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THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

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How Do You Forgive the People Who Killed Your Family?

**Thirty years after the genocide in
Rwanda, survivors and
perpetrators live side by side.**

by Clint Smith



Villagers hid in a church in Rukara, Rwanda, in April 1994. Hutu militia surrounded the church and launched a series of attacks that lasted for days, killing hundreds.

Hussein Longolongo killed seven people during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda; he oversaw the killing of nearly 200 others.

He told me this on a warm March day in a courtyard in central Kigali, almost exactly 30 years later. I had come to Rwanda because I wanted to understand how the genocide is remembered—through the country’s official memorials as well as in the minds of victims. And I wanted to know how people like Longolongo look back on what they did.

Longolongo was born in Kigali in the mid-1970s. As a teenager in the late 1980s, he didn’t feel any personal hatred toward Tutsi. He had friends who were Tutsi; his own mother was Tutsi. But by the early 1990s, extremist Hutu propaganda had started to spread in newspapers and on the radio, radicalizing Rwandans. Longolongo’s older brother tried to get him to join a far-right Hutu political party, but Longolongo wasn’t interested in politics. He just wanted to continue his studies.

On April 6, 1994, Longolongo attended a funeral for a Tutsi man. At about 8:30 p.m., in the midst of the funeral rituals, the sky erupted in red fire and black smoke. The news traveled fast: A plane carrying the Rwandan president, Juvénal Habyarimana, and the Burundian president, Cyprien Ntaryamira, had been shot down over Kigali. No one survived.

Responsibility for the attack has never been conclusively determined. Some have speculated that Hutu extremists shot down the plane; others have blamed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Tutsi military group that had been fighting Hutu government forces near the Ugandan border. Whoever was behind it, the event gave Hutu militants a pretext for the massacre of Tutsi. The killing started that night.

Almost as if they had been waiting for the signal, Hutu militia members showed up in Longolongo’s neighborhood. One group arrived at his home and called for his brother. When he came to the door, they gave his brother a gun and three grenades and told him to come with them.

Within a few days, most of the neighborhood’s Hutu men had been ordered to join the effort. “The instructions were clear: ‘Rwanda was attacked by the RPF, and all the Tutsi are accomplices. And to defeat the RPF, we have to

fight them, but also kill all the Tutsi in the neighborhoods,” Longolongo told me. Any Hutu found hiding a Tutsi would be considered an accomplice and could be killed.

The pace of lethality was extraordinary. Although approximations of the death toll vary, many estimate that, over the course of just 100 days that spring and summer, about 800,000 Rwandans, primarily Tutsi, were killed.

From the September 2001 issue: Bystanders to genocide

Longolongo believed that he had no choice but to join the Hutu militants. They taught him how to kill, and how to kill quickly. He was told that the Tutsi had enslaved the Hutu for more than 400 years and that if they got the chance, they would do it again. He was told that it was a patriotic act to defend his country against the “[cockroaches](#).” He began to believe, he said, that killing the Tutsi was genuinely the right thing to do. Soon, he was placed in charge of other militia members.

For Longolongo, the fact that his mother was Tutsi and that he’d had Tutsi friends became a justification for his actions; he felt he had to make a public spectacle of his executions, to avoid suspicions that he was overly sympathetic toward the enemy. He feared that if he didn’t demonstrate his commitment to the Hutu-power cause, his family would be slaughtered. And so he kept killing. He killed his neighbors. He killed his mother’s friend. He killed the children of his sister’s godmother. All while he was hiding eight Tutsi in his mother’s house. Such contradictions were not uncommon in Rwanda.

As Longolongo told me his story, we were sitting with Serge Rwigamba, who works at the Kigali Genocide Memorial. Longolongo doesn’t speak English well, so Rwigamba served as our translator. We kept our distance from others in the courtyard, unsure who might overhear what we were discussing or how they might react to it.

On April 22, 1994, Longolongo recounted, he and an armed group of men entered a chapel where dozens of Tutsi were hiding. “We killed about 70 people,” he said, his gaze fixed directly ahead. “I felt like it was my duty,

my responsibility ... I had no pity." He put his fingertips to the sides of his head. "I was brainwashed."

After Longolongo got up to leave, I turned to Rwigamba. He had been visibly uncomfortable at points during the conversation—looking down at the ground, his fingers stretching and contracting across the arms of his chair as if searching for something to hold on to. Rwigamba is a Tutsi survivor, and dozens of his relatives were murdered in the genocide.

The two men, roughly the same age, had never met before. But as Longolongo was speaking, Rwigamba told me, he'd realized that he recognized one of the scenes being described.

It was the chapel. He knew that chapel. Rwigamba himself had been hiding there when Longolongo and his men attacked. His father and brother had been killed that day. Rwigamba had barely escaped. Now he leaned back in his chair, covered his face with his hands, and took a deep breath. We sat in silence for a few moments.

Rwigamba doesn't deny that propaganda played an enormous role in persuading Hutu to do what they did. But looking at Longolongo's empty chair, Rwigamba lamented that he had seemed to push responsibility for his actions onto others rather than holding himself accountable. Rwigamba wants perpetrators like Longolongo to acknowledge that they made a choice. They weren't zombies. They were people who chose to pick up weapons; they were people who chose to kill.

Thirty years have passed since 100 days of violence ravaged Rwanda. Thirty years since machetes slashed, since grenades exploded, since bodies rotted, since homes burned, since churches became slaughterhouses and the soil became swollen with blood. Rwandans are still living with the scars of those terrible days. They are still learning how to calibrate their memories of all that happened.

In my conversations with dozens of Rwandans this year, I saw how profoundly the genocide continues to shape the lives of the people who lived through it. There are people who protected their neighbors and people who brought machetes down on their neighbors' heads. There are people who hid

family in their homes and people who handed family over to the militia. There are people who killed some so they could protect others. Survivors' recollections of those horrifying days are at once fresh and fading. Questions of whom and how to forgive—of whether to forgive at all—still weigh heavily.

[From the December 2022 issue: Clint Smith on how Germany remembers the Holocaust](#)

Over the past decade, I have traveled to dozens of sites throughout America and around the world to explore how crimes against humanity are memorialized. Rwanda has some of the most graphic sites of memory I have ever seen, places where the gruesome reality of what occurred is on display in sometimes shocking detail. And it is different from other sites I've visited in another crucial respect: In most of those places, few, if any, survivors are left. Here, hundreds of thousands of people who survived the genocide are still alive to tell the story, and Tutsi and Hutu live alongside one another as neighbors. I wanted to understand what public memory of an atrocity looks like when the perpetrator and the victim continue to walk past each other every day. I wanted to understand whether true forgiveness is even possible.



Serge Rwigamba lost dozens of relatives in the genocide. (Dadu Shin)

A few days before we met Longolongo, Rwigamba had shown me around the Kigali Genocide Memorial, which opened in 2004. The memorial sits on a hill that is said to hold the remains of 250,000 people, buried in columns of caskets that descend deep into the earth. Some caskets contain the remains of an entire family. The skull of a mother might be sitting alongside the rib

cage of her husband, the tibia of her daughter, and the femur of her firstborn son. The graves are covered by massive rectangular blocks of concrete, ornamented in garlands of pink and red roses placed by visitors.

Rwigamba works as a guide and coordinator at the memorial, and also serves as vice president of the Kigali chapter of Ibuka, a civic organization that works to ensure that survivors of the genocide receive social, political, and economic support. Throughout my trip, he served as my translator and guide. He was 15 years old in 1994. He lost more than 50 members of his family, some of whom are buried at the memorial site. After the genocide, he recalled, his trauma felt suffocating. Every day, he woke up after another cycle of nightmares and thought about his family. He missed them intensely. “Working here was one of my ways to get close to them,” he told me.

We walked around the museum at the center of the memorial, which outlines the history that preceded the genocide and highlights photographs and stories of people who were killed. The goal is to demonstrate who they were in life, not to simply show them as corpses. But what stayed with me was the omnipresent sense of death. One room displays rows of skulls of people who were murdered.

We heard wailing, and Rwigamba went to see what was happening. When he returned, he explained that a survivor was visiting the memorial to see her father’s resting place. When she walked through the room of skulls, she broke down. Members of the museum’s staff went to comfort her. Rwigamba told me that this kind of thing happens often. As we walked back outside, the sound of the woman’s screams echoed through the halls.

I wanted to understand what public memory of an atrocity looks like when the perpetrator and the victim continue to walk past each other daily.

Rwigamba said that in the 16 years since he started working at the memorial, he has learned more about the way Hutu extremists used propaganda before and during the genocide. It made him wonder. “I kept on thinking about what could have happened if I was born a Hutu. What would have happened to me?”

Anti-Tutsi propaganda was everywhere in the early 1990s, deepening Hutu's suspicions of their Tutsi neighbors. In December 1990, an extremist Hutu newspaper had published the "Hutu Ten Commandments," which called for Hutu political solidarity and stated that the Tutsi were the common enemy.

The roots of this antipathy went back a long time. Before Germany and later Belgium colonized Rwanda, those who owned and herded cows were generally considered Tutsi, and those who farmed the land Hutu. Under colonialism, however, these permeable class boundaries became fixed, racialized markers of identity, and much of the majority-Hutu population (along with the Twa, a group that made up 1 percent of the population) lived in relative poverty, under the control of an elite Tutsi political class. This inequality opened deep fissures: The anthropologist Natacha Nsabimana has written that "the violence in 1994 must be understood as part of a longer history that begins with the racial violence of modernity and European colonialism."

As animosity toward the Tutsi grew in the mid-20th century, Belgian colonial powers started to place members of the Hutu population in charge. In the years before and after Rwanda gained independence, in 1962, Hutu government forces killed thousands of Tutsi. Hundreds of thousands more Tutsi fled the country.

Tutsi exiles intermittently attacked Rwanda's Hutu throughout the 1960s. In the late '80s, thousands of exiles joined the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which invaded Rwanda from Uganda in 1990, setting off a civil war. In 1992, under international pressure, President Habyarimana and the RPF negotiated a cease-fire, and the two sides began working out a peace agreement. Hutu extremists, who saw the agreement as a betrayal, doubled down on promoting anti-Tutsi lies.

Rwigamba gazed out over the memorial's courtyard, recalling the messages that Hutu received from the government and the media in those years. "What if I would have been approached with so much pressure—from society and from my education? Hatred is an ideology and is taught at all levels of the society and all levels of community. So it was so hard for a child of my age to do something different." Rwigamba paused. He looked like someone who had missed a turn and was trying to see if they could back up. "I don't want

to give an excuse for the people who committed the genocide,” he said, “because they have killed my family. But I could actually try to learn some sort of, you know, like, empathy, which enables you to think about the possibility of forgiveness.”

Still, Rwigamba told me, identifying with the killers in any way, even as a thought exercise, can feel shameful. Another part of him believes *I don't have to put myself in the shoes of perpetrators. I am a victim!* That, he says, is “the easiest way to cope with your wounds”—but perhaps not the right one.

After the genocide, Rwigamba went to school with the daughter of one of the commanders who oversaw killings in his neighborhood; they sat in the same classroom. He knew that it wasn't her fault, that she herself had not held the machetes. But, he wondered, did she carry the same beliefs as her father? Did she listen to his stories with admiration? Did she dream of finishing his work? For a long time, Rwigamba said, his classmate's presence was a reminder of all that he had lost, and all that could be lost if history were to repeat itself.

Years later, however, after Rwigamba encountered his former classmate at church, he chose to put these thoughts out of his head. He told himself that she was not there to torment him, and he moved on. The scholar Susanne Buckley-Zistel refers to this phenomenon as “chosen amnesia,” describing it as a way for members of a community to coexist despite having had fundamentally different experiences during the genocide. All over Rwanda, every day, for 30 years, many people have chosen amnesia.

The facade of Sainte-Famille Church in Kigali is adorned with vermillion-colored bricks and white-tile pillars that form the shape of a cross. On the day Rwigamba and I visited, a priest dressed in white held a microphone, his voice swelling in a wave of Kinyarwanda as the congregation nodded at his sermon. We sat down in a mahogany pew at the back of the church, and Rwigamba pointed a few rows ahead of us. “I hid under that bench for two months.”

After the genocide began, Hutu militiamen showed up at Rwigamba's home and told his family that they were going to kill them. They told them to

kneel down on the ground. Everyone did as they were told, except for Rwigamba, who was so afraid, he couldn't move. His father began praying; his mother cried. The men cocked their guns and pointed them at his family. "Then, suddenly, they stopped," Rwigamba said. The men told them that they would let them live, for now, if the family paid them. So Rwigamba's parents scrounged together all they could. "They left us, but with the promise of coming back and finishing us off," Rwigamba said. No one waited around to find out if they were telling the truth.

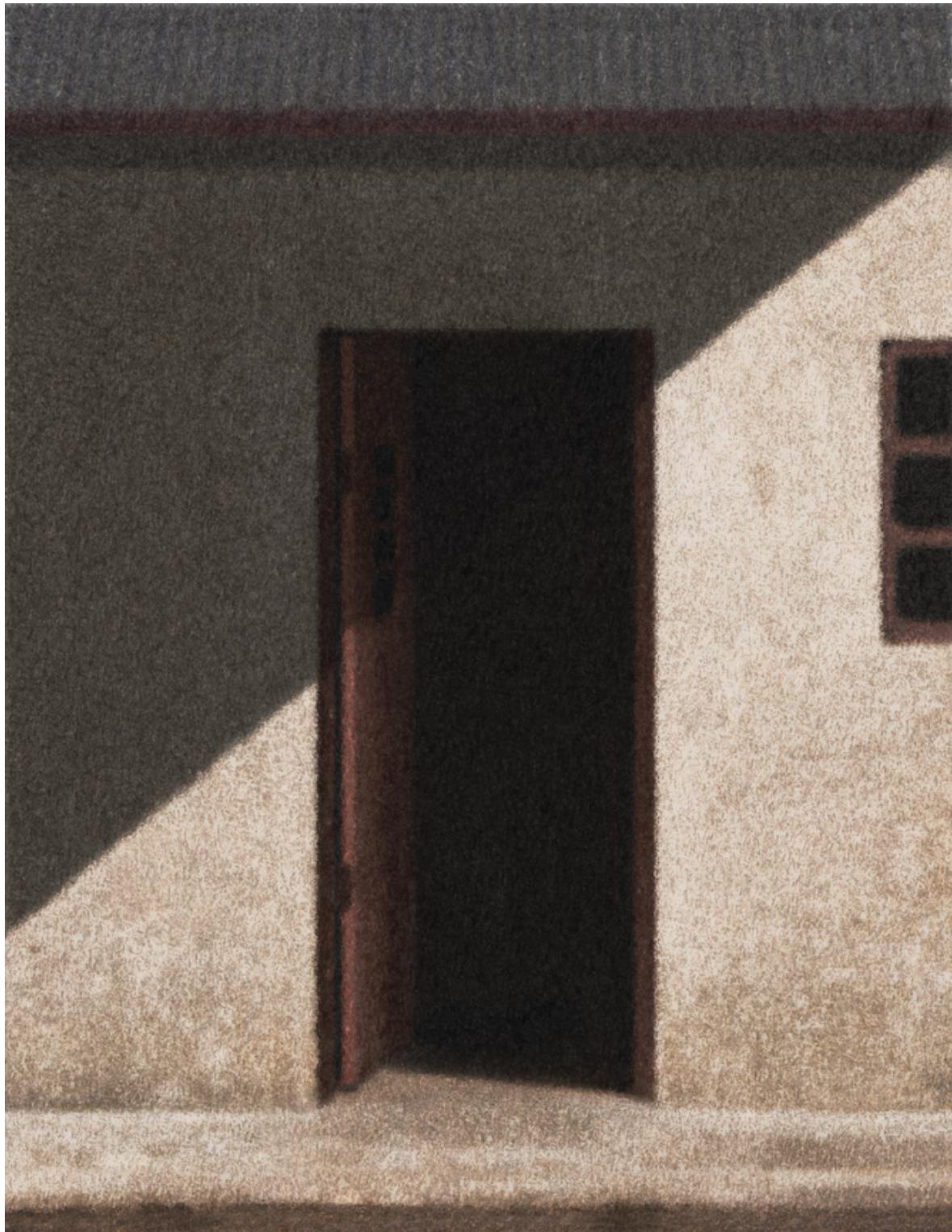
As the days wore on, Rwigamba and his family moved from place to place, often at a moment's notice. Eventually, they hid in the chapel that Longolongo and his crew attacked. Soon after that, Rwigamba and his sister and mother found themselves in another part of town, at Sainte-Famille Church, which housed thousands of Tutsi during the genocide.

[Churches were a popular hiding place](#): More than 90 percent of all Rwandans were Christian, and many people hoped that the militia would not attack spaces that were sacred to both Hutu and Tutsi alike. Some Hutu who had been caught in the crossfire between Hutu forces and the RPF also sought refuge in churches. As a result, at Sainte-Famille, Rwigamba and his family sheltered side by side with the families of the people trying to kill them.

Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka, a priest at Sainte-Famille, would soon become infamous. He traded his clerical robe for a flak jacket, carried a pistol, and, according to multiple witness accounts, personally handed over Tutsi to the Hutu militia. Day after day, the militia showed up with a list of names of Tutsi who were believed to be seeking refuge in the church. Rwigamba recognized many of the killers from his neighborhood—boys and young men he had gone to school with. Every day he watched people get killed, certain that he would be next. The carnage went on for more than two months. Hundreds of Tutsi were killed; many women were raped. (The United Nations estimates that up to 250,000 women were raped in the genocide; another estimate puts the number even higher.)

During a pause in the church service, Rwigamba and I slid out of our seats and stepped outside, into a light rain. About 50 yards away was a black-marble wall with rows of names inscribed on each side. Rwigamba bent

down and pointed to the bold white letters of two names: Emmanuel Rwigamba and Charles Rwigamba. His elder brother and his father, who were murdered by Hutu militia members, then thrown into a mass grave nearby.



“This was littered with corpses of people who had been killed and left here,” Rwigamba said, gesturing toward Sainte-Famille’s parking lot.

He pointed to another spot, to the left of the church, where he remembers watching the Hutu militia force a man to dig his own grave before they shot him and threw him into it.

“I feel so lucky to have survived,” Rwigamba said. “When we were moving around those skulls and bones at the museum, I often felt like I could have been one of them.”

He looked back at the church entrance as people began filing out. “Maybe the people that we were seeing in the museum—maybe they were the same people that were with me here.”

at the Murambi Genocide Memorial Centre, I smelled the dead before I saw them.

Dozens of embalmed bodies were laid out across two rows of tables on either side of the room. I walked toward the back of the room and stopped in front of a body whose right arm dangled over the edge of the table. The woman’s head was turned to the side. Her mouth was ajar, revealing half a row of uneven teeth on the bottom. Her skin, swathed in powdered lime that had turned it a haunting white, was sunken in between her ribs. Her toes were curled and her left hand had been placed above her head, as if she were attempting to protect herself from something above. There was a rosary around her neck, the crucifix at rest near her chin. A black patch of hair was still present on the back of her head. Beneath it, a hole in her skull from where a machete had cracked it open.

The Murambi memorial sits on the site of a former technical school. In April 1994, a group of local leaders convinced the Tutsi in the area that they could find protection here; the Centre estimates that, within two weeks, 50,000 Tutsi had gathered. But it was a trap.

Soon the school and the hill it sat atop were surrounded by several hundred men. They threw grenades and shot bullets into the crowd, then attacked those who were still alive with clubs and machetes. Thousands were killed (the exact number remains contested). The victims were tossed into mass graves, but some were later exhumed and put on display as part of the

memorial. Today, these mass graves are covered with grass, and the school's two dozen classrooms serve as the centerpiece of the memorial.

Leon Muberuka, a Tutsi survivor who works as a guide here, accompanied me through each classroom. Muberuka was 11 when the genocide happened. He remembers everything: the bodies on the ground, the stench of death. He still finds it difficult to spend time in these classrooms. I did too.

When we stepped outside, Muberuka saw me rubbing my nose, attempting to expel the lingering scent of the bodies from my nostrils. "This place, in the morning, the smell is very, very, very hard," he said. "We close the door at night, and when we open it—" He widened his eyes, held his nose, and exhaled through his mouth.

We walked to a building at the far end of the compound. As I crossed the threshold, I paused. In front of us, inside cylindrical glass tubes, I saw about 20 corpses that were better preserved than the ones I had just seen. Many of these bodies were brown rather than white. Their skin looked closer to what it might have looked like in life. I walked toward the back of the room. In a single encasement were two small children. I looked down at a placard and read the first two sentences:

The young boy died because of a massive attack to the head. The skull lies open and shows the still preserved brain.

The child, who appeared to have been about 5, wore a light-blue shirt with a pink elephant on the front. His mummified eyes were still visible, though sunken into his head. I stepped to the left and looked down at the hole in his skull. I leaned forward, and I saw the child's brain.

I went outside to collect myself. Seeing this made the horror of the genocide more real; it left me feeling a mix of shock, despair, and rage—both deeply moved and profoundly unsettled. I thought about other memorial sites I've visited. After the Holocaust, Allied soldiers found thousands of bodies in barracks, gas chambers, crematoria, and train cars. What if some of those bodies had been preserved and put in a museum? What if I'd walked into Dachau and seen the bodies of Jewish people who had been murdered on display inside gas chambers? Would that not compromise the dignity of the

dead? Or was putting the full, gruesome reality on display like this a way to ensure that people would continue to respect its gravity? When I traveled to Germany a few years ago, one man I interviewed, the child of Holocaust survivors, described his repugnance at the fact that, these days, people take selfies at places like Auschwitz and Dachau. Surely, given what was being shown here, no one would dare do the same?

Outside, a yellow-orange sun set behind the surrounding hills. On the three-hour drive north to Murambi, I had marveled at the beauty of these rolling hills, covered in the thick leaves of banana trees. I'd passed women in the valleys below bending over rice paddies, dipping their hands into the shallow water; men sweating as they walked bikes uphill, jugs of water strapped to the seat; children in flip-flops chasing soccer balls in front of shops where the smell of sweet potatoes hung in the air.

Seeing the bodies helped me picture the roads that wrap around these hills blocked by machete-wielding men, the land full of the dead and dying. Instead of smelling sweet potatoes when you rolled down your window, I realized, you might have smelled corpses rotting beneath the sun.

To Muberuka, the vividness is exactly the purpose of a memorial like this one, as uncomfortable as it may be. "This is our past, and everyone needs to know this," he said.

"Sometimes people can say the genocide did not happen in Rwanda," Muberuka added, his brow wrinkling in indignation, alluding to those who claim that the violence was not a genocide but a manifestation of long-standing, two-sided ethnic and tribal conflict. "Through this evidence, it's real," he said. "So that's why, for me, it's important to preserve this memorial and some physical evidence."

To many, the bodies on display serve as a reminder to the world of how profoundly it failed to come to Rwanda's aid.

Muberuka's parents and sister were killed in the genocide. Or at least he thinks they were—he never found their bodies. "I don't know where they have been buried," he said. He paused and looked down. "I don't know if they are buried or not." A gust of wind whistled between us. "When you

bury someone ... you know he's dead. But if you don't know—" He looked at me, then up at the sky. "Even now, we are still waiting. Maybe we will see them."

Rumors swirled around his community. People told Muberuka that they had seen his sister, who was a baby at the time of the genocide. What if she had been picked up by a family and brought across the border to Uganda? Maybe she was in Kenya.

I asked if he thought she might still be alive.

"I don't think so," he said softly. "Thirty years, it's just ..." His voice trailed off.

For decades, Muberuka had held on to hope. But it was a torturous existence. He saw this hope torture those around him as well. He knew people who—15, 20, 25 years after the genocide—would walk up to a stranger in the market and grab their face, thinking they might be a long-lost sibling, daughter, or son.

He decided that he had to let go, or he could never move forward. Here, again, was this idea of chosen amnesia. It was everywhere. Today, though he works at the memorial, Muberuka and his surviving siblings do not discuss the genocide with one another; he says it's easier that way.

Another reading of the Murambi Genocide Memorial Centre and similarly graphic sites is that they are an outgrowth of the Rwandan government's desire to reinforce its power and control. Paul Kagame, formerly the Tutsi military leader of the RPF, became president of Rwanda in 2000, and he continues to occupy that office today. In some respects, he has been an enormously successful leader. Many of the Rwandans I spoke with praised him as a singular figure who has, through his insistence on reconciliation, managed to prevent another genocide.

But the country's relative stability during his time in power has not been without costs. International observers have labeled Kagame an authoritarian. His tenure has been marked by allegations of human-rights abuses against political opponents, journalists, and activists. In 2015, the United States

government [urged Kagame to step down](#) to allow a new generation of Rwandans to lead the country. Freedom House, a watchdog group based in the U.S., said in [a 2022 report](#) that Rwanda is “not free.” The government, it said, had been “banning and repressing any opposition group that could mount a serious challenge to its leadership.” In July of this year, [Kagame was reelected](#) to a fourth term. Rwanda’s National Electoral Commission said that he received 99.2 percent of the vote.

The political scientist Timothy Longman argues that sites like Murambi serve as a warning to Rwandans from the Kagame regime: *This is what we put an end to, and this is what could happen again if we are not careful—if we are not in charge.* Longman is a professor at Boston University and the author of *Memory and Justice in Post-genocide Rwanda*. He spent years living in the country as both a scholar and a field researcher for Human Rights Watch. He understands the impulse to create memorials that force visitors to confront what happened, he told me, and he shares the view of many Rwandans that the bodies serve as a reminder to the world of how profoundly it failed to come to Rwanda’s aid. Still, he finds the display shocking and horrific—a calculated attempt on the part of the Kagame regime to maximize visitors’ distress at the expense of the victims’ dignity. Using the bodies to provoke a reaction, he believes, compromises the site’s ability to meaningfully honor the dead.

“If the survivors had designed these sites, there wouldn’t be bodies,” Longman said. In his book, he writes about a conversation he had with a nun who had survived the genocide: “It is not good to leave the bodies like that,” she said. “They need to find the means to bury them.” But Longman also writes about the perspective of another nun whose sentiments echoed what I heard from Muberuka. “It has another role,” she said. “It helps to show those who said that there was no genocide what happened. It acts as a proof to the international community.”

When Longman and I spoke, I told him how moved I had been by the stories that the survivors shared with me at the various sites I’d visited, even as I was cognizant of the fact that the memorials were ultimately accountable to the state. Longman considered my point. “For the survivors at these sites, it’s their job,” he replied carefully. “They’re not telling a stock story, but on the other hand, they’re telling their story every day. I don’t think there is

insincerity, but people know on some level what they are supposed to say, and in particular they know what they *can't* say. It doesn't mean it's untrue, but as with anything in Rwanda, conversation is always constrained because you're in an authoritarian context, and there are consequences if you say the wrong thing."

On July 4, 1994, after nearly three months of violence, RPF forces took control of Kigali, forcing the Hutu militia out of the city. As the RPF moved through Rwanda, nearly 2 million Hutu fled to neighboring countries. In the months and years to come, the transition government faced a question: How to achieve justice for victims while also advancing the goal of reconciliation?

[From the March 2021 issue: Stories of slavery, from those who survived it](#)

Eventually, more than 120,000 Hutu were arrested on charges of participating in the genocide. Rwandan prisons were overcrowded and teeming with disease. One of the tens of thousands of Hutu prisoners was Hussein Longolongo. In prison, he was forced to take part in a government-sanctioned reeducation program. He initially dismissed much of what he heard in the program as Tutsi propaganda. "But as time went on, I became convinced that what I did was not right," he told me.

Longolongo also participated in more than 100 of what were known as *gacaca* trials. *Gacaca*—which roughly translates to “justice on the grass”—had historically been used in Rwandan villages and communities to settle interpersonal and intercommunal conflicts. Now the government transformed the role of the *gacaca* court to handle allegations of genocide.

Witnesses would present an account of an alleged crime to community-elected judges, who would assess its severity and determine the appropriate consequences. Because 85 percent of Rwandans were Hutu, the judges were overwhelmingly Hutu. "A lot of *gacaca* was actually about the Hutu community themselves trying to come to terms with what Hutu had done," Phil Clark, a political scientist who has written a book about the *gacaca* courts, told me. "It was Hutu judges, Hutu suspects, and often Hutu witnesses doing most of the talking. And genocide survivors sometimes were a bit reluctant to get overly involved for that reason."

“Thirty years is not enough to trust them … We work together. We live together. But we don’t trust them.”

The courts convened for a decade, from 2002 to 2012. There were many delays, but for years at a time, all community members were required to attend weekly trials. By 2012, more than 12,000 *gacaca* courts, involving 170,000 judges, had tried more than 1 million people. Nothing like this had ever been done on such a large scale anywhere else in the world.

The legacy of the trials is mixed. “The courts have helped Rwandans better understand what happened in 1994, but in many cases flawed trials have led to miscarriages of justice,” Daniel Bekele, then the Africa director at Human Rights Watch, [said in 2011](#) when the group [released a report](#) on the *gacaca* process. If the trials helped some survivors find a sense of closure, they reopened wounds for others. They were sometimes used to settle scores. In some cases, Tutsi survivors, wanting to exact vengeance on Hutu as a group, made false accusations. Although the public setting of the trials was intended to ensure transparency, it also made some potential witnesses unwilling to testify. And many people stayed silent even when they believed that a defendant was innocent, afraid of the backlash that might come from standing up for an accused perpetrator.

Some observers objected to the fact that only crimes against Tutsi victims were brought in front of the courts, while crimes against Hutu were overlooked. “The genocide was terrible; it was serious, and justice absolutely had to be done,” Longman told me. “But it doesn’t mean that war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the RPF should be completely ignored.”

