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to Be President?

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# How We Got ‘Democracy Dies in Darkness’

## And other stories from eight years running *The Washington Post*

by Martin Baron



I should not have been surprised, but I still marveled at just how little it took to get under the skin of President Donald Trump and his allies. By February 2019, I had been the executive editor of *The Washington Post* for six years. That month, the newspaper aired a [one-minute Super Bowl ad](#), with a voice-over by Tom Hanks, championing the role of a free press, commemorating

journalists killed and captured, and concluding with the *Post*'s logo and the message "Democracy dies in darkness." The ad highlighted the strong and often courageous work done by journalists at the *Post* and elsewhere—including by Fox News's Bret Baier—because we were striving to signal that this wasn't just about us and wasn't a political statement.

"There's someone to gather the facts," Hanks said in the ad. "To bring you the story. No matter the cost. Because knowing empowers us. Knowing helps us decide. Knowing keeps us free."

Even that simple, foundational idea of democracy was a step too far for the Trump clan. The president's son Donald Trump Jr. couldn't contain himself. "You know how MSM journalists could avoid having to spend millions on a #superbowl commercial to gain some undeserved credibility?" he tweeted with typical two-bit belligerence. "How about report the news and not their leftist BS for a change."

Two years earlier—a month into Trump's presidency—the *Post* had affixed "Democracy dies in darkness" under its nameplate on the printed newspaper, as well as at the top of its website and on everything it produced. As the newspaper's owner, Jeff Bezos, envisioned it, this was not a slogan but a "mission statement." And it was not about Trump, although his allies took it to be. Producing a mission statement had been in the works for two years before Trump took office. That it emerged when it did is testimony to the tortuous, and torturous, process of coming up with something sufficiently memorable and meaningful that Bezos would bless.

Bezos, the founder and now executive chair of Amazon, had bought *The Washington Post* in 2013. In early 2015, he had expressed his wish for a phrase that might encapsulate the newspaper's purpose: a phrase that would convey an idea, not a product; fit nicely on a T-shirt; make a claim uniquely ours, given our heritage and our base in the nation's capital; and be both aspirational and disruptive. "Not a paper I want to subscribe to," as Bezos put it, but rather "an idea I want to belong to." The idea: We love this country, so we hold it accountable.

No small order, coming up with the right phrase. And Bezos was no distant observer. "On this topic," he told us, "I'd like to see all the sausage-making.

Don't worry about whether it's a good use of my time." Bezos, so fixated on metrics in other contexts, now advised ditching them. "I just think we're going to have to use gut and intuition." And he insisted that the chosen words recognize our "historic mission," not a new one. "We don't have to be afraid of the *democracy* word," he said; it's "the thing that makes the *Post* unique."

Staff teams were assembled. Months of meetings were held. Frustrations deepened. Outside branding consultants were retained, to no avail. ("Typical," Bezos said.) Desperation led to a long list of options, venturing into the inane. The ideas totaled at least 1,000: "A bias for truth," "Know," "A right to know," "You have a right to know," "Unstoppable journalism," "The power is yours," "Power read," "Relentless pursuit of the truth," "The facts matter," "It's about America," "Spotlight on democracy," "Democracy matters," "A light on the nation," "Democracy lives in light," "Democracy takes work. We'll do our part," "The news democracy needs," "Toward a more perfect union" (rejected lest it summon thoughts of our own workforce union).

By September 2016, an impatient Bezos was forcing the issue. We had to settle on something. Nine *Post* executives and Bezos met in a private room at the Four Seasons in Georgetown to finally get over the finish line.

Because of Bezos's tight schedule, we had only half an hour, starting at 7:45 a.m. A handful of options remained on the table: "A bright light for a free people" or, simply, "A bright light for free people"; "The story must be told" (recalling the inspiring words of the late photographer Michel du Cille); "To challenge and inform"; "For a world that demands to know"; "For people who demand to know." None of those passed muster.

In the end, we settled on "A free people demand to know" (subject to a grammar check by our copy desk, which gave its assent). Success was short-lived—mercifully, no doubt. Late that evening, Bezos dispatched an email in the "not what you're hoping for category," as he put it. He had run our consensus pick by his then-wife, MacKenzie Scott, a novelist and "my in-house wordsmith," who had pronounced the phrase clunky. "Frankenslogan" was the word she used.

By then, we needed Bezos to take unilateral action. Finally, he did. “Let’s go with ‘Democracy dies in darkness,’” he decreed. It had been on our list from the start, and was a phrase Bezos had used previously in speaking of the *Post*’s mission; he himself [had heard it from the \*Washington Post\* legend Bob Woodward](#). It was a twist on a phrase in a 2002 ruling by the federal-appellate-court judge Damon J. Keith, who wrote that “democracies die behind closed doors.”

“Democracy dies in darkness” made its debut, without announcement, in mid-February 2017. And I’ve never seen a slogan—I mean, mission statement—get such a reaction. It even drew attention from *People’s Daily* in China, which tweeted, “‘Democracy dies in darkness’ @washingtonpost puts on new slogan, on the same day @realDonaldTrump calls media as the enemy of Americans.” Merriam-Webster [reported a sudden surge in searches](#) for the word *democracy*. The *Late Show* host Stephen Colbert joked that some of the rejected phrases had included “No, you shut up” and “We took down Nixon—who wants next?” Twitter commentators [remarked](#) on the *Post*’s “new goth vibe.” The media critic Jack Shafer tweeted a handful of his own “rejected Washington Post mottos,” among them “We’re really full of ourselves” and “Democracy Gets Sunburned If It Doesn’t Use Sunscreen.”

Bezos couldn’t have been more thrilled. The mission statement was getting noticed. “It’s a good sign when you’re the subject of satire,” he said a couple of weeks later. The four words atop our journalism had certainly drawn attention to our mission. Much worse would have been a collective shrug. Like others at the *Post*, I had questioned the wisdom of branding all our work with death and darkness. All I could think of at that point, though, was the Serenity Prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.”

But the phrase stuck with readers, who saw it as perfect for the Trump era, even if that was not its intent.



The *Post*'s publisher, Fred Ryan, speaks to the newsroom as the staff celebrates winning a Pulitzer Prize in 2016. (Chip Somodevilla / Getty)

We must have been an odd-looking group, sitting around the dining-room table in the egg-shaped Blue Room of the White House: Bezos, recognizable anywhere by his bald head, short stature, booming laugh, and radiant intensity; Fred Ryan, the *Post*'s publisher, an alumnus of the Reagan administration who was a head taller than my own 5 feet 11 inches, with graying blond hair and a giant, glistening smile; the editorial-page editor, Fred Hiatt, a 36-year *Post* veteran and former foreign correspondent with an earnest, bookish look; and me, with a trimmed gray beard, woolly head of hair, and what was invariably described as a dour and taciturn demeanor.

Five months after his inauguration, President Trump had responded to a request from the publisher for a meeting, and had invited us to dinner. We were joined by the first lady, Melania Trump, and Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner. By coincidence, just as we were sitting down, at 7 p.m., the *Post* [published a report](#) that Special Counsel Robert Mueller was inquiring into Kushner's business dealings in Russia, part of Mueller's

investigation into that country's interference in the 2016 election. The story followed another by the *Post* [revealing that Kushner had met secretly with the Russian ambassador](#), Sergey Kislyak, and had proposed that a Russian diplomatic post be used to provide a secure communications line between Trump officials and the Kremlin. The *Post* had reported as well that Kushner met later with Sergey Gorkov, the head of a Russian-owned development bank.

Hope Hicks, a young Trump aide, handed Kushner her phone. Our news alert had just gone out, reaching millions of mobile devices, including hers. "Very Shakespearean," she whispered to Kushner. "Dining with your enemies." Hiatt, who had overheard, whispered back, "We're not your enemies."

### [Read: Trump's war against the media isn't a war](#)

As we dined on cheese soufflé, pan-roasted Dover sole, and chocolate-cream tart, Trump crowed about his election victory, mocked his rivals and even people in his own orbit, boasted of imagined accomplishments, calculated how he could win yet again in four years, and described *The Washington Post* as the worst of all media outlets, with *The New York Times* just behind us in his ranking in that moment.

At our dinner, Trump sought at times to be charming. It was a superficial charm, without warmth or authenticity. He did almost all the talking.

Trump, his family, and his team had put the *Post* on their enemies list, and nothing was going to change anyone's mind. We had been neither servile nor sycophantic toward Trump, and we weren't going to be. Our job was to report aggressively on the president and to hold his administration, like all others, to account. In the mind of the president and those around him, that made us the opposition.

There was political benefit to Trump in going further: We were not just his enemy—we were the country's enemy. In his telling, we were traitors. Less than a month into his presidency, Trump had [denounced the press as "the enemy of the American People"](#) on Twitter. It was an ominous echo of the phrase "enemy of the people," invoked by Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and

Hitler's propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, and deployed for the purpose of repression and murder. Trump could not have cared less about the history of such incendiary language or how it might incite physical attacks on journalists.

Whenever I was asked about Trump's rhetoric, my own response was straightforward: "We are not at war with the administration. We are at work." But it was clear that Trump saw all of us at that table as his foes, most especially Bezos, because he owned the *Post* and, in Trump's mind, was pulling the strings—or could pull them if he wished.

At our dinner, Trump sought at times to be charming. It was a superficial charm, without warmth or authenticity. He did almost all the talking. We scarcely said a word, and I said the least, out of discomfort at being there and seeking to avoid any confrontation with him over our coverage. Anything I said could set him off.

He let loose on a long list of perceived enemies and slights: The chief executive of Macy's was a "coward" for pulling Trump products from store shelves in reaction to Trump's remarks portraying Mexican immigrants as rapists; he would have been picketed by only "20 Mexicans. Who cares?" Trump had better relations with foreign leaders than former President Barack Obama, who was lazy and never called them. Obama had left disasters around the world for him to solve. Obama had been hesitant to allow the military to kill people in Afghanistan. He, Trump, told the military to just do it; don't ask for permission. Mueller, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, fired FBI Director James Comey, and FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe were slammed for reasons that are now familiar.

Two themes stayed with me from that dinner. First, Trump would govern primarily to retain the support of his base. At the table, he pulled a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket. The figure "47%" appeared above his photo. "This is the latest Rasmussen poll. I can win with that." The message was clear: That level of support, if he held key states, was all he needed to secure a second term. What other voters thought of him, he seemed to say, would not matter.

Second, his list of grievances appeared limitless. Atop them all was the press, and atop the press was the *Post*. During dinner, he derided what he had been hearing about our story on the special counsel and his son-in-law, suggesting incorrectly that it alleged money laundering. “He’s a good kid,” he said of Kushner, who at the time was 36 and a father of three, and sitting right there at the table. The *Post* was awful, Trump said repeatedly. We treated him unfairly. With every such utterance, he poked me in the shoulder with his left elbow.



Baron's office at the *Post*. (*The Washington Post* / Getty)

A few times during that dinner, Trump—for all the shots he had taken during the campaign at Bezos’s company—mentioned that Melania was a big Amazon shopper, prompting Bezos to joke at one point, “Consider me your personal customer-service rep.” Trump’s concern, of course, wasn’t Amazon’s delivery. He wanted Bezos to deliver him from the *Post*’s coverage.

The effort quickened the next day. Kushner called Fred Ryan in the morning to get his read on how the dinner had gone. After Ryan offered thanks for

their generosity and graciousness with their time, Kushner inquired whether the *Post*'s coverage would now improve as a result. Ryan diplomatically rebuffed him with a reminder that there were to be no expectations about coverage. "It's not a dial we have to turn one way to make it better and another way to make it worse," he said.

Trump would be the one to call Bezos's cellphone that same morning at eight, urging him to get the *Post* to be "more fair to me." He said, "I don't know if you get involved in the newsroom, but I'm sure you do to some degree." Bezos replied that he didn't and then delivered a line he'd been prepared to say at the dinner itself if Trump had leaned on him then: "It's really not appropriate to ... I'd feel really bad about it my whole life if I did." The call ended without bullying about Amazon but with an invitation for Bezos to seek a favor. "If there's anything I can do for you," Trump said.

Three days later, the bullying began. Leaders of the technology sector gathered at the White House for a [meeting of the American Technology Council](#), which had been created by executive order a month earlier. Trump briefly pulled Bezos aside to complain bitterly about the *Post*'s coverage. The dinner, he said, was apparently a wasted two and a half hours.

Then, later in the year, four days after Christmas, Trump in a tweet called for the Postal Service to charge Amazon "MUCH MORE" for package deliveries, claiming that Amazon's rates were a rip-off of American taxpayers. The following year, he attempted to intervene to obstruct Amazon in [its pursuit of a \\$10 billion cloud-computing contract](#) from the Defense Department. Bezos was to be punished for not reining in the *Post*.

Meanwhile, Trump was salivating to have an antitrust case filed against Amazon. The hedge-fund titan Leon Cooperman [revealed in a CNBC interview](#) that Trump had asked him twice at a White House dinner that summer whether Amazon was a monopoly. On July 24, 2017, Trump tweeted, "Is Fake News Washington Post being used as a lobbyist weapon against Congress to keep Politicians from looking into Amazon no-tax monopoly?"

As Trump sought to tighten the screws, Bezos made plain that the paper had no need to fear that he might capitulate. In March 2018, as we concluded

one of our business meetings, Bezos offered some parting words: “You may have noticed that Trump keeps tweeting about us.” The remark was met with silence. “Or maybe you haven’t noticed!” Bezos joked. He wanted to reinforce a statement I had publicly made before. “We are not at war with them,” Bezos said. “They may be at war with us. We just need to do the work.” In July of that year, he once again spoke up unprompted at a business meeting. “Do not worry about me,” he said. “Just do the work. And I’ve got your back.”

A huge advantage of Bezos’s ownership was that he had his eye on [a long time horizon](#). In Texas, he was building a “[10,000-year clock](#)” in a hollowed-out mountain—intended as a symbol, he explained, of long-term thinking. He often spoke of what the business or the landscape might look like in “20 years.” When I first heard that timeline, I was startled. News executives I’d dealt with routinely spoke, at best, of next year—and, at worst, next quarter. Even so, Bezos also made decisions at a speed that was unprecedented in my experience. He personally owned 100 percent of the company. He didn’t need to consult anyone. Whatever he spent came directly out of his bank account.

#### [From the November 2019 issue: Franklin Foer on Jeff Bezos’s master plan](#)

In my interactions with him, Bezos showed integrity and spine. Early in his ownership, he displayed an intuitive appreciation that an ethical compass for the *Post* was inseparable from its business success. There was much about Bezos and Amazon that the *Post* needed to vigorously cover and investigate —such as his company’s escalating market power, its heavy-handed labor practices, and the ramifications for individual privacy of its voracious data collection. There was also the announcement that Bezos and MacKenzie Scott were seeking a divorce—followed immediately by [an explosive report](#) in the *National Enquirer* disclosing that Bezos had been involved in a long-running extramarital relationship with Lauren Sánchez, a former TV reporter and news anchor. We were determined to fulfill our journalistic obligations with complete independence, and did so without restriction.

I came to like the *Post*’s owner as a human being and found him to be a far more complex, thoughtful, and agreeable character than routinely portrayed. He can be startlingly easy to talk to: Just block out any thought of his net

worth. Our meetings took place typically every two weeks by teleconference, and only rarely in person. During the pandemic, we were subjected to Amazon's exasperatingly inferior videoconferencing system, called Chime. The one-hour meetings were a lesson in his unconventional thinking, wry humor ("This is me enthusiastic. Sometimes it's hard to tell"), and fantastic aphorisms: "Most people start building before they know what they're building"; "The things that everybody knows are going to work, everybody is already doing." At one session, we were discussing group subscriptions for college students. Bezos wanted to know the size of the market. As we all started to Google, Bezos interjected, "Hey, why don't we try this? Alexa, how many college students are there in the United States?" (Alexa pulled up the data from the National Center for Education Statistics.)

In conversation, Bezos could be witty and self-deprecating ("Nothing makes me feel dumber than a *New Yorker* cartoon"), laughed easily, and posed penetrating questions. When a *Post* staffer asked him whether he'd join the crew of his space company, Blue Origin, on one of its early launches, he said he wasn't sure. "Why don't you wait a while and see how things go?" I advised. "That," he said, "is the nicest thing you've ever said about me."

Science fiction—particularly Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Larry Niven—had a huge influence on Bezos in his teenage years. He has spoken of how his interest in space goes back to his childhood love of the *Star Trek* TV series. *Star Trek* inspired both the voice-activated Alexa and the name of his holding company, Zefram, drawn from the fictional character Zefram Cochrane, who developed "warp drive," a technology that allowed space travel at faster-than-light speeds. "The reason he's earning so much money," his high-school girlfriend, Ursula Werner, said early in Amazon's history, "is to get to outer space."



Baron and the *Post*'s owner, Jeff Bezos, in 2016 (*The Washington Post* / Getty)

From the moment Bezos acquired the *Post*, he made clear that its historic journalistic mission was at the core of its business. I had been in journalism long enough to witness some executives—unmoored by crushing pressures on circulation, advertising, and profits—abandon the foundational journalistic culture, even shunning the vocabulary we use to describe our work. Many publishers took to calling journalism “content,” a term so hollow that I sarcastically advised substituting “stuff.” Journalists were recategorized as “content producers,” top editors retitled “chief content officers.” Bezos was a different breed.

He seemed to value and enjoy encounters with the news staff in small groups, even if they were infrequent. Once, at a dinner with some of the *Post*'s Pulitzer Prize winners, Bezos asked Carol Leonnig, who had [won for exposing security lapses by the Secret Service](#), how she was able to get people to talk to her when the risks for them were so high. It had to be a subject of understandable curiosity for the head of Amazon, a company that routinely rebuffed reporters' inquiries with “No comment.” Carol told him

she was straightforward about what she sought and directly addressed individuals' fears and motivations. The *Post*'s reputation for serious, careful investigative reporting, she told Bezos, carried a lot of weight with potential sources. They wanted injustice or malfeasance revealed, and we needed their help. The *Post* would protect their identity.

Anonymous leaking out of the government didn't begin with the Trump administration. It has a long tradition in Washington. Leaks are often the only way for journalists to learn and report what is happening behind the scenes. If sources come forward publicly, they risk being fired, demoted, sidelined, or even prosecuted. The risks were heightened with a vengeful Trump targeting the so-called deep state, what he imagined to be influential government officials conspiring against him. The Department of Justice had announced early in his term that it would become even more aggressive in its search for leakers of classified national-security information. And Trump's allies and supporters could be counted on to make life a nightmare for anyone who crossed him.

Journalists would much prefer to have government sources on the record, but anonymity has become an inextricable feature of Washington reporting. Though Trump-administration officials claimed to be unjust victims of anonymous sourcing, they were skillful practitioners and beneficiaries as well. The Trump administration was the leakiest in memory. Senior officials leaked regularly, typically as a result of internal rivalries. Trump himself leaked to get news out in a way that he viewed as helpful, just as he had done as a private citizen in New York.

Trump had assembled his government haphazardly, enlisting many individuals who had no relevant experience and no history of previously collaborating with one another—"kind of a crowd of misfit toys," as Josh Dawsey, a White House reporter for the *Post*, put it to me. Some were mere opportunists. Many officials, as the *Post*'s Ashley Parker [has observed](#), came to believe that working in the administration was like being a character in *Game of Thrones*: Better to knife others before you got knifed yourself. Odds were high that Trump would do the stabbing someday on his own. But many in government leaked out of principle. They were astonished to see the norms of governance and democracy being violated—and by the pervasive lying.

Trump's gripes about anonymity weren't based on the rigor of the reporting—or even, for that matter, its veracity. Leaks that reflected poorly on him were condemned as false, and the sources therefore nonexistent, even as he pressed for investigations to identify the supposedly nonexistent sources. With his followers' distrust of the media, he had little trouble convincing them that the stories were fabrications by media out to get him—and them. Conflating his political self-interest with the public interest, he was prone to labeling the leaks as treasonous.

Though administration officials claimed to be unjust victims of anonymous sourcing, they were skillful practitioners and beneficiaries as well. The Trump administration was the leakiest in memory.

At the *Post*, the aim was to get at the facts, no matter the obstacles Trump and his allies put in our way. In January 2018, Dawsey reported that Trump, during a discussion with lawmakers about protecting immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador, and African countries as part of an immigration deal, asked: “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?” In March, Dawsey, Leonnig, and David Nakamura [reported that Trump had defied cautions](#) from his national security advisers not to offer well-wishes to Russian President Vladimir Putin on winning reelection to another six-year term. “DO NOT CONGRATULATE,” warned briefing material that Trump may or may not have read. Such advice should have been unnecessary in the first place. After all, it had been anything but a fair election. Prominent opponents were excluded from the ballot, and much of the Russian news media are controlled by the state. “If this story is accurate, that means someone leaked the president’s briefing papers,” said a senior White House official who, as was common in an administration that condemned anonymous sources, insisted on anonymity.

To be sure, sources sometimes want anonymity for ignoble reasons. But providing anonymity is essential to legitimate news-gathering in the public interest. If any doubt remains as to why so many government officials require anonymity to come forward—and why responsible news outlets give them anonymity when necessary—the story of Trump’s famous phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky offers an instructive case study.

In September 2019, congressional committees received a letter from Michael Atkinson, the inspector general for the intelligence community. A whistleblower had filed a complaint with him, he wrote, and in Atkinson's assessment, it qualified as credible and a matter of "urgent concern"—defined as a "serious or flagrant problem, abuse or violation of the law or Executive Order" that involves classified information but "does not include differences of opinion concerning public policy matters."

Soon, a trio of *Post* national-security reporters [published a story](#) that began to flesh out the contents of the whistleblower complaint. The article, written by Ellen Nakashima, Greg Miller, and Shane Harris, cited anonymous sources in reporting that the complaint involved "President Trump's communications with a foreign leader." The incident was said to revolve around a phone call.

