

PRICE \$8.99

NOV. 9, 2020

# THE NEW YORKER



- [A Reporter at Large](#)
- [Annals of National Security](#)
- [Art](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Coronavirus Chronicles](#)
- [Dept. of Polls](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [Florida Postcard](#)
- [Fresh Starts](#)
- [If U Cn Rd Ths](#)
- [Onward and Upward with the Arts](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Pop Music](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Sketchbook](#)
- [Tables for Two](#)
- [The Current Cinema](#)
- [The Theatre](#)

# A Reporter at Large

- [Why Trump Can't Afford to Lose](#)

# Why Trump Can't Afford to Lose

The President has survived one impeachment, twenty-six accusations of sexual misconduct, and an estimated four thousand lawsuits. That run of good luck may well end, perhaps brutally, if Joe Biden wins.

By [Jane Mayer](#)

November 1, 2020



The President was despondent. Sensing that time was running out, he had asked his aides to draw up a list of his political options. He wasn't especially religious, but, as daylight faded outside the rapidly emptying White House, he fell to his knees and prayed out loud, sobbing as he smashed his fist into the carpet. "What have I done?" he said. "What has happened?" When the President noted that the military could make it easy for him by leaving a pistol in a desk drawer, the chief of staff called the President's doctors and ordered that all sleeping pills and tranquilizers be taken away from him, to insure that he wouldn't have the means to kill himself.

The downfall of [Richard Nixon](#), in the summer of 1974, was, as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein relate in "[The Final Days](#)," one of the most dramatic in American history. That August, the Watergate scandal forced Nixon—who had been cornered by self-incriminating White House tape recordings, and faced impeachment and removal from office—to resign. Twenty-nine individuals closely tied to his Administration were subsequently indicted, and several of his top aides and advisers, including his Attorney General, John Mitchell, went to prison. Nixon himself, however, escaped prosecution because his successor, [Gerald Ford](#), granted him a pardon, in September, 1974.

No American President has ever been charged with a criminal offense. But, as [Donald Trump](#) fights to hold on to the White House, he and those around him surely know that if he loses—an outcome that nobody should count on—the presumption of immunity that attends the Presidency will vanish. Given that more than a dozen investigations and civil suits involving Trump are currently under way, he could be looking at an endgame even more perilous than the one confronted by Nixon. The Presidential historian Michael Beschloss said of Trump, "If he loses, you have a situation that's not dissimilar to that of Nixon when he resigned. Nixon spoke of the cell door clangng shut." Trump has famously survived one impeachment, two divorces, six bankruptcies, twenty-six accusations of sexual misconduct, and an estimated four thousand lawsuits. Few people have evaded consequences more cunningly. That run of good luck may well end, perhaps brutally, if he loses to [Joe Biden](#). Even if Trump wins, grave legal and financial threats will loom over his second term.

Two of the investigations into Trump are being led by powerful state and city law-enforcement officials in New York. Cyrus Vance, Jr., the Manhattan District Attorney, and Letitia James, New York's attorney general, are independently

pursuing potential criminal charges related to Trump's business practices before he became President. Because their jurisdictions lie outside the federal realm, any indictments or convictions resulting from their actions would be beyond the reach of a Presidential pardon. Trump's legal expenses alone are likely to be daunting. (By the time [Bill Clinton](#) left the White House, he'd racked up more than ten million dollars in legal fees.) And Trump's finances are already under growing strain. During the next four years, according to [a stunning recent Times report](#), Trump—whether reelected or not—must meet payment deadlines for more than three hundred million dollars in loans that he has personally guaranteed; much of this debt is owed to such foreign creditors as Deutsche Bank. Unless he can refinance with the lenders, he will be on the hook. The *Financial Times*, meanwhile, [estimates](#) that, in all, about nine hundred million dollars' worth of Trump's real-estate debt will come due within the next four years. At the same time, he is locked in a dispute with the Internal Revenue Service over a deduction that he has claimed on his income-tax forms; an adverse ruling could cost him an additional hundred million dollars. To pay off such debts, the President, whose net worth is estimated by *Forbes* to be two and a half billion dollars, could sell some of his most valuable real-estate assets—or, as he has in the past, find ways to stiff his creditors. But, according to [an analysis by the Washington Post](#), Trump's properties—especially his hotels and resorts—have been hit hard by [the pandemic](#) and the fallout from his divisive political career. “It’s the office of the Presidency that’s keeping him from prison and the poorhouse,” Timothy Snyder, a history professor at Yale who studies authoritarianism, told me.

The White House declined to answer questions for this article, and if Trump has made plans for a post-Presidential life he hasn't shared them openly. A business friend of his from New York said, “You can’t broach it with him. He’d be furious at the suggestion that he could lose.” In better times, Trump has revelled in being President. Last winter, a Cabinet secretary told me Trump had confided that he couldn’t imagine returning to his former life as a real-estate developer. As the Cabinet secretary recalled, the two men were gliding along in a motorcade, surrounded by throngs of adoring supporters, when Trump remarked, “Isn’t this incredible? After this, I could never return to ordering windows. It would be so boring.”

Throughout the 2020 campaign, Trump's national poll numbers have lagged behind Biden's, and two sources who have spoken to the President in the past month described him as being in a foul mood. He has testily insisted that he won

both Presidential debates, contrary to even his own family's assessment of the first one. And he has raged not just at the polls and the media but also at some people in charge of his reëlection campaign, blaming them for squandering money and allowing Biden's team to have a significant financial advantage. Trump's bad temper was visible on October 20th, when he cut short a "60 Minutes" interview with Lesley Stahl. A longtime observer who spent time with him recently told me that he'd never seen Trump so angry.

The President's niece Mary Trump—a psychologist and the author of the tell-all memoir "[Too Much and Never Enough](#)"—told me that his fury "speaks to his desperation," adding, "He knows that if he doesn't manage to stay in office he's in serious trouble. I believe he'll be prosecuted, because it seems almost undeniable how extensive and long his criminality is. If it doesn't happen at the federal level, it has to happen at the state level." She described the "narcissistic injury" that Trump will suffer if he is rejected at the polls. Within the Trump family, she said, "losing was a death sentence—literally and figuratively." Her father, Fred Trump, Jr., the President's older brother, "was essentially destroyed" by her grandfather's judgment that Fred was not "a winner." (Fred died in 1981, of complications from alcoholism.) As the President ponders potential political defeat, she believes, he is "a terrified little boy."

Barbara Res, whose new book, "[Tower of Lies](#)," draws on the eighteen years that she spent, off and on, developing and managing construction projects for Trump, also thinks that the President is not just running for a second term—he is running from the law. "One of the reasons he's so crazily intent on winning is all the speculation that prosecutors will go after him," she said. "It would be a very scary spectre." She calculated that, if Trump loses, "he'll never, ever acknowledge it—he'll leave the country." Res noted that, at a recent rally, Trump mused to the crowd about fleeing, ad-libbing, "Could you *imagine* if I lose? I'm not going to feel so good. Maybe I'll have to leave the country—I don't know." It's questionable how realistic such talk is, but Res pointed out that Trump could go "live in one of his buildings in another country," adding, "He can do business from anywhere."

It turns out that, in 2016, Trump in fact made plans to leave the United States right after the vote. [Anthony Scaramucci](#), the former Trump supporter who served briefly as the White House communications director, was with him in the hours before the polls closed. Scaramucci told me that Trump and virtually everyone in his circle had expected [Hillary Clinton](#) to win. According to

Scaramucci, as he and Trump milled around Trump Tower, Trump asked him, “What are you doing tomorrow?” When Scaramucci said that he had no plans, Trump confided that he had ordered his private plane to be readied for takeoff at John F. Kennedy International Airport, so that the next morning he could fly to Scotland, to play golf at his Turnberry resort. Trump’s posture, Scaramucci told me, was to shrug off the expected defeat. “It was, like, O.K., he did it for the publicity. And it was over. He was fine. It was a waste of time and money, but move on.” Scaramucci said that, if 2016 is any guide, Trump would treat a loss to Biden more matter-of-factly than many people expect: “He’ll go down easier than most people think. Nothing crushes this guy.”

Mary Trump, like Res, suspects that her uncle is considering leaving the U.S. if he loses the election (a result that she regards as far from assured). If Biden wins, she suggested, Trump will “describe himself as the best thing that ever happened to this country and say, ‘It doesn’t deserve me—I’m going to do something really important, like build the Trump Tower in Moscow.’ ”

The notion that a former American President would go into exile—like a disgraced king or a deposed despot—sounds almost absurd, even in this heightened moment, and many close observers of the President, including [Tony Schwartz](#), the ghostwriter of Trump’s first best-seller, “The Art of the Deal,” dismiss the idea. “I’m sure he’s terrified,” Schwartz told me. “But I don’t think he’ll leave the country. Where the hell would he go?” However, Snyder, the Yale professor, whose specialty is antidemocratic regimes in Eastern Europe, believes that Trump might well abscond to a foreign country that has no extradition treaty with the U.S. “Unless you’re an idiot, you have that flight plan ready,” Snyder said. “Everyone’s telling me he’ll have a show on Fox News. I think he’ll have a show on RT”—the Russian state television network.



*"We decided to combine Halloween and Thanksgiving this year."*  
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

In Snyder's view, such desperate maneuverings would not have been necessary had Trump been a more adept autocrat. Although the President has recently made various authoritarian gestures—in June, he threatened to deploy the military against protesters, and in July he talked about delaying the election—Snyder contends that Trump's predicament “is that he hasn't ruined our system enough.” Snyder explained, “Generally, autocrats will distort the system as far as necessary to stay in power. Usually, it means warping democracy *before* they get to where Trump is now.” For an entrenched autocrat, an election is mere theatre—but the conclusion of the Trump-Biden race remains unpredictable, despite concerns about voter suppression, disputed ballot counts, and civil unrest.

On Election Day, the margin of victory may be crucial in determining Trump's future. If the winner's advantage in the Electoral College is decisive, neither side will be able to easily dispute the result. But several of Trump's former associates told me that if there is any doubt at all—no matter how questionable—the President will insist that he has won. [Michael Cohen](#), Trump's former attorney, told me, “He will not concede. Never, ever, ever.” He went on, “I believe he's going to challenge the validity of the vote in each and every state he loses—claiming ballot fraud, seeking to undermine the process and invalidate it.” Cohen thinks that the recent rush to confirm [Amy Coney Barrett](#) to the Supreme Court was motivated in part by Trump's hope that a majority of Justices would take his side in a disputed election.

Cohen, who pleaded guilty in 2018 to lying to Congress and to various financial crimes, including making an illegal contribution to Trump's Presidential campaign, has faced questions about his credibility. But he affirmed, “I have heard that Trump people have been speaking to lawyers all over the country, taking their temperatures on this topic.” One of Trump's personal attorneys, the Supreme Court litigator William Consovoy, has initiated legal actions across the nation challenging mail-in voting, on behalf of the Republican Party, the Trump campaign, and a dark-money group that calls itself the Honest Elections Project. And a former Trump White House official, Mike Roman, who has made a career of whipping up fear about nonwhite voter fraud, has assumed the role of field general of a volunteer fleet of poll watchers who refer to themselves as the Army for Trump.

Cohen is so certain that Trump will lose that he recently placed a ten-thousand-

dollar bet on it. “He’ll blame everyone except for himself,” Cohen said. “Every day, he’ll rant and rave and yell and scream about how they stole the Presidency from him. He’ll say he won by millions and millions of ballots, and they cheated with votes from dead people and people who weren’t born yet. He’ll tell all sorts of lies and activate his militias. It’s going to be a pathetic show. But, by stacking the Supreme Court, he’ll think he can get an injunction. Trump repeats his lies over and over with the belief that the more he tells them the more people will believe them. We all wish he’d just shut up, but the problem is he won’t.”

Schwartz agreed that Trump “will do anything to make the case he didn’t lose,” and noted that one of Trump’s strengths has been his refusal to admit failure, which means that “when he wins he wins, and when he loses he also wins.” But if Trump loses by a landslide, Schwartz said, “he’ll have many fewer cards to play. He won’t be able to play the election-was-stolen-from-me card—and that’s a big one.”

It’s hard to imagine a former U.S. President behind bars or being forced to perform community service, as the former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi was, after being convicted of tax fraud. Yet some of the legal threats aimed at Trump are serious. The case that Vance’s office, in Manhattan, is pursuing appears to be particularly strong. According to court documents from the prosecution of Cohen, he didn’t act alone. Cohen’s case centered on his payment of hush money to the porn star [Stormy Daniels](#), with whom the President allegedly had a sexual liaison. The government claimed that Cohen’s scheme was assisted by an unindicted co-conspirator whom federal prosecutors in the Southern District of New York referred to as “Individual-1,” and who ran “an ultimately successful campaign for President of the United States.”

Clearly, this was a reference to Trump. But, because in recent decades the Justice Department has held that a sitting President can’t be prosecuted, the U.S. Attorney’s office wrapped up its case after Cohen’s conviction. Vance appears to have picked up where the U.S. Attorney left off.

The direction of Vance’s inquiry can be gleaned from Cohen’s sentencing memo: it disclosed that, during the 2016 Presidential campaign, Cohen set up a shell company that paid a hundred and thirty thousand dollars to Daniels. The Trump Organization disguised the hush-money payment as “legal expenses.” But the government argued that the money, which bought her silence, was an illegal campaign contribution: it helped Trump’s candidacy, by suppressing damaging

facts, and far exceeded the federal donation limit of twenty-seven hundred dollars. Moreover, because the payment was falsely described as legal expenses, New York laws prohibiting the falsification of business records may have been violated. Such crimes are usually misdemeanors, but if they are committed in furtherance of other offenses, such as tax fraud, they can become felonies. [Court documents](#) stated that Cohen “acted in coordination with and at the direction of Individual-1”—an allegation that Trump has vehemently denied.

It has become clear that the Manhattan D.A.’s investigation involves more than the Stormy Daniels case. Secrecy surrounds Vance’s grand-jury probe, but a well-informed source told me that it now includes a hard-hitting exploration of potentially illegal self-dealing in Trump’s financial practices. In [an August court filing](#), the D.A.’s office argued that it should be allowed to subpoena Trump’s personal and corporate tax records, explaining that it is now investigating “possibly extensive and protracted criminal conduct at the Trump Organization.” The prosecutors didn’t specify what the grand jury was looking into, but they cited news stories detailing possible tax fraud, insurance fraud, and “schemes to defraud,” which is how New York penal law addresses bank fraud. As the *Times*’ recent reports on Trump’s tax records show, he has long made aggressive, and potentially fraudulent, use of accounting gimmicks to all but eliminate his income-tax burden. One minor but revealing detail is that he deducted seventy thousand dollars for hair styling, which ordinarily is a personal expense. At the same time, according to congressional testimony that Cohen gave last year, Trump has provided insurance companies with inflated income statements, in effect keeping two sets of books: one stating losses, for the purpose of taxes, the other exaggerating profits, for business purposes. Trump’s lawyers have consistently refused to disclose his tax records, fighting subpoenas in both the circuit courts and the Supreme Court. Trump has denied any financial wrongdoing, and has denounced efforts to scrutinize his tax returns as “a continuation of the worst witch hunt in American history.” But his legal team has lost every round in the courts, and may be running out of arguments. It’s possible that New York’s legal authorities will back off. Even a Trump critic such as Scaramucci believes that “it’s too much of a strain on the system to put an American President in jail.” But a former top official in New York suggested to me that Vance and James are unlikely to abandon their investigations if Trump loses on November 3rd, if only because it would send an unwanted message: “If you’re Tish James or Cy Vance and you drop the case the moment he’s out of office, you’re *admitting* it was political.”

To get a conviction, the government would need to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Trump knowingly engaged in fraud. Prosecutors I spoke with said that this could be difficult. As Cohen has noted, Trump writes little down, sends no e-mails or texts, and often makes his wishes known through indirect means. There are also potential obstacles posed by statutes of limitation. But prosecutors have clearly secured Cohen's coöperation. Since Cohen began serving a three-year prison sentence, at the federal correctional facility in Otisville, New York, he has been interviewed by lawyers from Vance's Major Economic Crimes Bureau no fewer than four times. (Cohen was granted early release because of the pandemic.)

Norman Ornstein, a political scientist at the American Enterprise Institute, in Washington, D.C., and an outspoken Trump critic, said, "The odds are 99.9999 per cent that New York State authorities have him on all kinds of tax fraud. We know these aren't crimes that end up just with fines." Martin Flaherty, a founding director of the Leitner Center for International Law and Justice, at Fordham University, and an expert in transitional justice, agreed: "I have to believe Trump has committed enough ordinary crimes that you could get him."

The question of what would constitute appropriate accountability for Trump—and serve to discourage other politicians from engaging in similar, or worse, transgressions—has already sparked debate. Flaherty, an authority on other countries' struggles with state crimes, believes that in America it would have "a salutary effect to have a completely corrupt guy getting thrown in jail." He acknowledged that Trump "might get pardoned," but said, "A big problem since Watergate is that élites *don't* face accountability. It creates a culture of impunity that encourages the shamelessness of someone like Trump."

There are obvious political risks, though. Anne Milgram, a former attorney general of New Jersey and a former Justice Department lawyer, suggested that Biden, should he win, is likely to steer clear of any actions that would undermine trust in the impartiality of the justice system, or re-galvanize Trump's base. "The ideal thing," she told me, would be for the Manhattan D.A.'s office, not the Justice Department, to handle any criminal cases. Vance, she noted, is a democratically elected local prosecutor in the city where the Trump Organization is based. Unthinkable though it may be to imagine Trump doing time on Rikers Island, she said, "there's also a cost to a new Administration just turning the page and doing nothing." Milgram continued, "Trump will declare victory, and Trumpism won't be over. It raises huge questions. It's a fairly impossible

situation.”

Though Trump doesn’t have the power to pardon or commute a New York State court conviction, he can pardon virtually anyone facing federal charges—including, arguably, himself. When Nixon, a lawyer, was in the White House, he concluded that he had this power, though he felt that he would disgrace himself if he attempted to use it. Nixon’s own Justice Department disagreed with him when it was asked whether a President could, in fact, self-pardon. The acting Assistant Attorney General, Mary C. Lawton, issued a memo proclaiming, in one sentence with virtually no analysis, that, “under the fundamental rule that no one may be a judge in his own case, it would seem that the question should be answered in the negative.” However, the memo went on to suggest that, if the President were declared temporarily unable to perform the duties of the office, the Vice-President would become the acting President, and in that capacity could pardon the President, who could then either resign or resume the duties of the office.

To date, that is the only known government opinion on the issue, according to Jack Goldsmith, who, under [George W. Bush](#), headed the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel and now teaches at Harvard Law School. Recently, Goldsmith and Bob Bauer, a White House counsel under [Barack Obama](#), co-wrote “[After Trump: Reconstructing the Presidency](#),” in which the bipartisan pair offer a blueprint for remedying some of the structural weaknesses exposed by Trump. Among their proposals is a rule explicitly prohibiting Presidents from pardoning themselves. They also propose that bribery statutes be amended to prevent Presidents from using pardons to bribe witnesses or obstruct justice.

Such reforms would likely come too late to stop Trump, Goldsmith noted: “If he loses—if—we can expect that he’ll roll out pardons promiscuously, including to himself.” The President has already issued forty-four pardons, some of them extraordinarily controversial: one went to his political ally Joe Arpaio, the former Arizona sheriff who was convicted of criminal contempt in his persistent violation of immigrants’ rights. Trump also commuted the sentence of his friend Roger Stone, the political operative who was convicted of seven felonies, including witness tampering, lying to federal investigators, and impeding a congressional inquiry. Other Presidents have also granted questionable pardons. Bill Clinton’s decision to pardon the financier Marc Rich, in 2001, not long after Rich’s former wife donated more than a million dollars to Clinton’s Presidential library and to Democratic campaign war chests, was so redolent of bribery that it

provoked a federal investigation. (Clinton was cleared.) But, Goldsmith said, “no President has abused the pardon power the same way that Trump has.” Given this pattern, he added, “I’d be shocked if he didn’t pardon himself.” Jon Meacham, a Presidential historian, agreed. As he put it, “A self-pardon would be the ultimate act of constitutional onanism for a narcissistic President.”

Whether a self-pardon would stand up to court review is another matter. “Its validity is completely untested,” Goldsmith said. “It’s not clear if it would work. The pardon power is very, very broad. But there’s no way to really know. Scholars are all over the map.”

Roberta Kaplan, a New York litigator, suggested the same scenario sketched out in Lawton’s memo: Trump “could quit and be pardoned by Pence.” Kaplan represents [E. Jean Carroll](#), who is suing Trump for defamation because he denied her accusation that he raped her in a dressing room at Bergdorf Goodman, in the nineteen-nineties. The suit, which a federal judge allowed to move forward on October 27th, is one of many civil legal threats aimed at Trump. Although Kaplan can imagine Trump trying to pardon himself, she believes that it would defy common sense. She joked, “If that’s O.K., I might as well just pardon myself at Yom Kippur.”

Scholars today are far less united than they used to be about the wisdom of pardoning Presidents. Ford’s pardon of Nixon is increasingly viewed with skepticism. Though Ford’s action generated public outrage, a consensus eventually formed among Washington’s wise men that he had demonstrated selfless statesmanship by ending what he called “our long national nightmare.” Ford lost the 1976 election, partly because of the backlash, but he later won the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award for his decision, and he was lauded by everyone from Bob Woodward to Senator Ted Kennedy. Beschloss, the historian, who interviewed Ford about the matter, told me, “I believe he was right to offer the pardon but wrong not to ask for a signed confession that Nixon was guilty as charged. As a result, Nixon spent the rest of his life arguing that he had done nothing worse than any other President.” The journalist and historian Sam Tanenhaus has written that Ford’s pardon enabled Nixon and his supporters to “plant the seeds of a counter-history of Watergate,” in which Nixon “was not the perpetrator but the victim, hounded by the liberal media.” This narrative allowed Nixon to reframe his impeachment and the congressional investigations of his misconduct as an illegitimate “criminalization of politics.”

Since then, Trump and other demagogues have echoed Nixon's arguments in order to deflect investigations of their own misconduct. Meacham, who also spoke with Ford about the pardon, says that Ford was so haunted by criticism alleging he had given Nixon a free pass that he began carrying a typewritten card in his wallet quoting a 1915 Supreme Court decision, in *Burdick v. United States*, that suggested the acceptance of a pardon implies an admission of guilt. The burden of adjudicating a predecessor's wrongdoing weighed heavily on Ford, and, Meacham said, "that's what Biden may have to wrestle with."



*"I enjoy root vegetables as much as anyone, but enough is enough."*  
Cartoon by Tom Toro

Several former Trump associates worry that, if Biden does win, there may be a period of tumult before any transfer of power. Schwartz, who has written a new book about Trump, “[Dealing with the Devil](#),” fears that “this period between November and the Inauguration in 2021 is the most dangerous period.” Schwartz went on, “If Biden is inaugurated President, we’ll know that there’s a new boss, a new sheriff in town. In this country, the President is No. 1. But, until then, the biggest danger is that Trump will implicitly or explicitly tell his supporters to be violent.” (Trump has already done so implicitly, having said at the first debate that [the Proud Boys](#), an extremist group, should “stand by.”) Mary Trump predicted that, if Trump is defeated, he and his associates will spend the next eleven weeks “breaking as much stuff on the way out as they can—he’ll steal as much of the taxpayers’ money as he can.”