Rwigamba told me that he did not think the process was perfect. But he saw it as the most practical and efficient way to achieve a semblance of justice on a reasonable timeline. He also appreciated that it drew on traditions and practices that were created by Rwandans rather than relying on judicial mandates imposed by outsiders. “*Gacaca* taught us that our traditions are rich and our values are strong,” he said.

Longolongo, for his part, found meaning in the opportunity to come face-to-face with the families of those he had helped kill—to admit to his crimes,

and to apologize. I asked him if his conscience is now clear. “I feel so relieved,” he said. He told me that he became friends with many of the surviving family members of Tutsi he had killed after he showed them where the bodies of their loved ones had been discarded. “I feel like I fulfilled my mission,” he said.

This revelation took me aback. “You mean you are now friends with some of the people whose loved ones you killed?”

Longolongo nodded and smiled. “After realizing that I was genuine and telling the truth, I’ve got so many friends.”

I wondered if *friends* was the word that these Tutsi would use to describe the relationship. I thought of a comment made by a genocide and rape survivor in the 2011 Human Rights Watch report: “This is government-enforced reconciliation. The government forced people to ask for and give forgiveness. No one does it willingly … The government pardoned the killers, not us.”

On the way back to my hotel in Kigali one evening, I spoke with my driver, Eric (given the sensitive nature of his comments, I am using only his first name). Eric is Rwandan, but he was born in Burundi. His family, like many other Tutsi at the time, left Rwanda in 1959 to escape violence at the hands of Hutu extremists. They returned in 1995, after the genocide ended.

I had read that, after the genocide, the RPF—now the ruling political party in Rwanda—officially eradicated the categories of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa on the grounds that they were false differences imposed on Rwandans by colonial powers, categories that had only led to conflict and bloodshed. There were no more ethnic categories, the government said, only Rwandans. I was curious how Rwandans identify today, regardless of the government’s directive, and I asked Eric about this.

“Some of them still identify. You can’t stop that. Some people still have that ideology. But also, it’s not something that is official.” He paused and began to speak again, then stopped abruptly. “It’s not allowed.” As he talked, I realized that, privately, Eric still seemed to think in terms of Tutsi and Hutu.

“I live together with someone who was in jail for 18 years. Someone who killed people. I know him,” Eric said. “He’s my neighbor.” Eric told me he doesn’t feel angry at this man—he has even hired him to do construction work on his house, and has had the man’s children do small tasks for him.

But as Eric went on, I noticed that he seemed to see this as a gesture of generosity, and a way of showing the Hutu that Tutsi are superior—that despite what the Hutu did to the Tutsi, the Tutsi were still willing to help them. That they would never do to the Hutu what the Hutu did to them, because they are more evolved.

Would you say that you’ve forgiven him? I asked.

“Yeah. I have forgiven him,” Eric said, nodding. But then he reconsidered. “You know, you can’t say that you have forgiven him 100 percent, but you have to move on,” he said. “We are not like them.”

I was struck by the texture of Eric’s voice when he said “them.” It was laced with a bitterness I had not yet encountered during my time in Rwanda.

“Naturally, Tutsi and Hutu are not the same in their hearts,” he continued.

“You will see. We are not the same. They have something bad in their hearts. They are naturally doing bad. That’s how they are.

“We leave them alone,” Eric said. “We give them what we’re supposed to give them. We try to live—to survive, to live with them. That’s it. That’s all. Still, we have to be careful, because we are not sure if their hearts have changed.

“Thirty years is not enough to trust them,” he continued. “We work together. We live together. But we don’t trust them.”

Albert Rutikanga was 17 when President Habyarimana’s plane was shot down. He heard the news on the radio and ran to tell his father. “We will be killed,” his father said.

The next day, Hutu began burning Tutsi homes in his village, Rukara. His family quickly fled to the local church, where he and I now stood. On April 8, 1994, Rutikanga told me, militia members arrived, screaming, with guns

and machetes in hand. They surrounded the church. They threw grenades and shot bullets through the open windows. Waves of attacks continued for days.

Rutikanga pointed to a pew on our right. “My dad was sitting here and he was reading a Bible; that’s how he was killed.” His mother died in the attacks as well. Rutikanga was struck by shrapnel from the grenades thrown into the church. He lifted his pant leg to reveal a large cavity in the flesh of his thigh.

Soon, the RPF arrived in the village and the Hutu militia fled, leaving behind hundreds of dead Tutsi. Rutikanga didn’t step foot in the church again for 15 years.

Eventually he became a high-school teacher. He often brought his students on day trips to the genocide memorial in Kigali. They were moved by the memorial, but he came to suspect that they didn’t fully understand what had happened in 1994. There had been so many years of silence. The students’ parents, Rutikanga realized, were not having honest conversations about the genocide with one another or with their children. He decided that he would try to recruit survivors to engage in direct discussions with perpetrators.

Many survivors were initially reluctant. “They would say, ‘Are you foolish? How can you forgive those people when they killed our family?’” Rutikanga told them that these conversations weren’t something they should do for the perpetrators. “Forgiveness is a choice of healing yourself,” he would say. “You cannot keep the anger and bitterness inside, because it will destroy you.” Forgiveness, he said, is the choice of surviving again.

Rutikanga found it just as difficult to recruit perpetrators. “They did not trust me,” he said. In 2016, he approached Nasson Karenzi, who, at 30, had been part of the militia that attacked the church where Rutikanga and his family were hiding. Later, while in prison, Karenzi confessed to his crimes in a letter he handed to the authorities. He was eventually released.

Karenzi was skeptical at first. What if the conversations caused even deeper rifts? But he shared Rutikanga’s sense that something needed to be done to foster deeper trust and reconciliation within the community, and he agreed to

talk with other former perpetrators about participating. Once they had about 20 people, perpetrators and survivors alike, Peace Education Initiative Rwanda was born.

During the group's first meetings, facilitated by an outside mediator, everyone treaded carefully. People were wary of revealing too much, of opening old wounds when the person who was responsible for creating those wounds—or the person who had been forced to carry them—might be sitting directly across from them. But slowly, the discussions became more vulnerable.



People began to tell their friends and family about the organization, now called PeacEdu, and more joined. Today, 1,400 adults in the village have participated in PeacEdu workshops, and the group has reached 3,500 young Rwandans through its school-based programming.

PeacEdu's office is a small concrete building with yellow walls and French doors that open onto a garden courtyard. There, I met with four participants

in the program. The two women, Francoise Muhongayire and Clementine Uwineza, were survivors of the genocide. The two men, Karenzi and Francois Rukwaya, had participated in it.

Rukwaya had a bald head that caught the light from above; he wore a checkered green oxford shirt that seemed a size too big. The first thing he told me was that he had killed eight people in one attack, early on in the genocide. He was 27 in 1994, and was later imprisoned. He, too, wrote a confession, and was later released. ([Kagame has freed thousands of prisoners en masse on several occasions.](#))

Muhongayire wore a green-and-gold dress, with frills that bloomed from the shoulder. She had a large Afro and spoke in long sentences that rose and fell like the hills around us. She recounted running from the militia and hiding in a swamp the day the genocide began. When she returned to search for her family, she found her parents and eight of her siblings dead. She and a group of other Tutsi hid in a house where they thought they might be safe. But the militia found them, poured gasoline on the house, and set it on fire. The home was engulfed in flames and almost everyone inside died. Muhongayire barely escaped. She still carries scars from the burns.

“I lived a miserable life after,” she said. “I had no one. I was living with so much depression. Until I saw Karenzi, who came toward my house. And when I saw him, I immediately ran away and tried to hide because that triggered me and made me think that he was coming to attack us.”

Karenzi came back again and again, each time asking for forgiveness. At one point, Muhongayire told him that she forgave him just so he would stop bothering her. But she didn’t mean it.

Not long after, Rutikanga approached her about joining his new initiative. Muhongayire wanted no part in it. These people had killed her entire family. How could she look them in the eye? Forgive them? No chance. Finally, Rutikanga persuaded her to give it a try. She could always get up and leave if it became too difficult.

Yet as she listened to Karenzi and others explain what had led them to commit violence and listened to them apologize, genuinely, for all they had

done, Muhongayire could feel something changing inside her. At the time, she had a heart condition that doctors could not accurately diagnose or treat. Her heart was weak, and she felt like her body was beginning to fail. But she told me that after she was comfortable enough to share her own story in the PeacEdu sessions—to look at Karenzi and the other Hutu sitting alongside him and tell them about all they had taken away from her—she started to feel lighter and stronger. As she kept going to sessions, she said, her mental and physical health began to improve. She no longer wanted to die. She had a chance to live again.

Uwineza was 18 when the genocide began, and she was raped multiple times by Hutu soldiers. She contracted HIV from the assaults. Like Muhongayire, Uwineza was reluctant to join Rutikanga's initiative, but when she learned that other women who had lost their families and survived sexual violence were participating, she decided to try it. Over time, alongside the other survivors, she began to experience a shift. "I was able to recover," she said, holding her thumb and index finger together and slowly pulling them apart, "a little bit."

Karenzi said that he'd had to learn to set aside his own guilt. It was not easy, he said, but it was the only way to demonstrate to survivors that he was not motivated by selfish reasons, that he truly wanted to help them find closure.

The results changed the realities of daily life in the village. "When I feel like I want to go to her house," Karenzi said, nodding toward Muhongayire, "I am free to go there, and vice versa. We have built a very deep trust, and we live together as a community." Muhongayire leaned over and said something in Karenzi's ear while placing her hand on his shoulder. They both laughed.

Discussion groups like these are still rare in Rwanda. In other villages where Hutu and Tutsi live together, Muhongayire said, people may act politely in public, but they are not fully healed. Small interpersonal conflicts bring out deep-seated fear and prejudice. "Inside of those Hutu, they have a feeling: *The Tutsi are still bad.* And on the other side, the survivors also feel the same way toward the Hutu," Karenzi said.

I asked the group if, 30 years ago, in the immediate aftermath of the genocide, they could have ever conceived that they would sit together like

this one day. They all looked at one another and shook their heads, smiling. “We could have never imagined it,” Muhongayire said.

Twenty miles outside Kigali, at a church in Nyamata that is now a memorial site, the clothes that were worn by thousands of victims are laid across dozens of wooden pews. The piles are so high that at first glance, I thought that they were covering bodies. But they were only clothes. A white sweater with a single pink flower on the collar, a yellow dress with blue polka dots, a small pair of jeans full of holes from shrapnel—a kaleidoscope of muted colors.

The guide at the site, a woman named Rachel, took me around the church turned memorial and told me her story. Both of her parents were killed in the genocide, as were her eight siblings. She found refuge with a family who took her across the border to what was then Zaire. After the killing ended, she returned to Rwanda, this time alone.

Rachel has no photographs of her family, because the militia set them on fire. She still remembers their faces, but they have become blurrier. Now, when she tries to recall them, she does not know what is real and what she has conjured in her imagination.

“After the genocide, I felt angry,” she said. “But nowadays, no. Because if you refuse to forgive someone, you have a kind of burden, and it is very difficult to move forward.”

I thought about a little girl’s dress I saw in the church, with red roses embroidered along its sleeves and blood stains streaking across its hem. “So forgiving is not something you did for them, as much as something you did for yourself?” I asked.

“Yes,” Rachel said. “For protection.”

This, in so many ways, is the story of Rwanda 30 years later: a story of protection. A country attempting to protect itself from another genocide, sometimes through deliberate forgetting. At the same time, memorials protecting the bones and bodies of those who were killed in an attempt to make forgetting impossible. Perpetrators, some who have tried to protect

themselves from prison and some who have tried to protect themselves from the poison of guilt that threatens to corrode their conscience. Survivors protecting the memories of their loved ones, but also their own stability. The contradictions are innumerable.

As survivor after survivor told me, 30 years is not that long ago. The scars are still on the land, and still on their bodies. It is impossible to truly forget. It is a decision to forgive. It is a constant struggle to move on.

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The Playwright in the Age of AI

Ayad Akhtar's new play,
McNeal, starring
Robert Downey Jr., subverts the
idea that artificial intelligence
threatens human ingenuity.

by Jeffrey Goldberg



Director Bartlett Sher, star Robert Downey Jr., and writer Ayad Akhtar (OK McCausland for The Atlantic)

Ayad Akhtar's brilliant new play, [*McNeal*](#), currently at the Lincoln Center Theater, is transfixing in part because it tracks without flinching the disintegration of a celebrated writer, and in part because Akhtar goes to a place that few writers have visited so effectively—the very near future, in which large language models threaten to undo our self-satisfied understanding of creativity, plagiarism, and originality. And also because Robert Downey Jr., performing onstage for the first time in more than 40 years, perfectly embodies the genius and brokenness of the title character.

I've been in conversation for quite some time with Akhtar, [whose play *Disgraced* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2013](#), about artificial generative intelligence and its impact on cognition and creation. He's one of the few writers I know whose position on AI can't be reduced to the (understandable) plea *For God's sake, stop threatening my existence!* In *McNeal*, he not only suggests that LLMs might be nondestructive utilities for human writers, but also deployed LLMs as he wrote (he's used many of them, ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini included). To my chagrin and astonishment, they seem to have helped him make an even better play. As you will see in our conversation, he doesn't believe that this should be controversial.

In early September, Akhtar, Downey, Bartlett Sher—the Tony Award winner who directed *McNeal*—and I met at Downey's home in New York for what turned out to be an amusing, occasionally frenetic, and sometimes even borderline profound discussion of the play, its origins, the flummoxing issues it raises, and, yes, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. (*Oppenheimer*, [for which Downey won an Academy Award](#), also came up.) We were joined intermittently by Susan Downey, Robert's wife (and producing partner), and the person who believed that Akhtar's play would tempt her husband to return to the stage. The conversation that follows is a condensed and edited version of our sprawling discussion, but I think it captures something about art and AI, and it certainly captures the exceptional qualities of three people, writer, director, and actor, who are operating at the pinnacle of their trade, without fear—perhaps without enough fear—of what is inescapably coming.

Jeffrey Goldberg: Did you write a play about a writer in the age of AI because you're trying to figure out what your future might be?

Ayad Akhtar: We've been living in a regime of automated cognition, digital cognition, for a decade and a half. With AI, we're now seeing a late downstream effect of that, and we think it's something new, but it's not. Technology has been transforming us now for quite some time. It's transforming our neurochemistry. It's transforming our societies, you know, and it's making our emotionality within the social space different as well. It's making us less capable of being bored, less willing to be bored, more willing to be distracted, less interested in reading.

In the midst of all this, what does it mean to be a writer trying to write in the way that I want to write? What would the new technologies mean for writers like Saul Bellow or Philip Roth, who I adore, and for the richness of their language?

Goldberg: Both of them inform the character of McNeal.

Akhtar: There are many writers inside McNeal—older writers of a certain generation whose work speaks to what is eternal in us as humans, but who maybe don't speak as much to what is changing around us. I was actually thinking of Wallace Stevens in the age of AI at some point—"The Auroras of Autumn." That poem is about Stevens eyeing the end of his life by the dazzling, otherworldly light of the northern lights. It's a poem of extraordinary beauty. In this play, that dazzling display of natural wonder is actually AI. It's no longer the sublime of nature.

Goldberg: Were you picturing Robert as you wrote this character?

Akhtar: I write to an ideal; it's not necessarily a person.

Robert Downey Jr.: I feel that me and *ideal* are synonymous.

Akhtar: Robert's embodiment of McNeal is in some ways much richer than what I wrote.

Downey: I have a really heavy, heavy allergy to paper. I'm allergic to things written on paper.

Akhtar: As I've discovered!

Downey: But the writing was transcendent. The last time that happened, I was reading *Oppenheimer*.

Goldberg: There's *Oppenheimer* in this, but there's also *Age of Ultron*, right?

Downey: Actually, I was thinking about that while I was reading this. And I'll catch you guys up in the aggregate. I'm only ever doing two things: Either I'm trying to avoid threats or I'm seeking opportunities. This one is the latter. And I was thinking, *Why would I be reading this?* Because, I mean, I've been a bit of an oddball, and I was thinking, *Why is this happening to me; why is this play with me?* And I'm having this reaction, and it took me right back to Paul Bettany.

So that you guys understand what's going on, this is the second *Avengers* film, *Age of Ultron*, and Bettany was playing this AI, my personal butler. The butler had gone through these iterations, and [the writer and director] Joss Whedon decided, "Let's have you become a sentient being, a sentient being that is created from AI." So first Bettany is the voice, and then he became this purple creature. And then there was this day when Bettany had to do a kind of soliloquy that Joss had written for him, as we are all introduced to him, wondering, *Is he a threat? Can we trust him? Is he going to destroy us?* And there comes this moment when we realize that he's just seeking to understand, and be understood. And this was the moment in the middle of this genre film when we all stopped and thought, *Wait, I think we might actually be talking about something important.*

Goldberg: Bart, what are you exploring here?

Bartlett Sher: I'm basically exploring the deep tragedy of the life of Jacob McNeal. That's the central issue. AI and everything around it, these are delivery systems to that exploration.

Akhtar: Robert has this wonderful moment in the play, the way he does it, in which he's arguing for art in this very complicated conversation with a former lover. And it gets to one of the essences of the play, which is that this is an attempt to defend art even if it's made by an indefensible person. Because in the end, human creation is still superior, and none of us is

perfect. So the larger conversation around who gets to write, the morality of writing, all of that? In a way, it's kind of emerging from that.

Goldberg: I can't say for sure, but I think this is the first play that's simultaneously about AI and #MeToo.

Downey: And identity and intergenerational conflict and cancel culture and misunderstanding and subintentional contempt and unconscious bias.

Goldberg: Are there any third rails you don't touch?

Akhtar: McNeal *is* the third rail. He's a vision of the artist in opposition to society. Not a flatterer of the current values, but someone who questions them: "That's a lie. That's not true."

Goldberg: The timing is excellent.

Downey: In movies, you always miss the moment, or you are preempted by something. With *Oppenheimer*, we happened to be coming out right around the time of certain other world events, but we couldn't have known. With this, we are literally first to market. Theater is the shortest distance between two points. You have something urgent to say, and you don't dawdle, and you have a space like Lincoln Center that is not interested in the bottom line, but interested in the form. And you have Ayad inspiring Bart, and then you get me, the bronze medalist. But I'm super fucking motivated, because I never get this sense of immediacy and emergence happening in real time.

Goldberg: Let's talk for a minute about the AI creative apocalypse, or if it's a creative apocalypse at all. I prompted Claude to write a play just like *McNeal*, with the same plot turns and characters as your play, and I asked it to write it in your style. What emerged was a play called *The Plagiarist's Lament*. I went back and forth with Claude for a while, mainly to try to get something less hackish. But in the end, I failed. What came out was something like an Ayad play, except it was bad, not good.

Akhtar: But here's the thing. You're just using an off-the-shelf product, not leading-edge story technology that is now becoming increasingly common in certain circles.

Goldberg: So don't worry about today, but tomorrow?

Akhtar: The technology's moving quickly, so it's a reality. And worrying? I'm not trying to predict the future. And I'm also certainly not making a claim about whether it's good or bad. I just want to understand it, because it's coming.

Downey: To borrow from recent experience, I think we may be at a post-Trinity, pre-Hiroshima, pre-Nagasaki moment, though some people would say that we're just at Hiroshima.

Goldberg: Hiroshima being the first real-world use of ChatGPT?

Downey: Trinity showed us that the bomb was purpose-built, and Hiroshima was showing us that the purpose was, possibly, not entirely necessary, but that it also didn't matter, because, historically, it had already happened.

Goldberg: Right now, I'm assuming that part of the problem I had with the LLM was that I was giving it bad prompts.

Downey: One issue is that LLMs don't get bored. We'll be running something and Bart will go, "I've seen this before. I've done this before." And then he says, "How can I make this new?"

The people who move culture forward are usually the high-ADD folks that we've tended to think either need to be medicated or all go into one line of work. They have a low threshold for boredom. And because they have this low threshold, they say, "I don't want to do this. Do something different." And it's almost just to keep themselves awake. But what a great gift for creativity.

Goldberg: The three of you represent the acting side, and directing, and writing. Who's in the most existential danger here from AI?

Downey: Anyone but me.

Akhtar: The Screen Actors Guild has [dealt with the image-likeness issue](#) in a meaningful way.

Downey: We've made the most noise—we, SAG—and we're the most dramatic about everything. I remember when I was doing *Chaplin*, the talk was about how significant the end of the silent era was.

Goldberg: Is this the same level of disruption?

Downey: I doubt it, but not because Claude can't currently pin his ass with both hands. There are versions that are going to be significantly more advanced. But technologies that people have argued would impede art and culture have often assisted and enhanced. So is this time different? That's what we're always worrying about. I live in California, always wondering, *Is that little rumble in the kitchen, is this the big one?*

Sher: For me, I think directing is very plastic. It requires integrating a lot of different levels of activity. So actually finding a way to process that into a computer's thinking, and actually having it work in three dimensions in terms of organizing and developing, seems very difficult to me. And I essentially do the work of the interpreter and synthesizer.

A machine can tell you what to do, but it can't interact and connect and pull together the different strands.

Akhtar: There's a leadership dimension to what Bart does. I mean, you wouldn't want a computer doing that.

Sher: This could sound geeky, but what is the distinguishing quality of making art? It is to participate in something uniquely human, something that can't be done any other way.

So if the Greeks are gathering on the hillside because they are building a space where they can hear their stories and participate in them, that's a uniquely human experience.

Akhtar: I do think that there is something irreducibly human about the theater, and that probably over time, it is going to continue to demonstrate its value in a world where virtuality is increasingly the norm. The economic problem for the theater has been that it happens only here and only now. So it's always been hard to monetize.

Goldberg: But I have two words for you: ABBA Voyage. I mean, it's an extraordinarily popular show that uses CGI and motion capture to [give the experience of liveness without ABBA actually being there](#). Not precisely theater, but it is scalable, seemingly live technology.

Downey: Strangely, this is the real trifecta: IP, technology, and taste. I think of this brand of music—which, you know, it's not my bag, but I still really admired that somebody was passionate about that and then purpose-built the venue. And then they said, “We’re not going to go for ‘Oh my God, that looks so real.’ We’re actually going to go for a more two-dimensional effect that is rendered in a way in which the audience can complete it themselves.”

Akhtar: ABBA Voyage is an exception. But it’s still not live theater.

Sher: It’s also not possible without the ABBA experience that preceded it. It’s an augmentation; it’s not original.

Goldberg: In terms of writing, Ayad, I did what you suggested I do and asked Claude to critique its own writing, and it was actually pretty good at that. I felt like I was actually talking with someone. We were in a dialogue about pacing, clarity, word choice.

Sher: But it has no intuition at all, no intuition for Ayad’s mindset in the middle of this activity, and no understanding of how he’s seeing it.

Downey: It does have context, and context is critical. I think it’s going to start quickly modeling all of those things that we hold dear as subtleties that are unassailable. It’s going to see what’s missing in its sequence, and it’s going to focus all of its cloud-bursting energy on that.

Goldberg: It might be the producers or the studios who are in trouble, because the notes are delivered sequentially, logically, and without defensiveness. Do you think that these technologies can give better notes than the average executive?

Akhtar: I know producers in Hollywood who are [already using these tools for their writers](#). And they’re using them empirically, saying, “This is what I think. Let’s see what the AI thinks.” And it turns out that the AI is actually

pretty good at understanding certain forms. If you've got a corpus of texts—like, say, *Law & Order*; you've got many, many seasons of that, or you've got many seasons of a children's show—those are codified forms. And the AI, if it has all those texts, can understand how words are shaped in that form.

Goldberg: So you could upload a thousand *Law & Order* scripts and Claude could come up with the thousandth and first.

Akhtar: About a year and a half ago, when I started playing with ChatGPT, the first thing that I started to see were processes of language that reminded me of reading Shakespeare. No writer is better at presenting context than Shakespeare. What I mean by that is Shakespeare sets everything quickly in motion. It's almost like a chess game—you've got pieces, and you want to get them out as quickly as possible so you have options. Shakespeare sets the options out quickly and starts creating variations. So there is a series of words or linguistic tropes for every single play, every poem cycle, every sonnet. They all have their universe of linguistic context that is being deployed and redeployed and redeployed. And it is in that play of language that you find an accretion of meaning. It was not quite as thrilling to see the chatbot do it, but it was actually very interesting to recognize the same process.



Goldberg: Shakespeare was his own AI.

Downey: Because he performed as a younger man, it was all uploaded into Shakespeare's system. So he was so familiar with the template, and he had all this experience. And similarly, all of these LLMs are in this stage where they are just beginning to be taken seriously. It's like we're pre-bar mitzvah, but these are sharp kids.

Goldberg: Would you use ChatGPT to write an entire piece?

Sher: Soon we'll be having conversations about whether Claude is a better artist than ChatGPT. Could you imagine people saying, "Well, I'm not going to see that play, because it was written by this machine; I want to see this one, because it's written by Gemini instead."

Goldberg: Unfortunately, I can easily imagine it.

Akhtar: I'm not sure that I would use an LLM to write a play, because they're just not very good at doing that yet, as you discovered in your own play by Claude. I don't think they're good enough to be making the kinds of decisions that go into making a work of art.

Goldberg: But you're teaching the tool how to get better.

Akhtar: So what? They've already [gone to school on my body of work](#).

[Read: The authors whose pirated books are powering generative AI](#)

Goldberg: So what? So what? Six hundred years of Gutenberg, and the printing press never made decisions on its own.

Akhtar: But we're already within this regime where power and monetized scale exist within the hands of very few. We're doing it every day with our phones; you're teaching the machine everything about you and your family and your desires. This is the paradigm for the 21st century. All human activity is passing through the hands of very few people and a lot of machines.

Goldberg: *McNeal* is about lack of control.

Akhtar: It is. I'm just making the point that we're not really in a different regime of power with AI. It may be even more concentrated and even more consequential, but at the end of the day, to participate in the public space in the 21st century is to participate in this structure. That's just what it is. We don't have an alternative, because our government has not regulated this.

Goldberg: You see the LLM as a collaborator in some ways. Where will the red line be for writers, between collaboration and plagiarism?

Akhtar: From my perspective, there are any number of artists we could look at, but the one that I would probably always spend the most time looking at is Shakespeare, and it's tough to say that he wasn't copying. As McNeal explains at one point in the play, *King Lear* shares 70 percent of its words with a previous play called *King Leir*, which Shakespeare knew well and used to write *Lear*. And it's not just *Leir*. There's that great scene in *Lear* where Gloucester is led to this plain and told it's a cliff over which he's going to jump, and that subplot is taken right out of Sir Philip Sidney. It may reflect deeper processes of cognition. It may reflect, as Bart has said, how we imitate in order to learn. All of that is just part of what we do. When that gets married to a corporate-ownership model, that is a separate issue, something that will have to get worked out over time, socially and legally. Or not, if our legislators don't have the will to do so.

Goldberg: The final soliloquy of the play—no spoilers here—is augmented by AI.

Akhtar: This has really been a fascinating collaboration. Because I wanted some part of the play to actually be meaningfully generated by ChatGPT or some large language model—Gemini, Claude. I tried them all. And I wanted to do it because it was part of what the play was about. But the LLMs had a tough time actually delivering the goods until this week. I've finally had some experiences now, after many months of working with them, that are bearing fruit.

I wanted the final speech to have a quality of magic to it that resembles the kind of amazement that I knew you had felt working with the model, and that I have sometimes felt when I see the language being generated. I want the audience to have that experience.

Sher: You know, I think the problem you were facing could have been with any of your collaborators. We just had this new collaborator to help with that moment.

Goldberg: You're blowing my mind.

Akhtar: It's not really that controversial.

Goldberg: Yes it is. It's totally controversial.

Downey: Well, let's find out!

Goldberg: It's more of a leap than you guys think.

Akhtar: It's a play about AI. It stands to reason that I was able, over the course of many months, to finally get the AI to give me something that I could use in the play.

Downey: You know what the leap was like? A colicky little baby finally gave us a big ol' burp.

Akhtar: That's exactly right. That's what happened. A lot of unsatisfying work, and then, unprompted, it finally came up with a brilliant final couplet! And that's what I'm using for the end of the play's final speech.

Goldberg: Amazing, and threatening.

Sher: I just can't imagine a world in which ChatGPT could take all experience and unify it with Ayad's interest in beauty and meaning and his obsession with classical tragedy and pull all those forces together with emotion and feeling. Because no matter how many times you prompted it, you're still going to get *The Pestilential Plagiarist*, or whatever it's called.

Downey: The reason that we're all sitting here right now is because this motherfucker, Ayad, is so searingly sophisticated, but also on occasion—more than occasionally—hot under the collar. My new favorite cable channel is called Ayad Has Fucking Had It. He's like the most collaborative superintelligence you will ever come across, and therefore he's letting all this slack out to everyone around him, but once in a while, if this

intelligence is entirely unappreciated for hours or days at a time, he will flare. He'll just remind us that he can break the sound barrier if he wants to. And I get chills from that. And that's why we're here. It's the human thing.

Akhtar: It's not new for humans to use tools.

Sher: Are we going to be required to upload a system of ethics into the machines as they get more and more powerful?

Downey: Too late.

Goldberg: That's what they promise in Silicon Valley, alignment with human values.

Downey: Two years ago was the time to do something.

Akhtar: You guys are thinking big. But I just don't know how this is going to play out. I don't know what it is. I'm just interested in what I'm experiencing now and in working with the technology. What's the experience I'm having now?

Goldberg: There's a difference between a human hack and an excellent human writer. The human hack doesn't know that they're bad.