Step by careful step, news organizations excavated the basic facts: In a phone call with Zelensky, Trump had effectively agreed to provide \$250 million in military aid to Ukraine—approved by Congress, but inexplicably put on hold by the administration—only if Zelensky launched an investigation into his likely Democratic foe in the 2020 election, Joe Biden, and his alleged activities in Ukraine. This attempted extortion would lead directly to Trump's impeachment, making him only the third president in American history to be formally accused by the House of Representatives of high crimes and misdemeanors.

The entire universe of Trump allies endeavored to have the whistleblower's identity revealed—widely circulating a name—with the spiteful aim of subjecting that individual to fierce harassment and intimidation, or worse. Others who ultimately went public with their concerns, as they responded to congressional subpoenas and provided sworn testimony, became targets of relentless attacks and mockery.

Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman of the National Security Council, who had listened in on the phone call as part of his job, became a central witness, implicating Trump during the impeachment hearings. He was fired after having endured condemnation from the White House and deceitful insinuations by Trump allies that he might be a double agent. Vindman's twin brother, Yevgeny, an NSC staffer who had raised protests internally

about Trump's phone call with Zelensky, was fired too. Gordon Sondland—the hotelier and Trump donor who was the ambassador to the European Union and an emissary of sorts to Ukraine as well—was also fired. He had admitted in congressional testimony that there had been an explicit quid pro quo conditioning a Zelensky visit to the White House on a Ukrainian investigation of Biden. The Vindmans and Sondland were all dismissed within two days of Trump's acquittal in his first impeachment trial. Just before their ousters, White House Press Secretary Stephanie Grisham had suggested on Fox News that "people should pay" for what Trump went through.

The acting Pentagon comptroller, Elaine McCusker, had her promotion rescinded, evidently for having merely questioned whether Ukraine aid could be legally withheld. She later resigned. Atkinson, the intelligence community's inspector general, was fired as well, leaving with a plea for whistleblowers to "use authorized channels to bravely speak up—there is no disgrace for doing so."

"The Washington Post is constantly quoting 'anonymous sources' that do not exist," Trump had tweeted in 2018 in one of his familiar lines of attack. "Rarely do they use the name of anyone because there is no one to give them the kind of negative quote that they are looking for." The Ukraine episode made it clear that real people with incriminating information existed in substantial numbers. If they went public, they risked unemployment. If they chose anonymity, as the whistleblower did, Trump and his allies would aim to expose them and have them publicly and savagely denounced.

"We are not at war with the administration. We are at work." When I made that comment, many fellow journalists enthusiastically embraced the idea that we should not think of ourselves as warriors but instead as professionals merely doing our job to keep the public informed. Others came to view that posture as naive: When truth and democracy are under attack, the only proper response is to be more fiercely and unashamedly bellicose ourselves. One outside critic went so far as to label my statement an "atrocity" when, after my retirement, Fred Ryan, the *Post*'s publisher, had my quote mounted on the wall overlooking the paper's national desk.

I believe that responsible journalists should be guided by fundamental principles. Among them: We must support and defend democracy. Citizens have a right to self-governance. Without democracy, there can be no independent press, and without an independent press, there can be no democracy. We must work hard and honestly to discover the truth, and we should tell the public unflinchingly what we learn. We should support the right of all citizens to participate in the electoral process without impediment. We should endorse free speech and understand that vigorous debate over policy is essential to democracy. We should favor equitable treatment for everyone, under the law and out of moral obligation, and abundant opportunity for all to attain what they hope for themselves and their families. We owe special attention to the least fortunate in our society, and have a duty to give voice to those who otherwise would not be heard. We must oppose intolerance and hate, and stand against violence, repression, and abuse of power.

We must be more impressed by what we don't know than by what we know, or think we know.

I also believe journalists can best honor those ideals by adhering to traditional professional principles. The press will do itself and our democracy no favors if it abandons what have long been bedrock standards. Too many norms of civic discourse have been trampled. For the press to hold power to account today, we will have to maintain standards that demonstrate that we are practicing our craft honorably, thoroughly, and fairly, with an open mind and with a reverence for evidence over our own opinions. In short, we should practice objective journalism.

The idea of objective journalism has uncertain origins. But it can be traced to the early 20th century, in the aftermath of World War I, when democracy seemed imperiled and propaganda had been developed into a polished instrument for manipulating public opinion and the press during warfare—and, in the United States, for deepening suspicions about marginalized people who were then widely regarded as not fully American.



Baron and his *Boston Globe* colleagues react to winning the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for the paper's coverage of sexual abuse by priests in the Roman Catholic Church. (*The Boston Globe* / Getty)

The renowned journalist and thinker Walter Lippmann helped give currency to the term when he wrote *Liberty and the News*, published in 1920. In that slim volume, he described a time that sounds remarkably similar to today.

"There is everywhere an increasingly angry disillusionment about the press, a growing sense of being baffled and misled," he wrote. The onslaught of news was "helter-skelter, in inconceivable confusion." The public suffered from "no rules of evidence." He worried over democratic institutions being pushed off their foundations by the media environment.

[From the December 1919 issue: Walter Lippmann's "Liberty and the News"](#)

Lippmann made no assumption that journalists could be freed of their own opinions. He assumed, in fact, just the opposite: They were as subject to biases as anyone else. He proposed an "objective" method for moving

beyond them: Journalists should pursue “as impartial an investigation of the facts as is humanly possible.” That idea of objectivity doesn’t preclude the lie-detector role for the press; it argues for it. It is not an idea that fosters prejudice; it labors against it. “I am convinced,” he wrote, in a line that mirrors my own thinking, “that we shall accomplish more by fighting for truth than by fighting for our theories.”

In championing “objectivity” in our work, I am swimming against what has become, lamentably, a mighty tide in my profession of nearly half a century. No word seems more unpopular today among many mainstream journalists. A [report in January 2023](#) by a previous executive editor at *The Washington Post*, Leonard Downie Jr., and a former CBS News president, Andrew Heyward, argued that objectivity in journalism is outmoded. They quoted a former close colleague of mine: “Objectivity has got to go.”

Objectivity, in my view, has got to stay. Maintaining that standard does not guarantee the public’s confidence. But it increases the odds that journalists will earn it. The principle of objectivity has been under siege for years, but perhaps never more ferociously than during Trump’s presidency and its aftermath. Several arguments are leveled against it by my fellow journalists: None of us can honestly claim to be objective, and we shouldn’t profess to be. We all have our opinions. Objectivity also is seen as just another word for neutrality, balance, and so-called both-sidesism. It pretends, according to this view, that all assertions deserve equal weight, even when the evidence shows they don’t, and so it fails to deliver the plain truth to the public. Finally, critics argue that objectivity historically excluded the perspectives of those who have long been among the most marginalized in society (and media): women, Black Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Indigenous Americans, the LGBTQ community, and others.

Genuine objectivity, however, does not mean any of that. This is what it really means: As journalists, we can never stop obsessing over how to get at the truth—or, to use a less lofty term, “objective reality.” Doing that requires an open mind and a rigorous method. We must be more impressed by what we don’t know than by what we know, or think we know.

[Darrell Hartman: The invention of objectivity](#)

Journalists routinely expect objectivity from others. Like everyone else, we want objective judges. We want objective juries. We want police officers to be objective when they make arrests and detectives to be objective in assessing evidence. We want prosecutors to evaluate cases objectively, with no prejudice or preexisting agendas. Without objectivity, there can be no equity in law enforcement, as abhorrent abuses have demonstrated all too often. We want doctors to be objective in diagnosing the medical conditions of their patients, uncontaminated by bigotry or baseless hunches. We want medical researchers and regulators to be objective in determining whether new drugs might work and can be safely consumed. We want scientists to be objective in evaluating the impact of chemicals in the soil, air, and water.

Objectivity in all these fields, and others, gets no argument from journalists. We accept it, even insist on it by seeking to expose transgressions. Journalists should insist on it for ourselves as well.

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*This article was adapted from Martin Baron's book, [Collision of Power: Trump, Bezos, and The Washington Post](#), which will be published in October 2023. It appears in the [November 2023](#) print edition with the headline "We Are Not at War. We Are at Work."*

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# The Kamala Harris Problem

## Few people seem to think she's ready to be president. Why?

by Elaina Plott Calabro



Vice President Kamala Harris and President Joe Biden at the White House, 2022 (Doug Mills / Redux)

*This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

On a Thursday morning in April, I met with Vice President Kamala Harris at Number One Observatory Circle, the Victorian mansion that, for the past two and a half years, she and the second gentleman, Doug Emhoff, have called home. She can be a striking presence when she walks into a room,

with a long stride and an implacable posture that make her seem taller than she is (about 5 foot 2). By the time I saw Harris at the residence, I had already traveled with her to Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles, and Reno, Nevada, as well as to Africa, trips on which she had carried herself with ease and confidence.

Ease and confidence have not been the prevailing themes of Harris's vice presidency. Her first year on the job was defined by rhetorical blunders, staff turnover, political missteps, and a poor sense among even her allies of what, exactly, constituted her portfolio. Within months of taking office, President Joe Biden was forced to confront a public perception that Harris didn't measure up; ultimately, [the White House issued a statement](#) insisting that Biden did, in fact, rely on his vice president as a governing partner. But Harris's reputation has never quite recovered.

Harris is intensely private, so I was somewhat surprised to be invited to her home. The residence had been redecorated, and in keeping with past practice the work was done without fanfare. There have been no photo spreads, and the designer, Sheila Bridges, signed a nondisclosure agreement. But Harris seemed to enjoy showing me around. In the turret room, she pointed to the banquette seating built along the curve. ("I just love circles," she said.) She gestured at some of the art she'd brought in, on loan from various galleries and collections, describing each piece in terms of the artist's background rather than its aesthetic qualities—Indian American woman, African American gay man, Japanese American. "So you get the idea," she said. We moved into the library, with its collection of books devoted to the vice presidency. (Who knew there were so many?) The green-striped wallpaper pattern that the Bidens had favored when they lived here was gone. Now there was bright, punch-colored wallpaper—chosen, Harris explained, in order to "redefine what power looks like."

She said this with a laugh, but it was a studied phrase. Redefining what power looks like has been the theme of every chapter of Kamala Harris's political career. She is the U.S.-born daughter of immigrants—[her mother a cancer researcher from India](#), her father an economist from Jamaica. As Biden's running mate, [she became the first woman, first Black American, and first South Asian American to be elected vice president](#). Before that, she was the first South Asian American and only the second Black woman to

serve in the U.S. Senate. Before that, she was the first woman, Black American, and South Asian American to serve as attorney general of her native California. Before *that*, she was the first Black woman in California to be elected as a district attorney.

### Jemele Hill: Kamala Harris makes history

When Biden underwent a colonoscopy in November 2021, Harris served as acting president, becoming the first woman (and first South Asian American) to officially wield presidential authority. If vice presidents have historically been tormented by the question of legacy—compelled to wonder not how they will be remembered but whether they will be remembered at all—Harris was assured of a mandatory nod in the history books the moment she was sworn in.

But after nearly three years in office, the symbolic fact of Harris's position has proved more resonant than anything she has actually done with it. From almost the beginning, Harris's vice presidency has unfolded in a series of brutal headlines: “[Exasperation and Dysfunction: Inside Kamala Harris' Frustrating Start as Vice President](#)” (CNN, November 2021). “[A Kamala Harris Staff Exodus Reignites Questions About Her Leadership Style—And Her Future Ambitions](#)” (*The Washington Post*, December 2021). “[New Book Says Biden Called Harris a ‘Work in Progress’](#)” (*Politico*, December 2022). “[Kamala Harris Is Trying to Define Her Vice Presidency. Even Her Allies Are Tired of Waiting](#)” (*The New York Times*, February 2023).

The hazy nature of Harris's responsibilities has made for easy satire —“White House Urges Kamala Harris to Sit at Computer All Day in Case Emails Come Through,” read [an early Onion headline](#). Clips of Harris sound bites gone wrong have ricocheted across social media, and not just right-wing sites. [A Daily Show feature in October 2022](#) paired clips from various Harris speeches (“When we talk about the children of the community, they are a children of the community …”) with clips from the fictional vice president Selina Meyer, played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, on *Veep* (“Well, we are the United States of America because we are united … and we are states”).

In June 2023, [an NBC News poll](#) put Harris's approval rating at 32 percent. While Biden's own approval numbers, in the low 40s, are hardly inspiring, the percentage of those who disapprove of Harris's performance is higher than for any other vice president in the history of the poll.

Ordinarily, as people around Harris like to remind reporters, a vice president's approval rating does not warrant notice. But if Biden—already the country's oldest president—wins reelection, he would begin a second term at age 82. And although Democrats recoil at any mention of Biden's mortality, it's hardly a coincidence that, as the 2024 campaign gathers pace, people have begun to contemplate the possibility that Harris could become president. In the [campaign's announcement video](#) and at events across the country for the past few months, Harris has been enlisted more prominently as a spokesperson for the administration's accomplishments—more visible, often, than the president himself. But unlike Biden, Harris does not simply need Americans to agree that she deserves four more years in her current job. She needs them to trust that she is ready, should the moment require it, to step into his.

Republicans may offer a mandatory “God forbid” when raising the prospect of some presidential health crisis, but they are already pushing the idea that “a vote for President Biden is a vote for President Harris.” They are doing so in large part because they see her as a more inviting target than the president himself: a woman of color whose word-salad locutions turn themselves into campaign ads, and whose outspoken advocacy on social issues makes her easier to paint as an ideologue lying in wait.

Harris and I talked at the residence for an hour. Toward the end of the conversation, she patted the cushion between us. “No reporter has sat here ever,” she said. It was a small moment, but it seemed to represent a recognition that something had to change—if not about the way Harris actually does her job, then about the way she presents herself, and her role, in public.

Even today, people who have worked for Harris make a point of telling you where they were during the Lester Holt interview. Usually, it is because they want to make clear that they were not involved.

In June 2021, at the end of a two-day trip to Guatemala, the vice president [sat down with the NBC anchor](#) to discuss Biden's immigration agenda.

Harris had recently become the administration's lead on the so-called root-causes element of border policy, working with Central American countries to alleviate the violent and impoverished conditions that lead many migrants to flee north to the U.S. in the first place. The questions should have been easily anticipated—such as whether Harris had any plans to visit the border itself, where crossings had surged. Yet when Holt did ask that question, Harris threw up her hands in evident frustration. “At some point, you know, I—we are going to the border. We’ve been to the border. So this whole, this whole—this whole thing about the border. We’ve been to the border. We’ve been to the border.” Holt corrected her: “You haven’t been to the border.” Harris became defensive. “And I haven’t been to Europe,” she snapped. “I don’t understand the point you’re making.”

The exchange became the subject of headlines and late-night monologues. (“Well, *that* escalated quickly,” Jimmy Fallon said on his show the same night.) Afterward, Harris shied away from the camera for months.

For many Americans, the Holt interview was the first real exposure to Harris as vice president. She had spent the better part of her career as a “smart on crime” prosecutor who won her first election—district attorney of San Francisco, in 2003—by positioning herself as a pragmatic reformer. As California’s attorney general, she targeted transnational gangs and cartels and [won billions in extra relief from big banks at the center of the foreclosure crisis](#). She had been the state’s junior senator for just over two years when she launched a bid for the presidency, in 2019, buoyed by the brief but bright flashes of stardom she’d earned from her tough, courtroom-style questioning of Trump-administration officials, [including Attorney General Jeff Sessions](#) (“I’m not able to be rushed this fast; it makes me nervous,” Sessions complained to her at one point), [and of the Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh](#). And although she was an early favorite for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, raising millions in donations as she promised to “prosecute the case against Donald Trump,” her campaign [fell apart before the Iowa caucus](#), beset by [uneven messaging, disorganization, and low morale](#).

Throughout her time in national politics, Harris has repeated some advice imparted to her by her mother: “You don’t let people tell *you* who you are. You tell *them* who you are.” Yet a consistent theme of Harris’s career has been her struggle to tell her own story—to define herself and her political vision for voters in clear, memorable terms. The result, in Harris’s first months as vice president, was that high-profile mistakes assumed the devastating weight of first impressions. Verbal fumbles (“It is time for us to do what we have been doing. And that time is every day”) became memes and were anthologized online. Shortly after the Holt interview, White House aides began leaking to [various news outlets](#) about top-to-bottom dysfunction in Harris’s office and Biden’s apparent concern about her performance. In her first year and a half as vice president, Harris saw the departure of her chief of staff, communications director, domestic-policy adviser, national security adviser, and other aides. Her current chief of staff, Lorraine Voles—formerly Al Gore’s communications director, who has expertise in crisis management—was brought on initially to help with, as Voles put it, “organizational” issues with the team still in place.

### [Read: The woman who led Kamala Harris to this moment](#)

Ron Klain, Biden’s first chief of staff, told me that after her initial missteps, Harris became highly risk-averse: “She’s always nervous that if she does something that doesn’t go well, she’s setting us back.” David Axelrod, a former senior strategist for President Barack Obama, noticed the same trait. “I think it’s one of the things that plagued her in the presidential race,” he told me. “It looked as if she didn’t know where to plant her feet. That she wasn’t sort of grounded, that she didn’t know exactly who she was.” He went on: “People can read that. When you’re playing at that level, people can read that.”

Those closest to Harris have tried to make sense of why the vice president’s positive qualities—her intelligence, her diligence, her integrity—have failed to register with Americans. It is impossible, of course, to talk about perceptions of Harris without laying some of the blame on racism and sexism. The briefest glance at the toxic comments about Harris on social media reveals the bigotry that motivates some of her most fervent detractors. But the vice president’s allies also acknowledge that she has struggled to make an affirmative case for herself. Judging from what has gone viral

online, she is better known for her passion for Venn diagrams than for any nugget of biography; right-wing personalities enjoy mocking this predilection almost as much as they enjoy mocking the way she laughs.

When I asked Harris what aspects of her skill set Biden depends on, she said: “You’ll have to ask him.”

Harris may understand intellectually the imperative to seem “relatable” to a broad audience—to condense her background to a set of compelling *SparkNotes* to be recited on cue—but she hasn’t made a habit of doing so. In smaller settings, she can be funny at her own expense. When I asked her what advice she would give to a successor, she referred back to some of those social-media reviews: “Don’t read the comments.” In our conversation at the residence, she touched briefly on how her “first woman” status shapes even the most workaday elements of the job: “I’m not going to tell you who said to me—it’s a previous president of the United States. He said, ‘Wow, women—I get up, I go work out, I jump in the shower, and I’m out the door. *You guys ...*’” (I suspect she was quoting Obama, a friend of hers who has spoken about [his efficient morning routine](#).) Harris told me that she has to let the Secret Service know a day in advance if she is going to be wearing a dress instead of a pantsuit, because agents have to pick her up in a different kind of car.

But she prefers a discreet distance from topics like these. A friend of Harris’s advised me before our first interview to avoid “small talk” or “diving immediately into personal matters.” The friend explained: “She appreciates the respect in that way.” Minyon Moore, a Democratic strategist with long-standing ties to Harris, made a related point: “She’s not a person—which I kind of like, but it doesn’t do her any good—she’s not a person that’s going to brag on herself. In fact, she’s very uncomfortable, say, beating her own chest. She just wasn’t raised that way.” Lateefah Simon, a former MacArthur fellow and now a candidate for Congress, was in her mid-20s when Harris hired her to run a program for young people convicted of nonviolent felonies, mostly involving drugs. Simon remembers Harris telling her she could either stand outside with a bullhorn or come push for change from the inside. “If you know Kamala Harris, she’s *stern*—she was a stern 38-year-old,” Simon recalled. But she could also be more than that: Harris gave Simon her first suit after she showed up on day one in Puma sweats.



Harris in 1997, when she was a deputy district attorney of Alameda County, California (Mary F. Calvert / MediaNews Group / *The Mercury News* / Getty)

Nearly three years after Harris's swearing-in, her current and former staff still seem to be unearthing pertinent elements of her life story. Twice while I was reporting this article, aides highlighted an experience in Harris's adolescence—one that had informed her decision to become a prosecutor—that they'd learned about only after joining her team. In high school, a friend confided in Harris that she was being molested by a family member, so Harris insisted that the friend move in with her own family (and she did). The outrage Harris felt in that moment would help define her path to the Alameda County district attorney's office, where much of her work as a deputy involved prosecuting sex crimes against children.

I understood why her aides wanted me to hear that story, which is not widely known. I wondered why—when I'd asked about her decision to become a prosecutor—Harris hadn't mentioned it herself. When we spoke at the residence, she did acknowledge the “request, sometimes the demand,” for personal revelation. “I guess it’s a bit outside of my comfort level,” Harris said, “because for me, it really is about the work. You know, I am who I am. I am who I am. And I think I’m a pretty open book, but I am who I am.” She went on a little longer, making clear that she understands that people want to know more. And then, in a softer tone, she said: “And I just, you know, yeah. I don’t know what to say about that.”

But what is “the work”? For the first time in her career, Harris holds a job devoid of any clear benchmarks of success. She was a transformational figure by the mere fact of her election, but the office to which she was elected doesn’t lend itself to transformational leadership.

After settling into Observatory Circle, Harris made a point of gathering historians for dinners—to discuss not just American democracy but also the history of the vice presidency itself. “You’re not supposed to be visible,” Heather Cox Richardson, who attended one dinner, told me, referring to the nature of the vice president’s job. “So there’s that really fine tightrope you walk, between how do you make people understand that you’re qualified

without looking like you're unqualified because you don't understand your role.”

Neither Biden nor Harris arrived in Washington with a particular vision for Harris's vice presidency. Harris had issues in which she was interested—racial justice, climate change, gun violence, maternal mortality—and as vice president she has explored these and others. But America imposed its own urgent agenda: Getting the pandemic under control absorbed much of everyone's attention. With a 50–50 partisan split in the Senate, Harris was also compelled to spend much of her time in her old place of work, exercising the vice president's constitutional duty to cast the deciding vote in the case of a tie. “We couldn't make plans for me to be outside of D.C. for at least four days of the workweek,” she recalled.

