics and Public Policy Center fellow, observed, “Pro-life is out. Pro-family is in.”

The Heritage Foundation, near the Capitol, is a shrine to movement conservatism. Copies of the Washington *Times*, a conservative D.C. paper, sit on the marble countertop where visitors are checked in. Legendary

donors have their names on the walls: Coors, of the beer fortune; Van Andel, of Amway. These are fat times at Heritage: under the organization's president of the past three years, Kevin Roberts, contributions are up around twenty-five per cent.

Conventional wisdom holds that the Republican coalition is composed of three wings: war hawks, free marketeers, and social conservatives. Roberts hails from the third wing. He started out as a historian of slavery, and then served as the president of a small Catholic college that became the inspiration for the 2019 Off Broadway play "Heroes of the Fourth Turning." After a stint at the Texas Public Policy Foundation—a powerhouse political organization—he took over at Heritage.

Since its founding, in 1973, Heritage has been closely associated with the Republican establishment, and with the free-market wing of the Party. Scholars at Heritage staffed the White House Administrations and Capitol Hill offices that solidified pro-business, pro-trade, anti-union, and anti-welfare policies as Republican mainstays. Roberts represents a shift: he is allied with realignment politicians who stand against market fundamentalism, crony capitalism, and foreign interventionism. The populist-nationalist right has finally taken "its hard-won place at the head of the conservative movement at this uniquely dangerous moment in history," Roberts said last year, at a gala for the magazine *The American Conservative*.

Under Roberts, a new generation of young staffers has joined Heritage—"very talented people who know what time it is in America," he told me. Many of them are pro-family conservatives who are practicing what they preach: there's been a baby boom at the foundation, with showers seemingly every other week. Roberts increased maternity leave to fourteen weeks and instituted a six-week paternity leave. He took down the donor portraits hanging outside his office and replaced them with the kind of photos you might find if you Googled "Americans": kids in Stetsons hanging out on a ranch, a veteran in fatigues hugging his daughter. Heritage is "the ordinary American's outpost behind enemy lines," Roberts said. Right now, he believes that those ordinary Americans are in danger of losing their country. One of his deepest concerns is that people aren't having enough kids—that the country is facing economic collapse, and national decline, as its

population shrinks. “We’ve got at most a generation to arrest this decline in birth rates, and therefore marriage rates, and therefore the health of the family as an institution,” he told me. “Or we will lose the Republic.”

The way to fix America’s decline, Roberts writes in a new book, is through family policy: “Our North Star must be striving to once again make a middle-class lifestyle available to every hardworking American family on a single-breadwinner income.” Everything must be oriented around this goal, he writes, including government spending. It’s not that protecting the free market and national security don’t matter, he told me. “It’s a difference of degree.”

Roberts is the face of Project 2025, the nine-hundred-plus-page policy wish list—compiled with the help of fifty-three conservative groups, and with two hundred and seventy-six individual contributors and thirty-four lead authors—that Heritage released ahead of the election. Heritage has been publishing something similar in advance of Presidential elections since 1980, typically with little public attention. But Project 2025 became one of the centerpieces of Vice-President Kamala Harris’s campaign against Trump. The mandate calls for things like deleting the words “diversity,” “equity,” “inclusion,” and “gender” from federal documents, and dismantling the Department of Education. It discusses reproductive issues extensively, proposing, for example, that the C.D.C. and H.H.S. promote fertility-awareness-based methods of birth control. (In February, the Alabama Supreme Court declared that frozen embryos could be considered “unborn children” for the purposes of wrongful-death suits against fertility clinics. Together with Project 2025, this sparked fears that Republicans also wanted to ban I.V.F.)

The Trump campaign disavowed Project 2025, with a warning “to anyone or any group trying to misrepresent their influence with President Trump and his campaign—it will not end well for you.” And yet many of the contributors may serve in the next Trump Administration. Roberts, in particular, is closely allied with Vance, whom he described to me as “the single most important person on family policy in the history of this country.”

Although Roberts said that there is a “zero-per-cent chance” of a federal abortion ban passing under the upcoming Trump Administration, Project 2025 contains all sorts of proposals to limit access to abortion through

executive orders and administrative rule-making—for example, calling on the F.D.A. to reverse its approval for abortion pills. Several of its recommendations appear to undercut the message of the pro-family right, such as a proposal to eliminate Head Start, a long-standing grant program that offers child care to low-income families, on the ground that it is “fraught with scandal and abuse.” Melissa Boteach, a vice-president at the National Women’s Law Center, told me, “Gutting that means that hundreds of thousands of children lose access to high-quality early education.”

But it’s also possible to see Project 2025 as a reframing of the conservative movement, in which every policy is considered through the lens of whether it supports traditional families. Some of the proposals are clearly related to family policy: the document calls on Congress to incentivize employers to provide on-site child care and to let their employees accumulate paid time off in lieu of overtime pay, so that they can spend time with their kids. But even the labor and trade policies seem crafted with the notion of family in mind. One lead author, Jonathan Berry, who headed the regulatory office in the Department of Labor under Trump, writes, “Our federal labor and employment agencies have an important role to play by protecting workers, setting boundaries for the healthy functioning of labor markets, and ultimately encouraging wages and conditions for jobs that can support a family.” The document also calls for a deregulated housing market that would make it easier for developers to build homes that young families can afford; trade policies that would reinvigorate America’s manufacturing base and allow workers to provide for their families; and laws requiring employers to pay time and a half on Saturdays and Sundays, creating an American work culture that’s more friendly to families who keep a Sabbath.

Whether or not its proposals will hold sway with the second Trump Administration, Project 2025 signals the rising power of a bloc of conservatives who challenge the former Republican consensus. Roberts, in his book, disses Friedrich Hayek, the economic guru of the right, calling him “some long-dead Austrian aristocrat.” He claims that “Republicans have lost the plot” on economic policy since Reagan, failing to invest in actually making things. “The recalcitrance of many wax-museum conservatives to support the American family with any policies besides aggressive tax cuts for big corporations is truly shocking and shameful,” he writes. The process

of compiling Project 2025 allowed “some of that fractiousness” among conservatives “to heal,” Roberts said.

The family turn reflects the newly remade Republican Party, which is more working class and racially diverse than it has been in the past: according to early exit polls and surveys, Trump won significantly more Black and Latino voters in 2024 than he did in previous elections. These voters want to know that their politicians care about the high cost of living and housing. Rubio told me, “You can’t be the Little League coach if you’re unemployed and struggling to find work and raise your family.”

Democrats, of course, talk about these things, too, but the core goals of liberal and conservative family policy tend to diverge. For Democrats, the mission is often lifting families out of poverty, whereas conservatives want to ease the way for people who have kids, or who want them. On the campaign trail, both Vance and Harris advocated increasing the child tax credit, which gives working parents a break on their taxes. In August, Vance didn’t show up for a Senate vote on a tax bill that would have expanded the credit. Many Republicans objected to the bill over the issue of refundability—they didn’t want low-income families who don’t owe much in taxes, or who don’t file them, to get this money from the government to help with the cost of their kids. Republicans typically oppose making tax credits refundable because they’re worried about creating a new form of welfare. And yet, as Boteach, at the National Women’s Law Center, said, “Children don’t cost less when you have lower incomes.” Republican opposition to refundability, she continued, “ends up hurting families that are headed by a single mom, Black families, and Latino families.”

Perhaps the biggest question dividing pro-family Democrats and Republicans is what kinds of families they want to promote. The consensus on the left is that it’s not the government’s job to encourage people to have kids or to be married. “I think the tax code should be as neutral as possible on those questions,” Boteach said. Conservatives believe the opposite: that it’s affirmatively good—for society, and for the economy—for people to get married, stay married, and have kids. They believe that religion is healthy for families, and that the government should give as much runway as possible to religious communities. What remains an open question is how

their new family-policy agenda would account for the many families in the United States who don't fit that mold.



Realignment conservatives often argue that federal spending is biased toward getting both parents to work and to put their kids in day care. Scholars at Heritage have batted around the possibility of a “family flexible savings account,” which would allow families to take money they would pay in income taxes and put it toward education, child care, health care, and housing, with bonuses for the third baby and beyond. “I’m enamored with that idea,” Roberts told me. Some of the policies that pro-family conservatives have pushed—such as banning hormones and surgeries for transgender kids—are wildly controversial. Others, such as regulating and placing age limits on social-media sites, have cross-partisan appeal. “We live in a moment when the conservative movement, especially when we think about President Trump’s politics and campaign, is really diverse,” Roberts said. “We probably need to be talking about things we agree on.” By focussing on family policy, he wants to have a conversation that “at least temporarily sidesteps the very clear differences that Americans have on abortion.”

And yet there are fundamental differences that will never be resolved. Most progressives see the right to an abortion as an essential feature of family

policy. “I don’t think any amount of social spending is going to make up for the loss of bodily autonomy,” Boteach said. “It is a miscalculation to think that you can whitewash anti-choice policies, stripping away people’s bodily autonomy and trying to dangle something in front of them to make them forget that.”

A major testing ground for family policy is the place where the current abortion landscape took shape: Mississippi, the state spotlighted in Dobbs. The woman behind that case, and behind efforts to expand family policy in Mississippi, is the state’s attorney general, Lynn Fitch. “It is our charge today, in this new Dobbs era, to channel that same determination and hope and prayer that has led you to these streets for fifty years,” Fitch told activists at the March for Life in 2023. “Use it to make more affordable, quality child care, and make it more accessible. Use it to promote workplace flexibility.” During the past two years, Fitch has helped secure state child-care tax credits for low- and middle-income families, expanded tax credits for parents who adopt kids, and made it possible for women to seek missing child-support payments even after their kids turn eighteen. Over what her staff described as vigorous pushback from some Republicans in the state legislature, Fitch helped enact a Medicaid expansion, allowing poor women to be covered for up to a year postpartum. Fitch and her staff also tout the half-dozen baby boxes in the state, where one can safely give up a newborn without fear of legal repercussions. So far, no babies have appeared.

Other initiatives have proved harder to advance. Since the Affordable Care Act was passed, in 2010, states have had the option to expand eligibility for Medicaid for everyone who qualifies, not just pregnant women, allowing more people to get health-care coverage; fourteen years later, Mississippi is one of ten states that still hasn’t done so. Fitch favors the expansion, which would benefit poor women and families, but “there are pretty strong feelings within the Republican side” resisting it, Michelle Williams, Fitch’s chief of staff, told me. Mississippi doesn’t have paid parental leave for state employees, something Fitch has advocated for. She has proposed a streamlined process for getting nonviolent misdemeanors expunged from criminal records, on the ground that the laborious process takes parents away from their kids and keeps people from getting jobs, but there’s also opposition to that effort.

Following the 2024 election, there will be twelve states, including Mississippi, that fully ban abortion with limited exceptions, such as in cases of rape or danger to the mother's life. Seven states will have gestational limits in place, ranging from around six weeks to eighteen weeks. According to a report from the Ethics and Public Policy Center, all of those states have passed laws to aid families in the wake of Dobbs. Tennessee offers free diapers for children under two to poor families; Ohio lets breast-feeding mothers get off jury duty.

These efforts can seem paltry given the level of need among families. "I take everything that Lynn Fitch is saying with a grain of salt," Oleta Garrett Fitzgerald, the Southern regional director for the Children's Defense Fund, told me. "Mississippi's racism, which has bled into ideology and public policy, has for the most part focussed on making it as difficult as possible for families in need to access resources." Garrett Fitzgerald pointed out that Fitch has referred to her endeavor as giving "a hand up and not a handout," a framing that Garrett Fitzgerald considers degrading. "People in this state paint poverty as if it's all Black, and that it's Black people not wanting to work," Garrett Fitzgerald said. In fact, direct government welfare for the poor is extremely limited in Mississippi. "One of the leading causes of family breakdown is poverty," Garrett Fitzgerald said. "We have to address the level of poverty in the state."

In general, Mississippi has done much more to legislate against abortion than to promote life. The heavily Republican state government has been unwilling to take major steps to protect the health of pregnant women. In the past few years, the state's maternal-mortality rate, which was already higher than the national average, has been rising. A review published by the state's Department of Health in 2023 cited a full Medicaid expansion and paid family leave as basic measures that the government could take to make women safer. Michelle Owens, an ob-gyn specializing in maternal-fetal medicine in Mississippi, who led the review, told me, "It is sometimes frustrating to feel like you're saying things over and over again, and the story is not changing."

As Republicans prepare to retake power in Washington, there will be significant jostling as different parts of the coalition vie for influence. Tim Carney, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, described talking

about family policy at a recent conference. “One of the questions I got was ‘How does subsidizing family fit in with conservatism, which basically says that it should be an individual responsibility to raise a family, not a government responsibility?’” he said. According to Carney, that attitude is shifting: “The younger crowd of conservatives doesn’t have the instinctual libertarianism that Reagan-era and Bush-era conservatives do on these questions.” One example is Oren Cass, the founder of American Compass, a think tank that wants to end the free-market fundamentalism of the G.O.P. “The decision to form a family and raise children . . . is the basic obligation of life and citizenship,” he wrote last year. A capitalism that is neutral about that “has no future, and does not deserve one.” Compass is something of a revolving door for Senate staffers and potential future White House aides who are interested in family policy. Staffers in the offices of Vance and Rubio spent time with the organization. Jonathan Berry, the former Trump official who worked on Project 2025, is a Compass adviser. He is committed to the notion that the government can, and should, try to shape people’s decisions around marriage and kids—and that it can do so creatively. “If you care about life issues, you ought to care about the supply of marriageable men,” he told me. That is “affected very heavily by education policy and trade policy and all kinds of other public policies that you don’t think of, conventionally, as social policy.”

Berry has come to see the decline of marriage and birth rates in the U.S. largely as a function of the warped concentration of money, influence, and power among the educated élite. This has piqued the interest of some on the left, who share his belief that the economy needs an overhaul, albeit for different reasons. “I’m starting to build relationships with the hipster antitrust scene, although we disagree on plenty,” Berry said. The godfather of that scene is Matt Stoller, a former Democratic Senate staffer who writes an influential newsletter on monopolies and antitrust issues. “If you look at what is the fresh, interesting thinking, it’s all realignment right,” Stoller told me. But, in his view, people in that circle have also made mistakes that alienated potential allies, such as scapegoating immigrants, promoting conservative judges who are hostile to regulatory action, and indulging the January 6th insurrection. “It’s a different experience, when you’re actually implementing ideas and dealing with politics and fighting institutions and dealing with Congress,” he said. On family policy, “I don’t think they’ve gotten there yet.”

The people in family-policy circles who have scored the most concrete wins are the culture warriors. The American Principles Project, a *PAC* and foundation that describes itself as “America’s top defender of the family,” channelled money into competitive races this election cycle with ads about keeping “men the hell out of women’s sports” and “taxpayer-funded sex-change procedures for minors.” “We’ve done women’s sports. We’ve done sex changes for kids. We’ve done D.E.I. and indoctrination in schools,” Jon Scheweppe, the organization’s policy director, told me. Like many Republicans, Terry Schilling, A.P.P.’s president, thinks it should be illegal for doctors to assist minors with gender transitions; this, too, is family policy, in his view. “How can you have families if your children are sterilized?” he asked.

Other segments of the Trump coalition dismiss family policy, especially in the overwhelmingly secular Barstool Sports contingent of the *MAGAverse*. Dave Portnoy, the founder of Barstool, recently tweeted a video of Vance proposing an increased child tax credit. “This is fucking idiotic. You want me to pay more taxes to take care of other people’s kids?” Portnoy wrote. “If you can’t afford a big family, don’t have a ton of kids.” Elon Musk, meanwhile, may be into pronatalism, but he doesn’t seem to care much about marriage, which those in the heavily socially conservative scene in Washington see as essential for the pro-family cause.

Yuval Levin, the A.E.I. scholar, told me, “I’ve been trying to make family-policy moments happen for the past twenty years. There’s always a sense that we’re in one, and then not much gets done, and it turned out we weren’t.” For all the enthusiasm about the realignment, Levin thinks that social conservatives are weaker now than they were in 2016—in part because of overreach. “The I.V.F. debate has been really terrifying to a lot of Republican politicians, and could easily cause them to be afraid of touching the stove on family policy,” he said.

And yet Levin sees family policy as the almost inevitable conclusion of the pro-life movement’s time in the political wilderness. Pro-life groups are realizing that they need to help people imagine a world without abortion. “In that sense, it’s not simply electoral—it’s much more cultural,” he said. “They have to show that, in saying they want a world where children are welcome and parents are valued, they have to mean it.”

The young people who came to Washington to work in Republican politics used to be overwhelmingly libertarian. “Today, they’re much more likely to be traditionally minded Catholics and Protestants,” Levin said. Schweppe told me, “What do realignment conservatives want? They want to get married young, have kids, and have economic success.” In conservative circles, the advice is to go start a family—“it’s where ‘Go start your own business and be a job creator’ was fifteen years ago,” Schweppe said.



Some young staffers are also choosing to live in Maryland, rather than in the expensive Virginia suburbs. If you were to draw an informal map of where young conservative politicos go to have their families, there would be a little crucifix over the Catholic hot spot of Hyattsville, a Maryland suburb that was featured in Rod Dreher’s 2017 book, “The Benedict Option,” about Christians in retreat from secular life. The Protestant territory might be marked in Cheverly, a neighboring area outside D.C.

I recently rode the Orange Line out to Cheverly to meet Rachel Wagley, the chief of staff for Blake Moore, a congressman from Utah who serves as the vice-chair of the House Republican Conference. Wagley, who wore a straw headband and tortoiseshell glasses with little makeup, drove up in a white Honda Odyssey with three car seats jammed into the row behind the driver’s seat. After I got in, she spotted a neighbor, a Republican Senate staffer. “Get

in!” she shouted out the window. He climbed into the way back, next to the booster seat where her oldest, who is six, normally rides.

We drove through quiet, hilly streets and rows of densely packed houses to a playground that residents call Cheese Park, in honor of its yellow holey climbing walls. Parents, including Wagley’s husband, Ted McCann, stood around chatting as their children played soccer. The scene was a casual Who’s Who of Republican politics: Wesley Coopersmith, Kevin Roberts’s chief of staff, greeted Wagley and McCann, who worked for the former House Speaker Paul Ryan and is now a lobbyist. A former staffer for Kevin McCarthy lived in a house not far from the park. The Republican star power, Wagley insisted, was incidental to the neighborhood. “Work is D.C.,” she said. “Life is Cheverly.”

Later, Wagley took me on a driving tour, pointing out the house known for collecting garden gnomes and the ones that are most competitive in the annual Christmas-decoration arms race. It became clear that Wagley would be well qualified to work as a Cheverly real-estate agent; she could rattle off the number of kids living in almost every home we passed, occasionally offering skeptical commentary about how this or that family planned to fit in a house with this or that square footage. We drove past the Cheverly pool, which has a five-year waiting list. (Wagley said that Moore approved her participation in this piece on the condition that she relay all the “Cheverly pool drama” of Hill staffers jockeying for entry.)