Downey: This is a harebrained rabbit hole where we could constantly keep thinking of more and more ramifications. Another issue here is that certain great artists do something that most people would labor an entire life or career to come close to, and the second they're done with it, they have contempt for it, because they go, "Eh, that's not my best."

Akhtar: I recognize someone in that.

Downey: All I'm saying is that I just want the feeling of those sparks flying, that new neural pathway being forced. I want to push the limits. It's that whole thing of pushing limits. When I feel good, when I can tell Bart is kicking me, when Ayad is just lighting up, and when I'm realizing that I just got a note that revolutionized the way I'm going to try to portray something, you go, "Ooh!" And even if it's old news to someone else, for me, it's revolutionary.

Akhtar: Another way of putting this, what Robert is saying, is that what he's engaged in is not problem-solving, per se. It's not that there's an identified problem that he is trying to solve. This is how a computer is often thinking, with a gamification sort of mindset. For Robert, there's a richness of the present for him as he's working that is identifying possibilities, not problems.

Sher: I've thought a lot about this, trying to understand the issue of GPT and creativity, and I'm a lot less worried now, because I feel that the depth of the artistic process in the theater isn't replicable.

The amalgam of human experience and emotion and feeling that passes through artists is uniquely human and not capturable. Word orders can be taken from all kinds of sources. They can be imitated; they can be replicated; they can be reproduced in different ways. But the essential activity of what we do here in this way, and what we build, has never been safer.

Downey: And if our job is to hold the mirror up to nature, this is now part of nature. It is now part of the firmament. Nature is now inclusive of this. We're onstage and we're reflecting this back to you. What do you see? Do you see yourself within this picture?

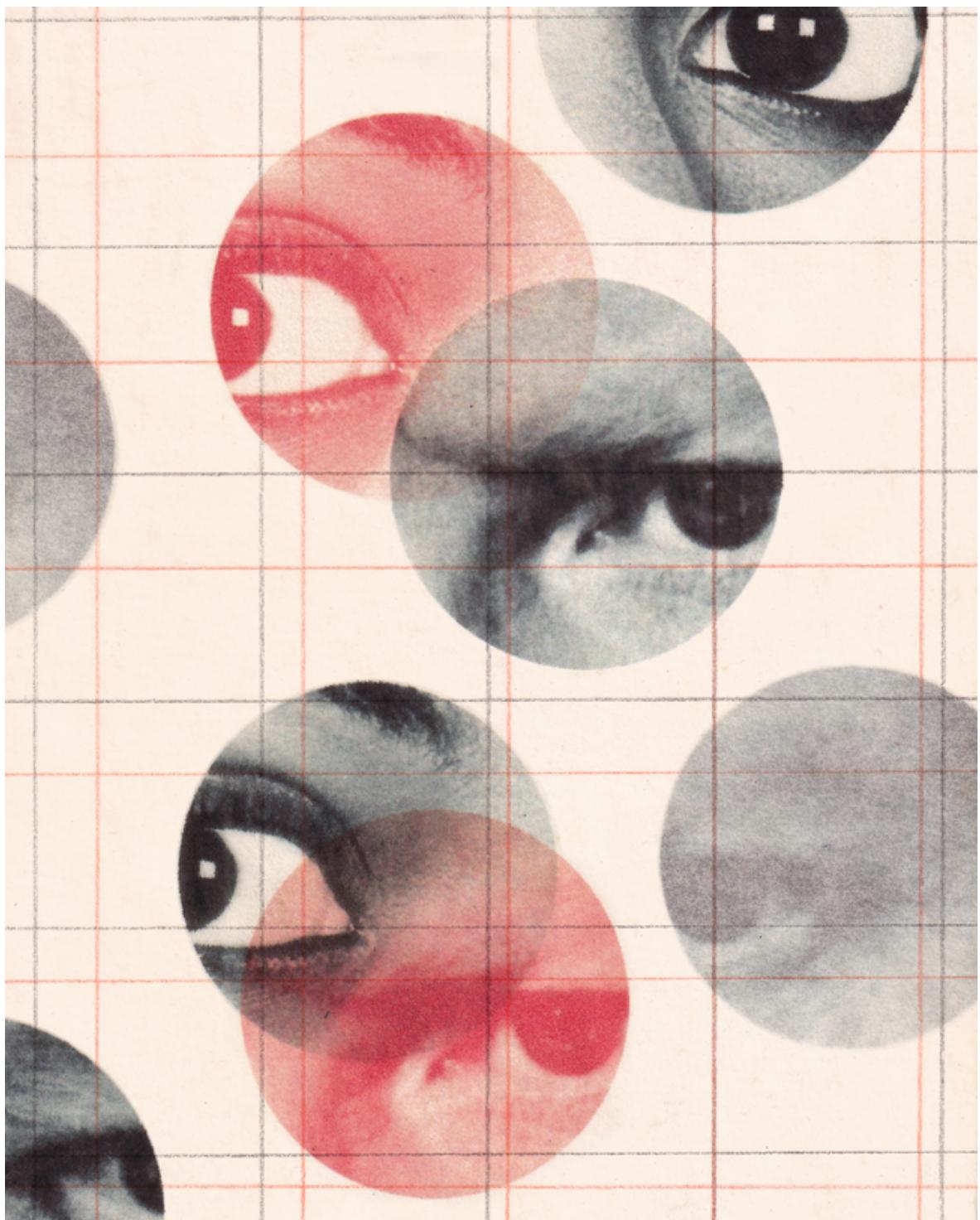
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The Rise of the Right-Wing Tattletale

In Texas and elsewhere, new laws and policies have encouraged neighbors to report neighbors to the government.

by Adam Serwer



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Last year, in Texas, a deteriorating marriage became the testing ground for a novel legal strategy favored by some of the country's most prominent right-wing lawyers and politicians.

Marcus and Brittni Silva's divorce had just been finalized when Marcus filed a lawsuit against two of Brittni's friends. [According to his complaint](#), Brittni had discovered that she was pregnant with their baby in July 2022, and ended the pregnancy by taking abortion medication. Marcus alleges that her friends Jackie Noyola and Amy Carpenter "assisted Brittni Silva in murdering Ms. Silva's unborn child." He is suing for wrongful death and asking for at least \$1 million in damages from each defendant.

Noyola and Carpenter tell their own version of what happened in [a countersuit they filed](#). Marcus drank often, they allege, and when he did, he was prone to verbally abusing Brittni. He got so drunk at one of her work events that he had to be escorted off the premises—but not before he called her a "slut," a "whore," and an "unfit mother" in front of her co-workers. Brittni had stayed in the marriage for the sake of their two daughters, but Marcus's outburst convinced her that there was no saving it. In the spring of 2022, she filed for divorce.

That summer, soon after *Roe v. Wade* was overturned but before Texas's abortion "trigger ban" went into effect, Brittni got a positive result on a pregnancy test. Certain that she did not want to have another child with Marcus, Brittni texted Noyola and Carpenter to talk about her options. Noyola and Carpenter allege that Marcus disapproved of the friendship; he would sometimes hide Brittni's car keys to try to prevent her from seeing her friends.

Brittni kept her pregnancy test a secret from Marcus, but according to Noyola and Carpenter's suit, he learned about it when he rifled through her purse and discovered a Post-it note with the number for an abortion hotline and, on her phone, her texts with her friends. Marcus took photographs of the texts. The next day, he looked through her purse again and found a pill that can be taken to induce abortion.

Later, Marcus confronted her, Brittni told her friends. She wrote in a text message that he had demanded that she give him her "mind body and soul" and act "like his wife who loves him." If she didn't agree to give him primary custody of their daughters, Brittni wrote, he would "make sure I go to jail." Brittni was surprised by Marcus's reaction, her friends' suit alleges; he'd never been opposed to abortion. Now he was accusing her of killing a

baby and threatening to go to the police. (Noyola and Carpenter have denied all the claims in Marcus's lawsuit, and he has denied all the claims in their countersuit.)

In fact, Marcus had already filed a police report. Soon, he obtained legal representation. Jonathan Mitchell, a conservative activist and attorney and the former solicitor general of Texas, became his lawyer in the case.

Mitchell is often cited as the brains behind Texas's 2021 "bounty law," which provides a reward of at least \$10,000 to plaintiffs who successfully sue someone who "aids or abets" abortion. The Silva case follows a similar logic: Marcus is, in effect, seeking a reward for reporting his ex-wife's friends to the state.

Mitchell declined to comment for this article. But his work on the Silva case and the bounty law, among other matters, reflects a tactic that conservatives have recently embraced in a range of social battles, including those over abortion, LGBTQ issues, and school curricula. Across the nation, Republican-controlled state legislatures and conservative activists have passed bills and embraced legal strategies that encourage Americans to monitor one another's behavior and report their friends, family members, and neighbors to the authorities. Call it the Snitch State.

[Adam Serwer: The Constitution is whatever the right wing says it is](#)

Texas has been particularly hospitable to rules that promote such monitoring in service of advancing conservative ideological goals. Perhaps it's a matter of necessity: Despite right-wing victories in court and at the ballot box in recent decades, public sentiment on a variety of cultural issues has drifted leftward. And so, in an effort to impose their values, Republicans have turned to invasive forms of coercion.

Most Americans, including most Texas voters, believe that abortion should be legal in some form. The architects of this new anti-privacy regime do not. Republican legislators in Texas have proposed numerous additional restrictions since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, including bills that would punish employers who help their workers get abortions, outlaw abortion funds that help women seek the procedure in another state, and circumvent local district attorneys who refuse to criminally prosecute abortion

providers. Some proposed measures would restrict access to contraception. One would criminalize speech by making it illegal to provide “information on how to obtain an abortion-inducing drug” and forcing internet providers in Texas to censor such information.

It’s hard not to conclude that the people pushing for bills like these want women to be scared to even contemplate having an abortion, let alone seek one out. They have said so themselves; in 2021, for example, the anti-abortion organization Texas Right to Life said it was “optimistic that,” in light of the bounty law, “the day is soon coming when abortion will not only be illegal, but unthinkable.” Even expressing support for abortion rights could be considered suspect. Indeed, the Silva lawsuit seems to foreshadow this reality: It alleges that Brittni and her friends “celebrated the murder by dressing up in *Handmaid’s Tale* costumes for Halloween,” as if their costumes indicate liberal views on abortion that deserve sanction by the state.

[From the October 2024 issue: What abortion bans do to doctors](#)

As of this writing, no one has yet been successfully sued under Texas’s bounty law, and other measures that seek to turn citizens into informants have faced challenges in court. (If reelected, former President Donald Trump is likely to appoint more federal judges who would look favorably upon such measures.) But these policies have chilling effects whether or not they are strictly enforced. The mere threat of having one’s privacy invaded and one’s life potentially destroyed is sufficient to shape people’s speech and behavior. American history shows us where this could lead.

The roots of this political style lie in the state-sponsored efforts of the first and second Red Scares. During the first, in the years following World War I, a wave of anarchist violence provided a predicate for suppressing free speech, as well as a justification for mob violence against people perceived to be disloyal to the government. But it was during the second Red Scare, in the 1940s and ’50s, that the informant emerged as a paramount figure in American politics, when the federal government’s attempts to block Soviet espionage metastasized into a national panic. Dozens of states passed laws criminalizing speech deemed subversive. Private employers, unions, and

professional groups adopted loyalty oaths and administrative tests that inquired about personal beliefs and past associations.

According to the constitutional scholar Geoffrey R. Stone, from 1947 to 1953, more than 4.7 million people were scrutinized as part of the federal government's loyalty program, leading to about 40,000 "full-field investigations" undertaken by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. The bureau relied on allegations from informants, many of which were "unsubstantiated hearsay —mere gossip, rumor, and slander," Stone writes. The accuracy of the allegations hardly mattered; federal investigators often did not take the time to verify informants' claims. As a result, people policed their own thoughts, actions, and relationships out of fear that someone might tell on them.

Soviet espionage and expansionism were both very real threats. Many Red hunters, however, were not merely trying to prevent the establishment of Soviet-style communism in the U.S., or to protect U.S. atomic secrets. At a moment when liberalism appeared to be ascendant, conservative beliefs about economics, labor, race, gender, and sexuality could all be imposed in the name of "fighting communism." As historians such as Ellen Schrecker and Landon R. Y. Storrs have argued, the second Red Scare was, in this way, successful at constraining the radical possibilities of New Deal social democracy. The power of organized labor was curtailed, and the potential for a more generous welfare state was limited. Even in books, films, and television shows, Americans sought to avoid topics and storylines that might be interpreted as left-wing.

Black workers—who were asked questions like "Have you ever danced with a white girl?" and "Have you ever had dinner with a mixed group?"—were among those who "suffered disproportionately" from loyalty investigations, Schrecker has written. Homosexuality, or perceived homosexuality, was also punished. As the historian David K. Johnson writes in *The Lavender Scare*, at one point during the Truman administration, "in the State Department alone, security officials boasted that on average they were firing one homosexual per day, more than double the rate for those suspected of political disloyalty." Ruining someone's life with an anonymous accusation was, for a time, a relatively simple matter.

During the second Red Scare, communism was frequently described as a plague that infected and transformed unwilling victims. Modern conservatives use similar rhetoric to justify fighting “wokeness” or “the woke mind virus,” presenting liberalism as a civilizational threat that justifies extreme measures to suppress it—particularly, these days, in the name of protecting children. But whereas conservatives in the ’40s and ’50s depicted the Soviet Union as a dystopian cautionary tale, their counterparts today openly venerate the oppressive tactics of illiberal societies abroad. In March, for example, Kevin D. Roberts, the president of the Heritage Foundation, described Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s tenure as “a model for conservative governance.” In September, Trump praised Orbán from the presidential-debate stage.

The contemporary crackdown is different in another crucial respect: Although many of the people targeted during the second Red Scare chose to withdraw from public service or public life in the face of invasive surveillance and constant suspicion, that is much harder to do in the 21st century. Today, many of us share intimate details of our personal lives online with friends, loved ones, and, often, total strangers. Whether we intend to or not, thanks to the data economy, we are all our own informants, sharing our location, reading habits, search terms, menstrual-cycle dates, online orders, and more. In exchange for using online services and social-media platforms, we make ourselves more visible to those who would become the eyes and ears of the state.

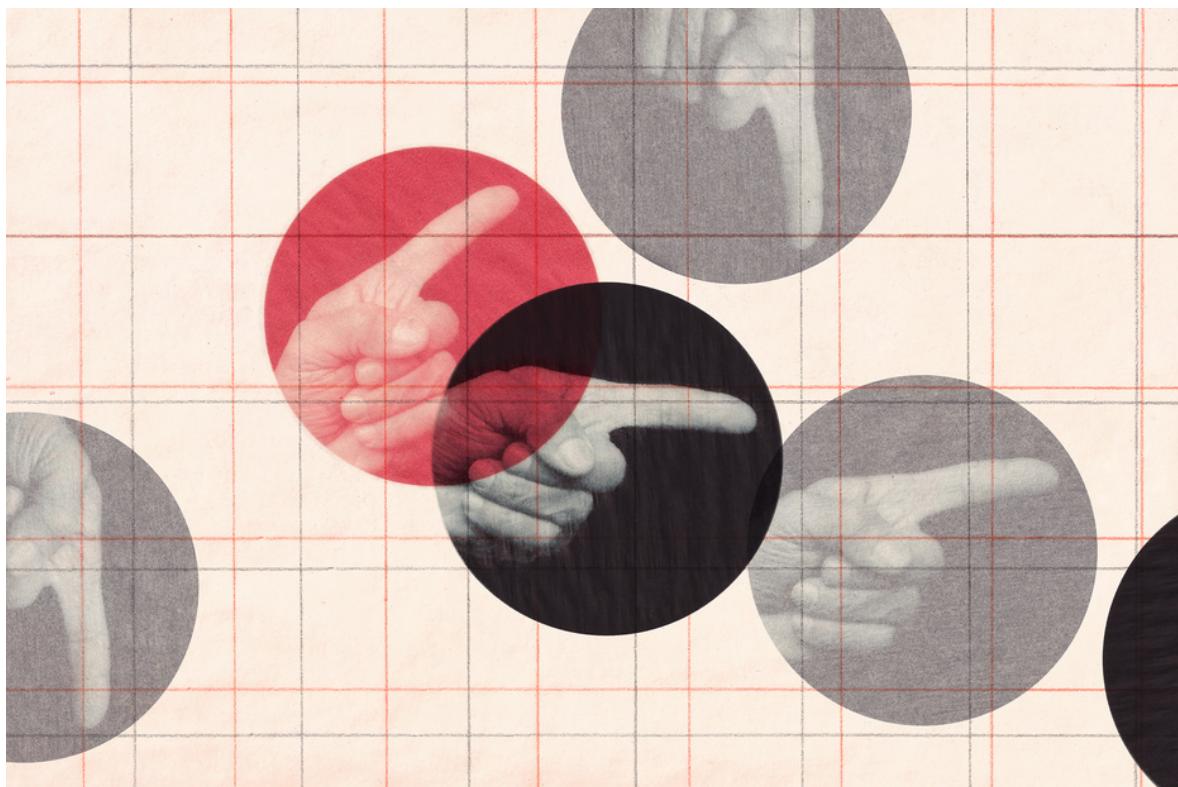
If you live in a part of the country where your very person could attract unwanted attention from the state and its informants, abstaining from social media or even withdrawing from public life may not guarantee safe harbor. Sometimes, you just need to leave.

Karen Krajcer grew up in a conservative religious family in Houston before moving to Austin, where she and her husband raised their kids. When their eldest child, who is trans, was in first grade, she came up to Krajcer in the kitchen and said, “Mom, I’m a girl.” Krajcer replied, “You don’t have to be a girl to like girl things.” “I know,” her daughter said. “But I’m a girl who likes girl things.”

“She just held my stare,” Krajcer told me. “And I realized that I didn’t understand what she meant, but that I’m her parent, and it’s my job to find out.”

Then, one day when she was in fourth grade, Krajcer’s daughter asked if she was going to die. “She’s not prone to questions like that,” Krajcer told me. “She wasn’t talking about self-harm or suicide. She was afraid.”

It was February 2022, and Texas Governor Greg Abbott had ordered the state’s Department of Family and Protective Services to investigate the parents of minors who were receiving gender-affirming medical care. “The Texas Family Code is clear,” Attorney General Ken Paxton wrote in a legal opinion that Abbott used to justify his order. “Causing or permitting substantial harm to the child or the child’s growth and development is child abuse.” Abbott called upon “licensed professionals” and “members of the general public” to tell the government about families who were known to have trans children, so that they could be investigated for abuse. These families were now surrounded by potential informants: teachers, friends, neighbors—even extended family.



Professional medical groups, including the American Psychiatric Association and the American Medical Association, objected to the order, noting in one legal brief that “the medical treatments characterized as ‘child abuse’ in the Abbott Letter are part of the widely-accepted treatment guidelines for adolescents suffering from gender dysphoria, and are supported by the best available scientific evidence.”

The portrayal of gender-affirming care as child abuse nevertheless led to a rash of reports. People called DFPS to report students “even if they’re just simply going by a nickname, or different pronouns,” Brian Klosterboer, an attorney with the ACLU of Texas, told me.

DFPS representatives appeared at Texas schools to pull students out of class for questioning, and showed up at children’s homes to speak with their parents. “As an investigator, when you go in to speak to a child, as easy as you try to be and as kind, it’s traumatizing; it just is. It’s invasive,” Morgan Davis, a former Texas child-welfare investigator, told me. Davis, who is trans, eventually resigned in protest of the order. A DFPS employee testified in court that, unlike with other kinds of investigations, she and her colleagues did not have discretion to set aside cases involving trans kids despite finding no evidence of abuse.

One DFPS employee who herself has a trans daughter asked her supervisor for clarification on the new policy. Would she now be considered an abuser for obtaining health care for her daughter? And if so, would her child be taken from her? According to a lawsuit that the ACLU filed on behalf of the employee and her family, she was put on leave hours later, and told the next day that she was under investigation. A state investigator came to her family’s home, seeking access to her daughter’s medical records.

The order threatened to separate trans children from their parents, which could lead to expensive legal battles for families who wanted to keep custody. Tracy Harting, a lawyer in Travis County who has been involved in child welfare for more than two decades, immediately grasped the cruel irony: If trans kids were taken from their parents, she told me, they would be entering a foster-care system “that’s already overrun with kids who were actually being physically and emotionally abused by their families.”

In response to the ACLU's lawsuit, a judge blocked enforcement of Abbott's order in March 2022, and two years later, a state appeals court upheld the injunction. But [an exodus of families with trans children](#) was already under way, particularly after Texas outlawed gender-affirming medical care for children in 2023. "I don't want to live in this state of terror anymore," one mother who left for Colorado told *Texas Monthly*.

[Listen: Radio Atlantic on when the state has a problem with your identity](#)

Krajcer and her family, who live in Oregon now, felt the same way. Although her daughter was not undergoing any medical interventions, Krajcer still feared that she could be reported to the authorities by someone who disapproved of her gender identity. The implications of staying in Texas, Krajcer said, were too terrifying to contemplate. "What happens if I'm out in a rural area and our trans daughter breaks her arm? Am I going to be able to take her to the ER for basic medical care? Or is there a chance that a nurse or a receptionist or just a person sitting in the waiting room could turn us in?"

"I imagined being led into some small windowless room for my monitored child visitation," Krajcer said, "and looking at our children and knowing that we could have gone, that we could have left, but we didn't."

In August 2023, Michael Troncale, then an English teacher in Houston, was upset about what he saw as the "anti-trans propaganda coming from the right wing in Texas." Wanting to show support for his transgender students, he put up a poster in his classroom that said trans people belong.

No one seemed to mind at first. But two months later, a school administrator told him that a parent had complained that the sign was "divisive." Troncale didn't know who the parent was, or if their child was in his class.

“‘Look, I’m sorry, but our legal team says you can’t have this up, because it’s a political message,’” Troncale says he was told. “I didn’t consider it political.”

Perhaps he should have. In the past few years, Texas conservatives have undertaken a campaign of censorship in schools that longtime educators told

me is unprecedented in its breadth and ferocity—part of a nationwide backlash against what conservatives perceive as left-leaning books and ideas, many of them involving LGBTQ and racial issues. A major means of enforcement for this campaign is tattling: Parents and students alike are encouraged to report the teaching of forbidden ideas, so that those who teach them may be punished.

The recent spate of regulations against so-called critical race theory in K–12 schools exemplifies this logic. (Actual critical race theory is an academic framework conceived of by the Black legal scholar Derrick Bell; it is not generally taught outside higher education.) In 2021, Texas passed House Bill 3979, which included the provision that educators cannot “require or make part of a course” the idea that “an individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of the individual’s race or sex.” Using language designed to sound egalitarian, the law purportedly safeguarded all students’ psychological well-being: Educators, it stipulated, cannot teach students that “one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex.”

When Representative Steve Toth introduced the bill, he said it was “about teaching racial harmony by telling the truth that we are all equal, both in God’s eyes and our founding documents.” The alternative, he suggested, was communist indoctrination, “a souped-up version of Marxism” from which children needed to be protected.

In practice, though, H.B. 3979 and the similar Senate Bill 3—which went into effect three months later, replacing the House bill—constitute a de facto government ban on material that conservatives oppose, and essentially mean that the feelings of a certain category of student are the only ones that matter. In 2023, a school-district trustee in Montgomery County asked for “personal ideologies” to be “left at the door.” One parent, she said, had told her that their first grader had been so distressed by a poster celebrating racial inclusivity that he moved classrooms. Another trustee suggested that displaying LGBTQ flags in schools might be illegal.

Texas’s recent cascade of book bans has also been framed as an attempt to protect children from distress. “Parents have the right to shield their children from obscene content used in schools their children attend,” Governor

Abbott has written. But parents already have the right to tell their kids which books they can and can't read; what Abbott is calling for is the right to control which books other people's children read.

[Read: Book bans are targeting the history of oppression](#)

Matt Krause, a former attorney for the Christian conservative law firm Liberty Counsel, was a Texas state legislator in the fall of 2021 when he sent a letter to superintendents inquiring about "books or content" in schools that "might make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex." He attached a list of roughly 850 books, requesting that the school districts tell him how many copies of each they had. Krause—who later acknowledged to *The Dallas Morning News* that he did not believe he had read the books in question—had no power to order any books banned, but his list, and his invocation of the language in H.B. 3979, helped spur an avalanche of challenges across the state.

According to [a lawsuit filed by library patrons in Llano County](#), one woman, who would later be appointed to the county's library board, sent an email to a county official with the subject line "Pornographic Filth at the Llano Public Libraries." Attached was a spreadsheet of books from Krause's list that were in the libraries. Another concerned citizen, who herself would also later be appointed to the library board, was more direct about what she found objectionable: In an email to allies, she referred to Krause's list as the "16-page list of CRT and LGBTQ book[s]." Indeed, the titles on Krause's list, many of which deal with topics such as racism, LGBTQ rights, and abortion, highlight the political nature of his effort.

Soon, the Llano County libraries began removing some of these books from their shelves. One librarian alleges that she was fired after she refused to remove targeted books. She is now working as a cashier to make ends meet while she [sues the county over her dismissal](#). (The county has denied any wrongdoing.)

After a court ordered the books returned to the shelves, county officials appealed the order and [considered shutting down the libraries](#) altogether rather than allow community members to access the material. (County

officials [said the removal of books](#) had nothing to do with their content. They ultimately decided to keep the library open, and [an appeals court later ruled](#) that some of the books must be returned. That court is [now reconsidering its order](#).) The officials are represented by Jonathan Mitchell, the same attorney who is representing Marcus Silva. [According to Axios](#), Mitchell has also reportedly drafted hypothetical bounty laws that would provide financial remuneration to those who snitch on librarians for keeping banned books on their shelves—or even just for expressing pro-LGBTQ sentiments.

In 2024, the purpose of banning books is not to keep children from accessing disturbing material—the internet exists—but to use the power of the state [to stigmatize certain ideas and identities](#). Nelva Williamson, an Advanced Placement history teacher from Houston, told me that she sees efforts like Krause's as part of a right-wing response to the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and the earnest desire of many young white people to learn more about the country's history of injustice. At the core of the backlash, Williamson thinks, is a fear that children will leave their parents' politics behind. “They just put CRT as an umbrella over everything,” she said.

“What is included in the obscenity standard is actually very vague,” Jeremy Young, a historian who runs PEN America’s anti-censorship program for education, told me. “And this is something that you’ll see across these bill types. The vagueness is the point; the vagueness is the way that the bills are enforced. Which is to say, when a bill has very vague definitions, it can be either overenforced or underenforced, depending on the person doing the enforcing.”

Texas legislators cannot embed themselves in every classroom to monitor whether forbidden concepts and books are being discussed and assigned. But they can rely on informants. According to NBC News, a chief deputy constable in Hood County, recently spent two years attempting to bring criminal charges against a group of school librarians after activists filed a complaint alleging that their libraries were carrying obscene books (the county district attorney ultimately said there was not enough conclusive evidence to charge the librarians). In October 2021, Rickie Farah, a fourth-grade teacher in the Dallas area who had previously been named Teacher of the Year, was reprimanded by the school board after a parent complained

about a book that her child brought home from Farah's classroom—[This Book Is Anti-racist](#), by Tiffany Jewell. Farah contested the reprimand and kept her job. But her colleagues got the message: Even allowing a student to encounter a book that a parent disapproved of might lead to consequences.

Higher education has also been a target for Republicans, who see universities as sources of “woke ideology.” Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick has argued that “tenured professors must not be able to hide behind the phrase ‘academic freedom,’ and then proceed to poison the minds of our next generation.” A 2023 bill to end tenure at state universities was rejected, but the legislature instead passed a law that gives politically appointed university overseers broad leeway to terminate tenured faculty for reasons of “professional incompetence” or “conduct involving moral turpitude.” Thus, in Texas, academic freedom may now be contingent on the political approval of state officials.

In 2022, Lauren Miller, who lived in Dallas, was pregnant with twins and suffering from such severe nausea that she found it difficult to eat and had to go to the emergency room twice. When one twin was diagnosed with a genetic disorder that is almost always fatal, she and her husband struggled to get clear guidance from medical professionals. No one would even say the word *abortion* out loud. “We would have genetic counselors—so, people who don’t even give abortions; they just counsel on options—get midway through a sentence and then just stop, just scared to say more,” Miller told me.

Then one genetic counselor, who had lived and worked in New York, let slip that in cases like these, doctors would usually perform a procedure called a “single fetal reduction.” Miller asked what that meant.

“She immediately clammed up and she started apologizing; you could tell she was scared,” Miller said. “It was truly like we had Greg Abbott, Ken Paxton, and, you know, other politicians, Texas Supreme Court justices, just sitting in that room taking notes, chewing on a pen cap right there with us.”

Miller decided to have the single fetal reduction—aborting one fetus—to protect her health and that of the other twin. Afraid to leave a paper trail, she told friends in a group text of the diagnosis, but not about her plans. She had

a quick, careful phone conversation with a friend who was a gynecologic oncologist, who recommended a doctor in Colorado. As she spoke over the phone with the Colorado doctor, Miller noticed that he made sure to say explicitly that he was not in the state of Texas.

“People aren’t sure what they can and can’t legally say.”

At a party with friends that fall, Miller and her husband were careful not to mention that they were going to Colorado. “Who was there who would overhear and report us because they want that \$10,000?” Miller said. “We didn’t know everybody who was at the house that evening.”