More fundamentally, Biden and Harris came into office with few instructive models for their partnership, despite Biden having once held the job himself. For nearly half a century, with occasional exceptions, the vice president has been a creature of the capital. The president, in contrast, has been a relative outsider. Walter Mondale, the archetype of the modern American vice president, had 12 years in the Senate under his belt when he was sworn in. He became Jimmy Carter's anchor to Washington. George H. W. Bush did the same for Ronald Reagan, as did Al Gore for Bill Clinton, Dick Cheney for George W. Bush, Joe Biden for Barack Obama, and Mike Pence for Donald Trump. But Harris and Biden flipped the script: a comparative newcomer serving as vice president to a man who'd launched his Senate career before she reached her tenth birthday.

### [Read: The long arc of Joe Biden](#)

In our interviews, Harris spoke of her relationship with Biden largely in generalities. When I asked how she and the president complement each other, she said, “Well, first of all, let me just tell you, we really like each other,” and then went on to talk about shared values and principles. When I asked Harris what aspects of her skill set Biden depends on, she was more direct: “You'll have to ask him.” (When I did, a spokesperson for Biden sent this statement: “Kamala Harris is an outstanding vice president because she's an outstanding partner. She asks the hard questions, thinks creatively, stays laser-focused on what we're fighting for, and works her heart out for

the American people. She inspires Americans and people around the world who see her doing her job with skill and passion and dream bigger for themselves about what's possible. I trust her, depend on her, admire her. And I'm proud and grateful to have her by my side.”)

Current and former aides to both say Harris and Biden have a good friendship. The president made the relationship a priority early on, setting up weekly lunches with Harris, like the ones he himself had valued with Obama. She still has lunch with him, she says, “when he’s not traveling, when I’m not traveling.” Given that Harris loves to cook—and regularly has friends and family over for meals—I asked whether she and her husband had hosted the Bidens for dinner. She said that they hadn’t, and seemed momentarily stuck in a feedback loop: “We have a plan to do it, but we have to get a date. But he and I have a plan, we have a plan to do it. And yeah, no, we actually have a plan to do it.”

As vice president, Harris has been unfailingly loyal to Biden. For West Wing staff, especially at the beginning, this was no small thing. During Harris’s vetting for the job, some of those close to Biden—reportedly including his wife, Jill—struggled with the memory of her sharp attacks on him during the presidential primary. In a televised debate, Harris had brought up the subject of Biden’s past opposition to busing, leading to one of the most withering exchanges of the race. “There was a little girl in California who was part of the second class to integrate her public schools, and she was bused to school every day,” Harris told Biden. “And that little girl was me.”

Perhaps in recognition of this history, Harris has been an unswerving advocate of Biden and his policy priorities. Ultimately, she told me, that is what she sees as the core of her mandate as vice president. Building out the rest of the mandate has proved more complicated.

The path to the Lester Holt interview began with tension over Harris’s policy portfolio. During one of the administration’s early multiagency meetings about the surge of unlawful crossings at the Mexican border, Biden was impressed as Harris outlined ideas for engaging the Central American countries that many of the migrants were coming from. According to Ron Klain, the president turned to Harris and said, “Well, why don’t you do that?”—meaning, become the point person on the morass of root-cause

elements. Harris approached the chief of staff after the meeting. “And she said,” as Klain recalled, “‘Well, I wasn’t really looking for that assignment —my idea was, this is what we should do, and someone *else* should do it.’” Klain told Harris he understood but, as vice president, Biden had worked on this aspect of immigration policy for Obama, and they needed her to take it on as well.

It wasn’t that Harris lacked relevant experience; as attorney general of California, she had worked extensively with law enforcement in Mexico on drug and human trafficking. But the politics of the issue were radioactive. Harris knew this, and so did Klain. “It was obviously a controversial assignment,” he acknowledged to me. “It wasn’t necessarily anyone’s idea of a glory assignment.” (Asked about this, the vice president’s office responded that Harris had “plunged into the issue with vigor.”) Harris broke the news of the task to her staff on a mordant note, opening a meeting with the announcement that she was “going to oversee the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” according to a person who was in the room, then dialing back to the slightly less grim reality.

As Klain saw it, Biden intended the appointment—to the same role he had once held—as a show of respect. But it also suggested obliviousness to Harris’s need, early in her term, for a measure of stability and success. Of course, as the Holt interview showed, Harris could make the task harder all on her own. Republican lawmakers and Fox News personalities relished the prospect of pinning the border crisis on Harris. She may have been responsible for just one sliver of U.S. policy, but they used her proximity to border issues to fuel the image of Harris as Biden’s “border czar.”

### [Read: Conflict between Kamala Harris and Joe Biden is inevitable](#)

In the first year of his presidency, Biden did little to present Harris as essential to the administration; neither did the Democratic Party more broadly. Indeed, there was a sense that Harris might be a liability more than anything else. Less than two weeks into office, [Harris appeared on a West Virginia news station](#) to pitch the Biden administration’s coronavirus stimulus package—which Joe Manchin, the state’s conservative Democratic senator, was not yet sold on. In an interview on the same station the next day, [Manchin said he was shocked](#) that Harris had given him no notice of the

appearance. “I couldn’t believe it,” he said. “That’s not a way of working together.” Later that year, [as my colleague Franklin Foer has reported](#), Biden invited Manchin to the Oval Office to discuss the stimulus package; Harris was there initially, but after pleasantries was sent on her way. [Biden had once said](#) that Harris’s would be “the last voice in the room” during important conversations. Not this time.



Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff, as they arrived in Accra, Ghana, in March 2023 (Ernest Ankomah / Getty)

In June 2021, Biden asked Harris to take the lead on voting rights for the administration. The House had recently passed the For the People Act—a massive overhaul of election law that addressed voter access, gerrymandering, campaign finance, and other matters—and Democratic leaders were eager to see movement in the Senate. That was unlikely. Mitch McConnell, the Senate GOP leader, promised that no Republican would support the bill; not all Democrats were on board either. The legislation would likely die by filibuster—a procedure that Biden, despite calls from many in his party, was almost certainly not going to try to undermine.

Harris's allies would later characterize voting rights as one of those impossible issues—*intractable* is the word they often use—that the president had saddled her with. Yet it was Harris herself who had lobbied for the assignment. Her personal background made her a natural spokesperson, and as attorney general of California, she had signed on to an amicus brief urging the Supreme Court to uphold the protections against discrimination in the Voting Rights Act—the protections eventually struck down in *Shelby County v. Holder*. But the bill's death by filibuster was virtually inevitable. And Harris didn't do much to stave it off.

Harris's aides once described her to reporters as potentially a key emissary for the administration in Congress—[helping corral votes by way of “quiet Hill diplomacy.”](#) But she lacked the deep relationships needed to exert real influence. Congressional officials told me that Harris rarely engaged the more persuadable holdouts on either side of the aisle. At a key moment in the negotiations, [Biden went to talk with the two resistant Democrats](#), Joe Manchin and Arizona's Kyrsten Sinema. Harris did not go with him. A White House official declined to get into details and said only that Harris was “interested and engaged” in conversations with Democratic lawmakers during this period. Harris shifted the terms of the discussion when I asked how her Senate background had proved useful in the administration’s push for legislation: “I mean, I think the work we have to do is really more in getting folks to speak loudly with their feet through the election cycle”—an unusual image, though the point was clear enough: Electing more Democrats might be more effective than trying to twist more arms.

For now, Senate Democrats are not fighting for time with Harris when she’s on the Hill. “You’d be hard-pressed to find a Democratic office that actually engages with her or her team on a regular basis,” one Democratic senator’s chief of staff told me. Traditionally, this person said, officials from the executive branch who visit the Capitol are cornered by lawmakers hoping to get their priorities before the president. But few people are “scrambling to make alliances” with Harris—not because of any dislike, as this person and other congressional officials told me, but simply because of uncertainty about the nature of her role. “In her case,” the chief of staff said, “it’s kind of like, ‘Hey, good to see you.’ And that’s kind of the end of it.”

This past spring, I traveled with Harris to Los Angeles, where she was scheduled to appear on Jennifer Hudson's daytime talk show. When Hudson asked Harris what she missed most about her old life, before the White House, [the vice president replied, “Have you watched \*The Godfather\*?”](#) I was in the greenroom with her staff as they looked apprehensively at the screen, wondering where their boss was going with this. Harris went on to describe the scene in which Michael Corleone is out for a quiet walk in Sicily with his fiancée, “and then the shot pans out, and the whole village is on the walk with them.”

There's no escaping the reality that her every move is probed and dissected. During our conversation at the residence, Harris pointed to the veranda. “Sometimes in the summer, I'll come and sit out with my binders and a cup of tea, and it's just really nice and quiet,” she said. It wasn't until later, when I listened again to the tape of the conversation, that I remembered what she'd said next: “You almost forget that there are 5,000 people around here.”

Having worked in politics and government for the better part of her life, Harris is accustomed to a certain amount of scrutiny. But in her past jobs—as a prosecutor, as attorney general—people were looking at her actual accomplishments. That was how it seemed to her, at least. A friend of Harris's told me that her professional yardstick was “outcome driven.” Campaigning for district attorney of San Francisco, [Harris criticized the incumbent's low conviction rate for felonies](#); running later for reelection, [she talked about how she had improved it by 15 percentage points](#).

Communication wasn't a matter of rhetoric. It was just laying out the facts.

This is still, in some ways, how Harris tends to perceive her job. She is always asking aides to get to the point: *Show me the data; show me the metrics*. And for some things, this works. But success in national politics involves gauzier, more emotional elements. It's not an accident that the single utterance by Harris that most people can call to mind—“That little girl was me”—drew on searing personal experience.

After *Dobbs*, Harris understood the mood of the country better than most people in Washington.

Go to enough of Harris's events and you'll notice a pattern. Many of them—conversations with community leaders at, say, a college campus or a civic center—begin shakily. The moderator opens by asking Harris a sweeping question about the state of the country, or the administration's approach to some major issue—the sort of question that a seasoned politician should be able to spin her way through on autopilot. And yet Harris often sounds like she's hearing the question for the first time.

During a [discussion at Georgia Tech focused on climate change](#), I listened as Harris was asked to speak about the administration's progress over the past two years in addressing the crisis. Her baroque response began: "The way I think about this moment is that I do believe it to be a transformational moment. But in order for us to truly achieve that capacity, it's going to require all to be involved ... and I will say, on behalf of the administration, a whole-of-government approach to understanding the excitement that we should all feel about the opportunity of this moment, and then also thinking of it in a way that we understand the intersection between so many movements that have been about a fight for justice and how we should see that intersection, then, in the context of this moment ... And so I'm very excited about this moment."

This is not Churchill. It's not even Al Gore. Only when Harris assumed the role of interrogator herself did she seem to find her rhythm, pressing the moderators on the stage—two scientists—to discuss their personal journey toward an interest in climate issues. She then leveraged one moderator's story to explain the administration's plan to replace lead pipes across the country—using \$15 billion from the bipartisan infrastructure deal, one of the Biden administration's marquee victories. The communities that have been suffering from contamination "have been fighting for years and years and years," Harris noted. "It didn't take a science degree for them to know what was happening to their children." The audience responded as if at a church service, with murmurs of affirmation.

Hillary Clinton told me that she has met with Harris at the White House and the vice president's residence, and has talked with her numerous times by phone. "I've tried to be as helpful and available to her as possible," Clinton said, adding, "It's a tough role." She noted that Harris isn't a "performance" politician, a comment she intended not as a criticism but as an

acknowledgment that Harris's skills mainly lie elsewhere. (Clinton isn't a performance politician either.) Harris doesn't dispute the point: "My career was not measured by giving lovely speeches," she told me.

Harris communicates most effectively when she can shift the focus away from herself. The first two conversations I had with the vice president, both while traveling with her, felt stilted and strained, as if I were tiptoeing around glass. But at the residence, alone, Harris was warm, inviting, at times even maternal. "You're newly married," she said. ("Yes," I responded, though it wasn't a question.) "Pay attention to your marriage," she counseled. "Friendships, marriage require that you pay attention. Because life has a way of sweeping you up."

Harris has configured many of her public events to resemble a back-and-forth conversation rather than a standard Q&A: She likes talking with people. The grassroots settings that Harris enjoys represent a mode of retail politics that rarely grabs national attention. But such events have given her a good read on what voters care about. They have also allowed her to inhabit her own space. As Klain observed, in Washington, you're "just the vice president." In the rest of the country, you're "the *vice president*."

In the aftermath of the Supreme Court's 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned the abortion protections embodied in *Roe v. Wade*, Harris had a strong sense of American public opinion on the issue. Amid a crush of headlines predicting a so-called red wave in the upcoming midterm elections—with the economy as the central issue—Harris was steadfast in her view that abortion rights would shape the contest. She spent much of 2022 on the road, hosting conversations on reproductive rights in red and blue states alike. Women, she told me, "won't necessarily talk loudly" about an issue like abortion. "But they will vote on it." In this respect, Harris understood the mood of the country, and the potential impact at the ballot box, better than most people in Washington. In the midterms, the Democrats did far better than expected, even winning a majority in the Senate; there was no red wave. Harris has continued to travel and talk about abortion rights ever since. It is a central issue for the Democratic base and one that Biden—a devout Catholic who, in his own words, isn't "big on" abortion—has been reluctant to press himself.



Harris marking the 50th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* at an event in Tallahassee, Florida, in January 2023 (Aileen Perilla / Redux)

Fighting *Dobbs* will be a long battle. But it's the kind Harris may be suited for. In one of our conversations, she spoke about "the significance of the passage of time"—a line that featured in [one of her more unwieldy speeches as vice president](#). I remember steadyying myself when the phrase surfaced. But what followed was a revealing commentary about the diligence and patience that are required to produce real change. Harris told me about [a commencement speech she had given at the law school of UC Berkeley](#). She spoke to the new graduates about *Brown v. Board of Education*—about how, after the ruling, integration largely took place on a creeping, county-by-county basis, and only in response to continual pressure. Exerting that pressure meant building a legal foundation, erecting a structure brick by brick, and laboring over the details, all in return for progress that was often measured in inches. This is a truth, Harris noted, that Thurgood Marshall and Charles Hamilton Houston and Constance Baker Motley all knew. "And I just got up there and I was like, 'You want to be a lawyer?'" she recalled. If you do, she told them, then you must learn to "embrace the mundane."

She laughed at the memory of that line. “And the parents are like, *Ooh, this is good*,” she recalled. “And the kids are like, *Oh, fuck.*”

Harris’s engagement with abortion rights has broken through to voters more than anything else in her vice presidency, according to the Democratic pollster Celinda Lake. But Harris has been effective in another arena—diplomacy—that to the public is hardly visible at all.

During his two terms as vice president, [Joe Biden traveled to 57 countries](#)—and before that, as a senator, he had decades to acquire experience abroad. In the past two years, Harris has traveled to 19 countries, including France, Germany, Poland, Guatemala, Mexico, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines, Ghana, Tanzania, Zambia, and Indonesia. She has met with 100 or so foreign leaders. They have tended to appreciate, as more than one White House official told me, how fact-based and direct she is. She has “very little patience,” one of them said, for the euphemisms and platitudes of routine diplomacy. Harris’s risk aversion appears to stop at the water’s edge.

Her first major diplomatic test came during a five-day trip to France in November 2021. For some time, Harris had been considering an invitation to attend the Paris Peace Forum, whose purpose was to discuss global inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic. But in the weeks before the event, relations between Washington and Paris had been pitched into tumult after the announcement of a lucrative joint U.S.-British submarine deal with Australia that nullified France’s own submarine deal with Australia. French President Emmanuel Macron was furious, recalling his ambassador from Washington; Biden soon admitted that his handling had been “clumsy.” For Harris, the trip to Paris went from optional to crucial.

In front of the cameras, Harris and Macron both said what they were expected to say about a positive long-term bilateral future. The atmosphere was one of chilly civility. But behind the scenes, Harris was helping lay the groundwork for cooperation on the looming crisis in Ukraine. She used her nearly two-hour meeting with Macron at the Élysée Palace to present an array of U.S. intelligence. Harris urged the French president to take seriously the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Three months later, Biden asked Harris to represent the administration at the high-visibility Munich Security Conference. It was a sign of Biden’s confidence—on a personal level (Biden had attended the conference many times) and also because of the timing. The U.S. now knew that a Russian invasion of Ukraine was imminent, and Harris was tasked with helping press allies and partners to develop a coordinated response. Five days before the invasion, Harris met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to share U.S. intelligence and plans for military support. Publicly, Zelensky still seemed uncertain about Russia’s intentions and the scale of the threat. “The vice president directly and very clearly conveyed to Zelensky and his team that this was going to happen,” an official on the trip told me, “and they should really be planning on that basis and not waste any time.”

Harris returned to the Munich Security Conference this past February. Speaking for the administration, she formally declared the U.S. view that Russia had committed “crimes against humanity” in Ukraine.

A month later, I joined Harris on a multicity tour of Africa. [China’s deepening presence on the continent provided the geopolitical backdrop](#). But Harris was bringing with her more than \$7 billion in commitments, largely from the private sector, to promote climate-resilience initiatives, money she had raised herself through months of tree-shaking phone calls to companies and individuals. The trip was a seven-day sprint, and logically taxing. On one occasion, [the American advance team had to upgrade an entire road from dirt to gravel](#); the vice president’s Secret Service code name may be “Pioneer,” but there are limits to what her motorcade can handle.

In Cape Coast, Ghana, Harris walked through the Door of No Return, where enslaved people had taken their final steps in Africa before being forced onto ships. She discarded her prepared remarks—something she had almost never done before—and spoke powerfully about the legacy of the diaspora in the Americas. In Lusaka, Zambia, she was driven to the rural outskirts of the capital to visit Panuka Farm, powered entirely by renewable energy. The vice president had spent time on a farm as a child; wearing jeans and Timberlands, she seemed at home inside the netted enclosures of sweet peppers and iceberg lettuce. Washington felt very far away.

Harris's allies touted the Africa trip as a historic effort to deepen ties with the fast-growing continent. But it hardly registered back home. Terrance Woodbury is a Democratic pollster who focuses on young and minority voters; he saw the Africa trip as a "pivot" in terms of Harris's self-presentation. Yet when I asked whether the trip had made any difference politically, he said, simply, "No."

Given Biden's age, the words *heartbeat away* connote a real possibility.

The trip also offered a reminder of Harris's ongoing struggle when it comes to telling her own story—and of the *Veep* comparison. The vice president's visit to Zambia had been billed as a kind of homecoming. As a young girl, Harris spent time in Lusaka with her maternal grandfather, P. V. Gopalan, who had been dispatched there in the 1960s from India to advise Zambia's first independent government on refugee resettlement. Now, decades later, she was returning to Zambia as one of the most prominent public figures in the world. Harris's scheduled stop at her grandfather's old home in the capital, where she was expected to speak about his work and how his career as a civil servant had shaped her own ambitions, promised to be a special moment.

Instead, dozens of reporters and others looked on as Harris laughed somewhat awkwardly in front of a concrete-and-stucco office building. Greeting her near the doorway was a U.S.-embassy official, who explained that, after a year of combing through public records, researchers had managed to locate the plot of land on which Gopalan's house had stood. The house itself, however, had been replaced by the headquarters of a Zambian financial-services group. Seeming not to know what else to do, Harris accepted an offer to tour the building. Reporters and cameramen, who had been anticipating a press conference at the end of the event, were ushered away. When I asked why the press conference had been scrapped, an aide said, "She needed a private moment." Life has a way of sweeping you up.

My conversation with Harris at the residence came three weeks after our return from Africa. She took me through her herb garden, just off the driveway, crouching to examine the state of her oregano, dill, rosemary, thyme, and sage. Washington's springtime pollen was at its worst, and my eyes were red-rimmed and watery as we made our way inside. After finding

a box of tissues, Harris sympathized, referring to D.C. as “a toxic swamp of pollen.” People from outside the area, she went on, “are not acclimated to this mix.” It was a botanical comment, but it reminded me of something one of Harris’s old friends had told me about the vice president’s seeming discomfort in the capital, and how much happier she appeared when traveling to other parts of the country.

Perceptions of Harris appear to be frozen in 2021. A recent op-ed in *The Hill*, largely sympathetic to the vice president, urged the Biden campaign to get her “off the sidelines”—this during a week when she traveled to Indianapolis; Jacksonville, Florida; and Chicago. (Many weeks, she is on the road at least three days out of seven.) At one point during my conversation with David Axelrod, he wondered why Harris hadn’t become more of a champion for the administration’s most significant achievements, such as the infrastructure package. But much of her cross-country travel is focused exactly on that.

Of course, Harris is not alone in having trouble breaking through. “I mean, why do only a third of voters know what the *president* has done?” Celinda Lake, the pollster, asked when we spoke. “My God, they spent millions of dollars on it. They’ve got ads up now.” If voters don’t know what the president has done, Lake said, “they sure as heck aren’t going to know what the *vice* president has done.”

This summer, I asked Jeff Zients, the current White House chief of staff, if he could recall a moment when Biden had noticeably leaned on Harris for guidance, or when her input had meaningfully changed the administration’s approach to an issue. He had mentioned earlier in our interview that Harris had been instrumental in putting “equity” at the forefront of the administration’s COVID response—ensuring that public-health efforts reach the underserved. Other examples? “Let me think of a specific anecdote, and I’ll have somebody follow up,” he said. His spokesperson texted after the call to confirm that the office would get back to me. Despite my follow-ups, that was the last I heard.

Vice presidents are chosen mainly for political reasons—as Harris was—and not actuarial ones. In most of the presidential elections during the past half century, the possibility that the candidate at the top of the ticket might die in

office was not a significant issue. (It was an issue for John McCain, in 2008, with his history of multiple melanomas, which was one more reason McCain's selection of the erratic Sarah Palin as his running mate had such negative resonance.) This time around, given Biden's age, the words *heartbeat away* connote a real possibility.