Wagley described herself as “theologically Lutheran, recreationally Anglican, married to a Catholic, and working for a Mormon.” She recently had her fourth baby, which she says she could do only because of her “uniquely awesome boss.” (“Congrats, you’ve met your Mormon minimum,” Wagley recalled Moore telling her, after she had her third.) Wagley, like other young political staffers, originally moved to Cheverly because the houses were affordable. Over the years, however, an intensely communal scene has emerged. A group of older women have started a stoop story time, where they read to kids in their front yards. “Every barbecue is more people than my wedding, but fortunately everyone’s under the age of seven,” Wagley said. “We’re, like, ‘All right, we need to buy ninety hot dogs.’ ”

A notable feature of the scene is the exceptional level of female professional achievement. This tracks with the rest of the family-policy world: Vance's wife, Usha, is a high-profile litigator. Katie Britt, an Alabama senator who recently introduced bipartisan legislation to make child care more affordable and available, sent her kids to day care so that she could go to law school. Hawley, who has been a strong proponent of family policy in the Senate, is married to Erin, a woman he met when they were both Supreme Court clerks, and who was instrumental in overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

The women of Cheverly aren't particularly invested in the trad-wife aesthetic, except maybe for one woman, who lives across the street from Wagley and makes all her own bread. ("She's German," another woman offered, by way of explanation.) But they do reject the reigning paradigms of American parenting—especially the norms of intensive parenting among the highly educated professional classes. Wagley described the path of the "customized child" in D.C. and its suburbs: dual-income families who move to northern Virginia and have one or two kids, whom they groom to go to an Ivy. (Wagley herself went to Harvard.) In a place like Cheverly, there might not be tons of money floating around, since the sort of women who are drawn there might go in and out of the workforce, or want to work part time. They might be professionally successful, and they might also value their community and family more highly than their job. During our chat, a neighbor texted a group of Cheverly women, including Wagley, that she was stepping out and asked them to watch her sleeping baby via a digital monitor while she was gone. "That's what's countercultural about Cheverly," Wagley said. "We're having kids in a different way."

This is the life that pro-family conservatives seemingly want everybody in the country to have access to. And yet, even in what appears to be a time of momentum for pro-family politics, the Cheverly life may seem unrealistic for most people. Even Wagley acknowledged this. "The policies we're fighting about are so funny," she said. A thousand dollars from a tax credit here, a couple of months of maternity leave there—"that's eight weeks. We're talking eighteen years!" Often, she said, these kinds of policies are "pushed by people who have such a small idea of what parenthood is."

When people talk about the right to an abortion, they're often talking about the right to choose the shape of their lives: to escape a bad relationship, to

get on their feet financially, to pursue their dreams without an unplanned detour. This world in Cheverly, and the conservative turn toward family, is also about choosing a vision of life: one in which people are bound by community, children are welcomed into a world that is built for them, and parents aren't alone in raising kids. "I am bullishly pro-life," Wagley told me. But "when we talk about pro-life policy, we have to talk about it hand in hand with supporting low-income women who are faced with an incredibly difficult choice. Pregnancy and the first year of having a child, for me, were extremely difficult. I was horribly depressed, and I had every privilege in the world. Republicans don't often acknowledge the depth of what they're asking these women to do."

She continued, "We're asking something huge of women by saying abortion is off the table. So we have to come in huge with options and opportunities for these women to thrive. We have done a horrific job in envisioning and painting for women a life that's achievable with children." ♦

Onward and Upward with the Arts

The Intensely Colorful Work of a Painter Obsessed with Anime

In a London warehouse pumping with dance music and movie soundtracks, Jadé Fadojutimi paints exuberant canvases all night long.

By **Rebecca Mead**

November 11, 2024



The studio of Jadé Fadojutimi, the British artist, is in a warehouse in South East London, with long skylights set into a corrugated-metal roof that reverberates loudly during the city's frequent autumnal rains. At eight and a half thousand square feet, the space initially appears overwhelming, but at its center Fadojutimi, who is thirty-one, has created a small zone of intimacy. A pair of antique couches—one upholstered in emerald damask, the other in ruby—sit back-to-back, offering opposite vantage points on a dozen or so exuberantly colorful paintings propped against the walls. Some of the canvases are completed; others are works in progress. Vintage armchairs are positioned around a pair of coffee tables, each of which is strewn with the detritus of millennial life: iPads, rolling papers, bowls of

fruit, vape pens, books, empty wine bottles, cooling mugs of herbal tea. Nestled in the corner of one couch is a plush panda bear, apparently well loved, its fur tinged with a rogue splash of citrine paint. Scores of potted plants encircle the seating area—spiky snake plants, opulent grasses, thick-leaved rubber plants—and a towering ficus tree filters the light from the skylights overhead.

Fadojutimi's paintings are, like the space where they are made, large in scale. Some of her canvases are ten feet high and sixteen feet wide, and she has gone even bigger. Within these ambitious dimensions, she creates intricate works that shimmer on the boundary between abstract and figurative. Amid vibrant gashes, iridescent arcs, and urgent lines, a viewer may discern the contours of leaves, flowers, butterfly wings, waves, or suns. But Fadojutimi's swirling images seem to capture a state of mind as much as they do a state of nature—they are always energetic, and sometimes ecstatic, blooming into color and motion and light. Like the cocoon improvised from domestic furnishings and greenery that she has installed at the heart of her studio, her paintings invite entry. They are an alternative place to dwell.

Fadojutimi received a master's degree in painting seven years ago, and since then has become one of the most prominent "ultra-contemporary" artists—a term that the art market has coined to designate practitioners born after 1974. She had her first solo exhibition at the Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, in London, in 2017, when she was twenty-four; less than four years later, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, mounted her first solo museum show. Fadojutimi's paintings have subsequently been acquired by numerous international institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, and the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis. In 2022, when she was still not yet thirty years old, she was included in the Venice Biennale, which was curated by Cecilia Alemani. "Her paintings have this power of dragging or sucking you in," Alemani told me. One of the works, she said, "seen from close up, looked like an abstract composition, but from afar it looked almost like the entrance to a magic forest."

Andrew Bonacina, formerly the chief curator at the Hepworth Wakefield museum, in Yorkshire, England, which presented a solo show of Fadojutimi's work in 2022, told me that he'd been impressed by her precocious command of materials—she often deploys oil paint, acrylic paint,

and oil pastels in a single canvas—and by the expressive quality of her brushstrokes. Bonacina compared her to Howard Hodgkin, the late British artist known for his fluency with gesture and color. “Howard would create abstractions which were deeply rooted in a place, or a person, or a moment,” Bonacina explained. “There’s a similar sense of wanting to capture something so fleeting and so personal.” He went on, “Howard said it took him decades to feel confident enough to know that this one brush mark was going to be the one that he wanted it to be. Jadé seems to have achieved that in a far shorter space of time.”

Katy Hessel, the author of the revisionist art-history book “The Story of Art Without Men,” which surveys the work of women artists from the sixteenth century to the present, chose Fadojutimi as one of three “new masters” from the current decade. “It’s so difficult, with abstract art, to create a new language, with everything in the twentieth century,” Hessel told me. She said, of Fadojutimi’s work, “It’s mesmeric. She sees the world in such an extraordinary way—she sees it through color.” Fadojutimi’s paintings have also received the endorsement of the marketplace. This past March, in London, Christie’s sold a giant canvas titled “The Woven Warped Garden of Ponder” for nearly two million dollars, about three times its estimate. The painting, lavishly inscribed with shimmery greens and blues and punctuated by petal-like reds and pinks, seems lit from within, like a stained-glass window at noon. It was the fourth time in four months that a record sale price had been reported for one of Fadojutimi’s paintings.



Fadojutimi works quickly. Some of her pieces are completed in a single session of a few hours (she calls these “one-hit paintings”); others are revisited later, so that one layer of paint gets veiled by another, like a scrim. Sometimes she props open one of her many notebooks, which are filled with vivid oil-pastel drawings, to get insight on how she might deploy color or form on a large canvas. But her paintings are not mapped out or even imagined in advance. Typically, she starts work in the evening and often paints through the night, to the accompaniment of punchy dance songs and sweeping orchestral soundtracks from anime movies. These rhythms leave their marks on her work, with a burst of color bearing the imprint of a beat drop. “It’s sort of like opera,” Millicent Wilner, a senior director at [Gagosian](#), one of the galleries that represents Fadojutimi, told me. “She dances in the process of painting. She kind of *boxes*. It’s somewhere between a fight and a ballet.”

In 2019, Fadojutimi became the youngest artist to have a work enter the collection of the Tate, Britain’s preëminent museum of modern and contemporary art. The piece was “I Present Your Royal Highness,” a canvas from 2018, in which a figure can be spotted amid lush jabs of paint. After the acquisition, Fadojutimi posted a series of images chronicling its making to Instagram: the first marks were laid down in the minutes before midnight, followed by a swarm of buttery circular shapes struck through with blunt

streaks and then layered with fleshy pinks and sanguineous swipes. Her documentation culminated at 5:30 a.m. The last shot was not of the finished painting but of her workspace. “I really enjoyed making this work which the last aftermath video shows,” she wrote. Paint-stained floorboards were littered with discarded disposable plates bearing what remained of oozing colors; pairs of cast-off white nitrile gloves lay in wrinkled disarray. The scene offered the unmistakable suggestion of a spent night of passion.

Earlier this fall, I made two visits to [Fadojutimi’s studio](#), where she was at work on a new group of paintings, a selection of which were destined for her first solo show in New York, to be held at the Gagosian gallery on West Twenty-first Street in November. Propped against the walls, or loaded on casters, were twenty or so canvases; scraps of paper bearing cryptic phrases—possible titles—had been taped alongside the works. One, reading “There’s no hope in this place once called home,” had been stuck next to a painting that looked, to my eye, like a marshy landscape seen through a lurid filter: a sluggish purple river; a bank of inflamed red reeds; a blue sun hovering low in a pink sky.

Fadojutimi had completed all of the paintings within the space of a few weeks, and a maquette of the white gallery space was balanced on one of her studio’s tables, with miniature replicas of her paintings provisionally stuck to its walls—a deck of colorful playing cards awaiting another shuffle. She had titled the show “Dwelve: A Goosebump in Memory.” Fadojutimi has dyslexia; she told me that, years ago, “dwelve” accidentally became part of her personal lexicon. “I used to say ‘dwelve’ instead of ‘dwell’ or ‘delve,’ ” she explained. She spoke carefully, weighing each word. “I thought they were the same word,” she went on. “It is a word that *could* exist—it speaks about how I move through life, dwelling and delving simultaneously.”

I’d first met Fadojutimi some months earlier, during the 2024 Venice Biennale. We got acquainted over a drink at a hotel near St. Mark’s Square; after we chatted, Fadojutimi, who had been wearing a colorful green floral dress and a matching coat by Gucci, told me that she was heading off to a personal-shopping appointment at Versace. “I make friends with people who work in clothes shops very, very quickly,” she told me another time, with a laugh, though she was quick to point out that the jeans and fluffy sweater she was wearing in her studio that day were not from a designer label. In

September, she went to Milan for the Marni ready-to-wear show—she took four suitcases for as many days—and a few years ago she appeared in a campaign for Loewe. Jonathan Anderson, the brand's creative director, told *Vogue* at the time, “There’s nothing more exciting than looking at a painting and you have no idea how [the artist’s] mind works.”

In an upstairs space at the warehouse, Fadojutimi has an office hung with her own drawings and equipped with a green chaise longue and a Chesterfield couch upholstered in vivid yellow. There is also a clothes rack abundantly filled with bright, patterned items. When we met there one afternoon, Fadojutimi explained that she keeps the outfits around as much for visual inspiration as for getting dressed. “I like to be surrounded by textiles,” she said. Before descending to the studio space, she changed into her work clothes: paint-spattered lace-up ankle boots, a baggy teal sweatshirt, and a calf-length silk skirt that swirled as she moved, as did her long braids, which fell around her shoulders and down her back.

PIVOTAL
MOMENTS IN NURSERY RHYMES



A blank canvas had been readied by one of her assistants. I had asked if I could watch her while she painted—but first we sat and talked. A team of six work alongside Fadojutimi, all of them her contemporaries. They form a social unit as well as a staff. “I get to make my paintings and still have a life within the studio,” she explained. Her partner, Marty, an abundantly

tattooed, light-footed Lithuanian artist who works primarily in collage, was there, as was Milan Tarascas, a sculptor and a longtime friend of Fadojutimi's who assists her in the studio. Fadojutimi had asked for a bottle of champagne to be opened; she rolled cigarettes, shuffled through tracks on her iPhone, and talked about books that she was reading. She was partway through "[All About Love](#)," by bell hooks, and had got her team to read it, too, so that they could discuss it. Fadojutimi has A.D.H.D., which, she explained, means that she doesn't always find it easy to concentrate on books. But she mines them for ideas. "[The Heartbeat of Trees](#)," written by a German forester named Peter Wohlleben, inspired the title of her show at the Hepworth: "Can We See the Colour Green Because We Have a Name for It?" Fadojutimi believes that she also has synesthesia, making her unusually sensitive to color and sound; when she's listening to different kinds of music, she told me, the tone of a room will change. "To me, color is a sense in itself," she said. "Color is feeling."

After sitting for a while in contemplation, Fadojutimi gathered herself to paint. "Marty, would you pick me a color?" she asked. He leaped up and threw a nitrile glove at a shelf of paints to make a random choice. It hit a shade of blue, and he started preparing a dish of the color. One of Fadojutimi's favorite materials is Interference paint, from a New York-based brand called Williamsburg; the pigment changes color depending on the direction of the light, giving her paintings a silvery or pearly sheen. Fadojutimi adjusted the playlist on her iPhone so that a tremulous orchestral track called "Flow Like Water," composed by James Newton Howard for the fantasy film "The Last Airbender," flooded from the speakers, and she approached the blank canvas. She used purple and pink acrylic markers to make the first gestures—straight grasslike lines and rounded shapes like chrysanthemum blooms—before adding what looked momentarily like a kindergartner's drawing of a stuffed animal: a circle for a body, another for a head, two more for ears.

Wearing gloves, Fadojutimi seized a dish of neon-pink paint in her left hand and a sponge in her right. She swept the color boldly across the canvas, then called for a bucket of water, into which she dipped two sponges, squeezing their contents over the paint she'd just applied, to create washes of color. With a round brush, she added punches of deep purple to the pink, then took up a flat brush, scraping all the pigment into a hard, tight arc before

squeezing water on it again. She then seized a fine brush, applying busy patches of teal; climbing on a step stool, she added lines that clambered up the canvas.

After about half an hour, she used a thick brush to put on the final element, at least for now: a horizontal bank of the blue paint at the top of the composition, like a twilit sky. She pulled off her gloves, stepped back, and sat on a couch to regard her handiwork. The painting wasn't finished, and it remained possible that she might ultimately deem it a failure. (About a fifth of the paintings Fadojutimi makes are never allowed out of the studio.) When I asked her how she felt, she laughed, and seemed initially at a loss for words—after all, how she felt was right *there*, on the canvas in front of us. "I feel like I want a cigarette," she offered. "I feel refreshed. I feel like I just had a shower."

Fadojutimi grew up in Ilford, a town on the eastern fringe of Greater London, the eldest of three daughters. Her father, a management consultant, and her mother, a civil servant, are British of Nigerian heritage, and in some respects her upbringing hewed to familiar cultural contours. She was permitted less social liberty than some of her schoolmates, and was expected to perform well academically—although, she told me wryly, "I don't have the *toughest* Nigerian parents in the world. We know this because I am doing art."

Fadojutimi was a solitary child and adolescent, aware from an early age that she didn't experience the world as many of her peers did. She preferred the classical soundtracks of Hans Zimmer to Beyoncé, and did not read the "Harry Potter" books. She recognizes that she spent much of her youth in a state of depression, although at the time she "couldn't actually understand how you could live any other way." She had a philosophical outlook on her condition. "I didn't understand why everyone cared so much about what other people thought," she said. "I am a person who removes herself rather than tries to blend in, so I also created my own loneliness at a very young age. But I also had the best time. It filled my world with music—it filled my world with color. My bedroom was my studio. I used to build worlds in there."

While she was still in elementary school, she discovered Japanese [anime](#) through watching “Sailor Moon,” a television adaptation of a manga series about a girl whose encounter with a talking cat inducts her into a new identity as a powerful heroine who fights evil. By the time Fadojutimi entered high school, she was a devotee of the genre. “I watched at least three hundred different series—I would sleep, wake up, and watch more anime,” she said. “I was really moved by them. I remember thinking, Wow, for how depressed I am, I am really *living* through these animations.” Fascinated by what she knew of Japanese youth culture, she began attending twice-yearly anime conventions in London, dressing in the style known as Lolita. The aesthetic is exaggerated twee girlishness: frilly pastel-colored dresses, ankle socks edged with lace, wigs decked out with oversized satin bows. “I felt more like myself when I was dressed up in these outfits than I did when I was in anything ordinary,” Fadojutimi told me. “You don’t even recognize yourself anymore. I was very into everything that was imagined into the real—dolls, cuddly toys, even going to Disneyland. So being able to play a part in that made me feel like I was existing beyond existence.”

After graduating from high school, where she had specialized in math, physics, and art, she enrolled at the Slade School of Fine Art, in London. Many of her classmates were far more sophisticated than she was about the art world—they knew which galleries represented which top artists, and had a much firmer grounding in art history. They talked about the concepts and ideas underpinning their work in a way that Fadojutimi felt unable to do. She told me, “I just liked color. Everyone seemed to think that my reason for making paintings wasn’t a reason at all. I was thinking about feelings, about soundtracks. Why does this anime that I watched three years ago still linger in my mind? Why can’t I let go of things like that, and why is it so hard to move on? I was having all these questions about emotions that weren’t therapeutic questions—they were very abstract.” She went on, “I wanted to feel these things through color, but I didn’t know how to express them. That’s where my paintings started coming from, but everyone was, like, ‘You can’t just make paintings from *feelings*.’ ”

Fadojutimi especially bridled against any suggestion that her work was, or should be, about her racial identity, particularly when the critical framework was derived predominantly from the experience of Black Americans. Her heritage, like that of many Black Britons, is one of immigration from Africa,

which has its own distinct and complex history. “It felt like a lot of the people who wanted to talk about what it meant to them to be Black would always lean upon histories of racism and slavery, and that never made sense to me here in England,” she told me. She hasn’t been to Nigeria, and, although her work has been bought by collectors who focus on Black or African-diasporic artists, Fadojutimi does not consider the lens of race to be generative for her art. “It was never one of my questions in the first place,” she said.

Imaginatively and creatively, Fadojutimi continued to be fascinated by Japanese culture—or at least what she understood of it from manga and anime. Having completed her degree at the Slade, she went on to do an M.A. at the Royal College of Art, where she had the opportunity to take part in a four-month exchange program in Kyoto. She immediately discovered that the everyday reality of Japanese life didn’t map onto her heightened expectations of what it would be like. That awakening was accompanied by a retreat into solitude and rumination. “To get my head around the realization that everything I had dreamed of wasn’t true was heartbreakingly,” she said, noting, “A lot of my stories have started with a beautiful depression where I have been forced to succumb to the fact that reality will always be different to your idea of what you want the world to be.” Nonetheless, she worked on improving her command of Japanese—she has become proficient, though less fluent than she would like to be—and produced huge quantities of drawings in which she began to find a language of her own. Japan remains an important part of her life; she spends a couple of months in the country every winter, and has found that it is an amenable place for her not only to paint but also to take a break from painting. Unlike in London, she is able to find a restaurant that’s open at 3 a.m., when she’s often just finished a canvas, and she can go out to eat alone without feeling unsafe.

Peter Davies, a lecturer at the Slade, told me that he was stunned by her development when he attended her R.C.A. graduation show, after her return from Japan. “Jadé’s work was extraordinary—something had happened, and it had completely changed,” he said. She had a new mastery of materials that combined the swiftness of drawing with the substantiality of painting. After graduating, in 2017, Fadojutimi was signed by Pippy Houldsworth, the London gallerist, who swiftly placed her work with collectors and in museums, in addition to connecting her with other gallerists internationally.

Gisela Capitain, whose gallery in Cologne is one of several that now represent Fadojutimi, presented a solo exhibition of her work in 2019. “Her paintings are wild, poetic, from time to time melancholic,” Capitain told me. As young as Fadojutimi was, she was also extremely self-possessed and ambitious: “She had her notebook, and had certain questions about how we would work with her as a gallery. ‘What is the commission?’ ‘How do you present the work?’ She is on the one side extremely clear, and like a businesswoman. And on the other she is like the most genuine artist you can ever imagine.”