They also worried about the logistics of their trip. “The first question,” Miller said, was “what kind of digital footprint are we leaving? Do we leave our phones behind? Do we drive? Do we do everything in cash?” Because of her severe nausea, she didn’t think she would make it 12 hours in a car from Dallas to Colorado, and she was concerned about driving through rural Texas on her way to get an abortion at 14 weeks pregnant, especially if she ended up in an emergency room. She decided to fly.

Miller was perhaps more fearful than she needed to be about her trip to Colorado. The Texas bounty law has not been used against people who travel out of state, and women themselves cannot be punished for having an abortion—only people who help them can. Still, given the political climate in Texas, her cautious behavior doesn’t seem irrational. What would the ultrasound tech back in Dallas say or do when they noticed there was only one heartbeat instead of two?

The procedure went well. Miller’s severe nausea subsided, and the remainder of her pregnancy was smooth. She delivered a healthy baby in March 2023. As it turned out, Miller’s doctor in Dallas, Austin Dennard, had also recently fled Texas for an abortion because of a pregnancy complication of her own. Miller recalled that at her first appointment with the doctor after her abortion, Dennard simply said, in a formal tone, “There is only one heart rate. I will note in your file that there is an intrauterine fetal demise of one twin.” The two women later joined a lawsuit filed by the Center for Reproductive Rights, which sought to set clear standards for exceptions to

the state's abortion ban. This past May, the Texas Supreme Court issued a ruling leaving the vague exceptions language intact.

Such [lack of clarity can have a chilling effect](#). "There's a lot of confusion," Damla Karsan, a Houston ob-gyn, told me. "People aren't sure what they can and can't legally say." In December 2023, Karsan was personally warned by Paxton against performing an abortion for Kate Cox, a Texas mother who was ultimately forced to leave the state to get an abortion after her fetus was diagnosed with the same genetic condition as Miller's. (Karsan was also a plaintiff with Miller and Dennard in the Center for Reproductive Rights lawsuit.)

Still, rules that provoke this kind of fear and uncertainty around private choices have flourished primarily in conservative enclaves; when I spoke with teachers in more liberal and diverse areas of Texas, they seemed less afraid of being reported to authorities. Areas like Llano County, where support for Trump is strong, have so far been most successful in their efforts to root out subversives and promote self-policing. For the time being, abortion laws like Texas's, as restrictive as they are ambiguous, don't stand a chance outside Republican-dominated states; women like Miller, Dennard, and Cox can still travel elsewhere—if they can afford it—to legally receive the care they need. Similarly, families with trans children can move out of state, and library patrons can go to court when books are removed from the shelves.

But for how long? In September, Texas sued to overturn federal privacy regulations that prevent investigators from seizing the medical records of women who leave the state to get an abortion. And just as the influence of the federal government supercharged the first and second Red Scares, it could very well, under a Republican president, expand the reach of the Snitch State nationwide. Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation's blueprint for a second Trump administration, suggests adopting a measure that would allow for a political purge of anyone in the federal government who is not obsequiously loyal to Trump. The former president, and conservative legal elites, have called for the traditional independence of the Justice Department to be disregarded, which would allow Trump, if reelected, to use the immense power of federal law enforcement to target abortion providers,

political dissidents, and even local prosecutors who do not use their discretion as the administration demands.

In his foreword to Project 2025's 900-page *Mandate for Leadership*, Roberts, the president of the Heritage Foundation, writes that "pornography"—which he describes as "manifested today in the omnipresent propagation of transgender ideology and sexualization of children"—"should be outlawed," and that "the people who produce and distribute it should be imprisoned." He adds that "educators and public librarians who purvey it should be classed as registered sex offenders." Roberts also describes gender-affirming care as "child abuse," and echoes the legal language used to ban "critical race theory" in places like Texas. The policy blueprint outlines a plan for forcing states to report abortion and miscarriage data to the federal government, referring to the harrowing experiences of women like Miller, Dennard, and Cox with the dismissive euphemism of "abortion tourism." Presumably, executing these plans would depend on a steady supply of willing informants.

Conservatives have long railed against the chilling effect of "cancel culture." But by encouraging people to tell on their neighbors, Republicans have, in effect, constructed a legal framework for socializing the means of cancellation. Having routinely mocked left-wing college students as "snowflakes" for their use of content warnings and their desire for "safe spaces," Republicans have now institutionalized their own opposition to points of view they dislike with laws that punish those who disagree with them. They have attempted to subject teachers, librarians, and educational administrators to harsh punishments should they express—or even make available—ideas that conservatives deem offensive. They have attempted to criminalize the parents of trans children, and have forced pregnant women to flee their home in order to receive lifesaving care. All of this has been done in the name of "liberty," to combat what Roberts has called the "totalitarian cult" that is the "Great Awakening."

The first and second Red Scares created oppressive societies in the name of preventing America from becoming one. The version of "liberty" being promoted by right-wing legislators and activists today rings just as hollow, a stifling political and social conformity enforced by the fear that someone, somewhere, might report you.

This article appears in the [November 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Right-Wing Plan to Make Everyone an Informant.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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Inside the Carjacking Crisis

On the street with an elite police unit as it combats a crime wave

by Jamie Thompson



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On August 7, 2022, Shantise Summers arrived home from a night out with friends around 2:40 a.m. As she walked from her car toward her apartment in Oxon Hill, a Maryland neighborhood just southeast of Washington, D.C., she heard footsteps behind her. She turned and saw two men in ski masks. One put a gun to her face; she could feel the metal pressing against her chin. He demanded her phone, wallet, keys, and Apple Watch. She quickly handed them over, and they drove off in her 2019 Honda Accord.

She called the police, and later that morning, a patrol officer spotted her Accord with several teenage boys in it. When the officer approached, the teens fled. As they sped down Alabama Avenue, in Southeast D.C., they collided with a city bus, then crashed into a pole. One was seriously injured. Two of the teens had been arrested for armed carjacking eight months earlier; one was still on probation. This was in keeping with what police had been regularly seeing: the same perpetrators arrested for carjackings again and again, even after getting caught.

Summers took three days off from work. She kept thinking about the feel of the gun on her skin, the way those seconds had stretched on interminably, the terror of believing that she would leave her children motherless. She was too scared to sleep at night, and afraid to leave her apartment. In need of groceries, she finally forced herself to walk to Safeway. “Every teenage African American male I saw, I’d freeze up,” Summers, who is Black, told me. “I was standing in the middle of the store crying and shaking.”

Now her fear was overlaid with guilt. Here she was, a Black woman who considered herself progressive, stereotyping young Black men as threats.

Summers is a single mother of four who works for the U.S. Postal Service. To pay for a new car, she had to take a second job that had her working until 11 o’clock every night, after her eight-hour shift at the post office. All the while, she was consumed with fear that the suspects, who knew where she lived, would come back and hurt her in retaliation for calling the police. She moved out of the apartment she’d lived in for eight years.



Shantise Summers was carjacked at gunpoint. None of her teenage assailants got jail time. “They’re violent thieves, scary thieves. What will they become next? Because the system just told them armed carjacking is okay.” (Anna Rose Layden for *The Atlantic*)

Two of the carjackers took a plea deal; the assistant state attorney declined to prosecute the one who had been seriously injured in the crash. This past January, at a hearing for the fourth suspect, who'd been 16 at the time of the offense, the judge ordered his family to pay \$2,000 in restitution (which Summers says she has not received, and doesn't ever expect to), then let him go. He walked out of court ahead of her.

Summers found herself puzzled by the language of juvenile court. Kids are called "respondents" rather than "defendants." They get found "involved" rather than "guilty." "We're treating them like children," Summers told me. "But there was nothing childlike about what they did to me." Summers believes that all four should have faced jail time. "They're violent thieves, scary thieves," she told me. "What will they become next? Because the system just told them armed carjacking is okay."

On a June evening about six months later, Detective Darren Dalton peered into the fading light, trying to determine the make and model of the vehicle approaching him. For the past two hours, ever since the call had gone out that a Cadillac Escalade had been stolen at gunpoint, Dalton and four other police investigators had been hunting for it.

As the SUV neared, Dalton glanced down at its license plate: FH 7152. He pressed the mic on his radio.

"I've got it," he said.

Dalton, a 15-year police veteran, is one of a dozen detectives on the new Prince George's County Carjacking Interdiction Unit. In the District of Columbia and the surrounding area, which includes Prince George's County pressed up against most of the city's eastern border, this crime has become an offense committed not just by seasoned criminals but by adolescents looking to rob people, go for a joyride, and beef up their street-tough bona fides. Since early 2023, a third of the unit's detectives have been shot at or have fired their own gun while pursuing carjackers.

In 2020, the killing of George Floyd transformed the politics of policing in America. That summer, consensus solidified not just on the left but in the political center that tough-on-crime policies had had a net negative effect—

and a disproportionate impact on poor Black neighborhoods. Politicians moved quickly to meet the moment. Many communities, including D.C., diverted money away from police departments and talked about directing it instead toward addressing crime's chronic causes: the insufficient number of jobs paying a living wage, failing schools, run-down public housing.

Even when the pandemic abated, carjackings kept increasing. A county executive said her community was "under siege." "I don't feel safe stopping at a gas station."

But during the pandemic, violent crime exploded around the country. This was especially true in the Washington area. By 2023, homicides in D.C. had climbed to a level not seen in a quarter century. Carjackings rose even more. They were happening everywhere, to everyone: a mother buckling in her children outside an elementary school; a food-delivery driver making his final stop of the day; a 90-year-old who watched the carjackers drive off with her late spouse's ashes.

Some of the victims were high-profile. In October of last year, three masked men carjacked Henry Cuellar, a Democratic congressman from Texas, as he arrived at his apartment, making off with his Toyota, phone, iPad, and sushi dinner. In January, Mike Gill, a 56-year-old father of three who'd served as the chief of staff for the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, was driving his new Jeep to pick up his wife from her law office in downtown D.C. when a man climbed into his car and shot him. Gill's wife found him in a pool of blood on the sidewalk outside her office, one foot still inside the Jeep; he would die in the hospital several days later. (Within hours of shooting Gill, his assailant successfully carried out three additional carjackings, and killed one other person.) Even law-enforcement officers have been victimized: In the past year, carjackers have attacked a police officer driving an unmarked car, stolen an FBI agent's car—pushing her to the ground near the Capitol before making off with her Chevy Malibu—and tried to steal the car of the two deputy U.S. Marshals on protective detail near Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor's home. (This attempt was thwarted when a Marshal shot one of the carjackers in the mouth.)

[David A. Graham: Does being a victim of crime shift a politician's views?](#)

Even when the pandemic abated, carjackings kept increasing. In 2019, Prince George's County police officers investigated fewer than 100 carjackings; by the end of 2023, that number had risen to more than 500. Angela D. Alsobrooks, the Prince George's County executive, said the community was "under siege." "I don't feel safe stopping at a gas station," she said at a press conference. In Washington, the number of carjackings more than doubled from 2019 to 2020, from 152 to 360, and then kept climbing—to 484 in 2022, and 958 in 2023. This startling increase stemmed from a complex and still somewhat mysterious set of factors, but prominent among them, at least according to cops in the Carjacking Interdiction Unit, were protracted school closings, which fueled truancy and juvenile crime; police reforms that restricted the ability to fight crime effectively; and a new hesitancy among some officers about risking their career or their life in a political atmosphere ("Defund the police!") that they felt villainized them more than the criminals.

On that night this past June, the stolen Escalade and Dalton's unmarked Mazda CX-9 passed each other driving in opposite directions along D.C.'s border with Maryland. Dalton didn't want to spook the carjackers, so he waited until the Escalade's brake lights disappeared over a hill in his rearview mirror, then made a quick U-turn. He accelerated to catch up, sliding into position about eight cars behind the stolen SUV, then slowly moved in closer, weaving through traffic until he was three cars back. Other detectives from his unit, also in unmarked cars, were heading toward him from across the county. They would take turns following the Escalade.



The view from Sergeant Josh Scall's passenger-side mirror as he drives his unmarked car through Prince George's County, looking for carjacked vehicles (Anna Rose Layden for *The Atlantic*)

If the SUV turned left, staying in Maryland, the detectives could chase it. But if it slipped across the D.C. line, the officers would have a harder time getting permission to chase it. This, too, was an outgrowth of the changing politics of policing over the past decade: Communities all over the country had placed new restraints on police departments' ability to aggressively pursue criminals. There were good reasons for these reforms—tragic examples of police overreach and outright abuse, especially in predominantly Black neighborhoods, were common. But police say this sudden overhaul had serious unintended consequences: more murders, more carjackings, and more violent crimes of other sorts, most of them in the very communities that the police reforms had ostensibly been aimed at protecting.

Among the new limits placed on police in D.C. was an effective ban on high-speed car chases, which too often end up killing innocent bystanders, or the police officers themselves. But the spike in carjackings had been so extreme that by now, in 2024, the city had been compelled to loosen its

restrictions a bit. Still, Dalton and his fellow detectives weren't sure they would be able to get permission, so they were hoping the Escalade stayed on the Maryland side of the border.

Dalton followed for two more miles, to the intersection of Southern and Branch Avenues. A crucial moment.

"Left turn onto Branch," Dalton said into the radio. The car was staying in Maryland.

At a stoplight, Dalton pulled up next to the Escalade and finally got a look inside. The driver wore a blue surgical mask and a hoodie cinched tight around his face. The front-seat passenger was wearing a black ski mask, with only his eyes showing.

In the distance, a police helicopter thumped across the sky, positioning itself overhead. As Dalton steadied his breathing, a fleet of patrol cars converged, preparing to give chase.

Stealing cars is as old as making them; as soon as Henry Ford's factories began churning out Model T's in the early 1900s, people began swiping them. But over time, car alarms and anti-theft systems made them harder to steal. You could no longer take most vehicles just by pushing a screwdriver into the ignition or manipulating wires. Which is partly why, in the 1980s and '90s, another type of car theft exploded: stealing occupied cars at gunpoint. In 1991, Scott Bowles, a police reporter for *The Detroit News*, wrote a story about Ruth Wahl, a 22-year-old drugstore cashier who'd been shot and killed after refusing to give up her Suzuki Sidekick. Bowles described this crime as a "carjacking."

The word would soon be inscribed in the American consciousness because of stories like this one: On a September morning in 1992, Pam Basu, a 34-year-old chemist, left her Maryland townhouse to take her 22-month-old daughter to her first day of preschool. When she pulled up at a stop sign, two men forced Basu out of her BMW. As she tried to grab her daughter from her car seat, screaming "My baby!," the suspects took off. Basu, caught in a seat belt, ran alongside the car, then tripped and bounced on the pavement. The suspects dragged her for about two miles, leaving behind a trail of flesh,

clothing, and blood. Basu, who died from her injuries, “looked like a rag doll,” a witness later told jurors. “It was the worst thing I’ve ever seen.” A neighbor found the car seat in the road, the toddler uninjured. Stories like Basu’s helped fuel the ’90s panic about vicious “superpredators” and led to the passage of the federal Anti Car Theft Act of 1992, which made carjacking a federal crime, punishable by a possible life sentence.

Criminologists found carjackers to be different from traditional car thieves, most notably in their willingness to commit violence. As Bruce Jacobs, a former criminology professor at the University of Texas at Dallas, has put it, a carjacking is “a Hobbesian standoff where fear reigns and brute force is the medium of communication.” Not every criminal has the temperament for it.

Carjacking violence can be wanton, even gratuitous. In March 2022, after an Uber driver named Juan Carlos Amaya drove two men to Southeast D.C., they put guns to his head and demanded his keys. Amaya quickly obeyed and got out of his car. One of the men shot him in the leg anyway. “They already had the car and the key,” Amaya told a local TV station. “They just had to leave.”

Major Sunny Mrotek noticed the uptick in carjackings in Prince George’s County the month that COVID lockdowns began, in March 2020. By the end of that year, the county police department had logged a 183 percent increase over the previous year. Most of the carjackers in the area were going unpunished—roughly 70 percent of cases go unsolved. The majority of those caught are younger than 25, and about two-thirds of those arrested for carjacking in D.C. from 2020 to 2024 were juveniles, many of them from predominantly Black neighborhoods hollowed out by economic neglect.

Mrotek believed that the pandemic had created an environment ripe for crime. With schools, malls, and recreation centers closed, and in-person access to various social services diminished, more young people were unsupervised. The first pandemic year was bad. “But then came 2021, and we just got crushed,” he told me. By year’s end, carjackings in Prince George’s County had jumped another 49 percent. And for the first time, the number of juvenile carjacking arrests surpassed adult arrests. Mrotek, who had been a cop for three decades, had never seen anything like this.

In response, the county's new police chief, Malik Aziz, created the agency's Carjacking Interdiction Unit, centralizing investigations in hopes of improving arrest rates and successfully resolving more cases. Starting in the fall of 2021, a lieutenant, two sergeants, and 12 detectives would handle all carjackings, under Mrotek's supervision.

Mrotek handpicked his investigators. He needed officers who had a detective's mind—part thinking cop, part street cop, with the skills to piece together complex cases; to surveil suspects; and, when necessary, to engage in risky chases by car or on foot. They would wear plain clothes—not suits and ties, like homicide detectives—and drive unmarked cars.

The carjacking crisis came at a time when police departments were already struggling to hire officers. The Prince George's County Police Department, budgeted for 1,786 sworn officers, has about 350 open positions, leaving the force the smallest it's been in a dozen years. (In 2012, according to Aziz, nearly 8,000 people applied to be police officers in the county; in 2022, only about 800 did, most of them unqualified.) D.C. has lost nearly 500 sworn officers since 2020, leaving the force at a half-century low of 3,285. Many officers who remained were hesitant to do proactive police work, preferring simply to respond to 911 calls. “The general feeling was *If you're not going to fund me, acknowledge me, or appreciate me, I'm going into self-preservation mode*,” Mrotek told me. To Mrotek and his colleagues, the relationship between the retreat from aggressive policing and the explosion of violent crime seemed obvious.

Around this time, Mrotek and other detectives noticed that they were arresting the same kids again and again; more than a few wore GPS monitors on their ankle from previous arrests. “Why are we locking up the same people every time?” Mrotek wondered.

His unit was judged by its numbers: how many cases it closed, how many cars it recovered. So he wanted to see data on what was happening to offenders after they were arrested. Were they getting locked up or released? What was the recidivism rate?

Mrotek, who retired this year, found himself frustrated by what he viewed as the “coddling mindset” of the juvenile justice system. To better understand

what was happening to kids as they went through the system, he began tracking the aftermath of every arrest his team made. He was stunned by what he found: dozens of cases in which teens were arrested for armed carjacking, pleaded to this or to lesser charges, and were released on probation. Kids found to be involved in carjackings rarely seemed to get any significant time in juvenile detention. He compiled a list of what he called the “top offenders”—teens on probation for carjacking who went on to be charged with additional carjackings. Suddenly, explaining the county’s carjacking problem seemed simple: If there were no meaningful consequences for committing a crime, kids would just keep committing it. “This isn’t brain surgery,” Mrotek told me. Kids would say to detectives, “‘I’m a juvenile—I’ll be home later today.’” Christina Henderson, a member of the D.C. city council, told me she would hear about offenders committing multiple carjackings. “That tells me that when he didn’t get caught after the first one, there was a feeling of invincibility—*Nothing is going to happen to me; let me keep going.*”

Mrotek is a father of two. He doesn’t think that a single impulsive decision should derail a kid’s future. But some crimes, he believes, are bad enough to require serious consequences, even for minors. “If you’ve just finished working 10 hours, stop at a gas station, and two juveniles pistol-whip you and drive off in your car, should they get only probation?” he said. “If we’re not punishing people for having a gun and violently assaulting people, what’s left? Murder?”

I talked with an assistant principal of a 1,200-kid middle school in the metropolitan D.C. area who shares this concern. “I don’t care who you are,” Ateya Ball-Lacy told me. “If you are in the community carjacking and putting a gun to somebody’s head, you need to be in a restricted environment. Period. Is it jail? Is it juvie? I don’t know, but clearly you need to be somewhere you can get help.”

Ball-Lacy grew up in Southwest D.C. during the crack epidemic. Several of her cousins died. “I never agreed with ‘defunding the police,’” she said. “When that conversation happened in my school district, we were very clear: That’s insane. If we don’t have police, who is going to break up the fights? I have a permanently torn rotator cuff as a result of breaking up fights. We cannot pretend that we are not in this place.”

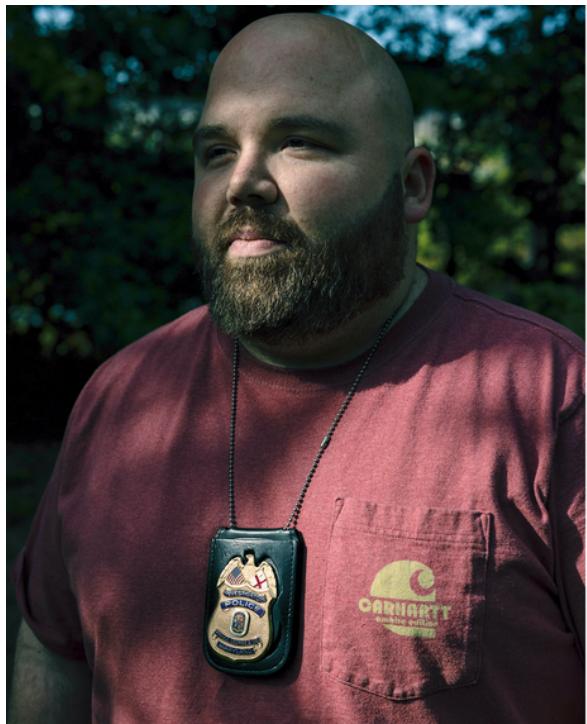
Mrotek proposes a fix that he believes could solve the carjacking problem: If a juvenile pulls a gun during a carjacking, they serve a mandatory three years—one-tenth of the maximum sentence for adults.

“I guarantee you the numbers will drop real fast,” he told me.

Some people say that society can’t arrest its way out of a crime problem. “Yes, we can,” Mrotek said. “It’s actually very simple.”

As the sun set, Detective Sara Cavanagh joined Detective Dalton in tailing the Escalade, following it into an apartment complex. The SUV stopped in front of an apartment; two suspects got out of the car and disappeared inside.

Cavanagh sat behind the wheel of her unmarked Chevy Equinox and waited. Four other detectives parked nearby, each in a separate unmarked car. Patrol vehicles began lining up along a side street. If the suspects tried to flee in the Escalade, officers would deploy a spike strip—Teflon-coated metal spikes arrayed along a cord that cops can throw onto the road—to flatten its tires. The police department’s helicopter circled above. If Cavanagh and her colleagues had to give chase, the helicopter would serve as “the eye,” with a spotter calling out directions.



Left: Detective Darren Dalton, of the Prince George's County Police Department carjacking unit, spotted a carjacked Cadillac Escalade this past June, leading to a chase and an arrest. *Right:* Detective Sara Cavanagh is the only female member of the Prince George's County carjacking unit. Her experience has led her to conclude that carjacking is among the most heinous of crimes, behind only rape and murder. (Anna Rose Layden for *The Atlantic*)

Cavanagh is the only woman in the Carjacking Interdiction Unit, which tends to attract rough-and-tumble, testosterone-driven types. Her squad's resident gym rat, Rusty Ueno, can bench-press 450 pounds. Many of the detectives have elaborate tattoos, samurai and lions swirling across their biceps, and they fish, hunt, and drink beer together on the weekends.

Cavanagh, who is 29, has taken on the role of little sister. She bounces into the office every day, ponytail swinging, chattering nonstop. "She makes us say hello to her," her sergeant, Matt Milburn, groused. But she has the unit's respect. She is the only woman in the entire department certified to carry a rifle, and many times she is the first to arrive at a crime scene. A former Division I soccer player, Cavanagh can beat anyone in her squad in a foot chase.

For Cavanagh, carjacking ranks behind only murder and rape in the hierarchy of awful crimes. She has seen the terror in victims' eyes. The ones that affect her the most are the elderly women. Like the old lady who had been unloading groceries in her driveway when four suspects approached and demanded her car. The woman put up a fight and screamed for help; as she tried to run, one of the men tackled her, breaking her foot. Or the woman in her mid-80s who was assaulted while parked at an ATM. Three adolescent boys grabbed her cash and pushed her while taking her car keys; she tripped backwards over a concrete parking barrier and hit her head on the ground. When Cavanagh's unit later arrested one of the boys, in a grocery store, they discovered that he was only 12.

"I really didn't want to like this kid—he'd just carjacked an old lady. But I felt sorry for him."

During the arrest, the kid said something to Detective Dalton about a bullet.

“You have a gun on you?” Dalton asked.

“No, a bullet in me,” the kid said.

“What are you talking about?”

“I got shot two weeks ago,” the kid said.

He’d been a victim in a triple shooting. A bullet was still lodged in his back.

Cavanagh later went to search the house where the kid lived. She found cockroaches everywhere, an empty refrigerator, 10 people crammed in two rooms, old takeout rotting beneath a bed. “I really didn’t want to like this kid—he’d just carjacked an old lady,” Cavanagh told me. “But I felt sorry for him.”

After every arrest, Sergeant Milburn looks up the suspect’s prior contact with the criminal-justice system. He estimates that in at least half of the unit’s juvenile cases, the suspect has had previous interactions with the police as a victim—of physical or sexual abuse, for example, or of neglect by a parent or family member. Milburn searched the 12-year-old’s history, and sure enough: He’d allegedly been physically abused at 6 years old. “Most of these kids don’t stand a chance,” Milburn told me. “I can’t tell you how many times we notify parents and they say, ‘I don’t care,’ or ‘Just send his ass to Cheltenham’”—the county’s juvenile detention center. “That happens more times than not.”

Cavanagh kept her eyes on the Escalade in the gathering dusk. The two suspects emerged from the apartment. “Carjacking 14,” she radioed, announcing herself by her call sign. “I’ve got two people on foot.”

The suspects climbed into the Escalade and headed toward the complex’s exit. Just past the gate, officers were hiding between two cars, where they’d laid the spike strip. Once the vehicle had passed over it, the officers would quickly yank the strip out of the road, to spare the tires of pursuing police cars.

From the sky, the helicopter spotter called out the Escalade’s movements: The suspects were coming around the corner, approaching the gatehouse. As

the Escalade bumped over the spikes, air hissed out of its tires. It wobbled but kept going.

The line of patrol cars emerged from the side street, sirens wailing. Cavanagh joined the chase, crossing into a residential neighborhood, bouncing over speed bumps at 40 miles per hour.

As the carjackers sped down a hill on their busted tires, they lost control of the Escalade, which veered off the road and smashed into the front of a house. The suspects leaped out and ran. For a long moment, the police radio was quiet as officers chased them on foot.

“Talk to me,” a dispatcher finally said.

“Got one in custody,” a breathless patrol officer replied.

The second suspect had disappeared into the trees, the vegetation too dense for the helicopter to pick up his heat signature. A supervisor called for a canine unit; perhaps a dog could pick up his scent.

Cavanagh raced toward the woodline, listening for the sound of sticks breaking or leaves rustling, then slipping into the trees to search.

Brian L. Schwalb, the District’s attorney general, told me he was surprised at how quickly the prevailing sentiment had returned to “Lock ‘em up” when carjackings and other crimes exploded. After all the marches and protests demanding criminal-justice reform in 2020, he said, “here we are four years later, and it’s as if that conversation never happened.” Frightened residents suddenly became less interested in hearing about root causes and long-term solutions, saying in community forums across the region that they felt unsafe and wanted something done *now*. Matthew Graves, the U.S. attorney for D.C., found himself suddenly being attacked as “soft on crime,” sometimes by the very same people who just months earlier were deriding him and other federal prosecutors as “mass incarceration.” As soon as people start feeling unsafe, Graves told me, calls for reform are replaced by a desire to “lock up as many people as possible for as long as possible.” Evidence of this dizzying shift can be seen in the 2024 presidential election: Kamala

Harris now embraces the prosecutor's background she attempted to distance herself from during the 2020 primary campaign.

In 2014, the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, led to a wave of police reforms across the country. The killing of George Floyd intensified that wave. But as violent crime rose sharply across D.C. over the past few years, many of those reforms suddenly seemed ill-conceived. A new narrative took hold, even among frightened liberals: The city's progressivism had prompted a descent into lawlessness. Juvenile criminals were facing no consequences. Young people were out of control. Politicians backpedaled, prosecutors promised to get tough again, and police officers said smugly to one another, *What did they think was going to happen?*

The D.C. city council's decision to trim the Metropolitan Police Department's budget in 2020 led to a hiring freeze that Peter Newsham, D.C.'s police chief from 2016 until early 2021, believes contributed to the spike in crime. "If you look at our data during that time period, crime almost immediately went in the wrong direction, particularly violent crime," Newsham told me. "To reduce the size of the police department was, in my opinion, irresponsible."