### Read: Why Joe Biden picked Kamala Harris

When I asked Zients what he's observed in Harris that makes him confident about her abilities as a potential chief executive, he at first started chuckling in what seemed to be discomfort at the subtext of the question. ("Well, I want to, you know, make sure we're not talking about anything—but, you know, she's prepared.") But after that he went on thoughtfully: "You know, the first thing I go to is when you're president, there are so many issues, and understanding what's most important to the American people, what's most important to America's position in the world—it takes experience, which she has, and it takes a certain intuition as to what matters most, and she's very good at quickly boiling it down to what matters most, and focusing on those issues, and then within those issues or opportunities, understanding what's most important, and holding the team accountable."

That's a sharp assessment of what a vice president can bring to the table, and not a bad way to make important observations about Harris that seem matter-of-fact and not tied to the prospect of a sudden transition.

So I was surprised when another White House official, who knows both Harris and Biden well, treated the topic of readiness as if it were somehow illegitimate—a ploy by desperate Republican candidates. "People who are polling near the bottom do things and say things to try and be relevant and get oxygen." Was it ridiculous to ask about Harris's constitutional closeness to the presidency? "She is the closest to the presidency, as all of her predecessors have been."

Nikki Haley, Tim Scott, Chris Christie, and Ron DeSantis, all of them presidential candidates, have explicitly raised the specter of a "President Harris." So have other Republicans. The probable GOP nominee, Donald Trump, who habitually belittles women, will likely do so too. He has referred to Harris as "this monster" and has questioned her citizenship. On

one occasion, he [made fun of her name](#)—“Kamala, Kamala, Kamala,” repeating it slowly with various pronunciations. Harris [called him childish](#) for that, but has largely declined to take the bait. Perhaps not surprisingly for a former prosecutor, she has become more [publicly outspoken](#) than anyone else in the White House about the indictments that Trump faces and the need to hold lawbreakers accountable.

The Biden administration has every incentive to embrace Harris. Why does addressing preparedness seem so difficult? [Harris has affirmed that she is ready, if need be](#), but there’s a limit to what she herself can say. It’s not unusual for a president, any president, to take pains to demonstrate his vice president’s readiness for the top job, if only by regularly referencing their closeness—the notion that the person is briefed on everything and has an opportunity to weigh in on major decisions, even if the fingerprints aren’t always visible. And no president comes to the Oval Office with every necessary skill. Harris is an uncomfortable fit in the vice president’s role, whatever that is, and she cannot speak or act independently; the job makes every occupant a cipher. But she has been a successful public servant for more than three decades. She ran the second-largest justice system in America, in a state that is the world’s fifth-largest economy. By virtue of her position, she is among those who represent the future of her party, and she represents its mainstream, not its fringe. Of course Kamala Harris is ready for the presidency, to the extent that anyone can be ready. This should not be hard for her own colleagues to talk about. Not talking about it leaves the subject open for political exploitation—by opponents whose own likely candidate makes the idea of readiness absurd.

And yet the topic is treated as a trip wire. In a brief conversation after an abortion-rights rally in Charlotte, North Carolina, on the first anniversary of the *Dobbs* decision, I asked Harris herself: Had she and Biden discussed how to address questions about her readiness to step in as president, should circumstances ever require it? “No,” she said. And that was the end of the conversation.

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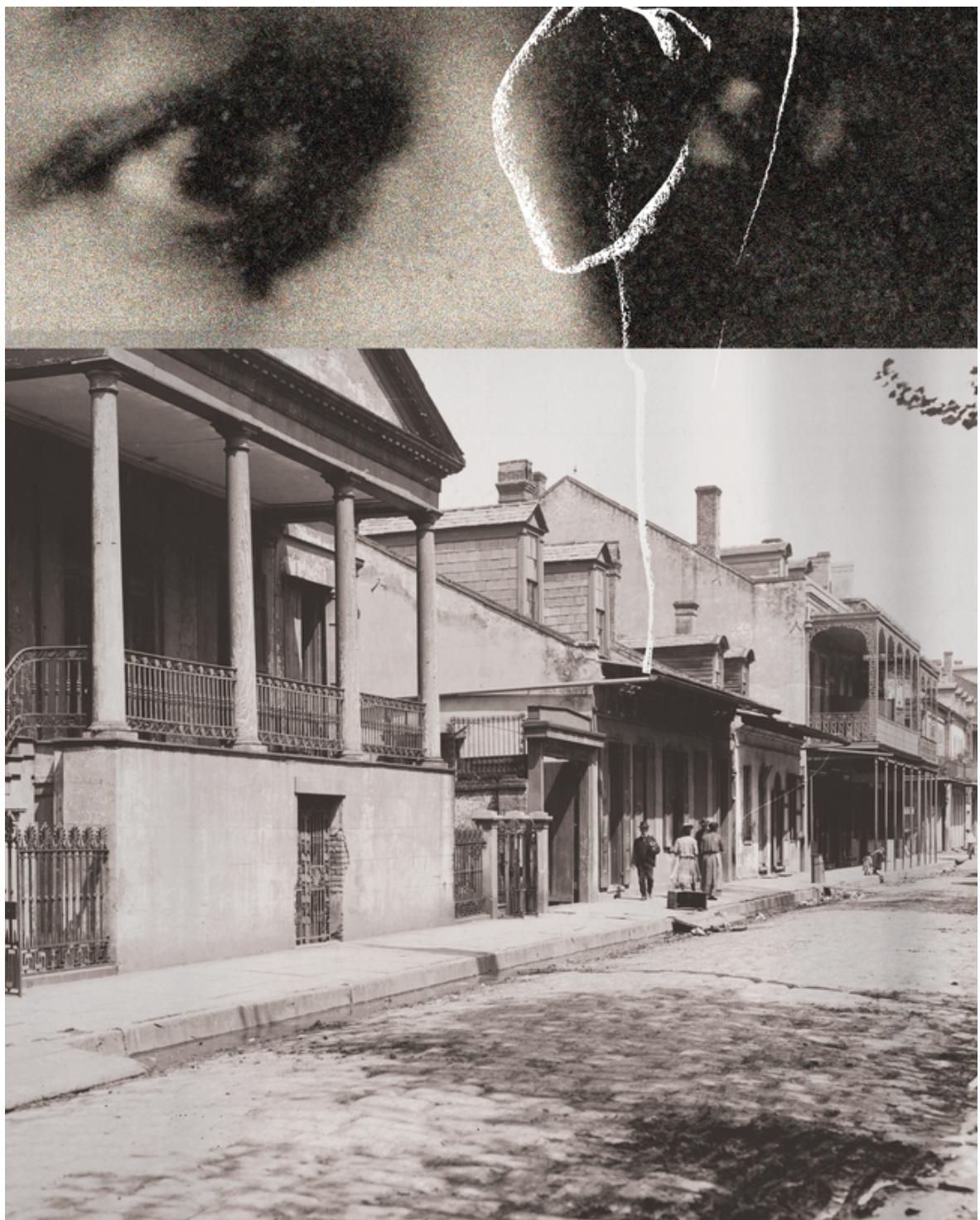
# Fiction

- **[She Who Remembers](#)**

# She Who Remembers

## A short story

by Jesmyn Ward



The Georgia men wake everyone in the drenched dark. The pain of the march simmers through me, and I wipe at my mud-soaked clothing, swipe at the threads of soil in my wounds—all of it futile. We are tired. Even though the Georgia men threaten and harass and whip, we chained and roped

women plod. “Aza,” I say, sounding the name of the spirit who wore lightning: “Aza.” Every step jolts up my leg, my spine, my head. Every step, another beat of her name: Aza.

We walk down into New Orleans, and each step is a little falling. We leave the lake and the stilted houses behind; the trees reach, swaying and nodding on all sides, and us in the middle of a green hand. When the hand opens, there is a river, a river so wide the people on the other side are small as rabbits, half-frozen in their feed in the midmorning light. Aza disappears. The boat that carries us over this river is big enough that all the women fit. There is no reprieve from our rope here. This river is wordless, old groans coming from its depths. After we cross, there are more houses, one story, narrow and long, and then two stories, clustered close together, sometimes side to side, barely space for a person to stand between them. The grandest are laced with wrought iron and broad balconies: great stone palaces rising up and blotting out the sky. Long, dark canals cut the city at every turn. The air smells of burning coffee and shit.

People crowd the streets. White men wearing floppy hats coax horses down rutted roads turned to shell-lined avenues. White women with their heads covered usher children below awnings and through tall, ornate doorways. And everywhere, us stolen. Some in rope and chains. Some walking in clusters together, sacks on their backs or on their heads. Some stand in lines at the edge of the road, all dressed in the same rough clothing: long, dark dresses and white aprons, and dark suits and hats for the men, but I know they are bound by the white men, accented with gold and guns, who watch them. I know they are bound by the way they stand all in a row, not talking to one another, fresh cuts marking their hands and necks. I know they are bound by the way they wear their sorrow, by the way they look over an invisible horizon into their ruin.

But some brown people look like they ain’t stolen. Some of the women cover their hair in patterned, shimmering head wraps, and they walk through the world as if every step they take is their own. They are fair as I am, some of them even fairer, as milk-hued and blue-veined as the white women in their bonnets and hats. I slide close to Phyllis, lean away from the caravan of wagons rumbling past. A handful of women snake by; their head wraps are

bright and glittering as jewels, and they look everywhere but at our bound line: stooped, bleeding, and raw from the long walk.

“They’re free,” I tell her.

“Who?” Phyllis asks.

“Them.” I point with my chin.

Phyllis sneezes and wipes her nose on her arm.

Three boys, heads shaved, follow behind an olive-skinned woman in a cream head wrap. The boys stare at us, their eyes wide and wondering, and the woman, who must be their mother, grabs the closest by his shoulder and herds the boys in front of her.

“*Non*,” the woman says. She hurries them to a trot that matches the horses pulling the wagons. “*Allons-y*.” One of the boys trips, but she bears him up with her hand on the back of his collar.

Phyllis watches them until they disappear around a tree-lined bend. I try not to, but I still search for more head wraps, more quick walkers with averted eyes who wear deep, brilliant colors. More who are free.

I know they are bound by the way they wear their sorrow, by the way they look over an invisible horizon into their ruin.

“Move,” the Georgia Man says, shouting us deeper into this warren of a city until he stops outside a wooden fence high as two women standing on each other’s shoulders. Haphazard roofs, tiled and patched, show over the top. There is a gate at the center of the fence, and as it swings wide, the sound of someone wailing in the enclosure swoops outward.

“In,” says the Georgia Man.

We walk in a knot through the door. I look back at the two-story houses and stone businesses. A white man with a bushy mustache stands on the porch of a home, his hands shoved in his pockets, watching us being herded. His face as blank as the windows.

“In, girl,” the Georgia Man says. The man across the street rubs one hand down his black-vested chest and tips his hat. The gate closes, ill-fitting wood scraping, and we are inside.

We enter into a courtyard clustered with buildings: Two are tall and whitewashed brick. The rest are short and windowless, their bricks dark as the river. The ground beneath us is beaten to dirt and sand, nearly as even as a wooden floor. But there are footprints in it, so many footprints: the dimples of five toes, the smooth ball of heels, sometimes ringed by the mark of a horse’s hooves. The Georgia Man enters one of the tall buildings, and his men dismount their horses and lead them to a stable. Laughter echoes from inside the buildings. Dogs yip and bark at the noise.

“Come,” says one of his men, short and burnt red at the forehead. His hair snakes below his collar. We women follow to one of the long, low, dark-brick buildings, while a white man leads the chained men to another building—this shack’s twin. We women stoop to enter, and when I stand, my hair brushes the ceiling. The taller women stoop and shuffle into the close darkness. There are no windows, and the only light comes from cracks between the bricks. The man takes his time untying us; the first woman he unbinds limps to the farthest corner of the room and sits. One woman drops to her knees right as the rope is taken off. Another hunched woman holds her hands in front of her like she has an offering, listing side to side. Phyllis slides down the closest wall. When my length of rope falls, I step backwards, slowly, as I did with my bees on days when it took time for the smoking moss to calm them. For a moment, the longing for my hive feels so strong, it makes me stumble to remember: the clearing, the old char of the tree, the honey, amber and heavy.

“Annis,” Phyllis says.

The Georgia Man closes the door. I sink to the floor next to Phyllis, lean my head back against the brick, close my eyes, and try to recall how beekeeping taught me to hold myself still, my mirth muted. How once, in my breathing, there was joy.

We sleep hungry, wrapped in rags. Phyllis’s rasping breath has turned to a hard, hacking cough. Some of the women snore, but most of them are still

and silent as fallen trees. Snakes of smoke coil on the ceiling, and I wonder if this is where my mama came, if she slept on this floor too. If she laid in the close, hot darkness and thought of me. I scratch my scalp and imagine the press of my fingers as my mama's the last time she washed my hair, oiled it, and braided it. I scoot so that my back grazes Phyllis's, and for one minute, I let myself pretend she's my mama, warm and whole.

A tendril of smoke winds through the crack of the bricks, gathers to sooty coils under the seam of the roof. Aza takes shape in a darker black.

"You came back," I say.

"Others called."

"Did you follow my mama here? To a pen?" I whisper.

Lightning rings Aza's neck before sizzling to darkness. She does not descend to the floor.

"Yes."

"What happened to her?" I ask.

The lightning arcs across her head in an electric halo. She frowns before speaking.

"The same that will happen to you," Aza says. Her face changes. A softening around her eyes could be sympathy, but then it is gone, fast as the zip of a flitting hummingbird over her cheek. "You will sorrow. One will come and take you away."

"You know?" I ask. "You know where my mama went?" Hope foams up my throat, and I do my best to swallow it all, the feeling, the hope, down.

"Out of this place," Aza says. "She was taken away, north and inland."

The feeling, the hope, is a heavy cream now, and it sinks down to my stomach.

“Did you follow her?” I ask.

Aza finally descends in a blanketing mist.

“She was ill, but she wouldn’t call me.” I reach out a finger. At the edge of Aza’s smoky garments is a pepper of cool rain. Her face is placid, still water. “Spirits need calling,” Aza says. “That’s the last I saw of her.”

I ball my hand into a fist and rub it against my stomach: It aches with cold.

“You knew she needed you,” I say, and wish I hadn’t. My hope gone rancid, bubbling up to eat at the back of my tongue like acid.

What I don’t say: *You did nothing.*

Aza is sharp and beautiful in the darkness. She looks away from me, beyond the brick walls, and her profile, for one perfect moment, is my mother’s. She seems near, near in the night, and longing clangs through me.

“Yes,” Aza says. “Sleep.”

I turn to my side, wondering how cold can soothe one moment and sear the next.

They make us wash in a trough before they dress us in sack dresses, all the same color brown. They take the first woman away midmorning while we are crouching in the low, dark building. When the first woman returns, she stumbles into the room before slinking into a corner. She refuses to speak, even when the other women crowd her, asking after her. Men come to the door and take us away, one at a time, calling us by name: Sara, Marie, Elizabeth, Aliya, Annis.

When the white man, featureless in the blotted-out doorway, calls me, I follow him into the bright, hot day. The slave pen is dusty and barren, but over the gate that separates us from the outside, the treetops lining the street sway. Clouds, with the underbellies of doves, float in the sky. The horses roped to poles shuffle and neigh. Men’s voices tangle into one rope, loop around me, squeeze. I can’t breathe. The white man leads me through the door of the grand building that the Georgia Man entered yesterday, but the

Georgia Man is gone. There is a fireplace and a mantel inside, candlesticks to light the room, glowing before mirrors edged in gold. There is a desk, a table with ornate scrolling at the corners, and high-backed wooden chairs. There are five white men, clean-clothed, their hair smashed flat in indentations left by the hats they've hung at the door. They are white-whiskered, tall and short, paunchy and lean, pale. They wear watch fobs. Their teeth gleam in the candlelight.

"Come here, girl," says the shortest and paunchiest of them. He is red at the edges: his hands, his hairline, his cheeks all mottled red, as if he has slashed some animal's throat and been splashed with blood. Another white man, lean and bald, stands next to him.

"Good gait," the short man says. "Bright eyes."

"She looks healthy enough, given you feed her," says the lean man to his paperwork.

"As I will," the short man says.

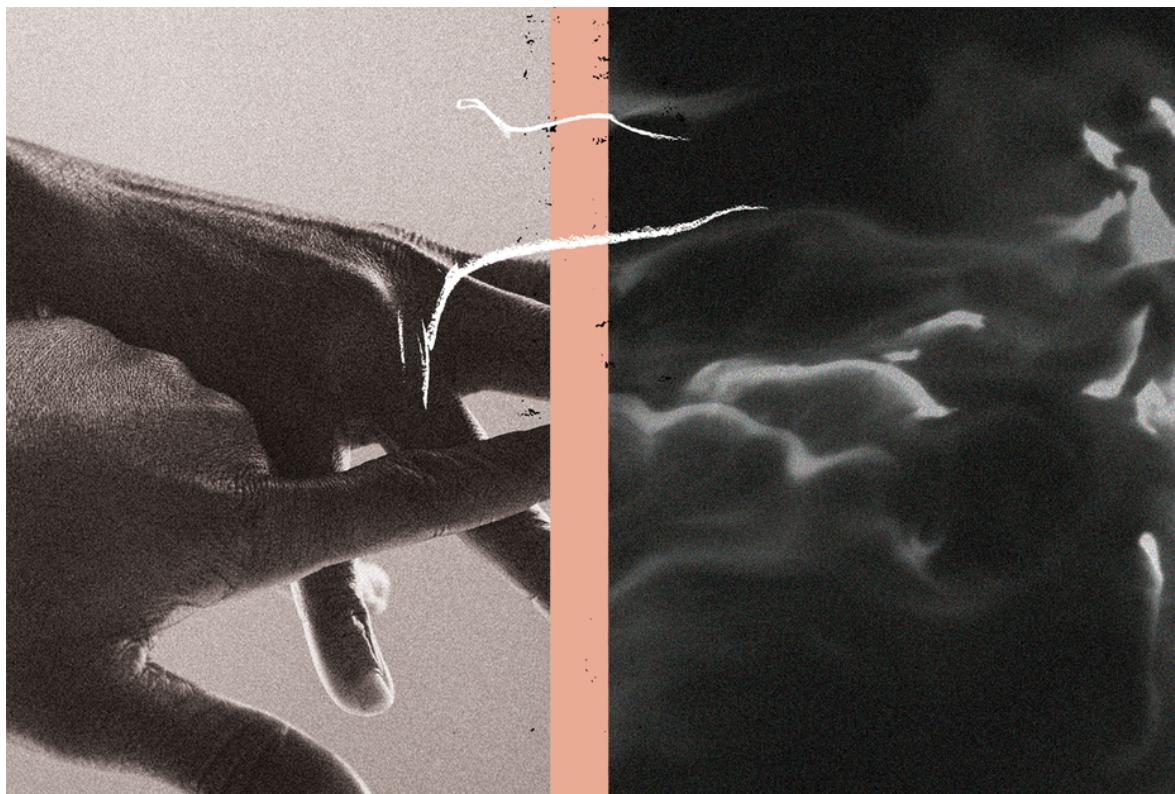


Photo-illustration by Oliver Munday. Sources: Pavlina Popovska / Getty; Marcus Schaefer / Trunk.

The lean man scribbles and talks over his shoulder.

“Take her in.”

“Yes, sir,” a voice says, and it is only then that I notice the brown woman, her hair covered and wrapped, her eyes on the floor, who stands from her seat and walks toward us, her shirt and skirt loose and plain. She puts out her hand to me but doesn’t take mine, and she turns, expecting me to follow her, before disappearing through a small door. The men are all watching me, but they say nothing. Inside, there is a low table with a stained cloth on it. I don’t want to go anywhere near it, but she points and says, “Please, sit.” I perch on the edge so the wood cuts into my legs.

“That’s the doctor, and he’s going to examine you. Ensure you’re healthy, and if something wrong, he’ll treat it.” She talks, but she looks beyond me, as if there is another me behind me, floating midair, ascending through the ceiling. *Aza*, I think. *Aza, you said you would stay.*

“You understand? Nod if you understand.”

I look at her, right at her: the splash of freckles across her high forehead, the mole at the side of her nose, the crooked set of her canine teeth.

“You understand,” she says.

*Aza*, I think. *This woman free. Who spare her?*

The doctor walks in.

“Undress,” the woman says.

*Aza, look*, I think. *Look at her.*

I pull my sack dress over my head. I swallow a small sound when the air touches my skin with a chill hand.

*Aza.* There is a shimmering at the side of my eye.

“He’s a doctor,” the woman says. She glances toward me and her eyes stick for a moment, and then she looks away. Shame like a frown on her. “He’ll ... examine you,” she whispers, and she looks past her folded hands and down to her feet.

*Aza, I think. Please.*

The waxy string bean of a doctor walks in and measures: height, hands, feet, waist, legs, arms, and head. He looks in my open mouth, my ears, peers into my eyes. I jump when he palms my skull, presses down onto the plates of my head, rubs across my closed eyes. I keep them shut when his hand works its way from my crown to my neck and crawls downward, a walnut-knuckled, pale spider.

“She is the witness to your suffering,” Aza says. “She witnesses and remembers. That is her power.”

“Delicate features from some admixture. She shows no marks from childbearing. Slender waist,” the doctor murmurs. “And wide hips.” The head-wrapped woman scribbles his notes, her gaze fixed to the page. “Would probably sell best as a fancy girl,” he says. I imagine myself like Aza, floating above the head-wrapped woman, above the doctor, above the little worms of pain burrowing into me with the doctor’s fingers as he works them over me, into me, into sleeves and pockets ever more tender, even softer. But knowing that my mama endured this, and worse, snaps me back, back into my body. For all the fighting she knew, she prized, she could not rebuke this.

*Oh, Mama.*

One of the men leads me back to the low brick building. It is hot and close, and I want to warn Phyllis before she follows the same man back out, tell her of the woman, the thin doctor, his stabbing hands. But I can’t. I sit next to her and hug myself, every part of me wet: my head, my face, down the middle of my shoulder blades, my stomach, my wrists, between my legs where the doctor probed, and down to my red, open feet. I lean into the wall. I squint against the sharp threads of daylight coming in at the seams; there

are etchings in the brick. Some letters. A shape that looks like a sun. And further down, a straight long line with a little triangle across the top. I touch it, trace it; it looks like a spear. I wonder if my mother might have carved this, put her mark here since she could never write her name.