Two years ago, Fadojutimi jumped from Houldsworth to Gagosian. “I outgrew Pippy,” she told me. “It was too personal. I didn’t want a mum anymore.” Making the move from a small, independent gallery to a global powerhouse provides an artist with substantial new resources; it can also exert unwelcome pressures, especially on a young person. Capitain said to me, “We told her, ‘Be aware—it’s a completely different setup, and it’s a completely different economic situation. It could be a risk. It could be that you have to make some compromises you aren’t used to.’ But she was sure that she could handle it.”

Not long after she joined the gallery, Gagosian devoted its booth at the art fair Frieze London to Fadojutimi, showing a series of seven works that some critics deemed underwhelming. In the *Guardian*, Jonathan Jones wrote that “her paintings boom and crash with color yet they don’t stop zinging long enough to let you sink into them.” In *The Art Newspaper*, in an article headlined “Be Ultra-Wary of the Ultra-Contemporary: A Triumph of Hot Air Over Real Value,” the critic Ben Luke described Fadojutimi’s offerings as “undercooked” and “apparently rushed out of the studio.” He also noted that all of them had reportedly sold for half a million pounds apiece.

Fadojutimi is not the only current artist who makes works at high speed—[Luc Tuymans](#), the Belgian painter, is known for completing canvases in a day, and the British figurative painter [Lynette Yiadom-Boakye](#) often matches this pace. Fadojutimi, who has always worked quickly, is sensitive to the notion that her paintings are rushed. She also rejects the implication that she, or Gagosian, is cashing in while the going is good. “People were seeing me as commercial, because I work fast, but that’s the way I am,” she told me. “I felt like I wasn’t being seen as a great painter but as someone who just paints

for money, which is impossible. I just know that when my paintings evolve I expect that to be reflected in their price, to some extent. Because otherwise I'd rather just keep them to myself." Fadojutimi said that, although it is nice that her work sells, she gets more gratification from having her paintings enter the collections of museums.

Not all critics focus on Fadojutimi's prices. Laura Freeman, the chief art critic for the London *Times*, reviewed Fadojutimi's show at the Hepworth, writing, "She paints with gymnastic energy and gloriously gestural brushstrokes. . . . Her lines can be as skinny as liquorice laces or as plump as prize marrows. Single colors run through layers of marbled paint like raspberry ripples. Is it weird to want to lick a painting?" She concluded, "Fadojutimi is young and green. She may yet be great."

When the pandemic hit, in early 2020, Fadojutimi was, at first, perversely grateful when the U.K. issued a stay-at-home order. Her life had accelerated to an exhausting pace. She told me, "Every time I wasn't painting, I was out of the country," travelling to the U.S. or to Japan, where she is represented by the Taka Ishii Gallery, in Tokyo. Although she appreciated the enforced break from travel and sociability, the confinement eventually induced severe anxiety. "I was more scared than I was brave with it," she recalled. Locked down at home, she started drawing obsessively in notebooks. "I had never made drawings with that kind of hyperfocus," she said. "It really opened up my painting language." When she returned to the studio, she applied what she had discovered; for example, she used oil pastels and pigment sticks to push aside liquid paint on the canvas, creating wormy, convoluted lines that gave the color an increased dimensionality.

Fadojutimi's works from that period are expansive and glowing—communicating a sense of openness that lockdown had placed off-limits. All was not calm, however; in the summer of 2021, Fadojutimi experienced a manic episode, and was involuntarily hospitalized. The incident is not easy for her to talk about, and during our conversations she initially approached the subject and then darted away. "They should have just asked me why I was dancing all the time," she told me at one point, with dark humor. Being institutionalized had been terrifying: "What was shocking to me was how scary it can be to be told that you have got to live with loads of people that

are unwell, and you are saying you are not unwell, and they are also saying they are not unwell—but *they* really are, and *you* really are.”

In 2020, even before that first hospitalization, Fadojutimi had been given a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. She had long suspected that she might have the condition, but the news was still painful. “I cried,” she recalled. “I always thought I was, but there were a lot of emotions in hearing a diagnosis. I obviously wasn’t living life like everyone else was. But I wasn’t living life *admiring* what everyone else had.” Her practice as an artist had been about figuring out how her own mind was ordered, and how best to give expression to her emotional experience. The public reception of her work had given legitimacy to her state of being, whatever the personal difficulties involved in making her paintings might be: the depression, the isolation, the struggle on many days just to get out of bed. “I’ve gotten used to being myself, and my paintings created this product of being that made me feel justified in my own, let’s say, findings,” she said. To have a label thrust on her felt diminishing and traumatic. She was also aware that a mental-health diagnosis can narrow the critical understanding of an artist’s work; the radiant œuvre of the Japanese artist [Yayoi Kusama](#), who has spent decades living in a Tokyo psychiatric hospital, is sometimes reduced to an extended act of “self-care.”



In the years since Fadojutimi received her diagnosis, she has experienced the cycles typical of her illness: periods of depressive quietude followed by manic elation. “Reality bleeds into this fictional landscape in your head,” she told me, of being in a manic episode. “You are still very much present with people, but it’s like when someone switches off the lights, or you are in a forest, and you can’t see, and your mind tries to make sense of it. Wherever there’s a gap for your imagination to fill, it’s filled—with something that makes sense but might not actually be true.” In this condition, she can be immensely productive for a while, but her mind eventually escalates to an unsustainable pitch. She has been hospitalized a handful of times, most recently this past summer; between our first acquaintance, at this spring’s Venice Biennale, and our meetings in her studio this fall, she spent several weeks in a hospital. Some of the paintings in her studio were made while on day release from the institution. (She was obliged to return in the evening.)

Given that these were the conditions of the paintings’ creation, Fadojutimi told me, she had decided to speak openly about her illness. “It’s become part of the paintings, and part of the energy that went into the paintings,” she said. Being bipolar, she told me, “makes my life a misery and a dream at the same time.” She remains under the care of a psychiatrist, and is resigned to the necessity of ongoing treatment, while also being skeptical of the efficacy of the approaches she has tried thus far. She spoke bitterly about the institutional structures for mentally ill patients in the U.K. “All the things that are supposed to give us better mental health—they are not there,” she said. “You can’t go outside. You can’t speak to your loved ones whenever you want. You can’t have your favorite fluffy things. You can feel like you are in a prison.” Fadojutimi wants to start a foundation that would aim to provide, among other things, support for mental-health patients who have fewer resources, and less influence, than she does. As an artist, she noted, she has a certain degree of license to live in an unconventional way—if she works through the night and sleeps through the day, nobody is going to fire her. Most people with mental-health problems are obliged to conform to society’s strictures. She also hopes to one day make a series of paintings inspired by stories she has heard from other patients. “I always wonder what happened to the people I left behind,” she said. “Did they manage to get help? What happened to Denise? What happened to Kathleen?”

The recent paintings in Fadojutimi's studio were disorientingly beautiful objects born out of crisis, but the best of them transcended the difficult circumstances of their making. They did not literally portray the challenges of living with mental illness, and they were not concerned with offering a narrative of therapeutic resolution. On one of my visits, Fadojutimi and I stopped before three canvases arrayed against a wall. Two of them were unresolved, even messy—"They're duds," she said—but the third was arresting. It had a black background, atop which Fadojutimi had layered reds and greens, in hues similar to the jewel-toned upholstery on her couches. As we looked at the canvas, Baroque music played in the background—Bach's cello suites, recomposed by Peter Gregson—and the painting itself began to remind me of Flemish Baroque still-lifes of flowers set against dramatically dark backgrounds.

I asked Fadojutimi what the painting was saying to her, and she laughed. "They don't *speak!*" she shot back. "What are you talking about?" It was an error to think of the painting as depicting the trauma from which it had emerged. "I think that's where the *energy* of the painting comes from, more than anything, but it's not something that I would literally describe," she explained. We looked at it a little longer. "For me, it's, like, wow," she said. "A lot can come out of life, hey? Like, you wouldn't be able to make anything like this unless you'd *lived*." She went on, "I am leaning my eye upon different areas of the painting, and then I follow a line and meet something else. And before it I am enthralled by its world. It's what I've always wanted. Another place to exist."

In mid-October, Fadojutimi and her team travelled to New York ahead of her Gagosian show, and I met her one afternoon at one of the gallery's Chelsea locations. She seemed excited to be under the city's high, clear skies rather than beneath London's lowering clouds. She was eager to get into the studio that was being readied for her—she wanted to keep making paintings right up to the deadline for their hanging. Fadojutimi also hoped to go to *MOMA* and sit immersed in Matisse's installation "The Swimming Pool," from 1952, in which the artist, then in his eighties, cut figures of divers and sea creatures from blue-painted paper and pasted them around his dining room in Nice. "At some point, I do want to exit the traditional constraints around painting, including this idea of it being framed by a canvas," Fadojutimi said. She is interested in sound art, and in working with textiles. "It hasn't

even been ten years of the career, so there's lots of time to delve into different areas of making," she said.

After we talked, a group of us headed outside and walked for a while on the High Line, which Fadojutimi had never visited. Her eye caught on the delicate blooms of purple asters, dotted at the center with chalky yellow; she said that she'd like to take armfuls of them back to the new studio. We crossed over to the British designer Thomas Heatherwick's Little Island, and climbed up to its highest point as the sun was dropping over the New Jersey skyline, bathing the city in an intense reddish glow. We passed a clump of ornamental grass whose fronds were covered with tiny petals that shimmered between green and pink, depending on how the light fell on them. "It was worth the walk for this," Fadojutimi said, emphatically.

On my first visit to her London studio, Fadojutimi had shown me one of the paintings that would soon be displayed in New York. It was among the earliest of this series, made during the period when she was still hospitalized but was able to go to her studio to paint for a few hours a day. The canvas had a radiant background of yellow—the same shade that the panda bear on her couch seemed to have brushed its fur against—that was layered with brushstrokes in red, purple, and green. Painting atop a colored background was relatively new to her, she'd told me, and she was excited by the possibilities it offered for illuminating her canvases in new ways. The piece had taken only two hours to complete, and the finished result resembled an overgrown bower, with antic shoots of new green growth and hotheaded floral bursts. On a nearby wall, Fadojutimi had scrawled a name for the painting: "The Generosity of Trauma." The title, she explained, was sincere. The darkest periods of her life have had their own peculiar richness, just as the brightest moments have offered fragile elation. Fadojutimi tries to keep one painting for herself from every show, and she was thinking that this might be the one she would retain. "I always keep the work that I know I'll never be able to make again," she said. ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [What's Your Parenting-Failure Style?](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

What's Your Parenting-Failure Style?

By Kira Garcia

November 11, 2024



Whether you're horrifying your teen with nauseating sex-ed analogies or watching TikToks while your toddler eats a bagel from the subway floor, face it: you're flailing in the vast chasm of your child's relentless needs. Why not get comfortable with your ineptitude? Discover your unique parenting-failure style with this fun quiz:

1. Your eight-year-old has been watching chainsaw demonstrations on YouTube lately. You wake up one morning to a loud buzzing from the back yard, followed by a crash. Do you:
 - (a) Put an extra frozen waffle in the toaster—sounds like she's working up an appetite.
 - (b) Performatively yell at her so that the neighbors can hear, but then, in private, praise her—those landscaping skills will pay for college.

(c) Chuckle into your cannabis-infused morning smoothie and turn up the volume on “The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives.”

2. You’re about to board a six-hour flight home from a family vacation, and your five-year-old, who just ate twelve very ripe plums, says his tummy hurts. Do you:

(a) Tape the lower half of his body into a duty-free bag and hope for the best.

(b) Take a business-class upgrade—the last one available—and wish your spouse good luck.

(c) Say, “What’s your name, young man? You’re a little young to be travelling alone!,” so that everyone can hear.

3. Your mother-in-law took your fourteen-year-old to see a foreign film. Over lunch at Olive Garden afterward, he wonders aloud about a specific sexual practice that a character in the movie refers to. Do you:

(a) Tell him to ask the server about it.

(b) Describe it, using breadsticks and onion rings as visual aids.

(c) Put on a Chappell Roan playlist and hope he figures it out.

4. Your sixth grader is doing makeup tutorials on Instagram that include shoplifting tips and savage descriptions of her science teacher’s appearance. Do you:

(a) Tell her to try harder next time—she didn’t even mention Mr. Welch’s hideous breath.

(b) Monetize her platform—you’ll need cash for bail one day.

(c) Explain that her glow definitely *doesn’t* come from within, and her frosted blush isn’t doing her any favors.

5. Your adult child is pregnant with her guru's baby and asks to borrow ten thousand dollars so the two of them can start a colonic-hydrotherapy center together. Do you:

- (a) Refuse—she's been rejecting *your* guru's advances for years, so this just feels rude.
- (b) Explain that your long-distance fiancé, Stanislav, has all your money tied up in a bitcoin mine.
- (c) Tell her you'll send twenty thousand if she gives you the placenta to use in a facial. ♦

Fiction

- [Heavy Snow](#)

Fiction

Heavy Snow

By Han Kang

November 10, 2024



Kyungha-ya.

That was the entirety of Inseon's message: my name.

I met Inseon the year I graduated. I was hired by a magazine where the writers mostly took their own photographs, but for important interviews and travel articles we'd pair up with freelancers we'd booked ourselves. Going on the road meant as many as three nights and four days spent in company, and, on the advice of my colleagues, who said it was best for women to team up with women and men with men, I called several photo production houses until I was introduced to Inseon, who happened to be the same age as me. For the next three years, until I left the magazine, Inseon and I went on monthly assignments together. We'd been friends for well over two decades by now, and I knew most of her habits. When she started a conversation with my name, I knew she wasn't simply checking in but had something specific and urgent she wanted to discuss.

Hi. Is everything all right? I removed my woollen glove to send my reply, then waited. I was pulling the glove back on when another text arrived.

Can you come right away?

Inseon didn't live in Seoul anymore. She was an only child, born when her mother was nearing forty, and thus encountered her mother's growing frailty earlier than most. Eight years ago, she had returned to a mountain village in Jeju to care for her mother, who was in the early stages of dementia and whom she lost four years later; she'd remained in that house on her own ever since. Before she left, Inseon and I used to drop by each other's place all the time to cook and eat together and to catch up, but what with the physical distance, our visits had grown less frequent. Eventually, the interval grew to an entire year, then two. My most recent trip to Jeju had been in the autumn of the previous year. During the four days I'd stayed with her, in her unassuming stone house with exposed wooden beams, she'd introduced me to a pair of small white budgies she'd brought home from a market two years ago. One of the pair could even say a simple word or two. Then she led me across the yard to her woodworking shop, where she said she spent the better part of her day. She showed me the chairs she'd made from tree stumps, planed but without any joinery. Sit down, feel how comfortable it is, she urged. Later she threw some wild mulberries and raspberries in a kettle and made me a sour and rather bland tea over the woodstove. While I drank the tea, grumbling about its taste, Inseon, in her jeans and work shoes, tied her hair firmly back, stuck a mechanical pencil behind her ear like some master artisan featured in a TV documentary, and got to work measuring and drawing lines on a board with a set square.

She couldn't mean come to her Jeju house. *Where are you?* I asked in my next text, just as Inseon's message arrived. It was the name of a hospital in Seoul, though not one I was familiar with. Then came the same question as before.

Can you come right away?

Then another message.

Bring ID.

•

The first thing I saw was the black lettering on a grimy banner boasting “Nation’s Best.” I walked toward the hospital entrance, wondering why, if it really was the nation’s best in surgical-wound closures, I had never heard of the place before. I passed through the revolving door into a dimly lit lobby. On one wall there were some photographs of a hand and a foot, missing a finger and a toe. Knowing that my memory might distort the images into something more fearsome than they actually were, I forced myself to look. But I was wrong; these photographs grew more painful the closer I looked. My eyes reluctantly moved on to the next set of photos: the same hand and foot, now with sutured-on finger and toe. There was a marked difference in skin tone and texture on either side of the suture lines.

I realized that Inseon must have had a similar accident in her workshop, that that must be why she was here.

There are people who actively change the course of their own life. They make daring choices of a kind that others seldom dream of, then do their utmost to be accountable for their decisions and the consequences of their actions. So that in time, no matter what life path they strike out on, people around them cease to be surprised. After studying photography in college, Inseon spent a decade steadily pursuing this badly paid profession. To make ends meet, she took on any work that came her way, but she was always broke. She ate little, spent little, and worked a lot. She packed a simple lunch wherever she went, wore no makeup, and cut her own hair using a pair of thinning scissors. Amazingly, these habits came across as natural, unaffected, even stylish. Then for some reason I never knew she applied and was admitted to carpentry school. Not long after she arrived in Jeju, Inseon set about converting the shed, once used to store harvested mandarins, into a workshop, and started making furniture.

Inseon was slender but tall at five feet seven, and I’d seen her handle and transport camera equipment since we were in our twenties. I didn’t consider her too frail for the work, even if I was surprised at her choice. I did worry about her frequent injuries, however. Not long after losing her mother, she’d got her jeans caught in an electric grinder and wound up with a thirty-centimetre scar from knee to thigh—she’d tell me later, laughing, I tried and

tried to pull it out, but it was no good; the grinder kept roaring and turning and gosh, it was monstrous. Two years ago, she'd broken her left index finger and ruptured a tendon while trying to stop a pile of logs she'd been stacking from falling; she'd needed half a year of rehab and treatment.

But this time it had to be worse. She must have severed something.

•

Inseon-ah.

I called her name. She was lying at the farthest end of the six-bed room, her eyes anxiously trained on the glass door I'd just entered through. It wasn't me she was waiting for. Perhaps she was in urgent need of a nurse or a doctor? But then, as if suddenly coming to, Inseon recognized me. Her large eyes opened wider, before growing as thin as two crescent moons nestled in a bed of fine lines.

You came.

I saw her mouth the words.

What happened? I asked, approaching her bed.

Above the loose-fitting hospital gown, her clavicle looked even more prominent than usual. Her face was about the only part of her that looked less gaunt than when I'd seen her last, though perhaps this was due to swelling.

Sliced my fingers off with the electric saw, Inseon said in a whisper, as if to minimize engaging her vocal cords, which suggested she'd hurt her throat rather than her fingers.

What? When? I asked.

Two mornings ago.

She slowly slid one hand toward me and added, Want to see it?

Her hand wasn't entirely bandaged up, as I'd expected. The tips of her first and middle fingers, both of which had been severed and reattached, remained exposed. Bloodstains, a mixture of fresh red and oxidized black, covered the sutures.

My eyelids must have blinked and fluttered.

Quite a sight, isn't it? Inseon said.

I saw her face flicker with self-reproach.

It doesn't matter how cold your hands get, she said, you never wear cotton work gloves when you're using power tools. It was entirely my mistake.

Hearing someone open the room's glass door, Inseon turned her head. From the sudden relief on her face, I knew it was the person she'd been waiting for earlier. A woman with short hair and a brown apron who looked to be in her early sixties approached us.

This is my friend, Inseon said to the woman. Then, to me: She's been taking care of me.

The carer smiled and said hello. She pumped some hand sanitizer into her palms and rubbed it meticulously into both hands, then brought over an aluminum box from the bedside table and placed it on her lap.

The part that was basically a miracle, Inseon resumed, was that an elderly woman I'm friendly with, who lives down the way from me, had an appointment at the hospital that day, and so her son had come to drive her into downtown Jeju.

As Inseon spoke, the aluminum box opened with a click. Two syringes of differing sizes, a bottle of alcohol disinfectant, a plastic case of sterile cotton, and a pair of tweezers were laid in a neat row inside.