Joe Lockhart, who served as Bill Clinton’s press secretary, suggested to me that, if Biden narrowly wins, a chaotic interregnum could provide an opportunity for a “global settlement” in which Trump will concede the election and “go away” in exchange for a promise that he won’t face charges anywhere, including in New York. Lockhart argued that New York’s legal authorities are not just lawyers but also politicians, and might be convinced that a deal is in the public interest. He pointed out that a global-settlement arrangement was made, “in microcosm,” at the end of the Clinton Presidency, when the independent counsel behind the [Monica Lewinsky](#) investigation agreed to wrap things up if Clinton paid a twenty-five-thousand-dollar fine, forfeited his law license, and admitted that he had testified falsely under oath. “So there’s some precedent,” Lockhart said, although he admitted that such a deal would anger many Americans.

Among them would be Bauer, Obama’s White House counsel, who is now a professor at the N.Y.U. School of Law. Bauer has argued that Presidents should be subjected to the same consequences for lawbreaking as everyone else. “How can the highest law-enforcement officer in the U.S. achieve executive immunity?” he said. “I understand the concerns, but, given the lamentable condition of the justice system in this country, I just don’t get it.” Ian Bassin, who also worked in the White House counsel’s office under Obama, and now heads the nonprofit group Protect Democracy, said that the impetus is less to punish Trump than to discourage future would-be tyrants. “I think Trump’s a canary in the coal mine,” he told me. “Trump 2.0 is what terrifies me—someone who says, ‘Oh, America is open to a strongman kind of government, but I can do

it more competently.’ ”

Guessing what Trump might do if he loses (and isn’t in prison) has become a parlor game among his former associates. In 2016, when it seemed all but certain that Trump wouldn’t be elected, aides started preparing for what they referred to as the Trump News Network—a media platform on which he could continue to sound off and cash in. According to a political activist with conservative ties, among the parties involved in the discussions were [Steve Bannon](#)—who at the time was running both the Trump campaign and the alt-right Web site Breitbart—and the Sinclair Broadcast Group, which provides conservative television programming to nearly ninety markets. (Sinclair denies involvement in these discussions.) Before Trump beat Hillary Clinton, he also reportedly encouraged his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to explore mass-media business opportunities. After word of the machinations leaked to the press, Trump acknowledged that he had what he called a “tremendous fan base,” but claimed, “No, I have no interest in Trump TV.” However, as *Vanity Fair* [recently reported](#), Kushner, during that pre-election period, went so far as to make an offer to acquire the Weather Channel as a vehicle that could be converted into a pro-Trump network. But, according to the magazine, Kushner’s offer—three hundred million dollars—fell well short of the four hundred and fifty million dollars sought by one of the channel’s owners, the private-equity firm Blackstone. Both Kushner and Blackstone denied the story, but a source who was personally apprised of the negotiations told me that it was accurate.

Barbara Res, the former Trump Organization employee, and a number of other former Trump associates believe that, if the President is defeated, he will again try to launch some sort of media venture. A Democratic operative in New York with ties to Republican business circles told me that Bernard Marcus—the billionaire co-founder of Home Depot and a Trump supporter—has been mentioned recently as someone who might back a second iteration of a Trump-friendly media platform. Through a spokesperson, Marcus didn’t rule out the idea. He said that, to date, he has not been involved, but added, “It may be necessary going into the future, and it’s a great idea.” Speculation has focussed on Trump’s joining forces with one of two existing nationwide pro-Trump mouthpieces: Sinclair and the One America News Network, an anemic cable venture notable for its promotion of such fringe figures as Jack Posobiec, who spread the [Pizzagate](#) conspiracy theory. A Trump media enterprise would likely run pointedly to the right of Fox News, which Trump has increasingly faulted for being insufficiently loyal. On April 26th, for instance, Trump tweeted, “The

people who are watching @FoxNews, in record numbers (thank you President Trump), are angry. They want an alternative now. So do I!"

A former Trump associate who is in the media world speculated that Trump might instead fill the talk-radio vacuum left by [Rush Limbaugh](#), who announced in mid-October that he has terminal lung cancer. Neither Limbaugh nor his producers could be reached for comment. But the former associate suggested that if Trump anchored such a show—perhaps from his golf club in West Palm Beach, Florida—he could continue to try to rally his base and remain relevant. The former associate pointed out that Trump could broadcast the show after spending the morning playing golf. Just as on “The Apprentice”—and in the White House—he could riff, with little or no preparation. Trump has been notably solicitous of Limbaugh, giving him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and tweeting sympathetically about his health. Limbaugh has become rich from his show, and is estimated to be worth half a billion dollars; Trump has publicly commented on how lucrative Limbaugh’s gig is, exclaiming in a speech last December that Limbaugh “makes, like, they tell me, fifty million a year, and it may be on the low side—so, if anybody wants to be a nice conservative talk-show host, it’s not a bad living.”

Res, however, can’t imagine Trump settling for a mere radio show, calling the platform “too small.” Tony Schwartz said of the President, “He’s too lazy to do a three-hour daily show like that.” Nevertheless, such a platform would offer Trump a number of advantages, including its potential to make him a political power broker in the key state of Florida. (Bannon recently forecast, to considerable skepticism, that if Trump loses the election he might run again in 2024.)

In 1997, Trump published his third book, “The Art of the Comeback,” which boasted of his resilience after a brush with bankruptcy. But, in a recent head-to-head matchup of televised town-hall events, Biden drew significantly higher ratings than Trump—a sign that a television comeback might not be a guaranteed success for the President. The *New York* columnist Frank Rich—a former theatre critic who has helped produce two hit shows for HBO—recently published [an essay](#) titled “America Is Tired of the Trump Show.”

Signals from the New York real-estate world are also not encouraging. I recently asked a top New York banker, who has known Trump for decades, what he thought of Trump’s prospects. He answered bluntly: “He’s done in the real-estate

business. Done! No bank would *touch* him.” He argued that even Deutsche Bank—notoriously, the one institution that continued loaning money to Trump in the two decades before he became President—might be reluctant to continue the relationship. “They could lose every American client they have around the world,” he said. “The Trump name, I think, has turned into a giant liability.” He conceded that in some parts of the country, and in other parts of the world, the Trump name might still be a draw. “Maybe on gas stations in the South and Southwest,” he joked.

If Trump is forced to concede the election, he will, Scaramucci expects, “go down to Florida and build up his war chest doing transactions with foreign oligarchs—I think he’s going to these guys and saying, ‘I’ve done a lot of favors, and so send me five billion.’ ” Nixon’s disgraced Vice-President, Spiro Agnew, who was forced to resign, in 1973, amid a corruption scandal, later begged the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia for financial support—while pledging to continue fighting Zionists in America. Starting with Gerald Ford, ex-Presidents have collected enormous speaking fees, sometimes from foreign hosts. After [Ronald Reagan](#) left office, he was paid two million dollars to visit Japan, and half of that amount was reportedly for one speech. White House memoirs have been another lucrative source of income for former Presidents and First Ladies. Bill and Hillary Clinton received a combined \$36.5 million in advances for their books, and Barack and Michelle Obama reportedly made more than sixty-five million dollars for their joint worldwide book rights. Trump has acknowledged that he’s not a book reader, and Schwartz has noted that, during the year and a half that they worked together on “The Art of the Deal,” he never saw a single book in Trump’s office or apartment. Yet Trump has taken authorial credits on more than a dozen books to date, and, given that he’s a proven marketing master, it’s inconceivable that he won’t try to sell more.

Lawrence Douglas, a professor of law at Amherst College and the author of a recent book on the President, “[Will He Go?](#),” predicted that Trump—whether inside the White House or out—will “continue to be a source of chaos and division in the nation.” Douglas, who is co-editing a textbook on transitional justice, told me that he’s uncomfortable with the notion of an incoming Administration prosecuting an outgoing head of state. “That really looks like a tin-pot dictatorship,” he said. He also warned that such a move could be inflammatory because, “to tens of millions of Americans, Trump will continue to be a heroic figure.” Whatever the future holds, Douglas doubts whether Trump could ever fade away contentedly, as many other Presidents have done: “He

craves the spotlight, both because it satisfies his narcissism and because he's been very successful at merchandising it." Peaceful pursuits might have worked for George W. Bush, but Douglas is certain of one thing about Trump's future: "This guy is *not* going to take up painting his feet in the bathtub." ♦

---

## Read More About the 2020 Election

- Why [Joe Biden](#) must win.
- The fall and rise of [Kamala Harris](#).
- When a [sitting President threatens to delay a sacrosanct American ritual like an election](#), you should listen.
- To understand the path Donald Trump has taken to the 2020 election, [look at what he has provided the executive class](#).
- What happens if Trump [fights the election results](#)?
- [The refusal by Mitch McConnell to rein in Trump](#) is looking riskier than ever.
- Sign up for our [election newsletter](#) for insight and analysis from our reporters and columnists.

# **Annals of National Security**

- **How a C.I.A. Coverup Targeted a Whistle-blower**

# **How a C.I.A. Coverup Targeted a Whistle-blower**

When a Justice Department lawyer exposed the agency's secret role in drug cases, leadership in the intelligence community retaliated.

By [Ronan Farrow](#)

October 30, 2020



Before dawn on January 23, 2019, Mark McConnell arrived at the Key West headquarters of the military and civilian task force that monitors drugs headed to the United States from the Southern Hemisphere. McConnell, a prosecutor at the Department of Justice and a former marine, left his phone in a box designed to block electronic transmissions, and passed through a metal detector and a key-card-protected air lock to enter the building. On the second floor, he punched in the code for his office door, then locked it behind him. On a computer approved for the handling of classified information, he loaded a series of screenshots he had taken, showing entries in a database called Helios, which federal law enforcement uses to track drug smugglers. McConnell e-mailed the images to a classified government hotline for whistle-blowers. Then he printed backup copies and, following government procedures for handling classified information, sealed them in an envelope that he placed in another envelope, marked “*SECRET*.” He hid the material behind a piece of furniture.

McConnell had uncovered what he described as a “criminal conspiracy” perpetrated by the C.I.A. and the F.B.I. Every year, entries in the Helios database lead to hundreds of drug busts, which lead to prosecutions in American courts. The entries are typically submitted to Helios by the Drug Enforcement Administration, the F.B.I., and a division of the Department of Homeland Security. But McConnell had learned that more than a hundred entries in the database that were labelled as originating from F.B.I. investigations were actually from a secret C.I.A. surveillance program. He realized that C.I.A. officers and F.B.I. agents, in violation of federal law and Department of Justice guidelines, had concealed the information’s origins from federal prosecutors, leaving judges and defense lawyers in the dark. Critics call such concealment “intelligence laundering.” In the nineteen-seventies, after C.I.A. agents were found to have performed experiments with LSD on unwitting Americans and investigated Vietnam War protesters, restrictions were imposed that bar the agency from being involved in domestic law-enforcement activities. Since the country’s founding, judges, jurors, and defendants have generally had the right to know how evidence used in a trial was gathered. “This was undisclosed information, from an agency working internationally with different rules and standards,” Nancy Gertner, a retired federal district judge and a senior lecturer at Harvard Law School, told me. “This should worry Trump voters who talk about a ‘deep state.’ This is the quintessential deep state. This is activities beyond your view, fundamentally affecting what happens in American courts.”

But the scheme benefitted the C.I.A. and the F.B.I.: the former received information obtained during operations, and the latter reported increased arrests and was able to secure additional federal funding as a result. The scope of the scheme was corroborated in hundreds of pages of e-mails, transcripts, and other documents obtained by *The New Yorker*.

For weeks, C.I.A. officials had been trying to stop McConnell from revealing the agency's activities. They sent a lawyer to Key West with nondisclosure agreements, but McConnell refused to sign. A day before his early arrival at the office, McConnell had learned of an order to delete the screenshots on his computer. "I knew that I had to get the electronic evidence to outside investigators," he told me. "There was no doubt about what I needed to do, and there was no doubt retaliation against me would follow." He worked quickly, not knowing when security officers would arrive. Later that day, they came to McConnell's office and deleted the images.

A little more than a month later, after C.I.A. officials accused McConnell of "spilling" classified information, the director of the task force suspended him. Soon, the C.I.A. director, Gina Haspel, visited the task force and was briefed on the matter. According to a sworn affidavit that McConnell filed with the Senate Intelligence Committee, and to a source with knowledge of the meeting, Haspel said that there needed to be repercussions for McConnell. (A C.I.A. spokesperson, Timothy Barrett, called the allegation "inaccurate and a gross mischaracterization.") The military leadership of the task force ignored McConnell's appeal of his suspension, and discussions about future assignments came to an abrupt halt. Six officials said that they believed the C.I.A. had retaliated against McConnell, leaving him nominally employed but unable to find a new post after decades of public service.

"This was appalling and blatant," Tom Padden, one of McConnell's supervisors, who has filed his own whistle-blower complaint, told me. "It was a blatant attempt to silence a career public servant who identified a real issue." McConnell and other officials accused Patrick Hovakimian, the Associate Deputy Attorney General, of failing to protect McConnell. Hovakimian is President Trump's nominee to become the general counsel for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and his handling of whistle-blower issues has been a central question in his confirmation process. (A Justice Department spokesperson said that Hovakimian enlisted a department lawyer and other officials "to ensure that any whistle-blower was treated appropriately.")

Last month, the House Judiciary Committee chairman, Jerrold Nadler, notified Attorney General William Barr and Christopher Wray, the F.B.I. director, that the committee would be investigating McConnell's allegations and requested records related to his case. Senator Ron Wyden, of Oregon, said that he would be calling on the Senate Intelligence Committee to investigate as well, and told me, "Senior officials should never punish employees who raise concerns about abuse, especially when it concerns secret programs or activities." McConnell said, "The C.I.A. has corrupted F.B.I. agents to violate basic rules as to how the Department of Justice does criminal prosecutions."

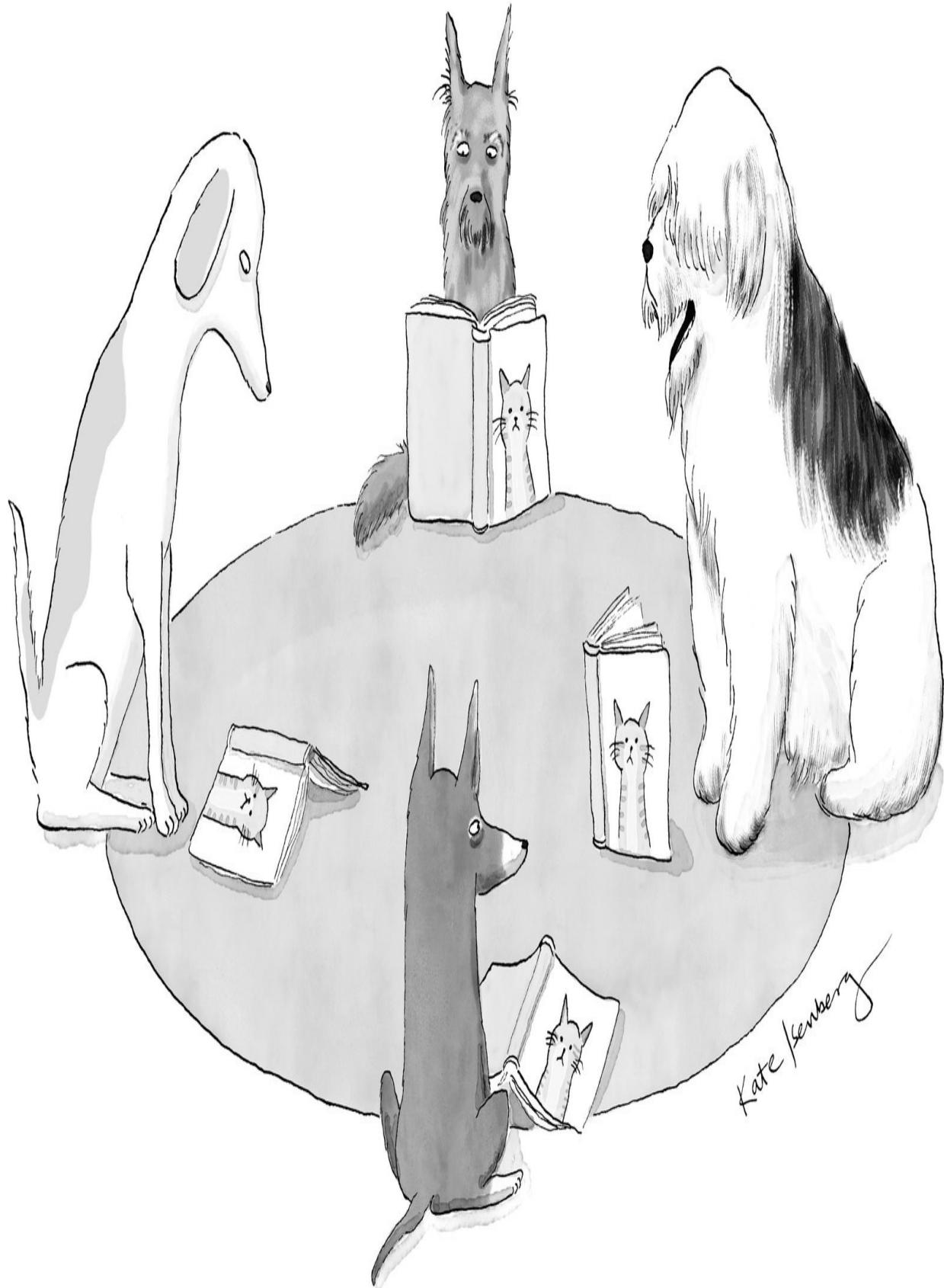
Mark McConnell, who is sixty-six, was born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida. He was brought up by his grandparents, a paper-mill worker and a homemaker. When McConnell was seven, he took to wearing the garrison cap of his father, a former marine. McConnell was the first in his family to go beyond high school; he counted coins at the Federal Reserve Coin Vault to pay for junior college, which he attended at night. He earned a bachelor's degree and a law degree from Florida State University before returning to Jacksonville to work as a public defender. Later, he spent six years on active duty in the U.S. Marines. After leaving active duty, in 1995, he worked as a state prosecutor and at the Department of Justice, where for sixteen years he has investigated fraud, corruption, national-security matters, and drug trafficking. McConnell has a salt-and-pepper mustache and speaks in a clipped Southern accent. "He's of a high moral character," a law-enforcement official who has worked with him told me. "Matter of fact, he's so straight it sometimes annoys people."

In July, 2017, McConnell was assigned to the Joint Interagency Task Force South, in Key West. It comprises people from various parts of the military, law-enforcement agencies including the D.E.A. and the F.B.I., and intelligence agencies including the C.I.A. and the N.S.A. McConnell kept his office sparse—the only sign of his military service was a photograph of the decorated marine Chesty Puller, with the quote "We're surrounded. That simplifies things."

Shortly after McConnell began working at the task force, a D.E.A. special agent named William Cambre stopped by his office. Cambre, a Louisiana native who had worked drug cases at the D.E.A. for more than fifteen years, told him that he had discovered troubling entries in the Helios database. They were labelled as having been submitted by the F.B.I., based on unclassified sources and methods, but they contained G.P.S. coordinates that were updated with unusual frequency. The entries were marked "SECRET/NOFORN," a classification level that

prevents disclosure to foreign nationals. Intelligence and law-enforcement officials later told me that the information came from a C.I.A. special-access program, one of the highest categories of classification in the government. The program, which one intelligence official described to me as “inherently extra-sensitive,” involved national-security surveillance. It also captured information that was unrelated to its mission but useful for finding drug traffickers. Cambre told McConnell that the F.B.I. had refused to answer questions about the source of the information, which he believed came from “the Christians”—slang for the C.I.A. “This is what they’re writing in Helios,” Cambre told him. “It’s a lie.” (An F.B.I. spokesperson said that the Bureau reviewed the arrangement with the C.I.A. and considered it “consistent with our internal protocols and legal requirements.”)

Searching Helios, McConnell ultimately found more than a hundred entries that bore the deceptive labelling Cambre had described. An F.B.I. agent estimated that fifty-seven prosecutions had relied on these entries. I was able to identify nineteen resulting criminal convictions. In all of the cases, U.S. Coast Guard cutters, relying on information from Helios, had intercepted small vessels on the open waters of the Pacific. They confiscated bales of cocaine, and arrested men from Ecuador, Colombia, and Mexico, who were taken to the U.S. to face trial. All nineteen pleaded guilty to federal drug charges and are now serving sentences ranging from six to fourteen years. The men, who worked at the lowest level of the drug trade, were poor and uneducated. Antonio Jorge Narvaez Tubay, a fisherman and a construction worker from Guayaquil, Ecuador, was apprehended south of Mexico in February, 2018. A sixty-year-old with four children, he had been struggling to care for his infirm father. “I was so desperate, and I was so poor,” he told the judge in his case.



*"I found the protagonist unsympathetic."*  
Cartoon by Kate Isenberg

It was not disclosed in the court proceedings that classified C.I.A. information had led the Coast Guard to the locations of the smugglers. In most of the cases, including Narvaez's, F.B.I. agents submitted affidavits attributing the arrests to routine patrols. McConnell and other officials said that the affidavits were intentionally misleading, denying prosecutors the information they needed to properly meet discovery obligations, and undermining the resulting convictions. "If I had learned that a law-enforcement agent had not been forthcoming about reliance on classified information in a case that was prosecuted, I would have had a conniption," David Laufman, a former prosecutor and a senior Department of Justice official, said.

"We always wondered how the fuck they figured out where these fishermen were," Ricardo Hermida, who represented Narvaez, told me. "It's a discovery violation. We were operating under misconceptions." (The Justice Department spokesperson said, "The government believed at the time, and continues to believe after its careful review, that the information underlying this claim was simply not discoverable.")

Under current law, federal prosecutors can disclose the presence of classified C.I.A. information to judges and request that it be shielded during trials for national-security reasons. Michael V. Hayden, who directed the C.I.A. under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, cautioned that law enforcement is not allowed to fabricate information, but he insisted that some programs are too sensitive for even limited court consultations, and defended the use of concealed intelligence in domestic trials. "We do that routinely," he told me. "We know something, but we can't say it, so we have to say it through someone else. Then we use it in court. It's not illegal, but it's complicated." Other experts questioned that view. Mary McCord, a law professor and a former acting Assistant Attorney General for National Security, said that, when a court refuses to protect sensitive intelligence, "we have to say we'll just dismiss the case. That's the way it's supposed to work. And government officials aren't supposed to say, 'We don't want to deal with that, so we're just going to lie.' "

In August, 2017, McConnell called his supervisor Tom Padden, who was in Washington, D.C. "When I get really pissed," McConnell told me, "I get monotone, I don't blink." He related to Padden what he had found in the Helios database. Padden, sixty and heavyset, with a neatly cropped white beard, served

in the Marines for twelve years before becoming a civilian prosecutor. He met McConnell when they were both stationed in Quantico, Virginia, and recruited him for the task force. Padden shared McConnell's respect for rules. "We are talking about the withholding and misrepresentation of information to prosecutors by agents who are supposedly part of the prosecutorial team. We've got discovery problems, ethical problems there," Padden told me. "You gotta have at least a prosecutorial supervisor in the know."

