

Walden Pond

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"The dog was the color of a maraschino cherry, and what it had in its jaws I couldn't quite make out at first, not until it parked itself under the hydrangeas and began throttling the thing."

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ARE WE NOT MEN?

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* T. Coraghessan Boyle * 31 minute read *

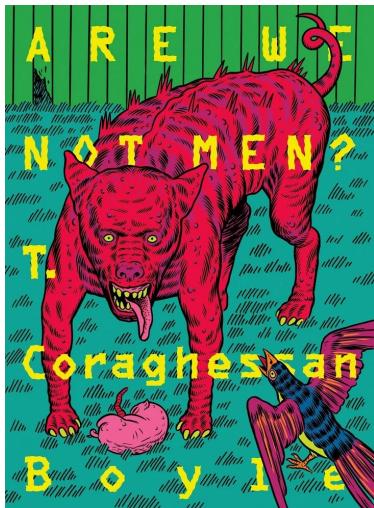


Illustration by Kristian Hammerstad *Illustration*
Kristian Hammerstad

The dog was the color of a maraschino cherry, and what it had in its jaws I couldn't quite make out at first, not until it parked itself under the hydrangeas and began throttling the thing. This little episode would have played itself out without my even noticing, except that I'd gone to the stove to put the kettle on for a cup of tea and happened to glance out the window at the front lawn. The lawn, a lush blue-green that managed to hint at

both the turquoise of the sea and the viridian of a Kentucky meadow, was something I took special pride in, and any wandering dog, no matter its chromatics, was an irritation to me. The seed had been pricey—a blend of Chewings fescue, Bahia, and zoysia incorporating a gene from a species of algae that allowed it to glow under the porch light at night—and, while it was both disease- and drought-resistant, it didn't take well to foot traffic, especially four-footed traffic.

I stepped out onto the porch and clapped my hands, thinking to shoo the dog away, but it didn't move. Actually, it did, but only to flex its shoulders and tighten its jaws around its prey, which I now saw was my neighbor Allison's pet micropig. The pig itself—doe-eyed and no bigger than a Pekinese—didn't seem to be struggling, or not any longer, and even as I came down off the porch looking for something I could brandish at the dog I felt my heart thundering. Allison was one of those pet owners

who anthropomorphize their animals, and that pig was the center of her unmarried and unboyfriended life. She would be shattered, absolutely, and who was going to break the news to her? I felt a surge of anger. How had the stupid thing got out of the house anyway, and, for that matter, whose dog was this? I didn't own a garden rake, and there were no sticks on the lawn (the street trees were an edited variety that didn't drop anything, no twigs, seeds, or leaves, no matter the season), so I stormed across the grass empty-handed, shouting the first thing that came to mind, which was "Bad! Bad dog!"

I wasn't thinking. And the effect wasn't what I would have hoped for even if I had been: the dog dropped the pig, all right, which was clearly beyond revivification at this point, but in the same motion it lurched up and clamped its jaws on my left forearm, growling continuously, as if my forearm were a stick it had fetched in a friendly game between us. Curiously, there was no pain—and no blood, either—just a firm insistent pressure, the saliva hot and wet on my skin as I pulled in one direction and the dog, all the

while regarding me out of a pair of dull, uniform eyes, pulled in the other. "Let go!" I demanded, but the dog didn't let go. I tugged. The dog tugged back.

There was no one on the street, no one in the next yard over, no one in the house behind me to come to my aid. I was dressed in the T-shirt, shorts, and slippers I'd pulled on not ten minutes earlier, when I'd got out of bed, and here I was caught up in this maddening interspecies pas de deux at eight in the morning, already exhausted. The dog, this cherry-red hairless freak with the armored skull and bulging musculature of a pit bull, showed no sign of giving in: it had got my arm and it meant to keep it. After a minute of this, I went down on one knee to ease the tension in my back, a gesture that seemed only to excite the animal all the more, its nails tearing up divots as it fought for purchase, trying, it occurred to me now, to bring me down to its level. Before I knew what I was doing, I balled up my free hand and punched the thing in the head three times in quick succession.

The effect was instantaneous: the dog dropped my arm and let out a yelp, backing off to hover at the edge of the lawn and eye me warily, as if now, all at once, the rules of the game had changed. In the next moment, just as I realized that I was, in fact, bleeding, a voice cried out behind me, “Hey, I saw that!”

A girl was striding across the lawn toward me, a preternaturally tall girl whom I at first took to be a teenager but who was actually a child of eleven or twelve. She marched directly up to me, glaring, and said, “You hit my dog.”

I was in no mood. “I’m bleeding,” I said, holding out my arm in evidence. “You see this? Your dog bit me. You ought to keep him chained up.”

“That’s not true—Ruby would never bite anybody. She was just . . . playing, is all.”

I wasn’t about to debate her. This was my property, my arm, and that lump of flesh lying there bleeding into the grass was Allison’s dead pet. I pointed to it.

“Oh,” she said, her voice dropping. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t . . . Is it yours?”

“My neighbor’s.” I gestured to the house just visible over the hedge. “She’s going to be devastated. This pig”—I wanted to call it by name, personalize it, but couldn’t for the life of me summon up its name—“is all she has. And it wasn’t cheap, either.” I glanced at the dog, its pinkish gaze and incarnadine flanks. “As I’m sure you can appreciate.”

The girl, who stood three or four inches taller than me and whose own eyes were an almost iridescent shade of violet that didn’t exist in nature, or at least hadn’t until recently, gave me an unflinching look. “Maybe she doesn’t have to know.”

“What do you mean she doesn’t have to know? The thing’s dead—look at it.”

“Maybe it was run over by a car.”

“You want me to lie to her?”

The girl shrugged. “I already said I’m sorry. Ruby got out the front gate when my mother went to work,

and I came right after her. You saw me—”

“What about this?” I demanded, holding up my arm, which wasn’t so much punctured as abraded, since most of the new breeds had had their canines and carnassials genetically modified to prevent any real damage in situations like this. “It has its shots, right?”

“She’s a *Cherry Pit*,” the girl said, giving me a look of disgust.

“Germline immunity comes with the package. I mean, everybody knows that.”

It was a Tuesday and I was working from home, as I did every Tuesday and Thursday. I worked in I.T., like practically everybody else on the planet, and I found I actually got more done at home than when I went into the office. My co-workers were a trial, what with their moods, opinions, facial tics, and all the rest. Not that I didn’t like them—it was just that they always seemed to manage to get in the way at crunch time. Or maybe I didn’t like them—maybe that was it. At any rate, after the little contretemps with the girl and her dog, I went back in the house, smeared an antibiotic

ointment on my forearm, took my tea and a handful of protein wafers to my desk, and sat down at the computer. If I gave the dead pig a thought, it was only in relation to Allison, who’d want to see the corpse, I supposed, which brought up the question of what to do with it—let it lie where it was or stuff it in a trash bag and refrigerate it till she got home from the office? I thought of calling my wife—Connie was regional manager of Bank U.S.A., by necessity a master of interpersonal relations, and she would know what to do—but in the end I did nothing.

It was past three by the time I thought to take a lunch break, and, because it was such a fine day, I took my sandwich and a glass of iced tea out onto the front porch. By this juncture, I’d forgotten all about the pig, the dog, and the grief that was brewing for Allison, but as soon as I stepped out the door it all came back to me: the trees were alive with crowparrots variously screeching, cawing, and chattering among themselves, and they were there for a very specific reason. (I don’t know if you have crowparrots in your neighborhood yet, but, believe me, they’re coming. They were the

inspiration of one of the molecular embryologists at the university here, who thought that inserting genes from the common crow into the invasive parrot population would put an end to the parrots' raids on our orchards and vineyards, by giving them a taste for garbage and carrion instead of fruit on the vine. The only problem was the noise factor—something in the mix seemed to have redoubled not only the volume but the fury of the birds' calls, so that you needed earplugs if you wanted to enjoy pretty much any outdoor activity.)

Which was the case now. The birds were everywhere, cursing fluidly (“_Bad bird! Fuck, fuck, fuck!_”) and flapping their spangled wings in one another's faces. Alarmed, I came down off the porch and for the second time that day scrambled across the lawn to the flower bed, where a scrum of birds had settled on the remains of Allison's pet. I flailed my arms, and they lifted off reluctantly into the sky, screeching, “_Turdbird!_” and the fractured call that awakened me practically every morning: “_Cock-k-k-k-sucker!_” As for the pig (which I should have dragged into the garage, I realized

that now), its eyes were gone and its faintly bluish hide was striped with bright-red gashes. Truthfully? I didn't want to touch the thing. It was filthy. The birds were filthy. Who knew what zoonoses they were carrying? So I was just standing there, in a quandary, when Allison's car pulled into the driveway next door.