The woman meant to drop off a box of mandarins for me, Inseon was saying, so they stopped by my house. When I didn't come to the door although the light was on in my workshop, they stepped inside to check if everything was O.K. and found me lying there, unconscious. They first tried

to stem the bleeding, then carried me to the back of the son's truck and rushed to the hospital. The woman was clutching the glove that held my amputated fingertips on the drive over. Then, since there's no hand surgeon on the island, they got me on the earliest flight to Seoul—

Inseon's whisper was interrupted. The carer had jabbed a needle into the still bloody suture of Inseon's index finger. Inseon's hand and lips trembled simultaneously. I saw the carer proceed to disinfect a second needle with an alcohol-soaked cotton ball and, deftly and without hesitation, she pricked Inseon's middle finger. Inseon didn't open her mouth again until after the woman had disinfected and replaced both needles in the aluminum container.

The important thing now is to make sure the blood flow doesn't stop, she said.

Though she was still whispering, voiced sounds did creep in between her words now and then, perhaps from the strain of trying to stifle the pain.

We have to make sure scabs don't form on the wound, she went on. They said that we have to let the blood flow, that I have to feel the pain. Otherwise the nerves below the cut will die. So we do this every three minutes, to prevent that from happening.

And what happens if they die? I asked numbly.

Inseon brightened suddenly, and I almost found myself smiling back at her beaming, childlike face.

They'll rot, of course. The reattached tips.

I stared at Inseon's fingers, freshly bloodied and swollen and looking even more livid than before. I raised my head, wanting to look away, only to meet Inseon's eyes.

Honestly, I'd rather give up, Kyungha.

Inseon's eyes shone beneath her darkened lids. If only I'd let go of them right at the start, she said, then we'd have simply stitched up the stubs and

been done with it back in Jeju.

I shook my head.

You work with your hands, don't you? I said.

Yes, you're right, she said. And even if I were to give up now, a lot of people go on to live with the pain.

I understood then that Inseon had seriously considered amputation as an option. Perhaps every three minutes, as she endured the needles. But the doctors would have told her about phantom pain. How, although the pain of keeping her fingers intact might feel worse now, if she gave up on reattaching them, she would have to live with an agony for which there would be no remedy or relief.

•

Is that snow?

I started at Inseon's words and turned to look behind me.

A large window faced out onto a road, and outside a sparse snow was falling. I watched the white, thread-like flakes draw empty paths through the air. When I looked around me, patients and carers alike were silently gazing out at the snowfall.

I studied Inseon's profile as she looked out the window. There are people who, though not notably handsome, give the impression of beauty; she was one of them. It was the sharp gleam in her eyes, partly, but, more than that, I was convinced it was due to her personality and the care she took with words. She remained poised even now, despite her bloodied hand, her loose hospital gown, and the I.V. line dangling from her forearm. She didn't appear frail or crushed in the least.

Looks like a big storm, doesn't it? she said.

I nodded in reply. It really did. The light had dimmed considerably.

How does something like that fall from the sky? Inseon said in a whisper I could barely hear.



She went on whispering, as though she didn't need me to answer her, as though she were speaking to someone else.

Then her voice was suddenly clear, free of pain.

The reason I asked you to come today, she said, is that I have a favor to ask of you.

Unable to look away from her eyes, which were suddenly alive and gleaming, I waited for her to continue.

•

This is the first time I've witnessed such a storm. Once, ten winters ago, I saw snow heaped up to my knees on the streets of Seoul, but the snowfall itself wasn't dense enough to fill the sky like this. Now, seat belt on, sitting at the front of a bus making its way down a coastal road as the storm bears down, I look out at the palm trees swaying in the gale. I know the wet surface of the roads must be close to freezing, but it feels unreal to watch this much snow simply vanish, not a trace of it sticking to the ground.

I start to feel uneasy. Wondering if I made the right choice in getting on the bus.

The plane I was on two hours ago made an extremely shaky landing at Jeju Airport. As the plane slowed to a stop on its glide down the runway, the young woman seated across the aisle from me tapped on her phone and murmured, Oh, no, every flight after ours is cancelled. The young man with her remarked, Lucky us. The woman laughed. You call this lucky? Are you seeing this weather?

When I made it out of the airport, the snow was coming down so hard I couldn't fully open my eyes. A porter in a neon vest advised me to take the bus. Warnings for snow and high winds had been issued for the island, and he didn't think any cabs would be willing to go all the way out to the village in the uplands where Inseon lived. He said that all the buses, no matter the route, would put on their tire chains and continue to run, but if it snowed through the night they, too, would suspend operations, and there was a good chance the uplands would be marooned by tomorrow morning.

I was anxious. It would be dark by five o'clock, and it was already half past two. Inseon's house was isolated from the rest of the village. I would have to walk at least half an hour from the bus stop to reach it. It didn't seem possible to find my way alone in this weather. All the same, I couldn't just stay in downtown Jeju and wait until morning. Hadn't the man at the airport said the hill roads could be closed off tonight?

Not long after that, an express bus pulled in. This bus stopped at P—, the southern coastal town closest to Inseon's village. I could take the bus to P— before transferring to the local bus to make the rest of the trip. But, as the express bus took me around the island, I worried that the small local bus that would get me to Inseon's village would stop running on account of the snow.

•

I have made my way here at Inseon's request. Because she said, I need you to go to my place in Jeju.

When? I asked.

Today. Before the sun sets.

What she was asking was close to impossible. Even if I took the quickest route from the hospital to the airport and managed to get on the next flight to Jeju. I thought she was making an obscure joke, but she looked perfectly serious.

If you don't, she'll die.

Who will?

My bird.

I was about to ask what bird when I remembered the budgies I'd met when I visited her the previous autumn. One of the birds had said hello to me and started chattering. I was surprised at how similar its voice was to Inseon's. I hadn't known budgies could imitate not only human pronunciation but vocal tones as well. Even more remarkable was that the bird had been able to carry on a quite plausible conversation by responding to Inseon's questions with a mix of replies like "sure" and "yeah," "no" and "dunno." Inseon urged me, Go ahead—try talking to him. Tell him to come and sit on your hand. I hesitated, but her smile emboldened me to open the door of the birdcage and hold out my finger. Want to sit here? I asked. To my embarrassment, the bird immediately answered, No. Then, as if cancelling out what he had just said, he hopped onto my finger. I remembered feeling moved by his near-weightlessness, the scratch of his tiny feet against my skin.

Ami died a few months ago, Inseon continued. Now only Ama is left.

If I remembered correctly, Ami was the bird that had spoken to me. The one with streaks on his otherwise white head and tail, of a yellow paler than lemon. Inseon had told me her birds were expected to live for another ten years—what had brought on Ami's sudden death?

Please go and see if Ama is still alive, Inseon said. If she is, give her water.

Unlike Ami, Ama was completely white from crown to tail, which made her look more plain, and, though she didn't speak, she could perfectly echo the sound of Inseon's humming. Ama had flown up onto my shoulder at almost

the same time that Ami had come to perch on my finger, and I could feel her body, as light as Ami's, and the same rough texture of her feet through the fabric of my sweater.

All right, I said, nodding, weighing the seriousness of Inseon's request. I'll go home, pack, then get on the first flight out tomorrow morning at dawn—

That won't work.

I was a little surprised, as it was not like Inseon to interrupt.

That'll be too late, she said. It's already been a couple of days since the accident. I was rushed into surgery that night and incoherent until yesterday. I contacted you today as soon as the anesthesia wore off.

Is there no one in Jeju you could ask?

No one, she said.

What about the woman who found you?

I don't know her phone number.

I thought I heard a hint of unusual urgency in her tone.

I'd like you to go, Kyungha. Look after Ama in that house. Just until I'm released.

What are you saying? I wanted to ask, but she continued before I could cut in.

Luckily, I filled her water dish the other morning. And made sure she had a good amount of millet, dried fruit and pellets, too, in case I was working until late in the evening. It might have been just enough to survive on for two days. But not three. If you can get to her today, there's a chance she might still make it. But by tomorrow she'll be dead. That's for sure.

•

Where are you headed? the bus driver shouts in Jeju-*mal*. I don't have a bag with me and my oversized clothes don't look like those of a tourist. He must think I'm from here.

To P—, I say.

Where?

I speak up. Could you let me know when we get to P—?

Though we aren't far from each other, it seems the driver hasn't heard me clearly. The roar of the wind drowns me out. I assume he's asking for my destination because most of the stops we've passed by have been empty. I'm the only passenger on the bus, so if he sees from afar that no one is waiting at the upcoming stops, he can drive past without slowing down.

•

Is Inseon used to this kind of snow?

That first year we started travelling together for work, because Inseon never brought up her home town and spoke without a noticeable accent, I assumed she had been born and raised in Seoul. Then one night I heard her talking to her mother on the pay phone in the lobby of our lodgings and realized she was from the island. She spoke in a dialect that was hard for me to understand, aside from a handful of nouns. Smiling, she asked a string of questions, made a few playful remarks, then laughed at some private joke before setting down the receiver.

What were you and your mom talking about that was so funny? I asked.

Nothing much. She was telling me about another basketball game she saw on TV, Inseon replied easily, her smile lingering. My mom is like any other grandmother, really, she went on. She was almost forty when she had me and is well into her sixties now. She doesn't know the rules that well and watches mainly for the crowd. She gets lonely when there's no work, since her place is so out of the way.

She sounded impish, like someone letting slip their best friend's little quirks.

She's still working at her age?

Of course. The women there work even into their eighties. When it's time to harvest mandarins, they help out in each other's orchards.

Inseon smiled again, returning to the earlier topic.

She likes to watch football, too. Even bigger crowds. She watches marches and protests on the news with the same interest. As if she's hoping to spot somebody she knows.

After that day, whenever there was a lull during our travels, whether on trains or buses, or in restaurants where the food was taking a while, I asked Inseon to teach me some Jeju-*mal*. I had loved the rich sounds and gentle intonations she had used on the phone with her mom.

At first, Inseon was reluctant. I doubt it'll do you much good when you travel to Jeju, she said. Everyone will be able to tell you're a mainland. But, when she saw that I was genuinely interested, she began to teach me the basics. I was most intrigued by the unfamiliar conjugations. When we attempted short conversations and I used the wrong tense out of *hada—haen—hamen—hajaen*, Inseon corrected me with a smile.

People say our word endings are short because we have such strong winds on Jeju, she said one day. The sound of the wind clips our words.

These were my impressions of Inseon's home—an unadorned language of abrupt word endings, a girlish grandmother who loved to watch basketball when she longed to be around people.

•

I can tell we have finally entered P—when I see the signboards for the post office. I reach out and press the bell to signal my stop, and the bus slows to a halt. The wind outside seems to ease up then, too, as if on cue. But, no, when I get off the bus, I see that the wind must have died down at some point along the way. I feel as if I've stepped into the eye of the storm. It's a little past four in the afternoon but so dim that it seems as if another heavy storm is approaching.

The streets are lifeless. No passing cars on the road, either. Only heavy snowflakes making their unfathomably slow descent. A traffic light glows bright red behind the dense arrangement of falling snow. As the snow lands on the wet asphalt, each flake seems to falter for a moment. Then, like a trailing sentence at the close of a conversation, like the dying fall of a final cadence, like fingertips cautiously retreating before ever landing on a shoulder, the flakes sink into the slick blackness and are soon gone.

•

Wiping the flakes from my eyelashes, I try to find my bearings. This is the coastal road; local buses don't stop here. I have to remember where the bus stop by the intersection was, the one Inseon pointed out to me before.

It is unbelievably quiet.

If it weren't for the chill of the icy particles falling and settling on my forehead and on my cheeks, I might wonder if I was dreaming. Are the streets empty because of the storm? Or are the lights out in the shops because it's a Sunday? The metal chairs upended on tables and the pavement signs lying toppled behind locked doors have an air of disuse. Mannequins behind one window wear flimsy autumn clothes. The only place with its lights on in this silent little town is a tiny corner shop.

I need to find a lantern and a hand shovel. The corner shop may not carry what I'm looking for, but I can ask whoever's there to point me in the right direction. I can also ask where I might catch the bus to Inseon's village. But, as I head toward the shop, the lights go off. A middle-aged man in a jacket walks out. Seeing him wrap a chain around the handles of the glass doors and turn the padlock with practiced ease, I quicken my steps.

Wait, I call out.

But the man is climbing into a minivan parked out front. I start running, wiping the snow away from my eyes as best I can.

Please—wait!

The countless crystals soak up and erase my voice. I hear the car start, the sound muffled by the wintry calm. The vehicle backs up onto the empty road. I wave my arms at the driver. Then look on helplessly as the minivan speeds away.

•

I startle when I find the bus stop.

I had thought it deserted, but there's a woman who looks to be well over eighty standing by the pole. Her back is bent and she has a cane. A light-gray woollen hat is pulled over her short white hair, and her quilted coat matches the hat. On her feet are dark rubber shoes lined with fake fur. She looks over at me as I approach, tilting her tremulous head to one side. I nod in greeting, but she goes on staring. Wondering if she missed my gesture, I bow my head again and notice a hint of a smile flit across her small, lined face.

I stand next to her and observe her profile until she slowly turns her head toward me. Empty, dispassionate, her eyes briefly meet mine. The look is neither friendly nor cold—in fact, it leans toward muted warmth. I realize that she reminds me of Inseon's mother. In her small frame and dainty features, but most of all in her air of indifference mingled with subdued kindness.

•

Enjoy your visit, Inseon's mother had said to me the last time I saw her, with a similarly apprehensive air, even as she spoke in a clear Seoul-*mal*. And with the dispassion that marks people who have long suffered and have been tempered by anguish—an equanimity that signals their readiness to withstand whatever misfortune might still be in store, all while remaining vigilant, even in the face of joy and good will.

I was surprised to see her mother, whose awareness I'd heard had been slipping, looking unexpectedly kempt and collected. I wondered who she had mistaken me for. Later that night, Inseon told me that her mother frequently forgot that she had a daughter and sometimes lapsed into

childishness, mistaking Inseon for her own older sister. When Inseon's mother had smiled at me, her creased eyelids had nearly closed and the light in her eyes had dulled. Seeing her reach out her hands, I had extended mine. We'd looked at each other, our four hands overlapping, and she'd searched my face curiously, cautiously, as if to determine who I was. When she eventually let go of my hands with a gentle smile, I bowed and left the room. I found Inseon by the kitchen stove.

What are you making?

Bean porridge, Inseon said, without turning around. I mixed black beans with white beans. Half-half.

She began stirring the large pot with a long wooden paddle. I went to stand beside her, and finally she looked at me.

She needs protein but she can't digest anything else, so I make this for her. Usually I only make as much as we'll eat, but I've made more since you're here.

I watched the dark-gray porridge, flecked with black, thicken as Inseon patiently stirred.

It smells really good.

It tastes even better. Inseon smiled assuredly and switched off the gas.

Were you planning on using this? I asked, pointing to a large bowl on a rack. She nodded. I put the bowl on a wooden tray and brought it over to her, and she ladled the porridge out. It felt easy and familiar to stand over the kitchen sink and lend a hand, as if we were sisters for whom this kind of wordless back-and-forth was second nature.

That's a generous serving.

You know the saying—a good appetite, a long life. My mom's going to live a good long life.

Inseon balanced the tray in her hands and headed to the main bedroom. I darted past her to open the door. Inseon stepped inside and closed the door behind her, leaving me to myself. I wandered about for a bit, then laid two sets of spoons and chopsticks across from each other. I ladled some more bean porridge into two large bowls and placed them on the table. I pulled up the chair, sat down, and stared at the steaming bowls.

Inseon returned and picked up her spoon. I did the same and tried the bean porridge. The warm, nutty flavor filled my mouth.

It's so good, I murmured, and, hearing this, Inseon said in her confident way, Have as much as you want. There's plenty more.

•

It seems the bus isn't coming, after all.

Even if one were to pull up now, by the time we reached Inseon's village it would be too dark for me to find my way.

It's time to find a bed for the night.

But first I have to call Inseon, I mutter out loud. My breath wafts into the falling snow.

I have to tell her that I'm giving up. That there's a snowstorm.

I glance at the woman beside me. Shouldn't I tell her before I go? Won't she need my help?

I gather up my nerve and speak to her.

Samchun, I say.

Inseon had told me to address older people here as *samchun*. Only outsiders say *ajossi* or *ajumoni*, *halmoni* or *haraboji*, she said.

Have you been waiting long? I ask.

The woman turns her blank eyes toward me.

Is there a bus coming soon?

Slowly, she lifts one hand from the cane she's leaning on. She points at her ear, eyes twinkling. Then shakes her head from side to side, as a wan smile unfolds over her face. Her thin lips, which I thought would never part, open at last.

With all this snow . . .

Her head continues to tremble as she turns away, as if to say she won't be making further conversation. She casts her eyes to the distance.

Her eyes glint even as they remain steady. I follow her gaze and, unbelievably, a small bus is turning into the intersection, its roof buried under a thick layer of snow.

•

The bus grinds to a stop with a sound that reminds me of chalk on a blackboard. That squealing, too, is muffled by the placid snow.

The front door opens. Damp heated air rushes out and reaches my nose. The driver, who has one cotton-gloved hand on the gear lever, addresses the woman.

Were you waiting long? Two buses got stuck uphill in the snow. You've been waiting all this time in the freezing cold, have you?

As earlier, the woman points to her ear and shakes her head without answering. Using her cane, she slowly climbs onto the bus, and I follow behind, as if in a trance. The bus is carrying no one else.

Are you going to Secheon-ri? I ask.

Yes, that's right, the driver says politely in Seoul-*mal*, and I sense a distancing in his changed tone.

Could you let me know when we're there?

Where, exactly? he asks. We stop four times in Secheon-ri. It's a big village.

The driver stares at me as I hesitate. I can hear the squeak and swish of the wipers as they clear the snow off the windshield.

This bus usually runs until nine, but there won't be another one today, he says.

I don't know the name of the stop, but I'll recognize it when we get there. I'll let you know.

Unconvinced by my own words, I tap my card. I sit behind the woman, who leans on her short cane for support. The snow on her hat has already melted into droplets beading the napped wool.

•

Dusk is rapidly setting in. The bus passes through the bank of gray-white snow clouds and mist I saw all the way from the coastal road. The houses dotting the road are now gone. Snowy deciduous trees stretch out on either side in a seemingly vast woodland.

The bus slows to a stop. The woman gets up from her seat. She hasn't told the driver where she's headed, but he seems to know where to let her off. The woman walks to the rear door, cane tapping as she goes. She tilts her head to glance back at me with an expression I can't make out—is it a faint smile, a parting salute, or simply a vacant look?—before turning away.

Should he be letting people off in such a deserted spot? I look around and glimpse a low wall of porous black rocks through the trees. A house. The driver waits for the woman to set both feet firmly down on the snowy ground before closing the door. Her stooped figure trudges through the heavy snow and gradually recedes. I shift in my seat to follow her until she is out of sight. I don't understand it. She's only a stranger I happened to stand beside at a bus stop. Why, then, do I feel in turmoil, as if I've just bidden someone farewell?



The bus slowly continues up the gentle slope for another five minutes, then stops. The driver turns off the engine, pulls the handbrake. Please wait while I chain the tires, he shouts.

I see that it has got even darker and that the wind rushing in through the open door is growing turbulent. The blizzard is about to resume. It's almost as if the calm that's surrounded us since the bus stop in P— emanated from the woman herself, and now that she's gone, it, too, has retreated.

•

I shouldn't have got off that bus.

Its chained wheels had left tracks in the snow as it slowly drove off, but, by the time it disappeared into the storm, huge snowflakes had already covered the tracks, erasing all trace of them.

Dim as it was, the snow gave off a grayish glimmer that lingered in the air, by which I could still make out things around me.