I wonder if she left this for me.

When Phyllis returns, she tilts to a fall next to me. Her sobs, soft as they are, come out of her like pulled teeth. I wait for her to still, and then I take the ivory awl from my hair, from where it is hidden in my scalp, from where I have worn it every day since my mother was taken, and I scrape into the wall next to the mark that could be my mother's. I scratch a circle, draw a straight line down the center of it, and then draw a little oval on one side of the circle, and on the other side, another: wings. When I squint, it could be a bee.

We are awake when the next white man comes to the squat building, unlocks the door, and directs us into the courtyard, where he lines us up before the seller, the short blotchy man laden with gold over his big-knuckled hands. The doctor stands off to the side with the woman who looks like us. Phyllis, next to me, crosses her arms over her stomach, as if she could protect her soft parts, those parts not bound by bone. The woman at the end of the line is short, shorter than most of us but muscled where the rest of us are thin as ribbon. The seller stands in front of the first woman and reaches out, grabbing her face.

“You a full hand. If a buyer asks, you say, ‘Yes, sir.’”

The doctor writes.

“Don’t, and you’ll be lashed. Understand?”

The woman trembles, shivering like a horse run too long. Then she nods. The seller moves down the line, studies each woman’s arms, fingers, legs, and back before speaking. “You a lady’s maid,” he tells a woman with one drooping eye. “You a prime hand,” he tells the big woman. “You a sick nurse,” he tells another who lurches with a limp. “You a child’s nurse,” he tells another with knotted hair falling down her back. “You a cook,” he tells

the one whom the walk didn't pare to nothing. "You a seamstress," he tells Phyllis. She doesn't even nod; her chin falls into her chest.

"And you ..." He brushes one knuckle up my arm. "You don't speak," he says. "The buyers'll know."

He echoes the doctor, telling me that I am a fancy girl, my only worth between my legs.

A finger of fog curls over his head, encircles it, and grows fat. Aza rises from it. She shines in the sun: river water lit from above. Her arms hang loosely from her sides, and her mouth moves.

"See," Aza says, and points to the seller's back, where there is a flame, narrow as a candle, in the air. The thief moves to the next woman, speaks to her, but his words are muffled. The flame blooms to a fire. A molten head rises from it, then shoulders, then a torso, then a blazing gown. The face turns dark, and a nose appears, then a mouth, and then eyes. The spirit's hair is a conflagration. Her head and shoulders crackle with definition, her visage a log fire, banked and blackened. Hovering over the man, over all of us, is a smoldering cloud of a woman, a burning spirit.

"See," Aza says. "She Who Remembers."

The seller steps to the next woman in our sad line and tells her how she will be sold.

The blazing spirit flexes her arms, which have turned black as her face. The seams in the wood of her forearms curl and move, form lines, form script. The fire at her heart slides into words. These words flow up her arms, over the hills of her shoulders, and into the valley of her black, black mouth.

"She is the witness to your suffering, to all suffering," Aza says. "She witnesses and remembers. That is her power."

The other spirit crackles and spits embers as the accounting scrolls up her arms, over her face, her whole body, only to disappear and make way for more as the women of our line nod at their narratives.

“This world makes us all anew. Calls new spirits, feeds the old. Gives us followers, offerings,” Aza says. “Us a piece,” she says.

[From the KING issue: Jesmyn Ward on how racism is “built into the very bones” of Mississippi](#)

I clench my hands, as if I could choke the seller’s words back into his mouth, back down his throat. I look over the other women in the line, past Aza, to the spirit who remembers. She looks back, her gaping mouth swallowing the last word, and smoke rises from her. There, the smell of an old fire, an ancient fire, a fire prodded and fed and blazed and stoked for generations. I wish I could speak; I want to ask Aza: *What she going to do with it? What her remembering going to do?* Aza’s fog obscures her hands, her arms, her gown, her neck, until all of her is wreathed, and with a crack, she disappears. She Who Remembers looks down at me, and her legs disintegrate, then her hips, her torso, her arms, and last, her face, all of it raining ash.

I would bury the awl in this short man’s eye.

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*This story was adapted from Jesmyn Ward’s novel, [Let Us Descend](#), published in October 2023. It appears in the [November 2023](#) print edition with the headline “She Who Remembers.”*

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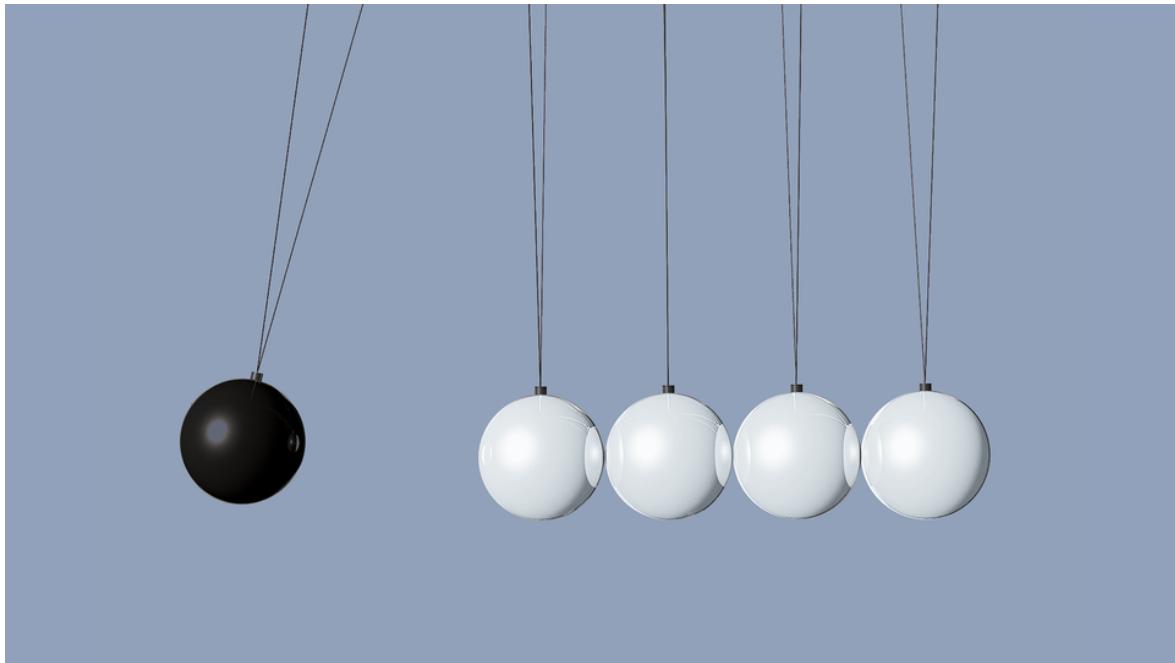
# Dispatches

- **Black Success, White Backlash**

# Black Success, White Backlash

**Black prosperity has provoked white resentment that can make life exhausting for people of color—and it has led to the undoing of policies that have nurtured Black advancement.**

by Elijah Anderson



*This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

For more than half a century, I have been studying the shifting relations between white and Black Americans. My [first journal article](#), published in 1972, when I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, was about Black political power in the industrial Midwest after the riots of the late 1960s. My own experience of race relations in America is even longer. I was born in the Mississippi Delta during World War II, in a cabin on what used to be a plantation, and then moved as a young boy to northern Indiana, where as a Black person in the early 1950s, I was constantly reminded of “my place,” and of the penalties for overstepping it. Seeing the [image of Emmett Till’s dead body](#) in *Jet* magazine in 1955 brought home vividly for my generation of Black kids that the consequences of failing to navigate carefully among white people could even be lethal.

For the past 16 years, I have been on the faculty of the sociology department at Yale, and in 2018 I was granted a Sterling Professorship, the highest academic rank the university bestows. I say this not to boast, but to illustrate that I have made my way from the bottom of American society to the top, from a sharecropper’s cabin to the pinnacle of the ivory tower. One might think that, as a decorated professor at an Ivy League university, I would have escaped the various indignities that being Black in traditionally white spaces exposes you to. And to be sure, I enjoy many of the privileges my white professional-class peers do. But the Black ghetto—a destitute and fearsome place in the popular imagination, though in reality it is home to legions of decent, hardworking families—remains so powerful that it attaches to all Black Americans, no matter where and how they live. Regardless of their wealth or professional status or years of law-abiding bourgeois decency, Black people simply cannot escape what I call the “iconic ghetto.”

I know I haven’t. Some years ago, I spent two weeks in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, a pleasant Cape Cod town full of upper-middle-class white vacationers and working-class white year-rounders. On my daily jog one morning, a white man in a pickup truck stopped in the middle of the road, yelling and gesticulating. “Go home!” he shouted.

Who was this man? Did he assume, because of my Black skin, that I was from the ghetto? Is that where he wanted me to “go home” to?

[From the May 1994 issue: Elijah Anderson on the code of the streets](#)

This was not an isolated incident. When I jog through upscale white neighborhoods near my home in Connecticut, white people tense up—unless I wear my Yale or University of Pennsylvania sweatshirts. When my jogging outfit associates me with an Ivy League university, it identifies me as a certain kind of Black person: a less scary one who has passed inspection under the “white gaze.” Strangers with dark skin are suspect until they can prove their trustworthiness, which is hard to do in fleeting public interactions. For this reason, Black students attending universities near inner cities know to wear college apparel, in hopes of avoiding racial profiling by the police or others.

I once accidentally ran a small social experiment about this. When I joined the Yale faculty in 2007, I bought about 20 university baseball caps to give to the young people at my family reunion that year. Later, my nieces and nephews reported to me that wearing the Yale insignia had transformed their casual interactions with white strangers: White people would now approach them to engage in friendly small talk.

When I jog through upscale white neighborhoods near my home, white people tense up—unless I wear my Yale or Penn sweatshirt.

But sometimes these signifiers of professional status and educated-class propriety are not enough. This can be true even in the most rarefied spaces. When I was hired at Yale, the chair of the sociology department invited me for dinner at the Yale Club of New York City. Clad in a blue blazer, I got to the club early and decided to go up to the fourth-floor library to read *The New York Times*. When the elevator arrived, a crush of people was waiting to get on it, so I entered and moved to the back to make room for others. Everyone except me was white.

As the car filled up, I politely asked a man of about 35, standing by the controls, to push the button for the library floor. He looked at me and—emboldened, I have to imagine, by drinks in the bar downstairs—said, “You

can read?” The car fell silent. After a few tense moments, another man, seeking to defuse the tension, blurted, “I’ve never met a Yalie who couldn’t read.” All eyes turned to me. The car reached the fourth floor. I stepped off, held the door open, and turned back to the people in the elevator. “I’m not a Yalie,” I said. “I’m a new Yale professor.” And I went into the library to read the paper.

I tell these stories—and I’ve [told](#) them [before](#)—not to fault any particular institution (I’ve treasured my time at Yale), but to illustrate my personal experience of a recurring cultural phenomenon: Throughout American history, every moment of significant Black advancement has been met by a white backlash. After the Civil War, under the aegis of Reconstruction, Black people for a time became professionals and congressmen. But when federal troops left the former Confederate states in 1877, white politicians in the South tried to reconstitute slavery with the long rule of Jim Crow. Even the Black people who migrated north to escape this new servitude found themselves relegated to shantytowns on the edges of cities, precursors to the modern Black ghetto.

All of this reinforced what slavery had originally established: the Black body’s place at the bottom of the social order. This racist positioning became institutionalized in innumerable ways, and it persists today.

I want to emphasize that across the decades, many white Americans have encouraged racial equality, albeit sometimes under duress. In response to the riots of the 1960s, the federal government—led by the former segregationist Lyndon B. Johnson—passed far-reaching legislation that finally extended the full rights of citizenship to Black people, while targeting segregation. These legislative reforms—and, especially, affirmative action, which was implemented [via LBJ’s executive order in 1965](#)—combined with years of economic expansion to produce a long period of what I call “racial incorporation,” which substantially elevated the income of many Black people and brought them into previously white spaces. Yes, a lot of affirmative-action efforts stopped at mere tokenism. Even so, many of these “tokens” managed to succeed, and the result is the largest Black middle class in American history.

To survive in white workplaces, Black newcomers must perform an elaborate dance in which they demonstrate their distance from the ghetto.

Over the past 50 years, according to [a study by the Pew Research Center](#), the proportion of Black people who are low-income (less than \$52,000 a year for a household of three) has fallen seven points, from 48 to 41 percent. The proportion who are middle-income (\$52,000 to \$156,000 a year) has risen by one point, to 47 percent. The proportion who are high-income (more than \$156,000 a year) has risen the most dramatically, from 5 to 12 percent.

Overall, Black poverty remains egregiously disproportionate to that of white and Asian Americans. But fewer Black Americans are poor than 50 years ago, and more than twice as many are rich. Substantial numbers now attend the best schools, pursue professions of their choosing, and occupy positions of power and prestige. Affirmative action worked.

But that very success has inflamed the [inevitable white backlash](#). Notably, the only racial group more likely to be low-income now than 50 years ago is whites—and the only group less likely to be low-income is Blacks.

### [Read: Five decades of white backlash](#)

For some white people displaced from their jobs by globalization and deindustrialization, the successful Black person with a good job is the embodiment of what's wrong with America. The spectacle of Black doctors, CEOs, and college professors “out of their place” creates an uncomfortable dissonance, which white people deal with by mentally relegating successful Black people to the ghetto. That Black man who drives a new Lexus and sends his children to private school—he must be a drug kingpin, right?

In predominantly white professional spaces, this racial anxiety appears in subtler ways. Black people are all too familiar with a particular kind of interaction, in the guise of a casual watercooler conversation, the gist of which is a sort of interrogation: “Where did you come from?”; “How did you get here?”; and “Are you qualified to be here?” (The presumptive answer to the last question is clearly no; Black skin, evoking for white people the iconic ghetto, confers an automatic deficit of credibility.)

Black newcomers must signal quickly and clearly that they belong. Sometimes this requires something as simple as showing a company ID that white people are not asked for. Other times, a more elaborate dance is required, a performance in which the worker must demonstrate their propriety, their distance from the ghetto. This can involve dressing more formally than the job requires, speaking in a self-consciously educated way, and evincing a placid demeanor, especially in moments of disagreement.

#### From the November 2018 issue: The personal cost of Black success

As part of my ethnographic research, I once embedded in a major financial-services corporation in Philadelphia, where I spent six months observing and interviewing workers. One Black employee I spoke with, a senior vice president, said that people of color who wanted to climb the management ladder must wear the right “uniform” and work hard to perform respectability. “They’re never going to envision you as being a white male,” he told me, “but if you can dress the same and look a certain way and drive a conservative car and whatever else, they’ll say, ‘This guy has a similar attitude, similar values [to we white people]. He’s a team player.’ If you don’t dress with the uniform, obviously you’re on the wrong team.”

This need to constantly perform respectability for white people is a psychological drain, leaving Black people spent and demoralized. They typically keep this demoralization hidden from their white co-workers because they feel that they need to show they are not whiners. Having to pay a “Black tax” as they move through white areas deepens this demoralization. This tax is levied on people of color in nice restaurants and other public places, or simply while driving, when the fear of a lethal encounter with the police must always be in mind. The existential danger this kind of encounter poses is what necessitates “The Talk” that Black parents—fearful every time their kids go out the door that they might not come back alive—give to their children. The psychological effects of all of this accumulate gradually, sapping the spirit and engendering cynicism.

Even the most exalted members of the Black elite must live in two worlds. They understand the white elite’s mores and values, and embody them to a substantial extent—but they typically remain keenly conscious of their Blackness. They socialize with both white and Black people of their own

professional standing, but also members of the Black middle and working classes with whom they feel more kinship, meeting them at the barbershop, in church, or at gatherings of long-standing friendship groups. The two worlds seldom overlap. This calls to mind W. E. B. Du Bois' "double consciousness"—[a term he used for the first time in this publication](#), in 1897—referring to the dual cultural mindsets that successful African Americans must simultaneously inhabit.

[From the August 1897 issue: W. E. B. Du Bois' "Strivings of the Negro People"](#)

For middle-class Black people, a certain fluidity—abetted by family connections—enables them to feel a connection with those at the lower reaches of society. But that connection comes with a risk of contagion; they fear that, meritocratic status notwithstanding, they may be dragged down by their association with the hood.

When I worked at the University of Pennsylvania, some friends of mine and I mentored at-risk youth in West Philadelphia.

One of these kids, Kevin Robinson, who goes by KAYR (pronounced "K.R."), grew up with six siblings in a single-parent household on public assistance. Two of his sisters got pregnant as teenagers, and for a while the whole family was homeless. But he did well in high school and was accepted to Bowdoin College, where he was one of five African Americans in a class of 440. He was then accepted to Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business, where he was one of 10 or so African Americans in an M.B.A. class of roughly 180. He got into the analyst-training program at Goldman Sachs, where his cohort of 300 had five African Americans. And from there he ended up at a hedge fund, where he was the lone Black employee.

What's striking about Robinson's accomplishments is not just the steepness of his rise or the scantness of Black peers as he climbed, but the extent of cultural assimilation he felt he needed to achieve in order to fit in. He trimmed his Afro. He did a pre-college program before starting Bowdoin, where he had sushi for the first time and learned how to play tennis and golf. "Let me look at how these people live; let me see how they operate," he recalls saying to himself. He decided to start reading *The New Yorker* and

*Time* magazine, as they did, and to watch *60 Minutes*. “I wanted people to see me more as their peer versus … someone from the hood. I wanted them to see me as, like, ‘Hey, look, he’s just another middle-class Black kid.’” When he was about to start at Goldman Sachs, a Latina woman who was mentoring him there told him not to wear a silver watch or prominent jewelry: “‘KAYR, go get a Timex with a black leather band. Keep it very simple … Fit in.’” My friends and I had given him similar advice earlier on.

All of this worked; he thrived professionally. Yet even as he occupied elite precincts of wealth and achievement, he was continually getting pulled back to support family in the ghetto, where he felt the need to code-switch, speaking and eating the ways his family did so as not to insult them.

The year he entered Bowdoin, one of his younger brothers was sent to prison for attempted murder, and a sister who had four children was shot in the face and died. Over the years he would pay for school supplies for his nieces and nephews, and for multiple family funerals—all while keeping his family background a secret from his professional colleagues. Even so, he would get subjected to the standard indignities—being asked to show ID when his white peers were not; enduring the (sometimes obviously) racist comments from colleagues (“You don’t act like a regular Black”). He would report egregious offenses to HR but would usually just let things go, for fear that developing a reputation as a “race guy” would restrict his professional advancement.

Robinson’s is a remarkable success story. He is 40 now; he owns a property-management company and is a multimillionaire. But his experience makes clear that no matter what professional or financial heights you ascend to, if you are Black, you can never escape the iconic ghetto, and sometimes not even the actual one.

The most egregious intrusion of a Black person into white space was the election (and reelection) of Barack Obama as president. A [Black man in the White House!](#) For some white people, this was intolerable. Birthers, led by Donald Trump, said he was ineligible for the presidency, claiming falsely that he had been born in Kenya. The white backlash intensified; Republicans opposed Obama with more than the standard amount of partisan vigor. In 2013, at the beginning of Obama’s second term, the Supreme Court gutted

the Voting Rights Act, which had protected the franchise for 50 years. Encouraged by this opening, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas moved forward with voter-suppression laws, setting a course that other states are now following. And this year, the Supreme Court outlawed affirmative action in college admissions. I want to tell a story that illustrates the social gains this puts at risk.

Many years ago, when I was a professor at Penn, my father came to visit me. Walking around campus, we bumped into various colleagues and students of mine, most of them white, who greeted us warmly. He watched me interact with my secretary and other department administrators. Afterward, Dad and I went back to my house to drink beer and listen to Muddy Waters.

“So you’re teaching at that white school?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“You work with white people. And you teach white students.”

“Yeah, but they actually come in all colors,” I responded. I got his point, though.

“Well, let me ask you one thing,” he said, furrowing his brow.

“What’s that, Dad?”

“Do they respect you?”

After thinking about his question a bit, I said, “Well, some do. And some don’t. But you know, Dad, it is hard to tell which is which sometimes.”

“Oh, I see,” he said.

He didn’t disbelieve me; it was just that what he’d witnessed on campus was at odds with his experience of the typical Black-white interaction, where the subordinate status of the Black person was automatically assumed by the white one. Growing up in the South, my dad understood that white people simply did not respect Black people. Observing the respectful treatment I

received from my students and colleagues, my father had a hard time believing his own eyes. Could race relations have changed so much, so fast?

[Read: A 1999 interview with Elijah Anderson on his book \*Code of the Street\*](#)

They had—in large part because of what affirmative action, and the general processes of racial incorporation and Black economic improvement, had wrought. In the 1960s, the only Black people at the financial-services firm I studied would have been janitors, night watchmen, elevator operators, or secretaries; 30 years later, affirmative action had helped populate the firm with Black executives. Each beneficiary of affirmative action, each member of the growing Black middle class, helped normalize the presence of Black people in professional and other historically white spaces. All of this diminished, in some incremental way, the power of the symbolic ghetto to hold back people of color.

Too many people forget, if ever they knew it, what a profound cultural shift affirmative action effected. And they overlook affirmative action’s crucial role in forestalling social unrest.

Some years ago, I was invited to the College of the Atlantic, a small school in Maine, to [give the commencement address](#). As I stood at the sink in the men’s room before the event, checking the mirror to make sure all my academic regalia was properly arrayed, an older white man came up to me and said, with no preamble, “What do you think of affirmative action?”

“I think it’s a form of reparations,” I said.

“Well, I think they need to be educated first,” he said, and then walked out.

I was so provoked by this that I scrambled back to my hotel room and rewrote my speech. I’d already been planning to talk about the benefits of affirmative action, but I sharpened and expanded my case, explaining that it not only had lifted many Black people out of the ghetto, but had been a weapon in the Cold War, when unaligned countries and former colonies were trying to decide which superpower to follow. Back then, Democrats and some Republicans were united in believing that affirmative action, by

demonstrating the country's commitment to racial justice and equality, helped project American greatness to the world.