Allison was in her early thirties, with a top-heavy figure and a barely tamed kink of ginger hair she kept wrapped up in various scarves, which gave her an exotic look, as if she were displaced here in the suburbs. She was sad-faced and sweet, the victim of one catastrophic relationship after another, and I couldn't help feeling protective toward her, a single woman alone in the big house her mother had left her when she died. So when she came across the lawn, already tearing up, I felt I'd somehow let her down and, before I could think, I stripped off my shirt and draped it over the corpse.

“Is that her?” she asked, looking down at the hastily covered bundle at my feet. “No,” she said, “don't tell me,” and then her eyes jumped to

mine and she was repeating my name, “Roy, Roy, Roy,” as if wringing it in her throat. “_Fuck you!_” the crowparrots cried from the trees. “_Fuck, fuck, fuck!_” In the next moment Allison flung herself into my arms, clutching me to her so desperately I could hardly breathe.

“I don’t want to see,” she said in a small voice, each syllable a hot puff of breath on the bare skin of my chest. I could smell her hair, the shampoo she used, the taint of sweat under her arms. “The poor thing,” she murmured, and lifted her face so I could see the tears blurring her eyes. “I loved her, Roy. I really *loved* her.”

This called up a scene from the past, a dinner party at Allison’s—Connie and me, another couple, and Allison and her last *inamorato*, a big-headed boor who worked for Animal Control, incinerating strays and transgenic misfits. Allison had kept the pig in her lap throughout the meal, feeding it from her plate, and afterward, while we sat around the living room cradling brandies and Bénédicte, she propped the

thing up at the piano, where it picked out “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” with its modified hooves.

“It was a dog, right? That’s what”—and here she had to break off a moment to gather herself. “That’s what Terry Wolfson said when she called me at work—”

I was going to offer up some platitude about how the animal hadn’t suffered, though for all I knew the dog had gummed it relentlessly, the way it had gummed my arm, when a voice called “Hello?” from the street behind us and we broke awkwardly apart. Coming up the walk was the tall girl, tottering on a pair of platform heels, and she had the dog with her, this time on a leash. I felt a stab of annoyance—hadn’t she caused enough trouble already?—and embarrassment, too. It wasn’t like me to go shirtless in public—or to be caught in a full-body embrace with my unmarried next-door neighbor, either, for that matter.

If the girl could read my face, she gave no indication of it. She came right up to us, the dog trotting along docilely at her side. Her violet gaze swept from me to the lump on the

ground beneath the bloodied T-shirt and finally to Allison. “*Je suis désolée, Madame*,” she said.

“*Pardonnez-moi. Mon chien ne savait pas ce qu'il faisait—il est un bon chien, vraiment.*”



This girl, this child, loomed over us, her features animated. She was wearing eyeliner, lipstick, and blush, as if she were ten years older and on her way to a night club, and her hair—blond, with a natural curl—spread like a tent over her shoulders and dangled all the way down to the small of her back.

“What are you saying?” I demanded. “And why are you speaking French?”

“Because I can. My I.Q. is 162 and I can run the hundred metres in 9.58 seconds.”

“Wonderful,” I said, exchanging a look with Allison. “Terrific. Really. But what are you doing here, what do you want?”

“_Your mother! _” the birds cried.
“_Up yours! _”

The girl shifted from one foot to the other, suddenly looking awkward, like the child she was. “I just wanted to please, *please* beg you not to report Ruby to Animal Control, because my father says they'll come and put her down. She's a good dog, she really is, and she never did anything like this before. It was just a—”

“Freak occurrence?” I said.

“Right,” she said. “An anomaly. An accident.”

Allison's jaw tightened. The dog looked tranquilly up at us out of its pink eyes, as if none of this were its concern. A bugless breeze rustled the trees along the street. “And what am I supposed to say?” Allison put in. “How am I supposed to feel? What do you want, forgiveness?” She gave the girl a fierce look. “You love your dog?”

The girl nodded.

"Well, I love—*loved*—Shushawna, too." She choked up. "More than anything in the world."

We all took a minute to gaze down on the carcass, and then the girl lifted her eyes. "My father says we'll pay all damages. Here," she said, digging into her purse and producing a pair of business cards, one of which she handed to me and the other to Allison. "Any medical treatment you may need, we'll take care of, one hundred per cent," she assured me, eying my arm doubtfully before turning to Allison. "And replace your pet, too, if you want, *Madame*. It was a micropig, right, from Recombicorp?"

It was a painful moment. I could feel for Allison and for the girl, too, though Connie and I didn't have any pets, not even one of the new hypoallergenic breeds. There was a larger sadness at play here, the sadness of attachment and loss and the way the world wrecks its changes whether we're ready for them or not. We would have got through the moment, I think, coming to some sort of understanding—Allison wasn't vindictive, and I wasn't about to

raise a fuss—but that same breeze swept across the lawn to flip back the edge of the T-shirt and expose the eyeless head of the pig, and that was all it took. Allison let out a gasp, and the dog—that crimson freak— jerked the leash out of the girl's hand and went right for it.

When Connie came home, I was in the kitchen mixing a drink. The front door slammed. (Connie was always in a hurry, no wasted motion, and though I'd asked her a hundred times not to slam the door she was constitutionally incapable of taking the extra two seconds to ease it shut.) An instant later, her briefcase slapped down on the hallway table with the force of a thunderclap, her heels drilled the parquet floor—*tat-tat-tat-tat*—and then she was there in the kitchen, saying, "Make me one, too, would you, honey? Or no: wine. Do we have any wine?"

I didn't ask her how her day had gone—all her days were the same, pedal to the metal, one *situation* after another, all of which she dealt with like a five-star general driving the enemy into the sea. I didn't give her a hug or blow her a kiss, either.

We weren't that sort of couple—to her mind (and mine, too, to be honest), it would have been just more wasted motion. Wordlessly, I poured her a glass of the Sancerre she liked and handed it to her.

"Allison's pet pig was killed today," I said. "Right out on our front lawn. By one of those transgenic pit bulls, one of the crimson ones they're always pushing on TV?"

Her eyebrows lifted. She swirled the wine in her glass, took a sip.

"And I got bit," I added, holding up my arm, where a deep-purplish bruise had wrapped itself around the skin just below the elbow.

What she said next didn't follow, but then we often talked in non sequiturs, she conducting a kind of call-and-response conversation in her head and I in mine, the responses never quite matching up. She didn't comment on my injury or the dog or Allison or the turmoil I'd gone through. She just set her glass down on the counter, patted her lips where the wine had moistened them, and said, "I want a baby."

I suppose I should back up here a moment to give you an idea of where this was coming from. We'd been married twelve years now, and we'd agreed that at some point we'd like to start a family, but we kept putting it off for one reason or another—our careers, finances, fear of the way a child would impact our life style, the usual kind of thing. But with a twist. What sort of child—that was the question. Previous generations had only to fret over whether the expectant mother would bear a boy or a girl or if the child would inherit Aunt Bethany's nose or Uncle Yuri's unibrow, but that wasn't the case anymore, not since *CRISPR* gene-editing technology had hit the ground running twenty years back. Now not only could you choose the sex of the child at conception; you could chose its other features, too, as if having a child were like going to the car dealership and picking which options to add onto the basic model. The sole function of sex these days was recreational; babies were conceived in the laboratory. That was the way it was and that was the way it would be, until, as a species, we evolved into something else. The

result was a nation—a world—of children like the tall girl with the bright-red dog.

To my way of thinking, this was intrusive and unnatural, but to Connie's it was a no-brainer. "Are you out of your mind?" she'd say. "You really want your kid—*our* kid—to be the bonehead of the class? Or what, take career training, cosmetology, *auto mechanics*, for Christ's sake?"

Now, tipping back her glass and downing the wine in a single belligerent gulp, she announced, "I'm thirty-eight years old and I'm putting my foot down. I've made an appointment at GenLab for 10 A.M. Thursday. Either you come with me"—she was glaring at me now—"or I swear I'm going to go out and get a sperm donor."

Nobody likes an ultimatum. Especially when you're talking about a major life-changing event, the kind of thing *both* people involved have to enter into in absolute harmony. It didn't go well. She thought she could bully me as if I were one of her underlings at work; I thought she couldn't. She thought she'd had the final word on

the subject; I thought different. I said some things I wound up regretting later, snatched up my drink, and slammed through the kitchen door and out into the back yard, where for once no birds were cursing from the trees and even the bees seemed muted as they went about their business. If it weren't for that silence, I never would have heard the soft heartsick keening of Allison working through the stations of her grief. The sound was low and intermittent, a stunted release of air followed by a sudden gargling that might have been the wheeze and rattle of the sprinklers starting up, and it took me a minute to realize what it was. In the instant, I forgot all about what had just transpired in my own kitchen and thought of Allison, struck all over again by the intensity of her emotion.