I oriented myself and started walking. I veered away from the main road and crossed through the fields on paths lined by snowcapped basalt walls. I passed pitch-dark greenhouses and came to a road that ran through a copse

of needleleaf trees. Here, where the road was just barely wide enough for a small car to pass through, the snow came up to my knees. To walk through the snowdrifts, I had to plunge my legs in, then pull them back up. My sneakers and socks were drenched. There were no buildings I could use as landmarks, and, as the trees around me were increasingly sunk in darkness and half smothered with snow, I couldn't tell exactly what they were—all I could rely on was my sense of uphill and downhill, my memory of the road narrowing and widening.

•

I have no idea when my phone slipped out of my hand. As the gray-blue twilight vanished, I'd come to the first fork in the road and turned on the flashlight on my phone. With not much battery left, I had planned to use it only when I had an important choice to make, like right then. I clearly remembered the path to Inseon's house as one that split off into two trails and was confused by the outlines before me, of three footpaths of different widths running through the woods. I thought the flashlight would allow me to recognize the route to take, but the white trees all spilled their shadows at once in my phone's faint light, which only made the place that much more unfamiliar. Still, I had no time to hesitate. I moved toward the widest of the three tracks. The very next moment, the ground gave beneath me and I fell through a heap of snow.

I instinctively covered my head with both arms. That must have been when I dropped my phone. As I tumbled down an incline, my head and body were pummelled by stones and rocks, but I didn't black out.

•

Did it become this dark in that short amount of time?

Did I lose consciousness, after all?

I push up the sleeve of my coat with my trembling left hand. I feel for my watch, knowing very well that it doesn't light up in the dark. I see only blackness.

My teeth won't stop knocking together. My jaw throbs so much I worry it's about to come loose. The chill burrows its way into my hood and past my scarf. I hug my shivering knees as tightly as I can and think.

•

I wonder about the bird.

Inseon told me that to save her I had to get her water that day.

But when does the day end for a bird?

These little ones fall asleep like a light going out.

That was how Inseon had described it one evening last autumn, after she had let the birds out for an hour to fly around and then returned them, one after the other, to their cage. Before she draped a blackout cloth over them, she briefly looked the birds in the eyes.

They'll be wide-eyed and chirping like this, but as soon as the light's gone, they'll fall straight to sleep. It's like they're hooked up to a power source. Even in the dead of night, if I pull this cloth away, they wake right up and start chirping and chattering again.

•

I want to sleep.

I truly believe I will finally be able to drift off.

•

But there's the bird.

When did the wind start blowing again?

My body is no longer curled up in a ball. My fingers have unclasped. I raise a sluggish hand to my face to wipe the ice away from around my eyes. I'm stunned to see light, a midnight blue barely discernible from the darkness.

Has the day already dawned?

Or am I dreaming?

I lie back as neatly as I can and look up at the sky. I can't believe it. The surrounding blackness is no longer absolute. It's stopped snowing, too. The pale swirling in the air is the wind stirring up old snow. Revealed in the moonlight. For the winds have scattered the snow clouds and a half-moon now hangs over the woods.

•

A bluish glimmer emanates from the dry stream winding its way up through the woods like a long white snake. I take one step at a time, leaning forward so I won't fall back. The moon appears but is obscured repeatedly by the changing clouds. All the treetops are swaying in its wan light, emitting a deep-blue hue, as if they'll never darken again.

At last, I spot the fork in the road.

This time, I don't make a mistake. I head down the gentle slope for a bit, then follow the road as it levels out, relying on the light of the moon reflecting off the untrodden snow. The rustling and creaking of the woodland, the sound of my legs plunging into knee-high snow, the rasp of my breath, all commingling into one.

•

There is something out there. Something luminous.

Once I emerge on the other side of the brush, a long stretch of dark-blue road appears. As it winds around the woods, the path brightens, until I see a radiant pool of silver at the end. Breathing hard, I forge ahead as best I can through the snow. When I reach the bend, I rub my eyes again and look directly at the light.

Inseon's workshop.

The iron door gapes open, revealing an island of light inside. Did someone else get here before me? I shudder. Then it hits me.

No one's been by since that day.

While they rushed to load the bleeding victim onto the bed of their truck, no one had bothered to turn off the lights. There hadn't even been time to shut the door.

It stands wide open, as if expecting someone now. Wind gusts into the workshop, sucked inside along with the lustrous snow.

•

I close the door. I bolt the latch so that the wind won't blow it open.

There are logs lying in stacks on the floor. I step between them. On the concrete, beneath the dusting of snow carried in on the wind, I notice splotches of blood. By the workbench, under more snow, a pool of blood has hardened to ice. That must have been where Inseon lay unconscious after injuring her fingers. A partially cut log, an unplugged angle grinder, ear protectors, and various pieces of wood mottled by darkened blood lie on the workbench.

Taking care not to step on any blood or logs, I walk across the space. Nearing the back door, which opens onto the inner yard, I notice that there are logs lined up by the wall that have been painted black. Seeing the gradations of black on bark, I get the sense that these trees are speaking.

Turning the doorknob, I push on the back door, but it doesn't budge. I pull. Nothing. I thrust the full weight of my body against it. I feel the door shove through the snowdrift on the other side to open a handspan. Releasing my weight, I stop and reach through the gap to clear the snow away. I repeat this until I am able to squeeze myself sideways through the opening.

Pushing through the snow, I head for the darkened house.

•

In this murky gloom, Ama is probably asleep. I know that until I turn on a light she's unlikely to wake up and make her sharp chirp, as I've seen her do in the mornings when Inseon removed the cover from the cage.

When I absently caressed the white back of Ama's neck as she perched on my shoulder, the bird would stoop lower, then hold still, as if she were waiting for something.

She wants you to pet her more.

Obediently, I stroked the bird's warm nape again. She bowed even lower, as if in greeting, and Inseon laughed.

More. She's asking you to keep going.

•

I enter the house through the unlocked front door. Standing in the entryway, I remove my woollen gloves and stash them in the pocket of my puffer coat before pulling my soggy sneakers and socks off my numb feet. I slide the inner door open, step up onto the wooden floor, and feel along the wall. I find the light switch and flick it on.

A faint wailing of wind seeps through the rafters, the windows, and the doors, accentuating the lifelessness inside. The wide window facing the dark yard reflects my whole body back to me. Lowering the hood of my coat, I see my bloodied face and wild hair.

By this window, Inseon has placed a table she made from cryptomeria. The birdcage sits on it. The blackout cover and a few cleaning tools hang neatly from the metal hooks she's attached along one side of the table. The cage has one fixed perch and two matching swings, all made from bamboo that Inseon cut and sanded down and positioned at equal heights to prevent a struggle for dominance between the birds.

In the thunderous stillness, which is as chilling as any sudden loud eruption, I walk toward the cage and its unoccupied perch and swings. The water dish is dry. The wooden dish that Inseon fills with dried fruit and the square silicone container for pellets both stand empty. A handful or two of chaff is

all that remains, strewn across a ceramic plate. And beside all this lies Ama. ♦

(Translated, from the Korean, by e. yaewon and Paige Aniyah Morris.)

This is drawn from “[We Do Not Part.](#)”

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The Art World

The Painful Pleasures of a Tattoo Convention

The art endures partly because it's rooted in the moment—the surrender of one person to another.

By Jackson Arn

November 11, 2024



To get a sense of what an art form is all about, study the refreshments. Book readings: the refrigerated black trays of carrots and chewy-plastic cheeses. Gallery openings: the flutes of warmish bubbles, dispassionately sipped. How you're supposed to consume food and drink at these events mirrors how you're supposed to consume the art—pensively, daintily, the brain signing off on the senses' input. The New York Tattoo Convention, held during three days in October, just gives you candy. Beer and coffee sold at the front, tacos and burgers in food trucks outside, but free candy for all—bowls of it, spread across hundreds of tables.

Yes, this was around Halloween. But we are talking about a community where people dress up in permanent ink costumes that could be a butterfly or a tiger or the Joker, or all three. At the convention, I spotted tattoos of the Godfather, Harry Potter, Slim Shady, Saul Goodman, Walter White, Tony Montana, Pennywise, Tupac, Aslan, and the Viggo Mortensen character from “Eastern Promises” (less famous than the rest, but the inkiest role in one of the coolest tattoo movies), plus more divisive I.P. such as Donald J. Trump and Jesus H. Christ.



The venue was the Brooklyn Navy Yard’s Duggal Greenhouse, all thirty-five thousand square feet of it. Hillary and Bernie debated here in 2016. The building used to be a boat-assembly plant, which made the festivities oddly apt, since tattoos have always thrived on water: sailors marked themselves and shipped their skins to every latitude, and most of the world’s historic tattoo capitals (San Francisco, Venice, Yokohama, New York) are port cities where a thousand cultures sloshed. During the convention’s opening ceremony, two bagpipers and a drummer marched past rows of stalls, and for a second I wondered if bagpipes might be a tattoo thing. But no: two of the three organizers happened to be Irish.

Ireland may have had tattoos before it had its name. Celtic warriors are thought to have pricked their chests blue, and there is evidence that

“Britannia” comes from an ancient word for “covered in paint.” Rename the Brooklyn Navy Yard “Britannia,” then—some of the people here looked like they’d been born in ink, and as they reclined on tables they let artists ink them further. One of them, a bearded guy welcoming a fresh tattoo to the zone behind his left ear, acknowledged my existence with a smile and an upturned thumb. He wasn’t here to get a tattoo, exactly, because none of them were—they could do that anytime. They were here to look at thousands of people like me looking at them. They were here to *perform*. Not a very taxing performance, you might think, but some of the meatiest roles need little to no stage direction.

The New York Tattoo Convention, three years old and more than three hundred artists strong, is far from the biggest in the country. It is not even the biggest in New York City, and as far as I can tell it has no particular claim to being the coolest or the most respected. As my list of pop-culture characters suggests, men predominated, though most inked Americans are women. In its lack of obvious superlatives, however, the convention may be a sign of why tattoos as an art form are doing great, mostly because they avoid all the usual signs of what it means for an art form to be doing great.



On my first day, I met a middle-aged man named Dave, a loyal customer of Soul Kraft Ink Tattoos, in Asbury Park, New Jersey. His left leg won Best

Leg Sleeve at the Baltimore Tattoo Arts Festival, and his left forearm is quilted with the Duomo of Florence, Michelangelo's David and "The Creation of Adam," and a starry-nighted Vincent van Gogh. He spoke about Abraham, the artist who put everything in place, with reverent warmth, and for much of the weekend he lay on his side while Abraham decorated his right calf. To my eyes, Dave gave every indication of having done this for decades, but at the beginning of last year he had no tattoos at all. His first, a tiny blue-and-green *matryoshka* doll, was a girlfriend's idea, off Pinterest, in the pre-Abraham era. It's still on his right arm for now, above a half-completed sleeve by a different artist—Dave's skin has had many suitors, though sheer surface area makes his favorite clear. "Abraham's my buddy," he told me. "He calls me up, says, 'I have an idea, can I put it on you?'" There is a large tattoo of a woman's face on Dave's leg. When I asked him who she was, he told me he hadn't a clue.

Abraham is a youngish man with the tattooist's spooky gift for wordlessly putting strangers at ease. He was born in Venezuela and learned about art from his father, a painter. When I asked about his work, he gave Dave the credit as promptly as Dave passed it back. I noticed a lot of this at the Duggal Greenhouse—plentiful characters but no obvious, off-the-charts assholes. Maybe the organizers have good taste in people, or maybe the tattoo world simply doesn't attract many megalomaniacs. There is no bloated international market, for one, no Russian plutocrats investing in ink for tax purposes; and our megalomaniac-enabling millennium has so far produced household-name chefs, d.j.s, magicians, and household-organization consultants, but not a single household-name tattoo artist. One struggles to imagine that many people get into tattooing to become famous, or even merely rich, meaning they come for what remains. As I said, great.

This is an art built on oxymoronic coalitions. In "Tattoos: The Untold History of a Modern Art" (Yale), the historian Matt Lodder recounts the story of George V, who, in 1881, three decades before he became king, returned home from Japan with a dragon tattoo. Most tattooed Europeans at this time were prisoners or sailors, but whispers of the prince's naughtiness inspired a fad. Kaiser Wilhelm II got a tattoo. So did King Oscar II of Sweden and Winston Churchill's mother. For a while, ink meant you were either very high or very low, running a country or being run into the ground by it. After the First World War, tattoos were the prized accessories of both

flappers and the smart set. In 1970, *Time* reported that the tattoo was enjoying yet another moment, and today a third of America sports or hides one. Throughout all this, the tattoo has never been strongly associated with any particular era and has therefore never grown dated—in 1897, e.g., the New York *World* estimated that three out of four society women were tattooed, but no one hears “the Gilded Age” and pictures ink. It is some quiet species of miracle when an art form is never era-defining and never old news, either.



A second miracle: the mood at the Duggal Greenhouse was *happy*. This despite the entrance line being long, the election being three weeks away, and many of the people at the booths being in nontrivial amounts of physical pain—not just the people getting tattooed but also the artists, whose hundreds of hours of hunching condemn them to neck and back problems. (Paul Booth, renowned in tattoo circles, had to have his vertebrae surgically fused a few years ago.) Fans and journalists observed dozens of tattoo-getters—a.k.a. “canvases,” “skins,” or “collectors”—receiving art, but the artists themselves studied only a few square inches of skin, to the exclusion of the human beings attached.

They had to. Stick a needle a millimetre too far left or right and the tattoo comes out all wrong; go a millimetre too deep and it will spend its life

swimming in murk. This is why many tattoos begin as clusters of purple lines, either stencilled onto the flesh or, if the artist is especially good or the canvas especially trusting, done freehand. The drawing's purpose is to lay the groundwork for the tattoo, but the act is transfixing on its own, sometimes more so than what follows. The artist's arm moves like fingers and her fingers move like machinery, all before the machine is on. Whatever the tone of the eventual design, the pen lines need to be graceful, or else no flaming skulls or butterflies for anyone.

The tattooing itself requires other kinds of grace. You dip your barbs in the color you want and then, if your goal is a solid fill, make little oval motions, angling to avoid tearing the skin, mopping up excess ink with a soap-soaked paper towel. From a few feet away, in the company of other watchers, it looks sensual but clinical, a massage that is also surgery—rather as the candy you see everywhere is both indulgence and, in case of lightheadedness, medicine. The forerunner of the modern tattoo machine was invented by Thomas Edison, in 1876, and the first patent went to Samuel F. O'Reilly, in 1891; today, "tattoo" suggests "electric" unless otherwise specified. Traditionalists could visit Booth 78 and see a hand-guided needle gently gouging a man's shaved head. The artist doing the gouging looked up, noticed the blood fleeing my face, and told me to take a sticker, as though that would help. Her client, reassuringly, made no sound.

The unspoken closeness of artist and canvas isn't too hard to explain: the artist has the canvas's body in her hands, and the canvas has the artist's career in his. James, another Soul Kraft patron, assured me that the toughest part of being a canvas is staying still, which would make nearly every canvas I met extraordinarily talented. They arrived in sweatpants, put on headphones, and, except for the odd bathroom break, lounged on their sides for hours while the artists scratched away. Dave rested his head on a paper-towel roll and squeezed another between his knees; other skins texted, or chewed gum, or read, or pretended to. Watching them for too long made me want to go jogging. Their postures were, like a lot of this convention, sexual even when not especially sexy: they invited passersby to ogle, invited so insistently that it became almost aggressive, until I felt ogled in return. Ask yourself: When was the last time you saw a significant number of people, largely male, posing like vintage pinups for the eyes of thousands of

strangers? And when was the last time you saw people of any kind doing nothing in perfect, frozen harmony?

A hundred thousand years ago, some apes ate mushrooms and got high. The psilocybin rewrote their minds, precipitating self-consciousness and, eventually, turning hominids into humans. This theory, sometimes called the “stoned-ape hypothesis,” was proposed by Terence McKenna, in the early nineteen-nineties. For more on it, I refer you to James’s right arm. James can deadlift five hundred and forty-five pounds and has a soul patch that resembles Howie Mandel’s. When he invited me to inspect his art, he was friendly but pushy, maybe sensing that I could use the extra nudge to scrutinize. “I’m used to it,” he told me, sleepy-cheerful. It was his default expression for the duration of the convention.



James’s stoned-ape tattoo is explicitly psychedelic, which makes its black-and-grayness almost jarring, like hearing a lighthearted song played in a minor key. There is a story, beginning with the ape on the forearm and climbing, up rungs of DNA, past mushroom and frog, to the biceps, where *Homo sapiens* emerges. It’s concisely done without feeling cluttered, each part’s edge complementing a neighboring part’s—the white glare from the ape’s forehead, for instance, emphasizing the black of the DNA above. In its po-faced sincerity, its basic realism augmented with poster razzle-dazzle, its

indifference to being anything beyond what it seems, James's tattoo is in flagrant violation of what I (and probably you) have been trained to regard as "good taste," but neither does it offer the self-conscious, gallery-calibrated bad taste of KAWS or Koons. Ironically, considering the whole point of the story, it evinces a near-complete *lack* of self-consciousness, one that may leave you feeling strangely serene. I love that about it.

Tattoos like James's, if my less than scientific polling can be trusted, made up the single biggest portion of the art in the Duggal Greenhouse: some of it black-and-gray, some colorful, but all with a similar sci-fi or horror-inflected sombreness. The images flirt with what is usually called the biomechanical style, all melty flesh and fleshy machines. In his book, Lodder partly credits Booth, a court tattooist to heavy-metal royalty, with popularizing it, but I am tempted to say that the idea was there from the start. To get a tattoo often involves submitting to an electromagnetic-powered coil machine, which bites your body and leaves tiny drips behind. And, coil or no coil, being tattooed requires treating your body as a possession, a device to be tinkered with via more devices, so that you become not just a "canvas" but a "collector" of your own self, which from now on is bio and mechanical both.

None of which explains the gobs of pop culture I saw at the convention, the constant *déjà vu* of another Joker, another Harry Potter, another superhero, another supervillain. Tattoos are so personal that they are literally a part of you; pop culture is, by definition, primarily not yours. This isn't a contradiction, exactly; it reminded me of how N.F.T.s are also singular by definition yet assume the most gleefully fungible forms—doge memes and Bart Simpsons and so forth. It could be that the total fungibility of the content emphasizes the singularity of the medium. Thomas Edison mumbles, "Mary had a little lamb," and the familiarity of his words accentuates the newness, even the miracle, of the phonographic recording. A woman gets a Disney tattoo that resembles a hundred other Disney tattoos, and that's fine—make it two hundred! None of the other hundred and ninety-nine get her blood pumping.

Sooner or later, every art gets scholarly journals. Something is always gained from this new scrutiny—most basically, the acknowledgment that the artists are serious people who deserve respect for what they make. Often, the process involves treating the art form like another, already respected one,

and when this happens something is lost. Folk or hip-hop lyrics that get some of their bite from being uttered aloud are analyzed like modernist poems; graffiti sprayed on an office building loses its humor when treated as another oil hanging in a white cube. There must be dozens of journals devoted to tattoo studies, and yet the art seems to have resisted most attempts to intellectualize it—it remains, in 2024, proudly candy—and, by the same token, to convert it into something it's not. You can, of course, pretend that tattoos are paintings on funny canvases (the premise of countless coffee-table books with titles like “A Treasury of Tattoos”), but then you'd be ignoring what may be the central thing about them.



Which brings us back to the matter of pain. Pain affects each tattoo-getter differently—I know some who barely gritted their teeth and some who almost passed out—but it dignifies all tattoos equally. When I got to the convention, I assumed that I must be looking at a roomful of people on the teeth-gritting side of things: Wouldn’t experienced collectors get used to the feeling? I ran this by James and saw the sleepy-cheerful look vanish. “Does sex feel any less good after you do it the first time?” he asked, then explained how tattooing his nipple had felt like cutting his finger with a saw. It was almost sweet, the way he took the time to correct me so theatrically, as someone must have theatrically corrected *him* years ago, and back and back, to the days when Winston Churchill’s mom was still ink-free. If things

that had been repeated countless times couldn't keep their power in the moment, tattoos would have died out long ago.

