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# A Reporter at Large

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# The Underground Movement Trying to Topple the North Korean Regime

Adrian Hong says he leads a group of “freedom fighters” conducting a revolution. Has the U.S. already betrayed them?

By [Suki Kim](#)

November 16, 2020



On the afternoon of February 22, 2019, a tall Asian man rang the doorbell of the North Korean Embassy in Madrid. His business card identified him as Matthew Chao, an investor from Baron Stone Capital, with offices in Toronto and Dubai. Once he was allowed in, nine men in their twenties and thirties, carrying pellet guns, knives, and metal bars, entered. They covered their faces with black balaclavas, tied up four staffers with zip ties and handcuffs, and herded them into a meeting room, before taking a senior Embassy official to the basement. His wife and his eight-year-old son were put in a room on the first floor.

About thirty minutes later, an employee of a nearby gym was driving past the Embassy and came across a woman, her face covered in blood, who had jumped from a second-floor balcony. The gym employee called for an ambulance, and, when it arrived, the woman told the medics that there were intruders in the Embassy killing people. Soon, the police rang the doorbell of the Embassy. The tall Asian man, now wearing a badge featuring the face of [Kim Jong Un](#), North Korea's Great Leader, came out and told the police that there had been a misunderstanding. At 9:40 P.M., most of the men drove off in Embassy cars. An Uber, ordered under the name Oswaldo Trump, pulled up nearby, and the final two members of the group left in it. Afterward, the North Koreans walked out of the Embassy looking beaten and dishevelled. An Italian I.D. bearing the name Matthew Chao was found by the police.

It was a delicate time for [relations between North Korea and the United States](#). In 2017, the two countries had seemed to be on the brink of war. Donald Trump warned North Korea that it would be met with “fire and fury” if it continued to antagonize the U.S. A month later, North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test. At Trump’s first address to the United Nations, he threatened to “totally destroy North Korea,” and called Kim Jong Un “rocket man.” But then Trump seemed to have a change of heart, and in June, 2018, he met Kim in Singapore; it was the first time that leaders of the two countries had met in a bilateral summit. Trump pledged to work with Kim toward the “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

The incident at the Embassy occurred five days before Trump and Kim met again, in Hanoi, to discuss North Korea’s nuclear-weapons program. The Spanish government opened an investigation. On March 13th, *El País* connected the raid to the C.I.A., and suggested that the attackers had been searching for information on Kim Hyok Chol, the former Ambassador to Spain, who now led

the negotiations with the U.S.

The [Hanoi summit](#) was not a success. The White House claimed that North Korea had demanded an end to nearly all sanctions, for almost nothing in return, prompting Trump to abandon the talks.

On March 14th, *El Mundo* reported that the South Korean government may also have been involved in the incident at the Embassy. Not long afterward, the *Washington Post* reported that, in fact, a “shadowy group” called Cheollima Civil Defense had raided the Embassy. Soon, a Spanish court identified the participants as citizens of the U.S., South Korea, and Mexico, and issued arrest warrants. In late March, North Korea’s foreign ministry called the break-in “a grave terrorist attack” and demanded that the Spanish authorities “bring the terrorists and their wire pullers to justice.”

I was at home in New York, watching the news, when I saw the headline “Mexican national accused of breaking into North Korea’s Spanish Embassy.” The accompanying story identified the leader of C.C.D. as Adrian Hong. I sat upright. I had met Adrian in 2003, at the Korean American Students Conference at Cornell, where I had been invited to talk about my newly published novel. Adrian was representing Yale, where he was an undergraduate. We spoke briefly, but I didn’t hear from him again until 2014, when he contacted me through Twitter and e-mail. I had recently published a book, “[Without You, There Is No Us: Undercover Among the Sons of North Korea’s Elite](#),” based on my reporting while living undercover in Pyongyang for six months, in a locked compound with two hundred and seventy North Korean young men who make up the country’s future leadership. Adrian’s messages were insistent yet vague. He wanted to meet to discuss North Korea, but refused to elaborate, and we never got together.

Now I sent him an e-mail, though I didn’t expect to hear back. He was being hunted by the governments of Spain and North Korea, and it was unclear if the U.S. would attempt to find and extradite him. He hadn’t spoken to the media. But, within seconds, my phone buzzed. It was Adrian.

The next day, a tall Asian man wearing a baseball cap and a black windbreaker walked into the Times Square location of Dallas BBQ. It was 9:30 P.M., and the place was packed. We sat in a corner booth, Adrian with his back to the wall. He asked for my cell phone, which he put in a black pouch with his own. “This cuts

unwelcome guests listening in,” he said. His long hair was gathered in what he called a man bun, and he had a goatee. He looked like a student just returning from backpacking abroad, tired yet alert.

For the next three and a half hours, over a plate of barbecue ribs with mac and cheese, Adrian told me the story of what had happened in Madrid, and about a secret network of what he called “freedom fighters,” including some within North Korea, who are trying to bring down Kim Jong Un’s government. Explaining why he had named the group Cheollima Civil Defense, Adrian likened it to the “righteous armies” throughout Korea’s thousands of years of history, “civilian militias who have mobilized spontaneously when government failed them.”



*"He says my eagle tastes fishy, so this year I'm trying something new."*  
Cartoon by Danny Shanahan

March 1, 2019, a week after the raid, was the centennial of the launch of Korea's movement for independence from Japan, which occupied the country for thirty-five years. To mark the date, the C.C.D. renamed itself Free Joseon—for a Korean dynasty that lasted five hundred years, as well as what North Koreans call their country—and posted a video on its Web site announcing a government-in-exile for North Korea. The group was now attempting to transition from a civilian militia to a provisional government. The video was largely ignored by the media, but it was the first time that there had ever been an organized opposition to North Korea's dictatorship.

Adrian told me that he, as “Matthew Chao,” and his companions had been let in by someone inside the Embassy. “It’s no longer trespassing if you are invited,” he said. Contrary to the speculations of the Spanish press, Free Joseon was not part of any government or intelligence service. “I have never worked for or been paid by or trained with or partnered with anyone at the C.I.A. or F.B.I.,” Adrian said. I found no evidence that Adrian was employed by either agency, but he certainly had some sort of relationship with them. Jay Lefkowitz, who served as the special envoy for human rights in North Korea under George W. Bush, told me that it is not uncommon for advocates and government officials to form informal relationships. “Adrian was on the front line,” Lefkowitz said.

Free Joseon relied on resources that included “pro-bono labor, credit cards, and attempting things no government would risk,” Adrian told me. However, to set up a provisional government, the group also needed recognition. According to Adrian, “The plan was to have ambassadors and a cabinet in place.” He said that Free Joseon had initially received tacit support from members of the F.B.I. But then, he insisted, U.S. officials had turned on the group. (The F.B.I. declined to comment.) Within days of the *Washington Post* report, the Spanish court had the names of men involved in the raid. In the end, Adrian said, “the U.S. government sided with North Korea.”

We left the restaurant at 1 A.M. When Adrian turned his phone on, it was filled with urgent messages from members of his group who feared for his safety. He put me in a taxi, and walked off through Times Square.

Adrian began texting me nearly every night. He was in hiding, but I did not ask him where, since I assumed that our messages were being surveilled. Despite the

circumstances, he never appeared panicked. He wrote in lofty, vague paragraphs, but when he described Free Joseon's goals for freeing North Koreans from persecution he was precise and single-minded. "I don't have a particular passion for North Korea, beyond that it's culturally accessible to me and I am culturally equipped to advocate for it," he told me. "It's just the worst place on earth, and a symbol of what man's ingenuity and tenacity can achieve when organized for evil."

Adrian was born in 1984 in Tijuana, where his parents had immigrated from South Korea. His father was a Tae Kwon Do master who converted to Christianity and became a missionary. The family moved to San Diego when Adrian was six, but his father founded an orphanage in Mexico to which Adrian often returned, delivering donated supplies and helping to give aid to the homeless. Later, he conducted relief missions in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. According to those who knew Adrian at the time, his motivations seemed less religious than humanitarian. Adrian, like his father, taught Tae Kwon Do and is a practicing Christian, but, when I asked him about his faith, he said, "I make it a rule not to discuss personal beliefs. I am more concerned about freedom of belief."

At Yale, Adrian became interested in the plight of North Koreans. In 2003, while visiting Los Angeles, Adrian, then a junior, was sitting with Paul (PK) Kim, a standup comic eight years older, at a café called Blink, on Wilshire Boulevard. They had met when Adrian invited PK to a campus event, and they often discussed starting an organization to help North Koreans. One of them looked up at the café's sign, and decided to take the "B" out of the name and call the new group *LINK*—Liberty in North Korea. It was launched early the next year, at the Korean American Students Conference at Yale, which Adrian had organized.

*LINK* was "ninety per cent Adrian," PK told me; he became less involved after a couple of years. *LINK* sought out college students who, PK said, "need to be a part of something. So many young people join fraternities. They don't want to be alone." Adrian told me, "I built *LINK* on Xanga," a blog-based social network then popular among Asian Americans, where he had been active since 1999. (PK said, "Asians were Internet addicts more than most other groups.") Travelling to two or three college campuses a week, Adrian would change into his one "crappy suit," and give presentations about the horrors of life in North Korea, sometimes screening the documentary film "Seoul Train," which follows defectors escaping to China. Adrian got Asian American singers, rappers, and

dance crews to accompany his presentations.

Ki Hong Lee, a thirty-four-year-old Korean American actor who has appeared on the Netflix sitcom “Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt,” met Adrian at a *KASCON* event in 2005, when Lee was an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley. “If you spend three hours with Adrian, he makes you want to become a better person, do things you never thought about doing,” Lee told me. Lee helped start a chapter of *LINK* at Berkeley, and eventually he and Adrian travelled to South Korea to volunteer for an outreach program called Project Sunshine, which tried to raise awareness of the suffering of North Koreans. “You don’t really call someone to say, ‘Hey, you know what’s going on in the world that is messed up?’ ” Lee said. “He was that person I could do that with.”

Adrian dropped out of Yale in his senior year, and set up *LINK*’s ad-hoc headquarters above Koryo Books, in Manhattan’s Koreatown, before moving it to Washington, D.C. By then, there were nearly seventy local chapters. A close friend who helped get *LINK* off the ground told me, “Adrian knew that sometimes you have to work outside a diplomatic norm in order to reach something meaningful.” Since the U.S. Administration could change every four years, the North Korean regime found it easy to wait it out and maintain the status quo. Adrian admired people who effected great change; among them were Ahn Chang-ho, an early leader of the Korean independence movement, whom Adrian compared to Thomas Jefferson, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Adrian loved King’s interpretation of the Good Samaritan parable, which tells us, when confronted with someone in need, to ask not “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” but “If I don’t stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”

In 2004, George W. Bush signed the North Korean Human Rights Act, which made North Koreans broadly eligible for political asylum in the U.S. Two years later, Adrian and two other members of *LINK* travelled to Yanji, in northeast China, where they met four women and two teen-age boys who had escaped from North Korea and were hiding in an underground shelter. If the defectors were caught by Chinese authorities, they might be returned to North Korea, where they would be imprisoned in labor camps and risk execution. Adrian and the *LINK* workers accompanied them on a twenty-hour train ride to Shenyang, the site of the nearest U.S. consulate, to apply for asylum. But the consular officers turned them away, telling Adrian, over a phone line that had likely been tapped by the Chinese government, to go instead to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Beijing, some four hundred miles away. Adrian

got in touch with the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, which also directed him to the U.N.H.C.R. Finally, Adrian hired a van for the other *LINK* members and the defectors, while he travelled by plane. Chinese police stopped the van on the highway and arrested everyone inside. Adrian was arrested in a hotel in Beijing, and he and the other *LINK* members were jailed for about a week before being deported; the North Koreans were detained for more than six months. After much pressure from *LINK* and other activist groups, the defectors were eventually freed and they flew to South Korea. Adrian called the actions of the U.S. consulate “unacceptable and shameful.” In 2007, he wrote on the Web site Freekorea.us, “My experiences in December showed me that three years after the North Korean Human Rights Act has passed, nothing has changed on the ground for North Koreans.”

Jay Lefkowitz, the special envoy under Bush, says that Adrian was an “effective and ardent advocate.” By then, *LINK* had a hundred chapters worldwide. Yet Adrian’s experience in China had shifted something in him; in 2008, he abruptly resigned from the group. According to a journalist who knew him at the time, Adrian appeared to be severing ties with his former life. Adrian told the journalist that he was leaving D.C. and changing his phone number. The journalist wondered if Adrian was going to enter politics or get involved in intelligence. Adrian began styling himself to look older; he grew a beard, and slicked his hair back. He told a friend, “No one’s gonna listen to a twenty-something-year-old.”

That year, Adrian started a think tank called the Joseon Institute, to generate a plan for a civil society in North Korea should the regime collapse. Adrian pointed out to me that North Korea lacked independent courts, accountable police, informed citizens, N.G.O.s, and a free press. There isn’t much evidence of the Joseon Institute’s work beyond its now defunct Web site, which lists a board of advisers that includes a British Member of Parliament and former leaders of Mongolia and Libya. Mustafa A. G. Abushagur, a former Deputy Prime Minister of Libya, who spent thirty-one years in exile because of his opposition to Muammar Qaddafi, described Adrian as “genuine” and as being interested in the parallels between Kim Jong Un and Qaddafi. He said, “Adrian knew I had been in the opposition for a long time, and thought that experience might be able to help him.” Adrian continued to work behind the scenes. In 2009, at a *LINK* benefit, the journalist Lisa Ling, whose sister Laura was detained in North Korea while reporting along the border and held for a hundred and forty days, thanked Adrian for helping to free her sister. (Neither Lisa nor

Laura responded to a request for an interview.)

Between 2009 and 2012, Adrian served as a *TED* fellow; he also spent a year at Princeton's Center for Information Technology Policy. Emeka Okafor, who co-founded the *TED* fellowship program, told me, "Adrian was not excitable. He was a doer. He understood what it really took to deal with a certain regime, and was not starry-eyed about it." Adrian travelled to Libya during the revolution, and after the fall of Qaddafi he and an activist and *TED* fellow named Suleiman Bakhit worked on medical services for civilian casualties.

Yet Adrian found the world of N.G.O.s and advocacy groups unsatisfying. "We have all collectively accomplished almost nothing," he told me. For years, the U.N.'s General Assembly and the Human Rights Council have voted to adopt resolutions condemning the human-rights violations of the North Korean regime. In 2014, U.N. investigators concluded, "The gravity, scale and nature of these violations reveal a state that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world." In January of this year, when Human Rights Watch published its latest world report, John Sifton, the director of Asia Advocacy, said, "The people of North Korea suffer under constant surveillance and face the daily threat of imprisonment, torture, sexual abuse, and execution—and it's been this way since 1948." The summits with Donald Trump and South Korea's President, Moon Jae-in, have, if anything, made things worse. The U.N. Security Council has fifteen members. In December, 2019, eight of them supported a meeting to discuss North Korea's human-rights abuses, as the council has done in the past. In order to proceed, a ninth member was needed to sign on; the U.S. declined.

"Raising awareness through college lectures, tours, concerts, and bake sales wasn't enough," Adrian told me. "Rescuing refugees through the underground work in China and Southeast Asia wasn't enough. Advocacy, trying to convince governments to change their policies to do the right thing, wasn't enough. So then what was left was direct action." In 2010, Adrian started Cheollima Civil Defense, but he did not make its existence known to the public. Cheollima is the Korean equivalent of Pegasus, and during these years he listed his title as managing director of Pegasus Strategies L.L.C.

In 2014, Adrian sent me a message asking for advice about a "project to prepare new infrastructure for a new North Korea." Five years later, at Dallas BBQ, he explained that he had been trying to recruit me for Cheollima Civil Defense, now known as Free Joseon. He said, "I've been preparing for fifteen years. I've been

vetting people, interviewing them for a job, essentially. Some within this field are motivated by career. Some by narcissism. Some truly believe in the better world. And those are the ones I was looking for.” Because I had risked my life to tell the truth about North Korea, Adrian seemed to view me as someone who shared his heartbreak about the country.

On January 1, 2015, Adrian stopped posting on social media. His last tweet was a quote from Korea’s 1919 Declaration of Independence: “Behold! A new world is approaching before our very eyes! The age of might has receded, and the age of morality has arrived.” His last opinion piece had run the previous month, in *The Atlantic*, about the film “The Interview,” a slapstick tale of two white American heroes killing an evil dictator and saving North Korea, which allegedly prompted the North Korean government to hack the computers of Sony, which had made the film. (North Korea denied this, but called the attack “righteous.”) Many people found “The Interview” distasteful, a case of the most powerful country in the world entertaining itself at the expense of one of the most devastated. Adrian wrote, “The day will soon come when North Koreans are finally free, and liberated concentration camp survivors will have to learn that the world was more interested in the oddities of the oppressors than the torment of the oppressed.”

In June, 2019, I flew to Europe to meet with two members of Free Joseon and a friend of the group. We met at a dingy, empty Chinese restaurant in a city I promised not to name. (According to Lee Wolosky, Adrian’s lawyer and the former special envoy for the closure of the Guantánamo detention facility, the F.B.I. has informed him that agents of the North Korean government have been ordered to kill Adrian and other members of the group.) Free Joseon mostly organizes outside the Korean Peninsula. There are thirty-three thousand defectors in South Korea, but Ko Young Hwan, who worked for North Korea’s ministry of foreign affairs from 1978 until he defected, in 1991, told me that, because South Korea doesn’t recognize North Korea as a sovereign nation, citizens can face legal consequences for proposing governments-in-exile. Relations between the two Koreas often vary according to which party controls the South Korean government. The current administration, led by Moon Jae-in, promotes engagement with North Korea, and defectors fear losing their new citizenship by agitating against the country.



*"Throwing a knife pretty well is a long way from being a surgeon."*  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Two of the people I met at the restaurant were from the West. They had become involved with the group, in part, because they felt that people who were thought of as experts on North Korea—journalists, policymakers, and academics—frequently misrepresented how its society functioned. “There is no other subject area where the majority of the scholars in the subject do not speak the language,” one of them told me. The testimony of prominent defectors goes unheeded, because they often don’t speak English, and live under assumed identities.

The third person was from North Korea. The member met Adrian around 2008, in Seoul, where the member had defected; they discussed ways to liberate the people of North Korea, who, the member said, are like “frogs inside a well.” They’re curious about the outside, but even the most privileged members of the society are held back by their lack of understanding of the world. “We needed an action-oriented network internationally, and Adrian fit the bill,” the member said. “He focussed on making friends in the West.” The other member added, “Adrian actually did, as a non-North Korean, what I had only ever seen North Korean refugees do: risk his life without advertising it.”

By 2014, the two members had joined the group. “It’s not like there was any salary, a title, headquarters, or a badge. But we have a strategy and a vision,” one of them said. “There is no one else, no other entity in the world, that is working to represent the North Korean people, as opposed to the North Korean state.” Adrian wrote the first draft of the group’s declaration of independence, and other members revised it. The document was crafted to appeal to conservatives and liberals, defectors and those still inside North Korea, Koreans and non-Koreans. “We are not anti-unification or pro-unification,” a Free Joseon member told me. Adrian borrowed from other declarations of independence, including that of the United States. He also took a line from the Chinese national anthem: “Arise! Arise, ye who refuse to be slaves!”

In the spring of 2017, between forty and fifty members of Free Joseon gathered in New York City. They settled on a number of priorities, among them rescuing prominent North Koreans. In recent years, about a thousand diplomats, leaders of the Workers’ Party of Korea, doctors, and other citizens who were considered loyal to the regime have defected. Because these élites are under greater scrutiny than the general population, they require elaborate arrangements to flee the country. Once they defect, they connect Free Joseon to other élites.

Often, when such defectors make it out, they change their identities; if their escape becomes widely known, their family members in North Korea may be killed. The “generational penalty,” which was instituted by Kim Il Sung, the original Great Leader, extends for three generations. In 2018, the acting Ambassador to Italy and his wife fled the North Korean Embassy in Rome and went into hiding, reportedly in Seoul. Their teen-age daughter was repatriated to North Korea, and has not been heard from since.

“That is what keeps North Koreans in place. To be able to protest, you need to be prepared to be responsible for the death of someone you love,” one of the Free Joseon members told me. “That is why there cannot be an internal uprising in North Korea. That is why the group came into being.”

Other Free Joseon operations were aimed at demystifying the Kim family. On March 11, 2019, a few weeks after the Madrid Embassy incident, members of Free Joseon spray-painted the wall of the North Korean Embassy in Kuala Lumpur with the words “Free Joseon” and “We shall rise,” as well as the Free Joseon logo. Nine days later, they released a video of a person removing framed portraits of the previous Great Leaders, the father and grandfather of Kim Jong Un, from a wall of the Madrid Embassy, and smashing them on the ground. These images are sacred in North Korea, and defacing them is unthinkable to average citizens. Sung-Yoon Lee, a professor of Korean studies at Tufts’ Fletcher School, told me, “That taboo has been broken. There is a historical powerful symbolism here.” One of the Free Joseon members said, “The whole point of the group was to be a public symbol, so that North Koreans abroad and internally could see that there was hope in resisting.”

The three representatives I met in Europe said that the group had hundreds of members, in ten countries. Adrian estimated that there were thousands, in more than fifteen countries. Both numbers are impossible to verify, and the vagueness seems to be intentional. The group operates in a decentralized manner, so that, if one member is arrested, others won’t be jeopardized. Members use call signs to communicate through encrypted platforms; if they meet in person during an operation, they typically don’t learn one another’s true identity. The secrecy is imperative, because “one loose link leads to people inside,” a member told me. The compartmentalization of Free Joseon is so thorough that, in an odd way, its structure reminded me of the opacity of the North Korean system. The more I tried to follow Free Joseon, the more it became obvious that Adrian was the only person who really knew the extent of the group.

In the U.S., a Free Joseon member told me that he had been involved in several operations, all of them rescue missions involving élite defectors. He said that, beyond the core members, there were people who did discreet tasks; he called them “trusted sources.” He arranged a meeting for me with one at an ice-cream shop on Sunset Boulevard, in Los Angeles. A young Asian woman of about thirty, with blond highlights, came up to me and said a prearranged phrase: “I hope you like ice cream.” The woman, who met Adrian eight years ago, through her church, helped the group with Web design and occasionally gave it small donations. Sitting at a table facing a busy intersection, she opened her computer and showed me a video of a man in a khaki military jacket sitting on a sofa and signing a paper revealing his name, his official position, and the destination of his exile. She said that the man had been a high-level official in the North Korean government, whom Free Joseon helped to defect by faking an accident. Apparently, he had been declared missing by the North Korean government but was now living under an assumed name in a location that only the group knew.

Other people were recruited for a single operation. Charles Ryu, who is twenty-six, grew up an orphan in North Korea. When he was fourteen, he escaped to China but was caught and returned to North Korea, where he was put in a labor camp. He escaped again when he was sixteen. In 2017, Ryu, who is now a software engineer, joined *LINK* as an I.T. intern. He exchanged e-mails with Adrian but did not meet him until February, 2019, when he flew to Madrid to help him. “It was an honor,” Ryu said. “For me, it was personal, this brotherhood I felt with Adrian.” He describes the Madrid operation as a historic moment, the closest he’s come to North Korean territory since his defection. “I was really happy and saw the day when I could again be with my friends and neighbors,” Ryu told me. “It was amazing.”

On February 14, 2017, at 9 P.M., Chris Ahn was drinking his fifth San Miguel of the day at the rooftop bar of a backpacker hostel in Manila. He had been there for a week. Chris, a former marine who had served in Fallujah before getting an M.B.A. from the University of Virginia, was between consulting jobs when a close friend suggested a vacation to his home town. At the last minute, the friend had to work, so Chris had gone alone.

At the bar, his cell phone rang. It was Adrian.

Chris had a history of volunteering. In high school, he was active in the Key Club; after he returned from Iraq, he worked with a veterans’-advocacy group.

Chris's parents were Korean immigrants who ran a clothing shop in downtown Los Angeles. When Chris was a junior in high school, his father died, and Chris began running the store. The family moved to Chino Hills, about an hour away, where many Koreans now live. Chris took care of his mother, his grandmother, and a younger sibling. In 2000, he enlisted in the Marines. In 2005, he was deployed to Iraq, where he joined his battalion's intelligence shop. Michael Davis, a battery gunnery sergeant at Camp Fallujah, described Chris as "a good all-American boy," and told me that he "stood out for his dedication and devotion to his country and to his fellow-marines." Ryan Fisher, a friend from business school, told me that on the night Osama bin Laden's death was announced Chris brought an American flag to a veterans' gathering at a bar. "It was really big," Fisher said. "Not many people have a flag that big in their personal possession. He was proudly waving it."

In 2009, a mutual acquaintance introduced Chris to Adrian, and the two met at Lolita's, a burrito joint in San Diego. Chris was less compelled by the specific situation in North Korea than by the general idea of being helpful. "I'm just a regular guy who was trying to help those who needed help," Chris told me. "To me, that's just what Americans do."

Adrian took Chris to meetings at the Joseon Institute, which briefly had an office in New York, where a few North Korean defectors—including a former military officer—discussed the situation in North Korea. In 2011, they also met for half an hour in D.C. with U.S. government officials who specialized in North Korea. Chris said, "They were very simpatico with what Adrian was doing."

Now Adrian asked Chris where he was. "Holy shit, it's perfect," Adrian said, when Chris told him that he was in Manila. "You know what's happened with Kim Jong Nam, right?" Chris did. The day before Adrian's call, the eldest son of Kim Jong Il had been assassinated at the Kuala Lumpur airport, by two women who smeared a nerve agent on his face. The killing was assumed to have been ordered by Kim Jong Un, his half brother, in the interest of eliminating a potential rival. Adrian told Chris that he had just received a call from [Kim Han Sol](#), who is believed to be Kim Jong Nam's eldest son. According to Adrian, they were introduced in Paris, around 2013, by a mutual contact. Han Sol, who was wearing a pair of Gucci shoes, told Adrian that he was aware of his work with North Korea. The two men kept in touch. Adrian told me, "Never met a kid with so much money. Kim Jong Nam had stashed away a lot of cash during his life." Immediately after his father's death, Han Sol noticed that the Macau police

who typically guarded his house had disappeared. He called the mutual contact to tell Adrian that he, along with his mother and his sister, needed to get out of Macau as soon as possible. It was easy to see why Han Sol would be of interest to various countries and their intelligence services. Considered by some to be the rightful heir of the former Great Leader, Han Sol represented valuable leverage to whoever captured him, dead or alive—Adrian called this a “zero-sum game.”

Adrian, who was in the U.S., asked Chris, “Can you go meet them at the airport in Taiwan tonight, and make sure that no one is following them?” Chris threw some clothes in his backpack and headed to the airport. It was after midnight when he arrived in Taipei. He had Han Sol’s flight number, and he found a small noodle stand by the gate, where Han Sol and his family could sit while he scanned the crowd for threats.

The family arrived early that morning, wearing sanitary masks to cover their faces, which wasn’t unusual in Asia even then. Han Sol was about five feet ten inches tall, wearing a long-sleeved shirt and a coat, and rolling a suitcase. His mother was a pretty middle-aged woman, who reminded Chris of his own mother. Han Sol’s sister, who was wearing jeans, looked to be in her late teens. Adrian had told the family that Chris would be wearing a black T-shirt and a Dodgers cap and would answer to the name Steve. Han Sol spotted Chris and said, “Steve?” Chris nodded and said, “Let’s go.”

Chris spoke to Han Sol and his sister in English, and to their mother in Korean. When Han Sol’s mother asked what would happen to them, Han Sol said, “I trust him”—pointing at Chris—“because I trust Adrian.”

# Nonsense Poem

Wynken, Blynken, and Nod

Were all in a quarantine pod.



Nod—he was drinkin',



Blynken was thinkin',



And Wynken believed  
he was God.



RDR

Chris then brought the family to an airport lounge that had private rooms. Chris put Han Sol's mother and sister in one room, giving them his iPad and opening Netflix. The sister, who spoke fluent English, reminded him of a typical American teen-ager. Chris and Han Sol sat in a neighboring room. After an hour, Adrian called and told Chris that the network was negotiating with three countries to accept Han Sol and his family.

Chris tried to distract Han Sol by talking about American food. He described American barbecue, and how cooking techniques from different areas produced distinct flavors. Then he asked Han Sol, "Yo, it's a bit wild you are from North Korea—what was it like?" Han Sol talked about going fishing with his grandfather. The story sounded cozy and intimate—then Chris remembered that Han Sol was talking about Kim Jong Il, the former Great Leader of North Korea.

Late that evening, Adrian called Chris to say that a country had agreed to take in Han Sol's family, and that he had bought three plane tickets to Schiphol Airport, outside Amsterdam. By then, they had been in the Taipei airport for some eighteen hours.

At the gate, Chris escorted the family through the line and handed the gate agent their tickets and passports. When the agent checked their passports, he reacted with surprise, and then said firmly, "No, they are not getting on. They are too late." (Since Kim Jong Nam had been killed earlier that week, at another airport in the region, it's possible that their passports raised an alarm.) Chris looked at the line and said, "But there are people still boarding." The man began yelling, "They are not getting on!" Chris called Adrian and put him on speakerphone, so that he could hear the conversation. The man then said, "You know exactly why they cannot get on."

Chris and the family retreated to the lounge. A few hours later, two men who identified themselves as C.I.A. officers showed up—a Korean American named Wes and an older white man. One of them noticed Chris's memorial bracelet from the Iraq War. Chris told them that he was a veteran, adding, "I love my country, but I am not in the U.S. right now, nor did I break any law. I don't need to talk to you." They asked to speak to Han Sol. Chris told Han Sol, "I don't think you should talk to anybody until we understand what is going on." (The C.I.A. declined to comment.)

The next morning, airport agents arrived. They were markedly more friendly, and helped Chris book new tickets to Amsterdam.

Han Sol seemed relieved. But Wes had told Chris that he would be accompanying the family on the flight. This worried Chris. Before they parted, Chris, on Adrian's instructions, used his phone to film Han Sol thanking him and Adrian for insuring his safety. (On the Web site of Cheollima Civil Defense, the group thanked Lody Embrechts, then the Dutch Ambassador to both Koreas, who had approved Han Sol's transit and promised to help his family. Embrechts refused to comment for this article.) They also took a selfie together. "It was an insurance policy," Chris told me. "To prove we were not kidnapping Han Sol." The video also proved that, days after his father's assassination, Han Sol was alive. Three weeks later, the video was uploaded to YouTube, and the world learned of the existence of Han Sol, and of Cheollima Civil Defense.

At the gate, Han Sol gave Chris a hug, and boarded the flight.

A team sent by Free Joseon, assisted by a Dutch human-rights lawyer, was waiting at the gate at Schiphol. Embrechts was on hand to facilitate the entry of Han Sol and his family into the Netherlands. Yet they never came through the gate.

Adrian told me that Han Sol had called him to say that he had tried to exit through the gate but had been taken through a side door to a hotel in the airport. Adrian asked Han Sol if he wanted to seek refuge in the Netherlands. Han Sol confirmed his desire, so Adrian told the Free Joseon members and the lawyer to go to the lobby of the hotel, and Han Sol would come downstairs. Han Sol never showed up.

Multiple sources told me that the C.I.A. took Han Sol and his family elsewhere, though it is unclear if the location is in the Netherlands or another country altogether. "Governments are rarely unified in efforts," a member of the team sent by Free Joseon told me. "This was one of those moments that a foreign ministry and the secret services were at odds with each other." Sue Mi Terry, a former C.I.A. officer and a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told me, "I assume Adrian lost Han Sol to the C.I.A."

Adrian called losing Han Sol the second mistake of his career, after his arrest in China. Yet, though he felt for Han Sol—he was a defector who needed his help

—his ultimate goal is the end of the Kim dynasty, and Han Sol is part of that dynasty.

“Regimes like this don’t collapse slowly. It happens instantly. Every revolution is that way, and this will be the same,” Adrian told me. “I don’t mean a revolution in a figurative sense. I don’t mean the revolution of the mind. Or some kind of fantasy where five hundred thousand people protest in Pyongyang and the regime just packs their bags and leaves and some transitional government comes in place. This is not like any other country, where offering them enough money will mean they will liberalize—any opening or reform will result in their insecurity. The only way to make them change is to force them to change.”

The motivation behind the Madrid Embassy operation remains unclear. Members of Free Joseon maintain that the team, which included Chris Ahn and an American citizen named Sam Ryu, flew to Spain after someone at the Embassy requested their help in defecting; some core members, including Adrian, proposed trying to take over the Embassy during the rescue. The Ambassador to Spain had been expelled in 2017, after North Korea tested a nuclear weapon, and they thought that an embassy without an ambassador made a fitting target. But the North Korean member of Free Joseon whom I met in Europe told me that people in Pyongyang who are linked to the group thought that the attempt was premature, and the group became divided over the question.

The disagreement was apparent even in interviews with two of North Korea’s highest-ranking defectors. Thae Yong Ho, the former North Korean Deputy Ambassador to the United Kingdom and a member of the South Korean National Assembly, who defected in 2016, told me, “The fact that the world accepts a North Korean embassy as a diplomatic institution means that one must respect it as that. Free Joseon entered the Embassy illegally and tied up people. Resistance is good, but it must be done legally.” But Ko Young Hwan, who worked at several North Korean embassies for more than a decade, told me, “It’s a mistake to think a North Korean embassy is a normal embassy according to the Western definition. All illegal activities—from being the middleman for weapons trade, to laundering counterfeit money, to transporting luxury items for Kim Jong Un—happen inside.”

Thae said, “Why would whoever wanted to defect have needed Free Joseon to infiltrate the Embassy for rescue?” A source with knowledge of the operation

told me that the person who requested the rescue feared that his family, who remained in North Korea, would be killed if he was known to have defected, so he asked for a kidnapping to be staged.

Everything went according to plan until the police arrived. “I put the Great Leader pin on my chest and went to the door,” Adrian told me. “My Spanish isn’t even that good, you know, I hadn’t spoken it in a long while,” he added. “I asked them what they wanted. I tried to act North Korean, and back in the main room my team could see me on the security camera.” Adrian told the police that it was a false alarm. The team was jubilant when the police went away: “When I returned, they were, like, ‘You did it!’ ”

Yet the appearance of the police had spooked the North Korean who had requested rescue. Soon afterward, the phones in the Embassy began to ring. They rang and rang. The Free Joseon members looked at one another and wondered what to do. The phones kept ringing, as though someone outside knew what was happening inside. The Embassy’s interior is spartan, its rooms cavernous and echoing. “They know, they know, they know!” the North Korean said. He felt as if there were eyes everywhere, and told the team that he no longer wanted to defect and that they should leave as soon as possible.

Night had fallen. The Free Joseon team packed some of the Embassy’s electronic equipment, then took its vehicles and scattered to different airports, with an agreement that most of them would meet up in New York. On Adrian’s instructions, members of Free Joseon sent an e-mail to the Spanish government telling it to keep an eye out for any North Koreans entering Spain, since people inside the Embassy might be in danger from the North Korean government.



Martin  
Blad

In New York, Adrian met with two F.B.I. agents. For years, they had checked in with him when he returned from abroad. The agents asked if he had been involved in the raid, and if he had seen the Embassy's computers. Every North Korean embassy has a secure communications room from which covert operations are run. The computers that the group had with them were from that room. "You could unlock all their communications around the world," Adrian told me. "It's a game changer."

Adrian agreed to show the F.B.I. agents the computers, and they arranged to come to his hotel. Before the meeting, Adrian met Sue Mi Terry, the former C.I.A. officer, at a bubble-tea place in Times Square. He told her "this crazy story about Madrid," she said. They walked to his hotel, where he introduced her to a handful of young ethnic Korean men, who showed her video clips from the Embassy. She was also shown the computers. Adrian told her that the F.B.I. was coming to look at them.

When the F.B.I. agents arrived, Adrian told me, he agreed to turn the computers over for analysis for a period of fourteen days; he would also give them various hard drives and pen drives from the Embassy, in the hope that whatever the F.B.I. found would lead to tougher sanctions against the Kim regime. The computers were encrypted, and Adrian thought that the F.B.I. would have a better chance of cracking them than his group did. The agents asked for the names of everyone involved in the incident at the Embassy, but Adrian refused to provide them.

The next morning, there was a knock on the door of Adrian's hotel room. An F.B.I. agent claimed that a girl had gone missing in the hotel. He demanded the passports of everyone in the room.

By then, Chris Ahn had returned to L.A. When Adrian told him that the F.B.I. wanted to talk with him, Chris gave him his home address. About a week later, two F.B.I. agents who dealt with overseas affairs showed up. Chris served them tea and cookies and told them about what had happened in Madrid.

Adrian never got the computers back. Soon, the Spanish court identified him as the leader of the attack and requested his extradition. Adrian faces up to twenty-eight years in prison.

During the weeks after our meeting at Dallas BBQ, I often questioned Adrian's motives for continuing our conversations. I wondered if he was recruiting me to be his witness. Though Adrian focussed on the plight of North Koreans rather than on the danger he faced, the threat of extradition and North Korean assassins seemed to weigh on him. Once, at the end of the night, I asked him how he was feeling, and he texted back, "Mostly just tired." Then he added, "From doing this for so long without government protection or funding. It's hard to try to deliver the responsibilities of a government without the privileges." He added that he was most worried that "the movement would die." He thought that Free Joseon had achieved just three per cent of what needed to be done.

On April 6, 2019, Adrian told me that the F.B.I. had called him and said that there were credible threats by North Korea against his life and the lives of other members, and that he should take security measures and go underground. He wrote in one text, "Call 911, they said. After they are the ones who outed us."

On April 18th, U.S. marshals raided Adrian's apartment, in downtown Los Angeles, where they found only Chris Ahn, who was visiting. Chris was arrested and jailed for three months before being released on bail. He awaits a hearing to determine whether he will be extradited to Spain.