We'd managed to get the dog off the carcass, all three of us shouting at once while the girl grabbed for the leash and I delivered two or three sharp kicks to the animal's hindquarters, but Allison's dead pig was none the better for it. The girl, red-faced and embarrassed despite her I.Q. and whatever other

attributes she might have possessed, slouched across the lawn and down the street, the dog mincing beside her, while I offered to do the only sensible thing and bury what was left of the remains. I dug a hole out back of Allison's potting shed, Allison read a passage I vaguely remembered from school ("The stars are not wanted now: put out every one; / Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun"), I held her in my arms for the second time that day, then filled the hole and went home to make my drink and have Connie slam the front door and lay her demands on me.

Now, as if I were being tugged on invisible wires, I moved toward the low hedge that separated our properties and stepped across it. Allison was hunched over the picnic table on her patio. She was still dressed in the taupe blouse and black skirt she'd worn to work, and she had her head down, her scarf bunched under one cheek, and that got to me in a way I can't explain, so that before I knew what I was doing I'd fallen down a long dark tunnel and found myself consoling her in a way that seemed—how can I put this?—so very *natural* at the time.

It was dark when I got home. Connie was sitting on the couch in the living room, watching TV with the sound muted. "Hi," I said, feeling sheepish, feeling guilty (I'd never strayed before and didn't know why I'd done it now, except that I'd been so furious with my wife and so strangely moved by Allison in her grief, though I know that's no excuse), but trying, like all amateurs, to act as if nothing were out of the ordinary. Connie looked up. I couldn't read her face, but I thought, at least by the flickering light of the TV, that she looked softer, contrite even, as if she'd reconsidered her position, or at least the way she'd laid it on me.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I was upset, O.K.? I just went for a walk. To clear my head."

She had nothing to say to this.

"You eat yet?" I asked, to change the subject.

She shook her head.

"Me, either," I said, feeling the weight lift, as if ritual could get us through this. "You want to go out?"

“No, I don’t want to go out,” she said. “I want a baby.”

And what did I say, from the shallow grave of my guilt, which was no deeper than the layer of earth I’d flung over the shrunken and lacerated corpse of Allison’s pet? I said, “O.K., we’ll talk about it.”

“Talk about it? The appointment is Thursday, 10 A.M. That’s nonnegotiable.”

She was right—it was time to start a family—and she was right, too, about cosmetology and auto mechanics. What responsible parent wouldn’t want the best for his child, whether that meant a stable home, top-flight nutrition, and the best private-school education money could buy, or tweaking the chromosomes in a test tube in a lab somewhere?

Understand me: I was under duress. I could smell Allison on me still. I could smell my own fear. I didn’t want to lose my wife—I loved her. I was used to her. She was the only woman I’d known these past twelve years and more, my *familiar*. And there she was, poised on the edge of the couch, watching me, her will

like some miasma seeping in under the door and through the cracks around the windows until the room was choked with it. “O.K.,” I said.

Which is not to say that I gave in without a fight. The next day—Wednesday—I had to go into the office and endure the usual banalities of my co-workers till I wanted to beat the walls of my cubicle in frustration, but on the way home I stopped at a pet store and picked up an eight-week-old dogcat. (People still aren’t quite sure what to call the young, even now, fifteen years after they were first created. Kitpups? Pupkits? The sign in the window read simply “*Baby Dogcats on Special!*”) I chose a squirming little furball with a doggish face and tabby stripes and brought it home as a surprise for Connie, hoping it would distract her long enough for her to reevaluate the decision she was committing us to.

I tucked the thing inside my shirt for the drive home, since the minute the girl behind the counter put it in its cardboard carrier it began alternately mewing and yipping in a tragic way, and it

nestled there against my chest, warm and content, until I'd parked the car and gone up the steps and into the house. Connie was already home, moving briskly about the kitchen. There were flowers on the table next to an ice bucket with the neck of a bottle of Veuve Clicquot protruding from it, and the room was redolent of the scent of my favorite meal—pipérade, Basque style, topped with poached eggs—and I realized that she must have made a special stop at Maison Claude on her way home. This was a celebration and no two ways about it. In the morning, we would procreate—or take our first steps in that direction, which on my part would involve producing a sperm sample under duress (unlike, I couldn't help thinking, the way it had been with Allison).

We didn't hug. We didn't kiss. I just said "Hey," and she said "Hey" back. "Smells great," I said, trying to gauge her expression as we both hovered over the table.



"I developed my sense of humor as a defense mechanism and turned it into a lethal offensive weapon."

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"Perfect timing," she said, leaning in to adjust the napkin beside her plate, though it was already precisely aligned. "I got there the minute they took it out of the oven. Claude himself brought it out to me—along with a fresh loaf of that crusty sourdough you like. Just baked this morning."

I was grinning at her. "Great," I said. "Really great."

Into the silence that followed—neither of us was ready yet to address the issue hanging over us—I said, "I've got a surprise for you."

"How sweet. What is it?"

With a magician's flourish, I whipped the new pet from the folds of my shirt and held it out triumphantly for her. Unfortunately, I startled the thing in the process, and it reacted by digging its claws into my wrist, letting out a string of rapid-fire barks, and dropping a glistening turd on the tiles of the kitchen floor. "For you," I said.

Her face fell. "You've got to be kidding me. You really think I'm that easy to buy off?" She made no effort to take the thing from me—in fact, she clenched her hands behind her. "Take it back where you got it."

The pupkit had softened now, retracting its claws and settling into the crook of my arm as if it recognized me, as if in the process of selecting it and secreting it in my shirt I'd imparted something essential to it—love, that is—and it was content to exist in this new world on a new basis altogether. "It's purring," I said.

"What do you want me to say—hallelujah? The thing's a freak, you're always saying so yourself every time one of those stupid commercials comes on—"

"No more a freak than that girl with the dog," I said.

"What girl? What are you talking about?"

"The one with the dog that bit me. She must have been six-four. She had an I.Q. of 162. And still she let her dog out, and still it bit me."

"What are you saying? You're not trying to back out on me, are you? We had a *deal*, Roy, and you know how I feel about people who renege on a deal—"

"O.K., O.K., calm down. All I'm saying is maybe we ought to have a kind of trial or something before we—I mean, we've never even had a pet."

"A pet is not a child, Roy."

"No," I said, "that's not what I meant. It was just, I'm just—" The crowparrots started up then with one of their raucous dinnertime chants, squawking so piercingly you could hear them even with the windows shut—"Big Mac, Big Mac," they called. "_Fries!_"—and I lost my train of thought.

“Are we going to eat?” Connie said in a fragile voice, tearing up. “Because I went out of my way. Because I wanted this night to be special, O.K.?”

So now we did hug, though the pupkit got between us, and, coward that I am, I told her everything was going to be all right. Later, after she’d gone to bed, I took the pupkit in my arms, went next door, and rang the bell. Allison answered in her nightgown, a smile creeping across her lips. “Here,” I said, handing her the animal. “I got this for you.”

Fast-forward seven and a half months. I am living in a house with a pregnant woman next door to a house in which there is another pregnant woman. Connie seems to find this amusing, never suspecting the truth of the matter. We’ll glance up from the porch and see Allison emerging heavily from her car with an armload of groceries, and Connie will say things like “I hope she doesn’t have to pee every five minutes the way I do” and “She won’t say who the father is—I just

hope it’s not that a-hole from Animal Control, what was his name?”

This is problematic on a number of levels. I play dumb, of course—what else can I do? “Maybe she went to GenLab,” I say.

“Her? You’re kidding me, right? I mean, look at that string of jerks she keeps dating. If you want to know the truth, she’s lower-class, Roy, and I’m sorry to have to say it—”

I’m not about to argue the point. The fact is I tried everything I could to talk Allison out of going through with this—finally, to my shame, falling back on the same argument about the whole *Übermensch-Untermensch* dynamic that Connie used on me—but Allison merely gave me a bitter smile and said, “I trust your genes, Roy. You don’t have to be involved. I just want to do this, that’s all. For myself. And for nature. You believe in nature, don’t you?”

You don’t have to be involved. But I was involved, though we’d had sex only the one time (or two, actually, counting the night I brought her the pupkit), and if she had a boy and he

looked like me and grew up right next door playing with our daughter, how involved would that be?