The moment! People get tattoos for a million reasons, but nobody comes back without learning to love the act itself. "It's inevitable to become addicted," Abraham told me—wishful thinking, probably, but you see his point. The needle enters, and the low, irreplaceable burn of it is cruelly brief. Even tattoos themselves, whatever your parents told you, are flimsily impermanent things that get burned or buried with their hosts, at least most of the time. In 1952, this magazine published a Roald Dahl story about a man with a tattoo on his back by a famous painter. He visits a fancy gallery, and art-world weasels try to persuade him to undergo a dangerous surgery to remove the masterpiece from his body. When the tattoo eventually turns up for sale, "heavily varnished," we understand that the man was murdered, but his skin, at least, has been made immortal.

Technically, it's possible. The Ohio-based company Save My Ink Forever slices tattoos off corpses and frames them for grievers, and it isn't so hard to imagine a future international tattoo market, with all the attendant grotesqueries. But, for now, let's be grateful that tattoos are still principally about pleasure, not wealth or power or truth. This can make them seem slight, if you've been trained to convert art into one of these other, stabler currencies. And in a sense this would be correct. Pleasure *is* slight, which is why it matters so much, why it refuses to be embalmed, why it has to keep remaking itself from scratch, and why, in places like the Duggal Greenhouse, it goes right on buzzing. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified the publisher of "Tattoos: The Untold History of a Modern Art."

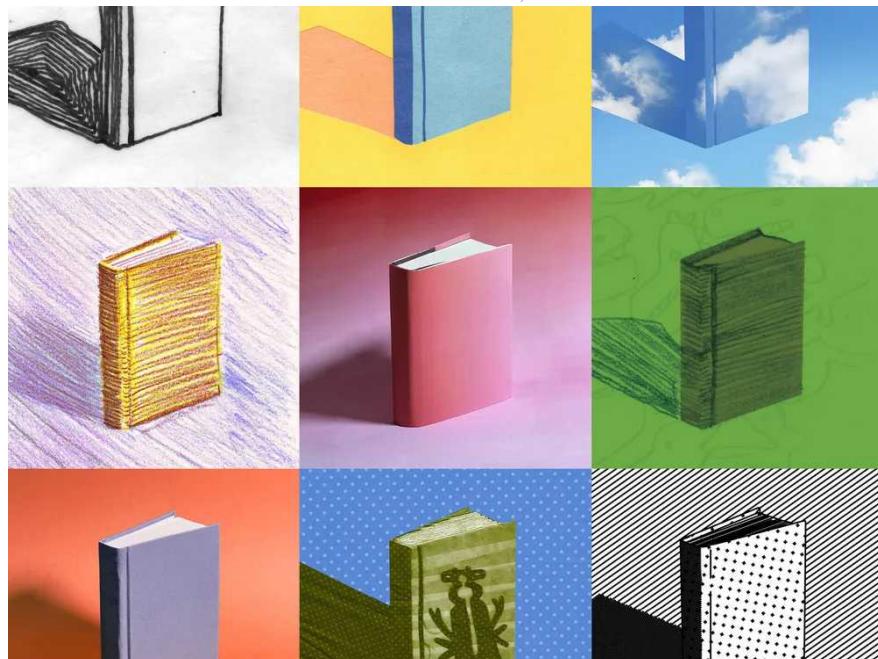
A Critic at Large

Is the Twentieth-Century Novel a Genre?

An ambitious new book sees hidden currents linking writers as disparate as Colette, Thomas Mann, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Ralph Ellison, and Chinua Achebe.

By Louis Menand

November 11, 2024



Genres are the Sirens of literary criticism. They seem friendly and alluring, but they are dangerously elusive shape-shifters. You really have to lash yourself to the mast.

Genres tend to be pictured as the bones of literary texts, the formal properties onto which the imagery and details of character, plot, and setting are grafted. These skeletons are transmissible across time. So “[Oedipus Rex](#)” (circa 430 B.C.E.), “[Hamlet](#)” (circa 1600), and “[Death of a Salesman](#)” (1949) are all called tragedies. But, apart from unhappy endings, those plays are more different than they are alike. It is hard to extract a robust definition

of “tragedy” that works for all three. Similarly, we call the *Odyssey* an epic. But why isn’t it a novel? Because it’s written in verse? Then how about a prose translation: would that be a novel? It’s not obvious why it wouldn’t. The *Odyssey* is a story about a family separated by war. So is “*War and Peace*,” and we don’t categorize that as an epic.

There is also the problem of basing our generalizations about literary types on a highly selective group of texts. Of the hundreds of tragedies estimated to have been written in ancient Greece, we know of only thirty-two complete ones, attributed to just three playwrights. We don’t know all the forms that tragedy, as the Greeks understood it, might have taken.

In the case of a genre like the novel, too, we are operating with a ridiculously small sample size. As [Franco Moretti](#) pointed out, in an article published in 2000, when literature professors talk about “the nineteenth-century British novel” they are talking about roughly two hundred books. He estimated that this is 0.5 per cent of all the novels published in Great Britain in the nineteenth century.

His work inaugurated a wave of data mining, in which formal elements of the novel—such as the use of quotation marks or chapter titles, or the rise and fall of subgenres, like detective fiction—could be charted on graphs. He founded the Stanford Literary Lab to undertake this kind of quantitative scholarship. Hard hats were required inside the building.

Moretti touched a nerve because no genre had received more critical attention in the twentieth century than the novel. For many critics, the novel was the king of genres, a literary form that enjoyed a unique intimacy with reality. Everyone seemed to know which books the term picked out, what the generic bones of the novel were, and why novels mattered. People talked about “the death of the novel” as though it could mark an inflection point in the history of civilization.

In the nineteenth century, few people had thought of the novel as an art form in the same league as painting or classical music. The novel was a mode of middle-class entertainment. One of the first writers to insist on fiction as an art was [Henry James](#), who analyzed the formal features of the novel in the prefaces he wrote for the multivolume New York Edition of his work (1907-

09); these analyses are still cited today. (James launched the New York Edition in the hope of boosting his book sales. Alas.)

In 1916, the Hungarian critic Georg Lukács published (in German) “[The Theory of the Novel](#),” another influential treatment of the genre. “The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” was his memorable definition. The genre was further explored by Mikhail Bakhtin, in Russia, in essays collected in “[The Dialogic Imagination](#),” and by F. R. Leavis, in England, in “[The Great Tradition](#). ” But the definition that became standard in literature departments was the one put forward by Ian Watt in “[The Rise of the Novel](#)” (1957). The term Watt used was “formal realism.”

The novel’s mission, Watt said, is to provide “a full and authentic report of human experience.” This is the effect that a novel’s formal features, from the types of characters it invents to the kind of language it uses, are all devised to produce. When we read a novel, Watt said, we feel that we are getting “the facts,” even though what we are reading is pure make-believe. To the extent that what we are reading seems fragmentary or discontinuous or not credible, we are not reading a novel.

Watt was writing about the eighteenth-century English novel—Defoe, [Richardson](#), and Fielding. Lukács was writing about the nineteenth-century European and Russian realist novel. The question Edwin Frank asks in his new book, “[Stranger Than Fiction](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), is whether there is such a thing as the twentieth-century novel. Is it profitable to talk about the twentieth-century novel as something different from the nineteenth-century novel or, for that matter, from the twenty-first-century novel? Frank thinks so: in his view, the twentieth-century novel is a distinct literary genre, and his book is an ambitious, intelligent, and happily unpretentious effort to map it.

Frank was inspired, he says, by “[The Rest Is Noise](#),” Alex Ross’s history of twentieth-century music. “Could the same thing be done with the novel?” Frank wondered. After overcoming some doubts, he decided that maybe it could, and so he set out to help readers understand the literary equivalents of twelve-tone music and bebop. The result is a book about books that can seem demanding or off-putting, books that are particularly long (like James Joyce’s “[Ulysses](#)” and Marcel Proust’s “[In Search of Lost Time](#)”) or

particularly weird (like Gertrude Stein's "[Three Lives](#)" and Machado de Assis's "[The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas](#)") or both (like Robert Musil's "[The Man Without Qualities](#)" and Georges Perec's "[Life: A User's Manual](#)").

Frank is not a literature professor, and this is not a literature professor's book. He is the editorial director of New York Review Books and the founder of its Classics series—a wonderfully eclectic array of reprints, collections, and fresh translations of works famous and neglected, most with new introductions by well-known writers. This is the imprint's twenty-fifth year. A big trade house wouldn't touch the vast majority of its titles, but New York Review Books finds its readers. There is no publisher quite like it.

"Stranger Than Fiction" is not a survey, which is good, since surveys can be fire hoses of names and dates that barely register and are quickly forgotten, and it is not a work of critical revisionism, which is O.K., since it allows Frank to ignore the secondary literature. Which he does. He rejects the term "modernism" as "overused"; the word "postmodernist" does not appear once. His book is an exercise in what he calls "descriptive criticism," and "descriptive" is a pretty accurate descriptor. Frank explains what is happening in the books—thirty-one in all, by thirty writers—that he has selected to represent "the twentieth-century novel."

"Plot summary" is the dismissive term academics use for this kind of criticism, but it is actually not that easy, first, to see accurately everything that is going on in a text and, second, to distill it in a form that can be both sympathetic to the writer's intentions and critical of the result. A lot of [Edmund Wilson](#)'s criticism was plot summary in this sense. Wilson just had a brighter flashlight than the rest of us. He could see things most readers cannot. There is enough biographical information in Frank's book to give us a sense of who the writers were and the worlds they inhabited. Historical context is mostly broad-brush (the First World War, the Holocaust). "Stranger Than Fiction" is chiefly about fiction.

Frank is interested, as literature professors generally are not, in the *feel* of certain books and writers, and he is adept at capsule characterizations. [Henry Green](#) "has the gift of falling asleep at the start of a sentence and waking up in some entirely other place without batting an eyelid." The prose of the

Russian writer [Vasily Grossman](#) is “as simple as an outstretched hand.” [W. G. Sebald](#) writes in a “soft-shoe, rather priestly way.” Colette “takes a cat’s view of human life.”

Frank calls “The Man Without Qualities” “the world’s longest feuilleton, a philosophical digression, a pilgrim’s progress.” He describes Thomas Mann’s [“The Magic Mountain”](#) as “at once a monument and a caprice . . . an immense book that is also in a sense an empty book.” D. H. Lawrence could seem “a sort of ventriloquist’s doll, perched on the century’s knee.” Elsa Morante’s [“History: A Novel”](#) is “openhanded and trouble-hearted and a little out of control.” [Ernest Hemingway](#)’s prose: “Writing like that is as much as anything about writing like that.”

Frank says that he has chosen to write about books he likes—“books that move me”—and the books he likes are typically books that, although they may be easy to admire, are not really all that easy to like. There are exceptions. Colette’s [“Claudine at School”](#) has to be one of the funniest books ever written. [“Lolita”](#) is funny in bits, and seductively narrated, which is, as Frank says, Nabokov’s intention, to implicate us in the self-justifications of a child abuser. Grossman’s Tolstoyan novel about the Battle of Stalingrad, [“Life and Fate,”](#) is—I don’t know a better word—powerful.



But “Life: A User’s Manual,” a six-hundred-and-sixty-page anatomy of a Paris apartment building which describes in exhaustive detail its occupants, their apartments, their multigenerational backstories, and every piece of furniture and bric-a-brac they possess is not exactly beach reading. Frank’s unpacking of that novel, on the other hand, is one of the best things in his book.

Seven of Frank’s thirty-one novels are by women. Three of the novels are from Latin America, one is African (Chinua Achebe’s [“Things Fall Apart”](#)), and one is Japanese (“Kokoro,” by Natsume Sōseki). Only four novelists are from the United States, and they don’t include [William Faulkner](#) or [John Dos Passos](#), which is an unusual choice since those two had a big influence on not just the American novel but the French novel in the nineteen-thirties and forties. Faulkner gets a little attention in “Stranger Than Fiction,” Dos Passos almost none. Of the American novels Frank chooses to write about, two are by expatriates (Stein and Hemingway), and one is by an émigré (Nabokov). The fourth American novelist is Ralph Ellison, and Frank does devote a chapter to [“Invisible Man,”](#) Ellison’s only completed novel.

Although [“Naked Lunch,”](#) [“Gravity’s Rainbow,”](#) [“American Pastoral,”](#) and [“Beloved”](#) make it onto a long list of books in an appendix mysteriously titled “Other Lives of the Twentieth-Century Novel,” postwar American fiction largely goes missing, Ellison aside. The simple reason is that Frank doesn’t think much of it. “There was something insular and *retardataire* about the postwar American novel,” he writes, “as if it wanted to cast aside the questions and quandaries of the twentieth-century novel and retrieve and enjoy the good old authority and amplitude of the nineteenth-century novel in new and improved form.” [Saul Bellow](#), [John Updike](#), and [Norman Mailer](#) may have been prize-winning best-sellers domestically, he says, but they had little influence on world literature. (Well, Bellow did win a Nobel Prize, which is surely international recognition of a sort.) In other words, the term “twentieth-century novel” does not include many well-known novels published in the twentieth century. So how does a writer make the cut?

Frank’s theory of the novel is a traditional one. It dates back at least to Stendhal’s definition in [“The Red and the Black,”](#) from 1830: “A novel is a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment it reflects the blue skies, at another the mud of the puddles at your feet.” The twentieth century was a

period of violent change; therefore, violent change is what the twentieth-century novel reflects—not, or not only, in its subject matter but in its form. When things become disjointed and unreliable, when the world turns upside down, so does the novel.

“The writers of the twentieth century are ambushed by history” is how Frank puts it. “They exist in a world where the dynamic balance between self and society that the nineteenth-century novel sought to maintain can no longer be maintained, even as fiction.” The twentieth-century novelist therefore rejects the “sanctimonious and sentimental and hypocritical” (Frank’s words) fiction of the nineteenth century. Twentieth-century writers found in the novel a form that had emerged from the nineteenth century “as a robust presence with a tenacious worldly curiosity and a certain complacent self-regard, a form that was both ready to shake things up and asking to be shook up.” They duly shattered the complacency and shook up the form. The novel was gut-renovated.

A great deal of this generic refashioning involved stripping the nineteenth-century novel of its genteel surface, exposing what Frank calls “those realities of the bedroom and the abattoir that the novel in the nineteenth century had tended to keep in the background.” This is why Colette makes the cut: she writes about sex with a flippancy that (in Frank’s theory) would have made [George Eliot](#) blush. And few writers have ever been as ungenteel as Joyce. “Ulysses” has frank depictions of defecation, urination, masturbation, menstruation, flatulence, eructation, and rhinotillexis (nose-picking). [Virginia Woolf](#) found the book vulgar. She had to force herself to read it—and then, in [“Mrs. Dalloway,”](#) another of Frank’s thirty-one, she borrowed many of Joyce’s techniques. (Mrs. Dalloway does not pick her nose, though, at least not on camera.)

The rejection of nineteenth-century sanctimony and hypocrisy is why Frank’s list includes André Gide’s [“The Immoralist”](#) and Jean Rhys’s [“Good Morning, Midnight”](#)—unpleasant stories narrated by unpleasant people. The twentieth-century novel is not out to please. It is “an exploding form in an exploding world.”

Of course, there is another way of looking at all this. If we drop the mirror metaphor, we can describe the history Frank is tracing as the emergence of

the art novel. Around 1900, writers began experimenting with the formal properties of their medium, something that painters, sculptors, composers, choreographers, and even artists in a brand-new medium, cinema, were doing at the same time.

What is striking about this period of lively artistic change in Europe and the United States is that it does not seem to have been a response to world events. It may be intuitive to associate movements that undermine traditional conceptions of how a novel should read or what a painting should look like with traumatic change, but we are much more likely to see artistic risk-taking when times are good than when they are bad. New art needs a cultural infrastructure—publishers, gallerists, impresarios, critics, prize juries, little-magazine editors, bookstore owners, even professors—to help create an audience for the scandalous and iconoclastic. It's hard to mobilize those agents when the bombs are falling.

Because of books like Paul Fussell's "[The Great War and Modern Memory](#)" (1975), twentieth-century styles in art and literature are often explained as responses to the rupture in Western self-consciousness created by the First World War. The war was a traumatic event in both Europe and the United States, and it led people to wonder whether they had really understood the apparently tranquil and prosperous North Atlantic world that preceded it. "The tide that bore us along," Henry James wrote in a letter to a friend ten days after fighting broke out, "was then all the while moving to *this* as its grand Niagara. . . . It seems to me to *undo* everything, everything that was ours, in the most horrible retroactive way."

But the war had nothing to do with the new art, because formal innovation was well under way before August, 1914. Alfred Jarry's play "[Ubu Roi](#)" was first performed in 1896, the same year that the French director Georges Méliès began experimenting with the properties of film. "Claudine at School" came out in 1900, "The Immoralist" in 1902. Picasso painted "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" in 1907. One of [Arnold Schoenberg](#)'s first atonal compositions, "Three Piano Pieces," was written in 1909.

Gertrude Stein wrote "[The Making of Americans](#)," among her most ambitious and radical texts, between 1903 and 1911. [T. S. Eliot](#) finished "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in 1911. [Marcel Duchamp](#) painted

“Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2” in 1912. [Vaslav Nijinsky](#)’s “Afternoon of a Faun” premièred in 1912. [“Swann’s Way,”](#) the first volume of “In Search of Lost Time,” was published in 1913, the year [Igor Stravinsky](#)’s “The Rite of Spring” had its début. Joyce began “Ulysses,” Franz Kafka began [“The Trial,”](#) and Stein published [“Tender Buttons”](#) in 1914. Almost all the modern “isms”—Cubism, Post-Impressionism, Futurism, Imagism, Vorticism, Symbolism, naturalism, and stream of consciousness, too—preceded the war. The first English use of “avant-garde” in the arts was in 1910. The spirit of Frank’s “twentieth-century novel” had its origins in peacetime.

When the war came, those innovations found new uses, but a cultural infrastructure to sustain them was largely in place. Hemingway’s [“In Our Time”](#) reflects the experience of war, and it is one of the books Frank discusses. But Hemingway got his prose style, in part, from writing that Gertrude Stein had done before the war began.

It’s not that the art novel lacked ambition or was intended for a coterie audience. Frank thinks that the mission Watt ascribed to the eighteenth-century novel, to make “a full and authentic report of human experience,” did not change. It just got problematized. After 1914, history seemed more uncertain, surfaces more deceiving, and the conventions of novelistic storytelling had become obsolete. “A sense of the novel as both mattering immensely, as being a crucial way of getting certain things right, but also being misbegotten, inspires and haunts the novelists of this book,” Frank says. “The problem of approaching the problem always lurks in the background.” By modernizing itself, the novel preserved its cultural relevance.

It didn’t last. Frank thinks that the novel ran out of currency thirty years ago. Novelists, in his view, are no longer pushing the envelope. I’m not sure that’s so. What does seem true, though, is that the novel is no longer at the center of the cultural conversation. People don’t ask today, “What are you reading?” They ask, “What are you streaming?” The television series is the middle-class entertainment medium of the twenty-first century. Or maybe it *was*, since people are already writing about the end of a golden age of television that began with shows like “The Sopranos” and “The Wire.”

Has prestige television changed the novel? Many nineteenth-century novels enjoyed a second life in the twentieth century as film adaptations. Henry James would, one hopes, be gratified to know that “The Portrait of a Lady” has been adapted as a miniseries, on the BBC, and as a feature film, directed by Jane Campion, plus a television version in Urdu—all together almost surely attracting a much bigger audience than the print edition.