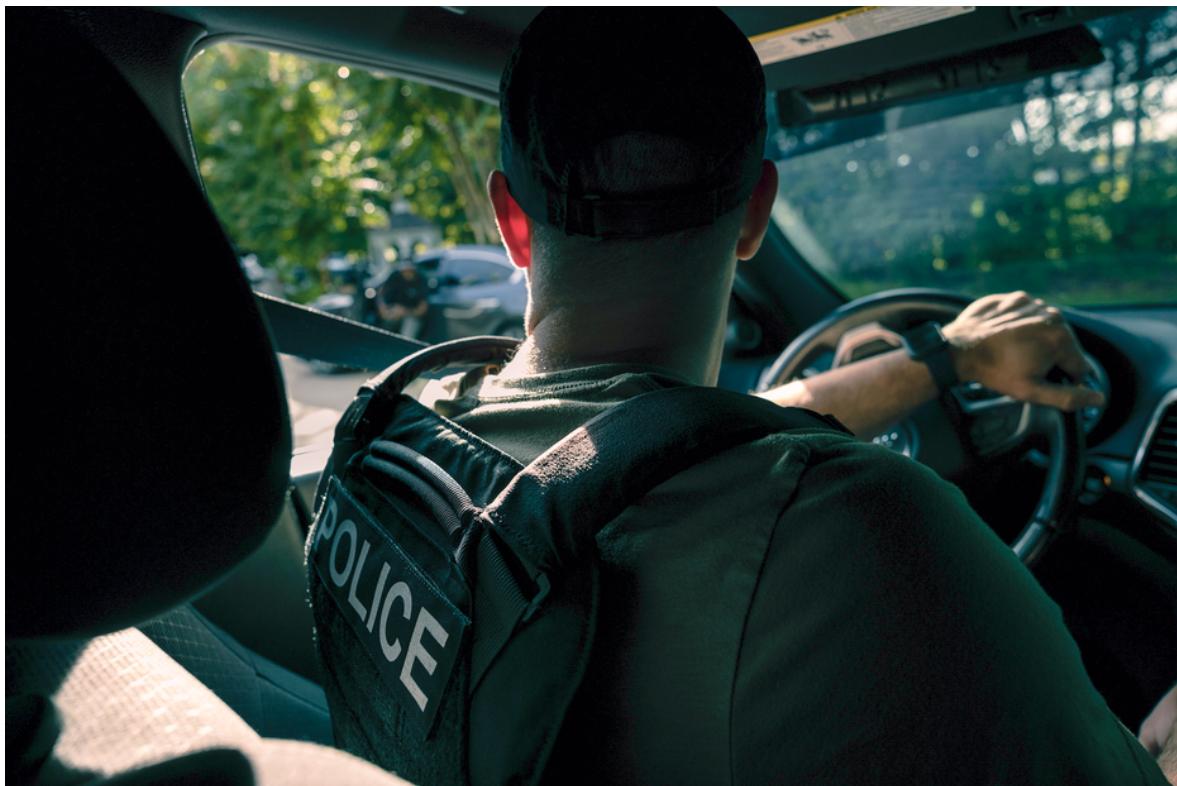
Newsham doesn't dispute that policing needs to reform and evolve. But Washington's police department has been evolving for decades, he said, under the supervision of the U.S. Department of Justice. "We're not the Derek Chauvins of the world," he told me, referring to the police officer who killed George Floyd.

Newsham is now the police chief for nearby Prince William County, Virginia, which has been averaging only a dozen or so carjackings a year. He says that if you were to place a red dot on a map everywhere across the region where a serious crime has occurred, most of those dots would be concentrated in D.C. and some of its adjoining Maryland neighborhoods. "As soon as you go into Virginia, there are very few red dots," he says. "How do you explain that?"

He answered his own question: "It's the lack of consequences in D.C. If you want to stop violent crime, you have to separate violent criminals from society. They're just not doing that. We're so concerned about the freedom

of the violent offender that we're putting everyone else in jeopardy.” (The poverty rate is also lower in Prince William County than in Washington.) Newsham says criminals in D.C. have told him they know not to commit a crime in Northern Virginia because they know punishment there “is going to be swift and certain.”

The carjacking fever seems to finally be breaking; this is the first year since 2019 in which carjackings are down—by more than 50 percent in D.C. and roughly 26 percent in Prince George’s County through August. Police leaders attribute the decline in part to their specialized carjacking task forces, which have gotten better at solving cases—and also to a public sentiment that has shifted back in favor of more aggressive policing and prosecution. Matthew Graves, the U.S. attorney, ascribes the decline in carjackings partly to his office’s successful prosecution of multiple cases that resulted in lengthy prison sentences. Christina Henderson, the city-council member, concurs. “I think the growing number of prosecutions has helped curb some of this behavior,” she said.



Sergeant Scall surveils a stolen Toyota Corolla. (Anna Rose Layden for *The Atlantic*)

But Eduardo Ferrer, the policy director of the Juvenile Justice Initiative at the Georgetown University Law Center, says the panicked return to a draconian tough-on-crime approach is misguided. “We’re revisiting failed policies from the 1990s,” such as youth curfews and longer pretrial detention, he told me. “We’re bringing back policies that we know did not work and that actually created a lot of harm.”

“When crime rises, the reaction has always been to get tough on crime,” Emily Gunston, who worked as first assistant attorney general for D.C. under Schwalb, told me. But “all of the studies show that putting kids deeper in the juvenile justice system *increases* criminality rather than reducing it.”

Ferrer noted that it’s a relatively small group of kids getting into trouble: Of the roughly 48,000 adolescents who live in D.C., fewer than 3 percent, or about 1,200, have been involved in the juvenile court system—and of those, about 1 percent, or fewer than 500, are charged with the most violent crimes: homicide, armed robbery, and carjacking. Gunston thinks the focus should be on this subset of offenders. “If we threw enough money and resources at these children,” she told me, “it would be much cheaper and more effective than what we’re doing.” Graves agrees that the most effective approach is to concentrate on the small number of people who are committing violent acts—but that the initial emphasis should be on removing them from the community.

Juvenile crime rates rise and fall, but the primary root causes of the crimes don’t change, Ferrer said: Based on data from 2022, he estimates that 12 percent of the kids involved in D.C.’s juvenile justice system are homeless, 75 percent are on Medicaid, at least 45 percent have a diagnosed behavioral-health issue, and at least 50 percent have reported abuse or neglect. Many of these kids have experienced significant and complex trauma, and so have their parents. Problems that have compounded over generations will not be solved quickly.

“It’s really important to hold two ideas in your brain at the same time,” Gunston said. “Carjacking is a terrible crime that has terrible effects on victims—and these are children who don’t have the same decision-making abilities as adults. A child who commits a crime like this has already been failed in so many ways.”

The concerns of a community worried about safety in the face of runaway violent crime are legitimate. So are concerns about the rights and life prospects of the sometimes quite young kids committing these crimes—kids born into poverty and structural racism, many of whom were themselves victims before they became criminals. Can these concerns be balanced effectively? Ferrer said the solution is to address the root causes of crime and poverty. “Real public safety is a by-product of thriving communities,” he told me, and that’s clearly true as far as it goes. But until we achieve that, would-be criminals, even young ones, have to know that they will face serious consequences for violent behavior. On this, police, prosecutors, criminologists, and most citizens in the afflicted communities agree. It should be possible to concentrate more intensive and proactive police work, and prosecutorial follow-through, on the small core of regular violent offenders, while at the same time investing public resources more broadly in impoverished neighborhoods. Brian Schwalb, the attorney general, calls this a “both and” approach: Violent offenders must face aggressive prosecution—and communities must address root causes of crime. Rather than careening wildly from one extreme (defund the police) to the other (lock ‘em up), Schwalb says the whole criminal-justice apparatus—police and prosecutors and policy makers—must constantly be calibrating minor adjustments in the balance between rehabilitation and punitiveness.

Milele Drummond, who has taught in D.C. public schools for 14 years, has been struck recently by how casually some of her students talk about carjacking. “To them, it’s not a big deal,” she told me. “It’s more fun to carjack” than to be in school.

Drummond, who lives in Southeast D.C., near the border with Maryland, worries about getting carjacked when she goes to get gas, especially when she has her two young children with her. But she also worries about her students. She had thought that teaching Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* would lead to productive discussions about racism. But she’s found that an easier way to convey some of these lessons has been to talk about crime and justice in their own city. When crime is a thing that happens to other people elsewhere, she tells her classes, it’s easy for people far from the scene to express empathy toward the perpetrator, and an understanding of why a person might have committed such a crime. But when people who are used

to feeling safe suddenly don't, that empathy and understanding tend to evaporate quickly.

Read: Why California is swinging right on crime

"When people of means and power and privilege start to feel afraid, everything changes," Drummond tells her students—the response shifts very quickly from "Oh, they have a sad story" to "Lock them up."

In other words, when the threat of becoming a victim increases in their own neighborhoods, even progressive reformers are apt to suddenly become tough on crime. Which is what many of the law-abiding residents of higher-crime communities have been all along.

It was now close to midnight. After chasing down the Escalade, the detectives had returned to the maze of gray cubicles on the second floor of their building. One wall was papered with flyers showing carjacked vehicles that had not been recovered. A discarded bumper with D.C. tags lay on the floor, retrieved from a carjacking scene.

Josh Scall, another sergeant on the unit, walked in wearing a backwards baseball cap that read Girl Dad. He has two daughters, 6 and 8. During the car chase, his wife had been texting him, telling him that the girls, worn out from a swim meet, had gone to sleep easily.

Scall looked over at a computer monitor on Dalton's desk, which was showing live feeds from each of the four interrogation rooms down the hall. Two young suspects, arrested in a different case, were yelling to each other through an air-conditioning vent.

"They're trying to charge me with armed robbery," one shouted.

In a third room, the suspect whom the carjacking unit had apprehended that night sat in a chair, his head on a desk, his left wrist cuffed to a wall. Ueno, the gym rat, had gone in earlier to get the kid's name, and described him as respectful. "He seemed defeated," he told the others. (They never found the second suspect.)

After George Floyd's death, Scall, a 14-year police veteran, had questioned his choice of career. Scrolling Facebook, he'd see that everyone, including friends, had seemed to turn against his profession. But since joining the carjacking unit in 2021, he told me, he'd felt renewed purpose. His squad was doing unambiguous police work, with clear victims and villains. Every time he showed up at a scene, he'd been called there to help. He liked that. His wife thinks the job is too dangerous. But Scall feels that the unit is making a difference.

Scall watched the detectives work. Cavanagh was typing up a probable-cause affidavit. Another detective retrieved a copy of the pursuit video from the helicopter hangar. A third followed the Escalade to the evidence bay for processing. Ueno hung up the phone and rolled his chair around to face the others. "All right, the juvenile's grandmother has been notified," he said. She had not sounded surprised to hear that her grandson had been arrested.

Just after midnight, Cavanagh walked over to the microwave to warm up a container of Irish stew. As the microwave beeped, her telephone rang. It was the owner of the Escalade. "They ran from us and ended up losing control and hit a house," Cavanagh told him. "So your car has some serious front-end damage."

After Cavanagh hung up, she went back to the affidavit. She was charging the juvenile with 13 criminal counts, mostly felonies. In a little while, she'd drop him off at a youth detention center. With no prior arrests, he'd likely be released later that morning.

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The Israeli Artist Who Offends Everyone

Long a fearless critic of Israel, Zoya Cherkassky-Nnadi has made wrenching portraits of her nation's suffering since October 7.

by Judith Shulevitz



"Massacre of the Innocents," 2023 (© Zoya Cherkassky. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.)

Updated at 11:36 a.m. ET on October 6, 2024

You can't walk far in Tel Aviv without encountering a raw expression of Israel's national trauma on October 7. The streets are lined with posters of hostages, and giant signs and graffiti demanding BRING THEM HOME. Making my way through Florentin, a former slum that has become an artists' neighborhood, to visit Zoya Cherkassky-Nnadi, one of the most popular painters in Israel, I passed a mural of a child being taken hostage. A Hamas terrorist in a green headband and balaclava points a rifle at the child, who has his hands in the air. The boy is recognizable as a version of the child in the [famous photograph from the Warsaw Ghetto](#) uprising in 1943. The artist first painted the mural in Milan, but images of October 7 are not always well received outside Israel. In Milan, someone scrubbed the Jewish child out of the picture.

Zoya—first name only, at least in the art world—also made drawings about October 7 that met with an unexpectedly hostile response abroad. Until then, Zoya's international reputation had been ascending. She was seen as a sharp critic and satirist of Israeli society—Israel's Hogarth, as it were. Like him, she sketches people whom others overlook; like his, her portraits editorialize. Perhaps you assume that *overlooked* means "Palestinian." Zoya has made paintings about the plight of Palestinians, but what really interests her are even less visible members of Israeli society, such as African immigrants, and the invisible and stigmatized, such as sex workers. Since her October 7 drawings were shown in New York, however, she has been accused of making propaganda for Israel. Similar charges have been leveled against other prominent Israeli artists since the start of the Gaza war, but the denunciation of Zoya was particularly public.

Zoya is an immigrant herself—born in Kyiv in 1976, when Ukraine was still part of the Soviet Union—and she has spent her life in a kind of internal exile. In Kyiv, she was a Jew. In Israel, she's a goy (non-Jew), at least by rabbinic standards, because her mother isn't Jewish, by the same standards. (Zoya's father was Jewish, and so was her mother's father.) She is married to an even more recent immigrant, Sunny Nnadi, who comes from Nigeria. She used to vote for the far-left, Arab-majority political party Hadash, but stopped when it, along with a coalition of similar parties, sided with Vladimir Putin in Russia's war on Ukraine. She has the word ATTITUDE

tattooed on her left forearm, in English. Her art tests the boundaries of the permissible. When Zoya had a major solo show in 2018 at the Israel Museum, one of the country’s preeminent institutions, the newspaper *Haaretz* noted the incongruity of the museum’s embrace of Israel’s “eternal dissident.”

That exhibition, which was called “Pravda,” depicted Soviet and post-Soviet immigrants struggling to acclimate to an unfriendly Israel. Two paintings, for example, lampoon the rabbinic authorities who enforce religious law. Many of the million or so new arrivals had never kept kosher or been circumcised, and roughly a quarter of those weren’t considered Jews by Israel’s rabbinic establishment, usually because their mothers, like Zoya’s, weren’t Jewish. A handful chose to undergo Orthodox conversions.

That’s the backdrop for *The Rabbi’s Deliquium*, which is set in the home of two young Russian converts to Orthodox Judaism. The scene is only half fantastical. The man wears a kippah and his wife’s hair is covered. Their baby’s head is also covered—by a giant kippah. (In real life, infants do not wear kippahs.) A rabbi is inspecting their kitchen to ascertain whether they are really keeping kosher; this kind of thing actually occurs. He lifts the lid of a pot and finds himself face-to-face with a huge pig snout. *Deliquium* means a sudden loss of consciousness. We know what is going to happen to the rabbi next.



The Rabbi's Deliquium, 2016 (© Zoya Cherkassky. Courtesy of the artist and Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv.)

In the second painting, [The Circumcision of Uncle Yasha](#), two ultra-Orthodox rabbis in blood-splattered scrubs perform the operation in a pool-blue operating room. One wields a pair of scissors while Uncle Yasha looks down at his penis in terror. The other rabbi covers his face with a book labeled TORAH, as religious Jews sometimes do with their prayer books, but in this case the gesture suggests a refusal to see. In the corner of the operating room lies a kidney dish filled with blood. The scene evokes the infamous anti-Semitic blood libel, in which Jews are said to drain the blood of a Christian child to use in their Passover matzah. The show's curator, Amitai Mendelsohn, understates the allusion's outrageousness when he calls it "slightly unsettling" in the catalog. The painting is so sacrilegious, it's funny—admittedly, it's also a Jewish in-joke that would probably work less well outside Israel, where a mordant reference to a slander that resulted in the deaths of countless Jews might well come across as simply distasteful.

Zoya's October 7 drawings are not funny at all. Days after the invasion, having taken her terrified 8-year-old daughter to Berlin, Zoya began putting on paper the scenes of horror that wouldn't stop tormenting her. She first posted her drawings on social media. Soon they were being projected onto the white facade of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art from "Hostages Square," the plaza in front of that building, which has become a site for public art and protest about the kidnapped. The Jewish Museum brought the drawings to New York, where [Zoya occasioned a story in *The New York Times*](#), among other outlets, not on account of her artwork, exactly, but because she was heckled and did something unusual in response.

The incident occurred in February, and some of it was [recorded on phones](#). Zoya and the museum's director, James Snyder, are about to have a conversation onstage when young activists in black surgical masks stand up and begin to shout. As they are hustled out, another group rises and yells from printed scripts: "As cultural workers, as anti-Zionist Jews of conscience, as New York City residents, we implore you to confront the reality of"—boos and cries of "Shut up" from the audience drown out their words. Clearly, the Jewish Museum crowd is not on the side of the protesters. Guards forcibly remove the second group of disrupters.

Suddenly, cheers erupt near the stage and Zoya comes into view, a large, long-haired, makeup-free woman in a stretchy gray dress and black boots, sitting calmly, apparently unfazed. You have to read the news accounts to learn what had just happened off-screen: Zoya had said, simply, "Fuck you."

When more protesters had been escorted out and the drama had subsided, Zoya caustically observed, "I am very, very happy that there are privileged young people from privileged countries that can know how everybody in the world should act."

The protesters had also given out flyers with an insulting caricature of "The Zionist Artist at Work," showing an artist in combat gear painting a missile. According to an Instagram post by a group called Writers Against the War on Gaza, the activists accused the Jewish Museum of participating in "violent Palestinian erasure" because Zoya had failed to include the Palestinian victims of the Gaza war in the show. Zoya's immediate response to that charge was that she may yet make art about the Palestinian victims.

“Just because I have compassion for people in the kibbutz doesn’t mean I don’t have compassion for people in Gaza,” [she told the *Times*](#).

Zoya has addressed Israeli cruelty toward Palestinians in the past. A 2016 painting called *The History of Violence* shows a uniformed Israeli soldier guarding two handcuffed men stripped down to their underwear, presumably Palestinians. *After Pogrom* (2023) portrays a couple and child in front of their burning home, an apparent reference to the [2023 settler rampage](#) in the Palestinian village of Huwara, in the West Bank. It reworks a World War II-era painting by Chagall, [*The Ukrainian Family*](#), about Jews in a similar situation, as if to say, *Who’s committing the pogroms now?*



After Pogrom, 2023 (© Zoya Cherkassky. Courtesy of the artist and Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv.)

Not everyone in the audience at the Jewish Museum opposed the protest. In an article largely sympathetic to the activists, the online art magazine *Hyperallergic* quoted an anonymous spectator saying that the audience's hostile response to the protest was "chilling." Two months after the incident, Zoya posted the following on Instagram: "The Central Committee of the CPSU"—the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—"allowed more freedom of artistic expression than [the] contemporary art world."

In late May, I asked Zoya what she thought about the melee now, especially that "Fuck you." Every aspect of her appearance says *I don't have time for this nonsense*: her single-color stretch dresses (she was wearing black that day), her Velcroed sandals, her blunt bangs, her black rectangular glasses. We were at a printmaking studio in Jaffa that had invited her to learn how to make monotype prints. The process involves painting on a large piece of plastic, then taking an impression. She was turning a painting of hers into a black-and-white version of itself, using broad, confident strokes, and she didn't stop as she answered my question. "I think this was exactly the level of discussion appropriate for this situation," she said.

Zoya's series *7 October 2023* deserves a place in the canon of art about war. Twelve small, meticulous drawings in pencil, marker, crayons, and watercolor form a mournful martyrology. The backgrounds are flat black and the colors are somber, except for violent reds and oranges that reappear in several works and sometimes burst into red-orange flames. Zoya uses an easy-to-parse visual language, part grim children's-book illustration, part German Expressionism: You feel Max Beckmann, one of her favorite artists, in the slashing lines, darkened hues, and unflinching yet somehow religious representations of horror. "I'm quoting historical paintings that depict suffering," she told me. She wanted their help channeling the pain "so I'm not alone in this series."

Zoya portrayed victims only; perpetrators are nowhere to be seen. With one exception—a drawing of child hostages—she did not reproduce the faces of actual people. Her figures are all sharp angles and outsize oval eyes. In a drawing about the Nova music festival, where hundreds of Israeli

concertgoers were killed, the sticklike upper arms of the young people running from their murderers stretch out while their forearms slant up toward heaven and their calves kick out behind them. The staccato repetition of limbs and hands and toes turns the scene into a dance of death. Two drawings do disturbing things with heads. In *Massacre of the Innocents*, based on the Giotto fresco of the same name, murdered children lie heaped on the ground, and you can count more heads than bodies (some bodies may be blocking our view of others, but the effect is still eerie). In Zoya's rendering of a rape victim lying face down in blood, her head has turned too far to the side, like a broken doll's, and her empty eye sockets stare at the viewer.

Israelis gave me strange looks when they learned that I'd come all the way from New York to write a profile of an artist. In the middle of a war? Maybe I was really writing about the cultural boycott? That too, I said. Many Israelis in the arts and academia dread the anti-Israel fury—or at least the fear of protest—that is making curators, gallerists, arts programmers, publishers, university department heads, and organizers of academic conferences loath to invite Israeli participants. Being shut out of international venues is a constant topic. For two decades, the Palestinian-founded Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement and the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel have pressured cultural organizations around the world to exclude Israelis, with mixed results.

But now the mission is succeeding. The Israeli visual artists I talked with feel that the world turned on them in a day—on October 19, to be precise, when *Artforum* published an open letter signed by 4,000 artists and intellectuals calling for a cease-fire, an end to violence against civilians, and humanitarian aid for Gaza. To the outrage of Israelis and many Jews elsewhere, the original version of the letter failed to mention that Hamas's atrocities had started the war—or to mention Hamas at all.

A month before I arrived in late spring, Ruth Patir, the artist chosen to represent Israel in the Venice Biennale, announced that her show would remain closed until there was a cease-fire and the hostages were released. The message, [relayed a day before the press preview of the Israeli pavilion](#), was idealistic but also strategic: It had become clear that protests would

block Israel's pavilion. I went to see Mira Lapidot, the chief curator of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, who helped hang the show in Venice and participated in the decision to cancel it. She has deep reservations about the way the war is being conducted, but she was shocked that people in the arts, of all fields, would fail to recognize that "a person is not their government and not their state, that people are multifaceted, have different views, that there is a place for individuality. It is all completely just wiped out."



The Terrorist Attack at Nova Music Festival, 2023 (© Zoya Cherkassky. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.)

No less unnerving than the cancellations are the opportunities that dematerialize: the once-friendly museum director who no longer calls, the dance company that can't seem to book its usual tours. When I asked Israeli artists whether they had any upcoming shows abroad, I found that if they said yes, very likely the show would be in one of three places: a Jewish-owned gallery, a Jewish museum, or Germany, where strict laws prohibit anti-Semitic activity. (In June, Germany's federal intelligence agency classified BDS as a "suspected extremist organization.") Artists from abroad are also staying away from Israel. Kobi Ben-Meir, the chief curator at the Haifa Museum, told me that he used to be able to talk reluctant artists into showing their work there; now, if they take his calls, they say *Let's talk in a year or so.* "We are kind of like in a ghetto right now, here and also internationally," Maya Frenkel Tene, a curator at the Rosenfeld Gallery, which represents Zoya in Israel, told me. "A Jewish ghetto."

Zoya being Zoya, she waved off my questions about boycotts. Being boycotted is not like having your home bombed, she said—and that, in turn, is not as bad as being in Gaza, she added. Later, she told me that she wished

boycotts were her problem. What is your problem, then? I asked. “What to do to avoid the Holocaust,” she said. Did she mean what would happen if Hamas or Hezbollah overran Israel? “It’s not only Hamas and Hezbollah. The scariest part is what is happening within Israel,” she said, “these crazy right-wing Israelis” who attack humanitarian aid convoys and terrorize Palestinians in the West Bank.

[Read: The new culture war in Israel](#)

Zoya deplores the coalition governing her country, but about Gaza, she said, “I’m jealous of people who know what is the right thing to do. I have no idea.” Like almost everyone I met in Israel, she wondered whether she and her family would have to leave; she and Sunny have thought about going to his village in Nigeria, but violence roils that country too.

Zoya’s dismissiveness notwithstanding, the boycotts are worrisome, and not just because they seek to censor the art of an entire nation. Zoya’s work in particular is a reminder of what would be lost. Her art offers the world a chance to learn about the richly complicated reality underneath the schematic picture of Israel as a society of oppressors and oppressed that is all too often disseminated by anti-Zionists. Zoya’s art should not be defined by the October 7 series alone. She is prolific and protean, and those drawings are not necessarily her best work. When she arrived on the Israeli art scene in her early 20s, she was precociously sophisticated. Over the course of nearly three decades, she has made unforgettable art about art and searing art about society, and mastered a remarkable array of genres: manga, digital art, Jewish liturgical texts, even Soviet Socialist Realism, whose greatest artists she is determined to rescue from the trash heap of Western art history. “She can do anything and everything in art,” Gideon Ofrat, a prominent historian of Israeli art, told me. “She does not repeat herself. She always develops a new style and a new language, and everything she touches is done expertly from a technical point of view.”

What unites Zoya’s eclectic body of work is her supremely jaded and very Soviet sarcasm—and an empathy for her subjects that has deepened over the years. “It’s easy to be ironic as an artist, but it is not easy to be funny,” Ben-Meir, the Haifa Museum curator, said of Zoya. Stupidity or hypocrisy or ideological rigidity activates her inner shock jock—in her art, and in person.

These days she gets a lot of her comic material from postcolonialist lingo. Once, as we were leaving her studio, a shrieking sound came from somewhere in the building. What on earth is that? I asked. Wild parrots, Zoya answered. Parrots were brought to Israel as pets but escaped and reproduced; now they occupy all of Tel Aviv. “They are not indigenous to this land,” she observed. “Genocidal settler parrots!”

When the 14-year-old Zoya learned in 1991 that her family had finally received permission to move to Israel—as it happens, they left two weeks before the fall of the Soviet Union—she was excited: She would finally have access to all the Western culture forbidden to her, like music and art. Yet she had already been studying for four years in one of the best art schools in the Soviet Union, a nation that offered more rigorous training in the techniques of academic realism than any other country, and when her teacher told her that art students in Israel didn’t master the same skills, she cried. “I thought, *I will never learn how to draw*,” she told me. She got into one of the top Israeli high schools specializing in art and found that the students’ draftsmanship indeed lagged behind hers. She had her friends back home send her their homework assignments and did them on her own.

Zoya belongs to a cohort of young émigrés from the former Soviet Union known as the “1.5 generation,” the first set of child immigrants in Israel who didn’t assimilate the way children usually do. The muscular sabra ideal never appealed to them; when they grew up, they held on to their hybrid identity, Liza Rozovsky, a reporter at *Haaretz* originally from Moscow, told me. The “Russians”—“in Israel they did become ‘Russian’ all of a sudden, even though most of them did not even come from Russia,” she noted—had their own schools, their own theater and music-enrichment classes. Missing their biscuits, cakes, and very nonkosher sausages, they opened grocery stores that stocked Russian brands. The children were miserable at first: They dressed wrong, ate funny-smelling sandwiches in school, and were bullied. Pride came later, Rozovsky said. The teenage Zoya did fine. “I was in the art bubble,” she explained. But she registered the unhappiness around her.

The Russians didn’t fit into the Western racial categories often used to classify Israelis—white Ashkenazi overclass on the top; dark Mizrahi, or Middle Eastern, underclass on the bottom—because they were white and

Ashkenazi, yet rungs below better-integrated Israelis socially; no one knew what to make of them. Whatever advanced degrees and white-collar jobs they may have had in the Soviet Union, now they worked as cleaning ladies and night guards. The run-down neighborhoods they moved into had previously been the domain of the Mizrahi Jews, and the two low-status groups engaged in a war of mutual condescension. The Mizrahim thought that Russian men were pale and unmanly and that Russian women were all prostitutes. Zoya remembers Israeli boys taunting Russian girls by calling out “Five shekels!,” meaning five shekels for sex. For their part, the Russians considered the Mizrahim—indeed, most Israelis—loud, uncultured boors.

Russians didn’t fit into the Israeli art world, either. In 1990s Israel, realism was reactionary, passé. “It was embarrassing to know how to paint, but even more embarrassing to know how to paint like a Russian,” Zoya said in a gallery talk in 2017. Good artists—serious artists—made abstract, conceptual, intellectual pieces. Cultural gatekeepers were Ashkenazi. There were almost no Russian gallery owners or curators. Zoya studied at the HaMidrasha School of Art at Beit Berl College, known as a home for avant-garde, nonrepresentational artists. The poststructuralist curriculum annoyed her. She couldn’t make sense of subversive French thinkers such as Georges Bataille and Jacques Lacan, because she wasn’t familiar with the discourses they were subverting; that made her feel ashamed. To the great chagrin of her mother, she never graduated. “I’m not a philosopher, and I didn’t go study art because I want philosophy,” she told me. “I like painting.”

Zoya didn’t become a painter right away. She made conceptual works whose point seemed to be that they were amusing to make. An early collaboration with a classmate involved flying to Scotland with a lightweight, human-size sculpture of a friend in what looked like a body bag—U.K. customs officers were flummoxed—and then taking the “friend” into the forest, where they posed him in various positions and photographed him. Don’t ask what the point was: They were 19. “At this age, you can’t really explain what the hell it means,” Zoya said.

Why would anyone turn one of the most despised symbols of anti-Semitism into jewelry and display it as if it were a Jewish treasure?

Her breakthrough came in 2002 with a solo show called “Collectio Judaica.” It was the product of a great deal more thought and care. Like “Pravda” 15 years later, it would probably not do well outside Israel; its attitude toward Jewishness is even more open to misinterpretation.

The show mostly consisted of Jewish objects, all perfectly designed and executed by Zoya. But it was not a simple celebration of Jewish material culture. Some of the items were traditional: a Passover Haggadah, two porcelain seder-plate sets, and four mizrach gouache paintings (a mizrach hangs on the eastern wall of an observant Jewish home in order to orient prayer). But other fabrications were, well, *sui generis*. In the gallery window lay three brooches, all 18-karat-gold replicas of the yellow cloth Star of David that the Nazis made Jews wear, complete with the word Jude in the middle. A Tel Aviv council member in the pro-settler National Religious Party heard about the show and demanded that the mayor and Israel’s attorney general close it. Her effort failed. The show was a hit.