In the following months, other officials independently raised concerns about the concealed intelligence. In late February, 2018, Dick Getchell, a federal prosecutor in the Southern District of Florida, e-mailed McConnell, asking to talk about "cases where targeting information does not appear to be LE-sourced" (the abbreviation stands for "law enforcement"). The same day, Getchell e-mailed the F.B.I. about a case resulting from a deceptive database entry. "Please advise as to the nature and substance of the information which FBI Miami provided which resulted in this seizure," he wrote. Rhonda Squizzero, an F.B.I. special agent, replied that the targeting information had been gathered in an F.B.I. operation called Black Pearl, made up of investigations called World's End, Calypso, and Wicked Wench—all references to the "Pirates of the Caribbean" film series. She wrote that those investigations had generated "case debriefs and electronic evidence" that pointed to a Mexican crime organization called La Victoria. McConnell and several other sources said that the investigations were a cover and could not be the source of the information. In a subsequent e-mail, Getchell expressed skepticism about La Victoria as well, writing that it was a group that "our office has never heard of." In fact, there is no evidence that any such organization exists. The F.B.I. spokesperson said that the Bureau takes "a host of precautions to protect both the intelligence we receive and the sources and methods used to gather it. This can include using code names."

"Everyone in the building knew this was crap," one law-enforcement official told me. "What they were doing was bullshitting."

McConnell and Padden also raised their concerns with C.I.A. and F.B.I. officials, who defended the concealment. In February, 2018, they met for three hours with the agency's senior operative on the task force. (*The New Yorker* is not publishing the C.I.A. operative's name, for safety reasons.) The operative argued against disclosing the C.I.A.'s role, either in the database or to prosecutors, saying that the arrangement benefitted both the C.I.A. and the F.B.I. The F.B.I.,

the C.I.A. operative said, was “a good partner.”

That spring and summer, the C.I.A. operative grew increasingly hostile to McConnell. During a meeting in March, according to McConnell, the operative warned, “If people keep talking about our program, someone is going to need to go to prison.” A month later, a meeting devolved into a shouting match. “If that cocksucker Cambre wants to fuck me in the ass, the least he can do is use some lubricant,” several people familiar with the conversation recalled the operative saying, referring to the D.E.A. agent who had initially raised the matter. “He’s going all ballistic,” McConnell told me, of the operative. “He was just lit.”

In the fall of 2018, McConnell learned that the F.B.I. had secured funds for a sprawling new drug-trafficking investigation called Stranger Tides—another reference to “Pirates of the Caribbean”—based entirely on the concealed C.I.A. intelligence. That November, McConnell notified task-force leadership of his intention to expose the practice, and he created a classified PowerPoint presentation revealing the deceptive database entries. He and Padden showed it, in secure areas, to employees who had the clearance level listed on the database entries. Adam Cohen, another of McConnell’s supervisors, who has specialized in drugs and organized crime at the Department of Justice for twenty years, told McConnell and Padden that their concerns were well founded. (The D.O.J. denied my request to speak to Cohen.) According to McConnell, Getchell, the Florida federal prosecutor, told him after one meeting, “The scales have fallen from my eyes.” (Getchell said that he could not comment for this piece without permission from the Southern District of Florida, which declined to make him available and which called McConnell’s and Padden’s allegations “inaccurate, and / or misleading.”)

Other law-enforcement officials worried that the scheme was undercutting efforts to combat drug smuggling. The disguised C.I.A. information facilitated quick hits on low-level couriers; when these operations succeeded, the F.B.I. used them to apply for limited federal drug-interdiction funds. “These are resources that could be going to criminal investigations that could dismantle an organization, and instead they go to whack-a-mole,” a law-enforcement official said. The official expressed these views to the C.I.A. operative whom McConnell and Padden had met with; the operative responded by offering the law-enforcement official’s own agency a secret intelligence-sharing arrangement. The official did not accept the offer.

Word of the deceptive database entries soon reached Washington, D.C. During meetings in December, 2018, and January, 2019, officials from the F.B.I. and the Department of Justice expressed concern about the scheme. One of them was Associate Deputy Attorney General Andrew Goldsmith, who remarked that it might create “Giglio” issues, a reference to *Giglio v. United States*, a 1972 Supreme Court ruling that obligates prosecutors to disclose information that might call into question the credibility of law-enforcement officials used as witnesses. (The D.O.J. spokesperson told me that Goldsmith reviewed the matter and “made recommendations to federal law-enforcement officials and prosecutors, which resulted in a careful review of both past cases and current practice.”)

Rather than acknowledge the problem, the C.I.A. had stopped sending classified information to the F.B.I. On January 11, 2019, officials from the C.I.A., the F.B.I., the Department of Justice, and the task force met at the agency’s headquarters in Langley, Virginia. One person who attended recalled that the C.I.A. officials, including the operative on the task force, were “out of their mind upset” about the disclosures and “pressing very hard for there to be some kind of consequences for Mark McConnell.”

In several meetings around that time, Patrick Hovakimian was one of the most senior officials representing the Justice Department. Colleagues described Hovakimian, who was then thirty-five, as politically savvy and adept at cultivating relationships within the intelligence community. Padden was at the meeting where Goldsmith raised concerns. He recalled, “Hovakimian looked like a referee at a tennis match watching the points sail by him.” Padden added, “He went silent.” In the January 11th meeting at the C.I.A., according to one attendee, when C.I.A. officials insisted on sanctioning McConnell, Hovakimian didn’t object. Instead, he emphasized that the D.O.J. should continue to work with the agency. “ ‘They’re an important partner,’ ” the person present at that meeting recalled Hovakimian saying. “I do think it was a turning point, and there was a circling of the wagons after the meeting.”

The C.I.A. operative soon e-mailed colleagues on the task force, directing them to sign nondisclosure agreements. He wrote, “Until we are able to protect this program, including the signing of NDAs by all individuals aware of this program, we cannot in good faith restart this critical data flow.” That day, a C.I.A. lawyer arrived at the task force to supervise the signing of the N.D.A.s. Several officials initially resisted signing. McConnell never signed.

“Everyone just wanted to sweep this under the rug,” one official recalled. The next day, a colleague went to McConnell’s office and said, “I hear they’re trying to wipe the evidence out of Helios.” Rear Admiral Pat DeQuattro, the task force’s director, had issued an order to “clean up” the database, deleting the deceptive entries. He told colleagues that he was acting on an order from the C.I.A. Members of the task force warned that the deletions could be seen as destroying evidence. McConnell’s superior Adam Cohen phoned DeQuattro, and the order was called off.

A week later, Hovakimian’s office directed that McConnell’s PowerPoint presentation be treated as an improper “spillage” of classified information, as C.I.A. officials had urged. (A Justice Department spokesperson noted that the department does not control the task force.) Soon afterward, DeQuattro ordered security to delete McConnell’s presentation from his office computer. McConnell told me that he was thinking, Either I shut up and let this happen, or I make a disclosure. On January 23rd, he arrived early and filed his whistleblower complaint. Later that day, he said, a security manager oversaw the deletion of the files, attributing the action to a “gentleman’s agreement” with the C.I.A. and warning that further inquiries could jeopardize McConnell’s security clearance.

At the end of the next month, two special agents with the Department of Justice inspector general’s office interviewed McConnell under oath for seven hours, at the task-force offices. While the meeting took place, the C.I.A. operative complained angrily to a colleague about the fact that the investigators were asking questions regarding C.I.A. activities. Soon, the task force’s chief of staff interrupted the interview. The questioning eventually resumed, but McConnell, in his complaint, accused the chief of staff of interfering with a protected disclosure. (Admiral Craig Faller, the commander of the U.S. Southern Command, which oversees the task force, said in a statement, “I am confident that the command fully cooperated with investigators at all levels.”)

Several days later, on March 4th, the chief of staff walked into McConnell’s office with a letter, signed by DeQuattro, suspending him from the task force. The letter attributed the decision to an “inquiry” from the C.I.A. about the “improper disclosure of classified information.” DeQuattro told colleagues the agency had compelled him to make a difficult decision. Several officials disputed the allegation against McConnell. “I think Mark McConnell found them doing something they shouldn’t have been doing,” one said. McConnell handed

over his badge and gave the chief of staff a copy of a government document on the rights of whistle-blowers. Security walked him out through the busy office and watched as he left in his car. “Their goal is to humiliate you,” McConnell said. “Hovakimian should have been demanding to know why his prosecutor was walked out for properly giving evidence of wrongdoing. And he didn’t.”

Gina Haspel’s meeting later that month with members of the task force in Key West came amid a decade-long crackdown on government whistle-blowers. In eight years, the Obama Administration charged, under the 1917 Espionage Act, more officials with disclosing classified information than all previous Administrations combined. In four years, the Trump Administration has matched that count. In 2018, Trump tweeted that “leakers are traitors and cowards, and we will find out who they are!” His ire has extended not just to officials who leak to the press but also to those, like McConnell, who file complaints with government investigators. Last December, the President shared on Twitter the rumored name of the intelligence official whose allegation that Trump solicited political favors from Ukraine’s President eventually led to impeachment. Early this year, after Trump was acquitted, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman, a key witness in the impeachment proceedings, was removed from his position on the National Security Council, and Michael Atkinson, the inspector general to the intelligence community, who had deemed the whistle-blower’s complaint credible, was fired. This summer, Senate Republicans stripped whistle-blower protections from annual defense legislation.

Haspel, a thirty-five-year veteran of the C.I.A., has been a rare survivor in the Trump Administration. Officials credit this to her cordial relationship with Trump and her care in avoiding direct disagreements with him. Trump has praised Haspel for what has been the greatest controversy of her career, her role in running a C.I.A. black site, where she oversaw brutal interrogations that critics have called torture. During the Ukraine whistle-blower saga, when former officials asked that she publicly support the individual behind the complaint, Haspel was characteristically quiet.

In Key West, Haspel made it clear that McConnell should face consequences for his disclosures. McConnell learned this from task-force staff shortly after her visit. In his affidavit to the Senate Intelligence Committee, he wrote, “I understood this to mean that the Director of the CIA had personally ordered unlawful retaliation against me for my whistleblowing activities.” (Barrett, the C.I.A. spokesperson, told me, “No one is more protective of lawful whistle-

blowers than Gina Haspel.”)



*"Maybe this romantic Backpack for Two was a bad idea."*  
Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

After McConnell's departure, he appealed to Admiral Faller, of the Southern Command, to restore his access privileges. Faller told Padden that he would "do the right thing." But McConnell never received a response. During a subsequent phone call with Padden, Faller attributed the silence to pressure from the C.I.A. "He was having contact from—'leadership' was the only term he used—at that agency, expressing concerns that Mark's appeal couldn't be approved," Padden recalled. He added that Faller suggested that the agency had threatened to stop collaborating with the Southern Command if the appeal was granted. (In his statement, Faller said, "At no point was I, or members of the *SOUTHCOM* staff, pressured by any outside agency to make any decisions related to this matter.") Dan Meyer, an attorney and a former executive director of the intelligence-community whistle-blowing program, said, "An agency, by going after the source of a complaint, is sending a chilling message all the way through the chain of command."

Padden and Cohen initially sought to reassign McConnell within the Southern Command. In anticipation, McConnell moved to a Marriott hotel near the command's headquarters, in Doral, Florida. But the reassignment "never happened, because the agency was pushing back," Padden said. A similar task force based in Hawaii initially appeared interested in creating a role for McConnell, but, after DeQuattro, the task-force director, called it, talks about an assignment there stopped. McConnell was nominally employed by the Department of Justice, and other law-enforcement agencies periodically turned to him for help and advice. But he was not given a full-time position. "They are absolutely persecuting him," Padden said.

Others connected to the disclosures also experienced varying degrees of hostility from the intelligence community. Months after McConnell's removal, Hovakimian and several colleagues at the Justice Department met with F.B.I. and C.I.A. officials, including the agency's operative on the task force. The C.I.A. officials expressed outrage that Cohen had failed to compel McConnell to sign the N.D.A., and that he had tried to facilitate subsequent assignments. One of the C.I.A. officials said of Cohen, "He has no integrity," and "We don't believe anything he says." One person who was present told me, "In their mind, the right thing was to crucify McConnell and anyone who tried to protect him."

During the meeting, an agency official asked the Justice Department for a letter

immunizing C.I.A. personnel from prosecution related to McConnell's disclosures. The department denied the request.

That November, the Pentagon inspector general issued a brief letter replying to McConnell's complaint, stating that he was suspended "at the request of another government agency." It continued, "We have determined that insufficient evidence exists to warrant investigation" of his allegations. After a year and a half, inspectors for the Department of Justice and the intelligence community have given no response. "The C.I.A. is so goddam powerful," McConnell's attorney, Mark Zaid, told me. "People are scared to do the right thing." Zaid, who also represented the official behind the Ukraine complaint, founded a pro-bono law firm called Whistleblower Aid with the former State Department whistle-blower John Tye. Their focus is unusual and often fraught. Earlier this year, Zaid's malpractice insurer dropped him, citing his high-profile work.

None of the people implicated in McConnell's and Padden's complaints are known to have faced sanction. F.B.I. agents who are accused of making false statements have continued to testify in cases, and some have received promotions. DeQuattro now serves in a senior role at the Coast Guard headquarters, in Washington, D.C.

Zaid called for an investigation into Haspel's treatment of McConnell. "Her role absolutely requires greater transparency and clarification as to what she knew and when," he told me. "It raises serious concerns as to her leadership and willingness to protect whistle-blowers." Tye said, "It's a terrible example she's setting. She's used to being able to hide everything, and I doubt she expected that her role in this would ever come to light."

During Hovakimian's confirmation hearing for the position of general counsel for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Senator Kamala Harris asked him about the Ukraine whistle-blower, the most controversial such case of the Trump Administration. She repeatedly questioned whether Hovakimian was involved in the decision to delay the transmission of the whistle-blower's complaint to Congress. "I'm not exactly sure which decision you're referring to, because I don't know who made it, if it was even made," Hovakimian said. He eventually said that the decision was made by the White House's Office of Legal Counsel, and promised to do everything he could "to insure that whistle-blowers are afforded all the statutory rights to which they're entitled." Officials who work with him said that, in McConnell's case, he made a more pragmatic

calculation. “Could Hovakimian have taken a stronger stance? Sure he could have,” a close colleague said. “But he made a judgment call that the relationship with the C.I.A., and our ability to work with them, was more important than the little bit of leverage he could have gotten from Mark. I think he made a business decision.” (A D.O.J. spokesperson said, “Any accusation that Associate Deputy Attorney General Hovakimian’s approach was dictated by a political calculus is completely false.”)

This past February, the Southern District of Florida acquiesced to the C.I.A.’s request that, in cases that resulted from concealed intelligence, prosecutors would not undertake the “prudential searches” typically used to determine whether classified material must be disclosed in court. According to a person familiar with the conversation, Getchell, the prosecutor, objected but was overruled. The C.I.A. then resumed inserting its classified intelligence into the Helios database, labelling it as F.B.I. information. Hovakimian forwarded to colleagues a celebratory e-mail exchange about the resumption of the practice. McConnell and Padden both called the outcome “a whitewash.”

Padden has continued to work at the Department of Justice, where he says that his relations with intelligence officials have become strained. He worries that he might be pressed into early retirement. He and his wife bought a house in Tennessee and have begun moving their belongings there. He said that, after the publication of this article, “I may face blowback, which would render me ineffective in my job.”

McConnell and his wife have moved several times to be near possible assignments, but they’ve never panned out. This January, an official in the Department of Justice inspector general’s office approached McConnell’s attorneys with a message from the C.I.A.: if McConnell apologized and stopped pursuing the matter, the agency would drop its complaint about him. Later that month, after McConnell filed for permission to speak to *The New Yorker*, the agency made it clear that, if he talked to the press, the deal would be off. Legal experts said that the offer, which McConnell declined, may have broken the law. “That looks to me like an attempt to use a settlement to bypass the regulations,” Meyer, the former head of the intelligence-community whistle-blower program, told me. “That is really bad business. That gets you terminated from your job in the federal government.”

McConnell often wakes up in the middle of the night, reliving his removal from

the task force. Taking the C.I.A.’s deal might have allowed him to revive his career in public service. “I knew that caving in to bribes or threats would make me unhappy with myself for the rest of my life,” he said. “Why would I ever acquiesce to that?” ♦

*Noor Ibrahim conducted additional research for this piece.*

# **Art**

- [\*\*Pay Phones Turned Into Public Art, in “Titan”\*\*](#)

[November 9, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Pay Phones Turned Into Public Art, in “Titan”**

In 2021, New York City’s phone booths will be removed to make way for Wi-Fi kiosks. Meanwhile, a dozen artists, including Glenn Ligon and Patti Smith, are making creative use of them.

October 30, 2020



*Photograph by Chris Maggio for The New Yorker*

New York City's pay phones are obsolete, and, by early next year, they will also be history—removed to make way for Wi-Fi kiosks. Through Jan. 3, a dozen artists (including Glenn Ligon, Patti Smith, and Jimmie Durham, whose contribution is pictured above) are making creative use of phone booths along Sixth Avenue, from Fifty-first to Fifty-sixth Streets. The project, called "**Titan**," was co-curated by Damián Ortega and Bree Zucker, in collaboration with the Kurimanzutto gallery.

## Books

- [Does Knowing God Just Take Practice?](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
- [Searching for Refuge After the Second World War](#)

# **Does Knowing God Just Take Practice?**

For both the faithful and the doubtful, the source of religious experience can seem mysterious. One anthropologist explores belief in more mundane terms—as a form of expertise.

By [James Wood](#)

November 2, 2020



I was nine or ten when my parents left their stolid Anglican church for one that was undergoing what was known as “charismatic renewal.” This was the mid-nineteen-seventies, in the northern English city of Durham, but the energies were all American. The young congregants—our church was popular with local university students—played guitars, gave testimonials, raised their hands in rhapsody, and “danced with the spirit” in the aisles. Sometimes, though not often, people spoke in tongues, a diabolical glossolalia that I found deeply fascinating. There was a church band—twelve-string guitars, tambourines, trumpet, and flute. We sang American hymns, songs I vaguely thought of as “Californian.” I grew to dread one of the most popular, “I Am the Bread of Life,” which had a chorus with the words “And I will raise him up.” As the chorus soared, earnest hands were raised heavenward—including the hands of my parents, who were always moved by this song to forgo their customary physical reticence. I would glance sideways at them and then quickly look away, as if I’d witnessed the throes of some primal scene.

The extremity of emotion that pulsed through the congregation every Sunday alarmed me. I came to think of that church as *the place where grownups weep*. Charismatic or evangelical churches are theatres of spiritual catharsis. You come to such places and lay your burdens before the Lord, open your soul to the Holy Spirit, and “let all the sadness and evil out” (as my mother once put it). This crisis of transformation was often physically arduous. People shuddered and their eyes filled with tears, while others who had already been through such experiences held their hands or prayed over them. “Free prayer” was encouraged; worshippers might blurt out their hopes, secrets, prophecies. The natural order of things was inverted: adults, spasming in emotion, appeared to need the calm intervention of the dry-eyed child. This was where perfectly ordinary English people seemed to lead a kind of double life, an existence that, in its strange abandon and abnormality, appeared almost criminally intense.

What was unsettling to the child, in other words, was probably what was so exciting to the adult convert: the drama of transferred authority. The believing adult, pulled toward the commanding Christ, felt the divine power of God’s call, and the divinely inspired power of the pastors and the elders who voiced that call: *You must change your life*. But the unbelieving or skeptical child, with no great desire to change his life, felt abandoned by those who should have been in charge, and wondered furtively at the authority of that divine command. Who was this God, this Jesus, this Holy Spirit? If he didn’t exist, then Sunday

morning was a mass sickness, nothing more than the contagion of hallucination. That prospect seemed quite troubling. But the alternative scenario didn't seem any better. Evangelical practice presumes a highly interventionist Jesus, a surveillance God who not only numbers the hairs on your head but cares about your job interview, whom you go out with, the house you want to buy. When my mother told the pastor that I had done well in a recent school exam, he gave me a hug and offered a hearty "Praise the Lord!" I thought that this God probably didn't exist, but, if he did exist, he had all the scrutinizing powers of a meddlesome headmaster, always alert for the smallest failures and successes.

I know how unbalanced this is. I'm sure I should have seen all the human goodness and decency—there was plenty of that around, too. I bring it up as a way of explaining my somewhat unbalanced interest in the work of the Stanford anthropologist T. M. Luhrmann, who has been studying American evangelical worship for at least twenty years. In 2012, Luhrmann published "[When God Talks Back](#)," an account of her experiences in charismatic churches in Chicago and the San Francisco area. These were part of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, a network of congregations founded in California in the nineteen-seventies. Curious about everything, open-eyed, endlessly patient, Luhrmann embedded herself like a military correspondent. Over several years, she interviewed more than fifty congregants, worshipped and prayed with them, joined Bible-study groups, and reported, with scrupulous neutrality, on their daily spiritual practice.

Her new book, "[How God Becomes Real](#)" (Princeton), represents a distillation of that deep work on American Evangelicalism, and expands her acute discussion of spiritual practice across other forms of religious devotion that she has studied or encountered over the years—charismatic Christian worship in Ghana and India, Santería ("a blend of Yoruba spirit possession and Catholicism that emerged among West African slaves in the Caribbean"), and British witchcraft (Luhrmann's first book, "[Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England](#)," from 1989, was the product of field work among apparently ordinary Londoners who practiced magic and witchcraft).

This comparative framework suits Luhrmann, precisely because she is not interested in the questions that so gripped me when I was young: what or who is God, and how can we know if this God exists? Luhrmann passes over questions of belief in search of questions of practice—the technologies of prayer. She wants to know how worshippers open themselves up to their experiences of God;

how they communicate with gods and spirits and in turn hear those gods and spirits reply to them, and she is interested in the kind of therapeutic transformation that such prayerful conversation has on the worshipper. She calls this activity “real-making,” and adds that her new book is not a believer’s or an atheist’s, but an anthropologist’s work. “Rather than presuming that people worship because they believe, we ask instead whether people believe because they worship,” she writes. Thus “the puzzle of religion,” as she defines it, “is not the problem of false belief but the question of how gods and spirits become and remain real to people and what this real-making does for humans.” Whether these questions—of belief and of practice—can be separated quite as staunchly as she wishes is the “puzzle” that surely haunts her own work.