Later that day, at 5:43 P.M., Adrian sent me a message that read, "Contact my lawyer if you can't reach me. May be getting arrested—can't talk now." At 10:41, he sent another: a jumbled message came through, reading, in part, "you may not be able to reach me for a while." It was followed, at 1 A.M., by a link to a letter written by Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, a Cambodian leader who collaborated with the U.S. in the nineteen-seventies. Before the Khmer Rouge executed him, he wrote, "If I shall die here on the spot and in my country that I love, it is too bad because we are all born and must die one day. I have only committed the mistake of believing in you, the Americans."

Soon afterward, the Department of Justice put Adrian on its wanted list, posting the model of car he was last seen driving and declaring him "armed and dangerous."

A year later, in early May, a message appeared on my phone: "Where did we eat last?"

"Dallas BBQ," I replied.

“Was it delicious? Your answer will determine whether this proceeds. I’m joking. It was terrible food.”

Adrian had been in hiding for more than a year. He said that he had not been in contact with family or friends, and he remained angry with the U.S. government. “They ask for help, then they put us in danger, they warn us of the danger, then they put us underground, then they make it very hard for us to actually go underground,” he told me. He felt that the Department of Justice’s “Wanted” poster had amounted to a road map for North Korean agents to find him.

On the phone, he elaborated for four hours about his vision for freeing North Korea. For a moment, it felt as if no time had passed since I encountered him as a student leader at Yale. “We are going to remove this regime,” he said. “We are going to confront it with force, with the strength of our ideas, and with our bodies until these people are free and can determine their own future.” The goal of his organization, he said, was “abolition.” How would he achieve that? “There is only one way,” he said. “It’s an uprising. It’s a revolution.” ♦

# American Chronicles

- [Will Trump Burn the Evidence?](#)

# Will Trump Burn the Evidence?

How the President could endanger the official records of one of the most consequential periods in American history.

By [Jill Lepore](#)

November 16, 2020



Donald Trump is not much of a note-taker, and he does not like his staff to take notes. He has a habit of tearing up documents at the close of meetings. (Records analysts, armed with Scotch Tape, have tried to put the pieces back together.) No real record exists for five meetings Trump had with Vladimir Putin during the first two years of his Presidency. Members of his staff have routinely used apps that automatically erase text messages, and Trump often deletes his own tweets, notwithstanding a warning from the National Archives and Records Administration that doing so contravenes the Presidential Records Act.

Trump cannot abide documentation for fear of disclosure, and cannot abide disclosure for fear of disparagement. For decades, in private life, he required people who worked with him, and with the Trump Organization, to sign nondisclosure agreements, pledging never to say a bad word about him, his family, or his businesses. He also extracted nondisclosure agreements from women with whom he had or is alleged to have had sex, including both of his ex-wives. In 2015 and 2016, he required these contracts from people involved in his campaign, including a distributor of his “Make America Great Again” hats. ([Hillary Clinton](#)’s 2016 campaign required N.D.A.s from some employees, too. In 2020, Joe Biden called on Michael Bloomberg to release his former employees from such agreements.) In 2017, Trump, unable to distinguish between private life and public service, carried his practice of requiring nondisclosure agreements into the Presidency, demanding that senior White House staff sign N.D.A.s. According to the *Washington Post*, at least one of them, in draft form, included this language: “I understand that the United States Government or, upon completion of the term(s) of Mr. Donald J. Trump, an authorized representative of Mr. Trump, may seek any remedy available to enforce this Agreement including, but not limited to, application for a court order prohibiting disclosure of information in breach of this Agreement.” Aides warned him that, for White House employees, such agreements are likely not legally enforceable. The White House counsel, Don McGahn, refused to distribute them; eventually, he relented, and the chief of staff, Reince Priebus, pressured employees to sign them.

Those N.D.A.s haven’t stopped a small village’s worth of ex-Trump Cabinet members and staffers from blabbing about him, much to the President’s dismay. “When people are chosen by a man to go into government at high levels and then they leave government and they write a book about a man and say a lot of things that were really guarded and personal, I don’t like that,” he [told](#) the

*Washington Post*. In 2019, he tweeted, “I am currently suing various people for violating their confidentiality agreements.” Last year, a former campaign worker filed a class-action lawsuit that, if successful, would render void all campaign N.D.A.s. Trump has only stepped up the fight. Earlier suits were filed by Trump personally, or by his campaign, but, last month, the Department of Justice filed suit against Stephanie Winston Wolkoff for publishing a book, “[Melania and Me](#),” about her time volunteering for the First Lady, arguing, astonishingly, that Wolkoff’s N.D.A. is “a contract with the United States and therefore enforceable by the United States.” (Unlike the suit against Trump’s former national-security adviser John Bolton, relating to the publication of his book, “[The Room Where It Happened](#),” there is no claim that anything in Wolkoff’s book is or was ever classified.) And Trump hasn’t stopped: last year, he required doctors and staff who treated him at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center to sign N.D.A.s.

Hardly a day passes that Trump does not attempt to suppress evidence, as if all the world were in violation of an N.D.A. never to speak ill of him. He has sought to discredit publications and broadcasts that question him, investigations that expose him, crowds that protest him, polls that fail to favor him, and, down to the bitter end, ballots cast against him. None of this bodes well for the historical record and for the scheduled transfer of materials from the White House to the National Archives, on January 20, 2021. That morning, even as President-elect [Joseph R. Biden, Jr.](#), is ascending the steps of the Capitol, staffers from the archives will presumably be in the White House, unlocking doors, opening desks, packing boxes, and removing hard drives. What might be missing, that day, from file drawers and computer servers at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue is difficult to say. But records that were never kept, were later destroyed, or are being destroyed right now chronicle the day-to-day doings of one of the most consequential Presidencies in American history and might well include evidence of crimes, violations of the Constitution, and human-rights abuses. It took a very long time to establish rules governing the fate of Presidential records. Trump does not mind breaking rules and, in the course of a long life, has regularly done so with impunity. The Presidential Records Act isn’t easily enforceable. The Trump Presidency nearly destroyed the United States. Will what went on in the darker corners of his White House ever be known?

“The truth behind a President’s actions can be found only in his official papers,” Harry S. Truman said in 1949, “and every Presidential paper is official.” Truman became an advocate of archival preservation after learning about the fate of his

predecessors' papers. When George Washington left office, in 1797, he brought his papers back to Mount Vernon, but, loaned out, they were "extensively mutilated by rats and otherwise injured by damp"; eventually, they were carried by the historian Jared Sparks to Massachusetts, where Sparks threw out anything he didn't like, scrapped what he found worthless, gave away much of the rest, and, beginning in 1837, published what he liked best as "The Writings of George Washington."

For many years, there was no alternative for a departing President but to take his papers home with him; there wasn't really any place to put them. Thomas Jefferson, "having no confidence that the office of the private secretary of the President of the U.S. will ever be a regular and safe deposit for public papers," took pains to deposit many of his papers with his Cabinet departments. In 1810, Congress established a Committee on Ancient Public Records and Archives of the United States. It reported that the records of the federal government were "in a state of great disorder and exposure; and in a situation neither safe nor convenient nor honorable to the nation." Congress took little action. In 1814, the congressional library burned to the ground.

Most of the papers of William Henry Harrison, the log-cabin candidate, succumbed to flames when that log cabin burned down. Those of both John Tyler and Zachary Taylor were largely destroyed during the Civil War. In 1853, when Millard Fillmore left the White House, he had his papers shipped to a mansion in Buffalo. He died in 1874, having made no provisions for the papers. When Fillmore's only son died, in 1889, his will ordered his executors to "burn or otherwise effectively destroy all correspondence or letters to or from my father." Only by the merest miracle were forty-four volumes of Fillmore's Presidential-letter books found in an attic of a house, in 1908, and only because it was on the verge of being demolished.

Chester Arthur's son had most of his father's Presidential papers burned in three garbage cans. "The only place I ever found in my life to put a paper so as to find it again was either a side coat-pocket or the hands of a clerk," [Ulysses S. Grant](#) once said. For years after Grant's Administration, scholars were able to locate hardly any of his Presidential papers. In 1888, Congress urged the Library of Congress to collect the papers of the Presidents. In the eighteen-nineties, the library established a Manuscript Division, and a historian who later became its chief began lobbying for the establishment of a National Archives; meanwhile, the American Historical Association formed a Public Archives Commission. In

1910, after the commission reported that “many of the records of the Government have in the past been lost or destroyed,” the A.H.A. petitioned Congress to build a depository. Congress authorized the funds, but no plan was undertaken until after the close of the First World War.

Grover Cleveland, during his two terms, preferred to communicate in person, leaving no paper trail. He insisted that the records of his Presidency were his personal property and, in 1886, refused to turn over papers that the Senate had demanded: “if I saw fit to destroy them no one could complain.” (That is what, during the Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, came to be called “executive privilege.”) Cleveland’s contention became a convention: the President’s papers belong to the President, who can deny requests for disclosure not only from the public but from other branches of the federal government. William McKinley was assassinated in 1901; his secretary held on to his papers until 1935, when he donated them to the Library of Congress, where they remained under his, and later his son’s, tight control until 1954. In 1924, a raft of papers from the Taft, Wilson, and Harding Administrations were found in the attic of the White House. Warren Harding’s Presidency was riven by scandal; after his death, his wife told the chief of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress that she had destroyed all his papers, although she had burned only those she thought “would harm his memory.” Most of the rest she left to the Harding Memorial Association. The Library of Congress acquired a cache of those and other papers in 1972, on the condition that they be closed to the public until 2014. (They turned out to include a thousand pages of love letters between Harding and his mistress. “Won’t you please destroy?” he wrote her in one letter. She did not destroy.) Calvin Coolidge instructed his private secretary to destroy all his personal files; on Coolidge’s death, the secretary said, “There would have been nothing preserved if I had not taken some things out on my own responsibility.”

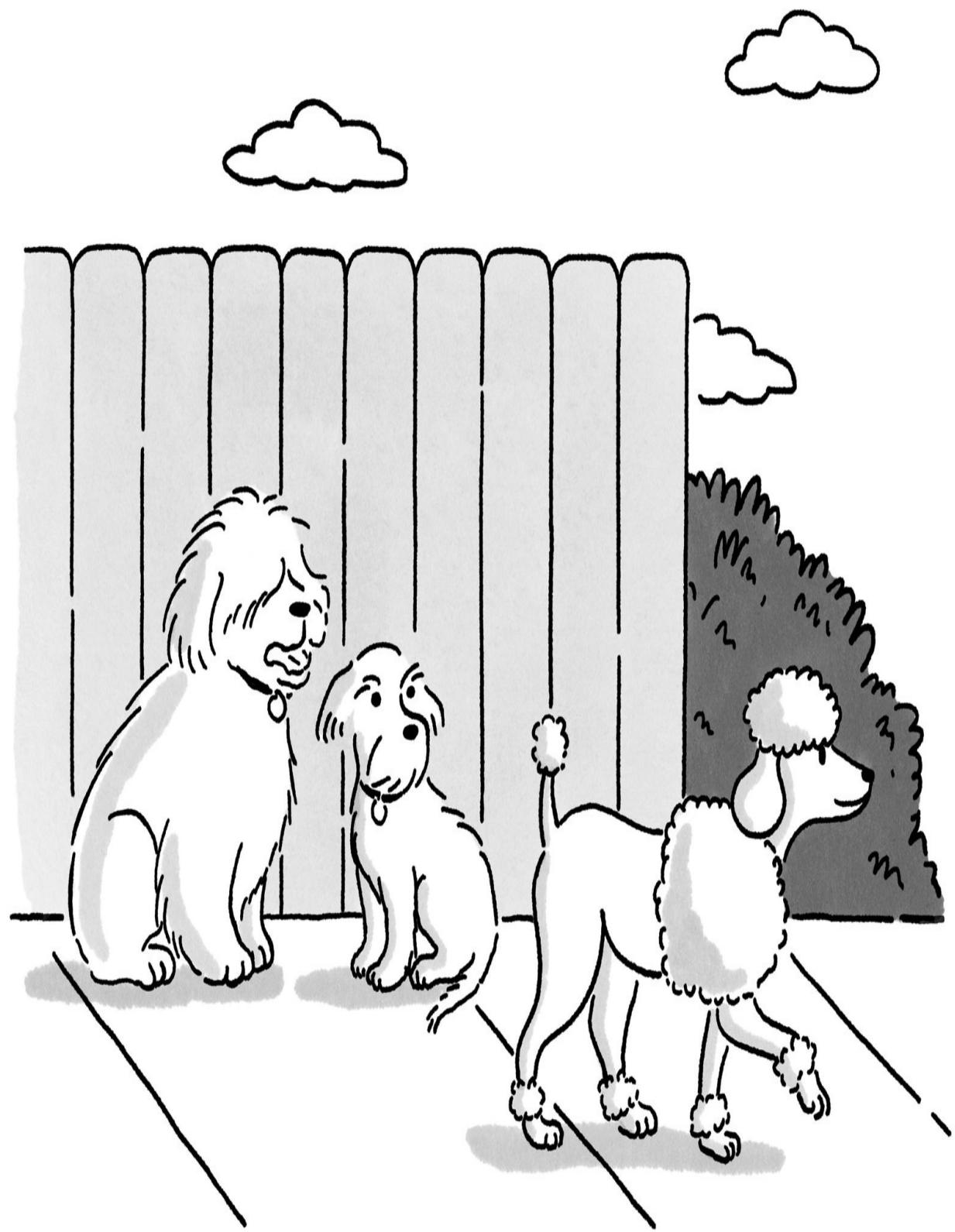
In 1933, [Herbert Hoover](#) laid the cornerstone of the National Archives Building. “This temple of our history will appropriately be one of the most beautiful buildings in America, an expression of the American soul,” he said. A granite, marble, and limestone monument with two forty-foot bronze doors behind seventy-two Corinthian columns, it was built at the height of the Depression, a massive public-works project. In 1941, with Hitler in power in Germany and Mussolini in Italy, Franklin Delano Roosevelt spoke at its dedication:

To bring together the records of the past and to house them in buildings where they will be preserved for the use of men and women living in the

future, a Nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgements in creating their own future.

Americans used to believe in those three things. Do they still?

Archives are ancient, but national archives, the official repositories of the records of a nation-state, date to the French Revolution: France established its Archives Nationales in 1790. Britain established what became a pillar of its National Archives in 1838. Newly independent nations have established national archives as part of the project of declaring independence: Argentina established what would become its national archive in 1821, Mexico in 1823, Brazil in 1838.



m.e.mcmain

*"And he claims he hasn't been to the groomer since before quarantine."*  
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

National archives uphold a particular vision of a nation and of its power, and, during transitions of power in nations that are not democratic, archives are not infrequently attacked. Most attacks involve the destruction of the evidence of atrocity. Brazil abolished slavery in 1888. Two years later, after a military coup, a minister of the new republic ordered the destruction of every document in any archive in the country which related to its history of slavery.

Richard Ovenden's new book, "[Burning the Books: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge](#)," is a litany of this sort of tragedy. "The preservation of information continues to be a key tool in the defense of open societies," Ovenden, who runs the Bodleian Libraries, at Oxford, writes. UNESCO's report "[Lost Memory](#)" is an inventory of inventories: a list of libraries and archives that were destroyed in the twentieth century, including the widespread devastations of the First and Second World Wars, the burning of some of the collections in the National Library in Phnom Penh by the Khmer Rouge, and the destruction of the National and University Library in Sarajevo, by the Bosnian Serb Army, in 1992. Libraries house books: copies. Archives store documents: originals. Archives cannot be replaced. As UNESCO's report puts it, "The loss of archives is as serious as the loss of memory in a human being."

All is not always lost. Officials of the British Empire [set fire](#) to entire archives as they left the colonies. In 1961, in Uganda, the objectives of what came to be known as Operation Legacy included the elimination of all documents that might "embarrass" Her Majesty's government. Decades later, some three hundred boxes from Kenya and nearly nine thousand files from more than thirty other former British colonies, including Malta, Malaya, and the Bahamas, were discovered in a top-secret government fortress north of London. In 1992, guards from the former Soviet republic of Georgia burned to the ground the Central Archive of Abkhazia. But many of its documents had been microfilmed or photocopied, and these records were stored in other buildings. In 2005, Guatemalan officials conducting a safety inspection of a munitions depot came across the long-hidden records of the brutal force that was the National Police—an estimated eighty million pages, described by my Harvard colleague Kirsten Weld as "papers spilling forth from rusted file cabinets, heaped on dirt floors, in trash bags and grain sacks, shoved into every conceivable nook and cranny, moldy and rotting." People have spent more than a decade preserving and organizing them.

Governments that commit atrocities against their own citizens regularly destroy their own archives. After the end of apartheid, South Africa's new government organized a Truth and Reconciliation Commission because, as its report stated, "the former government deliberately and systematically destroyed a huge body of state records and documentation in an attempt to remove incriminating evidence and thereby sanitise the history of oppressive rule." Unfortunately, the records of the commission have fared little better: the archive was restricted and shipped to the National Archives in Pretoria, where it remains to this day, largely uncatalogued and unprocessed; for ordinary South Africans, it's almost entirely unusable. In the aftermath of the Trump Administration, the most elusive records won't be those in the White House. If they exist, they'll be far away, in and around detention centers, and will involve the least powerful: the families separated at the border, whose suffering federal officials inflicted, and proved so brutally indifferent to that they have lost track of what children belong to which parents, and how to find them.

In 1950, Truman signed the Federal Records Act, which required federal agencies to preserve their records. It did not require Presidents to save their papers, which remained, as ever, their personal property. In 1955, Congress passed the Presidential Libraries Act, encouraging Presidents to deposit their papers in privately erected institutions—something that every President has done since F.D.R., who was also the first President to install a tape recorder in the White House, a method of record-keeping that was used by every President down to Richard M. Nixon.

The Presidential libraries are overseen by the National Archives and Records Administration. They were intended to be research centers, and include museums; and they serve, too, as monuments. The Barack Obama Presidential Library is the first Presidential library whose collections will be entirely digital—they will be available to anyone, anywhere, anytime. But the Presidential library, which started with F.D.R., may well end with Obama.

Donald Trump, if he decides that he wants a Presidential library, is far more likely to build a Presidential museum, or even a theme park, and would most likely build it in Florida. "I have a lot of locations, actually," Trump said on NBC last year. Last month, an anonymous group from New York published its own plans for a Trump library at [djtrumplibrary.com](http://djtrumplibrary.com). Its exhibits include a Criminal Records Room and a Covid Memorial, just off the Alt-Right Auditorium. But, long before Trump gets around to designing an actual Trump

Library, he is likely to run afoul of a struggle over Presidential records that began with [Watergate](#) and Nixon's tapes.

In 1974, a special prosecutor subpoenaed the Nixon Administration for the Watergate tapes. The White House refused to comply. The case went to the Supreme Court. In *United States v. Nixon*, the Court devised a balancing test that measured the argument for executive privilege against the judiciary's interest in criminal justice, and ordered Nixon to turn over the tapes on July 24, 1974. Fifteen days later, Nixon resigned, and proceeded to sign an agreement with the General Services Administration that would have allowed him to destroy the records of his Presidency. Congress then passed the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act, which prohibited Nixon from destroying the tapes. Nixon sued but, in 1977, in *Nixon v. Administrator of General Services*, he lost. Still, his legal battles continued into the nineteen-nineties.

To avoid all this happening all over again with another President, Congress in 1978 passed the Presidential Records Act. It puts Presidential records in the public domain; the public can see those records five years after the President leaves office, though a President can ask to extend those five years to twelve for material deemed sensitive. No longer are Presidential papers the private property of the President. The act also directs every White House to "take all such steps as may be necessary to assure that the activities, deliberations, decisions, and policies that reflect the performance of the President's constitutional, statutory, or other official or ceremonial duties are adequately documented and that such records are preserved and maintained as Presidential records." What counts as "such records" has been much contested. The archivist of the United States is appointed by the President; the archivist cannot tell the President what to do or what to save but can only provide advice, which the President can simply ignore.

The Presidential Records Act was scheduled to go into effect on January 20, 1981, with the Inauguration of the next President, who turned out to be Ronald Reagan. Reagan's Attorney General, Edwin Meese III, decided to help Nixon, who was still fighting in court for control of the archives of his Presidency. The Reagan Administration aided the efforts of Nixon's lawyers, who argued that the archivist of the United States has no discretion in evaluating claims of executive privilege but must, instead, defer to them without review. In 1988, in *Public Citizen v. Burke*, the D.C. Circuit Court ruled against Nixon and the Administration. The next year, Reagan left office, and his staff packed up his

papers.

Reagan's was the first Administration to use e-mail. Preparing to leave the White House, people in the Administration tried to erase the computer tapes that stored its electronic mail. The correspondence in question included records of the Iran-Contra arms deal, which was, at the time, under criminal investigation. On the last day of Reagan's Presidency, the journalist Scott Armstrong (formerly of the *Washington Post*), along with the American Historical Association, the National Security Archive (a nonprofit that Armstrong founded, in 1985), and other organizations, sued Reagan, George H. W. Bush, the National Security Council, and the archivist of the United States. That lawsuit remained unresolved four years later, in 1992, when C. Boyden Gray, a lawyer for the departing President, George H. W. Bush, advised him that destroying things like telephone logs was not a violation of the Presidential Records Act, because, he asserted, the act does not cover “‘non-record’ materials like scratch pads, unimportant notes to one’s secretary, phone and visitor logs or informal notes (of meetings, etc.) used only by the staff member.”

Non-record records that the Administration sought to destroy also included the White House’s digital archive of e-mail, a body of evidence that was the subject of yet another congressional investigation, this time into whether Bush had ordered the State Department to search Bill Clinton’s passport records as part of an effort to discredit him during the campaign. A federal judge placed a ten-day restraining order on the Bush White House, banning the destruction of any computer records. “History is full of instances where the outgoing President has decided to erase, burn or destroy all or substantially all Presidential or Executive Office of the President records before the end of his term,” the judge declared. But on January 19, 1993, the night before Clinton’s Inauguration, the Bush Administration deleted those computer files, in defiance of the court order. Near midnight, the office of the archivist of the United States, Don W. Wilson, a Reagan appointee, made an agreement with Bush, granting him control over all “Presidential information and all derivative information in whatever form” after leaving office.

Critics of the Presidential Records Act say that, along with the creation of independent counsels, it contributes to endless investigations and the politics of scandal. Lloyd Cutler served as counsel to both Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. “Now every congressional committee asks for every scrap of paper under the sun,” Cutler said in an oral history conducted in 1999. “Independent counsels

ask for every piece of paper under the sun. In this Administration, I would guess ten, fifteen lawyers are kept busy all the time digging up documents by the thousands, literally by the thousands. . . . It stops people from writing memos. Many people came to me and said, ‘Can they really look in my diary?’ I said, ‘I hope you don’t keep a diary. Sure, they can look at your diary.’ ” And so they stopped keeping diaries. And some of them started conducting government business using private e-mail accounts.

In some matters of secrecy, the Clinton Administration took its cue from the outgoing Bush Administration but promised to archive its e-mails properly. (A system was eventually set up so that if you tried to delete an e-mail you’d get a message that doing so was in violation of the Presidential Records Act.) Clinton claimed executive privilege again and again, to protect himself from congressional investigation; his staff argued that congressional Republicans were on a mission to destroy him, and so was Kenneth Starr, the independent counsel of the Whitewater investigation. Evading the Presidential Records Act became just another move in the partisan chess game.

Post-Watergate Presidential papers are seemingly more formal, more bureaucratic, less intimate, and less candid, as if the less control Presidents have over their archives, the less interesting those archives have become. “This is horseshit” is the sort of thing L.B.J. might scrawl on a memo (or any of us in a self-destructing text). You don’t see that as much anymore. Don Wilson, after leaving office, argued that the Presidential Records Act compromised the records of the Presidency. Records whose preservation was intended to aid historical research had become, instead, ammunition for prosecutors, creating “a climate for avoiding documentation or perhaps even destroying it.” Wilson told me, “Vice-President Cheney once said, when I asked him for his papers as chief of staff, ‘I didn’t keep any.’ ” And, as Columbia Law School’s David Pozen has argued, transparency does not always advance good government: it can interfere with the deliberative process, make deal-making impossible, and promote a culture of suspicion and mistrust.

Early in George W. Bush’s first term, his Administration disabled the automated e-mail archive system. Nearly all senior officials in the Bush White House used a private e-mail server run by the Republican National Committee. Then, between 2003 and 2009, they claimed to have lost, and later found, some twenty-two million e-mail messages. Nor has this practice been limited to the White House. Hillary Clinton’s use of a personal e-mail account on a private e-mail

server to conduct official correspondence while serving as Obama's Secretary of State violated the Federal Records Act, which allows the use of a personal account only so long as all e-mails are archived with the relevant agency or department; Clinton's were not. "The American people are sick and tired of hearing about your damn e-mails," Bernie Sanders said to Clinton in 2015, during a primary debate, all Larry David-like. But, closer to Election Day, renewed attention on Clinton's e-mails diminished her chances of defeating Trump.

The evidentiary shell game has been carried over from one Administration to the next. Reagan tried to protect Nixon's executive privilege; Bush tried to protect Reagan's. That so many staff members who served in earlier Republican Administrations serve again under later Presidents has made their commitment to defying the Presidential Records Act even more ardent. This was something keenly felt by George W. Bush, who, after all, was also concerned about protecting his father's legacy (which is yet another argument against political dynasties).

In 2001, when the twelve-year restriction on the Reagan papers expired, they did not all become available to the public, because George W. Bush signed an executive order that had been drafted by his young associate counsel, Brett M. Kavanaugh. During the Clinton Presidency, Kavanaugh had served as an aide to Ken Starr. In that capacity, he had argued against executive privilege. But, in the second Bush Presidency, Kavanaugh favored executive privilege. Executive Order No. 13,233, Further Implementation of the Presidential Records Act, tried to extend executive privilege, in effect, indefinitely. Specifically, it granted to the current President the right to review the declassification of the records of his predecessors before their release to the public: "Concurrent with or after the former President's review of the records, the incumbent President or his designee may also review the records in question, or may utilize whatever other procedures the incumbent President deems appropriate to decide whether to concur in the former President's decision to request withholding of or authorize access to the records." This, of course, allowed Bush to withhold from public view anything in his father's papers that he did not wish to see enter the public record, including documents drafted by members of his own Administration who had served in his father's Administration or in the Reagan Administration. As the archivist Bruce Montgomery observed, "In brief, the Bush order expanded executive privilege beyond the incumbent president to past presidents, their heirs, and even to vice presidents, seemingly in perpetuity."

Historians got angry. At a forum co-sponsored by the *PEN* American Center, Lyndon Johnson's biographer Robert Caro pointed out, "If you want to challenge the executive order, the historian must ask for specific, detailed things. The Johnson Library has thirty-four million pieces of paper. Unless you've been through it, you can't possibly know what's in there." This raises another delicate point. An archive that holds everything is useless unless you can find your way around it, and that requires money. The entire budget of the National Archives is about the cost of a single C-17 military-transport plane. In 2018, when Trump nominated Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court, the National Archives, with its limited resources, processed twenty thousand pages of documents relating to his service in the independent counsel's office during the Clinton Administration but was unable to get through all the requested documents from his work in the Bush Administration in time for the Senate to review them. In any case, Kavanaugh's collection was vast: his records included more than six hundred thousand e-mails alone.

Barack Obama revoked Executive Order No. 13,233 on his second day in office. His Administration settled a suit filed by the National Security Archive against the Bush Administration, for its failure to release visitor logs. Obama's White House published the logs of more than six million visitors, including the head of the National Security Archive. (Shaking his hand, Obama said, "You know, there's gonna be a record of this.") His Administration did not require corporate-style N.D.A.s. Nor had any President until Trump. I asked Don Wilson what he expected of the Trump papers, and he said, "What kind of record will we have other than what he dictates will be a record?"

The archivist of the United States, David Ferriero, has copies of three letters that he wrote, as a kid in the nineteen-sixties, framed on his office wall. One is to Eisenhower, asking for a photograph. The second is to John F. Kennedy, inquiring about the Peace Corps. The third is to Johnson: "Mr. President, I wish to congratulate you and our country for passing John F. Kennedy's Civil Rights Bill." The originals of those letters ended up in the National Archives, preserved, long before the passage of the Presidential Records Act.

Ferriero, an Obama appointee, says that the P.R.A. operates, essentially, as an honor system. He wishes that it had teeth. Instead, it's all gums. Kel McClanahan, a national-security lawyer, told me, "If the President wanted to, he could pull together all of the pieces of paper that he has in his office and have a bonfire with them. He doesn't view the archivist as an impediment to anything,

because the archivist is not an impediment to anything.”

After Trump’s Inauguration, in January, 2017, the National Archives and Records Administration conferred with the White House to establish rules for record-keeping, and, given the novelty of Trump’s favored form of communication, advised Trump to save all his tweets, including deleted ones. Trump hasn’t stopped deleting his tweets; instead, the White House set up a system to capture them, before they vanish. On February 22nd, the White House counsel Don McGahn sent a memo on the subject of Presidential Records Act Obligations to everyone working in the Executive Office of the President, with detailed instructions about how to save and synch e-mail. McGahn’s memo also included instructions about texting apps:

You should not use instant messaging systems, social networks, or other internet-based means of electronic communication to conduct official business without the approval of the Office of the White House Counsel. If you ever generate or receive Presidential records on such platforms, you must preserve them by sending them to your EOP email account via a screenshot or other means. After preserving the communications, you must delete them from the non-EOP platform.



*"I knew I loved you when I no longer found the sound of your eating excruciating."*  
Cartoon by Sarah Akinterinwa

It appears that plenty of people in the White House ignored McGahn's memo. Ivanka Trump used a personal e-mail for official communications. Jared Kushner used WhatsApp to communicate with the [Saudi crown prince](#). The press secretary Sean Spicer held a meeting to warn staff not to use encrypted texting apps, though his chief concern appears to have been that White House personnel were using these apps to leak information to the press.

Ethically, if not legally, what records must be preserved by the White House and deposited with the National Archives at the close of Trump's Presidency is subject to more dictates than those of the Presidential Records Act. In 2016, the International Council on Archives, founded with support from UNESCO in 1948, published a working document called "[Basic Principles on the Role of Archivists and Records Managers in Support of Human Rights](#)." Essentially an archivists' elaboration of the principles of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it urges governments to preserve archives that contain evidence of violation of human rights.

The rules about record-keeping, like so much about American government, weren't set up with someone like Trump in mind. It's not impossible that his White House will destroy records not so much to cover its own tracks but to sabotage the Biden Administration. This would be a crime, of course, but Trump could issue blanket pardons. Yet, as with any Administration, there's a limit to what can be lost. Probably not much is on paper, and it's harder to destroy electronic records than most people think. Chances are, a lot of documents that people in the White House might wish did not exist can't really be purged, because they've already been duplicated. Some will have been copied by other offices, as a matter of routine. And some will have been deliberately captured. "I can imagine that at State, Treasury, D.O.D., the career people have been quietly copying important stuff all the way along, precisely with this in mind," the historian Fredrik Logevall, the author of a new biography of Kennedy, told me.

Other attempts to preserve the record appear to have been less successful. The White House's P.R.A. guidelines, as worked out with the National Archives, forbade the use of smartphone apps that can automatically erase or encrypt text messages. It's possible that the White House has complied with those guidelines, but there's nothing that the National Archives could have done, or could do now, if it hasn't. Watchdog groups sued, concerned about the use of such apps, but the

Justice Department successfully argued that “courts cannot review the president’s compliance with the Presidential Records Act.” In 2019, the National Security Archive joined with two other organizations in a suit against Trump that led to a court’s ordering the Administration to preserve not only “all records reflecting Defendants’ meetings, phone calls, and other communications with foreign leaders” but records having to do with the Administration’s record-keeping practices. Earlier this year, the judge in that case dismissed the lawsuit: “The Court is bound by Circuit precedent to find that it lacks authority to oversee the President’s day-to-day compliance with the statutory provisions involved in this case.”

“I’m very worried,” Austin Evers, the executive director of the watchdog group American Oversight, told me. “There are a lot of senior officials in the Trump Administration who have been relying on impunity to sleep well at night, and I think it will dawn on them over the coming days and weeks that the records they leave behind will be in the hands of people they do not trust, including career public servants.” But, if Jared Kushner set a bonfire in the Rose Garden, Evers thinks that there would be repercussions. “The P.R.A. gets a bad rap,” he says. It’s difficult to enforce, but it’s not unenforceable. And if evidence of document destruction comes out, Evers says, American Oversight is poised to file suit: “We have litigation in the can.”

A week after Election Day, the House Oversight Committee sent strenuously worded letters to the White House and to dozens of federal agencies, warning them not to destroy or remove records during the transition. The letters were signed by the chairs of twenty other House committees. “That letter is the lifeguard whistle from the tower,” Tom Blanton, who runs the National Security Archive, told me. “‘Watch out, there are records drowning out there!’ ”

Trudy Peterson, who served as the acting archivist of the United States under Clinton, helped oversee the packing up of the Ford White House on the day of Carter’s Inauguration. Crowds were lining the streets, she recalled, while, inside, “people were packing up the President’s morning briefing. You have literally the hottest of the hot foreign-policy materials in your hands.” A convoy of trucks, under military escort, drove from Washington to Michigan. “In the mountains, we lost track of one of the trucks,” she told me. “For a matter of moments. But it stopped your heart.” Phillip Brady, who served under both Reagan and George H. W. Bush, once recalled what it was like to pack up. People from the White House counsel’s office, he said, “would again remind everyone that these

are Presidential documents; you're not permitted to walk out of the White House with them; these are things that become part of the permanent record." Brady visited the archives at the Bush Library and rummaged through boxes with his name on them. "Some of the messages were a little more candid than you like to recall they were," he said in an interview later. "Because of the hustle of the day, many times you're writing notes to someone: 'I think that's a stupid idea.' . . . An awful lot more is preserved than you would imagine." That's how it's supposed to happen, anyway.

The memo that Don McGahn sent to executive-office personnel in February, 2017, came with a warning, about leaving the White House:

At all times, please keep in mind that presidential records are the property of the United States. You may not dispose of presidential records. When you leave EOP employment, you may not take any presidential records with you. You also may not take copies of any presidential records without prior authorization from the Counsel's office. The willful destruction or concealment of federal records is a federal crime punishable by fines and imprisonment.

Custody of the records of the Trump White House will be formally transferred to the National Archives at noon on January 20, 2021, the minute that Biden takes his oath of office on the steps of the Capitol. Trump, defying tradition, is unlikely to attend that ceremony. It's difficult, even, to picture him there. Maybe he'll be in the Oval Office, yanking at the drawers of Resolute, the Presidential desk, barking out orders, cornered, frantic, panicked. Maybe he'll tweet the whole thing. The obligation, the sober duty, to save the record of this Administration will fall to the people who work under him. It may well require many small acts of defiance.

The truth will not come from the ex-President. Out of a job and burdened by debt, he'll want to make money, billions. He'll need, crave, hunger to be seen, looked at, followed, loved, hated; he'll take anything but being ignored. He may launch a TV show, or even a media empire. Will he sell secrets to American adversaries, in the guise of advice and expertise? It isn't impossible.

"Will you shut up, man?" an exasperated Biden said to Trump during their Presidential debate. Donald J. Trump cannot shut up. Aside from the prospect of silencing former White House staffers, shredding papers, deleting files, and

burying evidence, another danger, when the sun sets on the twentieth of January, won't be what's left unsaid, unrecorded, and unsaved but what Trump will be willing to say, still. ♦

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# **Annals of Activism**

- **How to Stop a Power Grab**

# How to Stop a Power Grab

As democracy hangs in the balance, activists are drawing lessons from the study of civil resistance.

By [Andrew Marantz](#)

November 16, 2020



About a week before Election Day, Erica Chenoweth, the Berthold Beitz Professor in Human Rights and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School, hosted an impromptu Zoom meeting for students, alumni, and colleagues—a free-form conversation in which people could ask questions, express anxieties, and try to gauge, from a comparative-politics perspective, whether the United States was totally screwed or just moderately screwed. As rectangles on the Zoom grid flickered to life, Chenoweth played “Freedom,” by Beyoncé (“I break chains all by myself / Won’t let my freedom rot in Hell”). Chenoweth is an expert in civil resistance, a term that Chenoweth uses interchangeably with “nonviolent mass action,” or “strategic nonviolent conflict,” or “unarmed insurrection.” Most political scientists study how political institutions work; Chenoweth and other scholars of civil resistance study what happens when mainstream political institutions break down and the people rise up.

Eventually, three dozen participants joined the Zoom, some from the Boston area and others from the pandemic diaspora—Nashville; Tunis; [Kenosha](#), [Wisconsin](#). The song ended, and Chenoweth, who speaks methodically and calmly about even the least calming subjects, walked through a few potential post-election scenarios. “The ideal, obviously, is that there’s a clear result that is quickly and widely accepted,” Chenoweth said. But what if [President Trump](#) were to declare victory prematurely? What if his Administration were to flood the courts with specious lawsuits, attempting to slow or stop the vote count in various states? What if the results were undeniable, but Trump loyalists—in the legislature, in the media, on the streets—refused to accept them?

In the event of any major violation, most people would be inclined to keep refreshing their news feeds, waiting fretfully for those in charge to decide what should happen next. Chenoweth argued that such a situation would require more than passive vigilance: “Regular people should know that there are steps they can take to uphold democracy.” This is a core tenet of civil-resistance theory, also known as people power—that citizens, working in concert, have more agency than they are led to believe.

In the past fifteen years, there has been a marked global increase in what international-relations scholars call “democratic backsliding,” with more authoritarians and authoritarian-style leaders consolidating power. “There’s no one moment when a country crosses from a democracy into an autocracy,”

Chenoweth told me in October. “The norms and institutions can grow weaker over years, or decades, without people noticing. But there are sometimes decisive moments of contestation and confusion, and would-be authoritarians can stoke and exploit that confusion.” Some landmarks are more obviously fraught than others. In the run-up to the election, Trump’s opponents constantly said that democracy was on the ballot—a partisan cliché that also happened to be true. Trump spent the past four years fomenting racism, spewing lies, and praising dictators around the world; in the weeks before the Zoom, he announced repeatedly that he would not accept an unfavorable election result, and that he had no particular allegiance to the American tradition of a peaceful transfer of power. On several occasions, he issued veiled threats of violence; during his [first debate](#) with [Joe Biden](#), for example, he appeared to instruct loyalist street thugs to “stand back and stand by.” Chenoweth told me, “There’s never been any real justification for the American exceptionalist myth that it can’t happen here. What we’ve seen from Trump is straight out of the authoritarian playbook.” Not only can it happen here, Chenoweth continued; if it did, “this is what it would look like.”