So there comes a day, sometime during that eighth month, a Tuesday, when I'm working at home and Connie's at the office, and I'm so focussed on the problem at hand that I keep putting off my bathroom break until the morning's nearly gone. That's the way it always is when I'm deeply engaged with a problem, a kind of mind-body separation, but finally the body's needs prevail and I push myself up from my desk to go down the hall to the bathroom. I'm standing there, in mid-flow, when I become aware of the sound of a dog barking on the front lawn and I shift my torso ever so slightly so that I can glance out the window and see what the ruckus is all about. It's the red dog, the Cherry Pit that set all this in motion, and it's tearing around on my hybrid lawn, chasing something. My first reaction is anger—anger at the tall girl and her fixer father and all the other idiots of the world—but by the time I get down the stairs and out the front door the anger

dissipates, because I see that the dog isn't there to kill anything but to play, and that what it's chasing is being chased willingly: Allison's dogcat, now a rangy adolescent and perhaps a third the size of the dog.

For all my fretting over the lawn, I have to say that in that moment, with the light making a cathedral of the street trees and the neighborhood suspended in the grip of a lazy, warm autumn afternoon, I find something wonderfully liberating in the play of those two animals, the dogcat especially.

Allison named him Tiger because of his coloration—dark feral stripes against a kind of Pomeranian orange—and he lives up to his name, absolutely fearless and with an athleticism and elasticity that combines the best of both species that went into making him. He runs rings around the pit bull, actually, feinting one way, dodging the next, racing up the trunk of a tree and out onto a branch before leaping to the next tree and springing back down to charge, doglike, across the yard. “Go, Tiger!” I call out. “Good boy. Go get him!”

That's when I become aware of Allison, in a pair of maternity shorts and an enormous top, crossing from her front lawn to ours. She's put on a lot of weight (but not as much as Connie, because we opted for a big baby, in the eleven-pound range, wanting it—her—to have that advantage right from the start). I haven't spoken with Allison much these past months, but I still have feelings for her, of course—beyond resentment, that is. So I lift a hand and wave and she waves back and I watch her come barefoot through the glowing grass while the animals frolic around her.

I'm down off the porch now, and I can't help but smile at the sight of her. She comes up to me, moving with a kind of clumsy grace, if that makes any sense, and I want to take her in my arms but can't really do that, not under these conditions, so I take both her hands and peck a neighborly kiss to her cheek. For a minute, neither of us says anything, then, shading her eyes with the flat of one hand to better see the animals at play, she says, "Pretty cute, huh?"

I nod.

"You see how Tiger's grown?"

"Yes, of course, I've been watching him all along. . . . Is that as big as he's going to get?"

The sun catches her eyes, which are a shade of plain everyday brown. "Nobody's sure, but the vet thinks he won't get much bigger. Maybe a pound or two."

"And you?" I venture. "How are you feeling?"

"Never better. You're going to be seeing more of me—don't look scared, that's not what I mean, just I'm taking my maternity leave, though I'm not due for, like, six weeks." Both her hands, pretty hands, shapely, come to rest on the bulge beneath her oversized blouse. "They're really being nice about it at work."

Connie's not planning on taking off till the minute her water breaks, because that's the way Connie is, and I want to tell Allison that by way of contrast, just to say something, but I notice that she's looking over my shoulder and I turn my head to see the tall girl coming up the walk,

leash in hand. “Sorry,” the girl calls out. “She got loose again. Sorry, sorry.”

I don’t know what it is, but I’m feeling generous, expansive. “No problem,” I call out. “She’s just having a little fun.”

That’s when Connie’s car slashes into the driveway, going too fast, and all I can think is she’s going to hit one of the animals, but she brakes at the last minute and they flow like water around the tires to chase back across the lawn again. It’s hard to gauge the look on my wife’s face as she swings open the car door, pushes herself laboriously from behind the wheel, then starts up the walk as if she hasn’t seen us. Just as she reaches the front steps, she swivels around. I can see she’s considering whether it’s worth the effort to come and greet our neighbor and get a closer look at the tall girl who hovers behind us like the avatar she is, but she decides against it. She just stops a moment, staring, and though she’s thirty feet away I can see a kind of recognition settle into her features, and it has to do with the way Allison is standing there beside me, as if for a portrait

or an illustration in a book on family planning, the XY chromosomes and the XX. It’s just a moment, and I can’t say for certain, but her face goes rigid and she turns her back on us, mounts the steps, and slams the door behind her.

When the *CRISPR* technology first came to light, governments and scientists everywhere assured the public that it would be employed only selectively, to fight disease and to rectify congenital deformities, editing out the mutated BRCA1 gene that predisposes women to breast cancer, for instance, or eliminating the ability of the *Anopheles* mosquito to carry the parasite that transmits malaria. Who could argue with that? Genome-editing kits (“Knock Out Any Gene!”) were sold to home hobbyists, who could create their own anomalous forms of yeast and bacteria in their kitchens, and it was revolutionary—and, beyond that, fun. Fun to tinker. Fun to create. The pet and meat industries gave us rainbow-colored aquarium fish, seahorses that incorporated gold dust in their cells, rabbits that glowed green under a black light, the beefed-up supercow, the micropig, the dogcat, and all the

rest. The Chinese were the first to renounce any sort of regulatory control and upgrade the human genome, and, as if they weren't brilliant enough already, they became still more brilliant as the first edited children began to appear, and of course we had to keep up. . . .

In a room at GenLab, Connie and I were presented with an exhaustive menu of just how our chromosomes could be made to match up. We chose to have a daughter. We selected emerald eyes for her—not iridescent, not freakishly bright, but enhanced for color so that she could grow up wearing mint, olive, Kelly green, and let her eyes talk for her. We chose height, too, as just about everybody does. And musical ability—we both love music. Intellect, of course. And finer features, like a subtly cleft chin and breasts that were not too big but not as small as Connie's, either. It was a menu, and we placed an order.

The tall girl is right beside us now, smiling like the heroine of a Norse saga, her eyes sweeping over us like

searchlights. She looks to Allison, takes in her condition. "Boy or girl?" she asks.

The softest smile plays over Allison's lips. She ducks her head, shrugs.

The girl—the genius—looks confused for a moment. "But, but," she stammers, "how can that be? You don't mean you—?"

But before Allison can answer, a crowparrot sweeps out of the nearest tree, winging low to screech "Fuck you!" in our faces, and the smallest miracle occurs. Tiger, as casual in his own skin as anything there is or ever was, erupts from the ground in a rocketing whirl of fur to catch the thing in his jaws. As quick as that, it's over, and the feathers, the prettiest feathers you'll ever see, lift and dance and float away on the breeze. ♦

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OUR GREATEST POLITICAL NOVELIST?

* newyorker.com *

Thursday 12 December 2013 * Tim Kreider *

11 minute read *



The image that should be here isn't downloading 😞

Sometime in the past couple of generations, capitalism's victory over our hearts and minds seems to have become complete, in that hardly anyone even notices it anymore. It's a monoculture, taken for granted, like monogamy, or monotheism, or having one sun. It's hard to think of any "serious" literary writers in the United States under the age of fifty who engage the big political issues of our time as directly as Boomer authors like Paul Auster ("Leviathan"), Thomas

Pynchon ("Vineland"), or Robert Stone ("A Flag for Sunrise"), let alone in the way that muckraker novelists like Upton Sinclair used to.¹¹ When we call literary writers "political" today, we're usually talking about identity politics. If historians or critics fifty years from now were to read most of our contemporary literary fiction, they might well infer that our main societal problems were issues with our parents, bad relationships, and death. If they were looking for any indication that we were even dimly aware of the burgeoning global conflict between democracy and capitalism, or of the abyssal catastrophe our civilization was just

beginning to spill over the brink of, they might need to turn to books that have that embarrassing little Saturn-and-spaceship sticker on the spine. That is, to science fiction.²²

Science fiction is an inherently political genre, in that any future or alternate history it imagines is a wish about How Things Should Be (even if it's reflected darkly in a warning about how they might turn out). And How Things Should Be is the central question and struggle of politics. It is also, I'd argue, an inherently liberal genre (its many conservative practitioners notwithstanding), in that it sees the status quo as contingent, a historical accident, whereas conservatism holds it to be inevitable, natural, and therefore just. The meta-premise of all science fiction is that nothing can be taken for granted. That it's still anybody's ballgame.

Kim Stanley Robinson is generally acknowledged as one of the greatest living science-fiction writers; collectively, the three novels of his "Mars" trilogy—"Red Mars," "Green Mars," and "Blue Mars"—have won all the major science-fiction and

fantasy awards. He is also, for my money, one of the most important political writers working in America today. In his Mars novels, Robinson uses the Red Planet as a historical tabula rasa, a template for creating a saner, more sustainable, and more just human society. What's most powerful about the Mars books as political novels is that they envision a credible utopia, one that doesn't—unlike, say, Skinner's "*Walden Two*"—rely on a revision of human nature. Robinson's characters are cynics, opportunists, idealists, narcissists, drug-dependent, manic-depressive, borderline Asperger's, and emotionally frozen survivors of abuse, but with all their flaws and conflicting agendas they manage to remake their world in more humane and equitable form.