Readers without firsthand experience of evangelical communities were probably surprised by some of the day-to-day details in “When God Talks Back.” Luhrmann describes, at the Vineyard churches, a relationship with God of casual and remarkably friendly intimacy. She prepares us by cautioning that her evangelical subjects approach God in a way that, to traditional believers, might seem “vulgar, overemotional, or even psychotic.” Among her interviewees, Elaine prays for guidance about whether to take a roommate or move to a new apartment. Kate gets angry with God and “yells at him when things go wrong—when she organizes a trip for the church and the bus company is flaky or it rains.” Stacy prays for a good haircut, and Hannah asks God about whom to date, and sometimes feels he is pranking her in little ways: “I’ll trip and fall, and I’ll be like, *Thanks, God.*” Rachel asks for help with how to dress: “Like, God, what should I wear? . . . I think God cares about really, really little things in my life.” Other women speak of setting an evening aside for a “date night” with the Lord (men speak of “quiet time” with God, Luhrmann reports). They are perhaps encouraged in this thinking by their pastor, who suggests that his congregants should “set out a second cup of coffee for God in the morning—to pour God an actual cup of steaming coffee, to place it on an actual table, and to sit down at that table . . . to talk to God about the things on our minds.”

These believers speak to their creator, and hear him speak to them. Generally, God’s voice is not audible, and “God” is merely the mental attribution of what a voiced divine reply would be like. But sometimes Luhrmann’s subjects attest to having heard an actual voice. Elaine, who is one of Luhrmann’s principal witnesses and the leader of the Bible-study group she joins, tells her that she was praying when she heard the Lord clearly say the words “Start a school.” But what believers hear, Luhrmann discovers, depends on where they’re from. In her

new book, she finds that in India and Ghana God seems to speak more audibly than in America: “People reported experiencing God talking more palpably, as if He spoke from outside their inner mind, than He did in the United States.” She thinks that a culture of skepticism—and perhaps an embarrassment about appearing weird or insane—prompts American worshippers to be somewhat suspicious of such audibility.

Luhrmann emphasizes that one needs a talent for this kind of highly attuned prayer. She notices how hard her subjects work at their relationships with God. Hearing God’s voice, she says, is a “richly layered skill,” and her subjects speak of developing it as one would speak of any expertise; they think that “repeated exposure and attention, coupled with specific training, helps the expert to see things that are really present but that the raw observer just cannot.” At various moments, Luhrmann likens the way her congregants view this aptitude for prayerful communication to wine tasting, being a sonogram technician, playing tennis. The Vineyard members talk to her about the importance of “discernment,” a word that Paul uses in I Corinthians, where he lists various “gifts” of the Spirit—the powers of prophecy, of healing, of speaking in tongues, and the “discerning of spirits.” I remember how important that talismanic phrase “gifts of the Spirit” was in our congregation, because it distinguished those churches fortunate enough to be in possession of such charismatic powers.

Luhrmann tells us that no one at the Vineyard laid out any rules of discernment, but that when she asked people how they knew that God was speaking to them they would revert to four “tests.” First, did a suggestion seem spontaneous, unlikely, not the kind of thing you would normally say or imagine? Second, was what you were hearing the kind of thing God might say, and not in contradiction to Biblical example or teaching? (Luhrmann stresses that the Vineyard’s God is not the severe God of the Hebrew Bible—who, for instance, orders Abraham to kill his son—but the loving God of the New Testament.) Third, could the revelation be verified by asking other people who were praying for the same outcome whether they had heard a similar message? Fourth, did hearing God’s voice impart a sense of peace? “If what you heard (or saw) did not, it did not come from God.”

I have a flyer from the Jehovah’s Witnesses that asks “Can We Really Believe What the Bible Says?” and lists three reasons for doing so, the third of which is “God cannot lie. The Bible plainly states: ‘It is impossible for God to lie.’ (Hebrews 6:18).” Below this, a friend of mine has written, in pen, “Q.E.D.” The

four tests of the Vineyard are beset by a similar circularity, and, in fairness, it's not clear how any so-called theological test could escape it. The evangelical relationship to God is so possessive, and so near-idolatrous, that it's hard to see how one could get outside it and manage the necessary "verification." Idolatrous, because conceiving a God who is interested in what shirt you wear can look a lot like inventing a God for your own small purposes. Again and again, evangelical worshippers seem to use God to validate the great luxury of capitalism: choice. Should I choose Denver or Chicago? This job or that job? That boyfriend or not? (The usual formulation for validating your decision is "I feel God *calling me* to do x.")



*"I'm buying some back-to-office clothes."*  
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

There's a story that the lovable German poet (and convert from Judaism) Heinrich Heine, lying on his deathbed in 1856, calmly uttered these final words about God's forgiveness: "He'll forgive me; that's his job." Heine, one imagines, was making fun of the whole contraption of last-minute bargains; more subtly, he was mocking the idea that we control God, that we know what tricks this little brass effigy we have fabricated in our own image will perform on our behalf. Evangelicals are very good at knowing what God's job is. Heine sounds like Ludwig Feuerbach, who proposed, fifteen years before Heine's death, in "[The Essence of Christianity](#)," that we make the God we need, projecting onto this creation our deepest anxieties and desires.

Modern Christians in the West like to think of themselves as believers who have left behind any cultic relationship with a usable God. Doubtless not a few of them harbor a special disdain for American Evangelicalism, with its gaudy, prosperous instrumentalism. Certainly, if belief were plotted along a spectrum, at one end might lie the austere indescribability of the Jewish or Islamic God ("Silence is prayer to thee," Maimonides wrote) and at the other the noisy, all-too-knowable God of charismatic worship, happy to be chatted to and apparently happy to chat back. But it is still a spectrum, and, indeed, any kind of petitionary prayer presumes a God onto whom one is projecting local human attributes. In this sense, you could say that Christianity is essentially a form of idolatry. The difficult, unspeakable Jewish God becomes the incarnated Jesus, a God made flesh, who lived among us, who resembles us. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer blamed Christian anti-Semitism on just this idolatry of the man-God: "Christ the incarnated spirit is the deified sorcerer." They called this "the spiritualization of magic." Evangelicals are hardly the only Christian believers to draw this Jesus, the deified sorcerer, near to them. I'm reminded of that whenever I see professional soccer players crossing themselves as they run onto the field, as if God really cared whether Arsenal beats Manchester United.

Luhrmann would say, with some justice, that in such cases we should focus more on the practice than on the beliefs. Crossing oneself is ritualistic, and she would probably add that the soccer player then performs on the field as if he and his team alone determined the outcome of the game, which is to say that—in a sense—he performs as if God didn't exist after all. In "How God Becomes Real," Luhrmann calls this the art of possessing "flexible ontologies," because "people may talk as if the gods are straightforwardly real, but they don't act that way." A

driver who prays that the car will stop without his using the brakes “would seem mad, not devout.” The real world, dependent on the laws of physics, runs easily alongside a highly elaborated and imagined belief-world, which shares several of the properties of fiction-making and fiction-reading. The Vineyard believers, Luhrmann discovered, learn how to “*pretend* that God is present and to make believe that he is talking back like the very best of buddies.” As with a fictional character, this God is at once absolutely real and not quite real. Luhrmann likens the capacity for imaginative absorption to being “engrossed in good magical fiction of the Harry Potter kind.” One of the spiritual guidebooks she consults suggests that worshippers relate to God not as an “Author,” a view that will make you “go mad or despair,” but as a “character.” As she notes, this move effectively abolishes heresy and doubt, by personalizing God’s authority. The “question of evil,” the ancient dilemma that has driven people to madness or despair—why is the world beset by tragedy if a providential and loving Author created it?—becomes a much easier therapeutic question: why is my life the way it is, and how can Jesus help me to make it better? Luhrmann neglects to say that the interventionist evangelical God ought to make the believer feel the problem of evil all the more acutely, since a deity mundane enough to have an interest in the outcome of a job interview might also be presumed to have had *some* role to play during, say, the Holocaust.

Luhrmann has brilliantly illuminated the magical attunement that constitutes a great deal of evangelical charismatic belief. Yet her work, at least to the religious skeptic, also carries with it an almost unbearable tension. She is, for the most part, carefully neutral about the existence of God, or even somewhat hospitable to the notion. When she talks about the playful or pretend elements of charismatic belief, she reminds her readers that of course it isn’t just pretend, that these worshippers are making “a real claim about the nature of the world, a claim about the objective reality of the Holy Spirit and God’s supernatural presence.” In “How God Becomes Real,” when she emphasizes how much training and technique go into spiritual absorption and prayerful communication, she concedes that such an argument might seem to “explain gods and spirits away, as if the experience of a god were nothing more than a temperamental byproduct.” That’s not what she thinks, she quickly adds, though without telling us why she doesn’t think so. At other moments, she seems to have done a bit of “real-making” of her own—having apparently been so deeply embedded in Elaine’s prayer group that “I was her prayer partner in house group, and week after week we prayed for specific upcoming job interviews” for Elaine.

We aren't told who or what Luhrmann was praying to. My surmise is that she isn't sure (a perfectly respectable position), which explains how often her analysis, at the very brink of deciding, as it were, which way to vote, engages in curious slippages of argument. Her major refuge is a kind of therapeutic pragmatism. She's fond of the verb "work." Prayer works, belief works, real-making works, she says, in the sense that, as far as these believers are concerned, God is made real; and these prayer practices therapeutically change the people who practice them. But does prayer "work" in the most important sense, of achieving what it proposes—which is to communicate with an actually existing God? Luhrmann won't be drawn out, committed as she is to a kind of Feuerbachian religious anthropology, in which God is merely the reality we conjure and create through our activities, imaginings, and yearnings.

"These practices work," she writes at the start of "When God Talks Back." "They change people. That is, they change mental experience, and those changes help people to experience God as more real." A page later, she writes that the most difficult problem that faces "anyone who believes or wants to believe in God" is "not whether God exists, in some abstract, in-principle, out-in-the-universe way, but how to find God in the everyday world and how to know that what you have found is God, and not someone else's deluded fantasy or your own selfish wish." This sounds like a reasonable caveat, but it's something of a fudge. Can the practice of finding God be so easily separated from the crucial question of whether there is a God to find? Presumably, once you are convinced that the God you have found is not a "deluded fantasy," you also believe that God exists, both as an abstract proposition and as an actual presence.

Luhrmann ends "When God Talks Back" by telling us that she doesn't "presume to know ultimate reality" but does feel that she has "come to know God." She wouldn't call herself a Christian, but finds herself defending Christianity. (Luhrmann was brought up as a Unitarian—a denomination that most evangelicals would consider essentially godless.) At the end of "How God Becomes Real," she announces that she doesn't believe that God exists, if by God one means "an invisible other somehow out there, sitting apart, a man with a beard in the sky." On the other hand, she finds it "uncomfortable to characterize what one might call believers as having false beliefs." Instead, she finds herself caught in the middle—between discounting the idea of God as something equally real and present in the world as "table and chairs" and discounting the words of the believers she has interviewed as "mere metaphors" (which would seem as if she were judging their beliefs as false).

There's something there: but what is it? In fact, Luhrmann's account quietly, insidiously, and even unwittingly deconstructs the notion that this something has an existence independent of the "mere metaphors" that her subjects use to describe their visionary experiences. In particular, her work on the training and teaching of prayerful instinct, as she acknowledges, inevitably emphasizes the cultivation of visionary expertise over the existence of the object of that vision. Chekhov writes jokingly about an exterminator who, when he reads Tolstoy's "[The Cossacks](#)," decides it's worthless because it doesn't mention bugs. We look for what we want to find, but its discovery is no guarantee of its existence. Wine tasters and sonogram technicians are drinking real wine and looking for real babies, but ghostbusters and psychics might be thought to have "trained" themselves to find mere figments. Luhrmann's analogies and angles of inquiry (looking for God is like reading "Harry Potter," and so on) often align her evangelical believers with the latter group.

In her new book, she writes about the proclivity for imaginative absorption. Apparently, people who score high in absorption tests "are more likely to say that God speaks to them." She adds that the more "some phenomenological event" (like crying or speaking in tongues) is "valued within a faith community, the more it will occur." She considers herself someone with just this talent for absorption: she tells us that she loved Tolkien when she was growing up, and provides an engrossing discussion of the years she spent as a young ethnographer in London, while investigating the practices of British witches. Like evangelicals, these witches studied how to wield their specific magical powers. Luhrmann took a nine-month course in such powers, which involved meditation and visualization, and, she reports, "my mental imagery *did* seem to become clearer." She began to have more "anomalous" experiences—"visions, voices, a sense of presence, out-of-body experiences." So the analyst with a proclivity for visionary experiences is reporting on a proclivity for visionary experiences, which in turn seems to predispose certain adepts to those visionary experiences: lots of bugs here. Yet surely prayer can't be studied solely as a technology or a practice. Prayer is also a proposition. It proposes that God exists and that we can communicate with that God. And evangelical prayer, premised on faith in an interventionist God, goes further, because it insists on a certain connection to miracle. Luhrmann may distance herself from the table-like reality of God, but her evangelical subjects almost certainly don't. God, for them, is even more real than a table and chairs, and, when it suits him, this real God can do miraculous things with tables and chairs.

There's nothing intellectually improper about Luhrmann's omnivorous agnosticism, to be sure, and only a thoroughly unbalanced reader like this one, with rusty old theological axes to grind, would demand that her writing be other than what it so valuably is. Besides, even when one has decided that God doesn't exist, one might still hesitate to conclude that religious practice, with its glories and degradations, is just one long unending history of illusion and hallucination. When I was growing up, the evangelical church I attended didn't offer the only example of how to think about religion. Durham is dominated by a beautiful cathedral, one of the great achievements of Romanesque architecture. I spent long hours inside this magnificent building as a cathedral chorister, and grew to love its gray silence, its massive, calm nave, the weight of centuries of devotion. Sometimes I could almost feel the presence of the faithful stonemasons who, in the twelfth century, arduously placed one stone on top of another.

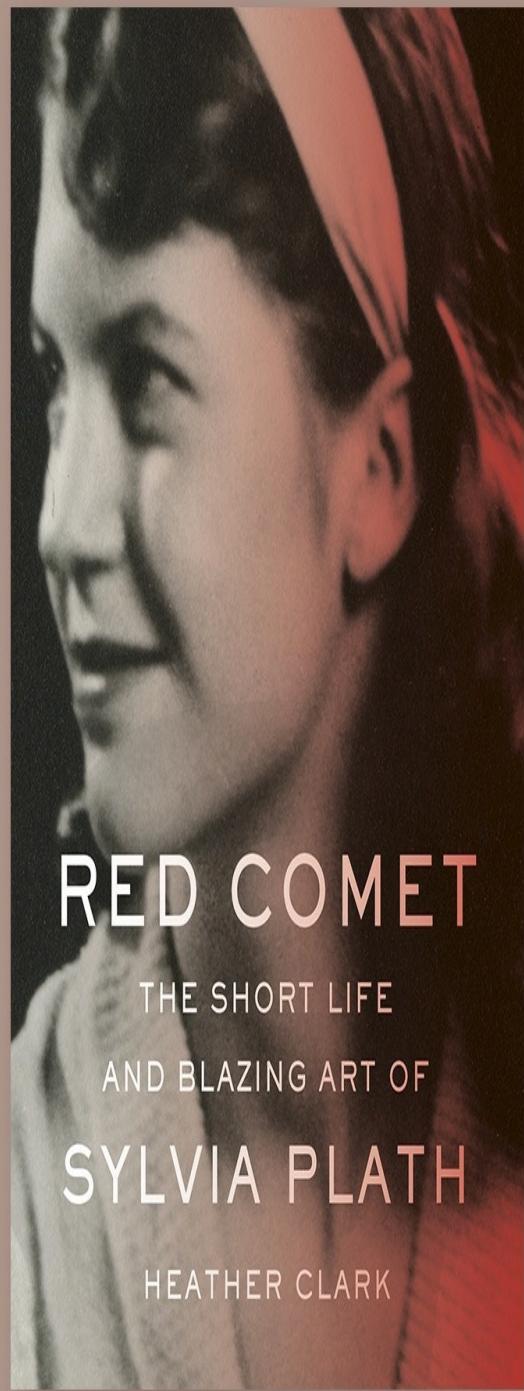
A friend of mine, with whom, when I was older, I used to have long "God battles" (me against, him for), once teased me with a question: If, as I claimed, religion was just an enormous illusion, was Durham Cathedral "just a mistake"? No, not a mistake—of course not, I replied. "O.K., a great temple, then, erected to honor an illusion? A big stone hoax?" Yes, perhaps. ♦

[November 9, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Briefly Noted**

“Red Comet,” “Ravenna,” “Earthlings,” and “Girls Against God.”

November 2, 2020



**Red Comet**, by Heather Clark (Knopf). Drawing on a wealth of primary sources, this revelatory biography of Sylvia Plath seeks to recover her legacy from myth and misconception. Clark presents the social, political, and cultural forces that forged Plath's interests, ambitions, and anxieties: pressures of gender and class; the Holocaust and nuclear warfare; the conformity of mid-century America. Plath's struggles with depression and her marriage to Ted Hughes emerge in complex detail, but Clark does not let Plath's suicide define her artistic achievement, arguing with refreshing rigor for her significance to modern letters. The result is a new understanding and appreciation of an innovative, uncompromising poetic voice.



JUDITH HERRIN

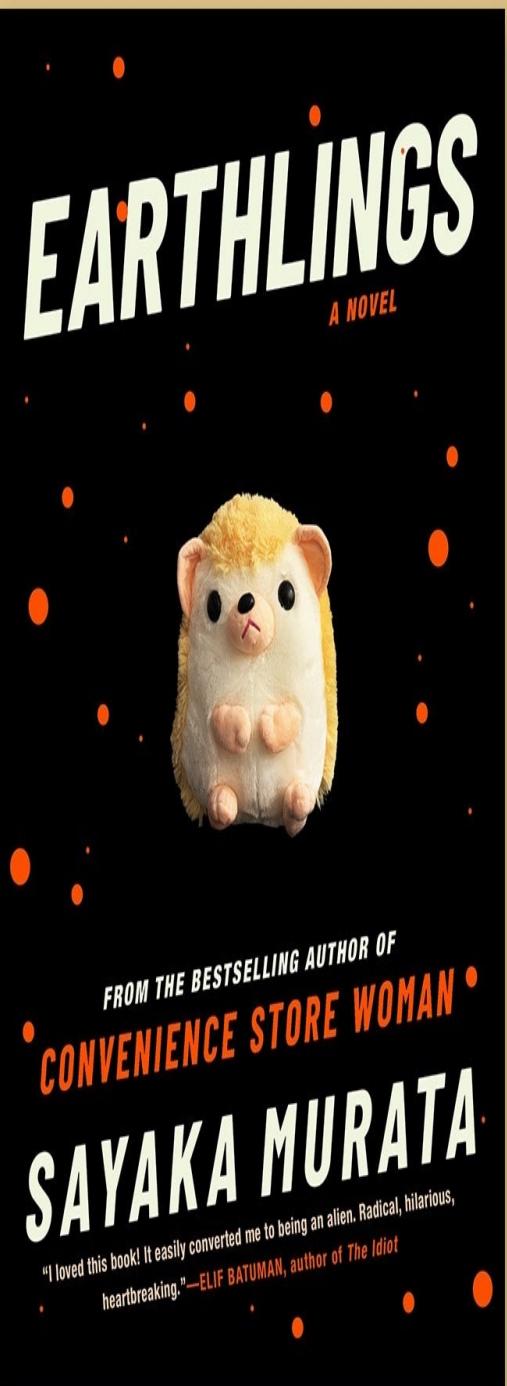
AUTHOR OF BYZANTIUM

# RAVENNA

CAPITAL OF EMPIRE,  
CRUCIBLE OF EUROPE



[\*\*Ravenna\*\*](#), by Judith Herrin (Princeton). In A.D. 402, as Rome was undergoing the convulsions that caused its demise, the unassuming city of Ravenna became a new imperial residence. For the next four centuries, as this bold history relates, Ravenna was “the fulcrum of energies” that gave rise to a new world: medieval Christendom. Its rulers embodied a unique synthesis of West, East, and “barbarian,” which shaped Ravenna’s laws and civic culture, as well as its art and architecture, including dazzling mosaics and octagonal churches. Although Ravenna was never entirely its own agent (it served as Constantinople’s entry point to the West), its brief flourishing made it, as Herrin elegantly argues, “the first European city.”



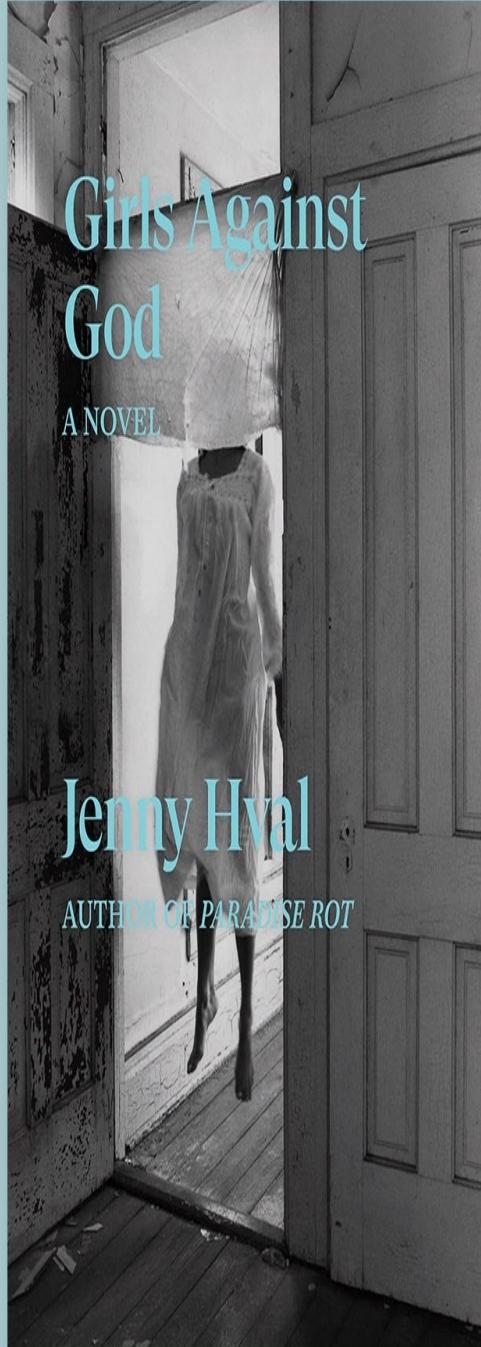
[Earthlings](#), by Sayaka Murata, translated from the Japanese by Ginny Tapley Takemori (Grove). What does it mean to feel at home in the world? Natsuki, the protagonist of this startling novel, doesn't know: from a young age, she's convinced that she has been contacted by aliens who will take her away from a middle-class Japanese life marked by cruelty. As Natsuki grows up, she continues to feel out of place in society's "Factory," in which her only purpose is to produce children. After she meets a man equally resistant to the strain of domestic life, the pair embark on an adventure that spirals toward madness. Murata takes a childlike idea and holds onto it with imaginative fervor, brilliantly exposing the callousness and arbitrariness of convention.