Chenoweth is forty, with a spiky hairdo and a gap-toothed smile. On Chenoweth’s Web site, along with the usual links to syllabuses and recent op-eds, are several warmly written form letters offering advice on such topics as how to take care of yourself during your first year of graduate school—the sign of a public intellectual who is inclined to give thoughtful counsel to anyone who asks, but who long ago lost the battle with their overflowing in-box. (Another piece of information on the site: “I am pretty indifferent to pronouns and don’t strongly identify with any of them. If pressed, I prefer being called by my name or they/them.”) The most poignant form letter is written in response to almost daily requests from activists all over the world. “It is my current practice not to offer advice or guidance to people involved in ongoing conflicts outside of my own country,” the letter reads. “If you are dealing with a seemingly impossible situation . . . by using peaceful methods to struggle for rights, security, and access, know that your bravery and persistence inspire me and the countless others who are watching.” In “[Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know](#),” which will be published early next year by Oxford University Press, Chenoweth writes that “nonviolent revolutions have indeed created major societal breakthroughs,” but that “there are still many people around the world who have not yet been exposed to these ideas or who remain more sympathetic to violent alternatives—and, as a result, default to apathy or to violence as their only options.”

During the previous decade, Chenoweth has written, they have “evolved from being a detached skeptic of civil resistance to becoming an invested participant in nonviolent movements at home,” including “anti-racism campaigns, the movement for immigrant rights, the sanctuary movement, the climate movement, the LGBTQ+ rights movement, and the democracy movement in the U.S.” (It’s worth remarking on how unremarkable it seems, in 2020, that the U.S. is a country badly in need of a democracy movement.) Chenoweth disclaims a central role in any of them, however. “As a scholar, I think I’ve made some original contributions,” Chenoweth told me. “In terms of movement stuff, it’s really just me trying to follow other people’s leads.” If a friend wants feedback on an action plan or a press release, Chenoweth makes comments in the Google document, sometimes suggesting a relevant historical detail. When there is a [Black Lives Matter](#) rally or a march against child separation, Chenoweth shows up. The image that comes to mind is that of Gregor Mendel volunteering at his local community garden.

During the Zoom, Chenoweth mentioned several ad-hoc groups (Hold the Line, Choose Democracy, Protect the Results, and others) that were creating contingency plans for the election and the post-election period. Chenoweth rattled off a few cases of civil-resistance campaigns that had managed to reverse post-election power grabs—Thailand in 1992, Serbia in 2000, Gambia in 2016—and said that such successful campaigns generally did four things: “They mobilized mass popular participation. They encouraged defection by people in positions of authority, like economic and business élites, security forces, even members of the opposition party. They tended not to rely solely on mass demonstrations but instead used methods of dispersal and noncoöperation, like boycotts and strikes. And, finally, they stayed disciplined, even when repression escalated.”

Chenoweth opened the floor for questions. Enrique Gasteazoro, an activist from Nicaragua and a recent graduate of the Kennedy School, asked, “Do you think that this resistance muscle that is being activated now, or potentially activated, could also be used as a deterrent?”

Chenoweth nodded and grinned—the satisfied reaction of an educator whose student has independently arrived at the right answer. “The best way to prevent a power grab is to keep it from happening in the first place,” Chenoweth said. “If Trump loses, and his lawyers are trying to decide how hard to fight the results, maybe they look around and see people mobilizing and decide it’s not worth it.

That could make all the difference.”

When we spoke the next day, Chenoweth used a metaphor that was both nonviolent and quite urgent: “If a bunch of us pull the fire alarm on our democracy now, and it turns out that this wasn’t the moment of emergency that we were all fearing, in no way would that be a waste of time.” After all, there are good reasons to hold occasional fire drills, especially when you live in a building that’s more than two hundred years old and full of structural flaws. “Whatever happens in this moment, it’s not as if our very deep problems go away, and it’s not as if the global trend toward authoritarianism goes away,” Chenoweth continued. “Maybe, next time there’s an emergency, we won’t have to waste time looking for the fire extinguishers and figuring out how to use them.”

When Americans talk about nonviolent protest, they usually have in mind the spiritual lineage connecting Jesus to Thoreau and Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Nonviolence is often conflated with pacifism, the faith of robed ascetics and secular saints. The caricatures are familiar: flowers placed in the barrel of a soldier’s gun; Instagram hashtags intended to “raise awareness”; an emphasis on principle over pragmatism. But the “civil” in “civil resistance” refers to civic engagement, not to decorous quiescence, and “nonviolent conflict” is hardly an oxymoron. “Nonviolent action means that the movement is not initiating or threatening violence,” Maria J. Stephan, a political scientist who studies civil resistance, told me. “There’s no guarantee that violence won’t be initiated by the state.” Omar Wasow, a Princeton University professor who studies the American civil-rights movement of the nineteen-sixties, told me, “King and others understood that, when protesters initiated violence against the state, in the eyes of the public the protesters lost legitimacy. When the state initiated violence against the protesters, the protesters won public sympathy. So that became part of their strategy.”



*"It's getting serious—he left his stuff."*  
Cartoon by David Sipress

Contemporary protesters, Wasow added, “sometimes complain that the media has its own interests. And they’re right: a thousand people march peacefully, three people set a car on fire, and the car is the lead segment on TV news.” This is hardly fair—nor is it fair that reactionary militias are often portrayed as defending “law and order,” whereas anti-Trump protests may be portrayed as undermining it—but, Wasow notes, civil-rights protesters in the sixties dealt with a similar dynamic. Today, there’s Fox News; in the sixties, there were pro-segregation newspapers. Wasow said, “King is remembered as an idealist, but his attitude on this stuff was much closer to Realpolitik: How can we use the media to advance our goals?”

As you dig into the civil-resistance literature, the notion of people power starts to seem less “Kumbaya” and more Sun Tzu. Lissy Romanow, the executive director of the activist training institute Momentum, said, “In theory, it might sound wishy-washy—*Repressive regime, please take pity on us!*—but actually it shows how to strategically wrest power away from people who have no interest in conceding any power. There’s nothing more hard-core than that.” Andre Henry, a thirty-five-year-old musician and organizer, told me, “As a Black person from the South, of course I knew all about the civil-rights movement, but it was taught to me as history. Then I started reading about how the same strategies of civil resistance are being used, within my lifetime, to topple totalitarian regimes all over the world.”

Hardy Merriman, the president and C.E.O. of an educational organization called the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, told me that, during the Cold War, “if you were a scholar of terrorism, or of Kremlinology, you could be a professor in a prestigious international-relations department. But, if you wanted to research how people win rights for themselves without blowing things up, you were basically on your own.” Even well into the two-thousands, the study of nonviolent struggle was often confined to departments of history or religion, or else it was banished from the academy altogether, relegated to musty church basements and sparsely attended Webinars. “A decade ago, if you’d asked me to list the major experts working in this field I could have named them all off the top of my head,” Merriman went on. “Now I can’t, because the mainstream is finally taking it seriously.”

As the subdiscipline has crept toward the center of academic discourse, it has

also been recast as a science. One of Chenoweth's projects at Harvard is called the Nonviolent Action Lab. Last year, in the online journal *Nature Human Behaviour*, Chenoweth and the international-relations scholar Margherita Belgioioso published a paper titled "The Physics of Dissent and the Effects of Movement Momentum," which compares the properties of social unrest to the laws of Newtonian mechanics. "We propose that the momentum of dissent is a product of participation (mass) and the number of protest events in a week (velocity)," Chenoweth and Belgioioso write. They even include some back-of-the-envelope equations that dissidents can use, in the heat of nonviolent battle, to "easily quantify their coercive potential."

In "Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know," Chenoweth describes the standard, top-down theory of power, which "focuses on the near-invincibility of entrenched power and implies that only militant and violent action can challenge the system." Chenoweth and other civil-resistance scholars propose an alternative theory, one in which "political power comes from the ability to elicit others' voluntary obedience." (As Frederick Douglass put it, "The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.") According to this view, even totalitarian states rely on the consent of their citizens, especially those who make up the regime's "pillars of support"—bureaucrats, business leaders, loyalist media, and so on. When those pillars erode—when tax collectors stop filling the government's coffers; when soldiers disobey orders, or simply call in sick; when formerly triumphalist opinion columnists and TV broadcasters start to waver—the colossus of state power can collapse, sometimes within a matter of days. The study of civil resistance, then, is in large part the study of how movements can win "defections"—how they can turn obedient subjects of the regime into allies of the disobedient majority.

In the mid-nineteen-fifties, James Lawson, a Methodist deacon from Ohio, travelled to India to study with Gandhi's disciples. When Lawson returned to the United States, he became a close associate of Martin Luther King, Jr., who called him "the leading theorist and strategist of nonviolence in the world." In 1959, Lawson planned and led the lunch-counter sit-ins in Nashville, the remarkably successful desegregation campaign that became a template for many of the future actions of the civil-rights movement. Just as the Indian independence movement had wielded economic power—for example, by boycotting British salt and textiles—Lawson targeted white-owned department stores. "At the beginning of 1960, I would guess we had only ten or fifteen per cent of the local Black population on our side, and far less, obviously, of the

white population,” Lawson told me recently. “People said, ‘Reverend Lawson, it’s not enough.’ I said, ‘We stay disciplined, and we stick to the plan.’ By May 10, 1960, the ‘Whites Only’ and ‘Colored Only’ signs started to fall.”

Now ninety-two, Lawson teaches workshops on civil resistance at the University of California, Los Angeles, and at an independent retreat called the James Lawson Institute, which has been held in various cities in the past six years. (Chenoweth, who has spoken at the retreat several times, refers to Lawson as a mentor.) In the summer of 2014, soon after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a young organizer named Nicole Carty attended the James Lawson Institute in Nashville. “A few hours away, protests were popping off in Ferguson,” Carty told me. “Getting to sit with James Lawson and pick his brain in that moment, it transformed my thinking about what I should do next.” The following year, after a Minneapolis police officer shot a Black man named Jamar Clarke, Carty helped organizers there plan their next series of tactics, which included an occupation of the Fourth Precinct that lasted more than two weeks and protests that shut down the security line at the Minneapolis airport. A few weeks later, the county prosecutor announced that he would no longer use grand juries in police-shooting cases, a decision that drew praise from activists. “It’s easy to be reactive—something bad happens, you take to the streets,” Carty said. “The real craft is in the planning, the strategizing. Having an entire sequence of tactics in mind—if I do this, then this, how do I ultimately win?”

In 1973, the political scientist Gene Sharp published “[The Politics of Nonviolent Action](#),” a three-volume work based on his Oxford University doctoral thesis. The [second volume](#) was a sweeping taxonomy—an attempt to do for civil-resistance theory what Linnaeus had done for biology. Drawing on centuries of examples, Sharp identified a hundred and ninety-eight “methods of nonviolent action”: vigils, mock funerals, “collective disappearance,” and so on. Some were “methods of concentration,” such as street demonstrations, but the majority were methods of dispersal or noncoöperation, such as strikes and boycotts. In the sixteenth century, Iroquois women won political rights within their tribe through a coöordinated succession of actions: refraining from sex and childbirth, striking when it came time to harvest crops, refusing to make moccasins for male soldiers. In the Iranian Revolution of 1979, some of the most decisive gains against the Shah came from acts of bureaucratic slow-walking, and from employees at nationalized oil fields working at half speed. In the American imagination, an uprising looks like a throng. In the Sharpian tradition, the winning combination of tactics may look like an absence—or, to the untrained

eye, like nothing at all.

As the 2020 election approached, I kept asking Chenoweth whether, in their expert opinion, American democracy would survive. In response, Chenoweth gave me names of activists to talk to. Mass uprisings may seem like harbingers of chaos, but many civil-resistance scholars argue the opposite: countries with a stronger culture of nonviolent resistance tend to be more equitable and democratic. Chenoweth said, “If the systems hold, it will be because organizers held the systems to account.”

Erica Chenoweth has never been a pacifist. “I grew up in Dayton, Ohio, in what I guess you’d call a pretty typical Midwestern context,” they told me. As an undergraduate, at the University of Dayton, Chenoweth considered joining the R.O.T.C., intending to enlist in the military and become a diplomat. They ended up enrolling in graduate school instead, but retained an interest in “things that explode, bullets flying through the air”; the new plan, they recalled, “was to be a terrorism expert, or a mainstream security scholar.” During Chenoweth’s final year of grad school, they attended a four-day workshop at Colorado College, hosted by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict.

Merriman, who was one of the workshop’s facilitators, recalled, “It became clear pretty quickly that Erica was going to need more than the usual amount of evidence.” Chenoweth put it more bluntly: “I sat in the back and quickly became the least popular person in the room.” For every historical example of a successful nonviolent uprising, Chenoweth could think of a failed one. “They brought up the Solidarity movement, I brought up Tiananmen Square,” Chenoweth recalled. “I kept saying, ‘Case studies aside, who has studied this systematically?’” Attendees slept in campus dorms, where Chenoweth’s roommate was Maria Stephan, then an I.C.N.C. employee. Stephan said, “One night, I just challenged Erica directly, along the lines of: If you think the efficacy of this stuff remains to be tested, then what kind of study would convince you?” Within a few hours, Chenoweth and Stephan had drafted a crude version of a research proposal.

During the next five years, Chenoweth and Stephan built a database called Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes, or NAVCO. It aimed to account for every attempted revolution worldwide, between 1900 and 2006: the Carnation Revolution, in Portugal; the Blancos rebellion, in Uruguay; the Active Voices campaign, in Madagascar; and three hundred and twenty others. “I took

for granted, as did all the political scientists I was familiar with, that the serious thing, the thing you do if you're a rebel group that really wants results, is you take up arms," Chenoweth told me. "Then I ran the numbers." Much of Chenoweth's career since then has consisted of interpreting and explaining what those numbers showed.

In 2011, Chenoweth and Stephan published their findings in a book called "[Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict](#)." It included detailed narrative case studies in which the authors hypothesized about why, say, the Philippine People Power movement of 1986 achieved its goals whereas the Burmese uprising of 1988 did not. (In Burma, activists over-relied on "methods of concentration, such as election rallies and protests," leaving themselves vulnerable to state repression. The movement in the Philippines alternated rallies with strikes and boycotts; it also drew the participation of a wide array of civil-society leaders, including clergy and teachers, many of whom eventually turned against the regime.) In the database, Chenoweth and Stephan condensed each campaign's months or years of struggle into a binary line of code: violent or nonviolent, success or failure.

Chenoweth and Stephan selected only "maximalist" resistance campaigns—big movements, with a thousand or more participants, that sought to fundamentally alter a nation's political order, either by seceding or by overthrowing a foreign occupier or a head of state. The American civil-rights movement of the nineteen-sixties was not included in the NAVCO data; although there were secessionists and insurgents within the movement, its main demands were reformist, not revolutionary. Moreover, campaigns were counted as successful only if their goals were achieved within a year of peak activity, without an unrelated intervention. The Greek resistance to the Nazis was coded as a failure, because although the movement contributed to the Nazis' retreat from Greece, Allied troops seemed to contribute more. The Indian independence movement, the popular archetype of nonviolent insurrection, was classified as a partial success—for one thing, the British did eventually quit India, but not within a year. Even taking these restrictions into account, more than half of the civil-resistance campaigns in the NAVCO data set were successes, a much starker result than Chenoweth had anticipated. Tom Hastings, a longtime activist and scholar of nonviolence, told me, "I've been at this since the sixties, and I can break that time up into two periods: B.C. and A.C., Before Chenoweth and After Chenoweth. For a long time, there have been those of us who had a philosophical commitment to nonviolence, or an intuition that nonviolence puts

you at a strategic advantage. Erica and Maria took that intuition and empirically proved it.”

Since 2011, Chenoweth has overseen the expansion of the database, and published dozens of journal articles, book chapters, and monographs. (Chenoweth and Stephan remain friends and occasional collaborators, but Stephan worked for several years at the United States Institute of Peace, a nonpartisan body founded by Congress, which limited what she could say in public.) Many of Chenoweth’s articles are quantitative and technical, but the upshot is simple enough: civil-resistance movements prevail far more often than armed movements do (about 1.95 times more often, according to the most recent version of the data). This seems to hold true across decades and continents, in democracies and autocracies, against weak regimes and strong ones.

In September of 2000, Slobodan Milosevic, who had been the dictator of Serbia for more than a decade, attempted to falsify election results in order to stay in power. In response, a student-led movement called Otpor coördinated a variety of tactics—highway blockades, subversive street theatre, a coal miners’ strike. The resistance was widely perceived as nonviolent and legitimate, and it grew quickly, gaining support among Serbs of every age and from all parts of the country. A Serbian policeman, ordered to shoot into a crowd of protesters, held his fire; he later told journalists that, given the cross-section of people present, he couldn’t rule out the possibility that one of them was his child. By early October, Milosevic had no choice but to leave office. The following year, he was brought to The Hague and tried for war crimes. Ivan Marovic, who was one of the leaders of Otpor, told me that, when he recounts the story of the movement, people often argue that its success must have been a fluke. He added, “Now I can just show them Maria and Erica’s book and say, ‘Don’t argue with me, argue with the numbers.’ ”

Andre Henry, the musician and organizer, has been active with several groups in Pasadena, California, where he lives. They include the local chapter of Black Lives Matter, an interfaith group called L.A. Voice, and the Jenga Club, a name that refers to the goal of toppling unjust social structures by removing pillars of support. In October, after a Pasadena police officer shot and killed a Black man named Anthony McClain, Black Lives Matter Pasadena wanted to pressure the mayor into releasing the officer’s body-camera footage. “Normally, we would probably just do a march, but because of *COVID* we had to get creative,” Henry told me. Someone remembered No. 42 on Sharp’s list of nonviolent actions:

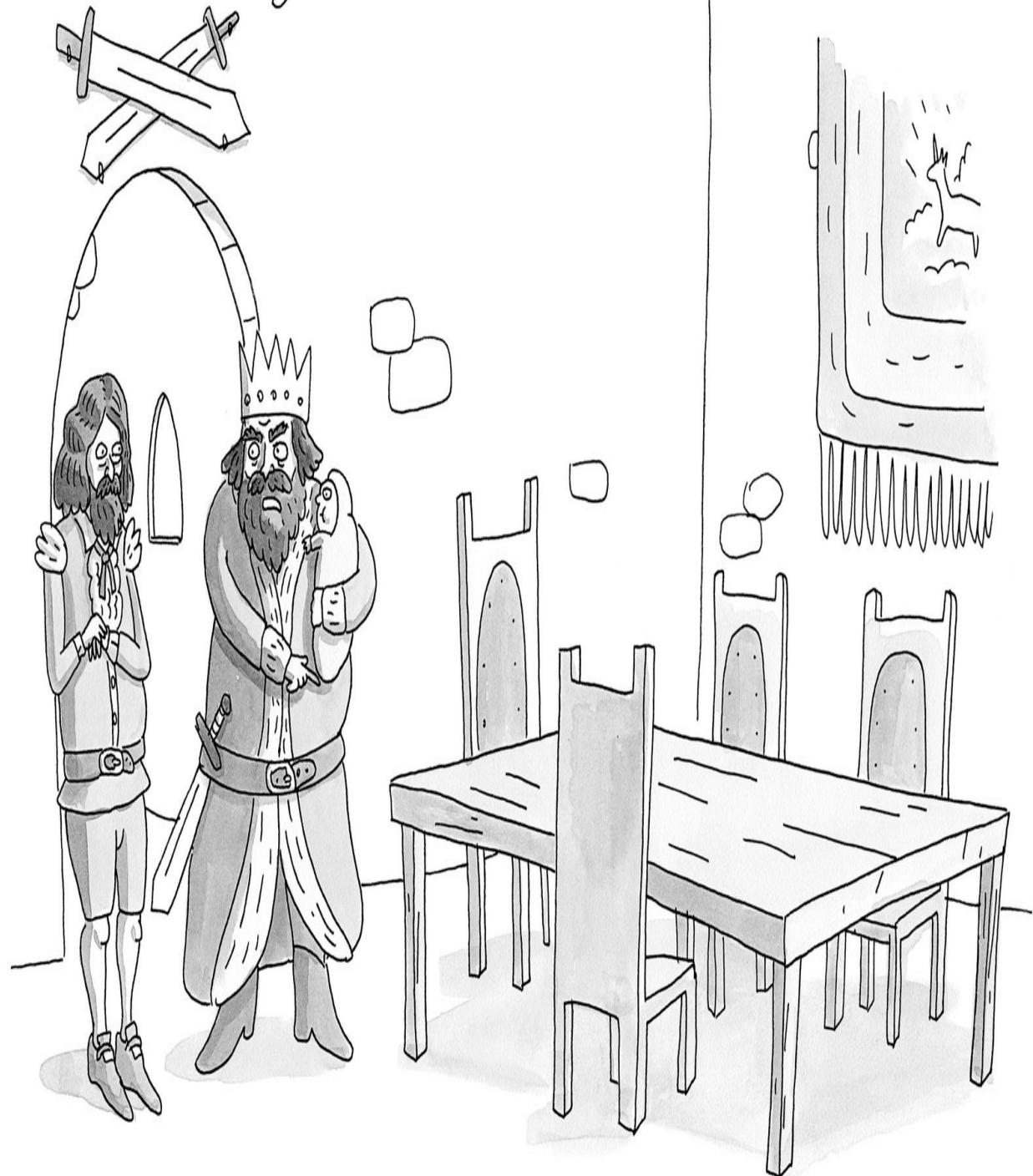
motorcades. “We drove really slowly, gaining more visibility the whole way,” Henry said. “It became a big enough deal that the mayor committed to releasing the footage the next day.”

Henry and I were speaking, over Zoom, shortly before Election Day. “I’m talking to organizers about what they’ve got planned if Trump uses outright Fascist tactics to stay in power,” he said. “I hear a lot of ‘We’ll stay in the streets until our demands are met!’ To which I go, ‘Yeah, getting in the streets is good, and it looks good on Instagram. But it’s not magic, where you chant “We don’t like this” until the powers that be have a change of heart. Who’s researching the real points of economic and social leverage?’ ” Henry leaned out of the frame for a moment. When he came back into view, he was holding a short book, co-authored by Sharp, that he was in the process of rereading: “[The Anti-Coup](#).”

Sharp, who died in 2018, was nominated several times for the Nobel Peace Prize, and he had a research appointment at Harvard, but his primary job was director of the Albert Einstein Institution, a small nonprofit that he ran out of his row house in East Boston. A pamphlet-size précis of his findings, “[From Dictatorship to Democracy](#),” was published in 1993 and circulated in Burma, Serbia, Egypt, and several other countries on the brink of revolution. In 2011, at the Occupy Wall Street encampment, in New York, activists set up a community kitchen, a library, and a media hub to disseminate live streams generated by the movement—all examples of what Sharp called “alternative social institutions.” If protests are expressions of what a movement is against, then alternative institutions can be manifestations of what a movement is for, a glimpse of how the world might look once it has been transformed.

During the Egyptian Revolution, activists occupied Tahrir Square, in Cairo, staffing ad-hoc checkpoints and building a stage with a professional-grade sound system. Musicians held concerts in the square, helping to sustain a festive atmosphere and attract a wide cross-section of visitors, some of whom became active in the struggle. Chenoweth told me, “If I had to pick one characteristic that correlates with a movement’s success, it’s the extent to which everyone in society—children, disabled people, grandmas—feels that they can either actively or passively participate.”

# LEGENDS OF KING ARTHUR!



Kahin

*"Babyproof this table!"*  
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

While at the University of Oslo, in the nineteen-fifties, Sharp crossed paths with George Lakey, another American activist and student of nonviolence. Lakey went on to work as a civil-rights organizer during the Freedom Summer Project of 1964, as a blockade-runner during the Vietnam War, as an environmental organizer fighting mountaintop removal, and, in 2020, as a democracy activist advising Americans on how to forestall a potential coup. In the two-thousands, Lakey taught at Swarthmore, where he and several students started the Global Nonviolent Action Database, a list of activist campaigns throughout history. “Sharp’s oldest example, in ‘The Politics of Nonviolent Action,’ was the plebeian uprising in ancient Rome, 494 B.C.E.,” Lakey told me. “Imagine how thrilled one of my grad students was when he found one that was centuries older”—a strike among Egyptian laborers building a tomb for Ramesses III, in 1170 B.C.E. Throughout history there have been wars, and, at least since Herodotus, there have been military historians. Likewise, Lakey pointed out, “nonviolent struggle has always been with us, but for a long time, as a species, we’ve been blind to it.”

Some American historians argue that the Revolutionary War was only the violent culmination of a longer and more consequential nonviolent struggle. “What do we mean by the revolution?” John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1815. “The war? That was no part of the revolution; it was only an effect and a consequence of it.” Adams went on to refer to a period of “fifteen years, before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington,” during which the colonists boycotted British goods, destroyed British property, distributed illegal pamphlets, and set up alternative institutions such as the Constitutional Convention. “Civil resistance repeatedly shows up in undemocratic moments and contexts,” Romanow, of Momentum, told me. “It’s not a coincidence that Black Americans have led when it came to bringing civil-resistance tactics into American organizing, because Black Americans have not been living in a democracy for four hundred years.” Romanow and I were speaking in late October. “Many people now rightly think that, if things go off the rails during or after this election, the institutions alone might not necessarily save us,” she continued. “Once you realize that, you can go pretty quickly from despair to exhilaration: the institutions can’t save us, but maybe we can save ourselves.”

Like many academics, Chenoweth is wary of being prescriptive. “I don’t think it’s my job to tell people how to liberate themselves,” Chenoweth told me. “I do,

however, think it can be useful to document patterns.” Sometimes the task is as simple as highlighting tactics that have been successful in the past, enabling future activists to think more creatively. During a recent lecture at Wellesley, Chenoweth described an anecdote relayed by a colleague, Stephen Zunes, about an action undertaken by a group of dissidents advocating for the autonomy of Western Sahara, a territory occupied by Morocco. Under Moroccan law, it is illegal to fly the flag of Western Sahara. To protest this law, instead of engaging in civil disobedience directly dissidents tied flags to the tails of dozens of feral cats. Chenoweth called this “a dilemma action,” because the government troops had to “either chase cats around the alleyways or let the flag fly. It’s a terrible set of choices for the opponent, and it’s humiliating.”

The first version of the *NAVCO* data set, now known as *NAVCO* 1.0, was, in Chenoweth’s words, “chunky data.” Subsequent iterations have yielded more granular findings. For example, when a civil-resistance campaign does succeed in overthrowing an oppressive government, the new government it installs is far more likely to remain stable and democratic. The data also yielded a pattern so simple and catchy that Chenoweth revealed it, in 2013, in the form of a *TED* talk —the 3.5 Percent Rule, which states that in every case where a mass-resistance campaign has attracted the “active and sustained participation” of at least three and a half per cent of the country’s population, the campaign has achieved its goal.

The 3.5 Percent Rule is meant to be descriptive, not predictive, a caveat that Chenoweth often repeats but that activists do not always hear. Since the talk, Chenoweth has become aware of two campaigns, in Brunei and Bahrain, that failed despite engaging more than three and a half per cent of the country’s population. Although civil-resistance campaigns in the past decade have continued to succeed more often than the armed ones, the success rate of all maximalist campaigns is dropping, as regimes become more proficient at surveilling and subduing rebellions. “I really blame the Internet,” Chenoweth said recently on a podcast. Although the Internet is good at “getting people to the streets quickly, in large numbers,” its costs to movements may outweigh its benefits. Also, momentum can be difficult to sustain without the more painstaking work of person-to-person organizing.

One of Chenoweth’s side projects, the Crowd Counting Consortium, attempts to quantify, in close to real time, the depth and breadth of the American protest movement, including both anti-Trump and pro-Trump demonstrations. Without

such a count, if the anti-Trump resistance did reach the three-and-a-half-per-cent threshold—about eleven and a half million people—how would anyone know? The project is a collaboration between Chenoweth; Jeremy Pressman, a political scientist at the University of Connecticut; and a rotating crew of volunteers who verify reports of protests, in the press or on social media, and convert them into raw data. One of the most diligent volunteers is Zoe Marks, a scholar of African politics at the Kennedy School, who happens to be Chenoweth’s partner. “A lot of our date nights involve spreadsheets,” Chenoweth told me, a bit bashfully.

According to the Crowd Counting data, 97.7 per cent of Black Lives Matter protests this past summer were free of violence, with no injuries reported by protesters, police, or bystanders. “These figures should correct the narrative that the protests were overtaken by rioting,” Chenoweth and Pressman wrote in a recent *Washington Post* article. Of course, in a world that includes social media and Rupert Murdoch, the narrative that should prevail is not always the narrative that does. At pivotal moments, such as after a police shooting or during an attempted authoritarian power grab, organizers may find themselves facing a paradox. If nobody mobilizes in response to egregious abuses by the state, the abuses may appear to go unanswered. If people do mobilize, and if a tiny minority of protesters initiate violence, then that violence can be used, cynically or otherwise, to cast the movement as illegitimate, making it more likely to lose. There is no consensus, either among academics or among activists, on what constitutes violence—some disavow property damage, others argue that a few smashed windows can sometimes help the cause. Under normal circumstances, an image of a protester throwing a rock could go viral, prompting a negative press cycle. In a volatile post-election moment, a single violent incident might give a flailing autocrat a pretext to ramp up repression by police, or even to declare emergency powers. Shortly after the 2020 election, as armed militias, white nationalists, and other Trump supporters planned a march in Washington, D.C., Lakey’s group, Choose Democracy, wrote an e-mail to its network of volunteers. “We don’t believe this is the moment for activation in the streets,” it read. “Let’s keep breathing, staying attentive, and be ready for action if things escalate.”

NAVCO 1.0 counted three hundred and twenty-three maximalist campaigns that occurred up to 2006. The list has been updated continually since then, and now comprises six hundred and twenty-seven examples—including, for the first time, an American campaign. In the prepublication copy of “Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know” that I received in October, the campaigns were laid

out chronologically in a table at the back of the book. Appearing shortly after “Anti-Gnassingbé,” a campaign in Togo, and shortly before the “Yellow Vests,” a movement in France, was the “Anti-Trump resistance.” Under “Primary method,” it was coded as nonviolent. Under “Outcome,” instead of “success” or “failure,” was the word “ongoing.”

In September, 2017, Merriman, of the I.C.N.C., wrote a blog post recommending more investment in what he called “democracy insurance.” Just as American taxpayers keep the Federal Emergency Management Agency staffed in case of natural disaster, he argued, so should nongovernmental organizations in free societies fund “civil resistance capacity” in case of a lurch toward authoritarianism. This argument was impossible to separate from Merriman’s interests—he was, after all, the president of an organization that specialized in building such capacity—but it was also substantiated by robust evidence. In his blog post, Merriman wrote that “democracies in many countries are backsliding, such as in Hungary, Poland, the Philippines, South Africa, and the United States.” He wanted to insure that, should this backsliding continue, the people would be ready to mobilize.

In late May, a video of Derek Chauvin kneeling on [George Floyd](#)’s neck set off a wave of protests around the country. On June 1st, near the White House, federal agents pepper-sprayed peaceful protesters, clearing the way for President Trump to pose for a photo op; a few weeks later, federal agents drove through Portland, Oregon, in unmarked vans, snatching protesters off the streets without warning. It seemed that the slide toward autocracy was rapidly accelerating. Merriman, who lives in a suburb of Washington, D.C., expressed his concerns to Romanow, who introduced him to three activists who specialize in digital organizing: Ankur Asthana, in Hoboken, New Jersey; Marium Navid, in Los Angeles; and Kifah Shah, in New York City. “Hardy has been immersed in civil-resistance theory for years,” Shah said. “Marium, Ankur, and I know how to get that information out to people and train them on how to use it.”

The four activists met on Zoom throughout July and August, whenever all of them could spare time from their day jobs. By the end of August, they had put together a fifty-five-page document called “Hold the Line: A Guide to Defending Democracy.” The guide established a few “red lines” (“Trump may declare victory even if the election day results are ambiguous”) and proposed some collective responses in the event that those lines were crossed—a combination of standard methods, such as calling elected officials to ask that

they respect the democratic process, and Sharpian methods, such as boycotts and civil disobedience. One section, written primarily by Merriman, was a crash course in the consent theory of power which cited several experts in the field, including Chenoweth and Stephan. The rest of the guide was studded with worksheets and sample meeting agendas. (The title page included a disclaimer: “The views expressed here are solely personal to the authors and do not represent the views of any employer.”) In October, the organizers began hosting Zoom trainings, encouraging volunteers to form local Hold the Line groups. By the end of the month, each session was attracting hundreds of people.

In late October, I visited Shah, in her sunlit two-bedroom apartment in Washington Heights. At the time, she was corresponding with dozens of Hold the Line volunteers, both by e-mail and in one-on-one “office hours” by phone, attempting to usher them away from generalized terror and toward a specific plan of action. She paraphrased their worries: “ ‘The election is going to be stolen!’ ‘The Supreme Court is going to stop counting our votes!’ I go, ‘I’m scared of that, too. But neither of us knows anyone on the Supreme Court. Who do we know?’ ” Shah referred to this as a “sphere of influence” exercise—a sort of grassroots version of the Serenity Prayer. “Maybe you know your local law-enforcement officials, and you can ask them to pledge that they’ll prevent militias from intimidating voters,” Shah said. “Maybe you get more people in your group, and maybe one of those people knows a state legislator.” Shah referred to this slow, modest work as “building movement infrastructure,” or simply “building”—a necessary component of any movement, not only the movement to prevent Trump from stealing power but also the movements that would continue agitating for progress as soon as Trump was gone.

Shah, who is thirty-two, was born in Pakistan and moved to Palm Springs, California, when she was three. “Knowing what has gone on in Pakistan and many other countries,” she said, she did not assume that election results are the final determinant of who takes power, even in a putative democracy. Her bookshelves were a pleasant jumble—“[Organizing for Social Change](#)” next to the Quran, “[Good and Mad](#)” not far from a stack of gastroenterology journals. (Her husband is a second-year medical fellow.) In the course of an afternoon, over the hum of Broadway traffic outside her window, Shah conducted calls with two community organizers in Houston, a group of tech employees in Silicon Valley, and a Muslim Students Association at Yale. In Virginia, a woman named Margaret had single-handedly solicited pledges from more than two dozen state officials, both Democrats and Republicans, affirming that they

would honor the will of the voters. “You rock, Margaret!” Shah said. “You are a natural!”

In Erie, Pennsylvania, a Benedictine sister named Anne McCarthy and a church volunteer named Juan Llarena were organizing a prayer vigil at an Episcopal church across the street from the county courthouse. The vigil would be held on Election Night while the ballots were being delivered to the courthouse to be tallied. “We’ve got about thirty people signed up,” McCarthy told Shah over the phone. “They’re all trained in de-escalation tactics.” McCarthy is a member of Pace e Bene, a national network of clergy and lay Christians who teach nonviolent resistance. At the group’s most recent annual conference, in August, Chenoweth was one of the keynote speakers.

“I love this idea, Anne,” Shah said. “Do you all want help sending a press release to local media?”

“We don’t want to risk a backlash,” McCarthy said. “There are armed militias based about half an hour away, and they might see us on the news and come looking for a confrontation.” Shah raised her eyebrows. When the call was over, she said, “One of my mantras is: If you’re organizing something locally, you know your turf better than I do. How am I supposed to know, sitting in New York City, where all the Pennsylvania militias are?”

Two days before the election, I attended a Hold the Line training on Zoom. Shah and the other organizers shared some recent accomplishments by local Hold the Line chapters, heralding each small advance with the kind of unqualified enthusiasm usually reserved for a middle-school dance recital. “Thanks for showing them love in the chat, guys!” Shah said. “Y’all are doing some amazing work.”

“Feeling inspired,” Molly, in Tucson, Arizona, wrote in the Zoom chat. “Go, Democracy!”

Susan, in Iowa, wrote, “I heard Gene Sharp back in the 70s and am glad you all are carrying on!”

Others seemed to find the whole thing baffling: If the country was on the brink of collapse, how were nonbinding pledges from local officials commensurate with the scale of the problem? Mark, a sixty-seven-year-old college professor from Michigan, asked about the “end game,” in the event that “Trump clearly

steals the election and gets the Republican governors and Supreme Court to fall into line. In that frightening but possible scenario, do we take to the streets and attack? Wouldn't that be the end of nonviolent strategies?" He added, "I've been a liberal Democrat since 1971."

Roula, in California, wrote, "Mark, I'm interested in that 'what if' and specifically want to know how we can organize \*economic\* resistance."

Laura, also in California, wrote, "What we've learned is that non-violence is essential to unseating a coup."



*"Sometimes I feel like the whole world is out to get me."*  
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

"Mark, have you read the Hold the Line guide? Nonviolence is a core principle," Jamie, in Colorado, wrote. "Nonviolence is also what's most able to be successful! Check the writings of Erica Chenoweth for some interesting stuff on why it's so important!"

On Election Day, Shah wore a red striped turtleneck, a blue hijab, and white jeans and sneakers. "This is about as patriotic as I get," she said. As part of a mutual-aid group, she had spent the morning helping elderly neighbors get to the polls, and had voted herself. Now, like roughly half of the American adult population, she was alternately claiming that she'd paid no heed to the election forecasts and fantasizing about a swift and uncontested Biden landslide. "I hope people don't come away with a sense of: 'See, the institutions did work in the end—what was I so paranoid for?'" she said. "Americans are way too good at amnesia and apathy."