The first wave of his Martian settlers are all scientists, who are no more perfect than any other human beings but have been rigorously trained in a kind of intellectual integrity. Robinson argues that, now that climate change has become a matter of life and death for the species, it's time for scientists to abandon their scrupulous neutrality and enter into the messy arena of

politics. Essentially, Robinson attempts to apply scientific thinking to politics, approaching it less like pure physics, in which one infallible equation / ideology explains and answers everything, than like engineering—a process of what F.D.R. once called “bold, persistent experimentation,” finding out what works and combining successful elements to synthesize something new. He scavenges ideas from the American Constitution, the Swiss confederacy, “the guild socialism of Great Britain, Yugoslavian worker management, Mondragon ownership, Kerala land tenure, and so on” to construct his utopias. The major platform planks these methods lead him to in his books are:

- common stewardship—not ownership—of the land, water, and air
- an economic system based on ecological reality
- divesting central governments of most of their power and diffusing it among local communities
- the basics of existence, like health care, removed from the cruelties of the free market
- the application of democratic principles like self-determination and equality in the workplace—

which, in practice, means small co-ops instead of vast, hierarchical, exploitative corporations—and,
– a reverence for the natural world codified into law.

Depending on your own politics, this may sound like millennia-overdue common sense or a bong-fuelled 3 A.M. wish list, but there’s no arguing that to implement it in the real world circa 2013 would be, literally, revolutionary. My own bet would be that either your grandchildren are going to be living by some of these precepts, or else they won’t be living at all.

You could argue that, if I didn’t fundamentally agree with his politics, Robinson’s fiction might seem contrived and didactic to me, the way Ayn Rand’s does if you’re not predisposed toward her brand of enlightened assholism. It’s true he likes to write lectures and speeches, but they’re more engaging than some of Tolstoy’s, who nearly succeeded in stomping my clinging fingers off of “Anna Karenina” with his ruminations on Russian agriculture circa 1870. But I don’t just admire Robinson’s ambitions or agree with his agenda;

I'm not recommending his books because they're good for you. Kim Stanley Robinson is one of my favorite novelists, period. I know the characters of his "Mars" trilogy —John Boone, Frank Chalmers, Maya Toitovna, Sax Russell, Anne Clayborne (none of whose names I needed to look up)—like I know old friends from college. I love them; they exasperate me; I talk about them behind their backs with my other friends. The history shared by these characters becomes so long and fraught and tangled over the course of his hundreds of pages and years (thanks to genetic longevity treatments, Robinson's able to keep the same ensemble of characters around for centuries) that it gives me a pang of longing and nostalgia and bittersweet sense of life's length and brevity. In a bold authorial gambit, Robinson kills off his most charismatic characters—the alpha males, the movers—by the end of the first novel in the trilogy, allowing his secondary characters to come to the fore, expose new facets, and evolve in unexpected and beautiful ways. The strength of his characterizations is inextricable from his power as a political visionary; Robinson is realistic

about human beings but nonetheless optimistic about our capacity for change. In the last pages of the "Mars" trilogy, a character who has bitterly resisted change for a hundred and fifty years reminds herself, "Nowhere on this world were people killing each other, nowhere were they desperate for shelter or food, nowhere were they scared for their kids." Put this way, it sounds like such a modest utopia to hope for.

* * *

Robinson's new book, "Shaman: A Novel of the Ice Age," is what you might technically call historical fiction, though it's not the kind with a buff Byronic groomsman clutching a swoony supermodel heiress on the cover. It's set so far back in prehistory—circa 30,000 B.C.—that it's effectively speculative fiction, an attempt to imagine another world. Any story about the prehistoric past, like stories about the future, is unavoidably political, in that it's an effort to define what constitutes basic human nature, which, in turn, is presumed to imply what kind of society most suits such an animal. The

anthropological picture of early man has varied with changing ideological fashions, from *Homo lupus*, every man for himself in an eternal war of all against all, raiding the neighbors and raping their women, to a noble savage, living in communal bands with plenty of slack time for drum circles and orgies. Back and forth it goes between warriors or hippies, hunters or vegans, all of which is construed to have some bearing on everything from our own current-day economic systems to the institution of marriage to diet.

“Shaman” is a lesser entry in Robinson’s corpus, not the book I’d recommend you start with (though it does include an outcast Neanderthal who breaks my heart). The novel’s main character, Loon, a fourteen-year-old shaman-in-training, is something of a blank slate—that stock narrator-protagonist ubiquitous in science fiction I like to call The Guy. Its plot is episodic and less than compelling, basically a coming-of-age story, its central arc a classic boy meets girl / girl is abducted by evil Eskimos / boy gets girl back. What’s most interesting about the

book is its vision of *Homo sapiens* and their society in what Robinson elsewhere calls “the morning of the world.”

Robinson’s Ice Age isn’t without its own identity politics. The roles of the sexes are rigidly separated, as in most Paleolithic societies, but it’s not what you could call a patriarchy; it’s the women who make the major decisions, without issuing decrees or fiats, by talking and settling things among themselves while doing chores. Shame is their greatest weapon for enforcing mores, one our own culture has largely lost; “They could spear you with a look,” Loon thinks. Robinson has always understood how women throughout history have contrived to exert power within even the strictest patriarchies, behind closed doors—“the Kegel grip of uterine law,” he calls it in “Blue Mars.”

Another notable feature of the novel—all the more striking because we only come to realize it gradually—is that all but one of its characters are, to put it extremely anachronistically, black. *Homo sapiens* are (duh) of African descent, and these earliest

Europeans haven't yet adapted to their new environment or interbred with the Neanderthals (the only "whites" in the book). Robinson has set a previous book in a nonwhite world—"The Years of Rice and Salt," an alternate history in which the Black Death eradicated the whole population of Europe and the scientific revolution occurred in Asia instead. Robinson's novels are speculative, but even so, I'm trying to think of another white American author who's written a whole novel without any white people in it. I also have to wonder how long it'll be before an American novelist can write a book set in the present in which in which nonwhite characters' race goes without mentioning for fifty pages.

One aspect of "Shaman" that disappoints, or puzzles, me is its assumptions about Ice Age social structures, especially sexual relationships. In the small tribal village Robinson depicts, teen-agers sneak off to fool around and young people sometimes hook up at annual festivals, but for the most part, once they're adults, people pair up, get married, and settle into monogamous relationships—in

effect, they behave a lot like middle-class Californians. It seems like an odd streak of imaginative conservatism for an author whose vision of future societies has been so untrammelled. Similarly, most of the hunter-gatherer tribes we see in "Shaman" are peaceable, too preoccupied with survival to kill each other. Robinson seems to see theft, rape, and slavery as luxuries of wealth and leisure, the cruelties of exploitation a function of relatively advanced civilizations, like the subarctic dwellers who kidnap Loon's wife. Loon's tribe in "Shaman" isn't exactly a preagricultural utopia—they're starving by the end of each winter—but it's still a pretty benign view of man in his primeval state, closer to Rousseau than Hobbes.

Wouldn't it ultimately be *more* optimistic to create a sort of past-dystopia, showing us how far we've come? There's evidence to suggest that prehistoric cultures would've seemed far more savage and alien to us than Robinson imagines here. I suspect this is less a failure of imagination on his part than a triumph of his convictions over the evidence, a projection of his

resolute optimism backwards through time to show us that folks are basically the same all over. He wants to show us believable Homo sapiens—gossipy, fractious, constantly bitching—who are also curious, resourceful, and intrepid.

Robinson seems mostly interested in using his protagonist as a vessel of perception: Loon has at least as much awe at the vastness and mystery of this world as we do, as much wonder at finding himself inexplicably in it, the same aching sense of the evanescent present. The most exotic aspect of Ice Age psychology Robinson imagines is what we modern readers would call animist or magical thinking. His characters regard animals as different kinds of people, the wolves as their cousins. Passages in the book are written from the points of view of wolverines or wildcats. Ghosts appear in dreams and by firelight, and speak to the living. Sometimes the Third Wind, that last desperate burst of energy and determination that comes to us when we feel beyond taking another step, speaks to us as narrator. Loon's world is alive, and he seems more alive than we are for it. The

animist worldview, common among what we call primitive people, may be coming back into fashion among some philosophers and even neuroscientists, in the updated guise of panpsychism, the hypothesis that consciousness is a quality inherent in all matter (cf. Christof Koch's "Consciousness: Confessions of a Romantic Reductionist"), which would have ethical implications for our treatment of other species and the natural world. Provable or not, it might be an indispensable story to prevent us from trashing our own planet.