# Girls Against God

A NOVEL

Jenny Hval

AUTHOR OF *PARADISE ROT*



**Girls Against God**, by Jenny Hval, translated from the Norwegian by Marjam Idriss (*Verso*). In this experimental novel by a noted singer-songwriter, the narrator, a filmmaker, dwells on her childhood in conservative southern Norway and her adolescence playing in a black-metal band. Her recollections feed into a film, described at the end of the novel, that distorts and reimagines existing works of art using blood, guts, and witchcraft. The narrator films two friends to a score of black metal, and the subject of an Edvard Munch painting is re-created “with ferocious, seething eyes.” Hval, who is known for using body imagery to express political ideas about art, depicts cultish rituals to subvert what she sees as “the restrictive framework of our daily lives.”

# Searching for Refuge After the Second World War

The end of the war brought a sense of possibility—a chance to redefine civilization. But for Jews displaced throughout Europe more doors closed than opened.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

November 2, 2020



On July 23, 1945, less than three months after Germany's surrender, Earl Harrison, the dean of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, sat down at Bergen-Belsen with a survivor named Yossel Rosensaft. Harrison, who was forty-six, was described by a fellow Philadelphia lawyer as a man with "broad shoulders, curly blond hair, clear blue eyes, a firm jaw and a big smile." The State Department had sent him as a special emissary to investigate the conditions in the camps that were hastily being organized to shelter "displaced persons," or D.P.s, and to report back "with particular reference to the Jewish refugees." Rosensaft, Harrison noted in his diary, was "only 33—looks older." He had been deported to Auschwitz from Będzin, Poland, escaped, been recaptured, and sent to Auschwitz, again, before ending up at Bergen-Belsen. Harrison recorded Rosensaft's wishes for the future:

1. Peace & quiet—live out remaining years.
2. Can't go back: Anti-S[emitism], parents killed—Land soaked with Jewish blood.
3. People outside E[urope] too quiet about what has happened—nobody seems concerned.

"Don't leave us in this bloody region," the notes continued. "Make effort to have doors of P"—Palestine—" & other countries open." Listening to him and others, Harrison wrote, "Seldom have I been so depressed. . . . And to think I was told, quite officially, there was no need of my visiting Belsen."

There were plenty of people in Washington and London who saw no need for Harrison to investigate at all, or even to make any "particular reference" to Jews. As David Nasaw recounts in "[The Last Million: Europe's Displaced Persons from World War to Cold War](#)" (Penguin Press), Allied authorities initially maintained that it was wrong to differentiate Jews from other displaced people on the basis of their experience as Jews. Indeed, Allied officials argued that to do so would constitute religious discrimination. The week that Harrison met with Rosensaft, a senior British official said that giving targeted support to Jewish survivors would be "unfair to the many non-Jews who have suffered on account of their clandestine and other activities in the Allied cause"—the dismissive "All lives matter" of the postwar days. Instead, displaced persons were to be sorted out on what General Dwight D. Eisenhower described as a "nationality basis,"

which meant that a Polish Jew who had survived the death camps might be left to share quarters with someone who had guarded a camp in Poland.

Harrison took a different view, writing, in a report to President Truman, that “the first and plainest need of these people is a recognition of their actual status and by this I mean their status as Jews.” Many had barely survived death marches as the Nazis retreated. In the brief period between the liberation and Harrison’s arrival, more than thirteen thousand former prisoners at Belsen died, as typhus continued to ravage the camp. Those who lived faced a second, bitter abandonment. One Jewish chaplain wrote in June, 1945, “Did our leaders plan on the basis of the fact that no Jews would be alive?”

Harrison’s report had an immediate effect on Truman, and on the organization of the D.P. camps, which were placed under the auspices of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and then of the International Refugee Organization (the predecessor of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). But none of this took place without a struggle. The objection that redressing a historic wrong amounts to reverse discrimination is, apparently, timeless. So is the insistence that those who have suffered injustices must never be pushy about it: in September, 1945, Clement Attlee, the British Prime Minister, wrote to Truman that “if our officers had placed the Jews in a special racial category at the head of the queue, my strong view is that the effect of this would have been disastrous for the Jews.” Ernest Bevin, Attlee’s foreign secretary, echoed that theme in a press conference two months later: “If the Jews, with all their sufferings, want to get too much at the head of the queue, you have the danger of another anti-Semitic reaction.”

The “queue” in question was a long, serpentine thing. The initial nation-based sorting of D.P.s was, on one level, an effort to impose order on a chaotic landscape. When Harrison arrived, Germany’s cities and infrastructure were largely in ruins, and the collapse of the Third Reich had left millions of non-Germans stranded—including prisoners of war, forced and slave laborers, Dutch dissidents, willing collaborators, and what one American chaplain described as “the men with the pajamas, you know, dirty, very short hair looking to talk to someone for aid.” At the war’s close, in May, 1945, there were more than six million D.P.s, by Nasaw’s tally; by October of that year, after a series of repatriations, including those of two million Soviet prisoners of war and forced laborers, the majority were gone. What Nasaw calls “the Last Million” were the “non-repatriable” remnant who refused to leave or had nowhere to go. Only a

fraction of them were Jews. Most of the rest were Polish Catholics, Ukrainians, and Balts from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Their reasons for remaining in Germany ran the gamut. There were Poles aligned with the London-based government-in-exile and at odds with the regime forming in Warsaw. There were Baltic S.S. recruits who had fled to Germany in the final days of the war, ahead of the Red Army, in some cases with their families. Some Ukrainians were nationalists who knew that Stalin was in a killing mood; others would have remembered the hunger of the famine years. There was no single story.

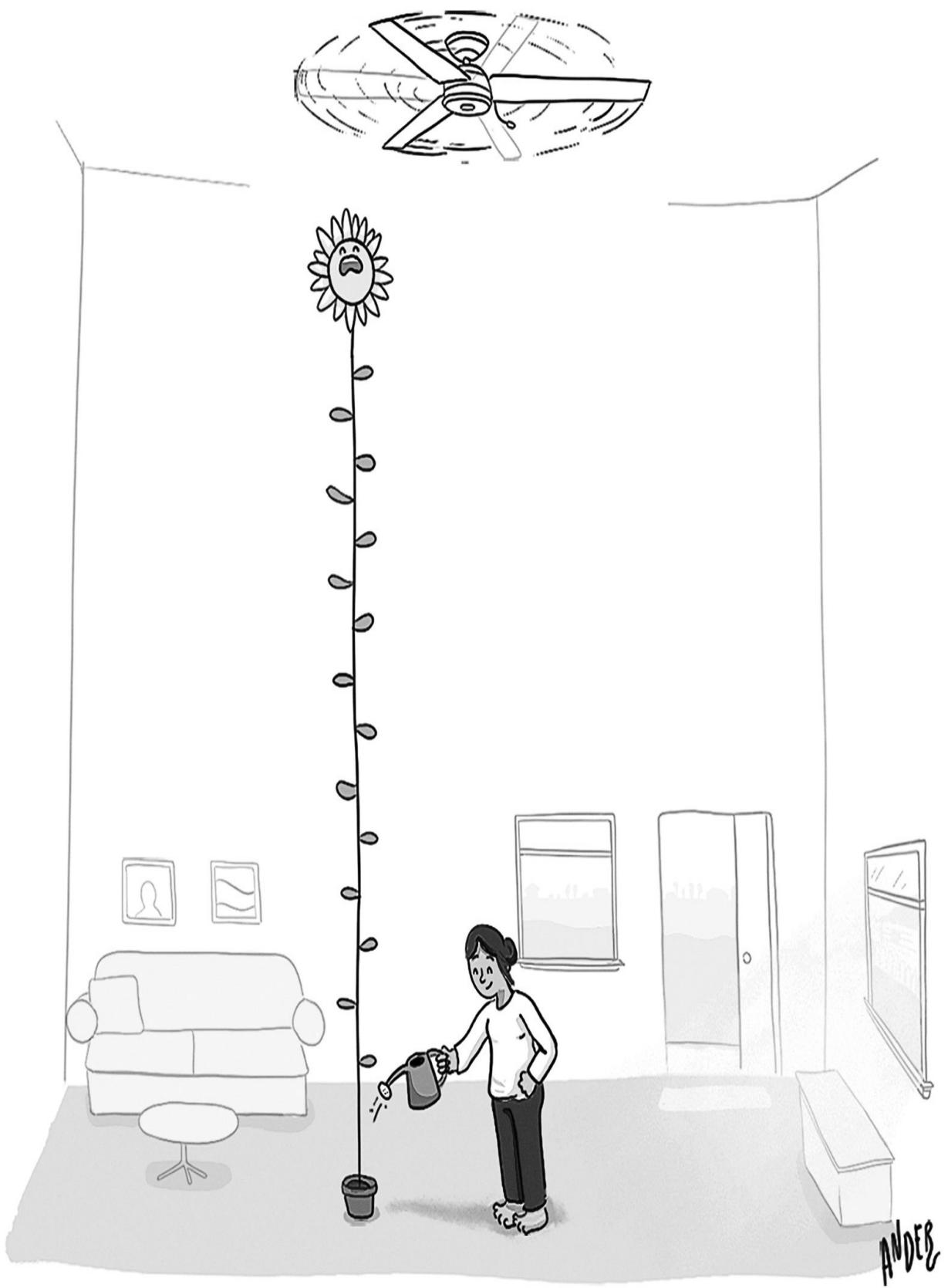
Nasaw, who has written well-regarded biographies of Andrew Carnegie and William Randolph Hearst, makes clear how much the Allied forces wished that those in the displaced remnant would simply go back to wherever it was they came from. (At one point, Fiorello La Guardia tried to talk the Poles into it.) Nasaw also captures the power of refusing to leave—the decision not to disperse. This isn’t to say that the goal of the Last Million was to stay in Germany forever. By not going through one door, they were trying to open others. For the Jews, the main options were, as Rosensaft laid them out, Palestine or some other place that had not been the recent site of genocidal murder, and the central conflict of “The Last Million” is the fight, in the years following the war, over which it was going to be.

One reason that the D.P.s were stuck was that so much around them had changed; with maps redrawn, there was no such thing as simply going back home. Stalin claimed the Baltic states, but the United States did not recognize their annexation, and was not about to force the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian D.P.s to return. Poland’s map had been radically reconfigured; it lost some territory to the Soviet Union and gained other regions from Germany, including land that had been German even before the Third Reich. (In effect, the entire country was picked up and moved to the west.) Nasaw offers a glimpse of the mutual incomprehension that resulted in scenes like the one in which an aid worker boosterishly presents the new map to a Polish refugee she is encouraging to return—“Just look what Poland got in exchange”—and is dismayed when the man keeps pointing to a village on the Soviet side of the line. That’s home, he says, and as long as it’s in the U.S.S.R. he’s not going back.

Many Polish Jews did try to return home, only to be greeted with violence from neighbors or newcomers who, in some cases, had taken possession of their houses. The point of no return came with a pogrom on July 4, 1946, in the town of Kielce, in which forty-odd Jewish survivors were killed: “stoned to death,

beaten to death, thrown from windows, shot, bayoneted,” Nasaw reports. News of Kielce accelerated an exodus of Jews into the western occupation zones of Germany. In May, 1945, there were about thirty thousand survivors in those German D.P. camps; a little more than a year later, there were some two hundred thousand.

The fate of the D.P.s, as Nasaw vividly shows, could hinge on how well they fit a certain stereotype of the worthy victim. Nasaw quotes aid workers who were consistently impressed by the Baltic D.P.s—“charming peoples to whom we could easily relate,” as the wife of one British official recalled—and put off by what they saw as the neediness of the Jews—as if they were too pitiful to truly pity. General George Patton, in his diaries, complained about how the Jewish survivors smelled. “Harrison and his ilk believe that the Displaced Person is a human being, which he is not, and this applies particularly to the Jews who are lower than animals,” he wrote. He called the Balts “the best of the Displaced Persons.” In another entry, after a tour of a former German military hospital, Patton wrote that the facility was “in a bad state of repair when we arrived, because these Jewish DP’s, or at least a majority of them, have no sense of human relationships. They decline, where practicable, to use latrines, preferring to relieve themselves on the floor.” It was lost on him that there might be other reasons that people recovering from years of brutalization, malnutrition, death marches, and the destruction of their families were not cheerfully organizing themselves into plumbing-repair brigades.



*"Please, for the love of God, stop watering!"*  
Cartoon by Alexander Andreades

Patton wasn't alone in his anti-Semitism or his blindness, and both of these things had an effect when it came to resettling the refugees. The prospect of increased Jewish immigration to Palestine, which Harrison recommended and Truman endorsed, exasperated the British, who still controlled the region and worried about its stability. In October, 1945, Lord Halifax, the United Kingdom's Ambassador to the United States, told Secretary of State James Byrnes that his government did not want to put itself "into a position of accepting a Hitler thesis that there is no room for Jews in Europe." By "Europe," the British plainly did not mean London; there was no concurrent mobilization to bring Jewish refugees into the U.K. In the United States, too, the number of Jews admitted during the first several years was achingly small.

The Western allies, when they did take in displaced persons, tended to go full Patton, cherry-picking those who were healthy, strong, and Christian. A telling example is the British "Balt Cygnet" scheme, which gave sanctuary to thousands of young Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian women—the "swans"—who, as a government memorandum reassuringly put it, "are of good appearance; are scrupulously clean in their persons and habits; have a natural dignity in their bearing." An aid worker wrote that most "would look more at home in the drawing room than in the kitchen." (They were put to work in kitchens, though, and in tuberculosis sanatoriums.) A follow-up program, chirpily called Westward Ho!, brought in men, with a preference for Balts, to address labor shortages in British agriculture and industry. It hit a snag when a doctor in London noticed that many of the Latvian men had their blood types tattooed under their left arms, revealing them to have been members of the S.S. The British authorities decided to accept a convoluted explanation for this: that the tattoos meant something different for Latvians than for everyone else. They told the doctor to stop asking about the tattoos. When British miners refused to work with the Baltic men whose S.S. tattoos they had spotted, the National Coal Board, Nasaw writes, recommended that they not be given jobs "where they might have to remove their shirts."

The American version of the story includes a note of political tragedy. In late 1946, the American Jewish Committee and other groups made the tactical decision that the best way to bring Jewish survivors to the United States was to make sure that the efforts to do so didn't appear "too visibly Jewish," as Nasaw puts it. Through lobbying and coalition-building, they pushed Congress to pass

legislation to accept four hundred thousand D.P.s; the “calculated gamble,” based on the proportion of Jews in the D.P. camps, was that a good hundred thousand of those admitted would be Jews. But it didn’t pay off: senators who didn’t want to let Jews in added language to what became the Displaced Persons Act of 1948—a preference for agricultural workers and those from nations that had been annexed, and a provision disqualifying anyone who entered the western zones after December 22, 1945, thereby excluding the Jews who had fled the Polish pogroms. In the end, Jewish D.P.s were left with few spots. (Nasaw makes the point that, because of the American restrictions, many Jews had to get fake papers or give false information to immigration authorities—something worth keeping in mind when considering the choices available to refugees today.) The politesse recommended by Attlee, Bevin, and others had gained the American Jews almost nothing.

A major revision of the Displaced Persons Act, in 1950, finally opened the door to the United States, but by then a majority of the Jews in the D.P. camps had given up and gone to Palestine, often illegally, and then to the new State of Israel, where many of them, in the early days of conflict, took up arms. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish Eastern Europeans arrived in the United States with little real examination of their wartime records. Most, Nasaw notes, were not collaborators, but the heedlessness of letting in those who were tainted the resettlement project. Nasaw can be too blithe about what D.P.s from lands the Soviets controlled, including prisoners of war, risked by returning there, and about how helpful Stalin might have been in separating the guilty from the innocent—Nasaw suggests that there was a missed opportunity here. The former Soviet prisoners of war presented in the book’s opening pages are quickly whisked off the stage. Timothy Snyder, in “[Bloodlands](#),” provides a more comprehensive view of that juncture. (So, from another vantage point, does Svetlana Alexievich, in “[The Unwomanly Face of War](#).”) Such omissions may be attributable, in part, to Nasaw’s reliance on English-language sources. He is better at illuminating the mind-set of the Americans and the British than that of the Germans and the Eastern Europeans. Still, a great contribution of Nasaw’s book is that it takes the cinematic moment in which American soldiers arrive and pronounce the nightmare over—“*Shalom Aleichem, Yidden, ihr zint frei*,” a Jewish chaplain from Brooklyn announced when he drove into Buchenwald—as a starting point rather than a closing scene.

“The Last Million” is, in one sense, a book about what happens when the concept of nationality proves inadequate, which is why it returns, again and

again, to Palestine. Jewish survivors, having been told that only their national identity mattered, understandably looked to the idea of a nation. Nasaw regards the opening of Palestine and the creation of Israel not only as a just outcome but as the “simpler” one—and perhaps even the only possible one—by contrast with gaining entry to the United States. At times, he seems frustrated that everyone in the postwar period can’t see how obvious it is: Congress isn’t going to come through; there’s only Palestine. This is how history worked out, of course, but that does not make it inevitable. And, as the Palestinians can attest, it certainly hasn’t been simple. Other endings might have been possible, too.

The wide-open moment after the war ended, when all sorts of imaginative futures did seem possible, is the subject of another new book, “[Ruin and Renewal: Civilizing Europe After World War II](#)” (Basic), by the Oxford historian Paul Betts. Its somewhat hopeful premise is that Europeans, as they stood amid the rubble of their cities in 1945, realized that they might not have the clearest idea of what it meant to be a civilized person, and might want to learn. “Civilization,” as an ideal, has meant different things in different eras, and Betts doesn’t try to define it. He’s more interested in the importance that people gave to the notion of civilization after the war, and in the novel and often self-contradictory ways in which they tried to express it.

Betts covers some of the same ground as Nasaw, but his focus is less on the journeys of the D.P.s than on how their fellow-Europeans were affected by the responsibility of looking after them. A notable divergence between the two books has to do with the ethnic Germans who were expelled from Czechoslovakia, Poland, and other countries in a vast act of ethnic cleansing after the war. There were, by some counts, more than ten million of them, and many had been subjected to state-sanctioned vengeance before they left; for others, the road to Germany was a gantlet of hunger and sexual violence. There is something of a lacuna in Nasaw’s book where one might expect them to be, given that they were, by many definitions (although not necessarily the one used by the occupying forces) displaced persons, too. Nasaw notes the phenomenon, observes that many ethnic Germans had collaborated with the Nazis, and reports that there was “little debate and no dissension” about the expulsion when it came up at Potsdam. Otherwise, the expellees remain at the margins of his story.

Betts demonstrates that, while other Allied leaders went along with the German expulsion when Stalin pushed for it at Potsdam—part of his ravenous campaign of ethnic reshuffling—public figures such as John Dewey, Varian Fry, and

Norman Thomas fervently debated it. The popular press joined in. One widely discussed pamphlet featured the photograph of a malnourished expellee child with the headline “*IS IT NOTHING TO YOU?*” What Betts calls “the polemics of pity” were part of a postwar effort to place civilization and humanitarianism in alignment with each other. Still, by emphasizing how many people on all sides had suffered, Betts writes, these responses at times “unwittingly erased the specificity of Jewish victimhood.” One benefit of reading Nasaw alongside Betts is to put a question mark next to the word “unwittingly.” But the questioning works both ways, as Betts delves usefully into some of the murky areas that lie beyond Nasaw’s purview.

Betts’s approach can be somewhat scattershot, moving from the fetishization of refrigerators and the mania in Germany for etiquette books to U.S. scares over brainwashing, a wave of Marian apparitions, the aspirations of the first Pugwash peace conference, in 1957, and the ways in which independence movements in African countries claimed the language of civilization for their own. As a cultural history the book is unusually rich and engaging, though Betts may be a better source on, say, the legal battle over the ownership of European paintings from an art museum in Algiers or the Afromodernist collaborations of Eastern European and Ghanaian architects than on the actual political struggles in those countries. There is something poignant about an international endeavor he recounts to write a history of civilization that mostly leaves out the wars—the idea being that civilization and armed conflict are antithetical—and something rousing about the coöperative effort of dozens of countries to save the monuments of Nubia from the rising waters of the Nile during the construction of the Aswan High Dam. (New York got the Temple of Dendur out of that.) At a certain point, the reader wonders what went wrong—when did certain of the possibilities, and the earnest ambitions for a world civilization, wither away?

An obvious answer is the escalation of the Cold War, which also, as it happens, underlies much of the bad behavior depicted in Nasaw’s book. (Nazi collaborators were repositioned as anti-Communists.) In Betts’s terms, talk of civilization came to provide an “ideological pretext for an emotional language of fear.”

There are few straight lines in Betts’s account, but in history there rarely are. Yossel Rosensaft, after a brief trip in 1949, decided that Israel was not for him. (“Ben-Gurion will not meet you at the boat,” he said in a speech to other survivors.) He eventually moved to New York and, as Josef Rosensaft, went into

the real-estate business, and began collecting art. Earl Harrison comes across as a hero in the pages of Nasaw's book—the model of a civilized man—and two years after visiting Germany he continued on that righteous trajectory by travelling to Texas to testify on behalf of Heman Marion Sweatt, an African-American who had been denied admission to the University of Texas School of Law because of his race. Harrison was an opponent of restrictive immigration policies and had been so even during the war, when he served, for two years, as the commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The commissioner's remit was broad, and so Harrison, with his curly blond hair and his big smile, also supervised many of the camps in which Americans with Japanese ancestry were interned. ♦

## **Comment**

- [\*\*The Trouble with Election Projections\*\*](#)

[November 9, 2020 Issue](#)

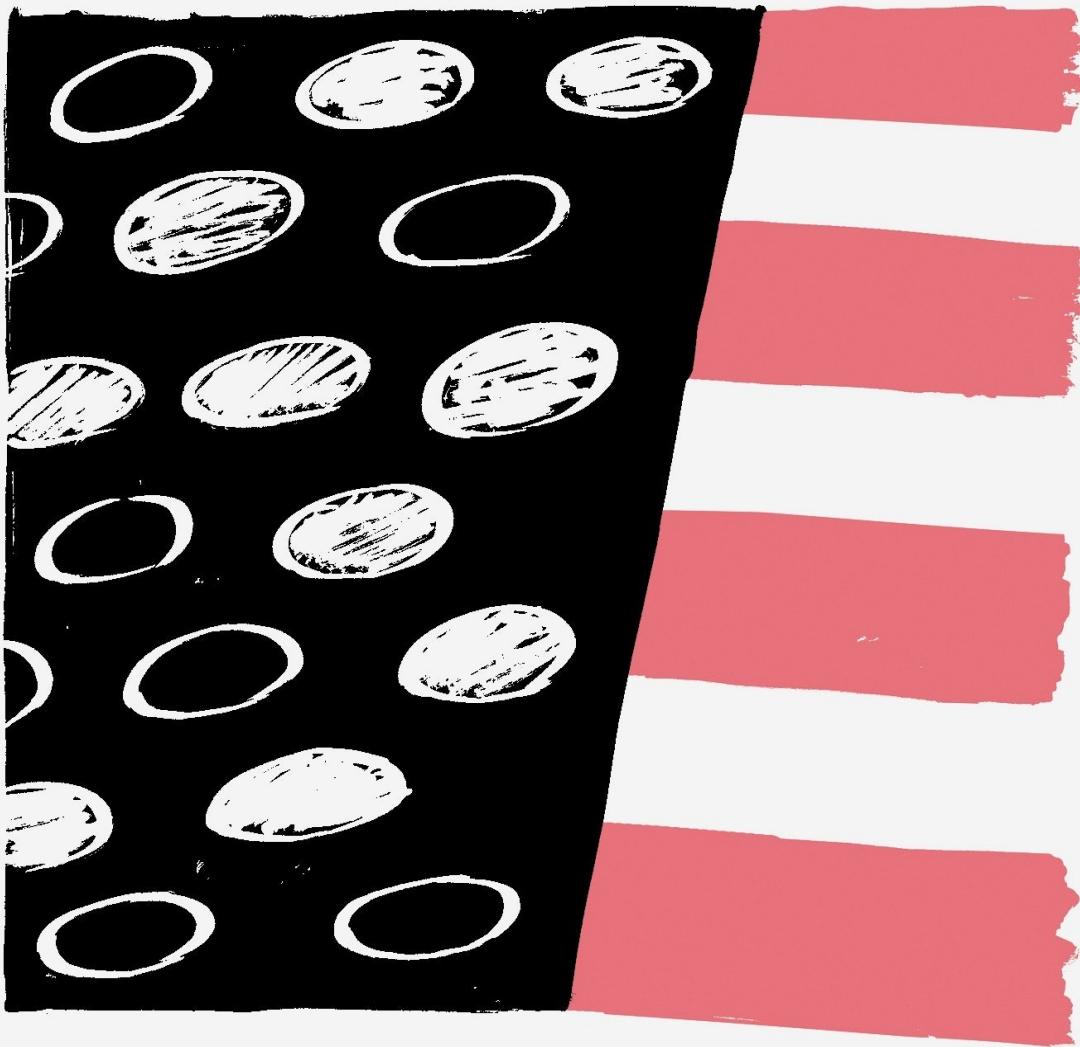
# The Trouble with Election Projections

Projecting a winner isn't the same as counting votes—and that's true more than ever in 2020.