Beyond that, I said to this almost entirely white audience, affirmative action had helped keep the racial unrest of the '60s from flaring up again. When the kin—the mothers, fathers, cousins, nephews, sons, daughters, baby mamas, uncles, aunts—of ghetto residents secure middle-class livelihoods, those ghetto relatives hear about it. This gives the young people who live there a modicum of hope that they might do the same. Hope takes the edge off distress and desperation; it lessens the incentives for people to loot and burn. What opponents of affirmative action fail to understand is that without a ladder of upward mobility for Black Americans, and a general sense that justice will prevail, a powerful nurturer of social concord gets lost.

Yes, continuing to expand the Black professional and middle classes will lead to more instances of “the dance,” and the loaded interrogations, and the other awkward moments and indignities that people of color experience in white spaces. But the greater the number of affluent, successful Black people in such places, the faster this awkwardness will diminish, and the less power the recurrent waves of white reaction will have to set people of color back. I would like to believe that future generations of Black Americans will someday find themselves as pleasantly surprised as my dad once was by the new levels of racial respect and equality they discover.

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*This article appears in the [November 2023](#) print edition with the headline “Black Success, White Backlash.”*

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# Culture & Critics

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# Comedians Only Care About Comedy

# **A new book cured me of any attachment to the idea of the stand-up as truth-telling philosophie.**

by James Parker



*This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

What do you get if you give a whale a cellphone? Moby Dick pics.

I made that one up. Is it funny? I don't think so. Nonetheless, it's a joke. Or what Jesse David Fox, in his compendious, deeply considered, provoking, and rather dizzying new *[Comedy Book](#)*, calls a "joke-joke." A verbal-conceptual circuit, an abstract frivolity. "Joke-jokes," Fox writes, "are jokes you find in joke books. They're freestanding, authorless, utilitarian tools to produce laughter." Or if not laughter, then perhaps just a faint tickle in the forebrain, as of a very tiny problem, solved.

Fox, a comedy critic at *New York* magazine, is explaining joke-jokes to distinguish them from what comedians mean when they say "jokes"—comedy jokes—which are bits, stories, ideas, images, moods, themes, words, basically anything that produces the comedy feeling, that does the thing that comedy is supposed to do.

Which is what, exactly? What's comedy for? Ah, well, now we're in it. Comedy is for jabbing us in our pleasure centers. For being nice by being nasty. For puncturing grandiosity. For relieving tension, creating tension, living in tension. It's for making us laugh, but then again—is it?

We are in a moment, comedy-wise. On the one hand, there's never been more of it—more specials, podcasts, comedy-generated discussions and debate and cultural flare-ups. There's a rhythm and an expertise about comedy criticism right now (Fox's very much included) that reminds me of good jazz writing from the '50s and '60s: savvy, insidery, immersed, excited, with its own developing vocabulary.

On the other hand, comedy, like everything else, is in bits. Online, it has shattered into memes and trolls and culture warlords and goats singing Bon Jovi. Laughter itself has fragmented. Just listen to it: You've got your gurgling, impotent *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* laughter over here; you've got your harsh and barkingly energized Trumpist laughter over there; you've got your free-floating Joe Rogan—podcast yuks; and then you've got the private snuffling and seizurelike sounds that you yourself make when you're watching Jay Jurden Instagram clips alone, on your phone, with your earbuds in. And for most of us, behind all of this, the feeling that we're whistling past the graveyard: that the sludge is rising, politically; that the bullyboys are cracking their knuckles; that we're "just kind of half-waiting,"

as Marc Maron put it in a recent HBO special, “for the stupids to choose a uniform.”

How did we get here? How did we arrive at a place where Jordan Peterson, who wouldn’t know a good joke if it ran him over, is instructing us on the importance of comedy as a defense against totalitarianism, while Dave Chappelle—one of the funniest men alive—[burns up his comic capital defending his right to be mean about trans people?](#)

Comedy, like everything else, is in bits. Laughter itself has fragmented.

Not laughing. That’s big right now too. Laughter withheld by the audience, out of disapproval, but also laughter withheld by the comedian: laughter checked, thwarted, confused, made to think about itself. [Hannah Gadsby’s Nanette](#), which debuted on Netflix in 2018, was the [supreme exhibition of stopped laughter](#). Fox calls it “the most revolutionary piece of stand-up of my lifetime.” Having carefully, and with many chuckles along the way, explained and deconstructed the primal mechanism of stand-up comedy for their audience—the building of tension, the controlled release—Gadsby then refused to do the second part. They built the tension, horrendously, via a story about a homophobic assault they’d suffered, and then left it there, held it there, undischarged. “This tension,” they said. “It’s yours. I am not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like.”

More recently, Jerrod Carmichael used [his intimate, small-venue special, Rothaniel](#), to publicly come out as gay, fragilizing and tenderizing the whole exchange between a comedian and his audience. *Rothaniel*, by leaving the performer so exposed, made the audience wonder about the eagerness and vulgarity of its laughter.

Fox has thought long and hard about all of this—about TikTok, memes, sadness, Adam Sandler movies, Maria Bamford, bombing onstage, and the ultimate joke, which is death. He shares his own grief at the loss of his brother, and wonders whether comedy, in the end, might simply be for helping us get through this difficult and sorrow-filled life.

Donald Trump, the stand-up at the gates of hell, is obviously a massive problem for comedy. Clinically humorless, destitute of jokes, too strange to

be hacky, and with the comic precision of a broken bicycle chain, he still—as the comedians say—destroys. He *kills*, night after night. He gives people, by God, that comedy feeling, or his version of it: gaseous, loopy, sneering, idolatrous, incipiently violent. Fascist levity. He’s almost a prop comic, but his prop is human weakness. Is he, in his dark-side-of-the-moon way, teaching us something about comedy? What if the breakthrough comedy event of the past five years was not *Nanette* or *Rothaniel* but the Trump rally where he said, “I can be more presidential than any candidate that ever ran, than any president, other than maybe Abraham Lincoln when he is wearing his hat”?

“The sense of what is funny,” Fox writes in a chapter titled “Funny,” “is so subjective—so completely built into your persona—that it feels objective.” What’s funny to you? What’s funny to me? I worship Sarah Silverman. I can’t understand Bo Burnham. Meanwhile, YouTube keeps suggesting that I watch interview clips of Theo Von. I still enjoy the comedy of Louis C.K., but I want a bit more from him. For two minutes he was the world’s pariah; he’s been busted and disgraced at a level granted to few mortals, a near-cosmic level, and he should tell us about it. Not just in a couple of jokes, which he’s already done; not just with a lit-up SORRY sign behind him—but in a full set, a full blinded-by-the-darkness artistic reckoning with who he was and who he is now. Is that too much to ask?

Well, yes it is. There’s no *should* in comedy. Louis C.K. will do what he wants. A bonus side effect of reading *Comedy Book*, of reading about all these comedians and their processes, was that I was cured, finally, of my sentimental attachment to the idea of the stand-up as truth-telling philosophie. Comedians love comedy. They love it more than anything else: more than truth, or people, or the vision of a more just society. That’s what makes them comedians. It’s a gift, a faulty chip, or a quirk of evolution. As Steve Harvey put it, talking to Jerry Seinfeld: “Tragedy strikes. I got news for you. We have the jokes *that night*.” Comedy goes where the pain is—yours, mine, the comedian’s, the world’s—straight to it, because that’s where the laughs are; because the laughs are pain, transmuted. Simple as that. Comedy has no responsibility. It never will. And we need it like air.

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# What Madonna Knows

**The artist is always one step ahead  
—and has a unique power to  
scandalize each generation anew.**

by Sophie Gilbert



We like our female icons, as they age, to go quietly—to tiptoe backwards into semi-reclusion, away from our relentless curiosity and our unforgiving gaze. Tina Turner managed this arguably better than anyone else, [holed up for the last decade of her life in a gated Swiss château](#) with an adoring

husband and a consulting role on the hit musical about her life, watching a younger performer step nimbly into her gold tassels. Joni Mitchell retreated to her Los Angeles and British Columbia properties for so long that when [she reappeared for a full set at the Newport Folk Festival last year](#), it was as though God herself was suddenly present, ensconced in a gilded armchair, her voice still so sonorous that practically every single person onstage with her wept.

If you age in private, the deal goes, you can reemerge triumphantly as royalty in your silver era. But Madonna never signed up for dignified placating. At 47, as sinewy as an impala in a hot-pink leotard and fishnets, she moved with such controlled, physical sensuality in the video for “Hung Up” that the 20-something dancers around her seemed bland by comparison. At 53, she headlined a Super Bowl halftime show—part gladiatorial circus, part intergalactic ancient-Egyptian cheerleading meet—while 114 million people watched. At 65, Madonna regularly uploads videos of herself to TikTok, her face plumped into uncanny, doll-like smoothness, strutting to snippets of obscure dialogue or electronica in psychedelic outfits categorized by one commenter as “colorful granny.”

What’s most striking to me about the videos is how Madonna retains the power to scandalize each generation anew—even teenagers nourished on a cultural diet of *Euphoria* and hard-core pornography—with her adamantly sexual self-presentation. “Lost her mind,” one TikTok commenter wrote as Madonna, wearing a black lace fetish mask, simply stared confrontationally at the camera. About a clip of her waving her arms in a diamanté cowboy hat, her chest festooned with chains, a cheerful-looking boy posted, “Someone come get Nana she’s wandering again.”

### [Read: The dark teen show that pushes the edge of provocation](#)

This is, mark you, almost 40 years after Madonna rolled around on the floor at the MTV Video Music Awards in a corseted wedding dress, her white underwear and garters fully visible to the cameras, in an early TV appearance that an outraged Annie Lennox called “very, very whorish … It was like she was fucking the music industry.” At the time, Madonna’s manager, Freddy DeMann, told her she’d ruined her career. One of the few who approved was Cyndi Lauper, perpetually compared to Madonna in

those days. Lauper seemed to recognize what her contemporary was trying to do, and what she's been doing ever since, often operating just beyond the frequency of comprehension. "I loved that," Lauper said. "It was performance art."

People have argued about Madonna from the very beginning. That people are still arguing about her—over whether she's too old, too brazen, too narcissistic, too sexual, too deluded, too Botoxed, too shameless—underscores the scope and endurance of Madonna's oeuvre. She makes music, but she's not a musician. She's not an actor either, or a director, or a children's-book author, even though she's embodied each of these roles (with varying degrees of success). She is, rather, an artist. More than that, she's a living, breathing, constantly metamorphosing work of art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—her life, her physical self, her sexuality, her presence in the media interweaving and coalescing into the totality of the spectacle that is Madonna. "My sister is her own masterpiece," [Christopher Ciccone told \*Vanity Fair\* in 1991](#), the year *Madonna: Truth or Dare*, a movie capturing her Blond Ambition tour, became the then-highest-grossing documentary in history.

We may not understand Madonna in the moment, but rarely is she wrong about what's coming.

In her reverent, 800-page [\*Madonna: A Rebel Life\*](#), the writer Mary Gabriel offers the argument that Madonna's entire biography is an exercise in reinventing female power. She crystallizes this mission of masterful defiance in a chapter about [\*Madonna's Sex\*](#), a 1992 coffee-table collection of photographic erotica that sold more than 1.5 million copies and almost torched her career. A decade into her stardom, Madonna had already

inhabited all the stereotypes that patriarchal society concocted for women—dutiful daughter, gamine, blond bombshell, adoring wife, bitch—in her pursuit of a new woman, a person who exercised her power freely, joyously, even wantonly, if that's what she wanted. Her quest was what the French philosopher Hélène Cixous described as the search for a "feminine imaginary ... an ego no longer given over to an image defined by the masculine."

Before long, Madonna had broken multiple records for a female solo artist, having sold more than 150 million albums around the world. She had also “transformed the traditional pop-rock concert format into a full-scale theatrical experience,” Gabriel writes, “raised music video from a sales tool to an art form, and put a woman—herself—in control of her own music, from creation to development to distribution.”

All of this is true, and yet the volume of evidence that Gabriel amasses reveals something even greater: not just a cultural phenomenon, or even a postmodern artist transforming herself into the ultimate commodity, but a woman who intuits and manifests social change so far ahead of everyone else that she makes people profoundly uncomfortable. We may not understand her in the moment, but rarely is she wrong about what’s coming.

### Read: What we talk about when we talk about ‘unruly’ women

To try to write about Madonna is to stare into an abyss of content: the music, the videos, the movies, the books, the fashion, but also the responses that those things generated, a corpus almost as significant to the construction of Madonna as the work itself. More than 60 books have been devoted to her, encompassing biography, critical analysis, comic books, sleazy profiteering, and even a collection of women’s dreams about her. “With the possible exception of Elvis, Madonna is without peer in having inscribed herself with such intensity on the public consciousness in multiple and contradictory ways,” Cathy Schwichtenberg wrote in *The Madonna Connection*, a 1993 book of essays summarizing the growing academic field known as Madonna Studies.

Gabriel’s biography is astonishingly granular in its attention to biographical detail, and also to historical context. You could, if you wanted, read the book as a kind of late-20th-century history of women’s ongoing fight for liberation, filtered through the lens of someone whom Joni Mitchell variously derided as “manufactured,” “a living Barbie doll,” and “death to all things real” and Norman Mailer described as “our greatest living female artist.” More often, *A Rebel Life* reads like a Walter Isaacson biography of a Great Man, a thorough life-and-times synthesis of a world-changing, civilization-defining genius—only with a lot of cone bras and syncopated beats.

Gabriel's attention to context is key, because trying to understand Madonna as a flesh-and-blood person—the biographer's traditional endeavor—is a trap. Self-exposure, for her, is about obfuscation more than revelation. Every new identity she disseminates into the world is just a different layer; the more you see of her, the more the “truth” of her is obscured. *Truth or Dare* famously includes a contretemps between Madonna and her boyfriend at the time, the actor Warren Beatty, while Madonna is having her throat examined by a doctor mid-tour. “Do you want to talk at all off camera?” the doctor asks. “She doesn’t want to live off camera, much less talk,” Beatty interjects. “Why would you say something if it’s off camera? What point is there of existing?”

Beatty was then the embodiment of Old Hollywood, square-jawed and restrained, while the considerably younger Madonna supposedly represented the MTV generation, coarse and venal, willing to trade even her most intimate moments for hard profit. (*Truth or Dare* premiered a full year before *The Real World* ushered in a new realm of “reality” entertainment.) What Beatty, along with many others, missed was that exposure wasn’t about selling out in any conventional sense. For Madonna, the construction of her public-facing persona was about spinning masquerade, fantasy, and fragments of self-disclosure into mass-media magic that confounded, again and again, efforts to categorize her.

She teased ideas about gender fluidity and bisexuality; she declared herself to be a “gay man”; she played up her friendship with the comedian Sandra Bernhard as rumors flew that the two were sleeping together. The main constant through her kaleidoscopic permutations was the response they elicited: As the cultural theorist John Fiske once put it, her sexuality was perceived as a new caliber of threat—“not the traditional and easily contained one of woman as whore, but the more radical one of woman as independent of masculinity.” (No wonder Beatty, the most masculine of screen stars, chafed at it.)

And yet, believe it or not, Madonna is human, and she was born—to a woman also named Madonna and a man named Silvio “Tony” Ciccone—in Bay City, Michigan, in 1958. When she was 5 years old, her mother died, a fact that seems as fundamental to the arc of her career as music or sex or religion. Tony, Gabriel writes, struggling alone with a houseful of unruly

children, simply raised Madonna in the same way that he raised her two older brothers. (At the time of her mother's death, Madonna had three younger siblings; two more followed when Tony married the family's housekeeper.) She played as they played; she fought and bit and belched and yelled just as they did. When we think about Madonna later, effortlessly disrupting conventions of feminine sexual presentation and power dynamics, this upbringing makes perfect sense. (In one of my favorite photos from *Sex*, Madonna stands by a window, facing outward, wearing just a white tank top, motorcycle boots, and no underwear, her buttocks exposed as she appears to scratch an imaginary pair of balls.)

Gabriel, from the start, is alert to signs of Madonna's self-transfiguring urges: how, in elementary school, she put wires in her braids to make them stick up like those of her young Black friends; how, in eighth grade, she scandalized her junior-high-school audience with a risqué, psychedelic dance sequence set to the Who's "Baba O'Riley"; how, at 15, she first presented herself to her dance teacher and mentor, Christopher Flynn, as a childlike figure carrying a doll under her arm, as if to signal that she was a blank slate for him to work on.

But the years that seem most crucial are the ones she spent in New York City trying to make it as a modern dancer after dropping out of the University of Michigan. In 1978, when she arrived, the city was experiencing ungovernable urban blight and a simultaneous creative renaissance. Modes of artistic expression were becoming ever more fluid; the Warholian creation of a persona, and the postmodern appropriation of original ideas and images into new art forms, expanded performance possibilities. After quickly realizing her limitations as a dancer, Madonna did a stint as a drummer in a New Wave band called the Breakfast Club. She did nude modeling to pay for a series of truly scuzzy apartments. When her father begged her to come home, she'd say, "You don't get it, Dad. I don't want to be a doctor. I don't want to be a lawyer. I want to be an artist."

Her desire to make art was tied up with her ferocious ambition, her early comprehension that celebrity could be its own kind of art form. A friend of Madonna's recalls to Gabriel that when she first met her, in a club in New York in the early '80s, Madonna said, "I'm going to be the most famous woman in the world." By 1982, she had redirected her focus toward music

and become embedded in what Gabriel describes as “a radical art kingdom” that melded high and low culture, where punk kids and street artists were suddenly the new creative aristocracy. The previous year, MTV had transformed music into a visual medium. Madonna started writing songs, and seems right from the start to have had a sweeping conception of what pop music could provide: not the kind of plastic, bubblegum stardom that jeering critics believed she was after, but a global canvas on which she aimed to project her vision.

Kim Gordon, of the band Sonic Youth, once wrote that “people pay to see others believe in themselves.” Madonna’s earliest fans were girls, gay men, queer teenagers of color who found community in the same spaces where her own sense of self was honed. In the video for her first single, “Everybody,” in 1982, Madonna dances onstage at a nightclub in a strikingly unsexy, punk-esque outfit: brown leather vest, plaid shirt, tapered khaki pants, theatrical makeup. The camera keeps its distance; you can hardly see her face. But by the video for her second, “Burning Up,” a year later, she’s unmistakably Madonna, with teased blond hair, armfuls of rubber bracelets, the mole above her lip and the slight gap between her teeth underscoring her confrontational, intent gaze. This was the moment when the product of Madonna seems to have coalesced. She wasn’t just making music (one critic famously described her vocals on her early albums as “Minnie Mouse on helium”). Provocation was part of her act—her second record, 1984’s *Like a Virgin*, was clear on that front—but not the point of it.

Her haters often respond to the same quality that her most ardent fans do: her confidently incisive mockery of the way culture prefers women to be portrayed.

Rather, what her fans immediately recognized in Madonna was the animating spirit of her work: complete certainty in her worth, and a pathological unwillingness to give credence to anyone other than herself. Everything else about Madonna may change, but this fundamental self-conviction is always there. And for anyone who’s been raised to be or to feel like a modified, shamed, incomplete version of themselves, it’s intoxicating. At 7, in 1990, I wore out my cassette tape of *I’m Breathless*—the concept album Madonna recorded to accompany her role in *Dick Tracy*—thrilled by the unthinkable bravado, the cockiness of “Sooner or Later.” At 40, I keep

coming back to her “Hung Up” video, stunned at the visual evidence that a middle-aged mother of young children could be so strong, so strange and charismatic and compelling.

This kind of power is unnerving to observe in women; instinctively, we’re either drawn to it or driven to destroy it. *A Rebel Life* sometimes feels excessively boosterish, noting and then brushing over criticism of Madonna’s more questionable acts over the years—her decision to [forcibly kiss Drake at Coachella in 2015](#), to his apparent distress, among them. But Gabriel’s useful goal is perhaps to get beyond a debate that’s been stoked by an extraordinary amount of vilification. Madonna, the most successful female artist of all time, is also indubitably the most loathed. And her haters often respond to the same quality in her self-presentation that her most ardent fans do: her confidently incisive mockery of the way culture prefers women to be portrayed. People reacted to *Sex*—a work that constantly identifies and then undercuts how people want to see her—with the pearl-clutching faux horror that tends to accompany Madonna’s provocations, as though she had done something utterly novel and irredeemably graceless.

### [Read: Madonna’s kamikaze kiss](#)

In fact, the book was right in step with contemporaneous art-world forays into hard-core erotica. *Sex* scandalized a mainstream audience that had presumably never seen Cindy Sherman’s *Sex Pictures* (the artist was one of Madonna’s inspirations) or Jeff Koons’s *Made in Heaven* series, in which the artist created explicit renderings of himself having sexual intercourse with the porn performer Ilona Staller, who was briefly his wife. Madonna has said she intended her book to be funny (in more than one photo, she outright laughs). But *Sex* also asserts her engagement with a lineage of artists who helped shape her, and highlights her determination to unsettle the conventional gaze.

Madonna’s videos and live shows, Gabriel argues, tend to be where you get the most complete sense of her vision, “a new kind of feminism, a *lived liberation*” that pointed the way for a woman to be captivating “not because she was so ‘pretty’ but because she was so free.” In her 1986 video for “Open Your Heart,” which features a giant Art Deco nude by the Polish painter Tamara de Lempicka, Madonna struts in a black corset in front of an

audience that watches her—sneeringly, or with feigned lack of interest—but doesn't see anything more than surface-level sexuality. At the video's end, Madonna (dressed now in a suit and a bowler cap, with cropped hair) dances away with a preteen boy who's been waiting for her outside. The spectators in the club want to possess and objectify Madonna; the boy wants to be her, recognizing her as an artistic kindred spirit, not just a sex object. (The video has long been interpreted by Madonna's queer and trans fans as a gesture of affirmation.)