"Shaman" is ultimately a novel about the importance of stories, filled with Ice Age myths, legends, superstitions and proverbs—some of which, apparently, have survived intact the thirty thousand years into our own time, longer than any other human artifact, sayings more enduring than stone. Our culture is adrift between stories right now—the old ones we lived on for thousands of years aren't working anymore, and we haven't come up with new ones to replace them yet. It's natural for us to see ourselves as being at history's endpoint, since,

so far, we are, but part of science fiction's job is to remind us that it's early yet, we're still a primitive people, the Golden Age may lie ahead. In an era filled with complacent dystopias and escapist apocalypses, Robinson is one of our best, bravest, most moral, and most hopeful storytellers. It's no coincidence that so many of his novels have as their set pieces long, punishing treks through unforgiving country with diminishing provisions, his characters exhausted and despondent but forcing themselves to slog on. What he's telling us over and over, like the voice of the Third Wind whispering when all seems lost, is that it's not too late, don't get scared, don't give up, we're almost there, we can do this, we just have to keep going.

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Tim Kreider⁵ is an essayist and cartoonist. His most recent book is "We Learn Nothing."

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J.G. BALLARD'S COLLAPSING FUTURE

* medium.com* Saturday 07 May 2016*

Andrew Curry* 11 minute read *

J.G. Ballard's novel High-Rise, long regarded as unfilmable, has after forty years been brought to the screen at the third attempt by the veteran British producer Jeremy Thomas, with Ben Wheatley directing. This article looks at the film and book through the lens of social change. Although Ballard once said he was only interested in what will happen in "the next five minutes," his novels sit on the edge of dystopia, leaning in to the imminent catastrophes at the end of the modernist era.



The first edition of High-Rise

One of J.G. Ballard's gifts was that he could sniff out the moments that happen just as waves of change shift from being progressive to being feral. Or to put it another way, to borrow from Marshall McLuhan's Tetrad model, just as a technology shifts from "enhancing" to "reversing"; reversing, that is, into a sea of adverse consequences. *Crash* (1973), for example, explored cars as a death-fetish; later, *Super-Cannes* (2000) described the corporation

just as it took on the characteristics of a private state. So it is with *High-Rise* (1975).

In this article, I plan to locate the book at the intersection of three long trends:

- * The middle class crisis of the 1970s
- * The closure of the modern city
- * The end of the idea of expansive modernity.

In summary and without too many spoilers, *High-Rise* tells the story of a newly-built residential block, the first of a set of five, built to the east of the City of London on what seems geographically to be the derelict dockland that became the financial centre Canary Wharf. The block is highly socially stratified, but only among the middle-classes. At the bottom are film technicians, air stewards and pilots; the wealthy are at the top. The building is vast; early on Ballard describes one floor as being the size of the flight deck of an aircraft carrier.

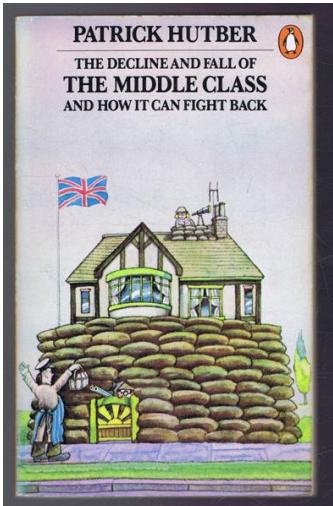
All of the services that might be needed are contained within; supermarket, schools, swimming pools, tennis and squash courts.

With obvious shades of Le Corbusier, it is a machine for living. And then, at first slowly, then much more quickly, the services start to fail. We know how it ends from the very first sentence of the novel, which is told is a long flashback:

"Later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr. Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months."

The middle class crisis

As we live through the political crisis of the 2010s, it is easy to forget how acute the political crisis of the 1970s was, in the UK and elsewhere. In Britain, 1979 marked the year when income became most equal, measured by the Gini co-efficient, through a combination of high taxation, high inflation, and strong trades unions. As these trends peaked there was social panic. *The Decline and Fall of the Middle Class, and How They Can Fight Back*, by the Sunday Telegraph journalist Patrick Huther, published in 1976, catches a mild version of this panic.



Middle class panic, 1970s edition

As he writes in the introduction,

“That this is a time of crisis for the nation is a commonplace, but it is equally a time of crisis for the middle classes, who are subjected to unprecedented pressures, and, at the same time to considerable denigration.” (p9)

Hutber had used his column in the conservative *Sunday Telegraph* to elicit from his readers their “hopes, fears, and finances,” and the responses say a lot about the electoral appeal of Thatcher, newly elected as Conservative leader, but not yet Prime Minister, with her

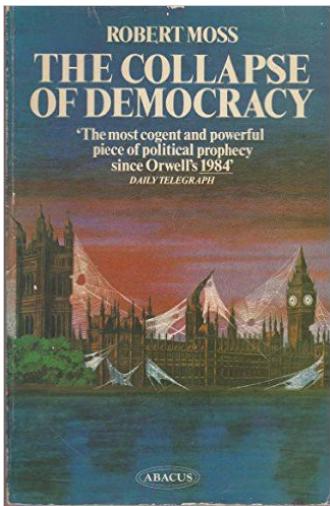
emphasis on cutting personal taxes, monetarist economics, and her visceral hatred of trades unions.

Much, though, is about the sense of small losses. An architect who writes that the middle class family is “up against the wall,” goes on to explain,

“I haven’t seen a play in London in two years. I only eat in restaurants on business. Can’t afford the gardener once a week any more. You start adding it up and it amounts to a social revolution.”
(p37)

There were less considered observers than Hutber. In the 1970s some in the UK threatened *coup d’etat*. In 1974 Colonel David Stirling created GB75 to take over the government should civil unrest prevent its normal operations, although he abandoned the plan when details were published. The former British Army general Walter Walker was involved in Civil Assistance, created in 1974 to supply volunteers in the case of a General Strike and publicised on the front page of the London Evening News.

Robert Moss, who by his own account had “personal experience of political warfare in Portugal, Chile, Vietnam and Northern Ireland,” published in 1975 a book in called *The Collapse of Democracy*, which opens with a scenario set in London in 1985:



The future is Leninist, apparently 1975 edition

“Outside the Ministry of Equality (formerly Buckingham Palace: it was renamed when the Royal Family moved to New Zealand) a couple of sleazy looking individuals had just caught site of a likely touch. One of them sidled up to the solitary American tourist and addressed him with the inevitable, “Psst. Got any dollars?” The official exchange

rate was frozen at £48 to the dollar... There is a story of a woman pensioner who lived for six months on a \$20 bill smuggled in by a nephew from Canada.

“The Knightsbridge Barracks is now the headquarters of the Volunteer Constables, a new mobile police force. Its nucleus was drawn from the factory militias that appeared in the north of England during the General Strike a few years back.”
(p23)

Well, you get the idea. It is almost impossible to look back at the documents of the 1970s and not be surprised by the language and the claims. Walker told journalists that the then Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson was a “proven communist,” a view held, wrongly, by elements in the British security services.

In terms of *High-Rise* the point is this: Ballard’s story of social breakdown within this middle-class enclave, in which social status was tightly defined by the floor of the building you could afford, represents a return of the (barely) repressed notion that the order of their lives was close to collapse.

More: an important part of the plot is the attempt by one character, Richard Wilder, to climb to the top. He is, literally, social climbing. In the context of the book Wilder's project is doomed from its start.

The closure of the city

This sense of middle class crisis was compounded by the decline of the city. In the '70s London, like New York, was emptying out. Population numbers were in long-term decline. The solution, in effect, was the start of forms of urban segregation, a long squeeze on the radical idea of the city as public space.

Anna Minton charts this in her book *Ground Control*. "The familiar story which is often told," she writes, "is that during the 1970s and the 1980s inner cities became dangerous places, where crime and violence were rife and middle class families fled to the suburbs in search of safety and security." (p25)

In this, the UK seemed to be following the US, where this flight was also spurred by the urban riots of the '60s and racial conflict.

This misses part of the story, says Minton. The decline of the inner cities followed industrial decline, which hollowed out the small factories and workshops which pepper urban maps of the '60s and '70s.

"As the post-war industrial economy faltered, there simply wasn't the money to allow local authorities to invest properly in cities. So the private sector came to the rescue, persuaded by the incentive of large amounts of public money." (p26)

Canary Wharf, which pioneered this model, was built through a specially created organisation, the London Docklands Development Corporation, a special purpose vehicle which owned the land, had public funding and planning powers, benefited from tax breaks, but was largely unaccountable. Much of the urban regeneration across London and the UK since the 1980s has involved the creation of privately owned public spaces (POPS), typically monitored by CCTV and 24-hour private security guards.