By [Jill Lepore](#)

November 1, 2020

The [2020 Presidential election](#) is likely to smash records. Turnout may well be higher than in any election in the past century. More young people are voting, more people of color are voting, and more people are voting early and by mail. The tallying, too, stands a chance of setting records: in how long it takes for the ballots to be counted, in how widely the results diverge from preëlection predictions, and—if the vote is close—in how fiercely the results are contested in the courts, in the states, in Congress, and in the streets.



All this uncertainty has been driving people to horse-race the polls. Liberals, it seems, pay more attention to polls than conservatives do, and some research suggests that, in 2016, preëlection polls helped deliver the White House to [Donald Trump](#). Four years ago this month, much of the press published not only national polls (which [Hillary Clinton](#) led with forty-six per cent of the vote) but also forecasts of the probability of victory (“Hillary Clinton has an 85% chance to win,” the *Times* announced on Election Day). This may have led some people, confusing the two, to conclude that Clinton was projected to win eighty-five per cent of the vote. Quite possibly, a number of them, given the seeming inevitability, decided not to vote.

This year, responsible news outlets have been more cautious, but they’re also trying to undo an expectation that their own industry has set: that the winner will be known on Election Night. Newspaper publishers and TV producers have taken pains to explain to their audiences that getting the results might take longer, much longer, this time, and reporters have been warned not to head off for vacation on November 4th. The most prudent outlets, including the *Washington Post*, have agreed not to make any predictions—an about-face, since, as Ira Chinoy, of the University of Maryland, has detailed, the press has been predicting the results of Presidential elections for nearly two centuries.

Election predictions are mathematical projections that use polls, early returns, and past election results. Americans across the country voted on the same day for the first time in 1848. That was also the first election reported by the newly formed Associated Press, a “wire service,” made possible by the telegraph, which, as a Wisconsin newspaper put it, promised to relieve the public of “that long suspense which formerly followed elections.” A Massachusetts newspaper urged readers to cut out and keep the returns, because they’d come in handy in 1852, for those who wanted to make their own projections. In 1860, the New York *Tribune* sold a “Political Text Book,” containing all the returns back to 1824, and many papers printed “score sheets,” something like baseball scorebooks, which readers could use to figure out who was winning.

In cities, Election Night was like New Year’s Eve: crowds gathered outside newspaper offices, where you could learn the results the fastest. In 1896, the *Tribune* announced the winner, William McKinley, by flashing red lights from its building. (Green would have signalled a victory for William Jennings Bryan.) In St. Paul, you only needed to open your window, because the *Dispatch* had

arranged for a steamship whistle to blow a “Succession of Sharp, Short Toots If Returns Favor McKinley. A Long, Dismal Wail If Returns Favor Bryan.” In 1916, William Randolph Hearst’s New York *American* broadcast the results by wireless, boasting, “Thus, through the clouds, was hurled the news of the night.” At 11 P.M., the paper called the election for Charles Evans Hughes; by morning, it had become clear that Woodrow Wilson had won. That same year, the Boston Globe, which pioneered the method of relying on “key precincts” to forecast a national result, offered an accurate projection.

In the race to be the first to call an election, CBS found a Polish mathematical savant, Salo Finkelstein, who could make predictions faster than any adding machine. He made his radio débüt in 1932, in the contest between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover. In 1952, CBS television news engaged the services of a “giant electronic brain,” the *UNIVAC* computer. That Election Night saw an unexpected outcome: Dwight D. Eisenhower beat Adlai Stevenson in a landslide. On the air, *UNIVAC* didn’t make that prediction until near midnight. “To me the most impressive thing about tonight is again the demonstration that the people of this country are sovereign, that they are unpredictable,” Edward R. Murrow said. But *UNIVAC* had made the right call early on; CBS had just been too shocked to broadcast it.

In truth, mathematical modelling based on key precincts in swing states, or what used to be called “the doubtful states,” had made projections so reliable that, in 1955, Isaac Asimov published a short story about a future in which a very fast computer, the Multivac, selects a representative American to decide the election for the whole country. No one else votes. That dystopia has not come to pass. In 2000, however, the [Bush v. Gore](#) debacle made clear that projecting a winner is not the same as counting ballots. “We don’t just have egg on our face,” NBC’s Tom Brokaw said the day after the election. “We have an omelette.” Early in the evening, NBC, followed by virtually every other network, had called Florida for Gore and then, later that night, called it for Bush, when all along it had been too close to call.

The networks’ projections in 2000 relied, in part, on exit polling, which was often flawed and has become an anachronism: it doesn’t work when so many people vote early, or by mail. The A.P., in the aftermath of the 2016 election, launched a painstakingly scrupulous program called VoteCast, which combines real-time national surveys with data and modelling derived from past elections. The problem is that there has never been an election like this one.

On November 3rd, if there's a landslide for [Joe Biden](#), that could be clear as early as eleven o'clock on the East Coast. But, if the vote is close, a "red mirage" could show Trump winning, a lead that might be swept away by a "blue shift." Democrats are three times as likely as Republicans to [vote by mail](#). Ten states don't even begin counting mail-in ballots until Election Day, and eighteen others accept them afterward, as long as they're properly postmarked. Counting the actual votes might take weeks, Republicans may try to stop it, and Trump could declare an illegitimate victory. Twitter and [Facebook](#) have pledged to add warning labels to any such claim, which is a little like sticking a warning label on a land mine, just before burying it. Meanwhile, there are two things to do: vote, and wait. ♦

---

## Read More About the 2020 Election

- Why [Joe Biden](#) must win.
- The fall and rise of [Kamala Harris](#).
- When a [sitting President threatens to delay a sacrosanct American ritual like an election](#), you should listen.
- To understand the path Donald Trump has taken to the 2020 election, [look at what he has provided the executive class](#).
- What happens if Trump [fights the election results](#)?
- [The refusal by Mitch McConnell to rein in Trump](#) is looking riskier than ever.
- Sign up for our [election newsletter](#) for insight and analysis from our reporters and columnists.

# Coronavirus Chronicles

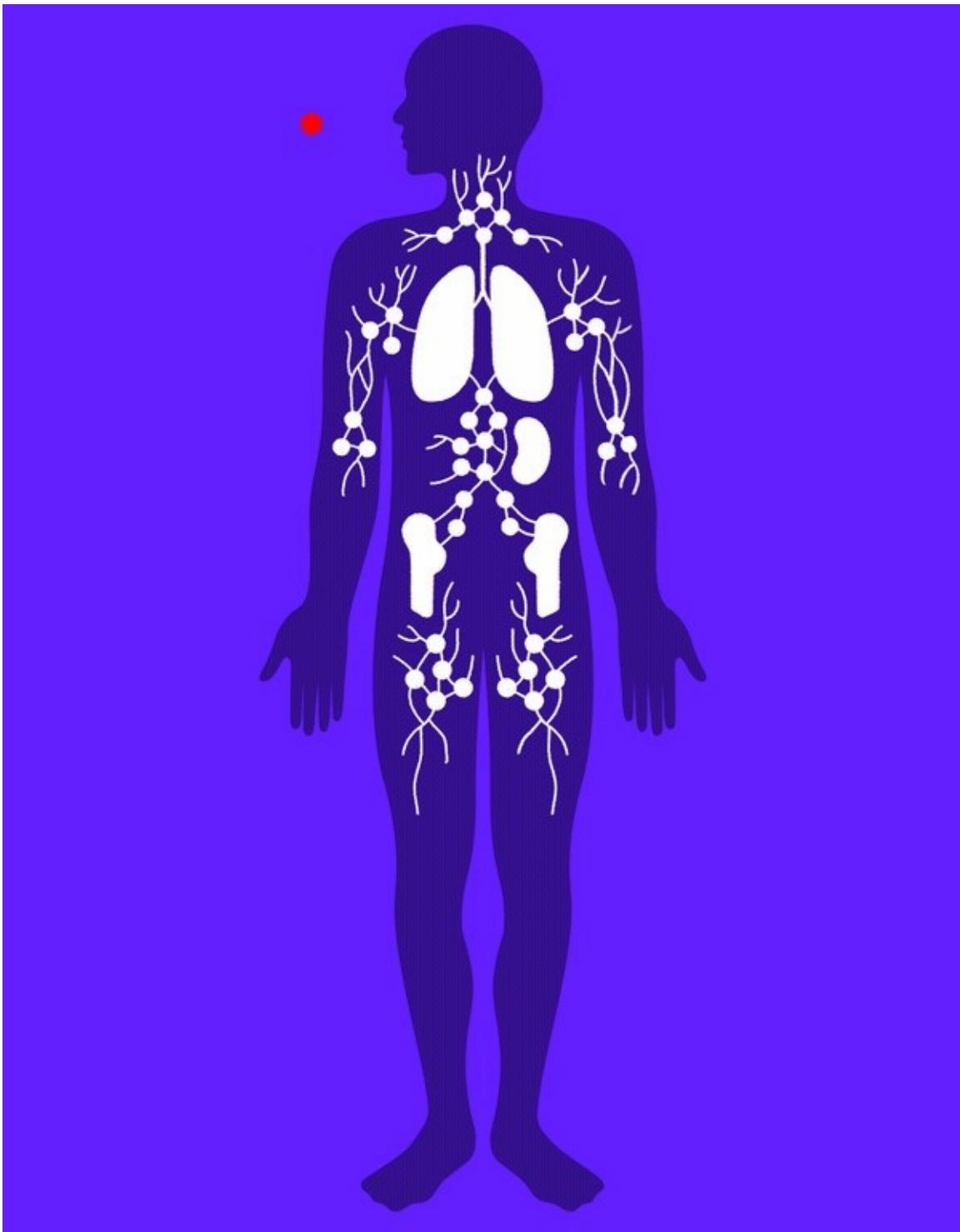
- [How the Coronavirus Hacks the Immune System](#)

# How the Coronavirus Hacks the Immune System

At a laboratory in Manhattan, researchers have discovered how SARS-CoV-2 uses our defenses against us.

By [James Somers](#)

November 2, 2020



Some four billion years ago, in the shallow waters where life began, our earliest ancestors led lives of constant emergency. In a barren world, each single-celled amoeba was an inconceivably rich concentration of resources, and to live was to be beset by parasites. One of these, the giant Mimivirus, masqueraded as food;

within four hours of being eaten, it could turn an amoeba into a virus factory. And yet, as the nineteenth-century mathematician Augustus de Morgan said, “Great fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite ‘em, and little fleas have lesser fleas, and so ad infinitum.” The Mimivirus had its own parasites, which sometimes followed it as it entered an amoeba. Once inside, they crippled the Mimivirus factory. This trick was so useful that, eventually, amoebas integrated the parasites’ genes into their own genomes, creating one of the earliest weapons in the immune system.

We tend to associate “survival of the fittest” with lions hunting antelope. But disease—the predation of parasites upon hosts—is actually the most potent force in evolution. “Every single phase of life has been selected to try to avoid parasitism,” Stephen Hedrick, an immunologist at the University of California, San Diego, told me. “It’s driven evolution as hard as it could be driven. Because it’s life or death all the time. And it’s a co-evolution.” Whenever a host develops an immune defense, it perversely rewards the survival of the very parasites that can defeat it. Hosts, meanwhile, tend to be at an evolutionary disadvantage. “Bacterial or viral populations are truly vast in size,” Robert Jack and Louis Du Pasquier write, in “Evolutionary Concepts in Immunology,” and the wide variation among them gives natural selection many candidate organisms upon which to work. Viruses and bacteria also reproduce half a million times faster than we do. Given this “generation gap,” Jack and Du Pasquier write, “one might well ask how on earth we could possibly have survived.”

A clue comes from the amoeba *Dictyostelium discoideum*. It spends much of its life marauding alone, eating things. But, when food is scarce, it releases molecules that serve as a flocking signal to others of its kind; the amoebas merge, forming a superorganism of as many as a hundred thousand members. For this multicellular “slime mold” to be effective, almost all the amoebas must give up their ability to eat, lest they prey on one another. The few that retain it don’t eat for themselves; rather, they swallow up debris and dispose of it to protect the organism. The other amoebas, freed from the burdens of offense and defense, form a “fruiting body” that releases spores for reproduction. Although none of the individuals would survive on their own, the collective thrives.

A human being is likewise a society of cells, with a coördinated defense. Our circulatory system doubles as a communications network; our blood vessels have an “endothelial” lining—a surface that is charged with the intelligent routing of immune cells. When ordinary cells are infected by a pathogen, they send signals

to their neighbors, who pass them on until they reach the endothelial cells. In response, the blood vessels swell, creating off-ramps through which white blood cells, which are part of the immune system's circulating defense force, can flow toward the site of infection. This is merely the beginning of our immune response.

Our bodies, like the United States government, make a startlingly large investment in defense. Our bone marrow produces billions of immune cells each day, and then discards most of them. Almost every one of our cells is perpetually scanning itself for evidence of invasion. The system is complex—ask a microbiologist about immunology and she'll whistle, wishing you luck. Those who describe it often resort to metaphor. Contemplating the enormous amounts of information that it collects and synthesizes throughout the body, Jack and Du Pasquier suggest that “the immune system can be regarded, above all else, as a computational device.”

This device is so finely tuned that we seldom notice it at work. Our guts burble with foreign microbes outnumbering human cells roughly ten to one, but the good are seamlessly sorted from the bad; every day, some of our cells grow into cancers, but the immune system dispatches them before they become dangerous. On a recent camping trip, I was bitten three times by some kind of insect while putting my arm into a jacket sleeve. Who knows what entered my bloodstream. Almost immediately, three welts formed; a few minutes later, the welts came down. In moments like that, it is easy to assume that we hold the advantage over the parasites.

On Friday, March 6th, a purified sample of the novel coronavirus arrived at the laboratory of a virologist named Benjamin tenOever, at the Icahn School of Medicine, in East Harlem. Many virology labs focus on a single pathogen, but tenOever’s studies dozens of viruses and how they change the cells they infect. During the winter, tenOever and his team were focussed on the flu. But, as the coronavirus pandemic began to escalate in the U.S., they initiated a side project, infecting lung cells in a dish with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes *COVID-19*, and studying the results. TenOever posted their preliminary analysis to Twitter on March 14th. Within a week, a program manager at the Defense Department emailed to ask about the research. Two weeks later, Defense gave tenOever a \$6.3-million grant to find out what the new virus was doing to our immune systems.

Born to Dutch parents, tenOever grew up in rural Ontario. Now forty-three, he approaches his work with an amused, easy confidence. On March 26th, he gathered his team and they discussed their plan. They would take half a dozen viruses—including *SARS*, *MERS*, and the new coronavirus—and induce infections in hosts, starting with cells in a petri dish and graduating to ferrets. They'd study the results to understand what made the new coronavirus unique. Their goal was to have results in three weeks.

The infections took place inside the lab's Biosafety Level-3 facility, a series of nested rooms in which each is kept at a lower pressure than the one surrounding it, so that air flows inward and up an exhaust chute containing sensitive filters. In the “warm zone,” where there is always the danger of being exposed to a live virus, you must wear a gown, two sets of gloves, two sets of shoe covers, a respirator mask, a face shield, and a bouffant cap. You work with your arms under a hood, protected by an extra set of disposable sleeves. When you're finished with your experiment, you disinfect this gear and throw it into an autoclave—a kind of kiln—where it cooks for twenty minutes. To return to the “cold zone,” you remove your shoe covers before stepping over a red line. In New York, at the end of March, these precautions had a whiff of the absurd: in a city where around three thousand new coronavirus cases were being diagnosed each day, you were more likely to be exposed to a highly pathogenic virus in your neighborhood.

A Ph.D. student named Daisy Hoagland, who had herself just recovered from a mild case of *COVID-19*, prepared the samples for analysis. Using a shaker machine and test tubes loaded with sand and ceramic pellets, she turned a suspension of ferret lung cells—some from infected animals, and others from members of the control group—into a homogeneous juice, then separated the solution in a centrifuge that generated fifteen thousand g's. It is painstaking work. (“I listen to a lot of podcasts,” Hoagland said.) Using a pipette, she carefully transferred the topmost layer, a pink liquid, into another tube, which she centrifuged again, until she had a purified sample of RNA. This she handed off to her colleagues Rasmus Møller and Maryline Panis for sequencing. The process takes sixteen hours to complete, and Møller, who during the height of the pandemic lived in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, often biked home at dawn over the Pulaski Bridge.

Whereas the sequencing of DNA defined molecular biology in the early two-thousands, the sequencing of RNA defines it today. If you imagine a cell as a

kind of computer, then your DNA contains all the software that it could possibly run. It is a somewhat astonishing fact of life that the exact same DNA is shared by every cell in your body, from the skin to the brain; those cells differ in appearance and function because, in each of them, a molecular gizmo “transcribes” some DNA segments rather than others into molecules of single-stranded RNA. These bits of RNA are in turn used as the blueprints for proteins, the molecular machines that do most of a cell’s work. If DNA is your phone’s home screen, then transcription is like tapping an icon. By sampling the RNA present in a group of cells, researchers can see which programs those cells are running at that moment; by sampling it after the cells have been infected with a virus, they can see how that virus substitutes its own software.

TenOever’s team quickly discovered that SARS-CoV-2 was uncannily good at disrupting cellular programming. A typical virus replaces less than one per cent of the software in the cells it infects. With SARS-CoV-2, tenOever said, about sixty per cent of the RNA in an infected cell is of viral origin—“which is the highest I’ve ever seen. Polio comes close.” Among other things, the virus rewrites the alarm system that cells use to warn others about infection. Normally, as part of what is known as the “innate” immune response—so called because it is genetically hardwired, and not tailored to a specific pathogen—a cell sends out two kinds of signals. One signal, carried by molecules called interferons, travels to neighboring cells, telling them to build defenses that slow viral spread. Another signal, transmitted through molecules called cytokines, gets a message to the circulatory system’s epithelial lining. The white blood cells summoned by this second signal don’t just eat invaders and infected cells; they also gather up their dismembered protein parts. Elsewhere in the immune system, these fragments are used to create virus-specific antibodies, as part of a sophisticated “adaptive” response that can take six or seven days to develop.

Usually, the viruses that humans care about are successful because they shut down both of these signalling programs. The coronavirus is different. “It seems to block only one of those two arms,” tenOever told me. It inhibits the interferon response but does nothing about the cytokines; it evades the local defenses but allows the cells it infects to call for reinforcements. White blood cells are powerful weapons: they arrive on an inflammatory tide, destroying cells on every side, clogging up passages with the wreckage. They are meant to be used selectively, on invaders that have been contained in a small area. With the coronavirus, they are deployed too widely—a carpet bombing, rather than a surgical strike. As they do their work, inflammation distends the lungs, and

debris fills them like a fog.



*"Thou shalt not comment on the haircut."*  
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

In late May, tenOever's team shared its findings in the biweekly journal *Cell*. In their article, they argued that it's this imbalanced immune response that gives severe *COVID-19*—which can sometimes cause blood clots, strange swelling in children, and ultra-inflammatory “cytokine storms”—the character of an autoimmune disorder. As the virus spreads unchecked through the body, it drags a destructive immune reaction behind it. Individuals with *COVID-19* face the same challenge as nations during the pandemic: if they can't contain small sites of infection early—so that a targeted response can root them out—they end up mounting interventions so large that the shock inflicts its own damage.

The gears of the immune response that come apart in *COVID-19* were discovered slowly, in a blundering way, as though science itself were recapitulating evolution. In a sense, there are several immune systems. In health, they coördinate with and balance each other. But a machine with so many moving parts is, inevitably, vulnerable.

Immunology as we know it began in earnest in 1882, at the Italian seaside. Ilya Metchnikoff, a Russian zoologist who would later help popularize yogurt in Western Europe, had developed an obsession with digestion, and with the process by which one cell eats another. In his memoir, Metchnikoff described the insight that would define his career. His family had gone to the circus, but he'd stayed home, “observing the life in the mobile cells of a transparent starfish larva” through his microscope. Suddenly, a thought occurred to him:

It struck me that similar cells might serve in the defense of the organism against intruders. Feeling that there was in this something of surpassing interest, I felt so excited that I began striding up and down the room and even went to the seashore in order to collect my thoughts. I said to myself that, if my supposition was true, a splinter introduced into the body of a starfish larva . . . should soon be surrounded by mobile cells.

Metchnikoff immediately performed the experiment, using a thorn from a rosebush in his garden. Sure enough, he saw cells surrounding the foreign body.

At the time, leading biologists, including Louis Pasteur, didn't think of hosts as actively defending themselves against pathogens. If it was often impossible to get diseases twice, then that was because we became inured to them, like alcoholics to liquor, or because some unknown quantity of illness within us was

“used up” as each disease ran its course. Immunology had advanced only haltingly since 1730, when the clergyman Thomas Fuller speculated that each person was born with “Ovula, of various distinct Kinds, productive of all the contagious, venomous Fevers we can possibly have.” According to this theory, an infection was actually an impregnation; each “egg” could be fertilized only once.

Using dyes to distinguish cells under a microscope, Metchnikoff helped show that the body actively defended itself. In fact, specialized cells responded to intruders in a process he described as “phagocytosis,” or cell-eating. One kind of cell-eater, called a “neutrophil”—because it can be stained only by pH-neutral dyes—swarmed to the site of the infection first. Larger cells called “macrophages” followed, absorbing both the invaders and the neutrophils into their “amoeboid protoplasm.” Neutrophils and macrophages, Metchnikoff found, lived in tissues throughout the body—a standing army.