Today, a novelist can hardly avoid fantasizing about the home-viewing market. And that market now includes not only popular writers like George R. R. Martin ([“Game of Thrones”](#)) and [Mick Herron](#) ([“Slow Horses”](#)), but authors of art novels, such as [Elena Ferrante](#) ([“My Brilliant Friend”](#)), [Margaret Atwood](#) ([“The Handmaid’s Tale”](#)), [Sally Rooney](#) ([“Normal People,”](#) [“Conversations with Friends”](#)), [Colson Whitehead](#) ([“Underground Railroad”](#)), and [Patricia Highsmith](#) (the [“Ripley”](#) books). Do fiction writers today design their stories to work well onscreen? The series themselves sometimes exhibit a fairly high degree of artfulness. Steve Zaillian’s “Ripley” is to “L.A. Law” as Virginia Woolf is to Charles Dickens. We may watch these shows relatively mindlessly, between dinner and bed, but that is how people read Dickens and Balzac in the nineteenth century. No one thought, Someday, there will be a Norton Critical Edition of [“Oliver Twist.”](#) But now there is. After this century is over, maybe an imaginative critic like Edwin Frank will cherry-pick the best of the television shows and write a book about them. Could be a genre. ♦

A Début Novel Captures the Start of India's Modi Era

In “Quarterlife,” Devika Rege uses three very different protagonists to explore the country’s ideological ferment—setting them first at play, then at war.

By James Wood

November 11, 2024



E pluribus unum might be the proper political aspiration for a large and multifarious country, but when it comes to the novel people tend to applaud something closer to the opposite. The novel gets idealized as a liberal agora, a meeting place of competing voices, the space for a special kind of evenhanded “dialogism.” Joseph Brodsky praised Dostoyevsky for his ability to play devil’s advocate against his own Christian faith: religious readers, making their way through Dostoyevsky’s many-voiced fiction, might not become atheists, Brodsky said, but they finish his novels uttering “the creed’s dictums with nostalgia rather than with fervor.” [Salman Rushdie’s “The Satanic Verses”](#) was defended on similar grounds in 1989,

after receiving its terminal review by the Ayatollah Khomeini. “Ours is an age of competitive languages,” the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes wrote, ten days after the fatwa was issued. “The novel is the privileged arena where language in conflict can meet.”

This is true of Dostoyevsky, and true, also, of the Rushdie of “The Satanic Verses.” But it’s an idea mainly honored in the breach. Most contemporary novels are too narrow to allow for the truly dialogical: autofiction is a bedroom rather than an arena. Ours is an age of crazily competitive languages, yet, paradoxically, this renders us politically squeamish. For who enjoys being yelled at? Even novelists whose lenses are turned outward seem to lose their nerve when it comes to the risky art of extending the principle of charity, of endowing one’s political opponents with presumptive reason and comprehended motive. Not so the Indian writer Devika Rege, whose first novel, [“Quarterlife”](#) (Liveright), is a fearless achievement in multifarious listening.

Rege’s book is largely set in Mumbai, and takes readers back to 2014, when [Narendra Modi](#)’s Hindu-nationalist party, the B.J.P., ousted the establishment Indian National Congress, ending a long postwar period of one-party (and often one-family) dominance. Rege uses three very different protagonists, along with a large gallery of smaller roles, to explore the ideological ferment of that moment: a new Prime Minister promising to end corruption and “clean the holy Ganga”; young capitalists and ambitious amoralists eager to join a shiny new economy; fatigued old élitists and Brahmins willing to risk a vote on the intriguing strongman; fervent religious nationalists drunk on the idea of Making India Hindu Again; assorted skeptics alarmed at the religious demagoguery, suspicious of “the fanatics who changed Bombay’s name to Mumbai,” or convinced that the landslide election represents “the revenge of the plebs.”

Rege belittles none of these voices as she sets them at play and, finally, at war. She writes only from within her characters’ heads, in a close-third-person present tense that seems to confine the novelist to the job of hospitable stenographer. Short sections, each headed with a character’s name, proceed in nervous rotation. The effect is of an urgent, vital orchestration.

Naren Agashe is the first of the three central protagonists to appear in the story. Originally from Mumbai, well educated and wellborn, he's badged with normative American successes—the Wharton School, a stint at Goldman Sachs. Naren, who's in his early thirties, is a free-floating capitalist; he can do a “global Indian accent” when it's called for. But after the crash of 2008 he soured on America, or it soured on him, and he has convinced himself that the Indian election is the right augury. So he is going home. “India won her political freedom in 1947,” he says, “and her economic freedom in 1991, but it wasn't until this election that our political and business classes got aligned. And just in time.”

He speaks these words to Amanda Harris Martin, a friend from his university days, who is travelling with him to Mumbai. She has won an India Impact Fellowship, partly enabled by Naren, which will involve her photographing an impoverished section of the city. Amanda is blue-blooded and high-minded: one side of her family arrived at Cape Cod in 1643, and moved to Jaffrey, New Hampshire, in 1743. She takes seriously a sentence on the tombstone of [Willa Cather](#), who is buried in the town: “That is happiness, to be dissolved into something complete and great.” Privately, Naren disdains Amanda's blanched do-gooding adventurism (“the usual white thing, coming for the poverty”), but he is haunted by Cather's epitaph—which might well be the novel's epigraph. Most of Rege's characters, innocently and less innocently, are hoping to be dissolved into something great.

Not least Naren's twenty-four-year-old brother, Rohit, the third of the central trio, and the most important. Rohit is the somewhat prodigal son—his life the comfortably wayward negative to Naren's procession of achievements. A onetime druggie and band manager, he's a club-goer who enjoys the tight community of his university friends. Now, apparently for want of anything better to do, he has started, with some of those friends, a video-production company. At first sight, Rohit appears as elastic and apolitical as Naren. The Agashe brothers are ideological opportunists; perhaps they, like their well-off parents, feel that after years of stasis and corruption they had no choice but to back Modi. (Their cousin Kedar, a leftish investigative journalist, pointedly disagrees with the Agashe family logic. “There was a choice,” he tells them. “It was between weak governance and fascism.”) While Naren has found his calling in capital, rudderless Rohit is ripe for radicalization.

Recently, he has started to judge his Mumbai friends for their thoughtless hostility to the election result. He begins to see his old gang as a frivolous clique.

One of the novel's achievements is its commitment to patience, to a wise narrative gradualism. Slowly, we see Rohit fill up his entitled emptiness with borrowed fervor. Intrigued and provoked by the rising Hindu atavism, he goes on what he posts as a #rootstour, a long journey to the Konkan coast, to the Agashe family's ancestral village, and finally to Pune, a modern economic force and an ancient jewel of the Marathas. (Rege was born in Pune.) Easily swayed, Rohit begins to bathe in newfound Hindu "authenticity." Momentously, it is on this "authenticity trip" that he meets Omkar Khaire, a young filmmaker who speaks poor English and basic Marathi, whose face is "brown and browy, the kind one has seen innumerable times behind counters or in queues at bus stops." Omkar is poor, from a violent background; he describes himself as "backward caste, class, everything." He is also a Hindu nationalist, the first Rohit has ever met. There is a touch, Rege hints, of noblesse oblige in the way the urban sophisticate takes the rough-edged provincial under his wing. "People hear *nationalist* and they think *fundamentals*," Omkar protests. "Please, we are not the Taliban. We believe in reform, because how you can have unity if all castes and ranks are fighting? But reform is not meaning total rejection of our culture. . . . If I may be saying one thing. As per Supreme Court, Hindu culture is including four religions: Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Hinduism. All are arising south of the Himalayas, all are responses to the Vedas, so this is our way of life. Christianity and Islam are Western concepts."

"Quarterlife"—the title has to do with the relative youth of its principals—is a rich, allusive, sometimes demanding novel. In a big, ideologically equilibrated composition of this sort, the variety of different viewpoints could resemble the wrong kind of orchestration: a TV show's market-tested kind, where diversity is just the formal or political requirement for efficient entertainment. An abstract description of the book's major and minor characters might sound rigged in this way. There's a young gay Parsi man who suffers the abuse of his bullyingly traditional father. A Muslim businesswoman who wears high heels and drinks Martinis, and a Hindu man—Gyaan, a video-production colleague of Rohit's—who is in love with her.

But what the writer then does with this assemblage is everything, and Rege's seriousness of purpose runs like an electrical wire through the book. Diversity is here the means of inquiry, inextricable from the questions the novel asks of diversity. What might it mean, in a very large, very diverse, religiously excitable country, to dissolve oneself into "something complete and great"? Can it be done without violence or discrimination? And what might "authenticity" mean in a culture as variegated as modern India's? Or in a globalized India, where, as one character puts it while appraising a Sofitel menu that boasts ten different cuisines, "these days everything has everything in it."

The objection might be made that most novels are essentially dialogical. What novelist would want to crack a unitary whip? In two ways, though, Rege's novel is unusual in contemporary fiction. Its narrative liberalism is constantly testing itself by the hospitality it affords illiberal voices. Rohit doesn't find Omkar threatening, and Rege extends to him a similar curiosity and comprehension. Second, its classic amplitude of form allows for the slow and steady examination not only of these illiberal voices but also, more interestingly, of a variety of quasi-liberal voices that emerge as troublingly adjacent to their more obviously intolerant "competition." The Broadway or TV version of dialogism simply involves opposites clashing. It's soluble Manichaeism. Carlos Fuentes's privileged arena for language in conflict may in fact be merely a loftier, postmodern version of this kind of thing. Rege's achievement, by contrast, is to redefine the dialogical as a kind of tight counterpoint, the novel asking us to discriminate between semitones rather than between wide octaves. She shows us that politics, properly understood, is more complex than competition.

Omkar, for instance, is subtler and more intelligent than some of his Hindu-nationalist allies. But for Gyaan, Rohit's colleague, people like Omkar are just fanatics, and Rohit has become "a Nazi apologist." "It's nothing new," Gyaan chides Rohit. "A young man goes in search of his roots and finds his politics. But you landed on the wrong side, and I'm wondering what happened to your famous bullshit meter!" So Gyaan is the ideological "competition" for Omkar. But what of Rohit and Naren? They belong to a wealthy, globalized class, and are insulated in ways that Gyaan, in love with the Muslim businesswoman, cannot be. Naren certainly looks down on Omkar, but also feels that he can comfortably accommodate him: though an

atheist, Naren agrees that India has always been a Hindu nation. “It’s not because I worship cows,” he suavely puts it. “But I appreciate my culture has value in bringing people together.” Besides, capitalism will prove a salve: “Once we get rich, people won’t be so touchy.” Rohit, though, hears only what he wants to from Omkar and Omkar’s friends. So he isn’t terribly troubled when Omkar talks of an Indian “unity” that is to be achieved via one majority religion (even if it has four branches), or when Omkar offers up the preposterous idea that Islam is a “Western concept” alien to India.

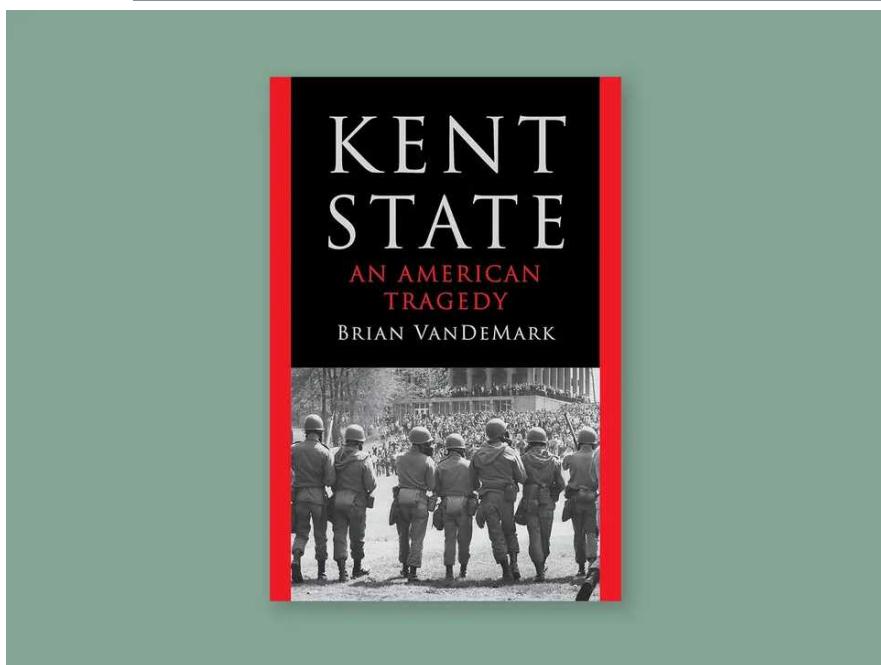
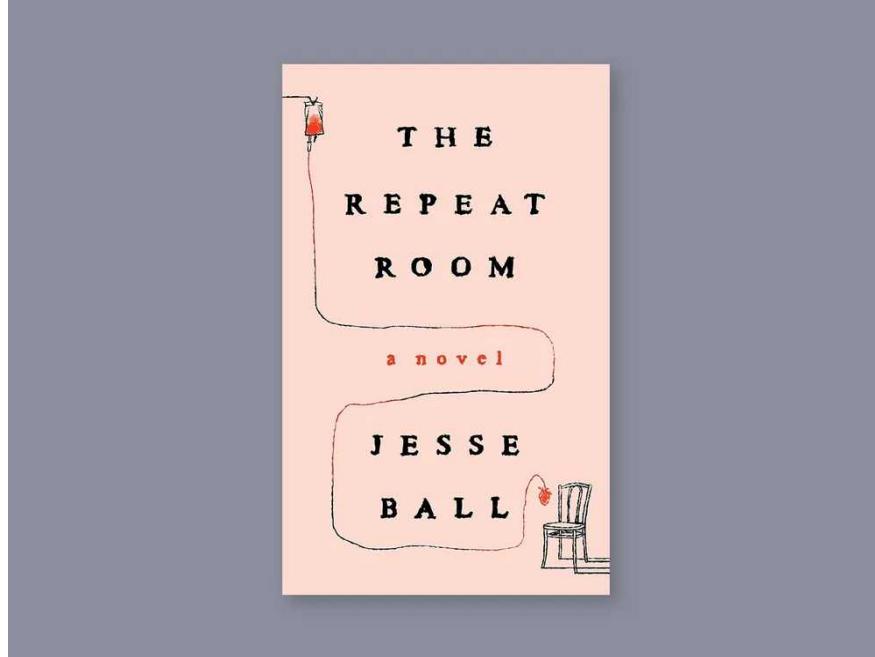
Indeed, Omkar has a pitch for Rohit. He has made a short demo film of the festival Ganeshotsav, a ten-day celebration of the Hindu god Ganesha, and now he wants to shoot something longer about it. “Quarterlife” culminates in a remarkable set piece, an extended depiction of this festival, as it winds its way through Mumbai toward the sea, and of Omkar’s attempt to film it. Across thirty-seven pages, Rege puts us inside the seething crowd, roving among the viewpoints of many participants, named and unnamed, educated and humble. Rohit, Omkar, and Amanda are all present, down there on the street, each with his or her own distinct motive. For Amanda, it’s curiosity; for Rohit, the novelty of belonging; for Omkar, devotion. Naren is not present, nor are Rohit’s parents and old friends: they seem to look on in haughty consternation. The scene has an air of fatal inevitability. Something has been opened that cannot be closed—or that can be closed only after bloodletting and sacrifice. We end Rege’s novel still inside the bewildered, close-quartered exhaustion of its characters and their overlapping forms of attention, aware that some strange ideological fever has risen and crested, a fever whose enthusiasts and victims barely understood it, but whose pulses and spikes have been lucidly charted by the diagnostic acuity of this talented first novelist. ♦

Books

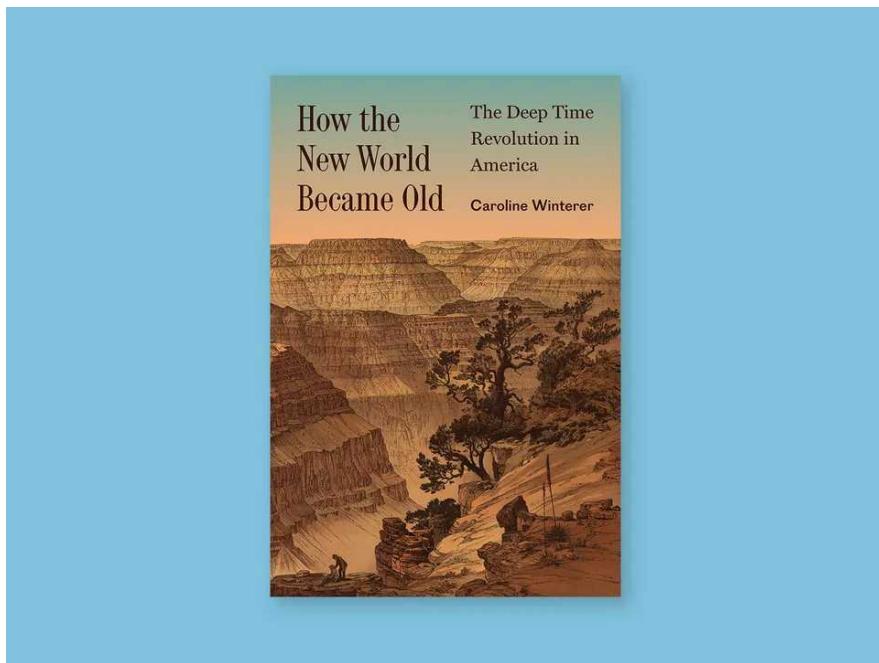
Briefly Noted

“Kent State,” “How the New World Became Old,” “The Last Dream,” and “The Repeat Room.”

November 11, 2024

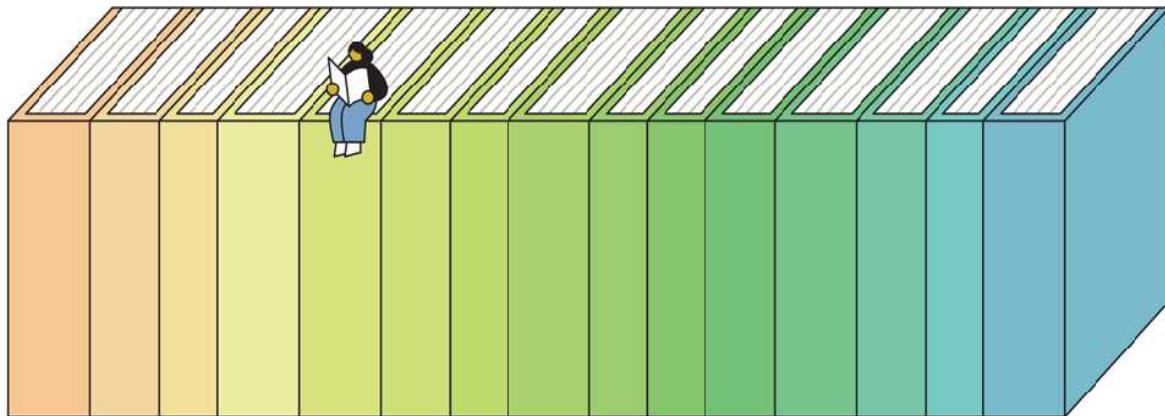


Kent State, by Brian VanDeMark (Norton). On May 4, 1970, the National Guard fired into a crowd of students protesting the Vietnam War at Kent State University, in Ohio. When the dust settled, nine students were injured and four dead. This vivid, comprehensive account explores the circumstances around the shootings. Beginning with a tortured recollection from Matt McManus, the sergeant who issued a command to fire what he intended as warning shots, VanDeMark gives voice to both students and Guardsmen, and goes on to consider the political, military, and legal causes and ramifications of the event—including a new pessimism about the efficacy of protest.