Late in the afternoon, Shah's husband, Ali Soroush, returned from a shift at the hospital wearing blue-green scrubs. "My attending started asking, 'How do we stop Trump if he starts doing crazy things?'" he said. "I told her, 'You may enjoy the Hold the Line guide.'"

"Love it," Shah said.

Soroush, whose parents lived through the Iranian Revolution of 1979, is generally wary of sweeping change. "I like to think about what's possible within the existing systems," he said. "Thinking outside of that makes me a bit uncomfortable." During the summer, when Shah first described Hold the Line to Soroush, he found the power-grab scenarios difficult to fathom. "He went, 'None of that is gonna happen. We have a constitution,'" Shah recalled. "I said, 'Babe, it's just a document!'"

"I'm the institutionalist in our house," he said.

When darkness fell, Shah turned on the TV, and the results began coming in. Virginia was called for Biden, then briefly un-called. Trump had an early lead in Pennsylvania. Someone on ABC News mentioned the prospect of recounts; someone else mentioned the possibility of an Electoral College tie. "This is fine," Shah said. She stood up and started pacing. "This is what we've been talking about for months. This is what we planned for." Soroush went into the

bedroom to lie down.

The next day, I spoke to Chenoweth. While the rest of the country was poring over the latest vote tallies from Allegheny County, Chenoweth was thinking about pillars of support, trying to gauge which key figures seemed unshakably loyal to Trump and which seemed prepared to defect should Trump's loss start to look definitive. That morning, Marco Rubio, the Republican senator from Florida, had tweeted, "Taking days to count legally cast votes is *NOT* fraud. And court challenges to votes cast after the legal voting deadline is *NOT* suppression." The tweet was "kind of both-sides-y," Chenoweth said. "He seems to be hedging, waiting to see which way the wind blows."

On Friday, at Marks's suggestion, Chenoweth and Marks began channelling their anxiety into a Google spreadsheet. One tab, documenting public statements of support for the vote-counting process or repudiations of Trump, was titled "Counting Commitments to Democracy." A separate tab, containing defiant statements from Trump loyalists, had the heading "Counting Complicity." When Sean Hannity, on Fox News, asked Senator Lindsey Graham whether states should put forward alternative slates of electors, Graham responded, "Everything should be on the table." Graham was added to the "Complicity" tab. (Later in the interview, Graham claimed that elections in Philadelphia were "crooked as a snake"; in the spreadsheet, this was filed under the "Alleges Fraud" column, though it could just as easily have gone under "Supports Misinformation.") The following night, the Fox anchor Laura Ingraham, speaking directly to the camera, urged President Trump to leave gracefully—a surprising and significant addition to the "Commitments to Democracy" tab. Every few hours, Chenoweth sent me an update by e-mail—"Extremely clear repudiation from Carlos Curbelo"; "McConnell refusing to comment"—treating the election as a volatile and fluid process, a matter not only of math but also of momentum. Everyone else I knew was waiting for the final result to be revealed; for Chenoweth, there was no such thing as a final result, at least not until the Inauguration.

On Saturday, November 7th, Shah and I had plans to meet at Columbus Circle, in Manhattan, for a rally that was originally billed as a reaffirmation of the sanctity of the democratic process. I was still at home, in Brooklyn, when I heard cheers erupting outside my window. I headed north toward the Brooklyn Bridge on my bike. Suddenly, somehow, everyone was carrying banners, tambourines, huge American flags, portable stereos playing "We Are the Champions" and "Philadelphia Freedom" and the timeless rap anthem "FDT (Fuck Donald

Trump).” The bleating horns of mail trucks and taxis, for once, heralded not frustration but peace and good will. I received a flurry of texts, all containing exclamation points or emojis. The only two exceptions were Chenoweth and Shah, who remained cautious. “Momentum is definitely in Biden’s favor,” Chenoweth wrote; as for Trump, “we’ll see if he has any enablers left.”

At Columbus Circle, Shah stood between a young man in a T-shirt, carrying a bullhorn and railing against Biden’s centrism, and a middle-aged woman in a pink feather boa, dancing with her eyes closed on top of a parked S.U.V. A very tall drag queen in a witch’s hat roamed through the crowd, shouting, “You’re fired, honey!”

“The whole Democratic coalition is out today,” Shah said, smiling. “This is a victory, but not a permanent victory. It’s, like, Let’s celebrate for an afternoon, and then let’s go home and make sure there isn’t a power grab happening under our noses.”

The week after Election Day, members of the Trump Administration continued to act as if the election results were still in doubt, or simply to pretend that Trump had won. A reporter asked Secretary of State Mike Pompeo whether he would start coöperating with Biden’s transition team. “There will be a smooth transition to a second Trump Administration,” Pompeo responded. Trump fired the Secretary of Defense and other top Pentagon officials, replacing them with loyalists. “There will be others,” Chenoweth wrote to me. In October, Chenoweth had told me, “If Trump does leave office safely, we might not be in immediate crisis mode anymore, but the struggle doesn’t end. That’s when the real work begins.” ♦

## At the Museums

- [A Missing Jacob Lawrence Painting Reappears After Decades](#)

[November 23, 2020 Issue](#)

# A Missing Jacob Lawrence Painting Reappears After Decades

How an Upper West Sider learned that the picture on her living room wall was wanted over at the Metropolitan Museum.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

November 16, 2020

In an October packed with surprises, at least one was good. A visitor to the exhibition “Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle,” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, came away suspecting that one of five paintings long missing from the series, which documents the nation’s turbulent birth in thirty twelve-by-sixteen-inch panels, was just across Central Park, hanging in her neighbor’s living room. How did she know? No image of the painting existed. The two women have lived in the same Upper West Side building for going on sixty years. Pop-in privileges are reciprocal; the museum visitor had seen her neighbor’s painting hundreds of times. At her nudging, the owner made contact with the museum’s curators. A week later, the painting—speedily authenticated—was on the Met’s wall, reunited with its brethren.



“I’m not a collector,” the painting’s owner said the other day, over the phone. “I’m just a person, and I love pictures.” The widespread excitement at the painting’s discovery was gratifying, but the publicity had startled her. “I’m hoping that my anonymity will be respected and that I can go back to Citarella and Fairway and my normal life.”

She and her husband bought the Lawrence in 1960, when she was twenty-seven. “I had a two-year-old and a three-year-old, and I wanted them to have rhythm classes, so I went to a music school. And when I entered the lobby there was a woman hanging pictures. She said to me, ‘You have an honest face. Will you watch my pictures?’” The woman’s husband, Mac Fagelson, worked for the Julius Lowy framing company. (“Very prestigious.”) The couple was holding an auction to provide music lessons for children in need. The Lawrence was one of the items for sale, and the young mother bought it, for around a hundred dollars. “It led to a twenty-five-year friendship,” she said.

Fagelson went on to give the painting’s owner a philosophy of art buying. “He said to me, ‘When you buy a picture, there are two things you must consider. One is can you afford it, and two is do you love it. Only time will tell who becomes famous and who is obsolete. So do not concern yourself with those issues.’” The Lawrence picture had checked both boxes. “I recognized the content immediately,” she said. “I knew it was the American Revolution.” (Actually, the painting, which features blue-coated soldiers pointing bayonets at a band of grimacing men, depicts Shay’s Rebellion, an uprising of Massachusetts farmers that took place in the newly independent United States.) “I loved it the minute I saw it. My husband agreed. He has a very good eye. The price was nominal. The colors were vivid. The style was different from anything I had seen. We knew who Jacob Lawrence was, but we never invested a lot of importance in it.”

Lawrence made his “Struggle” series between 1954 and 1956, while he taught at the Pratt Institute. Its subject matter spans the nation’s early decades, beginning with Patrick Henry’s “Give me liberty or give me death” speech and continuing through the drafting of the Constitution, the War of 1812, and westward expansion, highlighting the agonies of slavery and the experiences of Native Americans. The discovered painting, the sixteenth in the series, is titled “There are combustibles in every State, which a spark might set fire to. —Washington, 26 December 1786.” The line is from a letter sent by the soon-to-be President,

warning of internal threats faced by the young country. The series was split up and sold, against Lawrence's wishes, and had never been displayed together in a museum before.

The painting's owner had begun to suspect that her picture might be newsworthy earlier this year, after she read a *Wall Street Journal* article about the show's première, at the Peabody Essex Museum, in Massachusetts. But she was about to leave on a trip to Florida. "I thought, I cannot deal with this," she said. "There will probably be other opportunities." After her neighbor urged her to take action, she said, "I put it in a pillowcase, wrapped it in a lot of bubble wrap, went to my granddaughter's apartment, hung it on the wall, and said, 'Call me if you need me.' " (*Covid* concerns made her eager to avoid a curator's visit.)

The other day, the painting's owner and her husband were invited to visit the exhibition, privately, before the Met opened. (The painting has since left the museum, and will travel to Birmingham, Seattle, and Washington, D.C.) As an homage to Lawrence's distinctive palette, she wore a royal-blue jacket and a new blue checked scarf. "I usually like earth tones," she said. "So it was, as they say, *bashert*." The painting was still in the gold-leaf frame that Fagelson had chosen. "It doesn't just belong to me," she said. "It belongs to the artist. I'm just part of the story." ♦

## Books

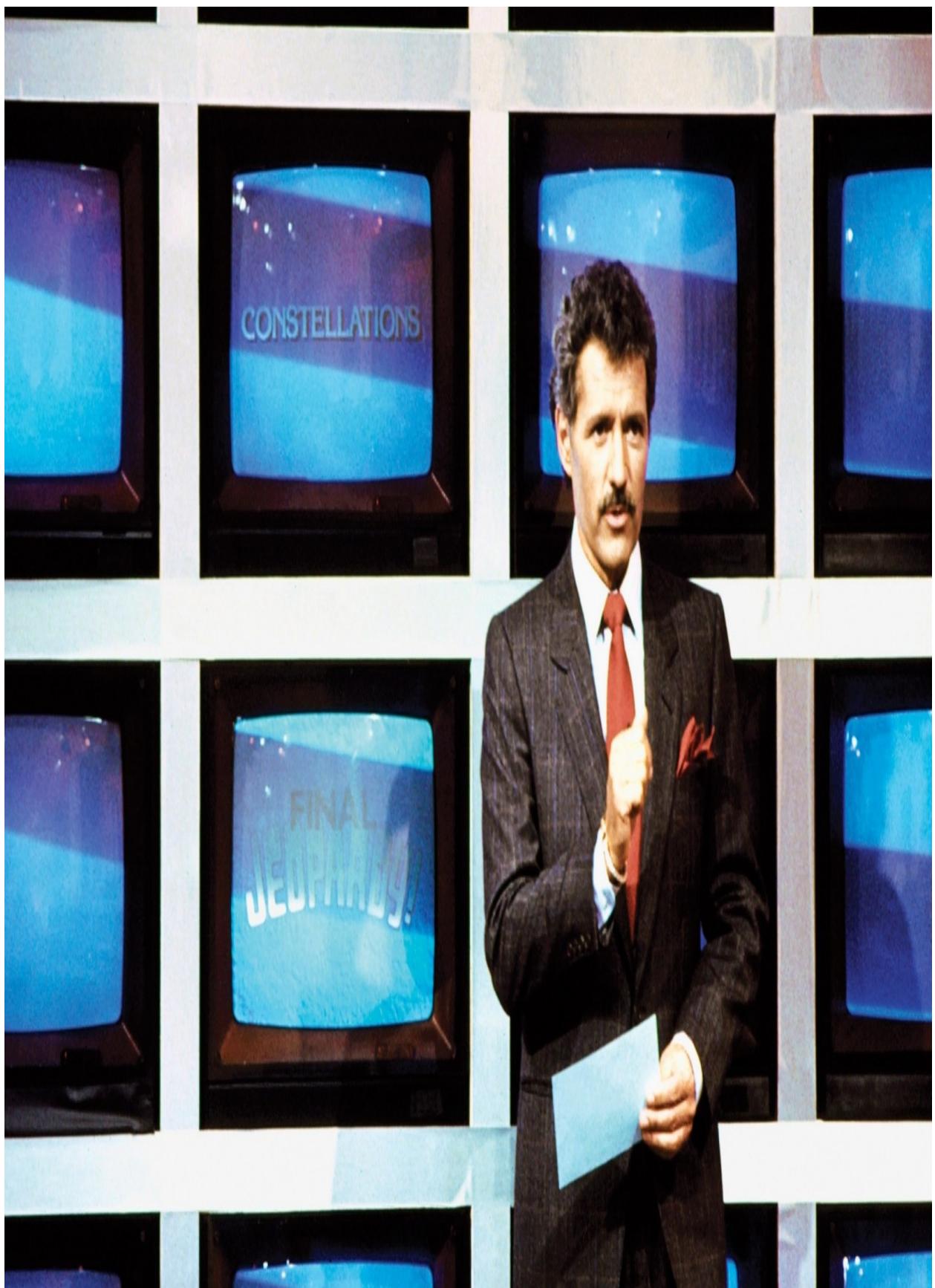
- [Wikipedia, “Jeopardy!,” and the Fate of the Fact](#)
- [How Paul Celan Reconceived Language for a Post-Holocaust World](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)

# **Wikipedia, “Jeopardy!,” and the Fate of the Fact**

In the Internet age, it can seem as if there’s no reason to remember anything. But information doesn’t always amount to knowledge.

By [Louis Menand](#)

November 16, 2020



Is it still cool to memorize a lot of stuff? Is there even a reason to memorize anything? Having a lot of information in your head was maybe never cool in the sexy-cool sense, more in the geeky-cool or class-brainiac sense. But people respected the ability to rattle off the names of all the state capitals, or to recite the periodic table. It was like the ability to dunk, or to play the piano by ear—something the average person can't do. It was a harmless show of superiority, and it gave people a kind of species pride.

There is still no artificial substitute for the ability to dunk. It remains a valued and nontransferrable aptitude. But today who needs to know the capital of South Dakota or the atomic number of hafnium (Pierre and 72)? Siri, or whatever chatbot you use, can get you that information in nanoseconds. Remember when, back in the B.D.E. (Before the Digital Era), you'd be sitting around with friends over a bottle of Puligny-Montrachet, and the conversation would turn on the question of when Hegel published "[The Phenomenology of Spirit](#)"? Unless you had an encyclopedia for grownups around the house, you'd either have to trek to your local library, whose only copy of the "Phenomenology" was likely to be checked out, or use a primitive version of the "lifeline"—i.e., telephone a Hegel expert. Now you ask your smartphone, which is probably already in your hand. (I just did: 1807. Took less than a second.)

And names and dates are the least of it. Suppose, for example, that you suspected that one of your friends was misusing Hegel's term "the cunning of reason." *So annoying.* But you don't even have to be sober to straighten that person out. As you contemplate another glass, Siri places in your hand a list of sites where that concept is explained, also in under a second. And, should the conversation ever get serious, Hegel's entire corpus is searchable online. Interestingly, when I ask Siri, "Is Dick Van Dyke still alive?", Siri says, "I won't respond to that." It's not clear if that's because of the Dick or the Dyke. (He is, and he's ninety-four.)

There is also, of course, tons of instant information that is actually useful, like instructions for grilling corn on the cob, or unclogging a bathtub drain. And it's free. You do not have to pay a plumber.

Leaving the irrefutably dire and dystopian effects of the Web aside for a moment, this is an amazing accomplishment. In less than twenty years, a huge percentage of the world's knowledge has become accessible to anyone with a

device that has Wi-Fi. Search engines work faster than the mind, and they are way more accurate. There is plenty of misinformation on the Web, but there is plenty of misinformation in your head, too. I just told you what the atomic number of hafnium is. Do you remember it correctly?

The most radical change that instant information has made is the levelling of content. There is no longer a distinction between things that everyone knows, or could readily know, and things that only experts know. “The cunning of reason” is as accessible as the date Hegel’s book was published and the best method for grilling corn. There is no such thing as esoterica anymore. We are all pedants now. Is this a cause for concern? Has it changed the economic and social value of knowledge? Has it put scholars and plumbers out of business and made expertise obsolete?

In the early years of the Web, the hub around which such questions circled was Wikipedia. The site will be twenty years old on January 15th, and a collection of articles by scholars, called “[Wikipedia @ 20: Stories of an Incomplete Revolution](#)” (M.I.T.), is being published as a kind of birthday tribute. The authors survey many aspects of the Wiki world, not always uncritically, but the consensus is that Wikipedia is *the* major success story of the Internet era. A ridiculously simple principle—“Anyone can edit”—has produced a more or less responsibly curated, perpetually up-to-date, and infinitely expandable source of information, almost all of it hyperlinked to multiple additional sources. Andrew Lih’s history of the site, “[The Wikipedia Revolution: How a Bunch of Nobodies Created the World’s Greatest Encyclopedia](#),” published in 2009, is similarly smitten.

Wikipedia took off like a shot. Within a month, it had a thousand articles, a number that would have been impossible using a traditional editorial chain of command. Within three years, it had two hundred thousand articles, and it soon left print encyclopedias in the dust. Today, Wikipedia (according to Wikipedia) has more than fifty-five million articles in three hundred and thirteen languages. In 2020, it is the second most visited site on the Web in the United States, after YouTube, with 1.03 billion visits a month—over four hundred million more visits than the No. 3 Web site, Twitter. The Encyclopædia Britannica, first published in 1768 and for centuries the gold standard of the genre, had sixty-five thousand articles in its last print edition. Since 2012, new editions have been available only online, where it currently ranks fortieth in visits per month, with about thirty-two million.

In the beginning, the notion that you could create a reliable encyclopedia article about Hegel that was not written by, or at least edited by, a credentialled Hegel expert was received, understandably, with skepticism. Teachers treated Wikipedia like the study guide SparkNotes—a shortcut for homework shirkers, and a hodgepodge compiled by autodidacts and trivia buffs. The turning point is customarily said to have been a [study](#) published in *Nature*, in 2005, in which academic scientists compared forty-two science articles in Wikipedia and the Encyclopædia Britannica. The experts determined that Wikipedia averaged four errors per article and Britannica averaged three. “Wikipedia comes close to Britannica in terms of the accuracy of its scientific entries” was the editors’ conclusion. By then, many teachers were consulting Wikipedia regularly themselves.

The reason most people today who work in and on digital media have such warm feelings about Wikipedia may be that it’s one of the few surviving sites that adhere to the spirit of the early Internet, to what was known affectionately as the “hacker ethos.” This is the ethos of open-source, free-access software development. Anyone can get in the game, and a person doesn’t need permission to make changes. The prototypical open-source case is the operating system Linux, released in 1991, and much early programming was done in this communal barn-raising spirit. The vision, which now seems distinctly prelapsarian, was of the Web as a bottom-up phenomenon, with no bosses, and no rewards other than the satisfaction of participating in successful innovation.

Even today, no one is paid by Wikipedia, and anyone can (at least in theory, since a kind of editorial pecking order has evolved) change anything, with very few restrictions. In programming shop talk, all work on Wikipedia is “copyleft,” meaning that it can be used, modified, and distributed without permission. No one can claim a proprietary interest. There are scarcely any hard-and-fast rules for writing or editing a Wikipedia article.

That seems to have been what got hacker types, people typically allergic to being told what to do, interested in developing the site. “If rules make you nervous and depressed,” Larry Sanger, the site’s co-founder, with Jimmy Wales, wrote in the early days, “then ignore them and go about your business.”

Wikipedia is also one of the few popular sites whose content is not monetized and whose pages are not personalized. Nothing is behind a paywall; you do not have to log in. There are occasional pop-ups soliciting contributions (in 2017-18,

almost a hundred million dollars was donated to the nonprofit Wikimedia Foundation), but no one is trying to sell you something. Everyone who looks up Pierre, South Dakota, sees the same page. There is no age-and-gender-appropriate clickbait, no ads for drain de-cloggers and books by German philosophers.

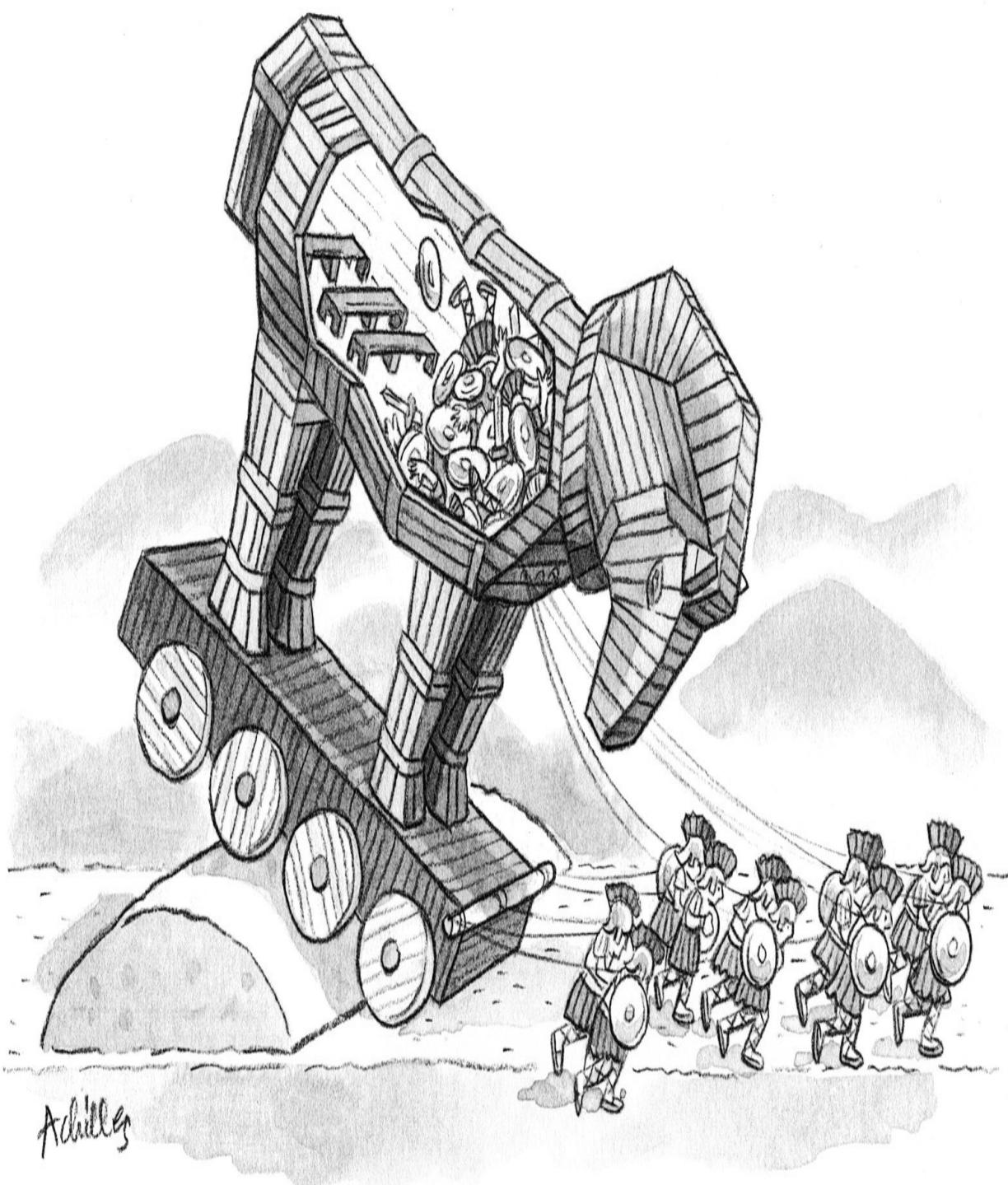
Wikipedia has some principles, of course. Contributors are supposed to maintain a “neutral point of view”; everything must be verifiable and, preferably, given a citation; and—this is probably the key to the site’s success with scholars—there should be no original research. What this means is that Wikipedia is, in essence, an aggregator site. Already existing information is collected, usually from linkable sources, but it is not judged, interpreted, or, for the most part, contextualized. Unlike in scholarly writing, all sources tend to be treated equally. A peer-reviewed journal and a blog are cited without distinction. There is also a semi-official indifference to the quality of the writing. You do not read a Wikipedia article for the pleasures of its prose.

There are consequently very few restrictions on creating a page. The bar is set almost as low as it can be. You can’t post an article on your grandmother’s recipe for duck à l’orange. But there is an article on duck à l’orange. There are four hundred and seventy-two subway stations in New York City; each station has its own Wikipedia page. Many articles are basically vast dumping grounds of links, factoids, and data. Still, all this keeps the teachers and scholars in business, since knowledge isn’t the data. It’s what you do with the data. A quickie summary of “the cunning of reason” does not get you very far into Hegel.

But what about the folks who can recite the periodic table, or who know hundreds of lines of poetry “by heart,” or can tell you the capital of South Dakota right off the bat? Is long-term human memory obsolete? One indication of the answer might be that the highest-rated syndicated program on television for the first ten weeks of 2020 was “Jeopardy!” The ability to recall enormous numbers of facts is still obviously compelling. Geek-cool lives.

“Jeopardy!” is thirty-seven years old under its host [Alex Trebek](#), who died earlier this month, at the age of eighty. But the show is much older than that. It first went on the air in 1964, hosted by Art Fleming, and ran until 1975. And the “Jeopardy!” genre, the game show, is much older still. Like a lot of early television—such as soap operas, news broadcasts, and variety shows—game

shows date from radio. The three national broadcast networks—CBS, NBC, and ABC—were originally radio networks, so those were genres that programmers already knew.



Achilles

TROJAN SPEED BUMP

Shows like “Jeopardy!” were as popular in the early years of television as they are today. In the 1955-56 season, the highest-rated show was “The \$64,000 Question,” in which contestants won money by answering questions in different categories. Soon afterward, however, a meteor struck the game-show planet when it was discovered that Charles Van Doren, a contestant on another quiz show, “Twenty-One,” who had built up a huge following and whose face had been on the cover of *Time*, had been given the answers in advance. It turned out that most television quiz shows were rigged. The news was received as a scandal; there were congressional hearings, and the Communications Act was amended to make “secret assistance” to game-show contestants a federal crime.

Whom did such “assistance” help? Mostly, the networks. When a player is on a streak, audience size increases, because more and more people tune in each week to see if the streak will last. In the nineteen-fifties, there were usually just three shows to choose from in a given time slot, so audiences were enormous. As many as fifty-five million people—a third of the population—tuned in to “The \$64,000 Question.” It was the equivalent of broadcasting the Super Bowl every week. The financial upside of a Van Doren was huge.

But the scandal made it clear that game shows are popular because they are also reality television. “Jeopardy!” and “[The Apprentice](#)” belong to the same genre. So, for that matter, does TikTok. The premise of reality television is that the contestants are ordinary people, not performers. This approach allows viewers to feel that they are matching wits with the people on the screen, but there is also something awe-inspiring about watching Charles Van Doren, or Ken Jennings, the owner of a six-month winning streak on “Jeopardy!,” run up the score. Still, you have to be able to believe that these people are not professionals, and that they are doing it without help.

In retrospect, the Van Doren fan-demic seems odd. He held advanced degrees and taught at Columbia; he was distinctly not the man on the street. It helped that he was young and good-looking, and that he really seemed to be sweating out the answers. One of the most popular “Jeopardy!” winners, on the other hand, is Frank Spangenberg, who for a long time held the record for five-day winnings (\$102,597). Spangenberg was a member of the New York City Transit Police. He was the ideal game-show type, someone viewers can relate to.

As Claire McNear explains in “[Answers in the Form of Questions: A Definitive](#)

[History and Insider's Guide to 'Jeopardy!'](#) " (Twelve), a book mainly for fans, the Van Doren scandal helped define "Jeopardy!" in two respects. The first is the concept for the show, which is credited to Julann Griffin, Merv Griffin's wife. She is supposed to have argued that, if it was a crime to give quiz-show contestants the answers in advance, then giving them the answers up front and having them come up with the questions would get the show around the Communications Act. This nonsensical reasoning is repeated in virtually every book on the show.

The other piece of long-term fallout from the quiz-show scandals is that when contestants on "Jeopardy!" return home, and everyone asks them, "So what is Alex Trebek really like?," they have no answer. This is because, except when the game is in progress, the contestants never interact with him. The policy is intended to insure that no contestant is getting off-camera help (which is also nonsensical, since contestants could be getting help from someone besides the host). But the lack of face time with Trebek is considered a major disappointment.

For Trebek was something between a cult figure and an icon. "Our generation's Cronkite," Ken Jennings called him in a column published last year, and the comparison is apt. Walter Cronkite did not report the news. He read cue cards on the air every week night on CBS for nineteen years. Trebek did not write the clues on "Jeopardy!" He read them on the morning of the taping, to make sure he had the pronunciations right. His aura of knowing the answers (or the questions) was, like Cronkite's air of gravitas, part of the onscreen persona. Cronkite was trained as a journalist. He knew what was going on in the world and he understood the events he reported on. But that is not why he became an icon. Trebek, too, was an educated man with genuine curiosity and many interests. But it would not have mattered if he wasn't. By some combination of familiarity and longevity, he and Cronkite acquired an outsized cultural status.

Like another TV icon, Johnny Carson, who hosted the "Tonight Show" for thirty years, Trebek's great talent was for being supremely at ease in front of a camera. Whoever he was when he was at home, on the air he was himself. In thirty-seven years, he never missed a taping. When he was diagnosed with cancer, in March, 2019, he was seventy-eight years old. But he worked right up to the end. On days when he was undergoing treatment, he would be suffering terribly. Between games—"Jeopardy!" tapes five games a day, in Culver City, with fifteen-minute breaks—he sometimes writhed in agony on the floor of his

dressing room. Fifteen minutes later, on the set and with the cameras rolling, he behaved as though he were perfectly healthy.

By his own account, offered in his brief and cheery memoir, “[The Answer Is: Reflections on My Life](#)” (Simon & Schuster), and confirmed by other reports, including McNear’s, when Trebek was off the air he was more laid-back and salty, less like your eighth-grade math teacher. But his tastes were conventional, and so was his career. He hosted numerous short-lived shows, in Canada, where he was born, and in the U.S., before getting the “Jeopardy!” gig. He did not think that the success of “Jeopardy!”—it ranked No. 1 or 2 among syndicated shows for many years—had anything to do with him. “You could replace me as the host of the show with anybody and it would likely be just as popular,” he says in the memoir. I guess we’ll see.

If there is a mystique about Trebek, one of the things we learn from McNear’s book is that there is also a mystique about the contestants. Today, many of them are not, in fact, ordinary people. They are trivia professionals, people who spend countless hours practicing and preparing. A major skill required on the show, for instance, is [mastering the buzzer](#). Aspiring contestants now manufacture their own buzzers and practice to get reaction times, measured in milliseconds, as low as possible. (You cannot press your buzzer until the host has finished reading the answer; if you press it too early, there is a quarter-second wait before you can press it again, and by then the other contestants are likely to have pressed theirs.) Since contestants who make it onto the show typically know almost all the answers, the outcome tends to turn on who is the fastest buzzer-presser. “A reaction-time test tacked onto a trivia contest” is how one contestant described it.

Competing on “Jeopardy!” brings fame, and for most contestants being able to say that they played a game on the show is all the reward they require. But winning on “Jeopardy!” does not bring riches. In fact, to cast a cold economic eye on the show, “Jeopardy!” contestants constitute an exploited class. Together with its sibling show, “Wheel of Fortune,” another Merv Griffin creation, “Jeopardy!” is said to bring in a hundred and twenty-five million dollars a year. (Griffin wrote the “Jeopardy!” theme tune, and he claimed, before he died, in 2007, to have made more than seventy million dollars in royalties from it.) Trebek, who worked only forty-six days a year, was paid in the neighborhood of ten million dollars.

But contestants’ travel and hotel expenses are not paid, and the second- and

third-place finishers do not keep the money they've "won"; they are given consolation prizes—two thousand dollars for second place and a thousand dollars for third—plus a tote bag and a "Jeopardy!" cap. (This is to incentivize riskier play.) According to McNear, in the 2017-18 season, the average amount that winners took home was \$20,022. In his six-month streak, Jennings won \$2.5 million, but during those six months ratings increased by fifty per cent over the previous year's, and "Jeopardy!" became the second-ranked show on all television, after "CSI." Two and a half million dollars was a very small price to pay. The riches of "Jeopardy!" are not necessarily what they seem. Other pockets got much fuller than Ken Jennings's.

Something of the same could be said about Wikipedia's reputation as a "free encyclopedia." Yochai Benkler has a peculiar essay in the "Wikipedia @ 20" collection. (Benkler is the lead author of a recent study, widely reported, showing that right-wing media, like Fox and Breitbart, not trolls or Russian hackers, are responsible for most of the misinformation about "voter fraud.") In his essay on Wikipedia, Benkler argues that the site is "a critical anchor for working alternatives to neoliberalism. . . . People can work together, build a shared identity in a community of practice, and make things they need without resorting to enforced market exchange."

But that is not quite how Wikipedia works. A major influence on Jimmy Wales's conception of the site was an essay by Friedrich Hayek called "The Use of Knowledge in Society," published in 1945, and Hayek is virtually the father of postwar neoliberalism. His tract against planning, "[The Road to Serfdom](#)," published in 1944, has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and is still in print. Hayek's argument about knowledge is the same as the neoliberal argument: markets are self-optimizing mechanisms. No one can know the totality of a given situation, as he puts it in "The Use of Knowledge" (he is talking about economic decision-making), but the optimal solution can be reached "by the interactions of people each of whom possesses only partial knowledge."

This theory of knowledge is not unrelated to the wisdom-of-crowds scenario in which a group of people are guessing the number of jelly beans in a jar. The greater the number of guesses, the closer the mean of all guesses will come to the true number of jelly beans. A crucial part of crowdsourcing knowledge is not to exclude any guesses. This is why Wales, in his role as Wikipedia's grand arbiter, is notoriously permissive about allowing access to the site's editing function, and why he doesn't care whether some of the editors are discovered to

be impostors, people pretending to expertise that they don't really have. For, when you are calculating the mean, the outliers are as important as the numbers that cluster around the average. The only way for the articles to be self-correcting is not to correct, to let the invisible hand do its job. Wikipedia is neoliberalism applied to knowledge.

Still, the people who post and who edit the articles on Wikipedia are not guessing jelly beans. They are culling knowledge that has already been paid for —by universities, by publishers, by think tanks and research institutes, by taxpayers. The editors at *Nature* who, back in 2005, compared Wikipedia with the Encyclopædia Britannica seem not to have considered whether one reason Wikipedia's science entries had fewer errors than they expected was that its contributors could consult the Encyclopædia Britannica, which pays its contributors. There is no such thing as a free fact. ♦

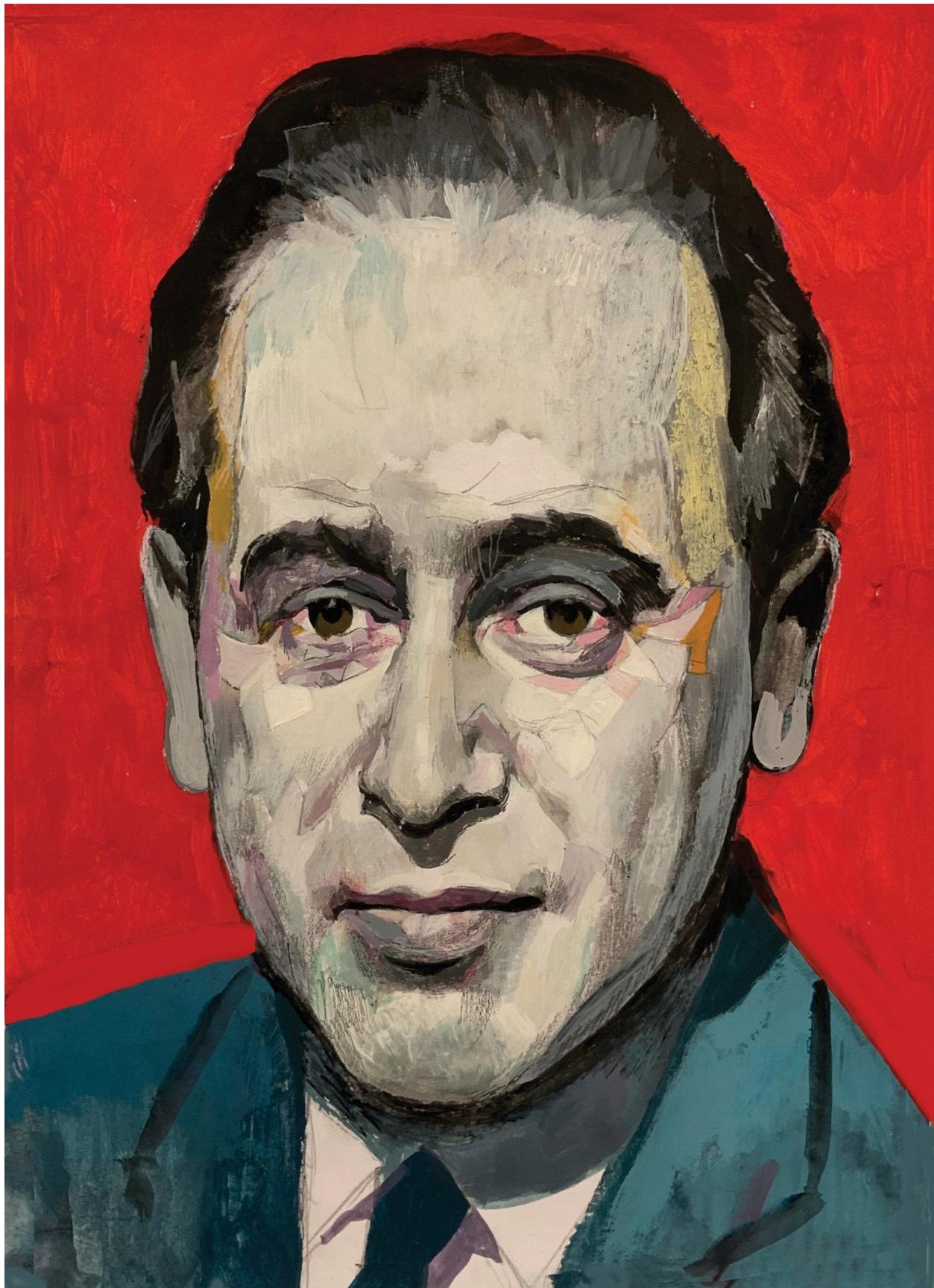
An earlier version of this article misidentified the head of the Wikimedia Foundation.