Why would anyone turn one of the most despised symbols of anti-Semitism into jewelry and display it as if it were a Jewish treasure? The seemingly bizarre undertaking encapsulated the fundamental gesture of the show. “I think this is the most important work Zoya did ever,” Zaki Rosenfeld, her gallerist in Israel, told me. (Since 2019, Zoya has also been represented by the Fort Gansevoort gallery, in New York.) Zoya was erasing the line between the sacred and the vile, the Jewish artifact and the anti-Semitic image, then polishing the resulting monstrosities to a very high shine.

The inspiration for “Collectio Judaica” came from a mug in the shape of a hooked-nosed Jew, which Zoya found in an antiques store in Tel Aviv. “I asked the seller, ‘How much is the anti-Semitic cup?’” she told me. “And he said, ‘Why do you think it’s anti-Semitic?’ For me it was obvious it’s anti-Semitic. And I said, ‘Maybe this is how he sees himself.’” “Collectio Judaica” was in essence an homage to distorted Jewish self-perceptions, an aestheticizing of their masochistic attractions. As Zoya later put it, she wanted to show “how Jews see themselves through the anti-Semitic gaze.”

The objects are mesmerizing. Take the Passover Haggadah. Zoya, who knew virtually nothing about Jewish liturgy, wrote it herself, by hand, in a Hebrew font she invented that looks remarkably authentic. She then illuminated it in

a style that combines medieval art and Russian Constructivism, tossing in a few references to Tetris, a computer game invented in the Soviet Union. Many of the illustrations portrayed rabbis with the bodies of birds. This was an allusion to a famous 14th-century Haggadah, the Birds' Head Haggadah, which sidestepped the medieval Jewish aversion to representing the human face by replacing Jews' heads with those of birds. But Zoya reversed the order and attached birds' bodies to Jewish faces, thereby invoking an old anti-Semitic trope in which Jews were portrayed as ravens.

Animal faces in the mizrach gouache paintings were based on a late-19th-century anti-Semitic German postcard depicting Jews as animals, [according to the scholar Liliya Dashevski](#). The panels of another exquisite object, an East Asian-style folding screen, featured paintings of Orthodox Jewish men whose coattails flip outward like birds' tails. Dashevski speculated that Zoya was playing on a secular-Israeli slur for Hasidic Jews, "penguins." And then there were the seder plates. In their center, Zoya drew Gorey-esque little boys, one trussed in rope, the other naked and chubby like a Renaissance putto. Around them she delicately splattered red paint, like drops of blood. Did the bound children merely refer to the killing of the firstborn, part of the story of Passover, and did the drops of blood allude to the red wine dribbled by seder participants onto the plate to indicate their sorrow at Egyptian suffering? Or was she invoking the blood libel? Yes and yes. The objects held layers of meaning.

Gideon Ofrat, the art historian, was enchanted by "Collectio Judaica." "This surprising, shocking, satirical anti-Semitism. It was breathtaking. It was very daring," he told me. He bought a pillow—"perfectly done"—embroidered with the portrait of a big-nosed old man with a sack over his shoulder, a depiction of the Wandering Jew, another anti-Semitic trope. The Jewish Museum in New York now owns the Haggadah and a seder-plate set.

Zoya's career as a high-concept prankster thrived, but toward the end of the aughts, she decided to do something really radical: learn to paint life again. The push came from a mentor she acquired during a stint in Berlin, Avdey Ter-Oganyan, a charismatic and transgressive Russian "action," or performance, artist with a fiery disdain for art-world norms. He encouraged Zoya to shed her intellectualism and recommit herself to seeing.



First Money, 2021 (© Zoya Cherkassky. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.)

But that would take practice. So Zoya went back to Israel and identified four female artists from the former Soviet Union who were eager to get out of the studio. The five of them went to the rougher neighborhoods of Tel Aviv, such as Neve Sha'anana, where many foreign workers and refugees live, and set up their easels. People stopped to chat or comment on their paintings; some posed for portraits. After a while, the women decided to call themselves the New Barbizon, a tribute to the 19th-century French painters who rebelled against the claustrophobic conventions of the French Academy and painted landscapes *en plein air*. Zoya got her husband, Sunny, who is a truck driver, to drive a “Barbizon mobile” so they could transport big canvases all over Israel. Eventually they traveled as far as Leipzig, Moscow, Paris, and London.

The New Barbizon painters were serious about painting, but their adventures had a certain performativity about them. As Zoya put it, they were trolling. Their target was the art establishment, which still turned up its nose at their old-school realism. At a big art fair in Tel Aviv called Fresh Paint, in 2011,

they sat right outside the fair on portable chairs. They put up signs—one of them read ARTIST WITH DIPLOMA—and drew the people waiting in line for 50 shekels a pop.

Within a few years, New Barbizon had become a phenomenon. (People in the art world “love being trolled,” Zoya said.) Collectors began buying the women’s work. The New Barbizon artists had many shows, as a group and individually; they still do.

With Zoya’s [2018 solo show at the Israel Museum](#), she came full circle. “Pravda” was one of the first major cultural events to reflect the Russian Israeli experience. The labels were in Russian as well as in Hebrew and English, which was unheard-of. As usual, Zoya trafficked in stereotype, counting on style—exaggerated cartoonishness, a hint of the grotesque—to communicate a spirit of satire. After all, stereotypes are a key part of the immigrant experience, the lens through which newcomers see and are seen. Hence the obtuse rabbis, the cowering Uncle Yasha, and, in *Aliyah of the 1990s*, the naked Russian woman, presumably a prostitute, presenting herself doggy-style. In *Itzik*, a swarthy Mizrahi falafel-store owner grabs a blond Russian waitress and tries to kiss her. Unsurprisingly, some Mizrahi Jews accused Zoya of racism. Zoya rejects the charge. It’s a “commentary on racism,” she said, not what she thinks of Mizrahim. “Some people get it; some people don’t get it. What can I do?”

“We rushed to the show,” Rozovsky of *Haaretz* told me. She recognized every scene in every painting: Zoya had painted her life. Rozovsky and a friend took a selfie in front of *The Circumcision of Uncle Yasha*, planting themselves on either side of his penis. “It was us! We were here! Not in some small Russian cultural center but in a museum.”

One afternoon during my visit, I got to see Zoya’s goofy side, because Natalia Zourabova dropped by. In addition to being a New Barbizon painter, she is Zoya’s best friend, and together they’re like “two snakes in conversation,” Zoya said. “If someone ever publishes our WhatsApp, we’re dead.” The two of them (Zoya doing most of the talking) told me about performance pieces they’d dreamed up—just for fun, not to actually stage. One would parody this year’s Met Gala, which hundreds of protesters tried to overrun; the police stopped them a few blocks away. The women would

play celebrities, dressing up in outfits made of shiny thermal blankets, and be carried dramatically up a staircase—it would invoke the entrance to the Met—on the shoulders of some strong men. Then they'd dash back down the stairs and play pro-Palestinian activists, protesting themselves in their role as celebrities indifferent to genocide. Maybe they'd ask Sunny and his mover friends to do the carrying, Zoya added, because, being African, they would insulate the women's celebrity characters from criticism: "They are Indigenous to a far place."

Netanyahu's formation of a far-right government in 2022 made left-leaning artists like Zoya feel even more cut off from mainstream Israeli society.

Indigenous is a word always lurking in Zoya's mind, waiting to be worked into a dark joke. It means "inhabiting a land before colonizers came," and is precisely what Jewish Israelis are accused of not being—they're allegedly the colonizers. (Those who dispute this claim counter that Jews have lived continuously on the land that is Israel and Palestine for thousands of years.) Hence, many Israelis hear *Indigenous* as the prelude to a demand: "Go back to where you came from." But where is that? Zoya, whose paternal great-grandparents were shot during the two-day slaughter of 33,771 Jews at Babi Yar, outside Kyiv, has an answer. It takes the form of a brazenly tasteless sketch of her and Sunny. He's decked out like a *Tintin* caricature of a cannibal, in bones and a grass skirt. Zoya wears the striped pajamas of a concentration-camp inmate. You have to read these portraits as hieroglyphics: Sunny = "Indigenous," Zoya = "Auschwitz," and together they're "the Indigenous of Auschwitz." Think of it as another "Fuck you."

Brash as she was, I was talking with a more subdued Zoya, she told me. The past four years have been hard. The loneliness of COVID brought a new tenderness to her work. During the pandemic, she did two online exhibitions for her New York gallery. "Lost Time" (2020) sketched historical scenes of Jewish life during periods of plague in a sweetly schmaltzy idiom that reminds me of the kitsch my parents used to hang on their walls. "Women Who Work" (2021) rendered the lives of sex workers, naked and numb and subject to violence, in a tone that is sorrowful but allows them their dignity and fleeting moments of intimacy. After the pandemic, she mounted "The Arrival of Foreign Professionals" (2023), oil paintings that tell tales from the African diaspora in Israel and Europe. Another show included fond portraits

of her husband's family and others from his hometown in Nigeria, Ngwo, where Sunny and Zoya now have a house.

The war in Ukraine put Zoya at a new remove from her past and her family, many of whom still live in the country. Recent paintings of her old Kyiv neighborhood show Russian tanks rolling through the streets. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's formation of a far-right government in 2022 made left-leaning artists like Zoya feel even more cut off from mainstream Israeli society. Since then, they've come to feel that they've been cast out of the community of nations.

[From the January/February 2024 issue: Zombie history stalks Ukraine](#)

Zoya shares the national anguish about the hostages, grieving for them as if they were relatives. One day, she told me, she went to a park with friends, and they saw a typical Israeli family—"you know, the grandpa that is telling jokes," and his three children and their children. It was, she said, "a very nice family that reminds you of the kibbutznik type of family." (The majority of the October 7 attacks were on kibbutzim in the south of Israel.) Zoya and her friends had looked at the family and said to one another, "This could be the family of the kidnapped. We look at them, and we're like—" She broke off her sentence and, putting her head in her hands, started to cry.

It dumbfounded me, the crumbling of the invincible Zoya. But I was finding the same despair everywhere I went. "You are not even allowed to talk about it," she continued, weeping, because each time the response would be the same: "'Look what you are doing in Gaza. You cannot cry for what happened to you.'" I felt I could almost hear hecklers, transmogrified into spectral figures in Zoya's head, snarling at Israel's pain.

And then Zoya, who had so laboriously restrained herself to look, implied that the act of seeing itself had become unbearable—not always, but sometimes. Seeing pictures of beautiful young people on Facebook, she said, she couldn't stand their beauty, because the images were likely to have been posted to commemorate those who had been killed at the Nova festival. Even seeing "your children"—her child—was distressing, "because you imagine things."

Zoya was still painting, of course, but her subject at the moment was, mostly, life in Germany, past and present, based on wry sketches she had made over the course of many visits. (Occasionally, the news was so terrible that she had to react, as when Hamas murdered six hostages at the end of August and she made a sketch of one of them, Hersh Goldberg-Polin, and posted it on Instagram.) She told me she had chosen Germany because she had a show coming up in Leipzig, but I thought that maybe she also had to avert her eyes from her immediate surroundings. If so, Zoya can't be the only artist in that situation. All over the region, the present is hard to look at, and the future is ever harder to imagine.

This article previously misstated where in Nigeria Zoya Cherkassky-Nnadi and her husband, Sunny, have a home. This article appears in the [November 2024](#) print edition with the headline “What Zoya Sees.”

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The Case for Kamala Harris

The Atlantic's endorsement



For the third time in eight years, Americans have to decide whether they want Donald Trump to be their president. No voter could be ignorant by now of who he is. Opinions about Trump aren't just hardened—they're dried out and exhausted. The man's character has been in our faces for so long, blatant and unchanging, that it kills the possibility of new thoughts, which explains the strange mix of boredom and dread in our politics. Whenever Trump senses any waning of public attention, he'll call his opponent a disgusting name, or dishonor the memory of fallen soldiers, or threaten to overturn the election if he loses, or vow to rule like a dictator if he wins. He knows that nothing he says is likely to change anyone's views.

Almost half the electorate supported Trump in 2016, and supported him again in 2020. This same split seems likely on November 5. Trump's support is fixed and impervious to argument. This election, like the last two, will be decided by an absurdly small percentage of voters in a handful of states.

Because one of the most personally malignant and politically dangerous candidates in American history was on the ballot, *The Atlantic* endorsed Trump's previous Democratic opponents—only the [third](#) and [fourth](#) endorsements since the magazine's founding, in 1857. We [endorsed Abraham Lincoln for president in 1860](#) (though not, for reasons lost to history, in 1864). One hundred and four years later, we [endorsed Lyndon B. Johnson](#) for president. In 2016, we endorsed Hillary Clinton for more or less the same reason Johnson won this magazine's endorsement in 1964. Clinton was a credible candidate who would have made a competent president, but we endorsed her because she was running against a manifestly unstable and incompetent Republican nominee. The editors of this magazine in 1964 feared Barry Goldwater less for his positions than for his zealotry and seeming lack of self-restraint.

Of all Trump's insults, cruelties, abuses of power, corrupt dealings, and crimes, the event that proved the essential rightness of the endorsements of Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden took place on January 6, 2021, when Trump became the first American president to try to overturn an election and prevent the peaceful transfer of power.

Harris doesn't curry favor with dictators. She won't abuse the power of the highest office in order to keep it. She believes in democracy.

This year, Trump is even more vicious and erratic than in the past, and the ideas of his closest advisers are more extreme. Trump has made clear that he would [use a second term to consolidate unprecedented power](#) in his own hands, punishing adversaries and pursuing a far-right agenda that most Americans don't want. "We believe that this election is a turning-point in our history," the magazine prophesied correctly when it endorsed Abraham Lincoln in 1860. This year's election is another.

[From the January/February 2024 issue: If Trump wins](#)

About the candidate we are endorsing: *The Atlantic* is a heterodox place, staffed by freethinkers, and for some of us, Kamala Harris's policy views are too centrist, while for others they're too liberal. The [process that led to her nomination](#) was flawed, and she's been cagey in keeping the public and press from getting to know her as well as they should. But we know a few things for sure. Having devoted her life to public service, Harris respects the law and the Constitution. She believes in the freedom, equality, and dignity of all Americans. She's untainted by corruption, let alone a felony record or a history of sexual assault. She doesn't embarrass her compatriots with her language and behavior, or pit them against one another. She doesn't curry favor with dictators. She won't abuse the power of the highest office in order to keep it. She believes in democracy. These, and not any specific policy positions, are the reasons *The Atlantic* is endorsing her.

This endorsement will not be controversial to Trump's antagonists. Nor will it matter to his supporters. But to the voters who don't much care for either candidate, and who will decide the country's fate, it is not enough to list Harris's strengths or write a bill of obvious particulars against Trump. The main reason for those ambivalent Americans to vote for Harris has little to do with policy or partisanship. It's this: Electing her and defeating him is the only way to release us from the political nightmare in which we're trapped and bring us to the next phase of the American experiment.

Trump isn't solely responsible for this age of poisonous rhetoric, hateful name-calling, conspiracies and lies, divided families and communities, cowardly leaders and deluded followers—but as long as Trump still sits atop the Republican Party, it will not end. His power depends on lowering the country into a feverish state of fear and rage where Americans turn on one another. For the millions of alienated and politically homeless voters who despise what the country has become and believe it can do better, sending Trump into retirement is the necessary first step.

If you're a conservative who can't abide Harris's tax and immigration policies, but who is also offended by the rottenness of the Republican Party, only Trump's final defeat will allow your party to return to health—then you'll be free to oppose President Harris wholeheartedly. Like you, we wish for the return of the Republican Party of Ronald Reagan, Bob Dole, John McCain, and Mitt Romney, a party animated by actual ideas. We believe that

American politics are healthiest when vibrant conservative and liberal parties fight it out on matters of policy.

If you're a progressive who thinks the Democratic Party is a tool of corporate America, talk to someone who still can't forgive themselves for voting for Ralph Nader in 2000—then ask yourself which candidate, Harris or Trump, would give you any leverage to push for policies you care about.

And if you're one of the many Americans who can't stand politics and just want to opt out, remember that under democracy, inaction is also an action; that no one ever has clean hands; and that, as our 1860 editorial said, “nothing can absolve us from doing our best to look at all public questions as citizens, and therefore in some sort as administrators and rulers.” In other words, voting is a right that makes you responsible.

Trump is the sphinx who stands in the way of America entering a more hopeful future. In Greek mythology, the sphinx killed every traveler who failed to answer her riddle, until Oedipus finally solved it, causing the monster's demise. The answer to Trump lies in every American's hands. Then he needs only to go away.

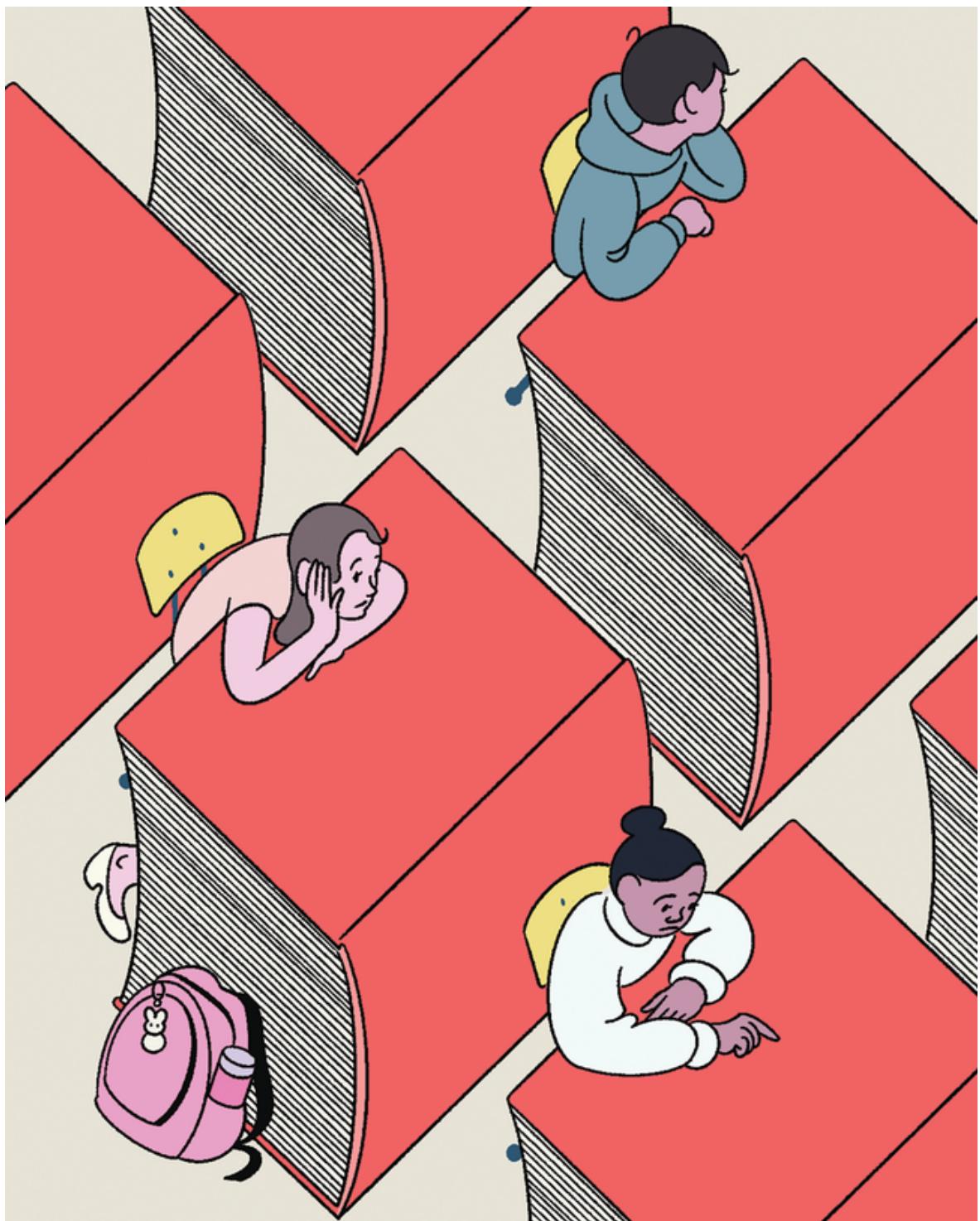
This article appears in the [November 2024](#) print edition with the headline “Kamala Harris for President.”

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The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books

To read a book in college, it helps to have read a book in high school.

by Rose Horowitch



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

Updated at 10:57 a.m. ET on October 1, 2024

Nicholas Dames has taught Literature Humanities, Columbia University's required great-books course, since 1998. He loves the job, but it has changed. Over the past decade, students have become overwhelmed by the reading. College kids have never read everything they're assigned, of course, but this feels different. Dames's students now seem bewildered by the thought of finishing multiple books a semester. His colleagues have noticed the same problem. Many students no longer arrive at college—even at highly selective, elite colleges—prepared to read books.

This development puzzled Dames until one day during the fall 2022 semester, when a first-year student came to his office hours to share how challenging she had found the early assignments. Lit Hum often requires students to read a book, sometimes a very long and dense one, in just a week or two. But the student told Dames that, at her public high school, she had never been required to read an entire book. She had been assigned excerpts, poetry, and news articles, but not a single book cover to cover.

[Read: Why kids aren't falling in love with reading](#)

“My jaw dropped,” Dames told me. The anecdote helped explain the change he was seeing in his students: It’s not that they don’t want to do the reading. It’s that they don’t know how. Middle and high schools [have stopped asking them to](#).

In 1979, Martha Maxwell, an influential literacy scholar, wrote, “Every generation, at some point, discovers that students cannot read as well as they would like or as well as professors expect.” Dames, who studies the history of the novel, acknowledged the longevity of the complaint. “Part of me is always tempted to be very skeptical about the idea that this is something new,” he said.

Daniel Shore, the chair of Georgetown’s English department, told me that his students have trouble staying focused on even a sonnet.

And yet, “I think there is a phenomenon that we’re noticing that I’m also hesitant to ignore.” Twenty years ago, Dames’s classes had no problem engaging in sophisticated discussions of [Pride and Prejudice](#) one week and [Crime and Punishment](#) the next. Now his students tell him up front that the

reading load feels impossible. It's not just the frenetic pace; they struggle to attend to small details while keeping track of the overall plot.

No comprehensive data exist on this trend, but the majority of the 33 professors I spoke with relayed similar experiences. Many had discussed the change at faculty meetings and in conversations with fellow instructors. Anthony Grafton, a Princeton historian, said his students arrive on campus with a narrower vocabulary and less understanding of language than they used to have. There are always students who "read insightfully and easily and write beautifully," he said, "but they are now more exceptions." Jack Chen, a Chinese-literature professor at the University of Virginia, finds his students "shutting down" when confronted with ideas they don't understand; they're less able to persist through a challenging text than they used to be. Daniel Shore, the chair of Georgetown's English department, told me that his students have trouble staying focused on even a sonnet.

Failing to complete a 14-line poem without succumbing to distraction suggests one familiar explanation for the decline in reading aptitude: smartphones. Teenagers are [constantly tempted by their devices](#), which inhibits their preparation for the rigors of college coursework—then they get to college, and the distractions keep flowing. "It's changed expectations about what's worthy of attention," Daniel Willingham, a psychologist at UVA, told me. "Being bored has become unnatural." Reading books, even for pleasure, can't compete with TikTok, Instagram, YouTube. In 1976, about 40 percent of high-school seniors said they had read at least six books for fun in the previous year, compared with 11.5 percent who hadn't read any. By 2022, those percentages had flipped.

[Read: The terrible costs of a phone-based childhood](#)

But middle- and high-school kids appear to be [encountering fewer and fewer books](#) in the classroom as well. For more than two decades, new educational initiatives such as No Child Left Behind and Common Core [emphasized informational texts](#) and standardized tests. Teachers at many schools shifted from books to short informational passages, followed by questions about the author's main idea—mimicking the format of standardized reading-comprehension tests. Antero Garcia, a Stanford education professor, is completing his term as vice president of the National Council of Teachers of

English and previously taught at a public school in Los Angeles. He told me that the new guidelines were intended to help students make clear arguments and synthesize texts. But “in doing so, we’ve sacrificed young people’s ability to grapple with long-form texts in general.”

Mike Szkolka, a teacher and an administrator who has spent almost two decades in Boston and New York schools, told me that excerpts have replaced books across grade levels. “There’s no testing skill that can be related to … *Can you sit down and read Tolstoy?*” he said. And if a skill is not easily measured, instructors and district leaders have little incentive to teach it. Carol Jago, a literacy expert who crisscrosses the country helping teachers design curricula, says that educators tell her they’ve stopped teaching the novels they’ve long revered, such as *My Ántonia* and *Great Expectations*. The pandemic, which scrambled syllabi and moved coursework online, accelerated the shift away from teaching complete works.

In a [recent EdWeek Research Center survey](#) of about 300 third-to-eighth-grade educators, only 17 percent said they primarily teach whole texts. An additional 49 percent combine whole texts with anthologies and excerpts. But nearly a quarter of respondents said that books are no longer the center of their curricula. One public-high-school teacher in Illinois told me that she used to structure her classes around books but now focuses on skills, such as how to make good decisions. In a unit about leadership, students read parts of Homer’s *Odyssey* and supplement it with music, articles, and TED Talks. (She assured me that her students read at least two full texts each semester.) An Advanced Placement English Literature teacher in Atlanta told me that the class used to read 14 books each year. Now they’re down to six or seven.

“It’s not like I can say, ‘Okay, over the next three weeks, I expect you to read *The Iliad*,’ because they’re not going to do it.”

Private schools, which produce a disproportionate share of elite college students, seem to have been slower to shift away from reading complete volumes—leading to what Dames describes as a disconcerting reading-skills gap among incoming freshmen. But private schools are not immune to the trend. At the prep school that I graduated from five years ago, I took a Jane Austen course my senior year. I read only a single Austen novel.

The issue that Dames and other professors have observed is distinct from the problem at community colleges and nonselective universities, where some students arrive with literacy and comprehension deficits that can leave them unable to complete collegiate courses. High-achieving students at exclusive schools like Columbia can decode words and sentences. But they struggle to muster the attention or ambition required to immerse themselves in a substantial text.

Faced with this predicament, many college professors feel they have no choice but to assign less reading and lower their expectations. Victoria Kahn, who has taught literature at UC Berkeley since 1997, used to assign 200 pages each week. Now she assigns less than half of that. “I don’t do the whole *Iliad*. I assign books of *The Iliad*. I hope that some of them will read the whole thing,” Kahn told me. “It’s not like I can say, ‘Okay, over the next three weeks, I expect you to read *The Iliad*,’ because they’re not going to do it.”

[Xochitl Gonzalez: The schools that are no longer teaching kids to read books](#)

Andrew Delbanco, a longtime American-studies professor at Columbia, now teaches a seminar on short works of American prose instead of a survey course on literature. The Melville segment used to include *Moby-Dick*; now his students make do with *Billy Budd*, *Benito Cereno*, and “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” There are some benefits—short works allow more time to focus on “the intricacies and subtleties of language,” Delbanco told me—and he has made peace with the change. “One has to adjust to the times,” he said.

The Columbia instructors who determine the Lit Hum curriculum decided to trim the reading list for the current school year. (It had been growing in recent years, even while students struggled with the reading, as new books by nonwhite authors were added.) Like Delbanco, some see advantages to teaching fewer books. Even the best-prepared students have probably been skimming some of their Lit Hum assignments for years. Joseph Howley, the program’s chair, said he’d rather students miss out on some of the classics—*Crime and Punishment* is now off the list—but read the remaining texts in greater depth. And, crucially, the change will give professors more time to teach students how they expect them to read.

But it's not clear that instructors can foster a love of reading by thinning out the syllabus. Some experts I spoke with attributed the decline of book reading to a shift in values rather than in skill sets. Students *can* still read books, they argue—they're just choosing not to. Students today are far more concerned about their job prospects than they were in the past. Every year, they tell Howley that, despite enjoying what they learned in Lit Hum, they plan to instead get a degree in something more useful for their career.

The same factors that have contributed to declining enrollment in the humanities might lead students to spend less time reading in the courses they do take. A [2023 survey of Harvard seniors](#) found that they spend almost as much time on jobs and extracurriculars as they do on academics. And thanks to years of grade inflation (in a recent report, [79 percent of Harvard grades were in the A range](#)), college kids can get by without doing all of their assigned work.

Whether through atrophy or apathy, a generation of students is reading fewer books. They might read more as they age—older adults are the most voracious readers—but the data are not encouraging. The American Time Use Survey shows that the overall pool of people who read books for pleasure has shrunk over the past two decades. A couple of professors told me that their students see reading books as akin to listening to vinyl records—something that a small subculture may still enjoy, but that's mostly a relic of an earlier time.

The economic survival of the publishing industry requires an audience willing and able to spend time with an extended piece of writing. But as readers of a literary magazine will surely appreciate, more than a venerable industry is at stake. Books can cultivate a sophisticated form of empathy, transporting a reader into the mind of someone who lived hundreds of years ago, or a person who lives in a radically different context from the reader's own. “A lot of contemporary ideas of empathy are built on identification, identity politics,” Kahn, the Berkeley professor, said. “Reading is more complicated than that, so it enlarges your sympathies.”

Yet such benefits require staying with a character through their journey; they cannot be approximated by reading a five- or even 30-page excerpt. According to the neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf, so-called deep reading—

sustained immersion in a text—stimulates a number of valuable mental habits, including critical thinking and self-reflection, in ways that skimming or reading in short bursts does not.