Metchnikoff’s findings were promising: he had uncovered what would become known as “cellular” immunity. At the same time, other researchers seemed to be making progress in an entirely different direction. Emil von Behring and Shibasaburō Kitasato, two biologists working in Berlin, injected guinea pigs, goats, and horses with diphtheria and tetanus toxins. They found that, from the victims’ blood, they could derive “antitoxins” capable of conferring protective immunity on other animals. (Von Behring won the first Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for this work, in 1901.) It wasn’t clear what these antitoxins, later called “antibodies,” were made of. Still, von Behring and Kitasato had discovered what came to be known as “humoral” immunity, and it had nothing to do with cells eating other cells.

There came to be two camps: the cellularists, aligned with Metchnikoff, and the humoralists, aligned with von Behring. The feud over the origins of immunity was political and cultural as well as scientific. Metchnikoff was working at the Pasteur Institute, in Paris, and his followers, who believed that cell-eating was the basis of immunity, were mostly French. Von Behring’s supporters, who focussed on antibodies, were German. The humoralists won the mainstream in 1897, when a biochemist named Paul Ehrlich published a theory explaining how antibodies might work. In his paper, Ehrlich drew a toxin as an amoeboid blob with small nubs jutting out of it, each differently shaped; the antibodies were like little tadpoles whose mouths sometimes fit exactly onto the nubs. It was these variations in shape, Ehrlich argued, that allowed the antibody system to adapt to

new pathogens and cripple them. For the first time, the elusive concept of immunity to specific diseases, so important and yet so poorly understood, felt tangible. “Helped in no small measure by the pictures which Ehrlich published,” Arthur M. Silverstein writes, in “A History of Immunology,” antibodies became “the principal object of interest to almost all immunologists.” Although Ehrlich and Metchnikoff shared a Nobel Prize for their contributions to our understanding of immunity, Ehrlich’s account eclipsed interest in Metchnikoff’s cell-eaters for nearly fifty years.

As biologists grew expert in the distillation of “curative serums,” the great quest in immunology became figuring out how antibodies were made, and how there could be so many kinds. It seemed that a person’s antibody repertoire was limitless: biologists found that the immune system could quickly create antibodies to fit synthetic chemicals never before seen in nature.

For the first half of the twentieth century, the going theory was that the invading element—the “antigen”—served as a template around which a corresponding antibody was molded. Only in 1955 did scientists discover the much stranger truth. It turned out that the cells that produce antibodies—called B cells, because they were first discovered in the bursa of Fabricius, an organ that does for birds what bone marrow does for humans—can produce only one kind each. Its structure is random, and nearly every B cell is discarded unused. If, however, an antibody created by a B cell happens to match some part of an antigen, that B cell will not just survive but clone itself. The clone incorporates many mutations, which offer the possibility of an even better match. After a few generations, an antibody with the best fit is “constructed” through a process of mini-evolution that occurs continuously in our lymph nodes and spleen. (Our ancestors the bony fish adapted the machinery of the B-cell system from an even more ancient parasite.)

The vividness of this picture—a weapons factory deep in our bodies, working on the principles of Darwinian selection—further etched the formula “immunity equals antibodies” into the biological imagination. And yet problems remained that only the cellularists could solve. During the Second World War, severe burns treated with donor skin grafts became more common. But the donor skin was often rejected by the body. When scientists examined the site of a rejected graft, they didn’t find antibodies. Instead, they saw swarms of a previously unknown kind of immune cell. Later, the attacking cells were shown to come from the thymus, a small, spongy organ, then thought to be vestigial, that

straddled the esophagus. They were named T cells as a result, and became an object of fascination. T cells were incredibly destructive but somehow selective. They knew the difference between self and other.

The balance between protection and self-destruction had always been a theme in immunology. Since Ehrlich's time, allergies had been seen as a misdirected immune response; in the nineteen-forties, scientists learned that certain precious parts of the body—the eyes, the reproductive organs, the brain—are actually walled off from much of the immune system. (Ehrlich himself discovered the “blood-brain barrier,” a mesh too fine for phagocytes and even tiny antibodies to penetrate.) Now the question of how the body distinguished between foreign and domestic tissue focussed itself on skin grafts and T cells.

Earlier, in mice, researchers had identified genes that affected the success of organ transplants: they called this collection of genes the major histocompatibility complex, or MHC, from the Greek *histos*, for “tissue.” In the sixties, a human version of the MHC was found. The genes turned out to be a blueprint for a remarkable system designed to distinguish self from non-self. Fragments of proteins built inside our cells are loaded onto tiny molecular rafts, which ferry them to the cell surface for inspection by T cells. Meanwhile, in the thymus, T cells are trained as inspectors: they are presented with rafts containing protein fragments, some of which are natural to the body. Any T cell that ignores its raft, or that goes on the attack in response to self-generated fragments, is destroyed. Competent inspectors are set loose to search for foreign material. They look for cells that display unfamiliar protein parts in their rafts and kill them.

This is how skin grafts are detected and rejected; how incipient cancers are disposed of; how cells that have been co-opted by viruses are rooted out. Together, B cells and T cells allow the human immune system to update itself as fast as our cells can replicate. But their power comes with risks. The immune system’s adaptive weapons aren’t always precise. Allergies affect somewhere between ten and forty per cent of the global population; as many as four per cent of people suffer from debilitating autoimmune diseases. And parasites could find ways to hack the system. “The invention of acquired immunity was like escalating a war with an omnipotent opponent,” Hedrick, who is a T-cell expert, writes. Our new weapons could be turned against us.

By the late eighties, it no longer made sense to contrast cellularists and

humoralists. They had both been right; it was just that they saw different parts of the immune system depending on where and when they looked. Phagocytes were often present at the moment of infection. Antibodies in the blood, which could take days to emerge, pursued invaders outside the body's cells, while T cells used MHC to peer inside those cells, destroying the ones that had been infected by viruses or corrupted by cancer.

Still, mysteries remained. At a 1989 symposium, the immunologist Charles Janeway described what he called the field's "dirty little secret": a vaccine containing an antigen designed to elicit antibodies wouldn't work unless an extra irritant, or "adjuvant"—usually a harmless chemical or bacterium—had been added. Why wasn't the antigen enough to jump-start the creation of antibodies? "To be quite honest, the answer is not known," Janeway said. His suspicion, though, was that the process couldn't begin unless the innate immune system—with its interferons, cytokines, and epithelial cells—had sounded its alarms first. Without marching orders, the standing army remained on call.

An innate system has to anticipate its enemies—a seemingly impossible task, given their stupendous variety. It wasn't until around 1997 that Janeway began to understand how such anticipation might be accomplished. About a decade earlier, a pair of biologists named Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard and Eric F. Wieschaus had found a gene that affected development in fruit flies. Nüsslein-Volhard had called it *Toll*, using the German word for "great." ("*Das ist ja toll!*" she exclaimed, upon making the discovery.) Another scientist, Jules A. Hoffmann, learned that the same gene was involved in the fruit-fly immune response; Janeway, with the help of Ruslan Medzhitov, showed that a version of it was also present in humans, and employed in some of the white blood cells that are the innate immune system's first responders. Through experiments with human cells, they showed that the gene coded for what came to be called a "Toll-like receptor," which could recognize a particular molecular motif—a building block of bacterial membranes. It was as if evolution had noticed that, while many cells built their houses out of oak or brick, dangerous bacteria always seemed to use pinewood. Why not make a pine detector?

Immunologists soon discovered a second Toll-like receptor, then a third; they started giving them names like TLR4 and TLR5. Whole new families of "pattern-recognition receptors" were found. Each receptor, ingenious in its design, recognized some characteristic microbial or viral signature—a kink in a virus's RNA, a crenellation in a microbial cell wall.

At long last, a picture of the whole system was coming into focus. It was all interconnected. Innate immunity kicks off the immune response, as cells at the site of infection use their receptors to recognize and combat invaders, and release interferons and cytokines to raise the alarm. Various types of white blood cells respond, having been routed to the infection via the bloodstream. They identify and eat foreign cells, returning the digested bits, via the lymph nodes, to the thymus and the bone marrow, as intel. In the days that follow, antibodies and killer T cells—the weapons of adaptive immunity—are built to spec. Everything plays a double or triple role. Antibodies, for instance, don't just attach to invaders to block their entry into cells; they also tag them so that they'll be easier for white blood cells to find and eat. The innate and adaptive arms ramp up each other's destructive abilities.

Here, again, Hedrick sounds a cautious note. “Such a scheme should worry any systems analyst,” he writes. “A potentially lethal mechanism controlled by positive feedback is a recipe for runaway destruction.”

In late March, a thirty-two-year-old man of Dutch ancestry was admitted to a hospital in the Netherlands. He had difficulty breathing, and a CT scan showed an opaque haze spreading in his lungs. He was given a diagnosis of *COVID-19*, and spent sixteen days in intensive care; four days after he was moved out of the I.C.U., one of his lungs collapsed. He recovered enough to be sent home nine days later. His twenty-nine-year-old brother, who lived in a different house, got sick at roughly the same time, and died. Their parents had moderate symptoms.

When scientists learned that a second pair of young brothers—twenty-one and twenty-three years old, of African ancestry—had also had severe cases of *COVID-19*, they sought to study all four men. By sequencing the genomes of the men and their parents, the researchers hoped to find an anomaly that might explain why some young people, particularly men, had such bad outcomes.

The Dutch team found something that echoed tenOever’s theory about the way in which *SARS-CoV-2* rewrites the cellular alarm system. The four men all had an ineffective variant of TLR7, a Toll-like receptor that recognizes viral RNA. When it works, TLR7 helps produce interferons, which tell nearby cells to increase their antiviral efforts. When it doesn’t, the alarm is silent, and the infection spreads. This genetic abnormality had made the virus’s work dramatically easier. The raiders had come to an unlocked house.



*"This is against our better judgment, but we'll word it so you can keep your little pistol."*  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

This spring, a clinical trial in the U.K. gave interferon-beta, a synthetic version of the molecule, to a random selection of a hundred and one patients hospitalized with *COVID-19*. The trial found that those who received interferon early in their infection were seventy-nine per cent less likely to become seriously ill. Researchers agree that timing is crucial. In the early days of a coronavirus infection, an interferon boost might help your innate immune system contain the virus. Later, though, it might be harmful; at that point, your adaptive immune system could already be out of control, and you might need an immunosuppressant, such as the steroid dexamethasone. (Last month, President Trump received dexamethasone as part of his treatment for *COVID-19*; he was also given a drug that contained lab-engineered antibodies capable of fighting the virus alongside, or ahead of, his body's own adaptive response.)

The genes for TLR7 are on the sex-linked X chromosome. That could be a partial explanation for why men suffer from severe *COVID-19* more often than women. But a TLR7 deficiency is likely to be rare—far rarer than the incidence of severe *COVID-19* among young people. There are almost certainly other genetic or environmental factors that weaken the interferon response. In mid-September, research published in *Science* showed that some *COVID-19* patients with bad outcomes had “autoantibodies” that were attacking their own interferon; another article published in the same issue outlined a genetic flaw related to TLR3, which is also involved in the interferon response. (As many as fourteen per cent of severe *COVID-19* cases may be attributable to one of these two conditions.) The more researchers study our immune response to the virus, the more complexity they find. According to some theories, how things go for you could depend on how many viral particles you’ve inhaled, and on whether they reach your lungs when you breathe them in. If you’ve had a cold recently, it’s possible that the T cells you developed to fight it could partially fit the coronavirus. Vitamin D levels might matter, because Vitamin D can help control inflammation. Harmful autoantibodies could be responsible for the persistent symptoms suffered by *COVID-19* “long-haulers.” All of this is still being explored.

The immune system uses feedback to stay balanced, like a gymnast on a beam. If a light breeze blows, the gymnast might sway a bit; sensing this, she’ll shift her weight to return to center. But, given a strong enough push, she’s prone to overshoot with her reaction and, from the other side, overshoot again until she

falls. Many factors contribute to the slip—a tight hip flexor, a strained calf, moisture in the air—each magnifying the force of the shove.

Older gymnasts tend to be less agile. The same goes for the immune system, which is why *COVID-19* disproportionately affects the elderly. The already high case fatality rate for sixty-five- to seventy-four-year-olds more than triples in people seventy-five and older. This age distribution is unique to the coronavirus. Kids are more susceptible to the seasonal flu; children and young adults who had the swine flu in 2009 were hospitalized the most, while the pandemic flu of 1918 hit adults in their twenties and thirties the hardest. (Perhaps their immune systems overreacted, or older people had acquired immunity to similar strains.) “The difference of risk and profile, young versus old—I don’t think anyone has seen an infectious agent behave quite like this before,” Richard Hodes, the director of the National Institute on Aging, part of the National Institutes of Health, said, of the coronavirus.

The lopsidedness of the virus means that vaccines might not be as effective in older patients, even with double the dose, or after repeated inoculations. The beauty of a vaccine is that it relieves us of the task of completely understanding the virus; its package of antigens simply presses the On button of the great machine. Helping older people may require a more fine-tuned approach, tailored to the particular way this virus destabilizes the immune system. What we have learned so far suggests that it isn’t just that being older makes you weak, and that *COVID-19* preys on this weakness; the disease’s mechanism of action is actually amplified in the aging body.

For this reason, about a month after beginning their coronavirus investigations, the researchers in tenOever’s lab switched from ferrets to hamsters. Ferret immune systems are highly responsive, and the animals were getting better too quickly. “They look a lot more like kids,” tenOever said. By contrast, some hamsters, when infected with the virus, “actually develop respiratory distress. We see a lot more infiltration in their lungs.” In older hamsters, as in older people, innate immunity is less likely to contain the virus and adaptive immunity is slower to turn on and off. The hamster ends up wildly dysregulated. “The difference between these two outcomes really comes down to, as you get older —” TenOever paused. “Getting older sucks. Everything breaks down, even at the simplest of levels.”

As we age, our immune systems stiffen up. “If I had to respond to an insult—

bacteria, a virus, a trauma, a lesion—the response is slower and is less strong,” Luigi Ferrucci, who studies the aging process and the immune system at the National Institute on Aging, told me. But, at the same time, the system becomes chronically activated. Cytokines circulate at a constant, high level in the blood, as though the body were at all times responding to some attack. This is true no matter one’s health. “Even in individuals that are extremely healthy, extremely well nourished, have no disease, and they’re taking no drugs, there are some inflammatory markers whose concentration increases with aging,” Ferrucci said. Think of the welt that rises with a bite, then imagine the same process—swelling, redness, stiffness, the accumulation of pus—slowly pervading the body. Your level of inflammation contributes to your “biological” age—which is not always in perfect lockstep with your chronological age—and increases your risk of developing cardiovascular disease, cancer, and dementia; it contributes to what geriatricians call “frailty.”

A phenomenon known as cellular senescence is partly responsible for the body’s increasing inflammation through time. As cells age and divide, small errors accrete in their DNA. These errors could lead to cancer, among other maladies. And so cells police themselves. When they detect decay in their DNA, they stop replicating and begin emitting cytokines, as though asking the immune system to inspect and destroy them. The accumulation of senescent cells may contribute to severe *COVID-19*: according to the current theory, Ferrucci said, they could “expand tremendously the cytokine storm,” in which a runaway feedback loop leads to a sudden spike in inflammation throughout the body.

Adaptive immunity suffers with age, too, but for different reasons. The thymus itself atrophies. (On a restaurant menu, thymuses are called sweetbreads. “Sweetbreads come from young calves,” Hedrick told me. “If you were to try to harvest the thymus from an old bull, you’d get . . . nothing.”) When you’re young, with a short history of exposure to pathogens, your thymus produces new T cells at an extravagant rate. But as you age production slows, and the cells differentiate. Some live indefinitely as “memory T cells,” carrying with them a record of their defeated foes.

Certain viruses use up more T-cell memory than others. Around twenty per cent of an older adult’s T-cell repertoire is devoted to fighting a single virus: human cytomegalovirus (HCMV), a strain of herpes that usually has no symptoms. It would be ironic if, in some small way, HCMV makes it harder to survive *COVID-19*. Unlike SARS-CoV-2, which spreads without hiding and so causes

extensive damage, HCMV is a master of disguise. When infecting a cell, the virus turns off that cell's MHC system. No cellular raft delivers evidence of the infection to the surface. Still, this isn't enough to avoid detection. Our immune system has invented a weapon, the "natural killer" cell, that looks specifically for cells without functioning MHC systems. And so HCMV evolved to create a decoy MHC raft, designed to fool the natural killers.

As a parasite, HCMV is almost perfectly adapted to its host; able to spread without attracting attention, it does nothing but consume resources. The thymus is one place where such cleverness leaves its trace. The practice of science is another. Many of the workhorse tools employed by molecular biologists—including the enzymes used by tenOever's team to sequence RNA, and the *CRISPR* gene-editing system, perhaps the most important scientific discovery of our time—were once either weapons or defenses in the microbial arms race. It's there, at the crucible of life and death, that biological innovation happens fastest, leaving us with technology for mounting a new kind of defense.

The last time I spoke to tenOever, in late July, his team had begun a search for treatments. In the BSL-3 lab, Møller was infecting hamsters; the plan was to give the animals candidate drugs, sequencing their RNA through the entire process of infection and treatment. By examining patterns in the data, the team could find out which drugs were better at undoing the coronavirus's reprogramming. TenOever made use of a handy way of visualizing what was happening in the cells. He could turn the genetic analysis into an inkblot-like map, showing which parts of its genome each cell was activating. "You can build a landscape, if you will," tenOever said. If the coronavirus shifted the landscape to the northeast, they would look for drugs that pulled it southwest. They were testing four good candidates a week like this.

It was an impressionistic way to look at an immune system. But the system was not designed to be legible; it was, of course, not designed at all. For years, Robert Jack, one of the authors of "Evolutionary Concepts in Immunology," taught a class on immunology to students just beginning their Ph.D.s. Bright and enthusiastic, the students struggled to untangle the immune system's feedback loops. Jack told me, "We tend to look at these systems and say, 'Wow, who would have thought of that? That's incredible. That's so fantastic. It does this incredibly complicated job, and it does it really well!'" He took a breath, then continued. "Whereas, in reality, the immune system has simply, in the face of pathogen attack, staggered from one emergency to the next. It just uses whatever

is lying around. It is hoping against all possibilities to try to survive a little bit longer. Whatever crazy solution it comes up with—so long as it works, it will be accepted.” The result is a system of great flexibility and power, which, pushed the right way, can be made to collapse upon itself. ♦

## More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now](#)?

## **Dept. of Polls**

- [In a Wisconsin Cookie Poll, Trump Wins by a Landslide](#)

[November 9, 2020 Issue](#)

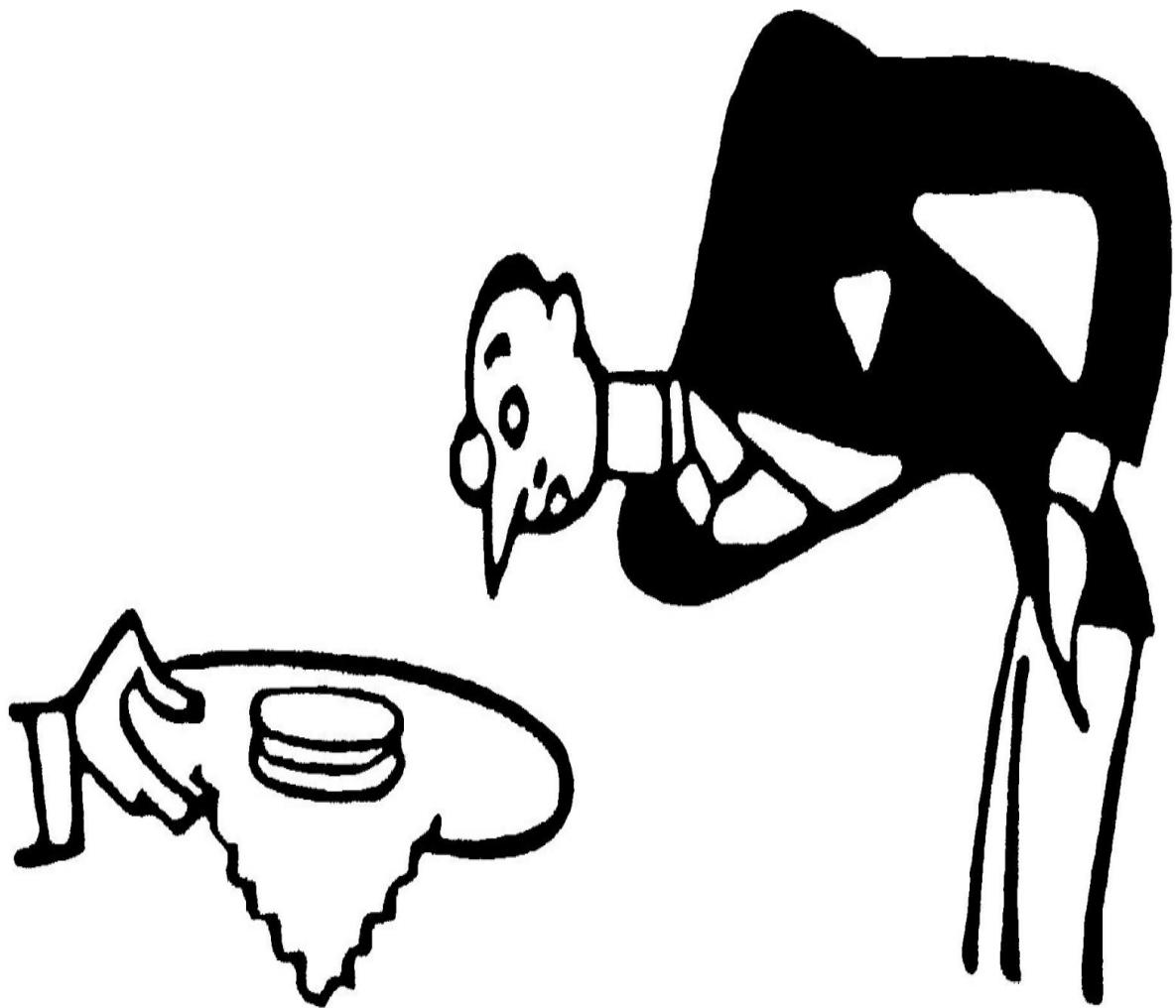
# In a Wisconsin Cookie Poll, Trump Wins by a Landslide

“We’ve never seen anything like it,” says the owner of Uncle Mike’s Bake Shoppe, which has been selling cookies decorated with the faces of Presidential candidates since 2008.

By [Elisabeth Zerofsky](#)

November 2, 2020

Sundays in Green Bay, Wisconsin, are for hunkering down in the den with wings and a sixer for the Packers game. What makes a Friday afternoon is a trip to Uncle Mike’s Bake Shoppe to pick up a kringle—most likely the sea-salt-caramel-pecan version, which was voted the best kringle in North America. The Wisconsin kringle, brought over by Danish immigrants in the nineteenth century, is a pizza-size confection composed of thirty-odd layers of flaky dough, filled with fruit, nuts, or cheese, and molded into an oval ring, which is why it’s called the toilet-seat pastry.