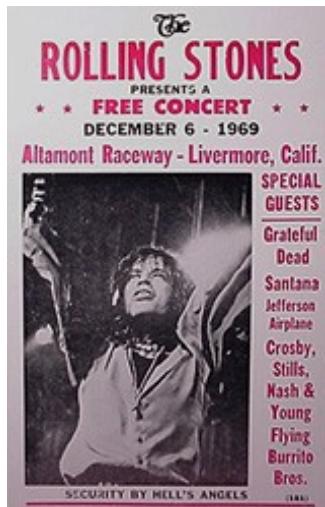


Building Canary Wharf. Photo: Ian Britton/FreeFoto. CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

At the same time the number of gated communities has risen, along with a rise in policing and council orders that are designed to target behaviour that is deemed anti-social. The third element of closure is the rise of the SUV or 4x4 vehicle, partly because of fears about safety and security. Such vehicles are more safe for those inside them and less safe for everyone else. In *High-Rise* the withdrawal from the city is almost complete. At the start of the novel, people still leave to go to work. By the end, the cars sit unused in the car park. Many have been wrecked or immobilised by objects hurled from the balconies of the building.

The end of modernity

Both of these trends—the crisis of the middle class and the closure of the city—sit inside a larger crisis: the end of the post-war economic boom and the political and social agreements that sat behind it.



Altamont, 1969: “The crowd of kids held an angel with a knife/ Who carved himself a slice of another guy’s life.”

Conventionally, this is dated from the oil shock of 1973, but even before this there were clear signs that economic and cultural confidence of the 1960s was deflating. The ugliness of the Altamont Free Festival in December 1969 is a better guide to the times than the peace and love of Woodstock. Perhaps the last moment of real confidence was

during the moon landing in 1969. Indeed, Ballard once said that the Apollo programme was the last act undertaken by a government out of a sense of world-historical optimism.

One way to chart these things is to look at the themes of different World Fairs, as Douglas Murphy does in *Lost Futures*. 1939 in New York was dominated by the idea of the automobile; 1958 in Brussels by nuclear power (the Atomium that was the centrepiece is still standing); 1964, once again in New York, on the space age, with a sliver of computing from IBM. The dominant building aesthetic throughout was that of Le Corbusier.

By 1967, the year of the Montreal Expo, that had changed. Buckminster Fuller designed the American pavilion as a geodesic dome, and the centrepiece was Habitat 67, designed by a young Israeli-Canadian architect Moshe Safdie, “an attempt to create a system of modular pre-fabricated housing, which would both

combine the advantages and avoid the problems of suburban sprawl and high density modern housing.”



Habitat 67. Photo: Gergely Vass. CC BY-SA 3.0

There are other markers of the changing mood. Richard Nixon was elected in 1968, and re-elected in 1972, on waves of conservative sentiment. The world’s post-war international financial system unravelled at the start of the 1970s under the pressure of American government debt. The United Nations Stockholm conference on the environment was held in 1972, and Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth were founded just before this.

The Limits to Growth and *A Blueprint for Survival* were both published in 1972. As Ian Christie noted to me, “by 1972 a narrative of systemic risk and cultural fear was well established, very much counter to the materialist progressivism of the 1960–67 period.”

By the time *High-Rise* was written, the idea of what it meant to be modern had taken a turn for the worse. As the decade wore on, the

sense grew of society closing in: by 1977, the Sex Pistols sang, “There is no future in England’s dream.” By 1981, in The Specials’ “Ghost Town,” “everything has been closed down.”

Buckminster Fuller and Moshe Safdie represented a notion of a lightweight future on a human scale, but the message got lost. If the modernity represented by the American model of post-war commodity capitalism was dead culturally, its forms continued to replicate themselves. They became one of Sohail Inayatullah’s “used futures¹”, a borrowed image of the future that is reproduced unthinkingly.

High-Rise, then, captures this sense of malignant reproduction. Some of most significant scenes, in both the book and the film, take place in a supermarket that is rapidly emptying of stock.

Cancelling the future

In his engaging essay² “There Is As Yet Insufficient Data For A Meaningful Answer,” Aaron Jaffe detours usefully around the edge of J.G. Ballard. Jaffe describes Ballard

as being “obsessively interested in the near-term catastrophic end: the collapsing inner space of human knowledge systems.” The writer’s own reflections on his work simultaneously both accept and reject the notion of the future.

“Increasingly, our concepts of past, present and future are being forced to revise themselves,” Ballard says in an introduction to *Crash* written in 1995, two decades after the novel. “Just as the past, in social and psychological terms, became a casualty of Hiroshima and the nuclear age, so in its turn the future is ceasing to exist, devoured by the all-voracious present. We have annexed the future into the present.”

He is on the same ground here that both David Graeber and Mark Fisher have revisited in recent years. In “Of Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit³” Graeber laments that a future he was all but promised as child in the sixties has somehow been switched for one in which the main product is different forms of simulation.

“In this final stultifying stage of capitalism, we are moving from poetic technologies to bureaucratic technologies. By poetic technologies, I refer to the use of rational and technical means to bring wild fantasies to reality... Computers have played a crucial role in the narrowing of our social imaginations.”

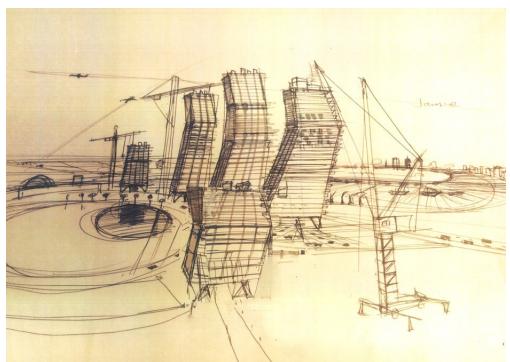
He observes that Alvin Toffler’s claim that the pace of change is speeding up, in *Future Shock* (1970), appears just as we reach our top speed, certainly in aviation, and as the historic growth in the number of scientific papers published levels off.

Fisher, a cultural theorist, riffs on Franco Berardi’s phrase “the slow cancellation of the future,” reflecting on “the gradual yet relentless way in which the future has been eroded over the last 30 years.... The future didn’t disappear overnight.” (p13)

Importantly, he acknowledges our part in this. “The capitalist dystopia of 21st century culture is not

something that was simply imposed on us—it was built out of our captured desires.” (p25)

Although it was written before the internet era, *High-Rise* somehow articulates our part in closing down our future. We come looking to make “an investment in the future,” as Laing says in the film, early on. And we end up after nights of partying cooking dog over an open fire.



Production design sketch for *High-Rise*, by Mark Tildesley, with thanks to Dezeen.

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From: <https://medium.com/@nextwavefutures/j-g-ballards-collapsing-future-8339169bb2b7>

- <http://www.benlandau.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Inayatullah-2008-Six-Pillars.pdf>

- <https://www.academia.edu/8829392/THERE>

supplementing the formal language of her mantras—*My name is Offred, and I intend to survive*—with a running commentary that's so acerbic, so shockingly vulgar and wonderfully snarky in this repressed society, that it makes you laugh out loud in disbelief.

This approach could also describe the adaptation as a whole: The writers, directors, and producers took the novel's foundation and built on it, enhancing Atwood's original ideas with subtext that feels so painfully acute that you would be forgiven for thinking that this was written in only the last five months. Because the women depicted in this series—*independent, outspoken, queer, sexually autonomous women of color and white women*—could have been raising their voices and signs in the Women's March. But they also could have been the women who chose not to march, who voted on the opposing side to these women in the election. The smartest thing that the showrunners did, in adapting this story to television, was to give every single one of these women a voice.

Spoilers for the first three episodes of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Any book spoilers will be whited out.

In the first three episodes, women are brainwashed through the mantra of *It was her fault*, and we witness at least two scenes of institutionalized rape; a deluded woman steals a baby while a more sympathetic woman contemplates the same; one Handmaid is made a literal example of the Scripture verse *If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out*, while another suffers the same treatment to a very different part of her body. It's like nothing I've ever seen before.