Over and over, the professors I spoke with painted a grim picture of young people’s reading habits. (The historian Adrian Johns was one dissenter, but allowed, “My experience is a bit unusual because the University of Chicago is, like, the last bastion of people who do read things.”) For years, Dames has asked his first-years about their favorite book. In the past, they cited books such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. Now, he says, almost half of them cite young-adult books. Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* series seems to be a particular favorite.

I can imagine worse preparations for the trials, and thrills, of Lit Hum. Riordan’s series, although full of frothy action and sometimes sophomoric humor, also cleverly engages in a literary exercise as old as the Western canon: spinning new adventures for the petulant gods and compromised heroes of Greek mythology. But of course there is a reason that, despite millennia of reinterpretations, we’ve never forgotten the originals. To understand the human condition, and to appreciate humankind’s greatest achievements, you still need to read *The Iliad*—all of it.

Due to an editing error, this article initially misstated the year Nicholas Dames started teaching Literature Humanities. This article appears in the [November 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Elite College Students Who Can’t Read Books.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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Culture & Critics

- [**Scent of a Man**](#)
- [**Alan Hollinghurst's Lost England**](#)
- [**You Are Going to Die**](#)
- [**Malcolm Gladwell, Meet Mark Zuckerberg**](#)

Scent of a Man

In a new memoir, Al Pacino promises to reveal the person behind the actor. But is he holding something back?

by James Parker



The huge solemnity of his eyes, grave and sober as a child's but with a spark of ancient, euphoric irony back in there somewhere. The gangster-ish heaviness of his hands, dynastic hands, *Godfather* hands. The too-big head. The carved, impassive face that suddenly droops, drags, goes baggy with the

weight of being alive. The voice, New York nasal as a young man, roaring and combusted as he ages, the lungs working like bellows, the larynx shooting flames. The timing—the beat, the lag, the throb of the void—between stimulus and reaction. And the energy, Jesus, that barely-inside-the-body *Dog Day Afternoon* energy, as if 30 seconds ago he disintegrated utterly into tics and ravings, splinters of self, and then 10 seconds ago—via some act of *Looney Tunes* reversal—he was whooshingly put back together.

It's 1973. Al Pacino and Frank Serpico are sitting on the deck of a rented seaside house in Montauk, two men staring at the ocean. Serpico is the whistleblower cop, refuser of bribes and kickbacks, whose testimony before the Knapp Commission helped expose systemic graft in the NYPD. He has paid a high price for his rectitude: Isolated and vilified by his fellow officers, he'd been shot in the face during a suspiciously botched arrest in 1971. Now Pacino is preparing to play him in Sidney Lumet's grimy, funky biopic *Serpico*, and the actor has a question. "Frank," he says, "why didn't you take those payoffs? Just take that money and give your share away if you didn't want to keep it?" "Al, if I did that," Serpico answers, "who would I be when I listen to Beethoven?"

Is he ever not Al Pacino, in any of his roles?

That's a story from *Sonny Boy*, Pacino's new memoir. It's more than a story, actually. It's a teaching. Who you are when you listen to Beethoven (or Miles Davis, or AC/DC)—isn't that what every actor, every artist, is trying to get at? It's the essence. It's your exposed and purely emotive being, and with it your availability to the divine. Compromise that, and you're screwed. So Pacino plays Serpico as a man of sudden moods and movements, abrupt jokes, changes of key, switching through ever more improbable costumes—shaggy hippie, meat-packer, ultra-Orthodox Jew—as he goes undercover, a trickster whose wild whimsicality connects somehow to what is vivid and incorruptible in his nature, even as the department, the city, the whole world congeals in venality around him.

Can I say that I've long loved Al Pacino? But until *Sonny Boy*, I knew almost nothing about Pacino himself—or rather, I was content to know him glancingly and prismatically, via the apparitions of Michael Corleone and

Ricky Roma and Tony Montana and Carlito Brigante. Is he ever not Al Pacino, in [any of his roles?](#)

[Read: The many eras of Al Pacino's stardom](#)

Reading *Sonny Boy*, you get the feel of something restless and almost nameless—until it coheres, white-hot, at the moment of dramatic expression. The moment of ignition. “What actors call their instrument,” Pacino writes, “is their entire being: your whole person, your body, your soul. It’s what you play on, it absorbs things and lets them out.” He is paraphrasing his Method teacher, Lee Strasberg. “The actor’s instrument,” Strasberg wrote in [A Dream of Passion](#), “is himself; he works with the same emotional areas which he actually uses in real life.”

The real life, then. Let’s have it. From *Sonny Boy* we learn that Pacino’s material, his toolbox, his emotional inheritance was his childhood in the tenements of the South Bronx: an absent father and a delicate, troubled mother, a wild life on the streets. His teens were delinquent. His 20s were a blur of drinking, acting, and bohemian precarity. “If the hour was late and you heard the sound of someone in your alleyway with a bombastic voice shouting iambic pentameter into the night, that was probably me.” Bum-hood, or at least a distressed Beatnik-hood, is always reaching for him, a world of 15-cent beers in dive bars and sitting for hours over a single cup of coffee in the Automat. Of boozing alone, reading tiny editions of Flaubert and Baudelaire on the subway.

The whiff of the street clung to him as he made his way, but so did an electric sense of destiny. The first wave of Method-associated stars—Brando, Dean, Clift—had already mumbled and stormed and shrugged and grimaced across the screens of America. By the time Pacino arrived, bristling with raw naturalism and second-generation Method-ness, he could wind people up just by entering a room. “I had that anarchic look,” Pacino writes. “No matter where I went, people looked at me as if to say, ‘Where does this guy come from? Who does he think he is?’” One inflamed theater director would periodically yell “Method actor!” at him. “It was a taunt, a put-down.” The momentum, though, is unstoppable. And it’s not just Pacino: Everyone’s pushing it. In 1967, he sees Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*: “I said, this is it, man—it’s over. He’s broken the sound barrier.”

Pacino's own breakout role—Michael Corleone in 1972's *The Godfather* and then, two years later, *The Godfather Part II*—was a huge challenge. A nonperson, almost. Formless at first, and then extremely dangerous. “Before filming started, I would take long walks up and down Manhattan, from Ninety-First Street to the Village and back, just thinking about how I was going to play him … He’s there and not there at the same time.” So Pacino made him at once blank and coiled. Cadaverous with power and repression. Given to lethal understatement, and with a strange, perfumed economy of gesture.

[From the June 1972 issue: David Denby's review of *The Godfather*](#)

Playing Sonny Wortzik, the flailing, wired bank robber/accidental hostage-taker of *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), was paradoxically more straightforward. Here Lumet set him in his element: overheated Brooklyn on the verge of Babylonian breakdown, a whole society doing the Method, as it were, triggering and retriggering itself. The mob is aroused and labile; the lumpy cops have no control, over the situation or over themselves. Trapped and pop-eyed, strutting around wildly under the terrible fluorescent tubes of the bank interior, Sonny channels it all, sweating through his off-white shirt, flapping his soiled handkerchief. He goes into the street screaming “Attica! Atti-ca!”—an improvisation—and the crowd of extras, to quote *Sonny Boy*, goes “fucking crazy.”

Does he harden into caricature in his later roles? In some of those films (*Sea of Love*, *Carlito's Way*), I see him operating on a kind of scorching autopilot. Then there's *Scent of a Woman*. I could watch this movie all day, and sometimes do. In it, the late-Pacino manner, the bark and the bluster, transcends itself, because here he's playing a man who is all manner, all bark and bluster, a husk of a man, a hollowly booming, mirthlessly laughing man: Lieutenant Colonel Frank Slade, blind man, in despair—“I'm in the DARK HERE!”—whose communication style is basically cranked-up Al Pacino.

“The profession of acting,” Strasberg said, “the basic art of acting, is a monstrous thing because it is done with the same flesh-and-blood muscles with which you perform ordinary deeds, real deeds.” *Sonny Boy* gives us the Pacino of ordinary deeds, bumbling around and having his experiences, and we see that he is in service—in thrall—to Pacino the actor. And if a certain

fuzziness or impressionism attends his memories, well, we get it: He doesn't want to violate, with too much insight, the precious mystery at the core of his craft. Doesn't want to compromise who he is when he's listening to Beethoven.

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Alan Hollinghurst's Lost England

In his new novel, the present isn't much better than the past—and it's a lot less sexy.

by Charles McGrath



Henry James is Alan Hollinghurst's favorite writer, and in his native England, Hollinghurst, now 70, has over the years acquired a bit of Jamesian eminence himself. He even gets compared to the Master sometimes. That's because of the sweep and density of his novels, which span more than a century of political and social change, and his exquisite understanding of the British class system. Readers also point to his beautiful, sonorous sentences. He's often called the best living writer of English prose.

But Hollinghurst began as a sort of *enfant terrible*. In 1988, his first novel, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, was an overnight sensation, famous for two things: its stunning prose and the frequency and frankness of its gay sex scenes. The book's narrator, a rich and idle young aristo named Will Beckwith, is mainly interested in old buildings and in cruising—especially for well-muscled, dark-skinned men. He describes his sex life with an avidity and an exactness that are almost poetic. Here, for example, is one of his many descriptions of male genitalia:

O the difference of man and man. Sometimes in the showers, which only epitomized and confirmed a general feeling held elsewhere, I was amazed and enlightened by the variety of the male organ. In the rank and file of men showering the cocks and balls took on the air almost of an independent species, exhibited in instructive contrasts. Here was the long, listless penis, there the curt, athletic knob or innocent rosebud of someone scarcely out of school.

Before Hollinghurst, few had written about gay sexuality so graphically, not even pornographers. There was more of the same in Hollinghurst's next book, *The Folding Star* (1994), whose protagonist, a failed writer named Edward Manners working as a tutor in a Bruges-like Flemish city in the late 1980s, is also an enthusiastic cruiser and appraiser of penises. Lots more followed in the novel after that, *The Spell* (1998), a stylish but ultimately failed attempt at a comedy of manners about four men who mostly just drink too much, do some drugs, and tumble into bed with one another.

Hollinghurst's fourth novel, *The Line of Beauty* (2004), is both a satire of British politics in the Thatcher era and a lament for lost innocence, national and personal. Considered by many people to be his masterpiece, it opens in 1983, when the Tories sweep the general election, and amid the excess and excitement of that period, it also touches on something only hinted at in the earlier books: the AIDS crisis. The protagonist is a young gay man, the aptly named Nick Guest, an outsider, middle-class and provincial, who's fascinated by wealth and privilege. He becomes a lodger at the London townhouse of an influential but corrupt Tory member of Parliament, and from that vantage educates himself simultaneously about sex, class, and politics. An amusing early scene captures the spirit: Upon losing his virginity to a young Black man he meets up with in a private garden across

the street from the MP’s house, he feels “as if the trees and bushes had rolled away and all the lights of London shone in on him: little Nick Guest from Barwick, Don and Dot Guest’s boy, fucking a stranger in a Notting Hill garden at night … It was so bad, and it was so much the best thing he had ever done.” The book was bold and ambitious, and also sufficiently racy that after being [awarded the Booker Prize](#) in 2004, it briefly became tabloid fodder. “Booker Won by Gay Sex” was the weird headline in the *Daily Express*, while *The Daily Telegraph* complained that the judges had been “seduced.”

For almost two decades at that point, Hollinghurst had seemed keen to make a point with his sexual explicitness: that although homosexual behavior had been criminalized for so long in Britain, gayness was a reality there, as everywhere, and that fiction should examine all of life, including sex, from a gay perspective as closely and honestly as it has portrayed life from a heterosexual one.

[Read: Tracing the internal queer revolution](#)

But none of his novels (with the exception of *The Spell*) is only about being gay, any more than, say, John Updike’s *Rabbit* books are only about being heterosexual. And after *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst may have felt that calling attention to sexual encounters, at least, had become less necessary. Since then, his novels have taken homosexuality pretty much for granted, and the sex has become comparatively scarce, and mostly not very graphic. [The Sparsholt Affair](#) (2017) even contains a funny, probably self-referential scene in which a character now in his 60s suddenly realizes that, except for his own and his husband’s, he hasn’t seen a penis in ages.

Hollinghurst’s cultural range—as his new novel, [Our Evenings](#), again confirms—is enormous. Before he left to write full-time, he was the deputy editor of *The Times Literary Supplement*, and for a while he was also in charge of something called [Nemo’s Almanac](#), a fiendishly difficult literary competition requiring contestants to identify obscure quotations from writers most people have never heard of. His novels are filled with allusions to books, poetry, music, art. Elaborate subplots in his first two also uncover a history of betrayals, political and cultural as well as personal, that are far more consequential than mere bedroom infidelities.

Hollinghurst is often called the best living writer of English prose.

His formal range is unusual too. Both *The Sparsholt Affair* and *The Stranger's Child* (2011) are narrative departures. Hollinghurst's previous method had been something like full immersion—telling us everything, and then some. These two work by means of elision and ellipsis, unfolding in sections separated by roughly 20 years. Important events (dating back to World War I in one case, and World War II in the other) happen offstage; characters disappear and then reappear, much the way they do in Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*, sometimes leaving the reader uncertain at first who these people are or what, exactly, is going on. Several chapters in *Sparsholt* are told from the point of view of a 7-year-old girl, and they add an element of *What Maisie Knew* to the story. Why all the fuss over this one little drawing? she wonders—a linchpin of the plot, if only she understood. She's not alone in her puzzlement: Both novels revolve around a cipher of sorts, each of them a war hero who casts a shadow and serves as proof of how ungraspable the past can be and how it nevertheless infiltrates the present.

The core of both books—and Hollinghurst's abiding preoccupation—is time, and what it does to everything. Buildings fall down; reputations sink. People age, in ways that novels seldom portray anymore. It's shocking in *Stranger's Child*, for example, to see one main character, so charming as a teenager, turn into a tipsy bag lady. Most of all, time obscures the truth. Hollinghurst's fiction is underpinned by a fierce and exacting morality that does not spare characters trying to cover up or forget the sins of the past. Which they do: People in his pages misremember their own remembering; stories change, and sometimes the important ones aren't told at all.

Our Evenings can't be called a sequel to *The Line of Beauty*—it begins much earlier, back in the '60s, and ends much later—but it revisits many of that book's themes and preoccupations, political ones especially. The perspective, though, is longer and more chastened. The heady Thatcher era is ancient history, and in contemporary England, where the new novel winds up, all the fizz is gone.

The outsider this time is an actor named David Win, who, just like Nick Guest, has his nose pressed against the glass of the English class system.

But, a decade or so older than Guest, he encounters a more closed world. He's half Burmese, raised by a single mother in a provincial town—"a brown-faced bastard," in a classmate's phrase. In *The Line of Beauty* (and in almost all of Hollinghurst's books, for that matter) dark skin makes a man especially desirable, but for Win, it's mostly just a burden, another mark of outsidership.

As a young teenager in the mid-'60s, Win is taken up by Mark Hadlow, a wealthy, left-leaning philanthropist whom the novel presses, a little unconvincingly, into representing all that's good about the old moneyed classes. Win even becomes a kind of surrogate son, replacing Hadlow's real offspring, a bully and a cheat who drifts ever rightward politically, eventually helping bring about Brexit. The publicity material for the novel promises an escalating rivalry between Win and Giles Hadlow, culminating in a "shock of violence," but that's not really what happens. Giles pops up periodically in Win's life, usually as an annoyance, sometimes a comic one. The real damage Giles does is to the nation, not to his father's protégé.

Told almost entirely in the first person by Win, *Our Evenings* for much of its nearly 500 pages is an old-fashioned coming-of-age story, lingering, in Hollinghurst's impeccable prose, at all the traditional stops: seaside holidays, public school, Oxford exams, punting on the Cherwell, the first stirrings of gay sexual desire, an unrequited crush on a straight classmate. Win takes forever to emerge from the closet: flirtations, mixed signals, invitations never followed up on. The book is more than half over before Win finally goes to bed with someone—and he's nothing like Nick Guest's hunk, just a mousy civil servant.

Win and his mother, Avril—the best character in the book—broach sex and relationships the way English parents and children used to: practically never. When Avril moves in with a woman, resorting for a while to the pretense of separate bedrooms, this upheaval in their lives is barely mentioned. As for her life with Win's father, she's evasive, and Win seems determined to stay ignorant. At times, in fact, *Our Evenings* reads like a throwback, a novel from the pre-Hollinghurst era—as if the author, now older and wiser, were reminding both himself and his readers that sexual honesty is rarely won easily, and that true emotional intimacy is often elusive.

The book also has a complicated, somewhat rueful take on race. From the beginning, Win's acting career is compromised by his brownness. An early adviser suggests that the teenage Win should just stick to radio. His subsequent apprenticeship is described in some detail, especially a funny stint in an experimental-theater troupe that specializes in mostly nude performances of the classics. By then—in the 1970s—there's a suggestion that, in progressive circles at least, Win's real handicap might be that he's not dark enough: A Black member of the troupe quickly becomes a star in London and then in Hollywood. Mostly Win's acting serves to supply the novel with a ready-made set of themes and imagery. As soon becomes obvious, lots of things in these pages take place just for show; hypocrisy reigns, and in one way or another, almost everyone is playing a part. Except for Win: Despite his profession, he, unlike Giles Hadlow, say—or his forerunner, Nick Guest—doesn't fake a thing.

The title, *Our Evenings*, refers partly to a haunting piano piece by Leoš Janáček that Win hears during his schoolboy days, and partly to the companionable and unexpected late-life relationship he discovers with the Dickensian-named Richard Roughsedge. But the pronoun could also apply to England as a whole, whose twilit hours, the book suggests, are not as sexy as the old days and still not very advanced when it comes to prejudice against the “wogs.” As is so often true of Hollinghurst’s work, an autumnal element runs through the book, a Housman-like sense of belatedness, of better times gone by. The composer Ralph Vaughan Williams, that warhorse of English traditionalism, is mentioned six times, and his plangent music—invoking a lost, idyllic England; a greener, more pleasant land—could easily be the novel’s soundtrack.

Our Evenings is not Hollinghurst’s strongest book, but it may be his saddest, with its sense of what James called “muddlement” and of lives never quite fulfilled. Win’s mother is lonely and misunderstood throughout. Win himself has trouble making lasting connections, and his career, though it eventually earns him some small renown, is not all it could or should have been. Almost as if wearying of itself, the novel doesn’t so much end as just come to a stop, seemingly overwhelmed by the mess that contemporary Britain has become. Brexit, COVID, bloodshed in the streets—even Thatcher’s England was happier than this. By the final pages, you may find yourself wondering whether Hollinghurst’s sense of loss might extend to his own exhilarating

early days, when in writing about gay life there were still boundaries to be broken.

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You Are Going to Die

Oliver Burkeman has become an unlikely self-help guru by reminding everyone of their mortality.

by Hillary Kelly



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

“The average human lifespan,” Oliver Burkeman begins his 2021 mega-best seller, *[Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals](#)*, “is absurdly, terrifyingly, insultingly short.” In that relatively brief period, he does not

want you to maximize your output at work or optimize your leisure activities for supreme enjoyment. He does not want you to wake up at 5 a.m. or block out your schedule in a strictly labeled timeline. What he does want you to do is remind yourself, regularly, that the human life span is finite—that someday your heart will stop pumping, your neurons will stop firing, and this three-dimensional ride we call consciousness [will just ... end](#). He also wants you to know that he's aware of how elusive those reminders can feel —how hard their meaning is to internalize.

Burkeman's opening sentence, with its cascade of unexpected adverbs, is the prelude to his countercultural message that no one can hustle or bullet-journal or inbox-zero their way to mastering time. Such control, and the sense of completion and command it implies, is literally impossible, Burkeman argues. In fact, *impossible* is one of the words he uses most frequently, though it sounds oddly hopeful when he says it. He is perhaps best known for the idea that “productivity is a trap” that leaves strivers spinning in circles when they race to get ahead. In Burkeman’s telling, once you abandon the “depressingly narrow-minded affair” that is the modern discipline of time management, you can “do justice to our real situation: to the outrageous brevity and shimmering possibilities of our four thousand weeks.” That is, you will find that an average 80-year life span is about far more than getting stuff done.

His book is self-help for people who generally find the genre mockable, or at least unhelpful. I figured this approach was made for me—an anxious perfectionist, snobby about how-to-ism, and impatient with positive thinking. I turned out to be right. *Four Thousand Weeks* has had the same effect for me as snapping a rubber band on my wrist to break a bad habit: I’ve surprised myself by how often, stuck in some self-sabotaging rut, I recite parts of it in my mind.

[Read: An interview with Oliver Burkeman](#)

But Burkeman’s enterprise—to free people from traditional, silver-bullet self-help while selling them his own carefully packaged counsel—is a tricky one. Burkeman himself doesn’t seem like an obvious advertisement for anti-productivity: Only three years after the success of *Four Thousand Weeks*, he has arrived with what he bills as a higher-efficiency follow-up, [Meditations](#)

for Mortals: Four Weeks to Embrace Your Limitations and Make Time for What Counts, a 28-day “retreat of the mind.” So I couldn’t help wondering how he would align his stop-and-smell-the-roses ethos with a more streamlined, regimented how-to book. I was eager to talk with the man who has seemingly mastered the art of not mastering time.

Burkeman, a tall, nearly bald 49-year-old Englishman, met me near Prospect Park in Brooklyn on a muggy summer morning, wearing navy hiking pants and bright-blue sneakers. This wasn’t quite one of his “unplanned walks,” an exercise he has promoted: Our conversational stroll had been arranged by his publicist. Still, he came across as the sort of low-key guy you’d happily chat with over a pint. Dotted with perspiration even before we set out together, he didn’t launch into credential-touting as we walked (he considers himself a mere dabbler in Zen Buddhism and the like). He earnestly copped to his own experiences as a life-hack-focused striver and where they had led him.

From 2006 until 2020, Burkeman was a serial sampler of efficiency zealots’ strategies, the kind that promise deeper focus and superior habits. He wrote about the experience once a week in a series for The Guardian titled “This Column Will Change Your Life.” An editor, aware of his interest in personal-psychology books, had suggested it, and after years of covering news for the paper, Burkeman had felt ready for, if not a life change, the chance to add a new gig.

As the wry billing of his column suggests, the degree of urgency he brought to the role of paid guinea pig wasn’t always apparent. In fact, blurring just how personally invested he was in the enterprise was part of his appeal. In 600 or so words, he briskly laid out a problem to solve; introduced a tip or mindset shift (the Pomodoro Technique, say: 25-minute bursts of work, preferably tracked by a little tomato-shaped kitchen timer); described, with more than a hint of self-deprecating humor, trying it out himself; and closed with a lesson in how this particular idea aligned, or didn’t, with what science reveals about human inclinations. As expected, the kitchen-timer trick kept him on task, blocking the tendency to “default to whatever inertia would have you do.” But it didn’t answer the larger question that so often distracted him: Is striving for focus really what we should be doing with our time?

Read: Oliver Burkeman on the spiritual emptiness of achievement

In 2014, several years after moving to Brooklyn from England, Burkeman experienced an epiphany of sorts on a Prospect Park bench. We tried and failed to find the bench while we walked, then agreed that it didn't matter exactly where it had happened; epiphanies, his work argues, are ephemeral anyway. Stressed and run-down, he realized that he would never "clear the decks" of adult life's niggling responsibilities and create a smooth path forward. But instead of despairing, he felt liberated. The idea of "getting it all done" is a fantasy. No one can! Now he could begin to wean himself off that towering delusion.

Death worries us, Burkeman argues, not just because it marks our end but because it epitomizes our utter lack of control.

Burkeman continued writing the column for six more years, though its emphasis slowly evolved. He started asking questions such as "[Are you living too much in the future at the expense of now?](#)" and positing theories like "[Too many problems? Maybe coping isn't the answer.](#)" He hastened to tell me that he had not found "total unbroken serenity." But he had acquired new insight, and it wasn't what he (or I) would have predicted. "I was pretty down on those hacks to begin with, right? Because I thought the fun thing would be to take this kind of absurd world and be quite sarcastic about it. And, you know, even at the beginning, I think I understood that there was something defensive in my sarcasm." Disdain hadn't motivated him; discomfort had. "And it turned out that, actually, it was more of a journey from more cynicism to less cynicism, a journey towards more sincerity," he went on. His post-epiphany disbelief in superhuman productivity remained unchanged, but vulnerability in the face of impossibly large life questions? Well, he could work with that. "With a bit of humor," he said, "you can actually get at the serious, tender thing."

Burkeman told me all of this on a visit from his native Yorkshire, where he returned in 2021. He and his wife, now with a young son, had moved back to the U.K. the month after *Four Thousand Weeks* came out—and no, he didn't have a "my new life" testimony to recount about the transatlantic shift. He enjoys long walks on the sublime moors but doesn't live like a monk; he lives like a guy lucky enough to be able to set his own pace (partly thanks to

sales of more than half a million copies of *Four Thousand Weeks*, according to his publisher). He relishes his return to where he grew up “lower-upper-middle” class in a “Quaker Jewish civil-rights-movement kind of nexus,” as he put it. He is busy, but not too busy. He writes [his newsletter, The Imperfectionist](#), twice a month, which is his way of responding to the legions of followers who fill his inbox with, yes, an impossible number of queries.

Four Thousand Weeks proved an opportune project. It was completed in the midst of the pandemic, when time was playing tricks on the at-home populace and death was distressingly ubiquitous. The book approaches time and death as phenomena we misunderstand without realizing it. Time, Burkeman observes, “became a *thing* that you *used*”(he’s a fan of italics) back in the Industrial Revolution, but it’s not; it’s something we inhabit. And death worries us not just because it marks our end but because it epitomizes our utter lack of control. The message is philosophical but directly targeted at the daily stressors of what Burkeman terms the “laptop-toting” class: “Your sense of self-worth gets completely bound up with how you’re using time,” he notes. “It stops being merely the water in which you swim and turns into something you feel you need to dominate or control, if you’re to avoid feeling guilty, panicked, or overwhelmed.” Standard self-help drums precisely that perspective ever deeper into us with an alluring lie. “Virtually every time management expert,” he writes, “implies that if you follow his advice, you’ll get enough of the genuinely important things done to feel at peace with time.”

[Read: What to read to come to terms with death](#)

His suggestion: “fully facing the reality” that [you will not, in fact, get it all done](#)—even, or especially, all the genuinely important things, whatever those are. When I repeat that idea to myself, it *does* seem to help—to shrink the broad horizon of possibility down to a more manageable path for me to stumble along. But that kind of profound realization, Burkeman admitted as we wandered the park, is something he cannot guarantee. That admission is part of what makes his methods so appealing—you don’t feel suckered. It is also what makes the premise feel as tenuous as your own self-discipline.

What he sells is not the promise of overcoming difficulties, but the unexpected comfort of relaxing into them.

Burkeman's chapter in *Four Thousand Weeks* on "the efficiency trap"—the idea that getting better at dealing with tasks only leads to more tasks—showcases his three-act approach to dispelling conventional wisdom. Here he begins by laying out the ideal level of busyness, the fantasy that beckons: Richard Scarry's aptly named classic [childhood locale of Busytown](#), in which nobody is idle or, notably, overwhelmed. The little postman pig and brown-bear schoolteacher "have plenty to do, but also every confidence that their tasks will fit snugly into the hours available." Burkeman is not tsk-tsking the childishness of the vision. He's taking note of how deep it runs in adulthood—and how often it's dredged up: This is the same blissful balance we see presented in "day in the life" videos and snapshots on Instagram, where time unfolds in a succession of pleasant accomplishments and undistracted rest.

Act II delivers the letdown that "there's no reason to believe you'll ever feel 'on top of things.'" That's tough talk, but his third act is the radical part: Actively avoid quick fixes and the clear-the-decks perspective, he advises. Instead, tolerate the discomfort of knowing that nearly all the vacations you hope to take won't come to pass, and that the house chores will go on and on (until they don't). What he sells is not the promise of overcoming difficulties, but the unexpected comfort of relaxing into them.

Burkeman cheerfully acknowledges that repetition is vital to his message—and to the way we self-reinforce it. A favorite tweet, he told me with a hearty laugh, goes something like this: "*Four Thousand Weeks* is basically just Oliver Burkeman shouting *You are finite; you're going to die* over and over again for 200-whatever pages. And I love it." His belief in the power of repetition is partly what inspired him to undertake *Meditations for Mortals*: "Even if the advice is excellent and exactly right, that doesn't mean it sticks," he told me; it "doesn't mean that you can just hear it and then go implement it." You need what he calls a "felt realization"—something that sinks into your bones.

"I have to be beaten over the head with certain insights about life," Burkeman said after we'd circled a portion of the park twice and found a

perch that overlooked a meadow (he was desperate to make sure we were both sitting comfortably in the breeze). In *Meditations for Mortals*, his practical advice reveals a new take on his old message. Maybe we aren't just afraid to die—maybe what equally intimidates are the real, unvarnished sensations of living: the fear of being unprepared, of letting a pleasant moment slip by, of facing even minor consequences for our actions. By the end of *Four Thousand Weeks*, he'd arrived at the realization about life that animates this new book—summed up in a favorite quote of his by the Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck: "What makes it unbearable is your mistaken belief that it can be cured." His solution? Develop "a taste for problems," a readiness to say to yourself, over and over, that problems are "what life is fundamentally about."

Before I had a copy in my hands, I feared that *Meditations for Mortals* would be a collection of Stoic-inspired aphorisms (Burkeman is a walking anthology of quotations, from sources as incongruous as Mitch Hedberg and Marilynne Robinson) or the sort of follow-up "workbook" that publishers introduce to squeeze more money out of a best-selling idea. It isn't. Explaining his goal to me, Burkeman sounded slightly more mystical than his straightforward prose. "A lot of what looks like our attempts to manage our lives successfully are really attempts to hold the full intensity of that aliveness at bay."