# How Paul Celan Reconceived Language for a Post-Holocaust World

His poems, now translated into English in their entirety, are an invitation to a new kind of reading.

By [Ruth Franklin](#)

November 16, 2020



Once, while reading the poetry of Paul Celan, I had an experience I can describe only as mystical. It was about twenty years ago, and I was working at a job that required me to stay very late one or two nights a week. On one of those nights, trying to keep myself awake, I started browsing in John Felstiner's "[Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan](#)." My eye came to rest on an almost impossibly brief poem:

Once,  
I heard him,  
he was washing the world,  
unseen, nightlong,  
real.

One and infinite,  
annihilated,  
they I'd.

Light was. Salvation.

In a dream state or trance, I read the lines over and over, instilling them permanently in my memory. It was as if the poem opened up and I entered into it. I felt "him," that presence, whoever he might be, "unseen" and yet "real." The poem features one of Celan's signature neologisms. In German, it's *ichten*, which doesn't look any more natural than the English but shows that we're dealing with a verb in the past tense, constructed from *ich*, the first-person-singular pronoun—something like "they became I's," that is, selves. The last line echoes Genesis: "Let there be light." As I repeated the poem, I suddenly understood it—more, I *felt* it—as a vision of a second Creation, a coming of the Messiah, when those who have been annihilated (the original is *vernichtet*, exterminated) might be reborn, through the cleansing of the world.

From his iconic "Deathfugue," one of the first poems published about the [Nazi camps](#) and now recognized as a benchmark of twentieth-century European poetry, to cryptic later works such as the poem above, all of Celan's poetry is elliptical, ambiguous, resisting easy interpretation. Perhaps for this reason, it has been singularly compelling to critics and translators, who often speak of Celan's work in quasi-religious terms. Felstiner said that, when he first encountered the poems, he knew he'd have to immerse himself in them "before doing anything

else.” Pierre Joris, in the introduction to “[Memory Rose Into Threshold Speech](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), his new translation of Celan’s first four published books, writes that hearing Celan’s poetry read aloud, at the age of fifteen, set him on a path that he followed for fifty years.

Celan, like his poetry, eludes the usual terms of categorization. He was born Paul Antschel in 1920 to German-speaking Jewish parents in Czernowitz (now Chernivtsi). Until the fall of the Habsburg Empire, in 1918, the city had been the capital of the province of Bukovina; now it was part of Romania. Before Celan turned twenty, it would be annexed by the Soviet Union. Both of Celan’s parents were murdered by the Nazis; he was imprisoned in labor camps. After the war, he lived briefly in Bucharest and Vienna before settling in Paris. Though he wrote almost exclusively in German, he cannot properly be called a German poet: his loyalty was to the language, not the nation.

“Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language,” Celan once said. But that language, sullied by Nazi propaganda, hate speech, and euphemism, was not immediately usable for poetry: “It had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech.” Celan cleansed the language by breaking it down, bringing it back to its roots, creating a radical strangeness in expression and tone. Drawing on the vocabulary of such fields as botany, ornithology, geology, and mineralogy, and on medieval or dialect words that had fallen out of use, he invented a new form of German, reconceiving the language for the world after Auschwitz. Adding to the linguistic layers, his later works incorporate gibberish as well as foreign phrases. The commentaries accompanying his poetry in the definitive German edition, some of which Joris includes in his translation, run to hundreds of pages.

No translation can ever encompass the multiplicity of meanings embedded in these hybrid, polyglot, often arcane poems; the translator must choose an interpretation. This is always true, but it is particularly difficult with work as fundamentally ambiguous as Celan’s. Joris imagines his translations as akin to the medical diagrams that reproduce cross-sections of anatomy on plastic overlays, allowing the student to leaf forward and backward to add or subtract levels of detail. “All books of translations should be such palimpsests,” he writes, with “layers upon layers of unstable, shifting, tentative, other-languaged versions.”

Joris has already translated Celan's final five volumes of poetry in a collection that he called "[Breathturn Into Timestead](#)" (2014), incorporating words from the titles of the individual books. The appearance of "Memory Rose Into Threshold Speech," coinciding with the centennial of Celan's birth, as well as with the fiftieth anniversary of his death—he drowned himself in the Seine, one rainy week in April—now brings into English all the poems, nearly six hundred, that the poet collected during his lifetime, in the order in which he arranged them. (The exception is Celan's first collection, published in Vienna in 1948, which printing errors forced him to withdraw; he used some of those poems in his next book.) Not only are many poems available in English for the first time but English readers also now have the opportunity to read Celan's individual collections in their entirety, as he intended them to be read. What Celan demands of his reader, Joris has written, is "to weave the threads of the individual poems into a text that is the cycle or book of poems. The poet gives us the threads: we have to do the weaving—an invitation to a new kind of reading."

Celan grew up with a multilingualism natural to a region where borders were erased and redrawn like pencil lines. "It was a landscape where both people and books lived," he recalled. After a few years at a Hebrew grade school, he attended Romanian high schools, studying Italian, Latin, and Greek, and immersing himself in German literary classics. On November 9, 1938, the date now known as Kristallnacht, he was on his way to France, where he intended to prepare for medical studies. His train passed through Berlin as the pogrom was taking place, and he later wrote of seeing smoke that "already belonged to tomorrow."

After Celan returned to Czernowitz for the summer, the outbreak of the Second World War trapped him there. He enrolled in Romance studies at the local university, which he was able to continue under Soviet occupation the following year. All that came to an end on July 6, 1941, when German and Romanian Nazi troops invaded. They burned the city's Great Synagogue, murdering nearly seven hundred Jews within three days and three thousand by the end of August. In October, a ghetto was created for Jews who were allowed to remain temporarily, including Celan and his parents. The rest were deported.

"What the life of a Jew was during the war years, I need not mention," Celan later told a German magazine. (When asked about his camp experience, Celan would respond with a single word, "Shovelling!") His parents were deported during a wave of roundups in June, 1942. It is unclear where Celan was on the

night of their arrest—possibly in a hideout where he had tried to persuade them to join him, or with a friend—but, when he came home in the morning, they were gone. His reprieve lasted only a few weeks: in July he was deported to a labor camp in the south of Romania. A few months later, he learned of his father’s death. His mother was shot the following winter. Snow and lead, symbols of her murder, became a constant in his poetry.

“Deathfugue,” with its unsettling, incantatory depiction of a concentration camp, was first published in 1947, in a Bucharest literary magazine. One of the best-known works of postwar German literature, it may have persuaded [Theodor Adorno](#) to reconsider his famous pronouncement that writing poetry after Auschwitz was “barbaric.” Felstiner called it “the ‘Guernica’ of postwar European literature,” comparing its impact to Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” or Yeats’s “Easter 1916.” The camp in the poem, left nameless, stands for all the camps, the prisoners’ suffering depicted through the unforgettable image of “black milk”:

Black milk of morning we drink you evenings  
we drink you at noon and mornings we drink you at night  
we drink and we drink  
we dig a grave in the air there one lies at ease

In phrases that circle back around in fugue-like patterns, the poem tells of a commandant who orders the prisoners to work as the camp orchestra plays: “He calls out play death more sweetly death is a master from Deutschland / he calls scrape those fiddles more darkly then as smoke you’ll rise in the air.” The only people named are Margarete—the commandant’s beloved, but also the heroine of Goethe’s “[Faust](#)”—and Shulamit, a figure in the poem whose name stems from the Song of Songs and whose “ashen hair” contrasts with Margarete’s golden tresses. The only other proper noun is “Deutschland,” which many translators, Joris included, have chosen to leave in the original. “Those two syllables grip the rhythm better than ‘Germany,’ ” Felstiner explained.

Each of his early poems, Celan wrote to an editor in 1946, was “accompanied by the feeling that I’ve now written my last poem.” The work included an elegy in the form of a Romanian folk song—“Aspen tree, your leaves gaze white into the dark. / My mother’s hair ne’er turned white”—and lyrics and prose poems in Romanian. He also adopted the name Celan, an anagram of “Ancel,” the Romanian form of Antschel. After two years working as a translator in

Bucharest, he left Romania and its language for good. “Only in the mother tongue can one speak one’s own truth,” he told a friend who asked how he could still write in German after the war. “In a foreign tongue the poet lies.”

Celan liked to quote the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam’s description of a poem as being like a message in a bottle, tossed into the ocean and washed up on the dunes many years later. A wanderer happens upon it, opens it, and discovers that it is addressed to its finder. Thus the reader becomes its “secret addressee.”

Celan’s poetry, particularly in the early volumes collected in “Memory Rose Into Threshold Speech,” is written insistently in search of a listener. Some of these poems can be read as responses to such writers as Kafka and Rilke, but often the “you” to whom the poems speak has no clear identity, and could be the reader, or the poet himself. More than a dozen of the poems in the book “Poppy and Memory” (1952), including the well-known “Corona” and “Count the Almonds,” address a lover, the Austrian poet [Ingeborg Bachmann](#). The relationship began in Vienna in 1948 and continued for about a year via mail, then picked up again for a few more years in the late fifties. The correspondence between the two poets, published last year in an [English translation](#) by Wieland Hoban (Seagull), reveals that they shared an almost spiritual connection that may have been overwhelming to them both; passionate exchanges are followed by brief, stuttering lines or even by years of silence.

The Bachmann poems, deeply inflected by Surrealism, are among the most moving of Celan’s early work. Bachmann was born in Klagenfurt, Austria, the daughter of a Nazi functionary who served in Hitler’s Army. She later recalled her teen-age years reading forbidden authors—Baudelaire, [Zweig](#), Marx—while listening for the whine of bombers. The contrast between their backgrounds was a source of torment for Celan. Many of the love poems contain images of violence, death, or betrayal. “In the springs of your eyes / a hanged man strangles the rope,” he writes in “Praise of Distance.” The metaphor in “Nightbeam” is equally macabre: “The hair of my evening beloved burned most brightly: / to her I sent the coffin made of the lightest wood.” In another, he addresses her as “reaperess.” Bachmann answered some of the lines with echoes in a number of her most important poems; after Celan’s suicide, she incorporated others into her novel “Malina,” perhaps to memorialize their love.

Most of Celan’s poems to Bachmann were written in her absence: in July, 1948, he went to Paris, where he spent the rest of his life. Even in a new landscape,

memories of the war were inescapable. The Rue des Écoles, where he found his first apartment, was the street where he had lived briefly in 1938 with an uncle who perished at Auschwitz. During the next few years, he produced only a handful of publishable poems each year, explaining to a fellow-writer, “Sometimes it’s as if I were the prisoner of these poems . . . and sometimes their jailer.” In 1952, he married Gisèle Lestrangle, an artist from an aristocratic background, to whom he dedicated his next collection, “[Threshold to Threshold](#)” (1955); the cover of Joris’s book reproduces one of Lestrangle’s lithographs. The volume is haunted by the death of their first child, only a few days old, in 1953. “A word—you know: / a corpse,” Celan wrote in “Pursed at Night,” a poem that he read in public throughout his life. “Speaks true, who speaks shadows,” he wrote in “Speak, You Too.”

The poems in “[Speechgrille](#)” (1959) show Celan moving toward the radical starkness that characterized the last decade of his work. There are sentence fragments, one-word lines, compounds: “Crowswarmed wheatwave,” “Hearttime,” “worldblind,” “hourwood.” But “Tenebrae,” the volume’s most effective poem, is one of the simplest in syntax. Celan compared it to a Negro spiritual. It begins as a response to Hölderlin’s hymn “Patmos,” which opens (in Richard Sieburth’s translation):

Near and  
hard to grasp, the god.  
Yet where danger lies,  
grows that which saves.

There is no salvation in Celan’s poem, which reverses Hölderlin’s trope. It is the speakers—the inmates of a death camp—who are near to God: “We are near, Lord, / near and graspable.” Their bodies are “clawed into each other,” “windbent.” There is no mistaking the anger in their voices. “Pray, Lord, / pray to us, / we are near,” the chorus continues, blasphemously. The trough from which they drink is filled with blood. “It cast its image into our eyes, Lord. / Eyes and mouth gape, so open and empty, Lord.” The poem ends on a couplet, whether threatening or mournful, that reverses the first: “Pray, Lord. / We are near.” A more searing indictment of God’s absence during the Holocaust—a topic of much analysis by theologians in the decades since—can hardly be imagined.

Celan’s turn to a different kind of poetics was triggered in part by the mixed

response to his work in Germany, where he travelled regularly to give readings. Though he was welcomed by the public—his audiences often requested “Deathfugue”—much of the critical reaction ranged from uncomprehending to outright anti-Semitic. Hans Egon Holthusen, a former S.S. officer who became a critic for a German literary magazine, called the poem a Surrealist fantasia and said that it “could escape the bloody chamber of horrors and rise up into the ether of pure poetry,” which appalled Celan: “Deathfugue” was all too grounded in the real world, intended not to escape or transcend the horrors but to actualize them. At a reading held at the University of Bonn, someone left an anti-Semitic cartoon on his lectern. Reviewing “Speechgrille” for a Berlin newspaper, another critic wrote that Celan’s “store of metaphors is not won from reality nor serves it,” and compared his Holocaust poems to “exercises on music paper.” To a friend from his Bucharest days, Celan joked, “Now and again they invite me to Germany for readings. Even the anti-Semites have discovered me.” But the critics’ words tormented him. “I experience a few slights every day, plentifully served, on every street corner,” he wrote to Bachmann.

Poetry in German “can no longer speak the language which many willing ears seem to expect,” Celan wrote in 1958. “Its language has become more sober, more factual. It distrusts ‘beauty.’ It tries to be truthful. . . . Reality is not simply there, it must be searched and won.” The poems he wrote in the next few years, collected in “The NoOnesRose” (1963), are dense with foreign words, technical terms, archaisms, literary and religious allusions, snatches from songs, and proper names: Petrarch, Mandelstam, the Kabbalist Rabbi Löw, Siberia, Kraków, Petropolis. In his commentary, Joris records Celan’s “reading traces” in material ranging from the *Odyssey* to Gershom Scholem’s essays on Jewish mysticism.

The French writer Jean Daive, who was close to Celan in his last years—and whose memoir about him, “[Under the Dome](#)” (City Lights), has just appeared in English, translated by Rosmarie Waldrop—remembers him reading “the newspapers, all of them, technical and scientific works, posters, catalogues, dictionaries and philosophy.” Other people’s conversations, words overheard in shops or in the street, all found their way into his poetry. He would sometimes compose poems while walking and dictate them to his wife from a public phone booth. “A poet is a pirate,” he told Daive.

“Zürich, Hotel Zum Storchen,” dedicated to the German-Jewish poet Nelly Sachs, commemorates their first meeting, in 1960, after they had been

corresponding for a number of years. Celan travelled to Zurich to meet Sachs, who lived in Sweden; she had received a German literary prize, but refused to stay in the country overnight. They spoke, Celan writes, of “the Too Much . . . the Too Little . . . Jewishness,” of something he calls simply “that”:

There was talk of your God, I spoke  
against him, I  
let the heart I had  
hope:  
for  
his highest, his death-rattled, his  
contending word—

Celan told Sachs that he hoped “to be able to blaspheme and quarrel to the end.” In response, she said, “We just don’t know what counts”—a line that Celan fragmented at the end of his poem. “We / just don’t know, you know, / we / just don’t know, / what / counts.”

In contrast to “Tenebrae,” which angrily addresses a God who is presumed to exist, the theological poems in “The NoOnesRose” insist on God’s absence. “Psalm” opens, “NoOne kneads us again of earth and clay, / noOne conjures our dust. / Noone.” It continues:

Praised be thou, NoOne . . .  
A Nothing  
we were, we are, we will  
remain, flowering:  
the Nothing-, the  
NoOnesRose.

If there is no God, then what is mankind, theoretically, as he is, created in God’s image? The poem’s image of humanity as a flower echoes the blood of “Tenebrae”: “the corona red / from the scarlet-word, that we sang / above, O above / the thorn.”

Some critics have seen the fractured syntax of Celan’s later poems as emblematic of his progressively more fragile mental state. In the late fifties, he became increasingly paranoid after a groundless plagiarism charge, first levelled against him in 1953, resurfaced. In his final years, he was repeatedly

hospitalized for psychiatric illness, sometimes for months at a time. “No more need for walls, no more need for barbed wire as in the concentration camps. The incarceration is chemical,” he told Daive, who visited him in the hospital. Daive’s memoir sensitively conjures a portrait of a man tormented by both his mind and his medical treatment but who nonetheless remained a generous friend and a poet for whom writing was a matter of life and death. “He loves words,” Daive writes, recalling the two of them working together on translations in Celan’s apartment. “He erases them as if they should bleed.”

Reading Celan’s poems in their totality makes it possible to see just how frequently his key words and themes recur: roses and other plants; prayer and blasphemy; the word, or name, NoOne. (I give it here in Joris’s formulation, although Celan used the more conventional structure *Niemand*, without the capital letter in the middle.) As Joris writes, Celan intended his poems to be read in cycles rather than one at a time, so that the reader could pick up on the patterns. But he did not intend for four books to be read together in a single volume. The poems, in their sheer number and difficulty, threaten to overwhelm, with the chorus drowning out the distinct impact of any particular poem.

Joris, whose language sometimes tends toward lit-crit jargon, acknowledges that his primary goal as translator was “to get as much of the complexity and multiperspectivity of Celan’s work into American English as possible,” not to create elegant, readable versions. “Any translation that makes a poem sound more accessible than (or even as accessible as) it is in the original will be flawed,” he warns. This is certainly true, but I wish that Joris had made more of an effort to reproduce the rhythm and music of Celan’s verse in the original, rather than focussing so single-mindedly on meaning and texture. When the poems are read aloud in German, their cadence is inescapable. Joris’s translation may succeed in getting close to what Celan actually meant, but something of the experience of reading the poetry is lost in his sometimes workaday renderings.

Still, Joris’s extensive commentary is a gift to English readers who want to deepen their understanding of Celan’s work. Much of the later poetry is unintelligible without some knowledge of the circumstances under which Celan wrote and of the allusions he made. In one famous example, images in the late poem “You Lie Amid a Great Listening” have been identified as referring to the murders of the German revolutionaries Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg and to the execution of the conspirators who tried to assassinate Hitler in 1944. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer argued that the poem’s content was

decipherable by any reader with a sufficient background in German culture and that, in any event, the background information was secondary to the poem. J. M. Coetzee, in his essay “Paul Celan and His Translators,” counters that readers can judge the significance of that information only if they know what it is, and wonders if it is “possible to respond to poetry like Celan’s, even to translate it, without fully understanding it.”

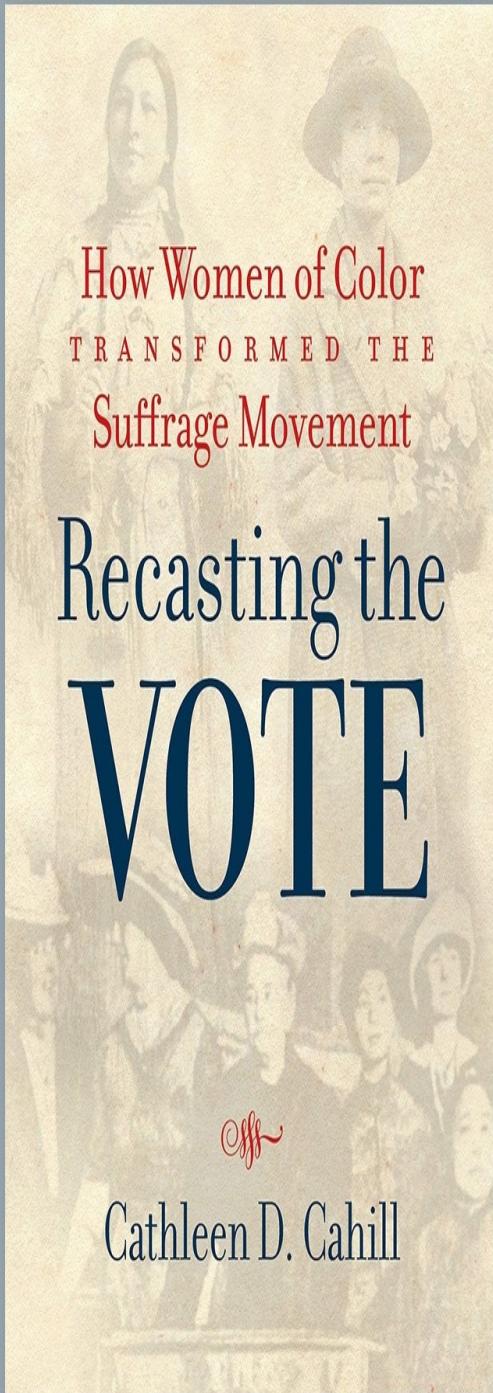
Celan, I think, would have said that it is. He was annoyed by critics who called his work hermetic, urging them to simply “keep reading, understanding comes of itself.” He called poems “gifts—gifts to the attentive,” and quoted the seventeenth-century philosopher Nicolas Malebranche: “Attention is the natural prayer of the soul.” Both poetry and prayer use words and phrases, singly or in repetition, to draw us out of ourselves and toward a different kind of perception. Flipping from the poems to the notes and back again, I wondered if all the information amounted to a distraction. The best way to approach Celan’s poetry may be, in Daive’s words, as a “vibration of sense used as energy”—a phenomenon that surpasses mere comprehension. ♦

[November 23, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Briefly Noted**

“Recasting the Vote,” “What Becomes a Legend Most,” “The War of the Poor,” and “The Office of Historical Corrections.”

November 16, 2020



[\*\*Recasting the Vote\*\*](#), by Cathleen D. Cahill (*North Carolina*). This spirited history situates the campaign for female suffrage within the broader narrative of civil rights. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment gave the vote to white women but not to millions of Black, Native American, Hispanic, and Chinese women, many of whom were active in the cause. White suffragists were often quick to exclude their Black colleagues from rallies, yet racism failed to stop women of color from using the movement to amplify their voices, enriching it in the process. Cahill's widened focus links the battle for enfranchisement to currents of exclusion and empowerment that continue to shape the vote today.

WHAT BECOMES  
A LEGEND MOST

A BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD  
AVEDON

PHILIP GEFTER



**What Becomes a Legend Most**, by Philip Gefter (Harper). “I trust performances,” Richard Avedon wrote. “Stripping them away doesn’t necessarily get you closer to anything.” This biography explores the paradoxes of Avedon’s sixty-year career as a fashion and portrait photographer. Avedon worried that his commercial work would deny him artistic recognition, at a time when many did not consider photography a real art. A control freak who became famous for capturing spontaneity, he pushed boundaries with nude images of Rudolf Nureyev, Allen Ginsberg, and members of Warhol’s Factory, while pursuing psychoanalysis—and two ill-fated marriages—to suppress his homosexual desires. His stark style made his images of models and celebrities iconic, but some of his most moving portraits are of his dying father, whom he felt he could never please.

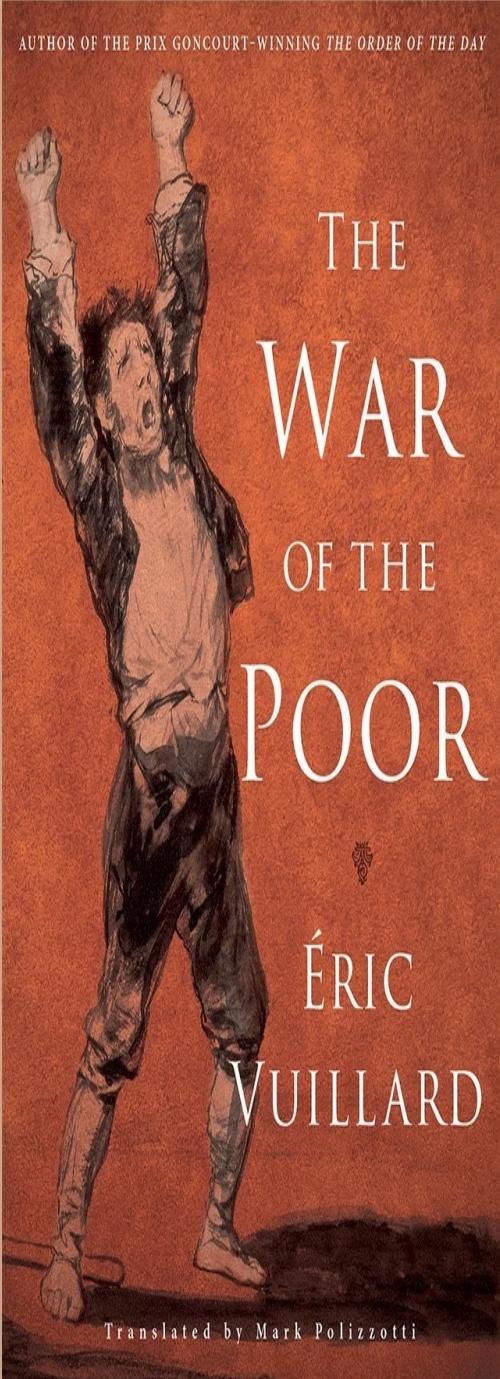
AUTHOR OF THE PRIX GONCOURT-WINNING *THE ORDER OF THE DAY*

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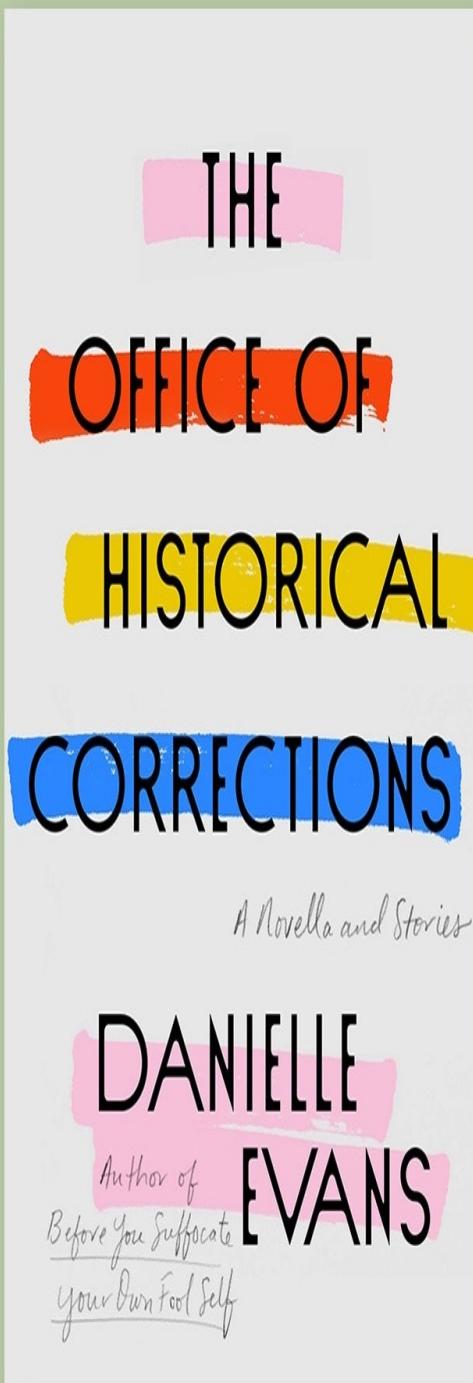


ÉRIC  
VUILLARD

Translated by Mark Polizzotti



[\*\*The War of the Poor\*\*](#), by Éric Vuillard, translated from the French by Mark Polizzotti (Other Press). This compact, artful blend of history and fiction centers on the figure of Thomas Müntzer, a Catholic priest from Saxony who, in 1524, led the German Peasants' War. Vuillard goes light on context, skipping through time from one popular uprising to another in cinematic bursts of image and action, and knitting things together with a muscular, angry commentary on "the great sophisms of power." He never forces analogies with the present, but the uprisings he describes feel like part of a war destined to rage in any era beset by gross inequalities.



**The Office of Historical Corrections**, by Danielle Evans (Riverhead). In these six assured short stories and one novella, women, mostly Black, undergo moments of trial and transition. Evans uses outré imaginative elements (a government fact-checking agency called the Institute for Public History, a death in an artistically rendered volcano) but grounds her narratives in the familiar—family illnesses, fraught relationships with exes, complicated reckonings with race. The title novella, in which two Black women confront a historical mystery in rural Wisconsin, and a story about a white college student facing consequences for wearing a bikini emblazoned with the Confederate flag offer particular insight into the wearying, often violent effects of racism on the minds and bodies of Black Americans.

## **Comment**

- [What Does Trump Get Out of Contesting Biden's Win?](#)

[November 23, 2020 Issue](#)

# What Does Trump Get Out of Contesting Biden's Win?

The election was not close, and the President's claims of voter fraud are merely a distraction from his many recent failures.

By [Steve Coll](#)

November 15, 2020

For much of [Donald Trump](#)'s reëlection campaign, he spread the calumny that voting by mail would be used for large-scale fraud in November, and he made clear that if he lost he would say that he was robbed and would seek victory in the courts. Trump's gambit was a variant of election-manipulation schemes familiar in countries like Pakistan and Belarus. His plan had holes, such as an absence of evidence, yet he seemed to think that he had a plausible chance, if the election was narrowly decided and he brought a case before the Supreme Court.



But the election wasn't close: [Joe Biden](#) won the national popular vote by more than five million votes, and he seems likely, once the last ballots are counted and recounted, to win the [Electoral College](#) by nearly the same margin that Trump had over [Hillary Clinton](#) in 2016. Trump has doubled down on his fraud ploy anyway. On November 7th, after the Associated Press and major television networks declared Biden the country's forty-sixth President, Trump tweeted, "*i won the election. . . . bad things happened.*" Since then, he has mainly sequestered himself in the White House while unleashing dozens of tweets and retweets containing false allegations, which Twitter has continually flagged as unreliable.

Last week, Biden offered a measured take on the President's refusal to concede: "I just think it's an embarrassment, quite frankly." He seemed to accept that it might require some time for Trump to come to terms with reality, and for Republican leaders to stop enabling him. [Mitch McConnell](#), the Senate Majority Leader, was among the many elected Republicans who declared that the President had every right to pursue his grievances in the courts. Yet Trump's accusations have not gained credibility since [Rudy Giuliani](#) delivered a [Borat](#)-worthy press conference at Four Seasons Total Landscaping, that new Philadelphia landmark, on the day Biden became President-elect. *Times* reporters surveyed election administrators in all fifty states and reported that the officials had found no evidence of significant voting issues. At least ten lawsuits filed by Trump's campaign or allies have been dismissed by the courts already. This past Wednesday, after promising "shocking" evidence of wrongdoing in Michigan, Trump's campaign released affidavits by poll watchers who had complained, as the *Washington Post* reporter David Fahrenthold wrote, about such violations as "loud noises" and "mean stares."

Trump, according to the *Times*, has asked White House advisers about using Republican-controlled legislatures in states like Pennsylvania to hijack the Electoral College, by appointing electors who would ignore official vote counts and return him to power. Even loose talk about such a maneuver suggests how unscrupulous Trump remains as he contemplates his loss of office. Nor is he the only one to muse recklessly about antidemocratic outcomes in the weeks ahead. Asked if the Administration was jeopardizing national security by refusing to cooperate with Biden's transition, Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#) smiled and said, "There will be a smooth transition to a second Trump Administration." He gave the impression that he was pranking liberals about their fears of a Trump

coup d'état, even as he and other loyalists wait obediently for the President to decide whether to accept his obvious defeat. "I think that the whole Republican Party has been put in a position, with a few notable exceptions, of being mildly intimidated by the sitting President," Biden noted.

Typically, the best way to understand Trump's actions is to ask what's in it for him. Four more years in the White House would extend his immunity from New York prosecutors conducting active investigations into possible criminal activity, ease pressure from bank creditors, and further enrich his family businesses: a win-win-win. Assuming that the President fails to rig a second term, he is fashioning a story about how corrupt Democrats foiled his reëlection, which might galvanize followers and donors after he leaves office. According to the *Post*, the President told advisers last week, "I'm just going to run in 2024. I'm just going to run again." His campaign has formed a political-action committee, called Save America, which appears designed as a means for him to raise money to influence the Republican Party after his Presidency ends. The *pac* is eligible to receive funds now for Trump's "election defense," but much of that money would likely be spent on other causes and candidates. Leave it to Trump to manufacture a constitutional crisis that also incorporates a fund-raising con.

The sheer theatricality of Trump's refusal to concede is a distraction from his failure, once again, to take the coronavirus pandemic seriously. Last week, the country set a new daily record for infections—more than a hundred and sixty thousand—and hospitalizations also reached a new high, after doubling during the past month. As this crisis unfolded, the President retweeted [Sean Hannity](#), Jon Voight, and other acolytes backing his election-fraud claims. He did pause to communicate about the pandemic, but only to complain, without evidence, that Pfizer's announcement of progress on an effective [vaccine](#)—a revelation made two days after Biden's victory—was timed intentionally to hurt his reëlection campaign. Biden, in his first action as President-elect, appointed a panel of doctors and public-health specialists to advise him on the pandemic, but they won't have real power for another two months, and, in the meantime, the Administration's refusal to authorize briefings and funding for Biden's transition means that his pandemic advisers will be deprived of vital information. Trump and his allies are "engaged in an absurd circus right now," [Nancy Pelosi](#), the Speaker of the House, said on Thursday, which is "making it even harder" to combat the coronavirus.

The pandemic has claimed more than two hundred and forty thousand American

lives, yet Trump has failed to see that his duty as President requires him to prioritize the safety of all citizens, even when this may not advantage him politically. During the campaign, he tried to delegitimize the form of voting most likely to protect people from the disease that his Administration had failed to contain. He did this because, as he said in April, [voting by mail](#) “doesn’t work out well for Republicans.” Now the President seems determined to put the pursuit of his invented claims of vote-rigging before his responsibility to address the economic and health impacts of what may be the most difficult surge of the pandemic yet. Trump’s presumptive last act in the White House is shaping up to be as bankrupt as all that came before. ♦

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## Read More About the 2020 Election

- William Barr is the one Administration official with the power to stop Donald Trump and his [attempted coup](#).
- Trump has survived impeachment, twenty-six sexual-misconduct accusations, and thousands of lawsuits. [His luck may well end](#) now that Joe Biden has been elected the next President.
- With litigation unlikely to change the outcome of the election, [Republicans are looking to strategies that might remain](#) even after rebuffs both at the polls and in court.
- We have to talk about what happened under the Trump Presidency and how we can [prevent it from happening again](#).
- If 2020 has demonstrated anything, it is the need to rebalance the economy to benefit the working class—and [there are many ways a Biden Administration can start](#).
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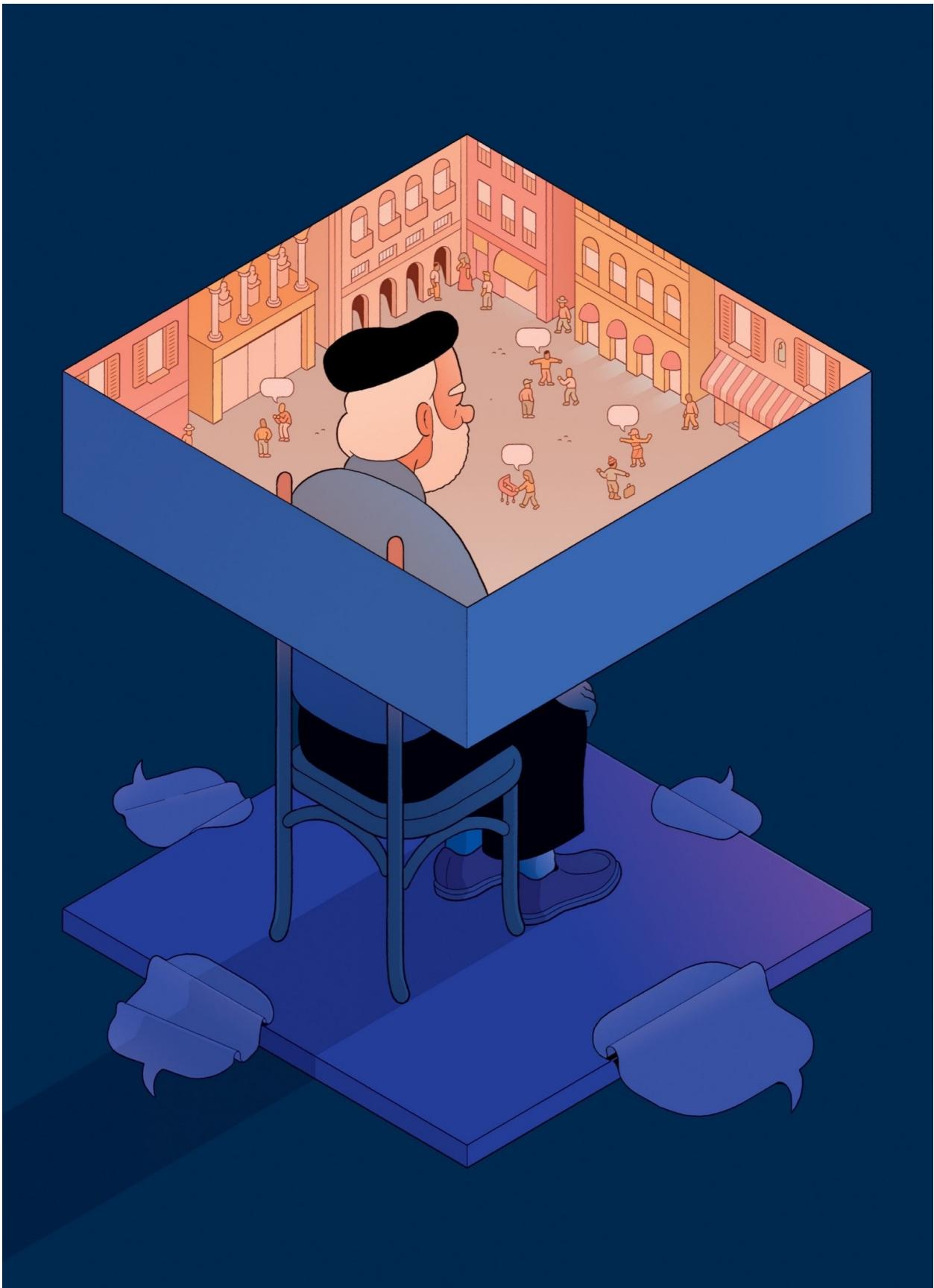
## Fiction

- [“The Old Man in the Piazza”](#)

# The Old Man in the Piazza

By [Salman Rushdie](#)

November 16, 2020



*Audio: Salman Rushdie reads.*

Every day, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, when the sun's heat has begun to diminish, the old man comes into the piazza. He walks slowly, shuffling his feet, which are encased in dusty brown loafers. He is wearing, most days, a dark-blue jacket buttoned all the way up to the neck, and navy pants that fasten with a drawstring at the waist. His hair is white, and there is a beret on his head. He goes to the only café in the piazza, the Café of the Fountain, and sits on a wooden chair at a wooden table and orders a small, strong coffee. At 6 P.M., he orders a beer and a sandwich. At 8 P.M., he rises, wipes his lips, and shuffles away, presumably to his home. We do not need to know where he lives. Everything of any significance in his life has happened and will happen right here, in this little piazza.