Three years later, in “Express Yourself,” directed by David Fincher, Madonna stages a riff on the 1927 Fritz Lang movie *Metropolis*, in which she rides a stone swan through a dystopian cityscape. She's a kind of Ayn Randian femme fatale in a green silk gown, holding a cat; later, dressed in an oversize suit, she flexes her muscles and grabs her crotch; in another scene, she lies naked, in chains, on a bed. (“I have chained myself,” she later clarified in an interview with *Nightline*. “There wasn't a man that put that chain on me.”) Madonna moves fluidly from subject to object, man to woman, captor to captive, skewering misogynistic Hollywood tropes. Her potent allure, whatever her guise, is unexpectedly disconcerting.

The video also has almost nothing whatsoever to do with the song, which is a totally generic, upbeat pop confection encouraging women to pick men who validate their mind and their self-worth. The discrepancy is, I think, purposeful: It begs us to notice the different registers her work is operating in, and to observe how “pop star,” for her, is just another chameleonic guise. I love Madonna's music, which functions at a level that enables her to be stupendously successful, ridiculously wealthy, a public figure of a sort no one has ever seen before. But those accomplishments are so much less interesting than everything else her music allows her to do through the performance she choreographs around it: blast through boundaries of sexuality and presentation; explore the permeability of gender; expose the hypocrisy of a music-video landscape in which, as she said in that same *Nightline* interview, violence against women is readily portrayed but sex gets you banned from MTV.

Thirty years later, in a culture where bombastic, sexless superhero movies now dominate mass entertainment and where erotica—as opposed to porn—has been all but banished to the nonvisual realm of fiction, her explorations

of sexuality feel as radical as ever. And we continue to resist them, to reflexively recoil. When I told people I was writing about Madonna, they invariably responded with some dismayed version of “Her face!!!” It’s easy to assume that she’s just another woman navigating the horror of aging in plain sight via an overreliance on cosmetic enhancements, just another former bombshell who won’t concede that her time as the ultimate sex object has ended.

But Madonna has never seemed to think of herself as a sex object. An objectifier who greedily prioritizes her own pleasure, yes; an alpha, absolutely; but never a sop to someone else’s fantasy. And the AI-esque strangeness of her appearance now suggests something else, too. I keep thinking about bell hooks’s argument, in a 1992 essay, that Madonna “deconstructs the myth of ‘natural’ white girl beauty” by exposing how artificial it is, how unnatural. She bends every effort, hooks notes, to embody an aesthetic that she herself is simultaneously satirizing. One might deduce that Madonna senses better than anyone where female beauty standards are heading, in an era of Facetune, Ozempic, livestreamed TikTok surgeries, and [Instagram face](#). And that she knows what she’s doing: Her current mode of self-presentation is Madonna supplying yet another dose of what the media want from women—sexiness, youth, erasure of maturity—distorted just enough to make us flinch.

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# The Smartest Man Who Ever Lived

**A novelist transforms the physicist  
John von Neumann into a scientific  
demon.**

by Adam Kirsch



*This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

If the most dangerous invention to emerge from World War II was the atomic bomb, the computer now seems to be running a close second, thanks

to recent developments in artificial intelligence. Neither the bomb nor the computer can be credited to, or blamed on, any single scientist. But if you trace the stories of these two inventions back far enough, they turn out to intersect in the figure of John von Neumann, the Hungarian-born polymath sometimes described as the [smartest man who ever lived](#). Though he is less famous today than some of his contemporaries—Albert Einstein, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Richard Feynman—many of them regarded him as the most impressive of all. Hans Bethe, who won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1967, remarked: “I have sometimes wondered whether a brain like von Neumann’s does not indicate a species superior to that of man.”

Born in Budapest in 1903, von Neumann came to the U.S. in 1930, and in 1933 he joined the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton, New Jersey. Like many émigré physicists, he consulted on [the Manhattan Project](#), helping develop the implosion method used to detonate the first atomic bombs. Just weeks before Hiroshima, he also published a paper laying out a model for a programmable digital computer. When Los Alamos National Laboratory got its first computer, in 1952, it was built on the design principles known as “[von Neumann architecture](#).” The machine was jokingly christened [MANIAC](#), and the full name followed, devised to fit the acronym: Mathematical Analyzer, Numerical Integrator, and Computer.

And that’s not all. Von Neumann also established the mathematical framework for quantum mechanics, described the mechanism of genetic self-replication before the discovery of DNA, and [founded the field of game theory](#), which became central to both economics and Cold War geostrategy. By the time he [died of cancer](#), in 1957, possibly due to radiation exposure at Los Alamos, he was one of the American government’s most valued advisers on nuclear weapons and strategy. His hospital bed at Walter Reed Army Medical Center was guarded by a security detail, to make sure he didn’t reveal any secrets in his delirium.

In his new novel, [The MANIAC](#), the Chilean writer Benjamín Labatut suggests that the name of the computer von Neumann helped invent fits the physicist himself all too well. If our world often seems mad—if we are unable to distinguish the real from the virtual, avid for technological power we can’t use wisely, always coming up with new ways to destroy ourselves —then perhaps the great minds that invented our world could not have been

entirely sane. But did the man who helped create nuclear weapons and artificial intelligence know that he was putting the human future in jeopardy? Or was the thrill of scientific discovery so intense that he didn't care?

*The MANIAC* sets out to penetrate this mystery with imaginary testimonies by real people—siblings and teachers, colleagues and lovers—who knew von Neumann at different stages of his life. Labatut mingles biographical facts with fictional episodes and details to take us through each stage, from the child prodigy in Budapest to the dying man in Washington, D.C., raging as his mind erodes. Along the way, the scientific and mathematical background of von Neumann's work is sketched in for a lay audience.

From the very beginning, Labatut makes it clear that von Neumann is no ordinary human being. His mother jots down notes on his development, as in a baby book: “Did not cry after doctor’s slap / Unnerving / Looked more like middle-aged man not newborn.” His math professor tells the class about an “exceedingly difficult” theorem that no one has been able to prove, only to see the boy raise his hand, go to the chalkboard, and write down a complete proof: “Years, all my years of work, passed by in a second … After that, I was afraid of von Neumann.”

Even as the novel trains its focus on von Neumann, however, its structure keeps him at a distance; he is not a person we come to know so much as a problem we need to solve. The problem, all of the narrators agree, is that his genius was exhilarating and frightening in equal measure. “What he could do. It was so rare and beautiful that to watch him was to weep,” his math tutor says. “Yes, I saw that, but I also saw something else. A sinister, machinelike intelligence that lacked the restraints that bind the rest of us.”

[From the June 2018 issue: Henry A. Kissinger on how the Enlightenment ends](#)

Labatut is intent on casting von Neumann as a Faustian figure, a man who transgressed the limits of knowledge to become something more and less than human. This idea may be Labatut’s greatest departure from biographical fact. In reality, the “maniac” seems to have impressed people with his cheerfulness and zest for life. In Ananya Bhattacharya’s 2022

biography, *The Man From the Future*, von Neumann is described by his friend and fellow physicist Eugene Wigner as “a cheerful man, an optimist who loved money and believed firmly in human progress.” By contrast, the Wigner who narrates several sections of *The MANIAC* speaks of von Neumann as a “luciferin” figure who “ranged beyond what was reasonable, until he finally lost himself.”

Labatut’s dark vision of modern science, and the way he skillfully distorts von Neumann’s biography to communicate that darkness, will be familiar to readers of *When We Cease to Understand the World*, his first work to be translated into English, in 2020. Blending biographical facts with outrageous fables, that novel offered miniature portraits of five 20th-century geniuses, including Fritz Haber, a chemist who invented both new fertilizers and chemical weapons, and Werner Heisenberg, the pioneer of quantum mechanics. The narrative technique owes a good deal to W. G. Sebald, who loved to ruminate on strange and troubling episodes from history, blurring the boundary between fact and fiction.

Labatut, however, is far freer in his distortions, which become more flamboyant and surreal with each section of the book. He depicts some of the most important figures in 20th-century science as haunted men, driven to madness by their pursuit of total knowledge. By the time we read that the French physicist Louis de Broglie, traumatized by the suicide of his best friend, commissioned an insane artist to create a replica of Notre-Dame Cathedral made of human feces, we are clearly in the realm of fable.

Yet the truly shocking thing is how many of the horrors described in *When We Cease to Understand the World* are entirely factual. The first gas attack in history, during the Battle of Ypres in 1915, actually did make “hundreds of men [fall] to the ground convulsing, choking on their own phlegm, yellow mucus bubbling in their mouths, their skin turning blue from lack of oxygen.” And Haber’s wife, Clara, really did shoot herself in the heart, bleeding to death in the arms of her young son, possibly out of guilt over her husband’s role in creating gas warfare. When Labatut tells the story of 20th-century science as a dark parable, he is extrapolating from history but not entirely falsifying it.

When science is inhumane, humanity has the right to take its revenge.

*The MANIAC* opens with a short, third-person narrative that has no explicit connection with the life of John von Neumann, but would have fit perfectly in the earlier book. It is the true story of Paul Ehrenfest, an Austrian physicist who was a friend of Einstein's, and [whose life ended in an act of horror](#): In 1933, he killed his 15-year-old son, Wassik, who lived in an institution for children with Down syndrome, and then himself. Though Ehrenfest lived in the Netherlands, Labatut suggests that he may have been motivated by fear of the Nazis, who had come to power in Germany earlier that year and passed a new law mandating the forced sterilization of people with disabilities. In Labatut's telling, Ehrenfest's act was a premonition not just of Nazi crimes, but of the terrifying development of modern science. He could think of no better way to keep his son "safe from the strange new rationality that was beginning to take shape all around them, a profoundly inhuman form of intelligence that was completely indifferent to mankind's deepest needs." For Ehrenfest, the most disturbing thing about this monstrous spirit is that it springs from within science itself, "hovering over his colleagues' heads at meetings and conferences, peering over their shoulders ... a truly malignant influence, both logic-driven and utterly irrational, and though still fledgling and dormant it was undeniably gathering strength, wanting desperately to break into the world."

Ehrenfest's response is an act of madness, but Labatut suggests that von Neumann's failure to be disturbed by the rise of the "inhuman" betrays an even deeper madness. Like the sorcerer's apprentice, von Neumann helped the malignant spirit of modern science "break into the world" without thinking about the price the world would pay. "The problem with those games, the many terrible games that spring forth from humanity's unbridled imagination," his wife, Klara, muses, "is that when they are played in the real world ... we come face-to-face with dangers that we may not have the knowledge or the wisdom to overcome."

*The MANIAC* drives this point home in a variety of ways, starting with an early-childhood memory shared by von Neumann's brother Nicholas. One night, their banker father brought home a Jacquard loom, which could be "programmed" to weave different patterns using sets of punch cards—a kind of primitive ancestor of the computer. The young János—his original Hungarian name, later Americanized to John—grows obsessed with the device, refusing to eat or sleep while he tinkers with it, trying to learn how it

works. Soon the boy panics, fearing that he won't be able to put the loom back together and it will be taken away: "He said that he simply could not part with the machine." The details of János's experience are imaginary, but the episode allows Labatut to offer a tidy preview of von Neumann's fatal flaw, as well as a little lesson in computer history.

### From the May 1964 issue: The computers of tomorrow

This is a [much tamer kind of fictionalizing](#) than in *When We Cease to Understand the World*, and in general *The MANIAC* feels like a more accessible and conventional treatment of its predecessor's basic idea—the moral corruption at the core of modern science. This is partly because Labatut has set himself a more difficult narrative challenge by focusing on a single life at greater length. He has to convey biographical details about von Neumann to readers who have never heard of him, introduce complex concepts from a range of scientific fields, and simultaneously weave all this information into a moody allegory about knowledge and transgression.

This means the literary spell is often broken by sentences that sound like they could have come from a textbook ("In 1901, Bertrand Russell, one of Europe's foremost logicians, discovered a fatal paradox in set theory"), and others that could be intoned in a movie preview ("He was the smartest human being of the 20th century ... His name was Neumann János Lajos. A.k.a. Johnny von Neumann"). The fact that *The MANIAC* is Labatut's first book written in English, rather than Spanish, may also play a role in this tonal unevenness.

*The MANIAC* describes von Neumann's work on the atomic bomb, but it strongly suggests that his most troublingly inhuman achievement was laying the groundwork for artificial intelligence. Late in the novel, we learn about von Neumann's work on cellular automata, which combined two of his major interests: computing and game theory. In his book [Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata](#), he imagined a grid of cells in which each cell changed its state—say, from "on" to "off," or from one color to another—according to inputs received from its neighbors. Essentially, this was a way of modeling how systems could evolve from simplicity to complexity based on what we now call an algorithm, the iterative application of a set of rules.

The concept has been highly influential in the study of both biological life and artificial intelligence.

[From the September 2023 issue: Does Sam Altman know what he's creating?](#)

In addition to explaining the basics of cellular automata, Labatut turns the idea into a symbol of von Neumann's failure to respect the difference between the gamelike abstractions of mathematics and the messy seriousness of human life. So it is poetic justice when Klara, infuriated by her husband's "pigheadedness," takes a printout of his work—"gorgeous filigrees of dots and lines that intermingled, fused, and then tore apart like the teeth of a broken zipper"—and sets it on fire in a trash can. It is another episode invented to point a moral: When science is inhumane, humanity has the right to take its revenge.

Yet in the long term, Labatut suggests, it may be humanity that has to submit. After bringing von Neumann's story to a close, *The MANIAC* pivots to a lengthy postlude about Go, the ancient Chinese board game in which players take turns placing black and white stones on a board, capturing an opponent's territory by surrounding it. In 2016, Lee Se-dol of South Korea, one of the world's top-ranked Go players, [was challenged to a match against AlphaGo](#), an AI developed by Google's DeepMind. Garry Kasparov had lost a chess match to IBM's Deep Blue 20 years earlier, but Go players were confident that their game was so much more complex that no machine could master it. Like so many skeptics before and since, they were proved wrong; AlphaGo won the match, taking four games to Lee's one.

After telling von Neumann's life story in about 200 pages, *The MANIAC* devotes its last 80 pages to this match. The effect is anticlimactic, but clearly Labatut sees the episode as the culmination of the book's tragic arc. Ehrenfest dreaded the emergence of an inhuman intelligence, von Neumann made that emergence possible, and now Lee sees it taking place in front of him.

"When future historians look back at our time and try to pin down the first glimmer of a true artificial intelligence," Labatut writes, "they may well find it in a single move during the second game between Lee Sedol and

AlphaGo.” That move was so radically unexpected that it seemed to throw thousands of years of Go tradition out the window; no human watching the game could understand the justification for it, yet it led to the computer’s victory. By the end of the fifth game, Lee no longer hoped to win, only to postpone defeat. Labatut imagines one Go official’s view on the matter, saying, “There’s no point in playing out the endgame if you know you’re going to lose, right?” Today, when AI is on the cusp of making everyone from coders to truck drivers obsolete, that question feels more uncomfortably relevant than ever.

*The MANIAC* doesn’t quite say that this is all John von Neumann’s fault, and of course it isn’t. The really frightening thing is that even such a great mind can do relatively little to hasten or slow the progress of science. If von Neumann had never lived, someone else would likely have made his discoveries at about the same time, the way Gottfried Leibniz and Isaac Newton both invented calculus and Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace both came up with the theory of evolution. “It is not the particularly perverse destructiveness of one specific invention that creates danger,” an observer in the novel says of von Neumann. “The danger is intrinsic. For progress there is no cure.”

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*This article appears in the [November 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Smartest Man Who Ever Lived.”*

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# What Emily Wilson's <em>Iliad</em> Misses

**Her new translation is inviting to modern readers, but it doesn't capture the barbaric world of the original.**

by Graeme Wood



*This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic, Monday through Friday. [Sign up for it here.](#)*

Early in Norman Mailer's *[Harlot's Ghost](#)*, perhaps the greatest novel about an American bureaucracy, the narrator describes a most unbureaucratic

figure, a Maine fisherman named Snowman Dyer who died in 1870 in his sister's home. Dyer once "bartered five lobsters for a small Greek tome that belonged to a classics scholar at Harvard." The English translation, which was printed between the lines of Greek, so intrigued Dyer that he decided to read the original. Having no teacher other than the dead page before him, he assigned the letters sounds at random. "As he grew older, he grew bolder, and used to recite aloud from this unique tongue while wandering over the rocks," Mailer writes. "They say that to spend a night in the dead sister's house will bring Snowman Dyer's version of Greek to your ear, and the sounds are no more barbaric than the claps and groans of our weather."

As knowledge of Greek has become more exotic—the mark of pedants, nerds, and graduates of expensive schools—capturing the barbarism of ancient Greek, and of the ancient Greeks themselves, has become harder. The ghost of Snowman Dyer would be a helpful tutor. Classical Greece is often thought to be a pillar that holds up modern civilization, and that impression is not wrong. Take away the tradition that begins with Greece, and everything political from Cicero to Machiavelli to Thomas Jefferson to Barack Obama tumbles down, and along with it a literary inheritance extending through Virgil to Wole Soyinka.

Learned men and women carried Greek civilization into the present. Where did the barbarism go? In *The Iliad*, Homer refers to the Carians, allies of the Trojans, as *barbarophonoi*—"barbarophones," or speakers of gobbledegook. (The Greek adjective *barbaros*, whence came the English *barbaric*, is imitative of foreign speech, like our meaningless *blah-blah-blah*.) Homer contrasts the barbarians with the civilized Greeks. But any modern account of the ancient Greeks—particularly the marathon of homicide in the Trojan War—has to capture both the heights of poetry and civilization, and the total, savage negation of what we recognize today as civilized. They are in the same people; they are in the same poem.

That poem has been slowly replaced in the popular imagination by a child's storybook version of the Trojan War that bears only vague resemblance to *The Iliad*. This version involves a kidnapped queen, battles, a wooden horse, and the fall of a great city. Elementary schools teach about Greece and the Trojan War, but if they taught the rape- and gorefest that is the actual *Iliad*, I daresay parents would complain. *The Iliad* starts in the middle of the war,

when the Greek King Agamemnon confiscates Briseis, the favorite sex slave of Achilles, the greatest Greek warrior. Achilles pouts over his loss for most of the poem and refuses to fight.

Then, when the Trojans kill Achilles's friend Patroclus, he stirs to action and slices through the Trojan ranks for more than 1,000 sanguinary verses, culminating in the slaying of the Trojan warrior Hector and desecration of his corpse. Troy still stands when the poem concludes. *The Iliad*'s plot is built on honor and dishonor, the hacking of flesh, and the grief of men and gods. We should not be surprised that this unrelenting premodern carnage is not the story most people know. There is no clever trickery with a wooden horse, no tossing of a golden apple inscribed "To the fairest!" to get the goddesses squabbling. The average reader can take these Disney-ready touches but can stand only so many minutes at a time in the true Homeric abattoir of antiquity.

Emily Wilson's translation of *The Iliad* is an *Iliad* for the masses, written in English verse legible to people who do not normally read verse. Some readers expecting Disney will find themselves ankle-deep in viscera. Her *Iliad* follows her translation of *The Odyssey* six years ago, which was overpraised for having been written by a woman—women have been translating Homer for centuries—and praised just the right amount for having revivified Homer and made that poem readable to a new generation. Many of the most commonly read English translations had begun to sound fusty, she said, and it was time for an update. Other recent translations, of course—by Richmond Lattimore, Robert Fitzgerald, Robert Fagles—were heralded in their time as having chased away the previous generation's archaisms. The bell of fustiness: It tolls for thee.

When the classicist David Grene praised early excerpts of *Lattimore's Iliad*, before its final publication in 1951, he called the translation "studiously simple," with words that are "not literary." What was simple then has ceased to be simple, and Fitzgerald garnished his translation, published in 1974, with literary language that Lattimore had avoided. The demands of reading poetic language, even at the high level of skill displayed by Fitzgerald, are excessive for many readers today. (In the opening lines, Lattimore writes that Achilles dispatched many a warrior to the "house of Hades," which is the Greek word as well as the English. Fitzgerald writes "the undergloom.")

*The Iliad*'s plot is built on honor and dishonor, the hacking of flesh, and the grief of men and gods.

[Fagles's translation](#), published in 1990, moved from "Hades" to "House of Death," which I believe is an underground Norwegian heavy-metal club. Hades is Death as well as death's domain, and the choice is defensible. It is also a sign of Fagles's drift away from the demands of knowing context: A reader will stumble if she doesn't know which god Hades is, but "House of Death" is legible to all English speakers. In the same spirit, Fagles drifted consistently toward phrases that were modern rather than archaic. His Homer is comprehensible because his language is tediously familiar, and indeed [so saturated with modern cliché](#) that the effect must be intentional.

Take the translation of the notoriously slippery word *polytropon*, used in the first line of *The Odyssey* to describe Odysseus. It is among Homer's most famous epithets, and therefore a helpful benchmark. It connotes cleverness, versatility, and movement. *Many-turning* would be the straightforward translation, although it is plainly unsatisfactory as a matter of English style. Lattimore went with: "the man of many ways." Better, if a little cryptic. Fitzgerald allows himself more syllables: "skilled in all ways of contending." Fagles, faced with this untranslatable word, resorts to cliché: "the man of twists and turns." As a translation of a single word, this choice, too, is defensible, but as poetry it is a leadoff grounder to first.

[From the November 1959 issue: The poet Robert Graves on Homer's winks and nods](#)

Confronting the same problem, Wilson calls Odysseus a "complicated" man. I doubt the irony is lost on her: The word *complicated* is a simple solution to a complicated, even insoluble, problem of translation. The word isn't perfect (Odysseus's epithet should not sound like his relationship status on Facebook), but its clarity and concision make her predecessors seem dithering and stuck. Little is known about Homer—whether he was one man or many, whether he was blind, whether he had a scribe—but we can be sure he didn't pause with his audience to mull word choice. Wilson doesn't either. Her choices do not call attention to themselves. They let the poem proceed.

In 1860, Matthew Arnold argued that Homer's translator should be like Homer: "rapid in movement, simple in style, plain in language, natural in thought." Wilson is here to answer that call. Many previous translations, she writes in her translator's note, ended in "a reading experience that mirrors how first-year language students labor valiantly through each word," unlike the "quick energy" of the original.