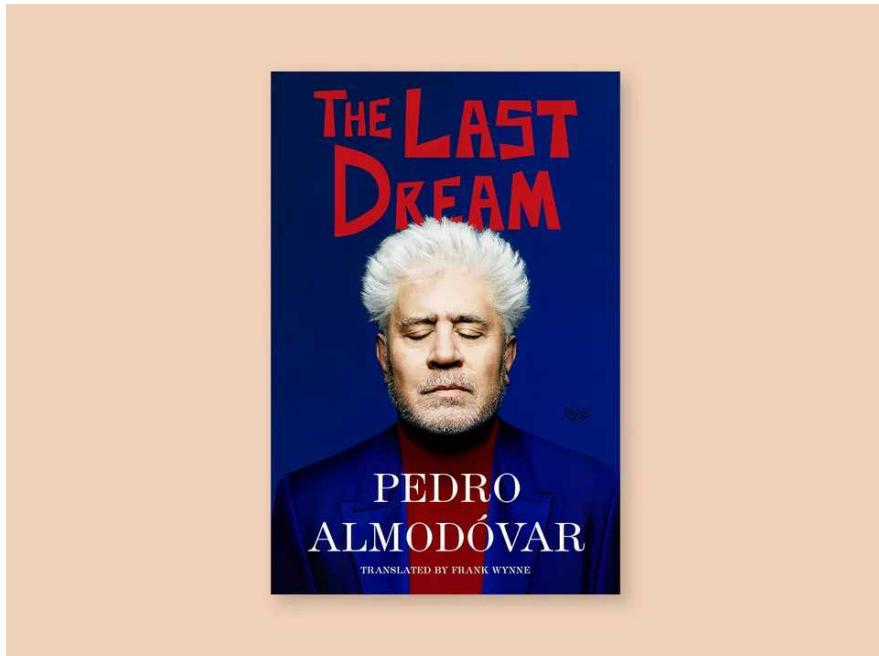


How the New World Became Old, by Caroline Winterer (Princeton). In 1826, explorers in upstate New York discovered trilobites that were some of the deepest ever unearthed, giving the fledgling United States a claim to ancientness predating that of Europe. In this elegant history, Winterer delves into the “deep time” revolution of the nineteenth century, a revolution that, as she shows, occurred not only among scientists but also among artists, poets, and theologians. Americans, Winterer writes, saw “a shimmering metaphysical significance” in the teeming strata beneath their feet, viewing coal deposits and fertile soil as divine gifts. Regarding themselves as stewards of the oldest lands on earth, they established the national parks in this era.

What We're Reading

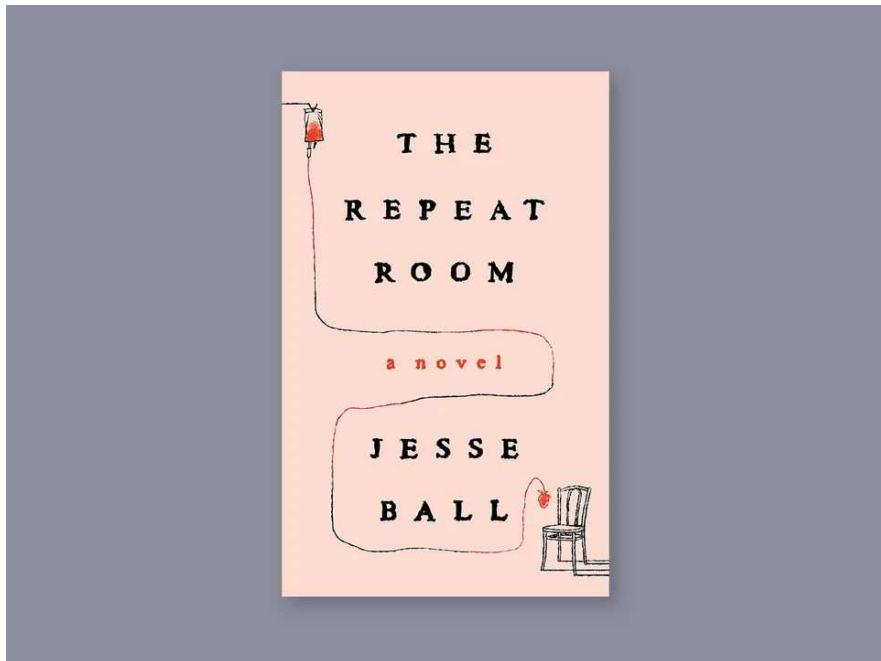


Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



The Last Dream, by Pedro Almodóvar (HarperVia). This collection of twelve stories by the celebrated Spanish film director gleefully subverts the

sacred as a matter of course. Populated by religious figures, sex workers, pop-culture icons, a gentle vampire, and a man who ages in reverse, these tales, written over five decades, are largely of a piece with Almodóvar’s exuberant, genre-defying cinema. A few, though, are stripped of outrageous plots and characters—intimate enough to resemble private jottings. The diaristic title story finds the author reflecting on the first sunny day after his mother’s death; another reckons earnestly with “having the desire but not the ability” to write a novel. Almodóvar introduces his book as a “fragmentary autobiography.” To read it, he observes, is to peer into the “relationship between what I write, what I film, what I live.”



The Repeat Room, by Jesse Ball (*Catapult*). In this bleak work of speculative fiction, a futuristic state’s justice system is defined by a unique form of jury duty. After candidates are put through a series of harrowing tests, a single judge is chosen to enter the Repeat Room—an apparatus that allows the person to relive an alleged crime from the perspective of the accused—and decide whether to order an execution. As the book follows its protagonist, a garbageman who is selected for the Room, it examines a criminal-justice system that puts everyone on trial, rewards those found fit to be part of society with the power to determine the fitness of others, and disguises the death penalty as a product of individual empathy. “Being human,” a tutorial film claims, “is deciding who gets to be human.”

“Christmas Eve in Miller’s Point” Transcends the Holiday-Movie Genre

Tyler Thomas Taormina’s comedy drama about a Long Island family boasts some of the year’s sharpest characterizations and a strikingly original narrative form.

By Richard Brody

November 08, 2024



It wasn’t on my list of likely occurrences that a nostalgic and sentimental holiday movie would provide some of the year’s sharpest characterizations on film and also boast a strikingly original narrative form. But this paradoxical blend turns out to make perfect sense in “Christmas Eve in Miller’s Point,” a finely crafted and achingly romantic memory piece, directed by Tyler Thomas Taormina. It’s set sometime in the two-thousands in the fictional Long Island town of the title, where members of a large Italian American family, the Balsanos, come together to celebrate the holiday. Written by Taormina and Eric Berger, who both grew up on Long Island and have been friends since middle school, the movie checks the

genre's boxes—long-awaited reunions and poignant separations, hearty festivity and romantic intimacy—but it does so in a way that provokes bracingly complex emotions and frames them in the snow-globe-like quotation marks of reminiscence.

The clan's matriarch, Antonia (Mary Reistetter), at whose house the Balsanos have gathered, is physically and mentally deteriorating, spending most of her time parked in an easy chair, offering wan greetings. The house teems with at least twenty family members—siblings, cousins, grandkids, other halves, and in-laws, ranging from toddlers to the elderly—plus some friends. Amid the revelry, fundamental relationships are drawn with a clarity that lays bare suppressed anguish, smothered disputes, and painful secrets. Antonia's four grown children are gradually introduced. There is the poised and pensive Kathleen (Maria Dizzia), who's there with her husband and two kids, one of whom, a teen named Emily (Matilda Fleming), bilyously resents her. Kathleen's sister, the energetic Elyse (Maria Carucci), is married to the flamboyantly domineering Ron (Steve Alleva), who cooks up the holiday feast while inveighing against the looming prospect of "chaos and insurrection." Their brother Matt (John J. Trischetti, Jr.) is their mother's caregiver, living in the house with his wife, Bev (Grege Morris). Matt instigates the film's main conflict when he proposes selling the house and moving their mother into a nearby nursing home—a plan that surprises his sisters and enrages his brother, Ray (Tony Savino), a widowed blowhard with a hidden artistic streak.

It's a mark of Taormina's audacious way with narrative architecture that the scene in which this conflict bursts forth—which includes the piquant detail of Ray yelling at Matt while on an exercise bike—is the movie's only traditional scene of overt exposition and constructed argument. Mostly, Taormina proceeds in fragments and snippets, with exquisitely rapid touches of dialogue and behavior which bring to life a house that is full of stories and long-standing tensions. "Christmas Eve in Miller's Point" is a drama of the individual and the group; it's a coming-of-age tale about many ages but also a reckoning with the frustrations of adolescence, the many varieties of loneliness in adulthood, and the struggle to define oneself against the identity assigned by a tight-knit family.

Taormina's idiosyncratic artistry, which was evident in his first feature, "Ham on Rye" (2019), has now, in his third, developed into uninhibited cinematic self-assertion. "Christmas Eve in Miller's Point" bolsters my belief that a great movie usually reveals itself quickly, in its first scenes and even in its first shots. The film's distinctive combination of sharp, nuanced writing and enticingly original visual compositions grabs the viewer almost instantly. In moments seemingly caught on the fly, characters flit through the house and out of it, meeting and separating, sharing laughs and exchanging confidences, giving voice to dreams and troubles in casual remarks and offhand gestures. The cinematographer, Carson Lund, festively ornaments the screen with points and streaks of color and light, and his drifting camera conjures murmurs of the past, recalling shots in classic memory films by Max Ophüls and Alain Resnais.

Taormina punctuates the familial drama with several spectacular set pieces, such as a festive meal at which an elderly woman named Isabelle (JoJo Cincinnati) delivers a loving litany of the departed; a scene of teary-eyed melancholy in which the family turns off the lights and watches home movies; and a Christmas Eve tradition in which the family joins neighbors to watch the local fire department's procession of fire engines festooned with Christmas decorations. Yet even such large-scale pageantry gives rise to brisk strokes of high drama, as when Emily unleashes adolescent hostility at the dinner table or when Kathleen becomes the bearer of a burdensome secret.

Meanwhile, at the edges of the action, the movie features micro-incidents of the sort that burrow deep in the mind, a whole box of madeleine moments in the making: a bunch of kids playing video games in the basement realize that the family iguana is missing, and one goes into a dark storage room to look for it; a waggish guest finds Isabelle asleep in a stair lift and presses a button to send her gliding downstairs unawares; Ray, on the patio, talks business into a landline with a very long cord; Ron declares that society is "survival of the fists," a malapropism that he reinforces by putting up his dukes; Kathleen tries to cheer up an ailing boy with a little dance of uninhibited joy.

The overwhelming profusion of incidents and details, of sidelong glances in crowded frames and notable actions occurring in the background, is

reminiscent of Wes Anderson's films. Taormina's ornamental sensibility is far less artificial—he adorns a largely realistic cinematic world with seemingly spontaneous touches and serendipitous observations—but, as with Anderson's work, the movie should be viewed at least twice to be truly seen: the action moves fast, its connections are implicit, and the talk is brilliantly epigrammatic, leaving viewers to look back and catch up while risking missing out on new pleasures as they speed along.

Taormina, like Anderson, also encourages a distinctive mode of performance. Few of the actors in the Balsano clan have long résumés—Dizzia is the most prominent, and her attentive, eloquent performance deftly meshes with Fleming's, as Emily—but Taormina's perceptive direction grants everyone moments in the spotlight. The movie seems to create actors along with characters.

“Christmas Eve in Miller’s Point” pivots on a twist of sorts that’s too good to mention but also too good not to. Emily and a cousin, Michelle (Francesca Scorsese), who’s a little bit older and a little bit bolder, sneak out of the house to meet their friends and take a car ride that Kathleen has forbidden. With this leap into the unknown, the movie instantly becomes a story of teen-age discovery, by turns passionate, tender, and goofy. It begins with a comedic wink at a young driver’s inexperience, and includes the motormouth intellectualism of a local boy, Craig (Leo Hervey). In an extended sequence of late-night snacks and seductions at a bagel shop, featuring a memorable cameo by Elsie Fisher, Craig’s smarty-pants riffs take on an earnest weight as Emily deems Christmas gifts “capitalist propaganda” and ponders what to do with hers. As the night progresses from jollity to intimacy, Taormina discovers wondrously discreet and delicate visual correlates for teen lust, including at its most fumbling. (The end credits give a sense of the comedy of the teens’ tussles, listing such characters as Bubble Gum Gal and Kiss-Marked Dope.)

At this point, the story brings Emily and the other teens into contact with two other groups—three postadolescent slackers who hang out at a graveyard, sullenly smoking (the most voluble of whom is played by Sawyer Spielberg), and two police officers with the misfortune of working on Christmas Eve (played by Michael Cera and Gregg Turkington). They provide a sense of a wider world that may look absurd to the teens—they

mock yet fear the slackers and hardly notice the sad-eyed officers—but which for Taormina, older and wiser, is full of pathos. (This is perhaps laid on a bit thick, these older characters' identities subordinated to the meaning that Taormina assigns them.)

Those streaks of exaggerated melancholy in the grubby ordinariness of suburban life don't detract from the exalted tone of Taormina's suburban reveries. "Christmas Eve in Miller's Point" is a drama of gimlet-eyed nostalgia. An image of Emily taking refuge in the woods at night connects her teen life with the grandeur of classic-era melodrama, and few movies ever tap the kind of intense emotion that Taormina stirs with a bag of dumpster-dived bagels. Without losing sight of what's banal and petty in suburban life, he imbues it with a sense of grace that emerges both from personal relationships and from the aesthetic of daily life—transcendence despite itself. ♦

Poems

- Vigil
- Everything Always

Poems

Vigil

By Camille Rankine

November 11, 2024



Long day's night, the endless dream.

Hot night on the veranda, frog chirp, cicada scream.

Sharp night, a naked light, your voice come back over and over.

Howl shaking loose night's woven threads.

Dog day's night, cloudburst, rumble.

Night lifts its head.

Sloe night, lip sweat, steeped indigo.

Bright night's incessant afterglow, and the day won't take me back.

Twilight, not awake, not asleep.

Night the sky collapsed.

Solstice night hour after hour.

Waking and it's still night:

Quarter to three, night's heavy limb across my chest.

Night closing its capacious robes over me.

Unremembered night, the night I loved you best.

Nightingale's song, your damp curls against my neck.

Night they put you in my arms.

That winter night, the early dark, your breath marking the air.

Night's whispered name.

Night of helicopter's drone and a punishing rain.

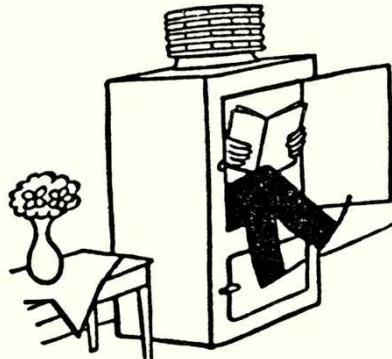
Night's redaction, and a home turns ash and grave.

Watchful night, hand in hand, faraway pinprick of flame.

Everything Always

By Alex Dimitrov

November 11, 2024



A man dangles a cigarette
over a fire escape on Crosby.
It's so early, I am still in last night.
All of life honks.
The streets steam.
Gin changes to coffee
and I think of you less
then I think of you often.
How strange! To be a person
instead of a tree. I'll miss it.
I'm in it! I watch a bucket
of peonies glint in the sun.
The wind moves through the avenue.
A woman loses her hat.
I lost something back there
but what use is turning around?

Goodbye to the past!
I buy leather pants.
I call my mother.
Someone has written
everything always
over the pavement
and I nod because I get it.
Isn't it time I move to Greece?
Today I only have time
to walk to the water.
I do that. I love it.
Who wants to go home, anyway?
Who wants to be what they are?

Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Monday, November 11, 2024](#)

Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, November 11, 2024

A challenging puzzle.

By Erik Agard

November 11, 2024



The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

The Mail

Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Parul Sehgal's review of Ta-Nehisi Coates's "The Message" and Tad Friend's Profile of the rare-book dealer Glenn Horowitz.

November 11, 2024

The Role of Reparations

Parul Sehgal, in her review of Ta-Nehisi Coates's "The Message," writes about how, in his 2014 essay "The Case for Reparations," which argued for restitution to the descendants of enslaved Black Americans, "Coates invoked German reparations to Israel after the Holocaust as a model. . . . He now acknowledges that they allowed Zionists to displace some seven hundred thousand Palestinians, forbidding them to return to their land and property" ([Books](#), October 21st). I wish that Sehgal had investigated Coates's assertion more thoroughly before repeating it.

The Reparations Agreement between Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany was signed in September, 1952, and took effect in March, 1953, some five years after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and its displacement of Palestinians. Israel's initial claim against Germany, in 1951, was for \$1.5 billion, the estimated cost of resettling half a million Holocaust refugees; the ultimate agreement was for some seven hundred million dollars, which was paid to Israel over the next fourteen years. By implying that there is a direct connection between German reparations to Israel and the displacement of Palestinians, Sehgal and Coates create a causality that ill serves both Palestinians and Holocaust victims.

*Geoff Kronik
Brookline, Mass.*

Dealing in Books

As one of very few women who handle literary archives in the book trade, I read Tad Friend's recent Profile of the book dealer Glenn Horowitz with dismay ("[Pivotal, Seminal, Rare](#)," October 28th). I wish that Friend had looked beyond Horowitz's gilded Hamptons doors; instead, by centering Horowitz's behavior as a paradigm in the rare-books field, the article obscures the concerted efforts of other dealers and collectors to create a culture of access and use around literary papers.

Horowitz's practices, as described by Friend, are typical of a small cohort of quick-tongued, fast-fingered dealers who operate at the expense of their clients and are aging out of the trade. More than ever, literary papers can be a site of meaning-making for writers, dealers, buyers, curators, and librarians; a new generation of dealers and curators values less established writers as much as Pulitzer Prize winners, expresses a feminist ethos of book collecting, and champions collaboration over coercion in negotiations. We don't create fictitious prices, and we pay our clients and colleagues in a timely, ethical manner. Literary papers offer us the gift of understanding process over product, and relationships over individuality. Shouldn't archive placements happen in a similarly honest and expansive spirit?

*Mary Catherine Kinniburgh
Brooklyn, N.Y.*

Friend's article could have focussed more on Horowitz's service to scholarship, something I experienced as the literary executor of the W. H. Auden estate. Whenever someone who had inherited an Auden manuscript insisted on holding on to it privately, preventing me from including it in the complete edition of Auden's work, I asked Horowitz to acquire it from the owner. Armed with a sheaf of hundred-dollar bills, he succeeded in every case, and the manuscript quickly went to the New York Public Library. One such manuscript was an unknown play that Auden had written, to be performed at a friend's birthday party. Only Horowitz's skill and tenacity made it available to the public.

*Edward Mendelson
New York City*

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Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

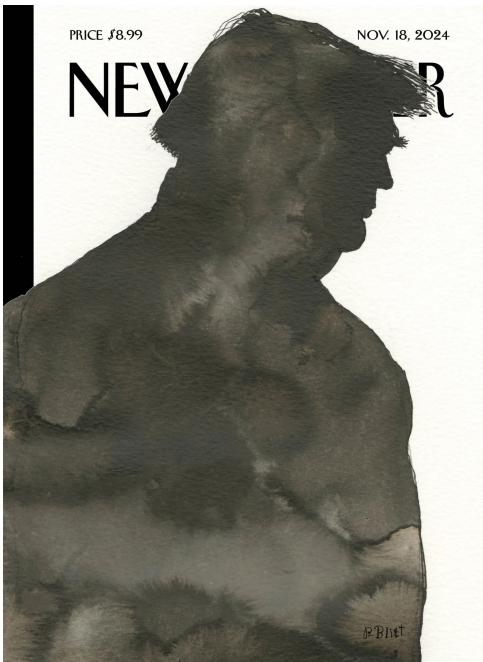


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