He takes his seat. He is the audience, an audience of one. The show is about to begin.

It is a piazza into which seven narrow roads debouch, one at each corner and one each at the midpoint of three of the piazza's four sides; only the side with the church is uninterrupted by a cobbled street. It should be a quiet place, a sleepy provincial square, but it is not. All around the piazza you can hear the loud sounds of people quarrelling, six days a week. On most of these days there are more people in the piazza than live in the locality. It's as if people came here, to this peaceful little square in this peaceful little town, to get into fights. They drive fifteen kilometres from the big city to express their bad moods. They raise their voices; they pound their right fists into the palms of their left hands; they stamp their feet (doesn't matter which foot—both are stamped equally). If they sit astride motorcycles they sound their horns in frustration, or to drown out their adversaries. If they are arguing while in adjacent motorcars with the windows down, they toot like the motorcyclists but also rev their engines and, when they are irritated beyond the point of endurance, they roll their windows up.

### [Salman Rushdie on being free to disagree.](#)

There is no end to their disagreements. They quarrel about the likelihood of hurricanes, about the scandal of bribery behind the contentious awarding of the Summer Olympic Games to a city in the Arctic Circle, about the impossibility of love and the futility of politics and the secret illegal affections of eminent Catholic priests. They dispute the flatness of the earth and the efficacy of

vaccines for measles, mumps, and rubella. They disagree about the best flavors of ice cream, and have strong and irreconcilable opinions concerning the beauty of film actresses. If they have read novels by writers who are also, or were at one time, married couples, then they vehemently take the side of one author or the other and will not be persuaded to change their minds. It appears there is nothing that unites our people except their love of the quarrel itself, the quarrel understood as a public art form, as the defining heart of our culture. The noise is terrible, grows louder as the day darkens into evening, and continues late into the night. By midnight the populace has had a fair amount to drink and that makes the discussions in the piazza even more heated. It is not unheard of for punches to be thrown.

The old man sits at the Café of the Fountain and listens. Because he leaves at 8 P.M., however, he avoids the later phase of the day, when alcohol has had its effect, and fists start flying.

Sundays are quiet. On Sunday, everyone stays home and eats, or goes to church, begs for forgiveness, then returns home and eats.

On Sundays, the old man does not come to the piazza.

This is how it has been in the square ever since the end of the so-called time of the “yes.” That dark age began forty years or so ago, a time when for a period of half a decade it was made illegal to argue. We were all obliged to agree, at all times. Whatever proposition was made, no matter how risible—that bread and wine could transubstantiate into flesh and blood, that the immigrant population transformed at night into drooling sex monsters, that it was beneficial to raise the taxes paid by the poor, that souls could transmigrate, or that war was necessary—it was forbidden to debunk it, even though immigrants ran the best bakery in the town and our favorite wine store, and even though most of us were poor, and none of us remembered any earlier lives spent as tortoises, or foreigners, or eels, and only a small minority of us were belligerent by nature. It was necessary at all times to assent.

Even our language—the language in which such great poetry has been written!—was altered. She was no longer permitted the word “no.” There was only “yes,” and variations on “yes”: “of course,” “certainly,” “for sure,” “absolutely,” “totally,” “no question about it,” “agreed.” When some rash radical remembered the word “no,” it felt worse than shocking, worse than sinful. It felt archaic. A

broken word from an ancient ruined time, like the remnant of a temple built to honor a god in whom nobody had believed for thousands of years. The god of “no.” What a laughable god he must have been! At any rate, that was how it felt to many of us.

Our language, however, sulked. She came to sit by herself in a corner of the piazza and often shook her head mournfully. She became pedestrian. She informed us that she was unwilling for the moment to fly or to soar, or even to travel by train or bicycle or bus. She said that she felt leaden-footed and preferred to sit quietly and contemplate the things that languages contemplate when they are by themselves and feel maltreated. If she needed to move, she told us, she would plod. Her attitude was forbidding. She wore tight clothing that constrained her movements, and uncomfortable shoes. We stopped approaching her.

Our language did not join the old man at the Café of the Fountain. She sat alone in her corner. They did not speak.

In the time of the universal “yes,” the piazza was quiet. You could hear the songbirds, the larks, whose numbers had not yet been decimated by weekend shooting parties. In the center of the piazza there is a small fountain—the fountain, obviously, from which the café takes its name—and back in the old days the silence allowed you to listen to the water, and soothe your aching heart. The old man was younger then, and his heart ached often, thanks to the repeated rejection of its sincerely offered emotions by young women with hair of different colors.

Even in those days when the word “no” was forbidden, those women were able to inform him that his feelings for them were not requited. “You are so kind,” they said, “but on that evening I am having my yellow/brown/red/black hair done.” What about another evening, then, he dared to ask, and they replied, “I am deeply moved by your generosity, but I will be having my black/red/brown/yellow hair done every evening for the foreseeable future, except on Sundays, when I will stay home and eat, or, in some cases, will first go to church and ask for forgiveness, and then go home and eat.”

After a while the old man stopped asking. He continued to come and sit, most afternoons, on his upright wooden chair at the Café of the Fountain and listen to the water flowing. He grew old before his time, distressed, like faux-antique

furniture, by his discovery that even the time of “yes” contained an unspoken “no.” His hair grew white, and he sat on his wooden chair and watched the world going by.

Five years passed. In the end it was our language herself who rebelled against the “yes.” She got up from the corner of the piazza where she had been meditating silently for half a decade and let out a long, piercing shriek that drove into our ears like a stiletto. It travelled everywhere, as fast as lightning travels. It contained no words. However, no sooner had it been uttered than all our words were unleashed. Words simply burst out of people and would not be held back. People felt great globs of vocabulary rising up in their throats and pushing against their teeth. The more cautious among us pressed our lips tightly together to stop the words from getting out, but the word-torrents forced our lips apart and out they came, like children released from single-sex boarding schools at the end of a long, dour semester. The words tumbled pell-mell into the piazza like girls and boys in search of happy reunions. It was a sight to see.

They were rough words, these first utterances—“Crap!,” for example, or “Get lost!” or even the excessively emphatic “Go fuck yourself!”—and this crudeness was perhaps regrettable, but these workmanlike, hard-edged words were effective, that has to be said. They were like bludgeons or explosives, and as they hammered down around us they swiftly brought the reign of the “yes” to an unsavory conclusion. The “yes” and its fellow-travellers (the aforementioned “of course,” “certainly,” “for sure,” “absolutely,” “totally,” “no question about it,” and “agreed”) were hung up on meat hooks in the piazza, and that was an end to that.

That was when the age of argumentation began. “But!” “Rubbish!” “Tripe!” “Nonsense!” “Bullshit!” “Liar!” “Idiot!” “Don’t you dare!” “That is such ignorant bigoted shit!” “Just go away! Nobody wants to listen to you!” Who would have guessed that these unlovely words would take center stage in that moment—these, and not our language’s beautiful and justly celebrated poetry, to which we previously referred? Odes and sonnets, lyric and epic poetry stood ignored, striking attitudes and gesticulating impotently.

Our language remained in her corner of the piazza, watching, but she had cast off her corset and her disfiguring clogs, and her long hair and skirt flowed loosely around her. The skirt went all the way down to the ground, so we could not see her shoes, although we sensed that she was tapping her feet to the beat of

some private music.

The old man also felt the pressure of words struggling to emerge from within him. He tried to contain them, for he was not sure what they might be or do or make possible or engender or destroy, but out they came, like vomit, words he hardly recognized as his own pushing through his lips, angry, contemptuous, blaming. Fortunately, everyone else was experiencing his or her version of the same phenomenon, so nobody was paying attention, and he himself soon forgot what those first words had been and settled back into his wooden chair to observe the life of the piazza as it now was.

Once the “yes” time had ended, the quarrels started up and drowned out the songs of the larks and the soothing splash of the fountain, which cared nothing for changes in society, and kept itself busy, in its insouciant way, with its fountaining. The old man—the man made old by sadness—no longer asked women questions of the heart, questions to which he already knew the answers, which could now be stated plainly without beating about the bush or claiming appointments at the hair salon.

At first, for a little while, he missed the silence of the five “yes” years. There had been something heartening about being in a constant state of affirmation, eschewing negativity, accentuating the positive. There had been something—what was the word?—something *modest* about declining to be judgmental, no matter how great the temptation. And something infinitely relaxing about being excused from a life of objection, of critique, even of protest. It had required a certain remodelling of the brain, that was true. He had had to restrain his natural impulse toward dissent, toward sentences that began “But on the other hand . . .” or “But isn’t it true that . . .” or “How can you possibly . . .” Save your breath—that had been the instruction of the age. Keep your unattractive words to yourself. For a time he’d found a measure of comfort in accepting the “yes.” In saying the unutterable “no” to “no.”

All this happened quite a long time ago. Today, the old man—old now in years as well as in sadness—still sits at the Café of the Fountain, but he is calm, no longer afraid of the rush of forgotten words from his mouth. He watches our disputatious citizenry as one might watch a soap opera on television, or a three-ring circus, or a professional football game.

Our language is still there, in the corner of the piazza farthest from the old man’s

chair. These days she often has companions, and these companions are invariably much younger than her, young men of a physical beauty that is almost obscene. These Byronic creatures plainly worship her, and perhaps, the old man thinks, she even allows them to ravish her in private, on those occasions when she leaves the piazza for a while. The companions change all the time. It is possible that our language is promiscuous. It is possible that her morals are exceedingly loose. When this thought comes to the old man it is as if a devil were whispering in his ear. But the thought doesn't appear to have occurred to anyone else, or, if the devil has whispered it into other ears, the owners of those ears think nothing of it and react with a dismissive shrug. Let her be whatever she wants! Let her do as she pleases! That is the general attitude nowadays. The old man sees that he is in a minority, and holds his tongue.

In all these years they have never exchanged even the most perfunctory of greetings, the old man and our language. There they sit, across the piazza from each other, he on his wooden chair and she on a little cushioned stool that was a gift from one of the obscenely attractive young men, who fell into disfavor with her not long afterward and was erased from her consciousness. Nothing of him remains except this stool. Recently, however, it seemed to the old man that she, our language, had nodded in his direction once or twice. But that may have been a trick of the light.

The architectural elegance of the piazza cannot be denied. The Baroque façade of the old church is splendid, and many of the other buildings on the piazza—buildings of mixed use, with little stores at street level and apartments above—are handsome structures made of golden stone, with burgundy shutters at the windows. They are mostly old, the golden houses, and in some cases are not in the best state of repair, but there they stand, solid, attractive, with red barrel-tiled roofs, giving the piazza an air of faded grandeur, like an impoverished nobleman who has squandered the family fortune. To tell the truth, the piazza looks as if it belonged in a loftier environment than this little town. It feels as if it had been imported wholesale from one of our beautiful cities, perhaps even our capital city, just fifteen kilometres away.

Facing the church across the piazza, on either side of the little cobbled lane that feeds into the piazza over there, are two structures that, if we were in Italy, we would call loggias—covered outdoor galleries with delicate pillar work and arches—and in these loggias the municipality has housed marble statues that imitate far more famous statues elsewhere, that copy those other statues to the

extent that their makers' skills permitted. We enjoy these facsimiles as profoundly as if they were the real thing. In the absence of genius, imitation is an acceptable substitute. Through these copies we pay homage to the masterpieces that we will never see. Some of us go so far as to assert that the originals do not exist and never did exist, that these alleged replicas are, in fact, the great works themselves, and should be accorded the respect due to their greatness. This is one of the popular subjects debated daily in the piazza. It remains unresolved.

(A clarification is necessary. We are not in Italy. If we were in Italy, our language, sitting over there, would be Italian. She might look like Anna Magnani or she might look like Sophia Loren. But that's not how she looks, because, just to repeat it, she is not Italian, and Italian is not the language we speak. This is our language, which we are speaking now, and we are here, not there. The old man in the piazza wears a beret, but that doesn't mean he's French. He's one of us.)

Now that he has stopped missing the peace and quiet of the "yes" years, the old man has actually begun to enjoy the quarrelsomeness of his fellow-citizens. The vanity of certainty, which gives each finger-wagging debater his or her reason for her or his insistence on that or this dispute, strikes the old man as the very *fons et origo* of comedy. The fervor with which many people in the piazza hold opinions that are demonstrably untrue—the sun, madam, does not rise in the west, no matter how vehemently you may argue that it does, and, sir, the moon is not made of Gorgonzola cheese, and to say this is not to agree with your opponent, who describes it as an elaborate papier-mâché fake, nailed to the sky to make us believe that we live in a three-dimensional universe of stars, planets, and satellites, rather than upon a dish with a great lid over it, a lid like an inverted colander, with many holes through which, at night, shines the bright thing we have been deceived into calling starlight. The piazza is full of passionate nonsense such as this, and the old man thinks, Oh, let them go on, there's no harm in it, after all.



*"The unit comes with curtains to protect you from the ones that don't."*  
Cartoon by Colin Tom

This, too, is the subject of many spirited discussions: Are mistaken notions harmful to the brain, to the community, to the health of the body politic, or are they merely errors to be tolerated as the product of simple minds? The fact that all those involved in discussing this question have heads full of tosh and piffle does not make for productive debates. The old man has the impression that at the end of each day people go home, drunk on wine and niggles, knowing less than they knew in the morning. And yet, he tells himself, the tongue set free is an excellent thing. Our language, sitting on her cushioned stool in the far corner of the piazza with the divine young men at her feet, is clearly happier than she was in the subservient, acquiescent days of the “yes.”

A day comes, however, when a certain argumentative twosome—it turns out that they are husband and wife, happily married for thirty years—descend upon the old man seated on his wooden chair and shout at him in unison, “We can’t stand it! You decide for us!” Their disagreement, as it happens, is a small thing. Where should they go for their summer vacation? To the sun-kissed island of A., which isn’t very far away, or to the distant country of B., which would be a much more adventurous choice, but less restful. “We just can’t seem to agree,” they chorus. “So we’ll do whatever you say.”

“Very well,” he says, and with those two words he abandons the neutrality of a lifetime, and the little wooden chair upon which he has spent decades being no more than a contented observer of the passing cavalcade is transformed—just like that!—into a seat of judgment. “Very well,” he repeats. “In these times of strife and stress, I recommend a good rest. Go and sunbathe on the sun-kissed island of A.”

The husband and wife stand very still. Then they turn to look at each other. “Nonsense!” they cry with one voice. “It’s a life of adventure for us!” And off they go to that distant country of B. Some weeks later they return and thank the old man for his judgment. They have seen enormous crocodiles that carry off several children a year and munch on them in the swamps, and giraffes that have grown to record heights, and giant axolotls. They have heard languages they had never heard before and witnessed the most vivid of spectacles, an avalanche that buried an entire village and a military coup that littered the streets with corpses. For a few days, while on safari, they were both transformed into hippopotamuses but that soon wore off and they were told that they should have read the

instructions to travellers and been inoculated against the local mosquitoes, insects notorious for spreading numerous virulent strains of metamorphism. They say, “Never mind, it was quite an experience, so worth it! So unique! And rolling in mud—we could get used to that!” In sum, they have had the holiday of a lifetime.

“Thank you, thank you,” they cry, and their gratitude is genuine. The old man replies mildly that he proposed they go elsewhere for a quiet time, and they laugh prettily. “But that’s how we fly!” they exclaim. “Always! We’re contrary! We ask people what they think and then we do the opposite. Call us perverse! But it has worked for us, and given us thirty years of happy married life.”

Word spreads across the piazza that the old man sitting on the wooden chair at the Café of the Fountain is a judge with the wisdom of Solomon. A crowd of people rush across the square to ask him to judge them, too. The old man has never been in such demand at any point in his long, uneventful life. It is, he concedes, flattering. He gives in.

He asks his petitioners to form an orderly line, and after that, every afternoon between four and six o’clock, when the heat of the day has passed, he hands down judgments, declaring in tones of growing authority that no, the earth is not flat, and no, most immigrants are not sex monsters, no more than you or I, and yes, one hundred per cent, God exists, and so do Heaven and Hell.

Word spreads farther. The nearby city hears that this little piazza in this little town contains a sage of such profundity that he can resolve all your disagreements on the spot. The crowd in the piazza grows larger every day. The police are needed to maintain order. There are television cameras. The old man extends his hours until 7 P.M. so that he can adjudicate more disputes every day (except Sunday). After seven he adjourns his court and refuses to answer any more questions, insisting on being allowed to enjoy a quiet hour by himself, with his beer and his sandwich. And promptly at eight he leaves the Café of the Fountain and shuffles off to who knows where.

It is rumored that leading members of the government and the opposition are discussing a visit to the old man, to see if he can resolve their differences. However, it is hard for these people, both on the left and on the right, to accept the possibility of being told that they are wrong. The visit of the politicians remains hypothetical.

The old man in the piazza is experiencing something utterly alien to him: renown. Among the growing group of children and adults sitting at his feet, around his little wooden chair, he notices some familiar faces, and identifies them as belonging to some of the golden young men who until recently were our language's most ardent disciples. Our language, suddenly almost alone in her corner of the square while her acolytes wait at the Café of the Fountain, is not pleased by this development. She warns the two disciples who have remained loyal to her that this will not end well. They listen respectfully, but her pronouncement comes across as envy. Times have changed. The people care less for our beautiful and complex language than they do for the great, crude questions of what is correct and what incorrect. We have ceased to be the poetry lovers we once were, the aficionados of ambiguity and the devotees of doubt, and we have become barroom moralists. Does the thumb point upward? Does it turn down? The old man in the piazza is our arbiter, and his thumbs have become a matter of national interest. We are all now gladiators in the Colosseum of the Thumb.

Our language is uninterested in the verdicts of the old man's thumbs (opposable, yet—for the moment, at least—unopposed). She cares only for words of many-layered beauty, for fineness of expression, for the subtlety of what is spoken and the resonance of what is better left unspoken, for the meanings between the words, and the illumination of those meanings that only her greatest disciples can provide. She finds the old man's cheap dicta disgraceful, and even more disgraceful is his growing pleasure at being accepted as the judge of what is right and what is wrong, what is so and what is not so. He used to laugh at the vanity of certainty, the obstinacies of the foolish and the emphatic assertions of the wrongheaded. Now he is the dispenser of nuance-free certitudes, and becomes more vain with every passing day.

Frontiers have long been a vexatious subject around here. In our recent history the drawing of borderlines through our territory by ignoramus from elsewhere has caused much heartache and loss of life. In our minds the words "borderline" and "ignoramus" are inextricably connected. On those rare occasions when we have tried to cross through one of the few border checkpoints that now exist upon our blood-soaked frontier, we have been either rebuffed or, if allowed to pass, sold counterfeit currency by hawkers on the far side, who know that we are unable to distinguish the fake currency from the real thing. In our minds the words "border" and "fake currency" are inextricably connected.

There are, of course, many frontiers other than those which separate us from our neighbors and make them our enemies. There is the invisible frontier between what we, as individuals or as a group, deem acceptable and what lies beyond that line, in the realm of the unacceptable. That frontier is a place of dangerous land mines, and most of us choose not to go anywhere near it. There is also the invisible frontier between action and observation. There are those who do, and then there are those who watch them do it. The audience sits here; the stage is over there. The fourth wall is a powerful force.

The old man in the piazza has enjoyed his visits to the theatre, but it has never occurred to him to climb up onto the stage, and in those avant-garde moments when actors have descended into the audience he has felt deliciously shocked in an old-fashioned way. Long ago when he was young he saw a show in which an actor, pretending to be an audience member, sat in the front row throughout the first act. During the intermission a telephone onstage rang unanswered, until finally the actor lost patience and went up onto the stage to answer it. (It was his wife.) While he was onstage, on the phone, the second act began, and he was trapped in the play. The old man found this to be a delightful conceit. Utterly implausible, but a joy to watch. It never occurred to him that one day he would be the person answering the phone during the intermission. He never imagined that he would become the audience member trapped in the play.

But now that he has crossed that border he has taken to his new role with relish. He has nothing against frontiers per se. On the contrary, he has begun to see it as his duty to define the new zones of propriety, winnowing out unacceptable attitudes and corralling them under the heading of Forbidden Things, while those whose attitudes are permissible remain here, among us, in the freedom of our undoubtedly free country. No longer willing simply to answer yes-or-no questions, he seeks to establish which of the disputing parties is the more virtuous, and to hand the palm of his judgment to those who have led better lives. It is even suspected that on many occasions he judges in favor of a plaintiff who is undeniably in the wrong, purely because his rival is shown to have led a less wholesome existence. In short, the old man is making himself a judge not only of rightness but of rectitude. This worries some of us, but we are unwilling to express our worry, because of the old man's popularity.

Our language, languishing in her corner, is perturbed. She tries to argue that the old man may be leading us toward a new version of the time of the "yes," in which even more words may be placed off limits. That's frontier justice, she

warns. Remember the land mines. Stay away.

She also worries, she reveals, about herself. For as long as we have known her she has been sprightly, energetic, vivid, the very best of languages, but she has to admit that of late she has begun to feel unhealthy. On some days she is feverish; on others there are aches and pains. She hopes that it isn't anything serious. It may just be a consequence of her advancing years, for while she may look youthful and beautiful—she thanks us for our compliments on her appearance! She is always grateful for our approval!—she is, in fact, a very old language, one of the oldest and richest, though she prefers not to flaunt her wealth, requires no throne to sit upon, and is content with her simple cushioned stool. But she is our language, after all, and so she feels it is her duty to inform us of her condition. She fears she may be decaying. It's even possible—though it's hard for her to admit this, even to herself—that she may die.

Nobody's listening.

Nobody cares.

And finally she rises to her feet, as she has risen just once before, and shrieks.

It is a shriek of an even higher pitch than the earlier one. It rises and rises until it passes beyond the capacity of human ears to hear it. At that point all the windows in the houses looking out upon the piazza shatter and a rain of glass falls and there are many injuries in the crowded square, injuries that cause other, reciprocal shrieks. These shrieks are of a lower order than the shriek of anguish uttered by our language, and they don't break anything.

We see our language standing upright and open-mouthed but we cannot hear her shriek, which has reached such an intensity that it begins to crack the red barrel tiles on the roofs and even the stone from which the buildings are made. One of the statues in one of the loggias, an elaborate copy of one in the Vatican that depicts the Trojan priest Laocoön wretched in angry serpents, explodes into a hundred thousand fragments.

Do the golden buildings of mixed use fall? Do the loggias collapse entirely? Is the piazza demolished?

No, that doesn't happen. In spite of our many failings, we are not creatures of melodrama. We prefer drama, pure and simple.

So the piazza stands. But the cracks are there. We can all see them. The buildings are cracked from roof to street. The tiles fallen, the burgundy shutters hanging askew. That is the truth. The piazza is broken, and so, perhaps, are we.

In the meanwhile, she's still standing there, our language, screaming her silent scream. And over at the Café of the Fountain the old man feels something happening to his words. They are drying up. They are scrambling farther and farther back in his mouth and diving down his throat to be dissolved by the various digestive fluids down there. There is a crowd waiting to hear what he has to say, but he is lost for words.

The people thronging the piazza are displeased. They want what they came for—to be judged—and they open their mouths to protest the old man's failure to deliver his verdicts. But there are no words to protest with. The people look over at the corner that our language has occupied for so long, our language whom they have so totally ignored of late, and they see her gather up her skirts and walk out of the piazza, forever abandoning the corner she made her own for more years than anyone can recall. She holds her head high, our language, and then she is gone. And after her departure nobody in the piazza can talk. The people make sounds, but the sounds are shapeless, devoid of meaning. The old man rises helplessly from his wooden chair with his beer in one hand and his sandwich in the other. He stretches out his arms to the people, as if he were offering them the sandwich and the beer. They turn their backs and walk away. He has become once again what he always was: an insignificant old man.

It is unclear what we must do now. What will become of us? We are at a loss to know how things will proceed.

Our words fail us. ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

## **Letter from California**

- [How a Deadly Police Force Ruled a City](#)

# How a Deadly Police Force Ruled a City

After years of impunity, the police in Vallejo, California, took over the city's politics and threatened its people.

By [Shane Bauer](#)

November 16, 2020



Three police officers in an unmarked pickup truck pulled into the parking lot of a Walgreens in Vallejo, California, responding to a call of looting in progress. It was just after midnight on June 2nd, and a group of people who had gathered around a smashed drive-through window quickly fled in two cars. Sean Monterrosa, a twenty-two-year-old from San Francisco, was left behind. As the police truck closed in on Monterrosa, Jarrett Tonn, a detective who had been with the Vallejo police force for six years, was in the back seat, aiming a rifle. No one told Monterrosa to freeze or to put his hands up, but he fell to his knees anyway. As the truck came to a stop, Tonn fired five rounds at Monterrosa through the windshield.

A week earlier, a police officer in Minneapolis had killed [George Floyd](#). Now the Bay Area was in the throes of an anti-police uprising. People marched, drove in caravans, and painted tributes to Floyd on walls and boarded-up windows. Police in Oakland, about thirty miles from Vallejo, launched tear gas at protesters, who gathered in intersections, blocked traffic on the freeway, looted stores, and lit fires in two banks. A man linked to the far-right Boogaloo movement was charged with killing a security officer outside a federal building. People ransacked malls in San Francisco, San Leandro, and the wealthy suburb of Walnut Creek, stealing from Best Buys, Home Depots, video-game stores, small businesses, and marijuana dispensaries. More than seventy cars were taken from a dealership; a gun shop was robbed of twenty-nine firearms. A curfew was instituted in Vallejo, but many people defied it. When Monterrosa got to the Walgreens, the store had already been looted.

Forty-seven minutes before Monterrosa was killed, he sent a text message to his two sisters, asking them to sign a petition calling for justice for Floyd. Monterrosa, whose parents emigrated from Argentina, had been critical of the police since, at the age of thirteen, he received citations for selling hot dogs outside night clubs. As teen-agers, Monterrosa and his sisters went to protests for people killed by cops in San Francisco: Jessica Williams, Alex Nieto, Mario Woods. In 2017, Monterrosa was arrested on weapons charges, for allegedly shooting into a building; he returned from jail covered in bruises. (The case was dismissed after his death.) He told his family that the police had smacked his head against the concrete in his cell.

When Monterrosa was young, the neighborhood where he grew up, Bernal Heights, was largely Black and brown, but as tech companies moved in [San](#)

Francisco became richer and whiter. Now, Monterrosa's mother says, their family are the only Latinos on the block. Sean encouraged her to know her rights as a documented immigrant. His mother generally thought that the police were a force for good, but Sean disagreed, saying that they were out to get Black and brown people.

Monterrosa loved San Francisco, but he couldn't afford to live there. Since the age of eighteen, he'd moved back and forth between the suburbs and his parents' place, working a variety of jobs. He got a carpentry position two months before the Bay Area issued shelter-in-place orders in response to the coronavirus, then he was laid off. He moved in with a new girlfriend. A couple of days later, he came to the Walgreens.

After Tonn shot Monterrosa, he got out of the truck and turned his body camera on.

“What did he point at us?” Tonn asked.



*When Monterrosa got to the Walgreens, the store had already been looted. Photograph by Carolyn Drake / Magnum for The New Yorker*

“I don’t know, man,” an officer said.

“He pointed a gun at us!” Tonn shouted.

“Do not move!” the officers yelled, training their weapons on Monterrosa, who lay limp on the pavement in a pool of blood. Two of them reached down and rolled him over, revealing a hammer sticking out of his pocket.

“Oh, fuck,” Tonn exclaimed.

“You’re good, man,” an officer said.

The officers cuffed Monterrosa.

“Fucking stupid!” Tonn shouted. He kicked the truck. “This is not what I fucking needed tonight,” he told a captain. “I thought that fucking axe was a gun.”

“Calm down,” the captain said. “Take some deep breaths.”

Tonn inhaled deep and slow.

“You’re going to be all right,” the captain said. “We’ve been through this before.”

Since the killing of Michael Brown in [Ferguson, Missouri](#), in 2014, protest movements have pushed big cities to reform their policies on when a police officer can use force. According to the database Mapping Police Violence, homicides by police in America’s thirty largest cities have declined by about thirty per cent since the year before the Ferguson protests. Yet they have not decreased nationwide. In rural and suburban areas, police killings have been on the rise for years, and roughly three-quarters of police homicides now occur in those areas. The killing of Monterrosa received some national media attention, because of the moment in which it occurred. But in Vallejo it was one more in an ongoing litany of police killings.

Vallejo, a postindustrial city of a hundred and twenty-two thousand people, is best known for its Six Flags amusement park and for its musicians: E-40, Mac Dre, H.E.R. Its per-capita income is less than half that of San Francisco, and its

population is more diverse, split among whites, African-Americans, Latinos, and Asians. Its police force, however, consists largely of white men who live elsewhere. Since 2010, members of the Vallejo Police Department have killed nineteen people—a higher rate than that of any of America’s hundred largest police forces except St. Louis’s. According to data collected by the anti-police-brutality group Campaign Zero, the V.P.D. uses more force per arrest than any other department in California does. Vallejo cops have shot at people running away, fired dozens of rounds at unarmed men, used guns in off-duty arguments, and beaten apparently mentally ill people. The city’s police records show that officers who shoot unarmed men aren’t punished—in fact, some of the force’s most lethal cops have been promoted.

The failure to hold police officers accountable has been an issue in Vallejo for as long as anyone can remember. According to confidential city documents, twenty-five years ago one officer shot another while drinking in a bar, and wasn’t fired. A cop with a drug problem kept his job even after he was caught stealing from evidence lockers and was arrested for prescription fraud. Twenty years ago, a lieutenant told a new officer named Joseph Iacono that, when a suspect runs away, the officer should use enough force to put the man in the emergency room. To see if Iacono could fight, he was placed in a holding cell with an uncoöperative suspect. Iacono is now the department’s Lead Force Options Instructor and, according to the documents, likes to say, “It can’t be awful if it’s lawful.”



*"Any other strengths?"*  
Cartoon by Kaamran Hafeez and Al Batt

In the past ten years, Vallejo has paid nearly sixteen million dollars in legal settlements involving the police, many thousands of dollars more per officer than America's largest police departments. None of that money has come from officers; it is paid by Vallejo and its insurers. Police violence has cost the city so much money that, in 2018, the statewide insurance pool that helped pay its legal fees took the unprecedented step of raising Vallejo's annual deductible, from five hundred thousand dollars to \$2.5 million, prompting the city to find another insurer. Vallejo is currently facing at least twenty-four use-of-force cases, which it estimates could cost some fifty million dollars.

"Vallejo police have been acting as if they own Vallejo for a long time," Stephanie Gomes, a former city-council member, told me. In 1969, two weeks after the Zodiac killer shot a couple in Vallejo, officers staged the first-ever strike by law enforcement in California. They had been receiving "top salary," one newspaper wrote, but, after refusing to work for five days, they won a seven-per-cent wage increase.

At the time, Vallejo was a relatively prosperous city. A naval shipyard provided thousands of jobs, and the median income was on a par with San Francisco's. But, in the mid-nineties, the shipyard closed, and Vallejo lost its main source of revenue. In the following years, the city became less white, and poverty increased. Fearing cuts, the police union, the Vallejo Police Officers' Association, identified city-council candidates who were friendly to its interests. The V.P.O.A. contributed money to their campaigns and launched attacks against those who opposed them.

The V.P.O.A.'s strategy, Gomes told me, was to try to "elect a majority of people who will vote for lucrative contracts and pretty much whatever they want." When Gomes ran for city council in 2005, she met with representatives of [Vallejo's unions, including police](#) and firefighters. She said that one of them asked her, "If you win, will you stay bought?" The V.P.O.A.'s approach seemed successful. Between 2000 and 2007, the police received a fifty-five-per-cent wage increase. Vallejo had one of the lowest per-capita incomes in the Bay Area but the best-paid police force.

After the housing bubble burst in the mid-two-thousands, the city's finances deteriorated further. In 2007, it had an eight-million-dollar deficit, which was

projected to double within a year. In the hope of avoiding collapse, Vallejo hired a new city manager, Joe Tanner. To Tanner, the source of Vallejo's financial problems was clear: three-quarters of its general fund was going to police and firefighters. Gomes led an effort to reduce their pay, but the unions defeated the city in arbitration, forcing it to limit street repairs and to eliminate funding for the senior center and the library. "Every citizen of Vallejo works to pay the salaries of the police and fire unions," a resident wrote to the local paper. "All we talk about is cutting services to feed the greed and avarice of the public safety unions."

Tanner and Gomes saw no choice for the city but to declare bankruptcy and renegotiate the unions' contracts. The problem, Tanner told me, was that "the cops owned the council." The majority of city-council members were endorsed by the public-safety unions, and they refused to vote in favor of bankruptcy. One day, Tanner said, a Vallejo cop approached him in a restaurant in a nearby town and told him, "You're gonna get yours." An anonymous caller threatened to burn his house down. His Jeep was keyed several times and its tires were slashed. Eventually, Tanner threatened to declare a state of emergency and lay off the entire police and fire departments. The council gave in, and, in May, 2008, Vallejo became the largest city in California ever to declare bankruptcy.

By 2011, owing to retirements and a hiring freeze, the police force had shrunk to ninety officers, around sixty per cent of its pre-bankruptcy size, and the police budget had been cut by about a third. The union had warned that the cuts would lead to an increase in crime—a billboard in the city read "*PUBLIC SAFETY IS DISAPPEARING*"—but, in the two years following Vallejo's bankruptcy, violent crime decreased by a quarter.

Police in other parts of the country worried that Vallejo's approach could spread. In 2008, the magazine *American Police Beat* published an article, titled "*TIME TO CIRCLE THE WAGONS*," which warned police departments that, as the country fell into a recession, "highly compensated law enforcement agencies" should be worried. Police unions should be prepared to "identify the vocal critics and make them feel your pain. Somehow this seems to be where the unions get queasy and weak-kneed." The article went on, "It is often difficult to convince yourself or the members to picket some councilman's business, put their home telephone numbers up on billboards, and in general make their lives a living hell. . . . Get dirty and fight to win."

As Vallejo was arguing for bankruptcy in court, Gomes told me, police cars and motorcycles drove by her house multiple times a day, and officers revved their engines and looked into her front window. One officer, Steve Darden, wrote a rap song about Gomes and posted it online. It included these lines:

I'm plain sick and tired of all the trash you're talkin'  
When the truth comes out we gonna send you walkin' . . .  
You're the worst kind causing all these problems  
When it starts heating up you run and hide in your closet . . .  
Be careful what you wish for it could come true  
As we all watch the plan backfire on you

Darden has produced a number of albums about being a cop in Vallejo. A common theme is the unfair treatment of police. Yet Darden has a long history of disturbing behavior. In 2010, he told a defendant in court that if he didn't stop glaring at him he would knock him out and make him "leave on a gurney." In 2011, Darden responded to a 911 call from a man who said he'd been beaten and robbed by his housemates. The man identified himself as a U.S. soldier and scolded Darden for taking forty-five minutes to arrive. Darden hit him in the face and took him to the ground, shouting, "You are talking to a United States marine!" According to an investigation by Open Vallejo, a nonprofit news Web site, Darden is one of a group of officers who have bent the tips of their badges to commemorate fatal shootings—an accusation that Darden has denied. He has been the primary shooter in two killings, and a recent photograph appears to show two bent tips on his badge. This year, he was promoted to lieutenant.

When Gomes arrived home one day, her neighbor told her, "Something really dirty just happened." The alarm on Gomes's house had been tripped, and two police officers had responded. The neighbor had seen them pry open a window and spend at least twenty minutes inside. Hours later, on the blog of a local newspaper, anonymous accounts posted about her personal items, including a satirical collage made by a friend that depicted Gomes as the mastermind behind the city's bankruptcy and police cuts. Gomes complained to the city, and the police chief ordered the cops to stop driving by her house.

If the police were willing to harass Gomes so persistently, she wondered what they did to people who had no power. After she was reelected, in 2009, she proposed forming a citizens' advisory committee to review complaints against the police. When she presented her proposal at City Hall, cops filled the chamber

and booed. One said that Gomes was “scapegoating” the police. Another said that the force was being “subjected to hate and tyranny.”



*The steps outside the Vallejo police station. Photograph by Carolyn Drake / Magnum for The New Yorker*

Although the committee was ultimately approved by the city council, its duties were watered down to producing a report of nonbinding recommendations. Its seven voting members were white, and three of them were former police officers.