Here is the Trojan warrior Hector, after his wife, Andromache, has complained that by heading into battle, he could get himself killed; their son, Astyanax, orphaned; and Andromache raped and enslaved:

"Strange woman! Come on now, you must not be too sad on my account.

No man can send me to the house of Hades  
before my time. No man can get away  
from destiny, first set for us at birth,  
however cowardly or brave he is.

Go home and do the things you have to do.  
Work on your loom and spindle and instruct  
the slaves to do their household tasks as well.  
War is a task for men—for every man  
born here in Troy, but most especially, me."

So Andromache is the "strange" one, for objecting to these fates! (Hector says the rape and enslavement are not really his concern, because he'll be gloriously dead by then.) Fitzgerald renders the first line as "Unquiet soul, do not be too distressed"; Lattimore, as "Poor Andromache! Why does your heart sorrow so much for me?" Fitzgerald's Hector—like all characters in his translation—is a poet manqué. Lattimore's Hector pities his soon-to-be-widow, also poetically. (Even in 1951, people didn't "sorrow" for one another, except in poetry.) Wilson's Hector, I would say, is an affectless psychopath, shifting topics abruptly from grief to neglected housework. Her translation meets only the minimal definition of metrical verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter, the business casual of English prosody), and in the bareness of her rendering, we get a refreshingly direct impression of this warrior's unsentimentality.

The critic Guy Davenport, in a pan of Lattimore, wrote that translation is a game of two languages, and that “the translator is in constant danger of inventing a third that lies between.” By this standard—and avoiding invention is more demanding than it sounds—Wilson is a prodigy. Her characters speak not like orotund Shakespeare imitators but like people talking in their native languages and registers. Wilson’s language does not challenge anyone’s idea of what English can be. When she is given a chance to coin a new and unusual phrase and free into English a word hitherto trapped in the amber of Greek, she unfailingly chooses the ordinary and imperfect English word. *Strange*, for example. *Daimonie*, the Greek word applied to Andromache by Hector (and also, a few lines earlier, by Andromache to Hector), implies both endearment and nuttiness. *Strange* lacks the vigor and color of “unquiet soul,” but it is something spouses might actually call each other, and anyway, the poem must go on.

In every line of Homer, a feast of choices is laid before the translator. But every dish chosen means a dozen others left uneaten.

I can think of few poems that are less patient, more eager to proceed toward the inevitable, than *The Iliad*. Much of it is about appointments with fate. Impeding progress toward that end would seem wrong, although Homer himself does so, with stunning dramatic effect. Much of the poem is spent waiting for the sulking Achilles to be roused to action. When the wrath of Achilles appears, like the monster in a horror film, its anticipation has ratcheted up the effect.

Before Achilles starts his rampage, his beloved fellow warrior Patroclus borrows his weapons and armor for an opening spree of death, a preview of the blood to flow. Wilson’s translation is at its minimal best:

Patroclus came in close, speared [Thestor’s] right jaw  
and drove the wooden spear shaft through his teeth,  
to hook and drag him over the chariot rail,  
as when a man sits on a jutting rock,  
and hooks a holy fish with shining bronze  
and fishing line, and drags it from the sea—  
just so he dragged him from the chariot,  
mouth gaping round the shining spear, and hurled him

face downward on the ground and as he fell,  
life left him.

Ezra Pound claimed that Homer wrote with such anatomical precision that one might wonder whether he was an army doctor. A few lines later, Patroclus sends a spear through the torso of the Lycian warrior Sarpedon, a son of Zeus. “It struck Sarpedon’s lungs and throbbing heart”:

Death veiled his eyes and blocked his nose. Patroclus set his foot  
onto the dead man’s chest and tugged his spear  
out of the flesh, and with it came the lungs.  
He pulled out both the weapon and the life.

In every line of Homer, a feast of choices is laid before the translator. But every dish chosen means a dozen others left uneaten. Ask a hoplite pikeman, if you have one handy: When you impale a man, and your spear doesn’t come out clean, is it your victim’s “diaphragm” (as Fitzgerald has it), heart sac (as some have suggested), or lung that’s likely to be clinging to your weapon? The Greek word for this mass of epigastric sinew is *phrenes*—the source of the English *phrenology* and *frenzy*—a word connected in ancient Greece to the idea of respiration and of the soul. It is the spirit within us that is alive as long as we breathe. In goes the spear, and out comes a chunk of lung or Lycian hanger steak, soul and flesh on the same skewer. (Fagles opts for *midriff*, which once meant “diaphragm” in English but today makes it sound like Sarpedon was speared somewhere between his low-rise jean shorts and his crop top.)

Wilson opts for *lungs*, which is simple and speeds the action right along. It is folly to try to pack all knowledge of Greek medicine and etymology into one line. But we lose something in the simplicity. Compare the choice of Homer’s first English translator, George Chapman. In 1611, he rendered the same word as *the film and strings of his yet panting heart*, a lovely and horrid phrase worth every one of the nine extra syllables it cost.

[From the January/February 2018 issue: A mind-bending translation of the New Testament](#)

Wilson offers an *Iliad* that a modern reader can consume without excessive mental interruption—perhaps like an Ionian peasant would have, as part of the poem’s original listening rather than reading audience. Her method yields what to my ear are some infelicities—she expresses concern about how best to translate *o popoi*, a Greek interjection a bit like *holy crap* or *sweet Jesus*. After the *Iliad*’s climactic duel between Hector and Achilles, the Greeks touch Hector’s once-fearsome corpse, find it softly human, and say, “*o popoi.*” “Look at this!” writes Wilson—a little too *Well I’ll be* for my taste. (Lattimore has “See now.”) Her modern language sometimes feels distractingly modern. She has Menelaus chide Antilochus, who has been driving his chariot maniacally fast, by yelling “You are the worst! Reckless endangerment!”—a phrase bizarrely transported to antiquity from American criminal law. But in general this *Iliad* is judicious and, yes, easy, at the expense of being poetic in the grand manner.

The modern reader can have all of this. But he cannot have everything. The ease brings us back to the question of barbarity. The skewered lungs and fishhooked faces will strongly suggest to the reader that these ancient Greeks did not exactly share our modern values. To the warriors of antiquity, life has no point but to seize others’ booty and women, then die heroically and be sent on a glorious pyre to the undergloom. Anyone who hesitates in embracing this order of things is reproached. When Zeus himself wonders whether he should intervene to save Sarpedon, Hera tells him to quit being such a softy and cheer on noble Sarpedon’s death. The poem does not entertain the modern view that old age, surrounded by loved ones and beeping hospital equipment, is the death devoutly to be wished. Even in the grand duel between Achilles and Hector, the winner is the warrior less modern in his habits and predilections. Achilles has no life outside a military encampment. Hector has a wife and son and lives in a city. He dies, and his face is ground into the mud.

For these homicidal aliens to speak in a crystalline modern idiom feels truer than for them to speak in a high literary style. But to sound modern at all feels, in its way, inescapably false. The older the work of literature, the tighter the translator’s bind: The authors’ and characters’ eras are gone, and the more they sound like modern men and women, the less they sound like the wild selves preserved in the Greek. Rendering them into approachable modern language, as Wilson has, brings them closer to us. But this exercise

must always fail. Making them into speakers of contemporary English is like lifting up to sea level the bizarre creatures scuttling in the deepest ocean. They cannot survive the journey. You can see their ruptured remains. You cannot see *them*.

I am aware of no literary solution to this problem, although some approaches make it worse. One way to handle it, I suppose, would be to defy Guy Davenport and invent what he warns against, a third language between the Greek and the English—"a treacherous nonexistent language suggested by the original and not recognized by the language into which the original is being transposed." Call this the Snowman Dyer solution. Lean hard into the inhumanity, the weirdness, the foreignness. Make them speak some language never heard by man or lobster. Taking the opposite approach, Wilson no doubt pleases Norton, her publisher, which hopes that many students will buy this book as a novice-friendly *Iliad*. (They should.)

Maybe the needed perspective is less literary than anthropological. In the early 2000s, I hiked around Afghanistan and tribal areas of Pakistan. Violence was ubiquitous, and Pashtuns spoke of friends and relatives who'd had their brains dashed out with rocks, or died valiantly in battle. They spoke about concepts that exist only vestigially in the cultures in which I was raised but that are the warp and weft of Homer's world: feuds, vendettas, the offering and acceptance of hospitality as a solemn bond. I told them I would prefer not to have my head crushed, and they understood. They were not stupid or savage. But they lived in more Homeric social worlds than my own. They said that because I was their guest, they would protect me even if it meant fighting, possibly to the death, their friends and neighbors. This bond is integral to Pashtun culture and is called *melmastia*. It is a theme in Homer, who called it *xenia*. I had memorized Greek verb forms and read *The Iliad* during my own expensive education, but the poem never felt more present than when I was listening to my Pashtun host vow to repay blood with blood.

Short of getting some very nasty paper cuts, however, one can't reasonably expect a mere book to deliver such vivid evocations of a blood culture. The next best thing is to make the text flow, to make the story proceed, and to conserve as much as possible of the direct, savage beauty of Homer. That will help a new generation understand why for thousands of years, readers

have discovered that time spent reading Homer is never wasted or regretted. The original text will still retain its awful secrets.

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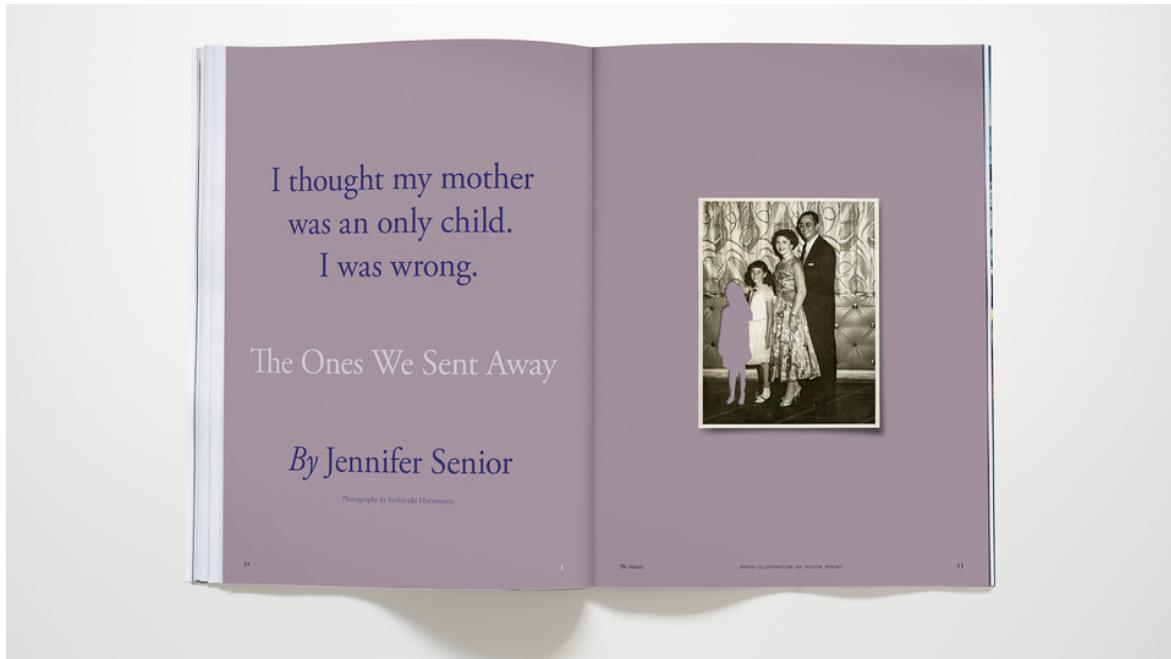
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# ‘We Must Never Forget the Evil That Occurred to Individuals With Developmental Disabilities’

## Readers respond to our September 2023 cover story.



The Ones We Sent Away

*Jennifer Senior’s aunt Adele was institutionalized as a toddler because of an intellectual and developmental disability. For the September 2023 issue, [Senior considered](#) the life Adele could have lived.*

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Jennifer Senior's story about her aunt's institutionalization struck a deep chord with me. My family has a similar story, made worse when I found out that I was the reason my sister was sent to a state "school." My mother cared for her oldest child, who was developmentally delayed, for the first two years of her life. But in 1950, she surrendered her to the state under intense pressure from family members, who felt that my expectant mother wouldn't be able to handle a newborn—me—and a high-needs daughter at the same time. My sister languished at the "school" for many years and never learned to walk. She died shortly after the institution was closed; an exposé had made public its shortcomings. I met my sister only once, when I was in college. I'll never forget how happy she seemed having somebody watch her eat lunch. She never took her eyes off me; it was like she knew who I was. Hardly anyone remembers her now, but I will, always. Her name was Cheryl.

**Wayne April**  
*Pasadena, Calif.*

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I felt tears welling up as I read Jennifer Senior's moving story about her aunt Adele, and by its conclusion, they ran freely.

My older brother, Larry, shares a birthday with Adele. He, too, was born with severe disabilities; in fact, at birth, the doctors told my parents that he would not survive more than a few weeks.

Larry proved them wrong—repeatedly. He recently celebrated his 47th birthday. My parents did not institutionalize him, but cared for him through dozens of complex surgeries, years of developmental frustrations, and countless instances of unfeeling relatives asking why they bothered to keep him. They had two more children after Larry: myself and my younger brother. Putting in the emotional, physical, and logistical labor to care for a child with special needs while maintaining the bandwidth to meet the needs of their other children was a significant challenge for them.

My younger brother and I have felt the repercussions of that challenge for decades now, for both good and bad. Larry, more than anyone else, has made me the man I am. But to this day, when I hear about a family raising a child

with special needs, I feel obligated to stress the importance of making sure that their other children are given as much attention and love as possible.

**Ryan Wagman**

*Northbrook, Ill.*

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I would like to share my family's experience, which cuts against the current prevailing sentiment that the best place for children with severe developmental and behavioral disabilities is their family's home.

My stepson J. has a number of diagnoses, all of which fail to describe the problems he lives with. I entered his life when he was a little over 2 years old. He'll turn 9 in a couple of months. J. isn't nonverbal, but his ability to meaningfully communicate is quite poor. Lately, you can catch him sitting in the living room before dawn, wearing his headphones and singing along to the *Sesame Street* spin-off *The Furchester Hotel* at an ear-splitting volume. His ecstatic refrain fills the house over and over as he rewinds the clip to the bit he loves. Half of my heart floods with his joy, but the other half sinks with the woe of a mom whose babies are going to be up an hour early. He isn't potty-trained and uses diapers. Some days, he prefers to take off his clothes and use the floor.

J. has the highest highs and the lowest lows. He loves football. He loves going to church and, afterward, Runza ("But not the drive-through," he reminds us). No one loves a birthday party more than J., as long as he gets to blow out some candles. But, in general, it doesn't take long for him to grow frustrated, and for his frustration to turn into violence. He bites, scratches, punches, kicks. He pulls hair. He slams his head into the ground, the walls, the windows. He hurts the dogs. He's broken the glasses on a teacher's face and the television on the wall. He's sent two adults to the emergency room. Our nanny stopped caring for him after she was injured. He was dismissed from his specialized before- and after-school care program. He can still attend school, but who knows how long that will last?

His older brother tries to keep quiet about the suffering he experiences. He will occasionally admit that a mark on his skin is a scratch or bruise from trying to escape J.'s aggression. He recently mentioned that he would like it

if J. would wear clothes more often and stop going to the bathroom on the carpet. He prefers to stay home and avoid the gawking public. J.'s two younger half-siblings are frightened by the outbursts, but so far are too young to really understand. I often wonder what terrible choice I will have to make if one of them is severely hurt.

J. has progressed to a point where he no longer fits safely in the context of a family. We hold our breath, hoping each day that this won't be the time things really go bad. But at any suggestion that it might not be safe for J. to live in our family home, we are told that, no, the best place for any disabled child is in the family home. Because, you know, the Bad Old Days.

At first, this felt like it must be true. Over time, however, it has come to feel like a disingenuous strategy to keep care cheap. The conditions at many of the institutions where children like J. were once warehoused were horrific, as Jennifer Senior makes clear in her article. But that doesn't mean institutional care can't work, or be the right solution for some children—which Senior also acknowledges.

J. needs specialized care. He needs an adult to make him their sole focus from when he wakes up until he goes to sleep. It's a full-time job—not something a parent can easily do while maintaining a career, a marriage, or a relationship with their other children. If there were a willingness to make the necessary investment, I imagine we could develop a system of high-quality care for children with serious behavioral disorders that meets each child and family where they are, providing the right care in the right setting at the right time. In the meantime, we feel like we are failing J. and our other children. The implied message we hear from many we encounter is that if we were able to love him better or be more dedicated, we could do it. We feel overwhelmed all the time, helpless and inadequate. We are old beyond our years and carry the special weariness of the chronically heartbroken.

### **Name Withheld by Request**

*Omaha, Neb.*

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I began volunteering with individuals with disabilities as a junior in high school in 1979. In 1982, it became my career. A significant part of my job in

the early years was helping facilitate the deinstitutionalization of individuals with developmental disabilities in West Virginia. I'm proud that West Virginia was among the first states in the nation to fully close its institutions; even so, I witnessed untold horrors in those places.

Then, in 1993, my son, Benjamin, was born with Down syndrome and autism-spectrum disorder. What had been a career choice suddenly became my life 24/7. Though the institutions no longer exist, significant perils remain: Individuals with disabilities are much more likely to be victims of abuse or neglect than nondisabled individuals. Across the country, disabled adults lack housing, meaningful jobs, and support services.

As long as we are able to care for Ben, he will reside with us. The day I can no longer care for him will be the worst day of my life. Even though Ben will go to live with his sister, I know I'll feel as though I failed him.

I'm now 60 and have been in the field for more than 40 years. I'm still working with the orneriest of the ornery, and I'm still loving it. We must never forget the evil that occurred and continues to occur to individuals with developmental disabilities, our most vulnerable population. A sincere thanks to Jennifer Senior for reminding us.

### Kent Moreno

*Shepherdstown, W.Va.*

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### Behind the Cover

In this issue's cover story, *The Atlantic*'s editor in chief, [Jeffrey Goldberg](#), [profiles General Mark Milley](#), the retiring chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. For our cover image, the war photographer Ashley Gilbertson captured Milley outside Quarters Six, the chairman's residence in Arlington, Virginia. Quarters Six looks out onto the Capitol from Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall, originally built to defend Washington, D.C., from the Confederate army during the Civil War. Gilbertson was a finalist for a 2022 Pulitzer Prize for his [photograph of the Capitol Police officer Eugene Goodman](#) as he defended the building from insurrectionists on January 6, 2021.

— **Bifen Xu**, *Photo Editor*

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*This article appears in the [November 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Commons.”*

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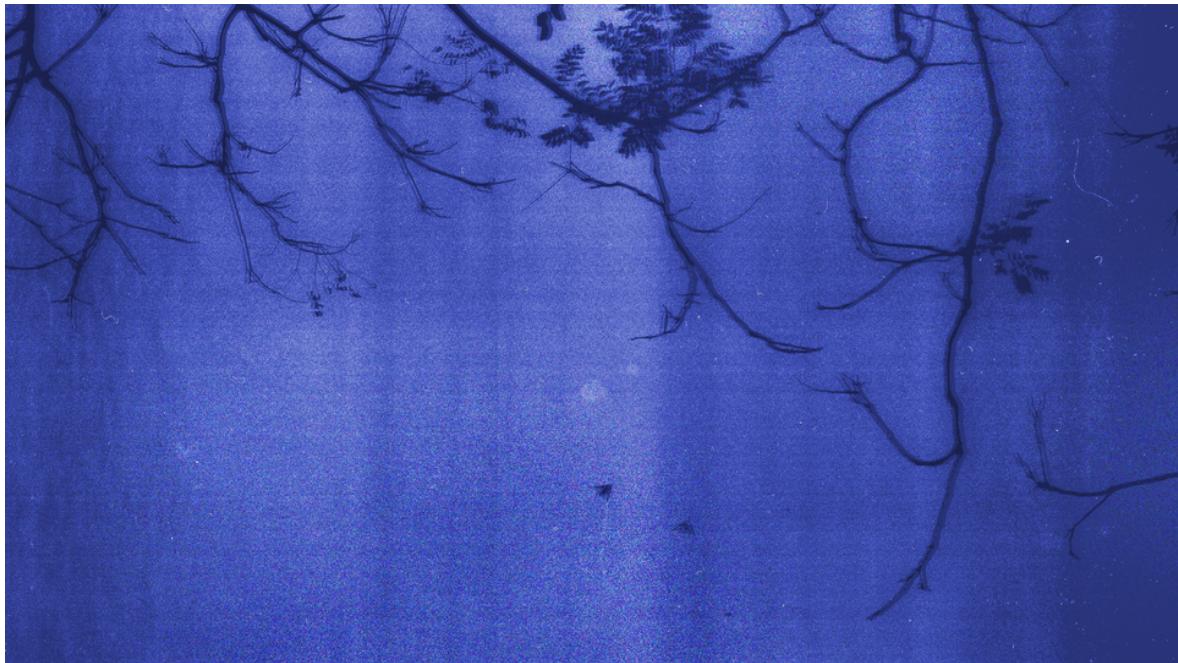
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# Poetry

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# On a Clear Day

by Victoria Chang



Agnes said her from the *innocence of* trees. I've thought trees  
grids came somewhere always were guilty.

They never can never say somewhere they didn't  
have an alibi, they were else or that witness the

murders. Is this to cut out and dismantle morning, I  
why I desire Agnes's grids them? Each enter the yard

and wait for speak back to 50th year finally realize  
the trees to me. This is my doing so. I that the trees

won't tell there is no a life. It is only a final draft,  
me. That first draft of and always the rectangles

drawn as we the same as though some tried to be like a  
go. Each one the others, years may have circle. This is

by design, so looks back at a remember are divided  
that when one life, all we the equal and sadnesses.

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*The gridlike form of this poem is inspired by the paintings of Agnes Martin. It appears in the [November 2023](#) print edition.*

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