The dystopian trappings are both foreign and familiar. If you're new to the story, you'll recognize that this is the progenitor to *Divergent*'s faction system built on color and values, or *The Hunger Games'* rebellion against the Capitol. It is a consistently amazing fact that Margaret Atwood dreamed up this dystopia over thirty years ago, and its relevance has grown rather than diminished. Yes, the women are dressed in hyper-stylized, color-coordinated outfits that more bring to mind medieval handmaids than

anything from the near-future. But these contrasts—red Handmaids, teal Wives, hospital-green Marthas—are a striking demonstration both of how these women are segregated by the system and how they choose to set themselves apart from one another. The outlandish strictures enacted by Gilead upon its inhabitants are really just trumped-up ways of representing universal, timeless women's struggles: judgment or punishment for any sort of sexual autonomy; men feeling that they are owed women; politicians and leaders intruding upon what women do with their bodies, just because they're capable of conceiving and giving birth—intrusions that prioritize the well-being of a hypothetical baby over that of the body that would carry it.

Photo: George Kraychyk/Hulu

But even as these women are funneled into different classes, their identities stripped from them, they do not lose their sense of self—as demonstrated by Offred's delightfully sharp internal monologue. While shopping with fellow Handmaids and Ofglen neutrally remarks about how

Offred's Commander likes oranges, Offred thinks, *I don't need oranges, I need to scream. I need to grab the nearest machine gun*. When Nick blandly inquires as to why Offred is leaving the house, despite her comings and goings being strictly regulated for the same handful of errands, she silently snarks, *No, Nick, I'm gonna knock back a few at the Oyster House bar, you wanna come along?* And when she's cornered—when Ofglen gets transferred, or the entire household believes she's pregnant—Offred simply thinks, *Fuck*. It's her true voice, the one she used in her daily life before Gilead. The one that's forbidden now.

It could be a stretch, but I also think that the writers are incorporating the novel's frame story. (Book spoilers, highlight to read.) Offred's formal monologues are so different from her imagined comebacks that they almost seem to exist in a separate narrative, elevated above the day-to-day. The sound quality is also different—not quite echoing, but sounding as if it inhabits a physical space as well as a figurative one. Which is to say, please let this

series end with someone finding a footlocker full of cassette tapes.
(End book spoilers.)

Just as important as the aural elements are the visual ones. The interviews with costume designer Ane Crabtree² (who was responsible for making *Westworld* look so authentic) are fascinating, from little details like sewing down the grommets of the Handmaids' shoes so that they forget they ever had shoelaces, to the dozen different pieces that make up the Handmaids' modest yet complicated attire. So too was the choice of a menstrual red for the gowns—really, for all of the women's color schemes. The Marthas' clothes are so pale as to nearly blend in with the walls of their homes. And instead of the standard blue we saw in the movie, which pits primary color shades of red and blue against one another, the Wives' dresses are more of a teal, which clashes harshly with the red every time they share space with the Handmaids.

Then there's the Ceremony. While every adaptation's take on this institutionalized rape has not dimmed the horror of the act, the

TV series has by far the best interpretation. And by "best," I mean the most disturbing: The camera mostly lingers on Offred's paralyzed expression and dead eyes, as she mentally disassociates from the moment even as she is being physically jerked up and down in Serena Joy's lap, back and forth, as the Commander does his duty. Little details, like Serena Joy pulling her foot over Offred's face to get up after it's over, or the Commander cleaning himself before zipping up, make it all the more chilling.

For these and other scenes in the Commander's household, it's important that we're in Offred's head. But by moving from strictly first-person to a sort of omniscient third-person, the narrative both depicts Offred's individual experiences while also transcending just her version of events.

A major criticism of the novel is the segregation of race among Gilead's women: The Handmaids all appear to be white, with the black women sorted into the Martha class of domestic servants. While Elisabeth Moss' Offred/June is still white, she's in the minority among the people

dearest to her: Her best friend Moira (Samira Wiley) and her husband Luke (O-T Fagbenle) are both black, and Luke and June's daughter Hannah (Jordana Blake) is biracial. Race is not a sticking point, either, at least not in the first few episodes; I'm commenting on it more now than the series has at all so far. No longer is a straight white woman our only narrator; there are multiple points of entry for viewers.

Photo: George Kraychyk/Hulu

Similarly, Moira isn't the sole queer character; Ofglen (Alexis Bledel) reveals, when talking about their lives before, that she had a wife and a son. In the book, Ofglen is something of an enigma, acting as little more than Offred's tipoff that there is dissent swirling beneath the surface in Gilead. By giving her a family to fight for and an identity that makes her a "gender traitor" by Gilead's standards, she becomes more than a seditious Handmaid. It's also, I suspect, an opportunity to dramatize what could have happened to Moira, as a queer woman, had she lived out her life as a Handmaid with Offred and the others.

Photo: George Kraychyk/Hulu

In addition to communicating with the shadowy resistance, Ofglen has also committed an equally grave crime: She has engaged in a relationship with a Martha. The consequences, as they unfurl in episode 3, "Late," are gutting: she and her lover are put on trial, with muzzles strapped over their mouths so that they cannot say a word in their defense as they are declared traitors. Then "Martha 6715301" (we never find out her real name) is hanged—in an especially shocking detail, by a crane—while Ofglen is forced to watch, helpless and screeching like a wounded animal. But she isn't granted the same fate, because not even her treason could erase the fact of her fertility. She awakens post-surgery to discover that her genitals have been mutilated—not enough to prevent her from conceiving or giving birth, but to remove any association with pleasure.

Photo: George Kraychyk/Hulu

This violation of Ofglen—who at this point is finally referred to by her real name, Emily—and Janine's plucked-out eye are both details

added to the show. In the book, Aunt Lydia reminds her charges that she can mutilate their hands and feet because those do not matter for their purposes. The showrunners simply took that viewpoint to a more shocking and devastating end—because as far as the Aunts are concerned, a Handmaid does not need to look appealing to be part of the Ceremony, or experience an orgasm during it. They are simply, as Offred puts it, two-legged wombs.

Photo: George Kraychyk/Hulu

Even Janine/Ofwarren, the Handmaid who swings wildly between smarmy complacence and unhinged grief, is an object of sympathy. She may parade her pregnancy through town, but it's a communal joy for every Handmaid: One of their ranks fulfilled her purpose and reinforced how relevant they are to the new world order. She has also created a new life, which despite its violent conception, is still precious. But whereas the birth was the peak of Janine's story in the book, viewers stick with her through her postpartum struggle. Her daughter

Angela was handed directly to the Wife after birth; Janine gets to hold her only when the baby needs to nurse. While Janine believes that she is essential to the household, what she has failed to grasp is that as soon as the baby has stopped nursing, she'll be shuttled off to another household to do this all over again. But right now, she has tricked herself into believing that "Charlotte" ("her real name") is hers and that the Commander loves her and their child, and is planning an escape for the three of them, this odd family linked only by blood.

Photo: George Kraychyk/Hulu

When contemplating Luke's fate in the novel, Offred dreams up at least three different scenarios, struggling to reconcile alternate and contradictory versions of Luke in her mind. The show's decision to follow different Handmaids through key events is much the same, a way of playing out different potential paths for Offred. "I'm not that kind of person," she demurs to Ofglen when the latter first mentions the resistance—but what if she finally gave voice to her inner monologue? Offred's supposedly missed period

immediately elevates her to a place of privilege within the Commander's household, with Serena Joy catering to her every need and actually *thanking* her for answering their prayers. Though Offred must break the news that she's not pregnant—in a scene that made me ache for Serena Joy but also squirm away from the Wife's cold fury—in Janine she sees the bittersweet position she could inhabit if she could only conceive. And, of course, she witnesses how dangerous it is to believe that your Commander could actually care for you simply because he fucks you and you happen to get pregnant. While Offred has not achieved the latter, her secret Scrabble game with Commander Waterford (Joseph Fiennes) is a much more dangerous form of intimacy.

Photo: George Kraychyk/Hulu

Despite the specific details of her account, book Offred is still an Everywoman, a vessel into which readers can project themselves to

imagine *what if this happened to me?* Perhaps this is why Atwood never explicitly named her, to emphasize that anyone could become Offred if she were cycled out of the Commander's household and someone new were brought in. Instead, the TV series has Offred name herself at the end of the pilot, conjuring up the name that used to define her—June, a nod to the long-held reader theory—and then does the same for the other Handmaids. Offred is no longer the Everywoman, but any woman.

Why should you watch this show? Because it's already surprised me, someone who knows the story inside and out.

From: <https://www.tor.com/2017/04/27/the-handmaids-tale-television-review/>

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- <http://www.tor.com/2017/04/24/the-handmaids-tale-movie-review/>
 - <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/04/handmaids-tale-hulu-costumes-margaret-atwood>

Welcome to the first issue
of Walden Pond! This is the
back, turn it over and get
reading.

Thanks for being an Alpha
tester. I'm really interested
your experience of using
this service, and especially
in your experience of
reading this zine.

Let me know when you've
had a bit of time to read. I'd
like to talk about how you
found it. What was good
and what was a pain?

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