Shortly after Sean Monterrosa was killed, the V.P.O.A. issued a statement saying that, before he was shot, he “abruptly pivoted back around toward the officers, crouched into a tactical shooting position, and grabbed an object in his waistband that appeared to be the butt of a handgun.” The statement, which neglected to say that Monterrosa had not been armed, asserted that “the officer used deadly force as a last resort because he had no other reasonable option to prevent getting shot.” Each week, people marched from City Hall to protest Monterrosa’s killing. The V.P.O.A., on its Facebook page, condemned the “screaming angry mob mentality and profound anger directed at the police.”

Nationwide, more than eighty per cent of police officers are represented by unions, and a 2006 report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that unionized police departments received complaints about their members’ use of force at a rate thirty-six per cent higher than that of non-unionized departments. In 2019, a University of Chicago study of sheriff’s deputies in Florida found that, when the deputies unionized, their violent misconduct increased by forty per cent.

Strong police unions also make it harder for cops to be punished. Officers can appeal sanctions through multiple reviews, and most departments allow appeals to be heard by an arbiter selected in part by the police union. According to a 2017 examination by the *Washington Post*, among departments that coöperated with its survey, roughly a quarter of cops fired for misconduct since 2006 were reinstated after an appeal. (In San Antonio, the share was seventy per cent.)

Five months before Monterrosa was killed, the V.P.O.A. had replaced its president, Detective Mat Mustard, who had run the union for ten years. Mustard was notorious in Vallejo for the investigation he led into the kidnapping of a woman named Denise Huskins, in 2015. Someone broke into the house where she and her boyfriend were sleeping, blindfolded and drugged them, and put her in the trunk of a car. When the boyfriend reported the crime, Mustard suspected that he had killed Huskins and invented the kidnapping story. At the police station, the boyfriend said, officers dressed him in jail clothes, then Mustard and others interrogated him for eighteen hours, calling him a murderer. Huskins, who

was being held a hundred and sixty miles away, was raped repeatedly. After she was released, the Vallejo police publicly accused her and her boyfriend of faking the kidnapping, comparing the situation to the movie “Gone Girl.” The police threatened to press charges against the couple, and after the rapist e-mailed the San Francisco *Chronicle*, confessing to the kidnapping, the police accused Huskins and her boyfriend of writing the e-mail. Soon, the rapist was arrested in South Lake Tahoe, after trying to repeat the crime. Even then, the Vallejo police insisted that Huskins and her boyfriend were lying. The couple sued Mustard and the city, eventually winning a \$2.5-million settlement. In a show of defiance, the police department named Mustard officer of the year.

The new president of the V.P.O.A., Michael Nichelini, had been on the police force in Oakland before he joined the Vallejo P.D., in 2006. In 2003, he participated in the suppression of an antiwar demonstration, in which police shot wooden dowels and rubber bullets at people who were blocking traffic in the city’s industrial port. Nichelini, along with other traffic officers, used his motorcycle to push back the protesters, striking at least one person.

According to an article in the Berkeley *Daily Planet*, youth of color in Oakland called Nichelini “Mussolini,” because of his reputation for racism. At least four civil-rights complaints were filed against him to the Oakland Citizens’ Police Review Board. In 2004, the board found that he had used excessive force after stopping a seventeen-year-old boy driving a truck on a suspended license. The boy claimed that Nichelini asked, “Are you a nigga or ese?,” and the board found that he used his knees to hit the back of the teen-ager’s head against the pavement.

Nichelini’s father, Robert, was Vallejo’s chief of police when his son joined the force. Robert Nichelini, who had also come from the Oakland Police Department, assured the Vallejo *Times-Herald* that his son had a “perfect record.” Vallejo is “such a family oriented city,” he told the paper. “What is wrong with a son following a father’s footsteps in the Vallejo Police Department?”

In 2019, eighteen-year-old Carlos Yescas and his twelve-year-old brother drove to a food market in a car with no license plate. According to a complaint that Yescas filed with the city, Michael Nichelini, who was in plain clothes, approached them and told Yescas, “You know you fucked up, right?” Yescas said that Nichelini didn’t identify himself as a police officer but insisted on

seeing Yescas's I.D. Nichelini then told him that "he was going to take his car and keep it." He reached into the car, grabbed the keys, and cuffed Yescas. As Yescas's brother filmed, Nichelini pulled Yescas from the vehicle, even though he was wearing a seat belt. Yescas called Nichelini a "white piece of shit," and Nichelini threw him to the ground and knelt on his back as Yescas repeatedly said, "I can't breathe." Yescas's car was confiscated, and the police department told his family that it couldn't be located. Then the department auctioned it off.

Melissa Nold, an attorney who specializes in police use-of-force cases, filed the complaint. Two months later, she and Nichelini were at a city-council meeting in which the police were requesting a change to their contract. They wanted a clause deleted that allowed the city to order an officer to be drug-tested after firing his weapon. The clause had not been enforced for years, but Vallejo's first Black police chief, Shawny Williams, was about to take office, and there was a presumption that he would be a reformer. Nichelini stood at the back of the room and filmed Nold. The clause was deleted and, two months later, Nichelini became the president of the V.P.O.A.

A few days after Monterrosa was killed, police replaced the windshield that Tonn had fired through. For possible involvement in the destruction of evidence, Nichelini was suspended by Williams. He maintains that he had nothing to do with the windshield replacement.

One spate of killings by police in Vallejo can be traced back to 2011, when an officer named Jim Capoot was shot and killed while chasing a suspected bank robber. He was the first cop to be killed in Vallejo in eleven years. The following year, police killed six people, accounting for nearly a third of the homicides in the city. Half the killings were committed by an officer named Sean Kenney.

Early on the morning of May 28, 2012, a forty-one-year-old Black man named Anton Barrett, Sr., whose nineteen-year-old son was also in the car, pulled out of a parking lot with his headlights off and ran a red light. He was drunk, and when cops tried to stop him he drove off. Then his car got a flat tire, and he and his son jumped out and ran in different directions through an apartment complex. Kenney began chasing Barrett, and, though he was carrying pepper spray and a Taser, he chose to draw his gun. Seconds later, he saw Barrett running toward him and fired five times. Kenney claimed that Barrett had started to pull a black object out of his pocket—it turned out to be a wallet. As Barrett lay on the

ground dying, another officer Tased him. Barrett's family sued, and the city eventually paid a settlement of two hundred and thirty-five thousand dollars.



*"Forget it—we're not buying some expensive sex robot for it to end up unused in the garage with the massaging armchair and the rowing machine."*  
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

Three months later, Kenney shot Mario Romero, a twenty-three-year-old Black man, who was returning home after a night out with his sister's boyfriend, Joseph Johnson. When the men pulled up to the house, Johnson called Romero's sister and asked her to let him in. Kenney and Dustin Joseph, who were responding to a call about a burglary in the neighborhood, shone a spotlight on the men.

Kenney said that Romero got out of the car and reached for his waistband. Then, he said, when the officers yelled for the men to put their hands up Romero crouched "into a firing position," prompting Kenney and his partner to begin shooting. Johnson, however, said that the cops began firing at him and Romero while they sat in the car.

Romero's sisters were watching from their living-room window, and said that they saw Kenney jump onto the hood of the car and unload his clip through the windshield into Romero, who was sitting in the driver's seat. Johnson corroborated this account. Kenney admitted that he'd stood on the hood but insisted that he hadn't fired from there. Romero was shot thirty times. After his body was removed, Kenney searched the car. He said that he found an airsoft gun on the floor, wedged between the driver's seat and the center console.

Seven weeks later, an autistic man named Jeremiah Moore and his boyfriend were smashing car windows and trying to set their home on fire during a psychotic episode. When the police arrived, Moore grabbed an antique rifle and Kenney shot and killed him. Moore's family sued, and won a two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar settlement.

The Romero family, along with other community members, attended sessions of the newly created citizens' advisory committee, which met for several hours every couple of weeks. But the issues the committee debated were modest: a small reduction in wages, requiring cops to use body cameras, creating a position for a civilian auditor who would respond to complaints of police misconduct. The former officers who sat on the committee regularly objected to these proposals, raising the spectre of lawsuits by the V.P.O.A. should the city try to interfere with police work.

In the end, the committee's recommendations included installing more surveillance cameras, establishing a daytime curfew for youths, increasing

enforcement of parking violations, and using money from a new public-services tax to hire more cops.

Three years after the death of Romero, his family won a two-million-dollar settlement. Later that year, the police department completed its review of the case and declared that the shooting was justified. Officers told Open Vallejo that Kenney was initiated into the badge-bending group. In 2011, he was made a detective. One of his new duties was to investigate officer-involved shootings.

Reformers who have succeeded in getting rogue cops censured or fired often come up against a frustrating reality: because there are no national and few statewide indexes that track police terminations and disciplinary infractions, tainted officers often find new jobs in different jurisdictions. A recent study published in the *Yale Law Journal* found that about three per cent of officers serving in Florida had been fired from other state agencies. These cops, who typically moved to smaller forces that were desperate for experienced officers, were more likely than others to be charged with misconduct in their new departments. Sometimes a cop will resign before he is fired, thus avoiding any consequences. Before Timothy Loehmann, the officer who killed twelve-year-old [Tamir Rice](#), in Cleveland, joined the city's police force, he had resigned from his previous job, in Independence, Ohio, where supervisors noted his insubordination, lying, and emotional immaturity.

Officers can also transfer in order to escape reforms. In the past year, large numbers of cops in Seattle, Buffalo, Atlanta, and San Francisco have left. After four cops were charged with killing George Floyd, about two hundred officers in Minneapolis filed to quit the department, citing "post-traumatic stress." Law Enforcement Move, a company founded in the wake of the recent protests, says that it helps officers "escape anti-police cities, and live in America, again!" Since June, its founder told me, the company has been contacted by more than a thousand cops, or their spouses, who are interested in relocating to more "police-friendly" communities.

Some of Vallejo's most notorious officers transferred from Oakland, where a lawsuit brought on behalf of a hundred and nineteen plaintiffs claimed that police had routinely kidnapped, beaten, and planted evidence on people. In 2014, a court-appointed overseer announced that he would be tightening oversight on uses of force, and punishing officers who didn't report misconduct by their colleagues. Within four months, six officers had left for Vallejo. Three of them

were eventually involved in lethal shootings. All six were sued for excessive use of force.

Two of the former Oakland officers were the twin brothers Ryan and David McLaughlin, who often searched men of color in Vallejo on the ground that they smelled marijuana, even after it had been legalized. The brothers justified these searches as “compliance checks,” meant to make sure that people weren’t carrying more than the legal limit. “That’s maybe how they roll in certain other nations,” a judge later said in court. “But that is not probable cause.”

In 2018, David McLaughlin, while off duty, got into a heated confrontation with a man celebrating his son’s birthday at a pizzeria in Walnut Creek. He pointed his service gun at the man, then tackled him and punched and elbowed him until his face was bloody. (McLaughlin maintains that he acted within professional boundaries.) Five months later, McLaughlin pulled over a man on a motorcycle for speeding, then drew his gun on him. The man’s cousin, an African-American marine veteran named Adrian Burrell, filmed the encounter from his front porch. McLaughlin ordered Burrell to retreat. Burrell refused, resulting in a struggle that, he alleges, gave him a concussion. McLaughlin faces lawsuits in both cases.

Jarrett Tonn, Monterrosa’s shooter, joined the Vallejo force the same year as the Oakland cops. Tonn had been an officer in Galt, California, where he worked with his cousin, Kevin Tonn. One day in 2013, Kevin confronted a man who he thought, incorrectly, was a suspect in a robbery. The man pulled out a gun and shot Kevin, then shot himself. Jarrett rushed to the scene, but his cousin was dying.



*A memorial for Sean Monterrosa in San Francisco, where he was from. Photograph by Carolyn Drake / Magnum for The New Yorker*

Transferring to Vallejo might have seemed like an unlikely career move. Crime was high, the city was just a few years out of bankruptcy, and the school system had recently emerged from state receivership. But Tonn wasn't going to live there. Even after the bankruptcy, Vallejo officers were some of the highest paid in California. Tonn's base pay during his first full year in Vallejo was a hundred thousand dollars—thirty-six thousand dollars more than he made in Galt. This didn't account for overtime and benefits. In 2018, he made twenty-seven thousand dollars in overtime and thirty-one thousand dollars in "other pay," and received twenty-two thousand dollars' worth of benefits. In addition, his pension was funded with fifty-eight thousand dollars.

The year after Tonn started working in Vallejo, he chased an unarmed man who was driving a stolen car. The man crashed into someone's front yard, then reversed into Tonn's car. Tonn doesn't remember feeling the impact, but in two seconds he shot eighteen rounds from his Glock into the car, injuring the man.

The officer who wrote the police review of the shooting was Kent Tribble, who once, when responding to a domestic dispute, went to the house of a Black man by mistake, Tased him through his bedroom window after the man shouted profanities at him, and later charged him with resisting arrest. On another occasion, when he was off duty, he pulled a gun on two men in Bend, Oregon, during a drunken confrontation after leaving a bar. (Tribble did not respond to a request for comment.) A couple of years later, Tribble was promoted to lieutenant. When he reviewed Tonn's shooting, he wrote that Tonn had acted in accordance with his training.

In 2017, Tonn was paired with Sean Kenney, the officer who killed three people in 2012. One day, Tonn and Kenney were pursuing Kevin DeCarlo, a suspect in a pawnshop robbery that had ended in a homicide. (He was never charged in connection with the crime.) When DeCarlo stopped at a stop sign, Kenney rammed his car. DeCarlo rammed Kenney back, then got stuck in a ditch. Tonn fired at least eight rounds with a rifle at DeCarlo; other officers, including Kenney, fired at him as well. A witness told police that the scene resembled an execution. DeCarlo suffered four broken ribs, a collapsed lung, and the loss of two fingers. Tonn told investigators that he thought DeCarlo was reaching for a firearm, but DeCarlo had no weapon. (Tonn did not respond to a request for comment.)

According to the Pew Research Center, only a quarter of cops ever fire their weapon on duty, but this was Kenney's fifth shooting in five years. A year and a half later, he retired. He started a consulting firm called Line Driven Strategies, which conducts training courses for police departments on the use of force and on how to investigate shootings by the police. Kenney declined an interview, saying that there was "too much negativity and hate in this climate."

Five weeks after shooting DeCarlo with Kenney, Tonn chased a carjacking suspect down an alley, then fired at him from half a block away. Tonn claimed that the man was carrying a gun, but no weapon was found. The policeman who wrote the internal report of the shooting, Jared Jaksch, was one of the officers who had shot at DeCarlo. Jaksch is also on the board of the V.P.O.A. He wrote that Tonn had done nothing wrong, but recommended that adjustments be made to training "to ensure officers know that they must react in self defense without consideration for potential future civil unrest."

I wanted to learn how Vallejo police officers viewed the perception that they act with impunity. Though no one on the police force agreed to talk to me on the record, I did find a body-camera recording in which an officer revealed his thoughts. On July 7, 2016, Josh Coleman and a partner were on patrol in Vallejo when they saw some twenty Black people standing in an intersection. For a documentary about Bay Area hip-hop, a Viceland reporter was interviewing Nef the Pharaoh, a protégé of E-40. Coleman assumed that they were shooting a rap video. He later told a court that, since he had seen guns used in rap videos, he thought this was sufficient cause to detain and search as many of the men as he could.

As an officer began to arrest a man with a handgun, Coleman ordered a group of onlookers to move across the street. (A judge later dismissed the charges, saying that there was no probable cause for a search.) A twenty-one-year-old woman, whom I'll call Aliya, ignored him, so Coleman threw her against his car and arrested her.

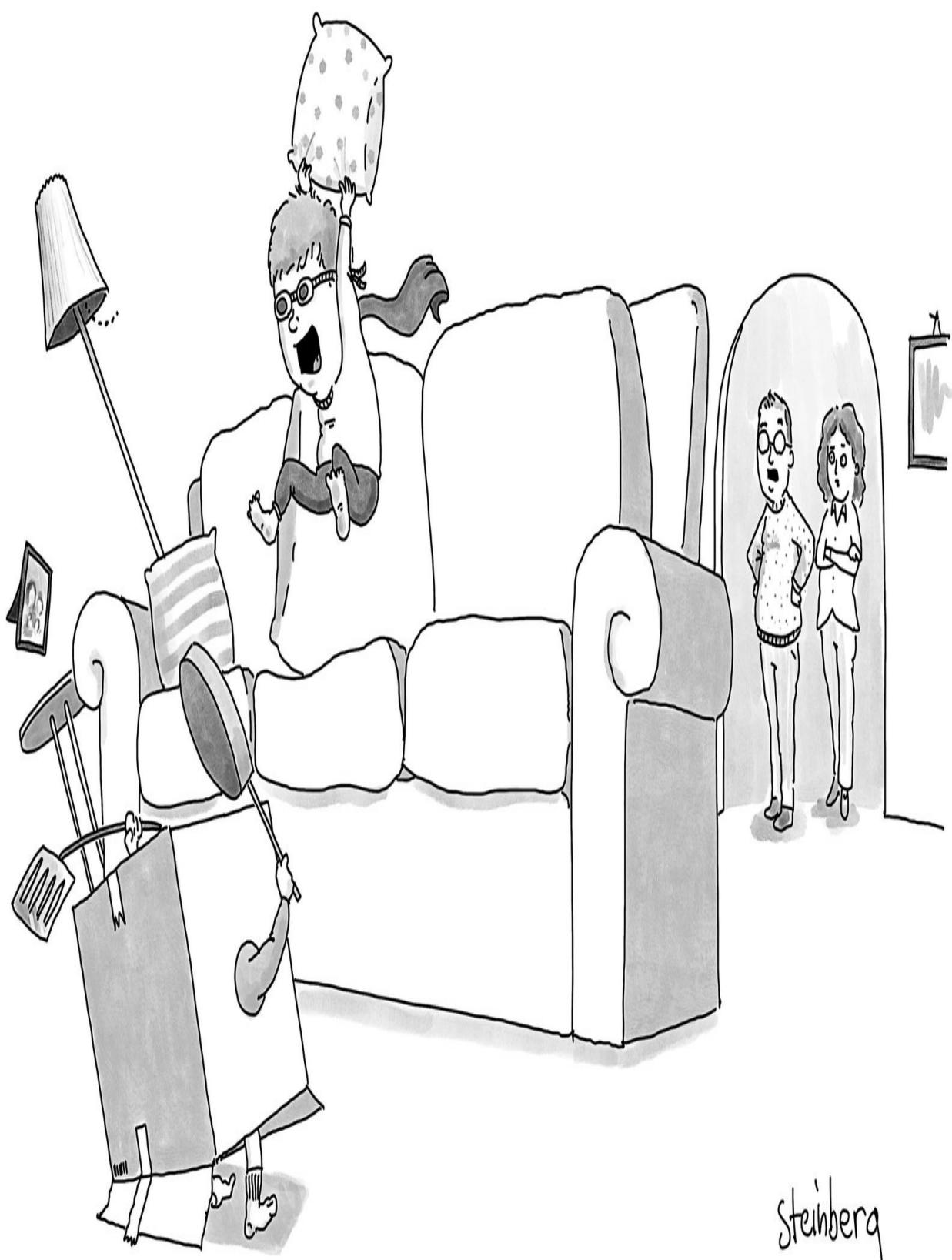
Coleman spotted a rapper known as Cousin Fik, with whom he went to high school. Coleman believes that the main reason for street violence is "the music, plain and simple." He admonished Cousin Fik for delivering a detrimental message. "Until men like you and people like I start delivering the same exact message, we are not going to be able to do anything," Coleman said. "People are still going to get killed."

At the police station, Coleman put Aliya in an interrogation room and asked her why she had refused to cross the street.

“Because that’s my baby daddy, and I don’t want nothing to happen to him,” she said. “All these police officers want to shoot a Black person. If you’re going to shoot him, I’m going to be right with him.”

“In the political climate today, do you think any police officer really wants to shoot a Black person?” Coleman asked.

“So why do they?”



Steinberg

*"Listen, we can risk sending them back to school, but, honestly, these are the skills they're going to need most in the new world."*  
Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

“We’re protecting our lives.”

“O.K., you’re cool today, but another officer would have had his gun out and automatically just shot him.”

“No, that doesn’t happen. Seriously, think about it logically. You think a police officer is willing to risk his one-hundred-thousand-a-year job, all of his medical benefits, because he wants to shoot somebody who’s Black and be on the news, and be accused of being a murderer, and now he has to live the rest of his life being a UPS driver because he can’t be a cop anymore?”

“I’m not saying you do, but you never know what these—”

“You’re not processing,” Coleman said.

“I’m just telling you I’m scared for him.”

“You’re processing this emotion out of an unrealistic fear.”

Coleman once shot a man at a bar when he mistook a can of Steel Reserve 211 beer tucked into the man’s waistband for a gun. On another occasion, he wrote in a police report that he had stopped a Black man when the man turned to look at his patrol car after Coleman drove past. “In some circumstances,” Coleman wrote, he found such behavior “to be an indicator of wrong doing.” “You’ve got to stop swallowing dope,” Coleman said he shouted after the man appeared to put something in his mouth. “It’s going to give you a tummy ache.” The man yelled back at him. Coleman then pulled across several lanes of traffic, got out of the patrol car, and tackled the man. Coleman noted in the report that, although the man was not carrying drugs, he had cash denominations “consistent with street level sales.” The man was carrying forty-eight dollars.

“I understand what you think,” Coleman said to Aliya. “I went to college. I remember being in my twenties and thinking that all these things are examples of police brutality, ’cause I didn’t understand what it’s like to be a police officer.”

“The fact that you just pull your guns out scares people,” she said.

“I wish we didn’t have to have firearms,” Coleman responded. He said that he wished there were an iPhone app that enabled him to make people freeze without endangering their lives.

“Ain’t that what y’all have the Tasers for?” Aliya asked.

“Tasers don’t work.”



*Police officers in Vallejo are largely white men who live elsewhere. Photograph by Carolyn Drake / Magnum for The New Yorker*

Months earlier, Coleman had been dispatched to a post office to deal with a homeless man who had threatened to harm himself. Coleman wrote in a police report that, as he was approaching, he wondered if the man might have a “more sinister purpose,” such as launching a terrorist attack. In order to disrupt the man’s ability to “secure the location” or take hostages, Coleman rushed in and Tased him.

“The crux of the issue is that there is a lack of respect for law now in this young culture,” Coleman told Aliya. “The young culture believes that they can do whatever they want. . . . Martin Luther King wasn’t smoking weed. Martin Luther King wasn’t hanging out at a rap-video shoot with a bunch of people with guns talking about how the police are killing Black people. . . . What happened to Malcolm X? What happened to Marcus Garvey? What happened to real men who stood for real values? What happened to Oprah Winfrey? I would say Bill Cosby, but he messed that up.”

Soon, Coleman said, “Do you want to go home today?”

“Yeah.”

“I want you to apologize to me,” he said.

“Sorry,” Aliya said, sounding surprised.

“That is a bad apology. I want you to really apologize.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s the best you have? One word?”

“Sorry for being in your scene.”

Willie McCoy, a twenty-year-old rapper, was the last person to be killed by Vallejo police before Sean Monterrosa. In February, 2019, the police got a call from a Taco Bell, saying that a man was unconscious in his car. A group of officers arrived and saw McCoy asleep in the driver’s seat. One officer noticed that he had a gun in his lap, with the magazine removed. Another officer said that he was going to open the door and grab the gun. “If he reaches for it, you know what to do,” he said. But the door was locked. The police had been

standing around the car for more than four minutes when McCoy scratched his shoulder and leaned forward, seeming dazed. Suddenly, six cops fired fifty-five bullets at him.

One of the officers, Ryan McMahon, had stopped a Black man a year earlier for bicycling without lights. McMahon beat the man, Ronell Foster, with his flashlight until Foster wrested it from him and attempted to run. McMahon shot him in the head and the back from several feet away, killing him. The V.P.O.A. posted on its Facebook page that killings like this could be avoided “if those that come into contact with the police follow their commands.” McMahon was cleared of wrongdoing by prosecutors, but Foster’s family sued the city and won a \$5.7-million settlement, the largest that Vallejo has paid.

Since June, activists in Vallejo have been calling for the city to “fire the fatal fourteen,” referring to officers on the force who have been involved in multiple shootings. In September, Williams, the department chief, broke with precedent and fired McMahon. Williams didn’t claim that the shooting of McCoy was unjustified; instead, he said that McMahon had violated “safety norms” by shooting while his partner was standing near the line of fire.

In a closed city-council meeting in October, Williams said that he is also pursuing disciplinary action against officers who recently kicked in the door of a house and Tased a man who they wrongly believed was suspected of domestic violence. In addition, Williams vowed to punish an officer who held his foot on a man’s head for at least a minute and a half while the man was handcuffed. Recent confidential city documents suggest that Williams is unpopular within the department. Officers have accused him of getting the job because he’s Black. “He thinks he is Black Jesus,” one said. Nichelini, the head of the V.P.O.A., has said that Williams “can’t speak English,” and that he won’t follow the chief’s orders if he doesn’t like them, according to the documents. “Chiefs come and go,” Nick Filloy, a public defender for fourteen years who works in Vallejo, told me. “It’s the sergeants and the shift lieutenants and the captains that really control the tenor of the department and that resist change.”

If Vallejo is an example of what can happen in a small city with a strong police union, it may also prove to be a test case of a city attempting to break the union’s power. In another closed city-council meeting in October, the mayor, Bob Sampayan, a former police officer, said, “I’m just absolutely done with the V.P.O.A. running the show. We need to show V.P.O.A. that they are not in

control.” The city has created a position for a civilian auditor to review police investigations and complaints against officers. The council, including its union-endorsed members, unanimously approved a proposal by the mayor, the chief, and the city manager to declare a public-safety emergency. This will allow them to implement police reforms without consulting the V.P.O.A., and to create non-union positions for assistant chiefs, who they hope will help rein in the police department. In response, the union said that the city was trying to “create a dictatorship . . . to circumvent state and local laws and regulations.”

The fight to break the union could go on for years, or it could fade away. In the meantime, the Monterrosa and McCoy families have sued the city. If these cases end in large payouts, insurance providers could refuse to continue the city’s coverage, which would force it to disband its police department, as has happened in a few other small cities, including Lincoln Heights, Ohio, and Maywood, California.

Monterrosa’s sisters and local activists recently put up a billboard facing the police station, where Jarrett Tonn is back at work. It shows Monterrosa, a slight smile on his lips. “We wanted to remind the police that Sean can’t be forgotten,” Ashley, one of Monterrosa’s sisters, told me. “We want to make sure Jarrett Tonn sees the person he killed every single day.” ♦

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## Race, Policing, and Black Lives Matter Protests

- The [death of George Floyd](#), in context.
- The civil-rights lawyer [Bryan Stevenson](#) examines the frustration and despair behind the protests.
- Who, David Remnick asks, is the true agitator behind the [racial unrest](#)?
- A sociologist examines the so-called [pillars of whiteness](#) that prevent white Americans from confronting racism.
- The Black Lives Matter co-founder Opal Tometi on what it would mean to [defund police departments](#), and what comes next.
- The quest to transform the United States [cannot be limited](#) to challenging its brutal police.

## Night Life

- [A Three-LP Set of Sonny Rollins, Liberated from the Studio](#)

[November 23, 2020 Issue](#)

## A Three-LP Set of Sonny Rollins, Liberated from the Studio

On Record Store Day (Nov. 27), Resonance Records is releasing “Rollins in Holland,” a set of the saxophone master’s expansive concert and radio performances from 1967.

November 13, 2020



*Photograph by Toon Fey / Courtesy Resonance Records*

Though Sonny Rollins, at the age of ninety, is no longer playing the saxophone, his legacy is still growing. On Record Store Day (Nov. 27), an annual celebration of independently owned music shops, Resonance Records, a prime label for rediscovered jazz classics, issues the three-LP set “**Rollins in Holland.**” It features expansive concert and radio performances with the bassist Ruud Jacobs and the drummer Han Bennink from 1967, and showcases—in cuts up to twenty-two minutes—Rollins’s freely associative artistry liberated from studio norms.

## **On Television**

- Royal Competition in “The Crown”

# Royal Competition in “The Crown”

The show depicts not only how the Empire has crumbled but its descent into a kind of domestic crumminess.

By [Hilton Als](#)

November 15, 2020



You don't have to be a royal watcher—I'm not—to find the fourth season of "The Crown" (on Netflix) compelling. It's not that it isn't fun to watch royal infidelity, sibling rivalry, emotional breakdowns, political friction, misbegotten romances, and dog mania play out against backgrounds that include Buckingham Palace and various grand country estates. But the point here is that, just as you begin to luxuriate in the lurid gossip behind the façade of tradition, wealth, and fading glory, Peter Morgan, the show's creator and writer, pulls back the brocade curtain and introduces a reality that feels more like yours than not. These wrinkles of truth—a mouse trotting unnoticed across the Queen Mother's floor while she waits for a call, guards fucking around and ignoring the security cameras during shift changes, a princess vomiting into a toilet again and again—are blemishes on a vast and decaying body; Morgan wants to show not only how the Empire has crumbled but its descent into a kind of domestic crumminess.

In an episode based on an incident that took place in 1982—the season covers the years 1979 to 1990—a young man named Michael Fagan (exceptionally well played by Tom Brooke) breaks into Buckingham Palace and holds the Queen (Olivia Colman) hostage in her bedchamber for about ten minutes. Unhinged, lonely, poor, and desperate for an audience, Fagan wants someone to hear his side of things: Margaret Thatcher (Gillian Anderson) has made life worse for men like him—out-of-work blokes who can't get a leg up, can't get a decent wage, let alone mental-health care. Added to all that frustration, there is his disappointment with the palace itself. How could a world we associate with power and glamour be so worn and chipped, so frowsy? "The Crown" is replete with letdowns. Long-held beliefs and hopes crash and burn, then crash and burn again, as reality intrudes.

The ten-episode season opens with well-edited shots of the Queen in full military regalia, sitting straight-backed on a horse, saluting her troops. It's an official occasion, and members of her immediate family are present. The scene is crosscut with period documentary footage of crowds in Northern Ireland protesting British rule—which makes clear Morgan's interest in what happens when you juxtapose an interpretation of fact with the facts themselves, when you plop your imagination down into the middle of the real. It's rare that this sort of juxtaposing is as good as it is in "The Crown"—I'm thinking of recent disappointments such as Hulu's "The Great," about Catherine the Great, and Netflix's "Self-Made," about the Black American businesswoman Madam C. J. Walker. While "The Great" and "Self-Made" play with history, or make a

play of history, their conceits are postmodern and glib (especially when it comes to character), allergic to both sentiment and depth. Morgan's characters, by contrast, live with history, and it's a shock sometimes, while watching "The Crown," to realize the extent to which we are all history's subjects, as vulnerable to its whims as we are to those of family.

Still, the Troubles seem far away, in another place altogether, when we find the aging Lord Louis Mountbatten (Charles Dance) in his summer residence, Classiebawn Castle, in northwest Ireland. It's 1979. A cousin of the Queen's, Mountbatten (nicknamed Dickie) was also something of a surrogate father to Prince Philip (Tobias Menzies), who was essentially orphaned as a child, and whose background Morgan featured in Seasons 2 and 3. Now Mountbatten—a military strategist who was much admired by Winston Churchill, and who served as India's pre-independence viceroy—is turning his attention to Prince Charles (Josh O'Connor). Dickie is pissed off. Charles, instead of finding a wife who will supply him with an heir, has fallen in love with a married woman, Camilla Parker Bowles (the wonderfully suggestive Emerald Fennell). Charles and Camilla first met around 1971, and sometime after that began their on-again, off-again relationship, which, by the dawn of the go-go eighties, made up Charles's entire erotic and emotional universe. The royal heart wants what it wants, but none of this sits well with Mountbatten, and he writes Charles a note to say so: Doesn't the Prince realize the grave moral responsibility of being the future King? He must grow up and assume the duty he was born into—upholding and preserving the monarchy. These directives, of course, don't acknowledge how society has progressed or how a young man like Charles has progressed with it. He's caught between Empire Dying and Empire Dead. No sooner does Mountbatten fire off the note than he, in the way of serials, gets blown up by the I.R.A., while out in his boat trapping lobsters.

A lot of "The Crown" is shot in closeup, or medium closeup, and it's a canny choice, given that everything takes place in a closed-off world of closed-off emotions. You feel the grief when the Queen and her family receive the news of Mountbatten's death, but it's because of what they don't or can't articulate during a brutal time. You have to read their thoughts—the flickering hurt, the mirth, the dull incomprehension, the anger—because rarely does their spoken language approximate what you can see them experiencing. Morgan takes the Windsors' collective repression and makes it a style.

Of the younger actors, O'Connor is especially adept at conveying physical

discomfort and rage. With his shoulders hunched and his hands buried in his jacket pockets, O'Connor's Prince Charles seems to have been made smug by martyrdom; it's a martyrdom that grows more shrill and anguished after he meets Lady Diana Spencer (Emma Corrin) and, eventually, marries her. Charles does so out of duty, rather than love; like a closeted gay man who marries a woman for social acceptability and advancement, Charles turns Diana into his beard. Diana, however, who fantasizes about a perfect romantic union with a fairy-tale prince, wants more, dreams of more, as she roller-skates around desolate Kensington Palace, boogying to Duran Duran. (This is a great touch, the kind of thing you might see on "The Windsors," a hilarious parody of life as a royal, also on Netflix.) Inevitably, the more Charles withholds love and attention, the more desperate Diana becomes for his approval, for control over her marriage. Her loneliness is a wound that Charles finds distasteful and longs to separate himself from, but he can't: he must live in service to the crown. Their scenes together in enclosed spaces—in a car, on a plane—work particularly well, because the actors' movement is limited and they must depend on their faces and their voices to convey the odd moments of joy or dismay. (It's important to remember that both Charles and Diana had an interest in amateur theatrics; as a young man, the Prince wanted to be an actor, while Diana loved to dance.)

I don't envy any actress trying to impersonate Diana, who, in some ways, remains the most relatable, and thus the most popular, English royal. Even with the enormous sympathy that Corrin evinces, especially when it comes to Diana's bulimia and her struggle to be seen, she can't quite find a center to the role. She seems disembodied somehow. She doesn't so much convey Diana's fears as express her fear of playing Diana. Corrin's Princess stands over there, while the actress stands over here, and we have to bridge the distance with our own feelings and memories.

Tom Burke, who plays Dazzle Jennings, a friend of Princess Margaret's, doesn't have the weight of all that history to contend with, but his acting is so far superior to that of some of the other players that he raises the bar on truthfulness in performance. By the time he appears—it's the mid-eighties—Margaret (Helena Bonham Carter) has been made puffy by booze, indolence, and willfulness. She's an inconsolable royal who, like Charles and Diana, loves to perform. Gummimg up her potty mouth with red lipstick, Margaret waits for Dazzle. When we see him, it's in medium long shot, and from Margaret's point of view; without saying a word, he fills the frame with vibrancy and perversion, snaking his way toward Margaret as David Bowie's "Let's Dance" plays in her

sitting room. Dazzle and Margaret, as they prance around, look like babies in evening dress; champagne is their milk. They're a couple who don't want the party to end. What would they do if it did? When the music stops, the Princess leans over to kiss Dazzle, who raises his hand to block her from doing so. The camera pauses on Burke's face, and you can see what his character feels in that moment: a mixture of sadness, pity, and curiosity. It's this quality—this ability to physically manifest imagination—that makes Burke, to my mind, one of the finest actors of his generation. (He exercised a similar precision and perverse understanding of discomfort in Joanna Hogg's 2019 film, "The Souvenir.") Watching Burke—who ups Bonham Carter's game, too—can break your heart, because this is not acting; it is being.

Colman's characterization of the Queen is also less a performance than a refraction of reality. Each character in "The Crown" has a history, and Colman drapes herself in the Queen's, as if in an ermine cape, and revels in it. There is a shattering scene in the fourth episode when the Queen is talking to Prince Philip about her failure to become the mother she wanted to be. She says that when her children were young she vowed that she would not have the nanny bathe them. And yet, when the time came and she tried to do it, she couldn't. She can love only at a distance because she has been loved only at a distance. It's in moments like this one that Morgan's writing rises to the level of Colman's performance, and his words support her vision of the Queen as a woman who lives in a world she didn't make but has sworn to uphold, even if that means remaining silent, at least for a time, on the horror of colonialism, the horror of apartheid in South Africa, the horror of Britain's oppression of Ireland, the horror of the recession under Thatcher's conservative watch. It takes a great actress to make us feel that these horrors—very real ones that have scarred and disfigured many over the years—are part of Queen Elizabeth's largely unspoken backstory. Colman brings them to the surface as subtly as she steers Morgan's script away from the girl-fight clichés of Elizabeth butting heads with Thatcher or Diana. She deals with these scenes with reason and, sometimes, controlled passion, but never melodrama, because that is not the person she is playing. Colman wants us to know that her interpretation of the Queen is hers, and also not hers: she is there to embody a living myth, and it is her job to show how that body responds when distressed or trying to express affection or disconcerted by the way the next generation wrestles with the problems of being in love and in trouble.