[Caroline Mimbs Nyce: Making a New Year's resolution? Don't go to war with yourself.](#)

Designed to be a guide through this existential and temporal mire (his topics include how much news to read and why messy houses needn't bother us), *Meditations for Mortals* is divided into four sections: "Being Finite," "Taking Action," "Letting Go," and "Showing Up," each of which contains seven chapters, one per day. Written with a tough-love zing, the chapters are short, five or six pages at most, and contain some of Burkeman's best tips (such as his recommendation to work on important things "dailyish," an idea that sounds obvious but eliminates the albatross of an overly rigorous schedule).

Burkeman's signature combination of philosophy and practicality is what makes *Meditations for Mortals* at once jarring and reassuring to read.

Peppered throughout the techniques he prescribes are reminders that there is no way “of *mastering the situation* of being a human in the twenty-first century,” and that trying to do so is an escape hatch from reality—the opposite of purposeful buckling down. In the last section, “Showing Up,” he exposes the root of contemporary malaise: Productivity culture turns life into something to “get through,” until some unspecified better moment. That moment, he writes, won’t come unless we admit that this often unpleasant, completely uncontrollable, forever-changing water is all we have to swim in.

The main aim of *Meditations for Mortals* is to acquaint readers with a broader perspective on what drives our mania for controlling our schedules and inboxes. We fear the present moment, the way that we are “confined to *this* temporal locality, unable even to stand on tiptoes and peer over the fence into the future, to check that everything’s all right there.” I’ve felt, more times than I care to admit, that despite my heartbeat and mortgage and two walking, talking children, I’m not yet inside my life. Someday it will start, I imagine, the part of life in which I’m really engaged, really moving forward, really jolted with the electricity of having a mind and body that can interact with this wild world. I’ll leave behind this practice life for the real one.

That’s where death and life come together. If real life is always waiting in the distance, then so is death. Or at least that’s the misapplied logic of the do-it-all class, which condemns us to constantly flee not just the ache of aliveness, but also its pleasures, and the longing that holds far more meaning than any color-coded to-do list ever can.

Before we separated at the park gates and Burkeman headed off to tackle a formidable to-do list (he’s finally clearing out the family’s old Park Slope apartment, three years later), he told me that ideally, you will read a chapter of this new book with your morning coffee, and find that it “in some tiny way changes how you go about thinking about your to-read pile or the decisions you’ve got to take today.” Then again, he can’t control how you read it, or what you do with his wisdom. That’s the dilemma that will almost surely keep Oliver Burkeman busy: His counsel that life’s problems can’t really be solved only primes his audience to want more advice.

For me, the wisdom is taking hold. Right now, I'm well aware that I need to go back and start at the beginning of *Meditations for Mortals* again. I'm ready to feel the bracing discomfort that will come with another guided 28-day retreat of the mind. As Burkeman's ideas seep into my bones, so—slowly—does the reality that I'm going to be bumping up against the rough edges of life every day, even every hour, until I die. The nubbiness, the initial recoil followed by a kick of recognition—yes, I'm off-balance: This is the point.

This article appears in the [November 2024](#) print edition with the headline “You Are Going to Die.”

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Malcolm Gladwell, Meet Mark Zuckerberg

The writer's insistence on ignoring the web is an even bigger blind spot today than it was when *The Tipping Point* came out.

by Gal Beckerman



Not long after Malcolm Gladwell's [*The Tipping Point*](#) was published, in the winter of 2000, it had a tipping point of its own. His first book took up residence on the *New York Times* best-seller list for [an unbelievable eight](#)

years. More than 5 million copies were sold in North America alone, an epidemic that spread to the carry-on bags of many actual and aspiring CEOs.

Gladwell offered three “rules” for how any social contagion happens—how, say, a crime wave builds (and can be reversed), but also how a new kind of sneaker takes over the market. The rules turned out to explain his own book’s success as well. According to his “Law of the Few,” only a small number of Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen are needed to discover and promote a new trend. (If this taxonomy sounds familiar, that’s just another sign of how deep this book has burrowed into the culture.) In the case of *The Tipping Point*, word of the book spread through corporate boardrooms and among the start-up denizens of Silicon Valley. As for the second rule, “The Stickiness Factor”—the somewhat self-evident notion that a fad needs to be particularly accessible or addictive to really catch on—Gladwell’s storytelling was the necessary glue. Many readers and fellow writers over the years have correctly noted, out of jealousy or respect, that he is a master at extracting vibrant social-science research and then arranging his tidbits in a pleasurable digestible way.

Gladwell’s third *Tipping Point* rule, “The Power of Context,” may have been the most crucial to his breaking out: the (again rather self-evident) notion that the environment into which an idea emerges affects its reception. He emphasizes this in the author’s note of his new book, *Revenge of the Tipping Point*, in which he revisits his popular concepts nearly 25 years later. His debut took off, he has concluded, because “it was a hopeful book that matched the mood of a hopeful time. The year 2000 was an optimistic time. The new millennium had arrived. Crime and social problems were in free fall. The Cold War was over.”

Unhinged virality as we now know it is absent from *The Tipping Point*. So are our dinging phones, the memes, the entire insane attention economy.

Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*, published in 1992, is a good counterpart; both books epitomize an era of confidence in which clear-cut laws could lead us, in steady progression, toward ideologies, economic systems, and sneakers that would conquer all others. “Look at the world around you,” Gladwell cheerily ends *The Tipping Point*. “It may seem

like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push—in just the right place—it can be tipped.”

Besides the triumphalism—9/11 was a year away—the other context for Gladwell’s assured teachings about the tidy mechanics of change was this: The internet was still young. In 2000, the World Wide Web was in its dial-up AOL phase; Mark Zuckerberg was in high school. Gladwell could easily ignore the disruption that still seemed distant, and he did. All of the epidemics in *The Tipping Point* travel along analog pathways, whether the word of mouth of Paul Revere’s ride that warned of British soldiers on the move, or the televised images on *Sesame Street* that spread literacy, or the billboards that helped propel the Airwalk shoe brand. Unhinged virality as we now know it is absent from *The Tipping Point*. So are our dinging phones, the memes, the entire insane attention economy.

[Andrew Ferguson: Malcolm Gladwell’s *Talking to Strangers* doesn’t say much](#)

Today, talking about social contagion without taking these forces into account would be preposterous. We are not in the world of Paul Revere and Big Bird. So when I saw the title of Gladwell’s latest book, I was sure I knew what “revenge” he had in mind: a wildly unpredictable form of communication had made a hash of his simple rules. You don’t need to be a media theorist to recognize that over the past quarter century, the speed and scale and chaotic democratization of the digital revolution have turned straight lines of transmission into intersecting squiggles and curlicues. Yet Gladwell in 2024 mentions the internet once, in passing. The role of social media, not even once.

Gladwell writes that he wanted to be less Pollyannaish this time around, and to look at the “underside of the possibilities I explored so long ago.” This means scrutinizing not just the rules that govern epidemics of all sorts (he slides between biological and social ones), but also how those rules can be manipulated. Here he gathers “cases where people—either deliberately or inadvertently, virtuously or maliciously—made choices that altered the course and shape of a contagious phenomenon.” *Revenge of the Tipping Point* is bookended by the dark story of the opioid epidemic. We read about how the Sackler family and their company, Purdue Pharma, identified

doctors who were super-spreader prescribers of OxyContin, keeping them well stocked with pills, and about the larger context that enabled the whole enterprise: The epidemic took off in states where, historically, the regulatory culture around opioids was comparatively lax.

The introduction of unsavory actors is one main difference in the new book, which otherwise confirms his earlier message—change requires only a very small number of people. The other big new concept is what he calls the Overstory. He borrows the term from ecology: “An overstory is the upper layer of foliage in a forest, and the size and density and height of the overstory affect the behavior and development of every species far below on the forest floor.” Gladwell acknowledges that a word already exists for the social version of this—*zeitgeist*, the set of collective assumptions and worldviews that can hover above an entire culture or country.

Overstory, if I’m following Gladwell, is meant to expand and complicate the Power of Context. In some examples, the Overstory provides the necessary conditions for a tipping point. Waldorf schools, one of Gladwell’s examples, have an Overstory that values independent thinking; this explains the disproportionate number of unvaccinated children at many of the schools. In other circumstances, a revised Overstory is the *result* of a tipping: As soon as a corporate board allocates at least a third of its seats to women, to take another of his examples, it will immediately become more open and collaborative. An Overstory can cover the United States as a whole. It can also encompass a particular city or state—Miami, say, which became a ripe environment for Medicare fraud, Gladwell argues, thanks to an Overstory featuring weak institutional oversight abetted by a virulent drug trade and shifting demographics. He doesn’t detail how various Overstories might interact, though he’s emphatic about their explanatory power. “Overstories *matter*,” Gladwell writes in his signature bold yet blurry style. “You can create them. They can spread. They are powerful. And they can endure for decades.”

Gladwell’s methodology has taken a lot of punches: that he cherry-picks, that he is reductive, that he is Captain Obvious. I have been irritated by these habits, even when I find his books playful and stimulating. But the Overstory concept presents a unique, and revealing, problem. Unlike Gladwell’s usual [love of easy formulas](#), this one’s vagueness would actually

seem to enhance its usefulness, especially in 2024, when we consider how swiftly and fluidly cultural and social change occurs. But in Gladwell's hands, I was disappointed to discover, the Overstory proves as blunt an instrument as any of his other rules and laws.

In one of the book's examples, Gladwell draws on research by Anna S. Mueller and Seth Abrutyn, two sociologists who did fieldwork in an affluent American suburb from 2013 to 2016, trying to uncover the sources of a teen-suicide cluster centered in the local high school. In [their book, *Life Under Pressure*](#), they concluded that the community (they gave it the pseudonym Poplar Grove) was dominated by a culture of high achievement that weighed the children down and contributed to their choice of suicide when they succumbed to the intensity. Gladwell has his Overstory. But he goes even further, calling Poplar Grove a "monoculture" in which students had zero opportunities to stand apart, to opt out of its meritocracy. Thus the first suicide became a sort of "infection," and "once the infection is inside the walls, there is nothing to stop it."

The idea that an American suburb in the 2010s could have its own hermetically sealed culture didn't sit right with me—maybe because I have teenage daughters and they have phones. Think about all the other influences that might have been pummeling these children, aside from what they were hearing from their peers at school and their parents and teachers. Examining a suicide cluster in northeastern Ohio in 2017–18 similar to Poplar Grove's, a [2021 study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*](#) called attention to the strength of virtual forces. Data showed nearly double the risk of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among the students posting "suicide cluster-related social media content." Or consider the controversial 2017 Netflix show *13 Reasons Why*, which told the story of a girl's suicide. [Another study found a 28.9 percent uptick](#), nationwide, in the suicide rate for 10-to-17-year-olds in the month after it started streaming. Abrutyn himself, one of the Poplar Grove researchers, [said in an interview](#) that social media "probably plays a role in accelerating or amplifying some of the underlying things that were happening prior."

Gladwell doesn't consider any of this, or the possibility that other online activities—video games, YouTube channels, chat rooms—may have provided the teenagers with an escape from the hothouse of Poplar Grove or

possibly heightened the appeal of suicide, scrambling any clear sense of just what constitutes a context. Surely the sociologists are right about the culture of high achievement they found, but perhaps it was one of many factors—a case not of a single Overstory, but of many competing or reinforcing Overstories. This would also make solving the problem of Poplar Grove not simply a matter of getting adults—the parents and the school—to chill out, as Gladwell suggests.

Gladwell has long insisted that change happens neatly, and he's sticking to it. Epidemics, he writes in the new book, are "not wild and out of control." They have a single source, and anyone can follow Ariadne's thread back to it. He's also sticking to a career-long dismissal and devaluation of digital communication and its possible effects—which do indeed feel wild and out of control. Back in 2002, in an afterword for the paperback edition of *The Tipping Point*, Gladwell wrote that he'd been asked a lot about "the effect of the Internet—in particular, email"—on his ideas. Excitement was running high about all the avenues the internet had opened up, and his answer was counterintuitive. The spike in email use was actually going to make its power more diffuse, he thought—and he again reached for the epidemic analogy. "Once you've had a particular strain of the flu, or the measles, you develop an immunity to it, and when too many people get immunity to a particular virus, the epidemic comes to an end," he wrote. In other words, our online networks would become so ubiquitous that they would lose their effectiveness as tools of persuasion.

If the dominant forms of communication today are fast and loud and reactive, then our culture and politics will also be fast and loud and reactive.

Almost a decade later, he followed this hunch even further in a much-discussed *New Yorker* article, "[Small Change](#)." He was responding to the growing notion that social media would prove to be a revolutionary weapon for enabling political transformation. Gladwell dissented, presciently in some ways. He contrasted the 1960s civil-rights movement with online activism, drawing on [the sociologist Mark Granovetter's study](#) of what he called "weak ties." The work of desegregating lunch counters and securing voting rights in the South demanded "strong ties," or personal, face-to-face relationships; what Gladwell saw on social media were networks based on weak ties, or casual, virtual acquaintances—too scattered for the sort of

“military campaign” needed to upend the status quo. The [Arab Spring’s unfolding](#) bore out [this view](#), as have fruitless bouts of online activism since then.

But in discounting the ways that the internet has transformed American society and politics, and not acknowledging the sort of change that weak ties can bring about, Gladwell has handicapped his analysis. Struggling to describe these online networks, he landed on “messy.” Like Wikipedia, he explained, they are subject to a “ceaseless pattern of correction and revision, amendment and debate.”

[From the October 2013 issue: Malcolm Gladwell, guru of the underdogs](#)

“Correction and revision, amendment and debate”—and all the ways such interactions can exhilarate and inform as well as overwhelm us: That sounds truer to our reality than the notion of a monoculture that can only be muscled out by another monoculture.

I wish [Marshall McLuhan would step up at this point](#) and give me a hand. As he argued, the media we use mold us, train our impulses. If the dominant forms of communication today are fast and loud and reactive—messy—then our culture and politics, and the paths of social contagions, will also be fast and loud and reactive. This can’t be ignored. And Gladwell should understand why.

In the last third of the book, he focuses on how Overstories come about and turns to two examples that depend on the medium of television. The first involves the hugely popular 1978 miniseries *Holocaust*, starring Meryl Streep. Gladwell contends that after four nights of graphic television, the idea of the Holocaust as a historical event coalesced in the public’s mind in a way that it never had before. He rhapsodizes about the influence wielded by a broadcast medium of this sort, one that reached so many people simultaneously—[120 million viewers \(half the country\)](#) in this case: “The stories told on television shaped the kinds of things people thought about, the conversations they had, the things they valued, the things they dismissed.”

The second example features the sitcom *Will & Grace*, which first aired from 1998 to 2006, and which Gladwell singles out as pivotal in laying the psychological groundwork for legalizing gay marriage. (As in his *Holocaust* example, Gladwell leaps over a great deal of contested history to make this big claim.) Television offered a new narrative about a gay man: Not closeted or tortured, he was in community with other gay men yet not wholly defined by his sexual identity. This was all transmitted subtly and with a laugh track, but, Gladwell writes, multiple “seasons of Will just being … a normal guy” altered the zeitgeist enough to open the country up to the possibility of gay marriage.

Television did effect change in the monocultural way that Gladwell imagines. It is a medium that maintains our attention through visual stimuli—drawing us in and shocking us with spectacles like that of naked men being lined up and shot in *Holocaust*, or of Will and Jack kissing in Season 2 of *Will & Grace*. Television is also a passive medium, and particularly effective at this kind of cultural inculcation. But network television is not the dominant medium anymore. As Gladwell himself puts it, in the one and only mention of digital communication’s impact in *Revenge of the Tipping Point*: “It is hard today, I realize, to accept the idea that the world could be changed by a television show. Audiences have been sliced up a hundred ways among cable, streaming services, and video games.”

What does social contagion look like today, when images and stories emerge out of the great sea of information and are just as quickly submerged? Interactivity and fierce feedback loops are constantly in play. Attention drives everything. And we are all in one another’s business. Even the notion of separate blue and red Americas, living under distinct Overstories, does not tell us much, because these seemingly separate realities are built in reaction to each other. Their narratives ping-pong back and forth hourly.

Consider a couple of recent examples. By now, the late-July virality of Tim Walz’s use of the word *weird* is campaign lore—the turbocharged meme began as a television clip and then proliferated on social media and rapidly entered the vocabulary of many other politicians. It also seemingly catapulted Walz to vice-presidential running mate, and redefined the Democrats as the normative party, in step with the national majority, unlike the bizarre Republicans.

[Helen Lewis: What's genuinely weird about the online right](#)

The pro-Palestinian protests this past spring offer another glimpse into how new ideas now flow. When the protests began roiling college campuses, their emotional force was hard for me to understand at first—until someone showed me the short videos of war-zone horrors that were circulating by the thousands on TikTok, most made by Gazans themselves. Each clip was a gut punch: a woman emerging from a collapsed apartment building with a dead baby in her arms; burned children in a hospital; a man collapsing in grief over bodies wrapped in white shrouds. The images motivating these students were channeled directly across the world to their phones, unfiltered. The students then uploaded footage of their own protests, especially as they were suppressed, adding another layer of instigating feedback. The global exchange of self-generated videos led to clashes with the police, to rifts within the Democratic Party, all while the reason for the passion and the tension remained mostly invisible to those not scrolling certain platforms.

Even a biological epidemic, Gladwell's central metaphor, doesn't really lend itself to an easy story of transmission, or of consolidated immunity, either. We're now all too familiar with COVID and its endless mutations, the mystery of long COVID, the way mask wearing was shaped by politics and culture and not merely science.

This is, indeed, all very messy, all wild and unruly. It is also the air we now breathe. The strangest thing about Gladwell's decision to simply ignore the new pathways of social contagion is that he has the right vocabulary for understanding them. Small groups of people *are* usually the instigators, but these can be Trumpers hanging out in a closed Discord chat room, getting one another riled up about a stolen election, or a few influential teenage BookTokers all gushing about the same romance novel and turning it into a best seller. And Overstories *do* matter, but they do not have the stability and the unanimity that Gladwell imagines. Every day, dozens upon dozens of such narratives compete to define our politics, our culture; to bring issues to the fore, dragging attention one way or another.

Gladwell ends his new *Tipping Point* on the same note of certainty as his original. “Epidemics have rules,” he writes. “They have boundaries.” The tools to alter their course “are sitting on the table, right in front of us.” I envy

his confidence. But I've lived through the past 25 years too, and that's not my takeaway. We exist in gloriously, dangerously unpredictable times, and understanding how social change works surely requires one thing above all: humility.

This article appears in the [November 2024](#) print edition with the headline “Malcolm Gladwell, Meet Mark Zuckerberg.”

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Immigrants Are ‘Normal People Forced to Flee Their Countries’

Readers respond to our September 2024 cover story and more.



Seventy Miles in the Darién Gap

For the September 2024 issue, [Caitlin Dickerson reported on](#) the impossible path to America.

As a Colombian American, I was deeply moved by “Seventy Miles in the Darién Gap.” Thank you, Caitlin Dickerson, for your courage. I had the deep fortune of migrating to the United States legally with my parents in the

1990s, so I didn't experience the Darién Gap personally. Recently, I've been helping a Colombian refugee who traveled through the Darién Gap. He began to tell me of his experiences there, and I was astounded by his story. He is understandably still processing what he witnessed, and I am letting him go at his own pace. Dickerson's reporting offered a remarkable window onto a harrowing journey undertaken by the most desperate of people. Thank you for investing in such solid journalistic work. Now I'm going to go hug my dogs and wife.

Carlos Enrique Gomez
Union City, Calif.

As a citizen of the United States and an avid consumer of its news, I'm saddened that most mainstream-media coverage of our immigration woes focuses on controlling our borders and not the underlying reasons people risk, and even lose, their lives in their attempts to immigrate here.

For those who only listen to sound bites, the word *immigrant* conjures frightening notions—outsiders on a quest to thwart our border security and take some of what we consider to be ours. In Donald Trump's view, they are murderers, criminals, and rapists.

Caitlin Dickerson's article reveals that these are mostly just normal people forced to flee their countries due to conditions beyond their control. I can't imagine how dire circumstances would have to be for me to leave my home! It's telling and sad to see that U.S. policy to discourage immigration has had the effect of increasing death rates among those who are already so helpless. Not to mention driving new profits for drug cartels.

I hope we can have more coverage centered on the root causes of immigration. After all, U.S. policy created many of the problems that plague countries in Latin America.

Peter Brown
Lyman, Maine

I teach high-school English in Columbus, Ohio. Last year, one of my students wrote an essay about his experience traveling through the Darién Gap. It was the first time I had ever heard of it. This student was hardworking and kind, and I was amazed by his story. When he wrote it, he had been in the United States for just over a year. It's 288 words, with minimal punctuation and no paragraph breaks.

He left his home country in South America with his mom and sisters. After passing through the Darién Gap, they spent time in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico, before eventually ending up in Ohio.

He concluded his essay with this: “It affects me in what? I got a lot of depression and stress and I won’t do something like that again.” I feel lucky to have taught this student, and I appreciate that *The Atlantic* covered this topic.

Chase Montana
Columbus, Ohio

‘Lord, Help Us Make America Great Again’

In the September 2024 issue, [McKay Coppins considered](#) the most revealing moment of a Donald Trump rally.

McKay Coppins’s close reading of Trump-rally prayers was unsettling, even frightening. I was concerned less by the apocalyptic fear and strange theology that the prayers mobilized, and more by the unnerving similarity I saw to the rhetoric marshaled against Trump and Republicans by their adversaries.

I confess to seeing in Trump’s opponents—and I count myself among them—the same tendency toward exaggeration (*Trump is a modern Hitler, Trump is an existential threat to democracy*). Conservatives have been quick to argue that many progressives behave with a quasi-religious zeal: Popular slogans echo liturgy; cancel culture exists as a penalty for heresy.

I'd like to think that there are differences between Trump and his critics that I'm not discerning. Could *The Atlantic* do a similar sort of analysis of the weirder expressions by Democrats and progressives?

Gary Gaffield

Fort Myers, Fla.

My Mother the Revolutionary

For the September 2024 issue, Xochitl Gonzalez considered what happens when fomenting socialist revolution conflicts with raising a family.

As a mother of young children and a committed socialist organizer, I found that Xochitl Gonzalez's recent article presented an unrealistic and at times bizarre portrait of the lives of people like me. The bulk of the article is a slippery mix of memory, feeling, and fact—understandable if its purpose was to explore the bitter process of reconciliation between an absent parent and her child, but unsatisfying if it aims to provide an accurate political analysis.

What moved me to comment was the strange choice, 6,000 words into an almost-7,000-word essay, to pivot to a discussion of the presidential campaign of Claudia De la Cruz and Karina Garcia, who are running on the ticket of the Party for Socialism and Liberation. Although the author conducted an interview with the candidates, the only remnant of that interaction was a physical description of them (They are—"not that it matters—beautiful") and a hasty reduction of their political platform (*Burn it all down. Start from scratch*). What a shame to silence these women and conflate their candidacy with the aberrant personal experiences of the author.

Polls show that more and more young adults like me have positive attitudes toward socialism. We see the failures of capitalism all around us, and we are eagerly dedicating ourselves to building a socialist future. Although the article depicts socialist activism as a kind of personal obliteration, a subordination of our individual selves to the menacing whims of "the party," the reality, in my experience, could not be further from the truth.

I proudly support Claudia and Karina, not just because their politics offer the only viable path out of poverty, imperialist wars, and ecological crisis, but also because they are working mothers like me. When they speak about inflation at the grocery store, it is from experience. When they speak about the astronomical cost of child care, it is from experience. When they speak about fighting for a world that truly nurtures our children, it is proof that our identities as mothers are an asset, not a liability, in this struggle.

Moira Casados Cassidy

Denver, Colo.

Behind the Cover

In “[Washington’s Nightmare](#),” Tom Nichols revisits the life of George Washington, whose bravery and self-command established an ideal that all future presidents would, with varying degrees of success, attempt to emulate. All, that is, save Donald Trump, a man who shares none of Washington’s qualities and exhibits the kind of base motives that the first president saw as a threat to the republic. For the cover, we turned to [Gilbert Stuart’s *The Athenaeum Portrait*](#). The unfinished nature of the work suggests the ongoing American experiment, but also the existential danger that a second Trump term poses.

— **Elizabeth Hart**, *Art Director*

Correction

“[You Think You’re So Heterodox](#)” (October) misstated where Joe Rogan’s home is located. It is west of Austin, not east of Austin.

This article appears in the [November 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Commons.”

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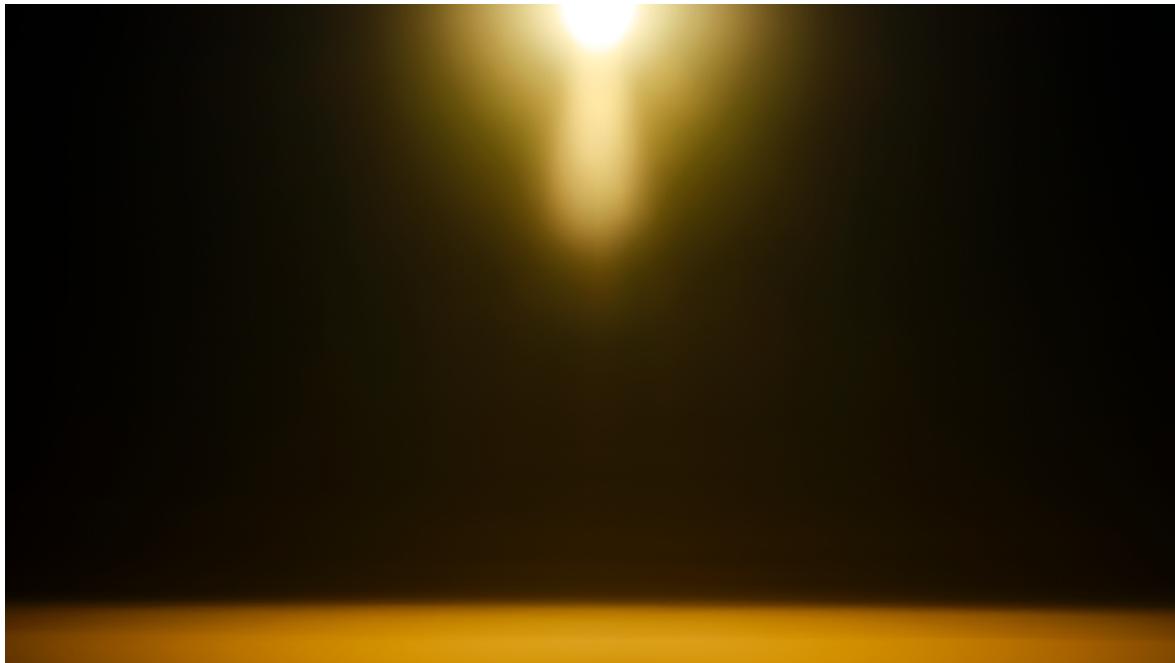
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Poetry

- [**All Souls**](#)
-

All Souls

by Kevin Young



Harvest moon.
My howling heart—

mouth a mask.
What say you?

The Sun
knows nothing.

Only night—

my voice raised in it
tall as wheat.

The maize
of your breath.

The body
betrays us—

so we run.
Still the moon

bearing babies
above us, waxes

unlike the leaves.
Burn on,

saith the trees.

*

Save yourself.

*

October, almost—

ghost moon.
Haunted heart.

No, I won't.

The rain slows, shows
the earthworms

they were wrong—
far harder to breathe

here, above earth,

than below,
where the storms
shelter their own.

*

The heart can't
help it—

forgets. Beats
like a bird

against the wind,
or the pane.

Slim to none.

Only its shadow scares
it away.

Strange, how hard
it is to donate—

so we wait.
Lend me your eyes.

Hatchet moon.
Late heat.

*

Execution moon.
Hanging there

helpless. Try this
on for size.

The weatherman
never goes outside.

Grief, a garment
that shrinks each
wash. Scarecrow stuffed full
of hay, newspapers
hawking yesterday.

*

Waste away.
Why not.

Like a stone.
Like a limb.

Like a lamb.
Like a rind.

Take your time.

Like a shore.
Like a sea

or its shell, itself
an ear

hearing the sea.
Like honey.

Make me.

*

Suffer the salmon.
The dolphin

& the meek.

The whale

who finds the shore
& our poor prayers.

The horse, though broke,
who can't quit

running. Why wait.
Half of nothing

is still nothing.
What keeps

you here, baying?
Even inside-dogs circle,

tamping down grass
no one but them

can see.
Suffer

& shelter me.

*

How it hammers,
the heart.

Go, head on
without me.

For the journey,
jettison nothing.

Let autumn do that—

how it sheds
clothes like a runaway

heading steady north.

*

So cold, you cry
when the wind

meets your eyes

Here autumn's only
winter in disguise

Sun carved
bright on the stoop

Say you're mine.

*

Plague me,
O Lord.

Wound me
like the worm moon

cut in two.

Hurricane
& tornado me.

Let loose
your levees

& the thunder—

the sky stained
with bright.

Prove it.

*

Monk moon.

Alone in a sky
studying itself.

God's many
guises—

dervishes, darkened
ballparks.

Artificial hearts.

*

Leave me be.

In the city along
the freeway a coyote

crawls from under
the guardrail—

crouches on hindquarters,
kneels even, like a man

tired as I am.

*

Let there
be night—

*

Out my window
a soldier in dress blues

beneath the faint
midday moon

lays a wreath
on a well-kept grave

& with what
arm he has left

salutes.

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