Honest and unhampered by affectation, Colman, the most humble of stars, shows us how little Elizabeth knows and how much she needs to know in her changing

world. At one of the family gatherings, Thatcher, the daughter of a greengrocer, is clearly uncomfortable as the royals try to convince her to join in the drinking game Ibble Dibble, which involves blackening one's face with a burned cork. Watching Colman and the brilliant Marion Bailey, who plays the Queen Mother, as they attempt to jolly Thatcher along, their faces striped with soot, I was stunned by what the royals didn't see in their game, blinded myself by the truth of their blindness. ♦

# **Philadelphia Postcard**

- [A Philadelphia Local Is Unamused by the Fuss](#)

[November 23, 2020 Issue](#)

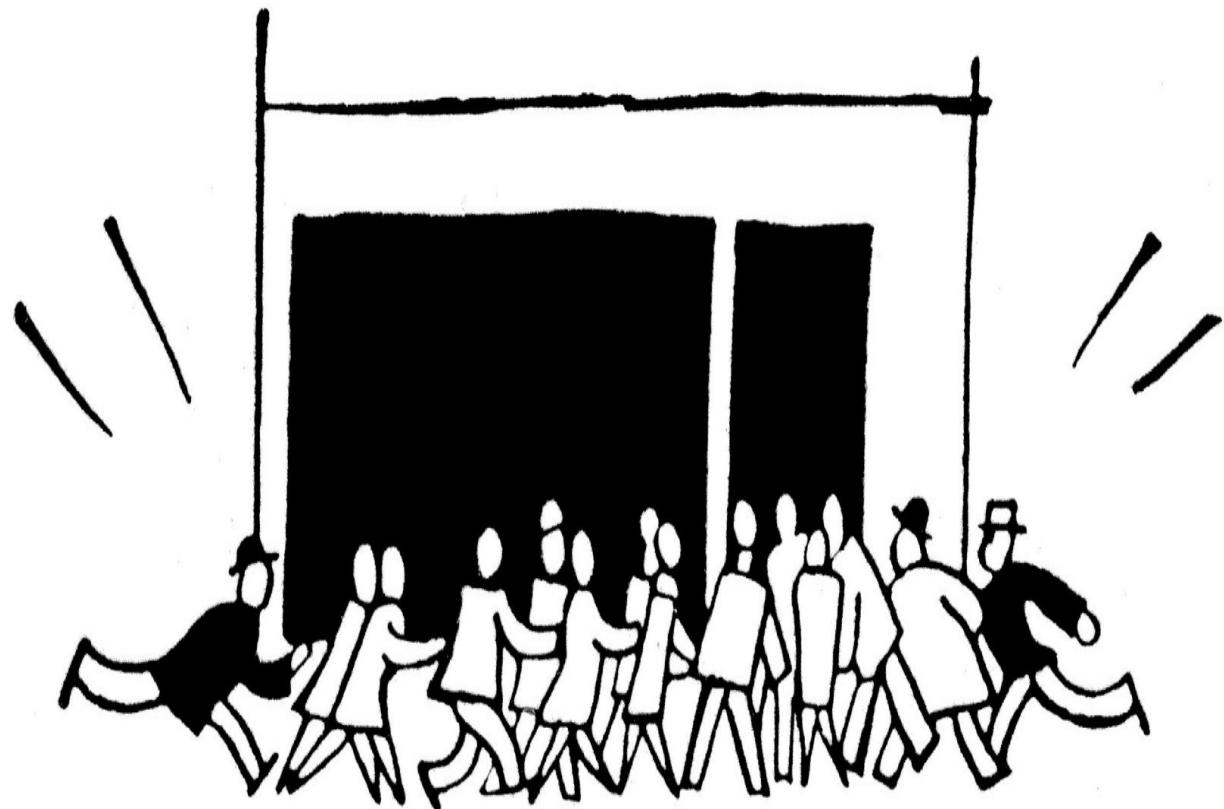
# A Philadelphia Local Is Unamused by the Fuss

Biden supporters blast music, Trump supporters wave signs that read “Stop the Cheat,” and the people of Philly have had enough.

By [Dave Eggers](#)

November 16, 2020

It was about 5 p.m. on November 5th. Inside the Convention Center in Philadelphia, the votes that would determine the Presidential election were being counted. Outside, Anne Palagruto, in her burgundy medical scrubs, was over it. The noise was too much. The closed streets were tying the city in knots.



“This is ridiculous,” she said.

The day was warm and balmy, and about three hundred Biden supporters were there to insist that every vote be counted. A few feet away, hemmed into a barricade cage, about twenty Trump supporters stood, waving Trump flags and being jeered by the Biden group. The Biden supporters had a d.j., and the music was loud. Earlier, there had been a particularly good run of Whitney Houston and James Brown and the “Cha Cha Slide.” Even one of the Trump people had been dancing to that one.

“I tell you the truth, I don’t see the point,” Palagruto said. “They count every vote either way. It’s the law. Not that I’m against protest, but I think, *C’mon*. They’re counting the votes! It took me an extra hour to get home because of traffic.” She had just finished her shift at a nearby hospital, where she works as a lab technician. From about fifty feet away, in front of a Panera Bread, she watched the scene. “They’re gonna count the votes whether you’re chanting or not!” she yelled, cupping her hands around her mouth. “They’re counting ’em! Now go home!”

Palagruto has an accent so acute—“gonna” was “go-won-a”—and an attitude so Philly-specific that, if the city ever wanted a no-B.S. tourism spokesperson, no one but her would suffice. *Come to Philly*, she’d say. *Or don’t. No one cares.*

She’d been dropped off earlier by her husband. “I jumped out of the car. He won’t come here because he’s afraid of everything,” she joked. Since the election, he’d been talking about voter fraud, but Palagruto wasn’t having it. “He’s what I would call naïve. He’s not stupid, he just believes a lot of stuff. He doesn’t look anything up. I say, ‘I’ll listen to your pain if you can back it up.’ ”

Down the street, a pair of women were making “Every Vote Counts” signs on the sidewalk. A man walked by wearing a “Leave Philly Alone” T-shirt. The chanting of “Count every vote!” got louder. Someone was beating a drum.

“And you know why I’m annoyed, too?” Palagruto said. “Because my house had a flood. Somebody flushed the toilet. They tell you, make sure you hear it stop after you flush, right? But who listens? So somebody flushed it, we went to bed, and it overflowed the whole eight or ten hours we were sleeping! I’m laughing now, because what are you gonna do?”

A river of bicycle cops flowed by. Three helicopters hovered, their rotors rattling like a lunatic washing machine.

“So the water was in the floor,” she continued, “and the ceiling. It built up like a fish tank, and eventually got too heavy, and in the morning the upstairs was downstairs. So they put us in a hotel, and guess where it is? Across the street from City Hall!”

First, there’d been the protests following the police killing of Walter Wallace, Jr., and now this. “I can’t go outside at night, because there’s curfews,” she said. “And you can’t go to Wawa. There’s no food. So I have to cook. Who wants to cook at a hotel?”

At the barricades, Trump supporters waved signs that read “Stop the Cheat.” These signs had been printed professionally, indicating a possibility that they’d been printed before Election Day.

“You can’t cheat,” Palagruto said. “You go down, you sign your name, you vote, you put it in the box. What do these people think?” She added that her husband, her daughter-in-law, and her daughter-in-law’s mother had all been poll workers. “There are, like, seven states that take ballots up to three days after. This is not new. So why are you complaining now?”

She had no patience for the Trump people, but the Biden people, she felt, were misguided: “You know what, if they want to protest for different, other things, rights and all that, I’m all for it. But everybody voted already!”

She went on, “I used to like living here. But the last few years there’s too much crime, everyone has a gun, every single day.” She asked a correspondent if he was from here; he said no.

“Then what are you doing here?” she asked. “I just feel like, you know, I have sons, too. It makes you worry, too, because every single day, this one’s shot, that one’s shot. They’re shooting each other. Why don’t you fix *that*, when you’re marching? How ’bout this: Hire a security guard for every block. How about that? There’s a lot of things you can do. I don’t understand it. I would do it different.” ♦

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# Read More About the 2020 Election

- William Barr is the one Administration official with the power to stop Donald Trump and his [attempted coup](#).
- Trump has survived impeachment, twenty-six sexual-misconduct accusations, and thousands of lawsuits. [His luck may well end](#) now that Joe Biden has been elected the next President.
- With litigation unlikely to change the outcome of the election, [Republicans are looking to strategies that might remain](#) even after rebuffs both at the polls and in court.
- We have to talk about what happened under the Trump Presidency and how we can [prevent it from happening again](#).
- If 2020 has demonstrated anything, it is the need to rebalance the economy to benefit the working class—and [there are many ways a Biden Administration can start](#).
- Sign up for our [daily newsletter](#) for insight and analysis from our reporters and columnists.

## Poems

- [We Feel Now a Largeness Coming On](#)
- [Back from the Cannery](#)

[November 23, 2020 Issue](#)

# We Feel Now a Largeness Coming On

By [Tracy K. Smith](#)

November 16, 2020

*Audio: Read by the author.*

Being called all manner of things  
from the Dictionary of Shame—  
not English, not words, not heard,  
but worn, borne, carried, never spent—  
we feel now a largeness coming on,  
something passing into us. We know  
not in what source it was begun, but  
rapt, we watch it rise through our fallen,  
our slain, our millions dragged, chained.  
Like daylight setting leaves alight—  
green to gold to blinding white.  
Like a spirit caught. Flame-in-flesh.  
I watched a woman try to shake it, once,  
from her shoulders and hips. A wild  
annihilating fright. Other women  
formed a wall around her, holding back  
what clamored to rise. God. Devil.  
Ancestor. What Black bodies carry  
through your schools, your cities.  
Do you see how mighty you've made us,  
all these generations running?  
Every day steeling ourselves against it.  
Every day coaxing it back into coils.  
And all the while feeding it.  
And all the while loving it.

[November 23, 2020 Issue](#)

# Back from the Cannery

By [Kirmen Uribe](#)

November 16, 2020

*Audio: Read, in English, by the translator, and, in the original Basque, by the author.*

Our grandmother worked at the cannery.  
And our mother and aunts.  
They were workers, not housewives.

Or were that, too.  
I liked that smell they brought home  
when they came in from work.

That smell of fish, perspiration, and brine.  
Though they all hated it.  
The smell that's so hard to wash off and forget.

The women at our house worked in the cannery  
and, afterward, at home.  
They cleaned anchovies at the kitchen table.

While I played around underneath it.  
If I was lucky they'd give me a taste.  
Even sandwiches were anchovy ones or tuna fish.

I preferred that to sausage or chocolate.  
Even though my friends laughed at me.  
Those were some different times.

Back then the women sang in the canneries,  
and their bosses gave them leave  
if they had to breastfeed the baby.

The women took their breaks together.  
In their work clothes, leaning against the stone wall  
taking the sun or smoking, eyes closed.

They had a peaceful moment that way,  
and forgot about work,  
husbands and children.

Today, quite a few years later,  
I close my eyes, too,  
wanting to find that peaceful moment of theirs.

I open my mouth, expectantly maybe,  
for a woman's hand to give me the gift  
of an anchovy fillet.

The gift arrived over the kitchen table.  
While I was playing underneath it.  
Alone, because they had to work.

*(Translated, from the Basque, by Elizabeth Macklin.)*

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

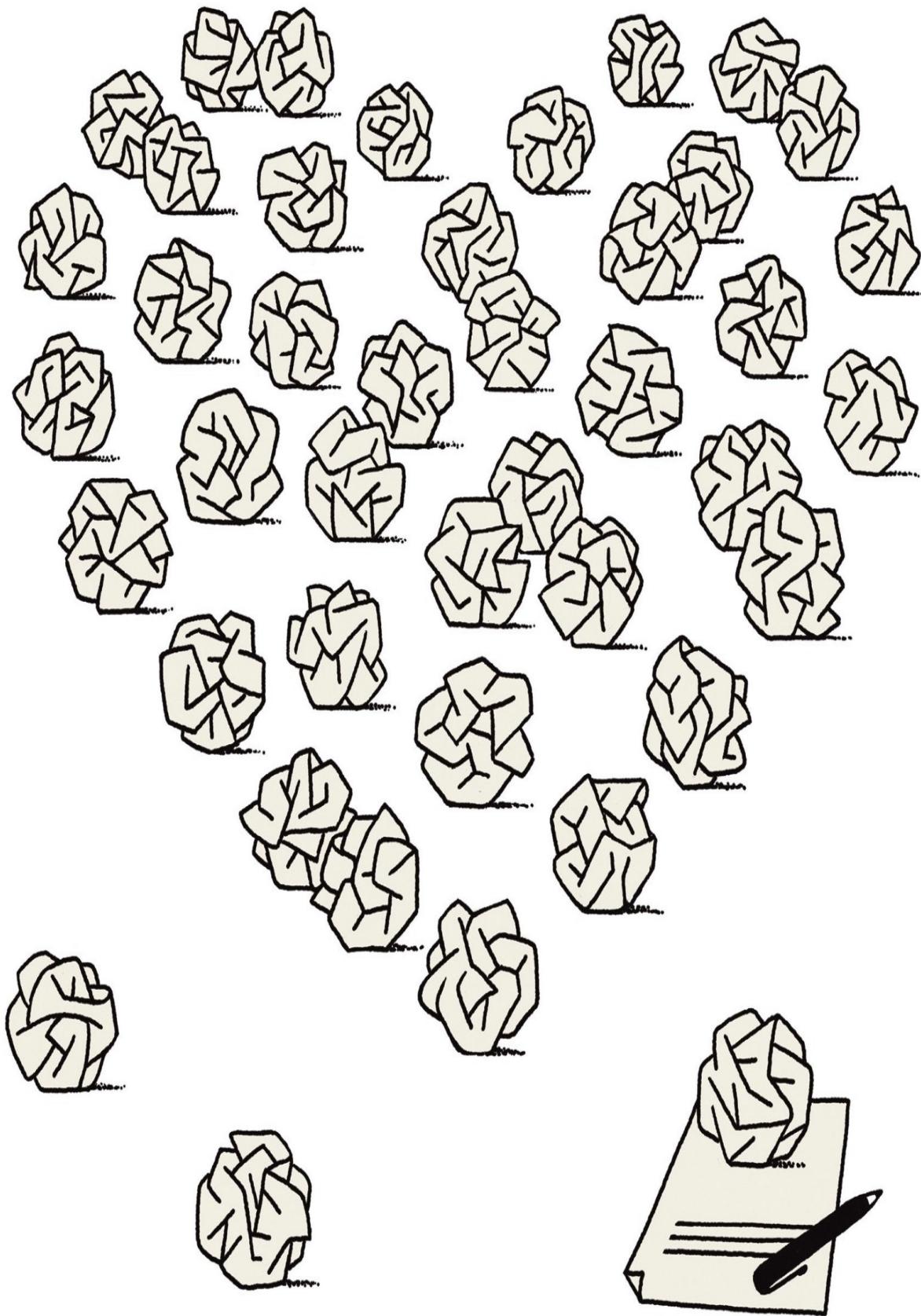
- [First Lines of Rejected “Modern Love” Essays](#)

[November 23, 2020 Issue](#)

# First Lines of Rejected “Modern Love” Essays

By [Zach Zimmerman](#)

November 16, 2020



Modern Love is a weekly column, a book, a podcast—and now, in its 16th year, a television show—about relationships, feelings, betrayals and revelations.

—*The Times*.

My husband and I don't text, we don't talk, we don't live together, I don't know where he lives (I have my guesses), and we've never been more in modern love.

The vows wrote themselves, pouring from my ballpoint pen like milk being poured from a gallon of milk.

At the top of Machu Picchu, as the woman I would one day call my wife vomited up the engagement ring I'd hidden in her Nalgene, I caught a glimpse of God's plan.

I asked Sally to watch “When Harry Met Sally” with me on our third date. My name isn't Harry—it's Henry—but it would have been very cool if it were Harry.

It felt right when I swiped right, but when he left I wished that I had swiped in the other direction (left).

The charcuterie board was covered with meats, cheeses, and a dog-eared letter from my late great-grandfather.

First, he stole my identity. Then he stole my heart.

In this “Modern Love” essay, I will argue that, although my ex cheated on me with my best friend, I share blame for the demise of our relationship, insofar as I could not successfully articulate my emotional wants, needs, and feelings in a concise, productive way during the relationship.

When I met Sally, I asked if she'd seen “When Harry Met Sally.” She had. I hadn't. My name is Brian.

“What is love? Baby, don't hurt me,” Haddaway sang over the hospital loudspeakers as a baby named Haddaway hurt me during a scheduled C-section.

I'm Christian. My husband is Jewish. We're getting a Buddhist divorce.

Of all the Etsy shops in all the towns in all the world, she bought used baby shoes from mine.

I called No. 54 at the D.M.V. where I work. The next day, No. 54 called my number.

Men always ask me to watch "When Harry Met Sally" because my name is Sally, but they're never named Harry, so they're not as clever as they think.

Everything on my wedding day was picture perfect—it's how I knew that something was horribly wrong.

Love is like a box of chocolates, in that I like both of those things.

In rural Alabama, where coyotes holler and jug bands play, "I love you"s are rarer than routine medical care.

The dick pic looked familiar, as if I'd seen it in a dream; then it dawned on me that it was a picture of my own penis.

When you realize you don't want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible, Sally.

I didn't know love until I gave birth and fell in modern love with the obstetrician. ♦

## **Tables for Two**

- [Eleven Madison Park's Foie-Gras-Stuffed Chicken To Go](#)

[November 23, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Eleven Madison Park's Foie-Gras-Stuffed Chicken To Go**

In the upheaval of the pandemic, the chef Daniel Humm converted his kitchen into a commissary for an organization that feeds New Yorkers in need—and converted fine dining into takeout for the one per cent.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

November 13, 2020



For years, the restaurant Eleven Madison Park set the standard for fine dining in New York City and the world, at least for a certain crowd. In 2017, it was ranked No. 1 by an opaque committee that chooses “the World’s 50 Best Restaurants.” By late 2019, the price of the tasting menu, which could take up to five hours to complete and once famously included a course of carrot tartare, fed tableside, and straight-facedly, into a meat grinder, had risen to three hundred and thirty-five dollars, before wine and other add-ons.



*For two hundred and seventy-five dollars, the dinner includes a pre-stuffed raw chicken, half of a roasted squash, salad fixings, a potato gratin, an apple tart, and a cannister of granola. Wine is extra.* Photograph by Naila Ruechel for *The New Yorker*

And then the ground beneath the restaurant industry fell out; not even the most venerated blocks of Madison Avenue were exempt. After the pandemic forced dining rooms to close, Daniel Humm, the chef who bought Eleven Madison Park from Danny Meyer in 2011, seemed to undergo a sort of radicalization. In an interview with *Bloomberg Businessweek*, in May, he described his “biggest lightbulb moment”: the decision to transform his kitchen into a commissary for a nonprofit called Rethink Food, which provides free meals for New Yorkers. “The infrastructure to end hunger needs to come out of the restaurants,” he said. “I don’t need to only feed the 1% anymore.”

For a while, it seemed like he might not feed the one per cent at all. The restaurant has never offered outdoor dining, and Humm has so far elected not to operate indoors at twenty-five-per-cent capacity. A hypothetical reopening is “a blank canvas right now,” he told *Bloomberg Businessweek*. “We would need to redefine what luxury means.” But, before the wealthiest New Yorkers could go into champagne-and-caviar withdrawal, Humm launched EMP To Go, offering a roast-chicken dinner—plus a turkey iteration for Thanksgiving, Krug Grande Cuvée and white-sturgeon roe optional—for pickup in not only Manhattan and Brooklyn but also the notorious one-per-cent strongholds of East Hampton; Greenwich, Connecticut; and Montclair, New Jersey.



*The meal is designed to serve as many as four people, and can be picked up from Manhattan, Brooklyn, Long Island, New Jersey, or Connecticut. Photograph by Naila Ruechel for The New Yorker*

Is EMP To Go the world's best takeout? On a recent rainy Sunday, I arrived at Grand Army Plaza, in Brooklyn, on the lookout for a dark-gray BMW X7 parked in the roundabout's inner ring, as per e-mailed instructions. At the car, a man scanned a clipboard for my name and then handed me an expensive-looking blue-canvas insulated bag embossed with the restaurant's abstractly floral logo, for which I had paid two hundred and seventy-five dollars. My feeling of furtive anointment was replaced quickly by a flush of embarrassment; putting aside questions of morality, fine dining is decidedly uncool.

Back home, I unpacked the free-range, certified humanely raised chicken, raw but ready to be roasted, pre-stuffed with brioche, foie gras, and truffle. A box of bitter greens came with tiny jars: vinaigrette and sunflower-seed crumble. There was half of a baked butternut squash, sheathed in waxy seaweed, with a miso-cured egg yolk to grate on top of it, plus a par-baked potato gratin, an apple tart, and a cannister of the restaurant's status-symbol granola. "Truffle and eggs," a two-hundred-dollar add-on I'd assumed was coyly named, turned out to be plainly literal: six raw eggs and a pair of dark, mottled knobs that smelled vaguely astringent, along with directions for how to master a French omelette.



*The butternut squash comes with a miso-cured egg yolk and a small zester for shaving it on top. Instructions for cooking the chicken include frosting the skin with butter before roasting it.* Photograph by Naila Ruechel for *The New Yorker*

The chicken was the most decadent I'd ever cooked, not to mention the most beautifully bronzed. (The secret, I think, was frosting the skin, like a cake, with softened butter.) The squash yielded easily to a spoon after I warmed it through, brown butter pooling in its cavity, and the rich, velvety gratin was stretchy with Gruyère and sharp with Parmesan. But my prevailing emotion was discomfort, when the plates had been cleared—and not because I had to wash them myself. If Humm's pivot to philanthropy felt like a silver lining of the pandemic, a long-overdue reckoning with a system that favors few, EMP To Go seemed to undercut it, luxury adapted but far from redefined. Shaved clumsily over my omelette, the truffles were only as remarkable as nuts, and, paradoxically, less valuable for their scarcity. (*Roast-chicken dinner \$275.*) ♦

# The Current Cinema

- “Mank” and the Making of “Citizen Kane”

[November 23, 2020 Issue](#)

# “Mank” and the Making of “Citizen Kane”

David Fincher’s bio-pic takes a dreamy look at the show-biz myths surrounding the uneasy collaboration of Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

November 13, 2020



As the film critic Donald Trump once pointed out, “There was a great rise in ‘[Citizen Kane](#),’ and there was a modest fall. The fall wasn’t a financial fall. The fall was a personal fall. But it was a fall nevertheless.” Wise words, equally applicable to Humpty Dumpty. Risings and fallings abound in [David Fincher](#)’s new movie, “Mank,” which was written by his late father, Jack Fincher, and is largely about the creation of “Citizen Kane” (1941). The title refers to Herman J. Mankiewicz, who is credited, at the end of “Citizen Kane,” as the co-author of the screenplay, together with a guy named Orson Welles. Their work was honored with an Academy Award—the only Oscar that the film received. Neither man showed up for the ceremony, in 1942, at the Biltmore Hotel, where, it is said, every mention of “Citizen Kane” was jeered.

Mankiewicz, who worked for this magazine in its infancy, before eloping west, was one of those people who are so deeply rooted in their era that you can’t imagine them living at any other time. He looked like a highly amused potato. Trying to think of something that he didn’t laugh at is a thankless task. (There is a photograph of him dressed up as Groucho, Chico, and Harpo Marx simultaneously.) His mug was round and knobbly; his mouth was wide and fully occupied, with booze going in and a gurgle of words flowing out. He was a gambler, too. On one occasion, according to “Mank,” he bet five thousand bucks on the fall of a leaf. So, who should play him onscreen? W. C. Fields could have done it, long ago, on condition that the props department supplied real alcohol, not some filthy aqueous substitute. Charles Durning would have been ideal. Oliver Platt, perhaps, might fit the bill. In the event, Fincher plumps for Gary Oldman, who, after triumphing as Winston Churchill, in “Darkest Hour” (2017), is no stranger to men of whopping appetites and liquor-boosted wit.

“Mank” pays tribute to “Citizen Kane” in aspects great and small. The snow globe, slipping from the hand of the dying Kane at the outset of Welles’s film, is nicely echoed by Fincher with a closeup of an empty bottle, tumbling from his hero’s grasp. Both films are in black and white, and both are chronologically restless, dancing to and fro from year to year. We start in 1940, with Mankiewicz en route to Victorville, an hour or two from Los Angeles. He has a leg in plaster and a mission to fulfill. At a lonely ranch, with a secretary, Rita Alexander (Lily Collins), to take dictation and to keep him off the sauce, he must generate a script for Welles’s début film. John Houseman (Sam Troughton), Welles’s theatrical comrade, will oversee the progress of the plan. (Troughton plays him as a fusspot, with diction to match: “We’re expecting grrreat things,” “We’re at a Rrrubicon moment.” Was Houseman quite as prim as that?) Now the

flashbacks kick in. One presents us with the car crash that injured Mankiewicz; another spirits us to 1930, with the writer Charles Lederer arriving at Paramount Studios. He bears an alluring telegram from Mankiewicz, informing him, “There are millions to be made and your only competition is idiots.”

There was such a telegram, although, in truth, it was sent to Ben Hecht. “Mank” does a lot of this—polishing old show-biz myths and rearranging them on the mantelpiece. Thus, the well-worn line about using Western Union, rather than a movie, if you need to send a message is randomly assigned to Louis B. Mayer (Arliss Howard), the lord of M-G-M. Similarly, every Mankiewicz fan has heard about his vomiting at dinner, apologizing to his host, and explaining that it’s O.K., because the white wine came up with the fish; but where did the gag occur? Fincher places it at San Simeon, the plush stronghold of William Randolph Hearst (Charles Dance, in excellent fettle), where Mankiewicz was often invited, in the nineteen-thirties. There, once more in flashback, we watch him, in his capacity as court jester, diverting and offending the other guests.

He becomes a particular pal of Hearst’s long-suffering companion, the actress Marion Davies (Amanda Seyfried), whom we first encounter as she stands atop a pyramid of wood, with the cameras about to roll, ready for her immolation. “What’s at stake here?” Mankiewicz inquires. Later, he and Davies take a moonlit stroll, among the statues and the private menageries. “Now, that’s sticking the old neck out,” Mankiewicz says, as they approach the giraffes.

The lines are funny, but not *that* funny, and it’s never easy to make us believe in someone of lofty comic repute. (Another supposedly all-conquering wag is the protagonist of “The Man Who Came to Dinner,” which appeared a year after “Citizen Kane.”) He hurts a hip at the start of the movie and spends the rest of it firing off zingers from a supine position, and yet, as played by Monty Woolley, he can’t live up to the hype. Some folks thought that the part should have gone to Welles.) Is Oldman, though technically dazzling, the right man for the job? As a rule, what he radiates onscreen is not warm humor so much as a nipping comic ferocity; rarely are we not afraid of him, and that’s a problem for the new film, because Mankiewicz is meant to be tolerated, if not loved, by those who know and employ him. No one is more patient than his wife, Sara (Tuppence Middleton)—habitually referred to as “poor Sara,” though she finally snaps and demands that the habit cease. Good for her. Hearst, likewise, listens to Mankiewicz’s bons mots with a lenient smile and says, “That’s why I always want Mank around.” And guess how Mankiewicz repays the favor. He turns San

Simeon into Xanadu and Hearst into Kane, the hollowest of hollow men. Or so the legend goes.

Who wrote “Citizen Kane”? How long have you got? In 1971, *The New Yorker* published “[Raising Kane](#),” a two-part investigation of the puzzle by Pauline Kael. She argued that Mankiewicz was a prime mover of the film, essential to its ambience of fun, and that his thunder was stolen by the perfidious Welles. Her case was made with typical trenchancy and dash, and answered (dismantled, some would say) by Robert Carringer, in his 1985 book “[The Making of ‘Citizen Kane’](#),” which traced Welles’s reshaping of the screenplay, over many drafts, after Mankiewicz was done.

A more provoking question: Who cares who wrote “Citizen Kane”? Historians of cinema will shriek at the very notion, but we need to remind ourselves that millions of movie watchers couldn’t give a damn either way, and I wonder what they will make of “Mank.” On the one hand, it’s a Kaelite enterprise, dwelling on Mankiewicz and shunting Welles, played with palpable relish by Tom Burke, firmly into the sidings. On the other hand, the pop and the zest that Kael admired, in “Citizen Kane” and elsewhere, are in curiously short supply. Fincher’s film is gorgeous to behold, with its bright and feathery texture, plus a delicate spectrum of grays; thanks to digital sorcery, the leaves of trees look as white as snow, as they used to do on infrared film. But to what purpose? The richer shadows and yawning angles of “Citizen Kane” answer to Kane’s vision of the world, tilted off balance by solitude and wealth, whereas the dreaminess of “Mank” seems to sap it of dramatic momentum.

As for the action, much of it consists of a man lying in bed and spinning a yarn. Fincher, clearly alive to the threat of stagnation, insures that his hero’s labors are regularly interrupted by visitors to the ranch, including Davies, Lederer, Welles, and Mankiewicz’s brother Joe (Tom Pelphrey), who would later direct “All About Eve” (1950) and “Cleopatra” (1963). Meanwhile, inside the flashbacks, other famous figures come and go, or so the credits allege; apparently, we get a Clark Gable, a Bette Davis, and even a Garbo, though I swear I didn’t see them flit by. The whole movie, indeed, has an air of this-then-that, in lieu of a plot, and we are left to work out how, or if, the pieces lock together. There’s a detailed excursus into the California gubernatorial race of 1934, which Upton Sinclair lost, running on a poverty-fighting platform. Mankiewicz backed him, to Louis B. Mayer’s disgust: gripping stuff, no doubt, but what’s it doing here?

Then, there's the scene in which the housekeeper at the ranch, Frieda (Monika Grossmann), reveals that an entire village of German Jews was able to emigrate to safety with Mankiewicz's aid. What? When? Accurate or not, it has the smack of a tall tale, of the kind that Mank would be the first to make sport of. (He became, in his own words, an "ultra-Lindbergh," protesting America's entry into the Second World War—a caprice on which "Mank" chooses not to touch.) What we have here, in short, is a portrait of the artist as a contrarian, bent upon self-sabotage, and what it sorely lacks is a Rosebud. Many viewers of "Citizen Kane" are disappointed by that narrative dingus, with its link to a lost childhood, and Welles himself disparaged it as "dollar-book Freud." But it's *meant* to be disappointing; the Grail is worth less than the quest, and the quest provides that film with its immortal swagger. "Mank," by comparison, is a story of a story, and, for all its great beauty, it winds up chasing its own tale. ♦

# The Other Coast

- [Cazzie David's Existential Dread](#)

[November 23, 2020 Issue](#)

## Cazzie David's Existential Dread

On a stroll through the Hollywood Forever cemetery, the daughter of the “Seinfeld” creator Larry David discusses her new book of essays about self-doubt, anxiety, and other youthful preoccupations.

By [Naomi Fry](#)

November 16, 2020

It was a scorching day in Los Angeles, the heat rising from the pavement in a near-audible sizzle, but the writer Cazzie David was not about to put on sunglasses. “I’m the sort of person who, if I put on sunglasses, I’m afraid everyone will be, like, ‘Oh, she thinks she looks cool,’ ” she said, grimacing. David, who is twenty-six, slight, and dark-haired, with the kind of sardonic manner associated more with the East Coast than the West, tugged at the hem of her sweatshirt. “Why did I wear long sleeves? That’s so stupid,” she muttered. She took it off, and then, squinting over her surgical mask, she was ready to enter a graveyard.



David was at Hollywood Forever, an L.A. cemetery in which laypeople rest side by side with celebrities, lending the serene grounds—palm trees, swan-filled ponds, the occasional peacock—a kitschy glamour. “I’ve never really spent time in a graveyard,” David said. Her father, Larry, the co-creator of “Seinfeld” and the creator and star of HBO’s “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” may be our era’s preëminent icon of unease. “My grandparents all died when I was young, and my parents didn’t want me and my sister to come to the funerals,” she said. “They thought it would be too disturbing. Instead, they would do these things with us, like release flowers into the ocean.” She paused. “It would have probably been healthier to just go to the funerals!” Pointing to a black marble headstone, she said, “How cute is this couple, though?” The slab was laser-engraved with the photographic image of a man and a woman, cheek to cheek, she in a beret, he with his hair slicked back, nineteen-thirties style. “I wonder if this is from the time they died or from when they were young?” She made her way over an expanse of lawn, searching for a shady spot to sit down, then stopped abruptly. “Oh, my God, did I just step on a grave?” she asked.

David has recently published a [book of humorous essays](#) about being young, self-doubting, and anxious. “I find it kind of impossible to ignore the more looming aspects of being alive,” she said. “I’ve always had anxiety, but when I was a freshman in college”—at Emerson, in Boston—“I had a sort of mental breakdown. I was looking at my own eyeballs in the mirror and was, like, ‘How do I even exist? How do our cells make us people? What does it all mean?’ ” She attended an outpatient program, which helped her get over the episode, but existential dread—which, as she describes in her book, can make one “panicked to the point where your bones are rattling in your body so fast you can’t feel them vibrate”—still dogs her. “It definitely ruins every part of life you’re supposed to be enjoying,” she said. She laughed: “Obviously, at the same time, I know how completely unimportant and unoriginal I am when I have these thoughts.”

With the advent of *COVID*, David moved into her father’s house, in Pacific Palisades, to “make sure everybody was protected, because I was afraid my family was too stupid to take care of itself. I’m just slightly less stupid. I was in charge of sanitizing produce, which meant I could have easily killed my dad with bleach.” She went on, “My dad and I are very similar in terms of our worries about sickness and death, but then there’s a whole other set of fears and insecurities that he would never be able to understand. Like when you throw in

something like growing up with social media while being a girl.” She took a swig of water from her canteen. “My dad might go to a party and think, ‘Everybody here is smarter and more successful than me,’ but, when I go on Instagram, it’s like socializing every second with everyone who’s designed to make me feel the worst about myself: my exes’ new girlfriends, people who have the career I want, Kylie Jenner.” She began to walk down the cemetery path again. “I take breaks from Instagram, and, of course, it helps so much,” she said. “But I have this fear that, if I don’t check my phone constantly, I would be publicly humiliated somehow and I wouldn’t know it.”

Stepping over a trail of ants rushing along a pavement (“Do you know that some ants can live for up to thirty years? That always makes me feel guilty about killing them”), David headed toward a pond. She came across the grave of Johnny Ramone (né Cummings), whose headstone is topped by a bronze statue of the musician, shredding on his guitar, with his motorcycle jacket and signature bowl-cut hairdo. “This is so sick!” she said, enthusiastically. She stepped back. “Do you think he would have liked this grave? It’s a little cartoony, maybe. I wonder if I would like a grave like this.” ♦

## **Under the Streets**

- [The Mystery of the 7 Train's Broken Windows](#)

[November 23, 2020 Issue](#)

# The Mystery of the 7 Train's Broken Windows

Who's been smashing the ballistic safety glass in the cars, messing with the line's usually excellent M.D.B.F. (mean distance between failures)?

By [Ian Frazier](#)

November 16, 2020

In August, a mysterious and selective chaos descended upon the No. 7 subway line. Late-night trains were arriving at their last stop, in distant Queens, with broken windows. Most 7 trains consist of eleven cars. In one particular train, all the windows had been broken in two cars, for a total of forty-three windows. This is not a common problem. Sometimes rowdy baseball fans will break a window or two, but nobody could remember breakage on such a scale. In a few weeks of repeated incidents, the count of broken windows mounted to three hundred and five.



When vandalism occurs in a car, the entire train is taken out of service. In the case of the 7, trains needing attention descend a ramp from the elevated tracks at the Queens end of the line, cross a train yard, and enter a maintenance facility known as “the barn.” This building is like a huge performance space, about seven hundred and fifty feet long, about forty feet high at the peak of its skylights, and wide enough to fit five subway trains, parked on parallel tracks. Usually, when you enter a subway car, you’re at the height of its doors. In the barn, you see it from wheel level up, which makes it look taller and more awesome. Workers use portable fibreglass staissteps to enter the cars.

Balwant Ramoutar, the superintendent of the facility, grew up in Guyana, has a West Indian accent, and wears a white hard hat bearing a black “7” inside a purple circle. “The broken windows were a very big job,” he said recently, to a temporarily hard-hatted visitor. “At one time, eight consists”—segments five or six cars long—“among the forty-six No. 7 trains were out of service. Usually during morning rush hour we send a train every ninety seconds. This is a busy line. In one month, the No. 7 trains usually run a total of about 1.9 million miles.” With trains out of service because of broken windows, the total mileage was considerably lower.

José Morales and Frank Gambino (“I always get asked about the name—I’m no relation”) have the title of car inspector, and both began working at the barn of the 7 train fourteen years ago. Morales is big and has a broad face; Gambino is slighter, with a narrow face. Both wear T-shirts, light zip-up fleeces, and dark trousers, and both radiate unflappability. When the trains with broken windows started showing up, Gambino and Morales fixed them. “A window can take two, three hours to replace,” Gambino said. “The window frames are aluminum, the setscrews that hold them in place are steel, and sometimes the screws have reacted chemically with the frames, and you need to drill them out. That takes time.”

“The guy who did the vandalism must have used a hammer,” Morales said. “It’s impossible to bust those windows with just your fist. They’re ballistic safety glass, they don’t shatter. Actually, they’re two panes thick, with a sheet of plastic laminate in between. Lifting them out or putting them in, we needed other workers to help, because they’re heavy.”



*"Big deal, you were in labor for nineteen hours. I'm sure it was no picnic for me, either."*  
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

"Some days it was funny, the guy would only break two or three windows," Gambino said. "I guess it depended on his mood."

The names of some of the different windows in subway cars are: full-picture windows (the main windows in the middle), half-picture windows (the same as full-picture, except smaller, to leave room for the vents), door windows (oval, self-explanatory), vent windows (long and narrow, ditto), and motorman's-vision windows. Motormen need to be able to see, the tunnels are sometimes freezing, and many trains, like the 7, travel above ground, on elevated tracks, for part of their route. A motorman looks through extra-expensive glass with heating filaments in it to melt the ice and frost. For a while, the 7's windows were being broken so fast that the manufacturer, a company in Trumbauersville, Pennsylvania, forty-six miles north of Philadelphia, could not keep up with replacements.

At the moment, police are following leads, including a man seen briefly in a surveillance video. He is average-looking—young, dark-haired, and slim, wearing a blue T-shirt and a black bandanna for a mask, and he carries a small backpack, maybe to hold the putative hammer. Recently, the 7 has been running without problems, and it achieved an almost-best-in-city mark of six hundred and nineteen thousand miles M.D.B.F., which stands for "mean distance between failures." During this respite period, Trumbauersville has ramped up production, and new windows have refilled the tall, neatly labelled plywood shelves in the barn's supply room.

The investigation is ongoing. The window damage cost the Transportation Authority about a third of a million dollars. Fewer windows have been broken on the 7 train since September. "The guy disappeared, who knows why?" Gambino said. "Maybe he decided to get a real job." ♦

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