In 2008, to mark the Presidential election, Uncle Mike's decided to start selling sugar cookies decorated with printed portraits, in icing, of the candidates' faces. Barack Obama appeared on a blue background, John McCain on a pinkish one. "It was just sort of a fun thing to do, you know, because some people get a little stressed out about the elections," Mike Vande Walle, alias Uncle Mike, said on a recent Friday at the shop, as the phone rang constantly. He was wearing a red Hawaiian shirt and a mask printed with ladybugs and bumblebees, only his eyes visible beneath white hair.

At some point, he decided to turn the cookie sales into a poll, or, rather, two polls: a national one, based on mail orders received from around the country, and a local one, based on purchases in the shop. The cookie poll, like many such undertakings, is not science. In 2012, Uncle Mike's sold more Mitt Romney cookies, despite Obama's taking the White House. But four years ago, when Wisconsin unexpectedly broke for Donald Trump—the first time since 1984 that the state had gone red in a Presidential race—the cookie poll predicted the outcome, with Trump up by about four points. "It was right on the money," Vande Walle said.

Asked about this year's results, Vande Walle pushed a piece of paper across the counter. "We've never seen anything like it," he said. The local poll, according to his tabulation, stood at sixty-eight per cent Trump, thirty-two per cent Biden. "I don't know if they're buying the Trump ones as jokes," he said. "That's the only thing I can think of, because that's a big spread." There were more Bidens than Trumps left on a tray in a display case, positioned between kringles and doughnuts.



*"It was an important election."*  
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

A young woman carrying a knockoff Louis Vuitton bag came into the shop with her mother and perused the display. "Should I drop one of these off for Grandpa?" she asked, pointing to the Trump cookies. Her mother looked horrified. A public-school teacher waiting in line to buy doughnuts had a similar reaction. "Smash the pink cookie," she said.

A little girl in pink leggings and a pink T-shirt was standing next to the cookie case with her mother and older sister. "Biden," she said, pointing to the blue cookie. She made a thumbs-down sign and stuck out her tongue. Then she said, "Trump! Yay!" She gave a thumbs-up.

Uncle Mike's is just outside Green Bay, in an area that is more Republican than the city proper. According to a local report, Vande Walle said, roadside signage breaks down as follows: "Trump is the No. 1 sign, then signs for pumpkins, and then Biden."

The week before Election Day, the national cookie poll also had Trump winning, sixty-five per cent to thirty-five. Vande Walle has declined to take a side. "I was thinking that after the election we should do some kind of special cookie, just because 2020 is such a weird year," he said. "So it might be neat to have a cookie wishing it gone." ♦

# Fiction

- “Ghoul”

# Ghoul

By [George Saunders](#)

November 2, 2020



*Audio: George Saunders reads.*

At noon Layla wheels over Vat of Lunch. For a sec I can be not-scary, leaning against our plastiform wall meant to resemble human entrails.

“Why aren’t the old served first?” crabs Leonard, Squatting Ghoul Two, senior to all.

Last week Leonard’s knee went out. We, his fellow Squatting Ghouls, have since been allowing him to sit upon a plastiform Remorseful Demon, which, at this moment, emits one of its periodic Remorse-groans.

“Grieve on, foul beast,” I say, per Script.

“Foul indeed!” says Tim, Feuding Ghoul Four: great guy, always blurting out such quips as “Brian, you are really on it, in terms of the way you keep casting your eyes fitfully back and forth while squatting!” To which I might reply, “Thanks, Tim, you Feuding Ghouls are also ripping it up, I so admire how, every day, you guys come up with a whole new topic for your Feud!”

### [George Saunders on surprising himself.](#)

Into my paper bowl goes: Lunch. A broth with, plopped down in it, a single gleaming Kit Kat.

Someday I, too, may be old, knees giving out, some group of Squatting Ghouls as yet unborn (or currently mere Li’l Demons, running around in their bright-red diapers) allowing elder me, kaput like Leonard, to sit on, perhaps, this very same plastiform Remorseful Demon, in that dismal future time!

Today, however, all is well: Break Week is nigh.

Next A.M., via Tram, the Break-eligible among us are taken all jolly to the Room: a cavernous space shaped exactly the same as our workhouse, *MAWS OF HELL*, as well as the eleven other plenteous underground workhouses within our Region. But free of the supplementary Décor that makes each workhouse a unique immersive experience. Free, as well, of Byway Paths, and the small cars on tracks that bear our delighted Visitors through us. The Room is, truth be told, just a great space for a relaxed chill-out! It has Bowling, should you choose; pretend meadow, with real-appearing flowers; free-flowing creek, beside which

we may sit, out of which fake fish leap on these sort of wheels, four fish per wheel, smiling, as if to say, “Leaping is what we love!”

Plus we each get a niche into which to put our stuff.

In the Room, we may mingle with individuals from our sister workhouses, such as *BENEATH OUR MOTHER THE SEA* or *WILD DAY OUT WEST*. May we mate there? Sure. We may. Many do. Should you observe someone mating and wish to be polite? Lurch off suddenly, as if you have left something back in your niche. Sometimes (tight quarters in the Room!) you may need to step or hop over a mating pair. The polite thing: step or hop over, saying nada. Should you personally know one or both, and feel saying nada might violate politeness, well, say something encouraging, such as “Go, go, go!” or “Looking good, James and Melissa, all best wishes!”

Today, hopping over two such folks, I think, Hey, isn’t that Mr. Tom Frame, normally the “Before” manifestation of Monk Decapitated for Evil Thoughts, in the portion of *MAWS OF HELL* called “Payback’s a Mother”? Mr. Frame, out of his seventeenth-century-monk threads, is mating with Gwen Thorsen, one of our rotating team of folks in hooded robes playing Death, and here I did not even know that Mr. Frame even knew her!

“Hey, Tom, hi, Gwen!” I cry, not wishing to violate politeness.

To which both briefly glance up at me all love-faced.

That is another great thing about Break Week: you are always seeing folks in new contexts!

For example, last Break, I saw Rolph Spengler, Flying Spear Launcher Three, quietly drinking tea, writing in his journal. No wings on, face not painted red, no wire elevating him aloft, no cloven-hoofed boots. Actually, he looked so tender in the face I felt the need of asking what he was writing.

“A letter to my son,” he said.

“I did not even know you had a son, Rolph!” I said.

“Well,” he said.

"I guess so, if you are writing to your son!" I said. "All I ever saw you as? A red-painted, big-winged, cloven-hoofed fellow, flinging down your spears."

"And I guess all I ever saw you as was a tiny Squatting Ghoul, far below me," Rolph said. "Whom I kept trying to just barely miss with my spears. My son is Edgar, *CHICAGO GANGSTER HIDEOUT*."

And, just like that, we became friends!

Now, whenever Rolph, on wire, hovers over our quadrant, he will wave down at me with his non-spear hand, at which I will rise from my squat and throw my arms wide, exposing my chest, as if to say, "Spear me, then, Flying Spear Launcher! Since I am already a Squatting Ghoul, how much worse can my afterlife even get?" At which Rolph will fake-pump his spear at me, as if to say, "Ha ha, talk to you next Break, pal!"

By which I mean: friendship may take time and faith to grow!

(Please note: whenever Rolph and I engage in our fun ritual, no Visitors are present. As if! As if Rolph and I would risk providing our Visitors a subpar experience in that way. No, we engage in this warm friendship exchange only when no Visitors are near. Which is so rarely the case. Normally we are just swamped!)

Moments after hopping over Gwen and Mr. Frame, I find Mr. Frame sitting across from me at Lunch, in Dining, explaining why he, a married man, was just now mating with Gwen.

Mr. Frame's wife, Ann Frame, used to be on Guillotine-Cart Pull Team Five. Those guillotines, being heavy, needing to be pulled over some fake rough terrain, which, though made of poly, still must be bumpy to seem real, Ann's back went out, and she was transferred to *VICTORIAN WEEKEND*, a big adjustment, since, instead of being scary, she had to adopt a mind-set of mincing and serving. Now she is Cockney Cook: sweet gig! All she has to do is, every half hour, blunder into this formal dining hall, interrupting some Royals (Visitors) eating in there, then blunder out, knocking over a tea cart while apologizing for her humble class origins in a Cockney accent. But alas: apparently, her new role has caused marital stress, because Mrs. Frame is now constantly practicing her Cockney accent, even while on Break, in the Room.

I try to be a pal by pointing out that Tom himself always takes ample care, prior to the moment of his decapitation, to appear genuinely terrified. Also, re the lightning-burst-thunderclap spate of total darkness that allows him to switch the headless “After” Animatron in for himself on the chopping block before he hops down the DisaHole: does he not always endeavor to do that quickly, so the switch will go unnoticed by our Visitors? Maybe, I suggest, he is more like Ann than he wishes to acknowledge! Isn’t his quick hopping analogous to Ann’s continually practicing her accent, i.e., a form of admirable professionalism?

“I guess what I’m saying is, I don’t practice hopping into the DisaHole when we’re on Break,” he says.

“I get that,” I say, listening and agreeing being a proven path to friendship. “That sounds frustrating.”

“But she just goes on and on,” he says. “Guv’n’r this, guv’n’r that. And why? For what?”

“Wants to do a good job?” I say. “For her Royals?”

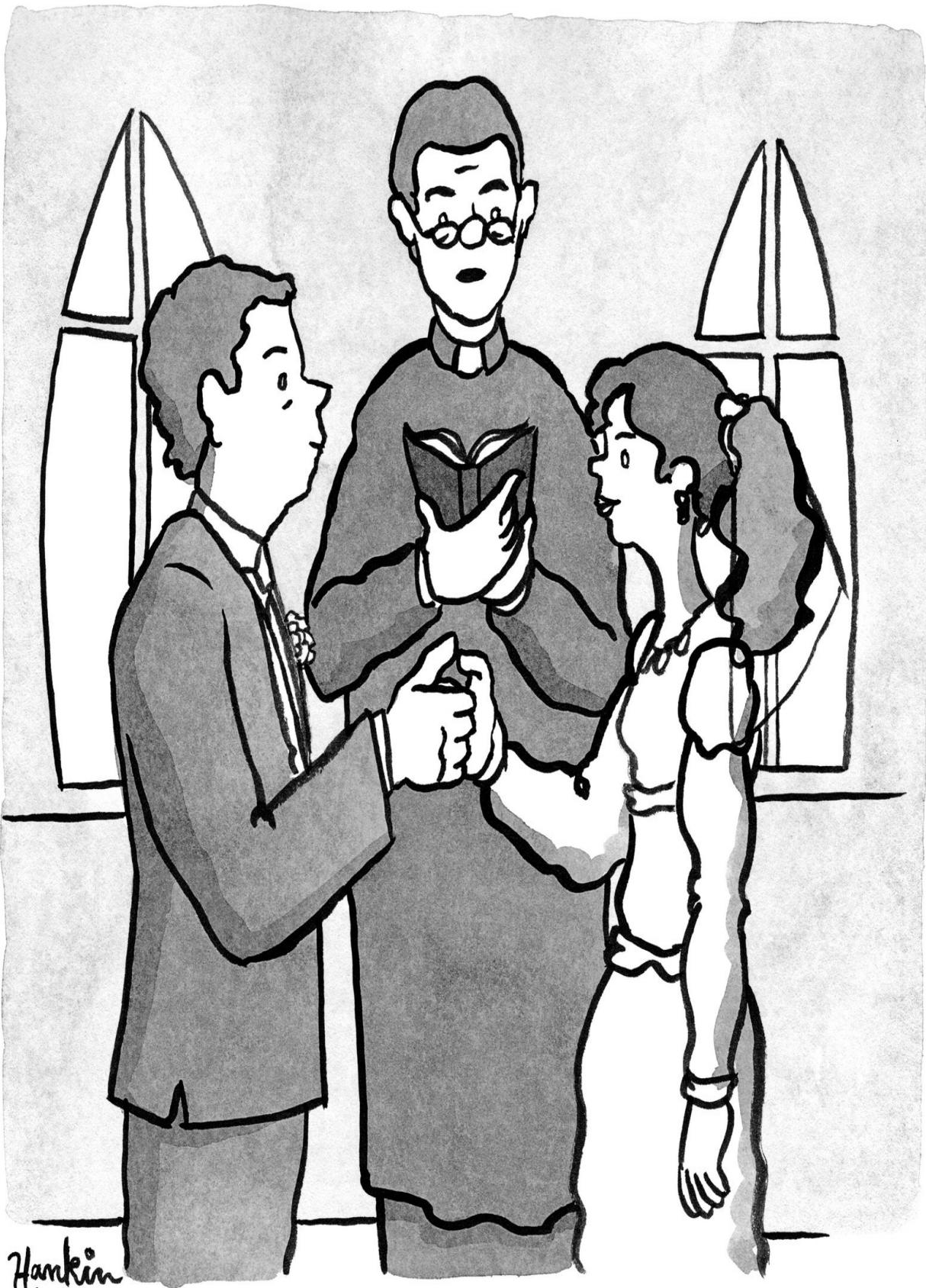
“Of whom there never are any?” he says, crossly.

Then there is this rather big silence.

“Not that I’m saying there never are any,” he says.

“I know you’re not saying that, Tom,” I say.

“I should probably just shut up,” he says.



Hankin

*"I now declare a thumb war."*  
Cartoon by Charlie Hankin

“Probably,” I say.

Jeez, I think, Tom, Mr. Frame, you have really put me in a bad spot!

Rules are rules, friends are friends. But now rules and friends urge differing courses of action upon me, and which shall I choose?

I take a long thinking-walk along our fake creek, pondering, and see several false ducks there, belly up, being serviced by Todd Sharpe. When Todd gets something right, a quack can be heard, or at least part of one.

Gosh! I am usually all about Team. When my back went out last year, did I discontinue squatting and stand up straight, which would have felt good? No, I squatted on, using a broken-off broom as a brace. Once, filling in as Screaming Doomed Cleric, though I had strep, I screamed for eight straight hours, even providing all six Optional Dread Whoops.

Yet I continue pacing the free-flowing creek, going back and forth from one wall where the creek ends in a painting of itself flowing off into eternity to the other, until finally Todd has every last duck up and running, except for one too broke to ever quack again, which Todd bears away under one of his arms.

Just then, from near Bowling, I hear both hue and cry.

And rush over to find a group informally gathered around my pal Rolph Spengler, Flying Spear Launcher Three, engaging in some kicking activity, as Rolph continues, despite the kicking, to emit such discredited ideas as: “We pass our days enacting insane rituals of denial with which I, for one, am done! Can’t we just admit and discuss?” And: “Truth, truth! Can’t we just, for once, speak the goddam—”

Jeez! No wonder that group around Rolph is kicking him!

Shirley from Monitoring shoots me a look, meaning: Brian, give Rolph there a kick, so I can write down that you were among those who gave Rolph a kick because you were, as we all were, shocked and offended by the boldness and audacity of Rolph’s lies and, wishing to do your part in sparing the larger community the burden of Rolph’s confusion, you, with your foot or feet, did

your best to stem the tide of twisted negativity pouring forth from strange, discredited Rolph.

At this point, in fairness, Rolph is no longer saying his lies. He is just inert. Shirley's eyes go wide, then glance down at my foot, as if to say, "Brian, I know you are one of the good guys and I would like to be able to write that down."

It is not a true kick I give Rolph, more of a foot-tap.

But it is that foot-tap, as I stumble away, that gives me pause. Leaning against a fake elm still in its ancient shipping box, I think, That tap did not hurt Rolph, probably. Not much. Then, with my right foot, I foot-tap my left calf, in order to feel what Rolph felt. Then again, harder. It should be a comfort to me: even when I foot-tap my own calf a ton harder than I actually foot-tapped Rolph, it doesn't hurt that much at all.

Still, it might have felt unpleasant if one was dying as one felt it.

Wait, where was I going again? I ask myself.

Monitoring & Reporting Services, I reply. To rat out Tom.

Thanks, I respond.

If you don't wish to be dealt with harshly, don't do anything wrong, I underscore.

Just be normal, I concur.

At least it is quick to cross the Main Plain, because, on this unsettling day, absolutely no one is mating.

Across Bridge C looms Monitoring & Reporting Services: trim mauve hut, many fluttering banners.

As I approach the bridge, my name is called, and I turn to find Gabrielle D. of *FIFTIES SOCK HOP*, chomping gum as usual, in bobby socks though sixty, along with her husband, Bill, whose letter sweater, it seems, grows tighter by the day. And who is always calling me Frankenstein. What is up with that? Inaccurate! Do I call him Eisenhower just because that individual is of Bill's

same theme-milieu?

Though on Break, hence not required to be in costume, they are. Plus Bill is wearing his hair slicked back and Gabrielle D. has retained her normal flouncy ponytail.

“What’s the haps, Frankie?” Bill says. “Frankenstein? Frank-a-roo?”

“Hi, Bill,” I say.

“Tom Frame asked us to slap this bit of scribble on you, babycakes,” Gabrielle D. says.

And hands me a note, which I read on the spot:

Dear Brian,

Please know that I have taken my recent error to heart and am thinking deeply upon it in order to decrease the likelihood of making a similar mistake in the future. When I said that thing about no Visitors ever coming down here, please know that I did not mean it and was, in my awkward way, making an attempt at facetiousness. Or, I said it in fun, being ironical, to indicate how fiercely I believe in its very opposite.

Because I consider myself a person of conscience, I feel compelled to underscore that, once your Reporting Period is over, you too will have committed a crime, one of omission. Please know that, should you opt to Report me, I will understand. However, if you opt not to Report me, I will consider us bonded forever into the future by the great kindness you will have shown me.

With thanks, in eternal friendship, no matter what you decide,

Tom Frame

“Any response, monster-man?” Bill says.

“Not at this time, Bill,” I say.

“We’re hip to that, daddy-o,” Gabrielle D. says, and off they go, holding hands,

and then, as is often the case, they pause so he can dip her.

Now I must just cross the bridge and rat Tom out.

But what a nice letter, how direct and trusting.

I turn on my heel, hit Vending up for a potpie, take it home, eat it in my Sleep Slot, go nowhere all night.

And, in this way, allow my Reporting Period to expire.

Yet how ironic.

Next morning, post-Breakfast, I am squatting near my niche, having a Gingerade, when up trots, all peppy, Amy, Special Assistant to Shirley of Monitoring.

“Hey, Bri,” she says. “Got a sec? Some of us were going through your niche just now? And look what I found.”

In her hand: that letter Mr. Frame wrote me that was so nice!

In her other hand: her whistle, which, I feel, at any second, she may blow on me.

“Just so you know?” she says. “Moments ago, I showed Mr. Frame this letter. After which, he very openly ratted you out, claiming that, yesterday, he blurted out a Regrettable Falsehood in your presence, and that you, at that time, gave him a look indicating that you wouldn’t turn him in. Which, per my records, you haven’t. Turned him in. Brian, I need some honesty here: did Mr. Frame, yesterday, blurt out a Regrettable Falsehood?”

“Yes,” I say.

“But you didn’t turn him in,” she says.

“I guess not?” I say. “Not yet?”

“Are you turning him in now?” she says.

“Did he really turn me in?” I say.

“I just detailed that to you,” she says. “Yes.”

“Then yes,” I say.

“And yet your Reporting Period is expired,” she says.

“Is it?” I say.

“And Mr. Frame is claiming immunity, for being First Individual Forthcoming,” she says.

Three cowboys from *WEST* amble by, fake-bowlegged.

And tip their huge hats at us.

“Brian, to be frank?” she says. “We were kids together. Remember TinyGhosts, remember BabyDracs, remember we were on the Teen Crew that built those first, hilariously inept Torture Racks? I really don’t want to blow this whistle and have a group gather and kick you to death.”

“I’d also prefer that not to happen,” I say.

“But you see my dilemma, though, right?” she says. “Mr. Frame just ratted you out, for not ratting him out. Who’s to say he might not rat me out if I fail to blow my whistle on you? See what I mean? Bri, are you willing to work with me on this?”

“Very much so,” I say.

“Stay quiet and nod,” she says. “During what follows.”

And blows her whistle.

A crowd gathers.

Amy, trusted by all, gives a disillusioned shake of her sad, dispirited head.

“Moments ago,” she says, “a Regrettable Falsehood was uttered aloud.”

A gasp goes up, and across dozens of faces there runs a ripple of, You’ve got to be kidding, this outrage makes us suddenly so mad.

“By Tom Frame,” Amy says.

She looks at me.

I nod.

“We know this,” Amy says, “because Brian here, doing his duty, though it was difficult, spoke the truth. To me. Just now. Immediately. Don’t be surprised if Mr. Frame, a self-admitted liar, now tries making some further shit up to save his butt.”

The crowd rushes off to find Mr. Frame.

“I just couldn’t blow my whistle on you,” Amy says. “I’ve found you cute since we were little.”

“I’ve found you cute, too,” I say.

Which I haven’t, that much, but it seems like a bad moment to begin violating politeness.

Soon, from the sounds Mr. Frame makes when the crowd finds him over by Vending, it becomes clear that the crowd has found Mr. Frame over by Vending.

Amy and I stand there listening, making silent winces of eek and ouch.

“I guess one never realizes how little one wants to be kicked to death until one hears a crowd doing that exact same thing to someone nearby,” I say.

“The thing is,” Amy says, “Mr. Frame actually did that for which he is right now being punished. So I don’t need to feel bad about that. Do I?”

“No,” I say.

“What I need to feel bad about, I suppose, is that you also did something bad, for which you have not yet been punished,” she says. “Jeez. And now I’m doing something bad, for which I may later be punished. You make me not even care about right or wrong, though.”



AW, MAN-  
THE PARTY'S  
ALREADY OVER.

LET'S GO  
FIND THEIR  
SWEATERS!

K. REILLY

Then we kiss. And, finding a place beside the free-flowing creek, mate. It is not my first time, but I have to say it is one of my best, my relief that I am not being kicked to death by a group of my peers being, I think, what makes it so memorable.

On my way back to my niche, I pass Mr. Frame. There he is, fallen, by Vending. One of our sickly little birds lands on Mr. Frame and gives him a peck. How do those birds get down here, anyway? That is one of our abiding mysteries. What would impel them to fly down our Egress Spout? Or have they been down here always?

Oh, Tom, I think, it's my fault, I should have thrown your letter away. But I treasured it and hoped to read it many more times. But mostly, Tom, it's your fault, for ratting me out to Amy, after she busted you for doing the wrong thing that you truly did do, after which you tried to claim the immunity that stems from being First Individual Forthcoming. What was up with that, Tom? Had you succeeded in ratting me out, it would be me, not you, being pecked by a random bird near Vending, looking much the worse for wear, Tom.

To which Tom, long gone, emits a hissing sound from the zone near his mouth.

That night Amy comes over and sleeps with me in my Sleep Slot: tight fit! Wedged in there so tight that neither of us can roll over unless we both do so at the same time, we mate, we laugh, we slide ourselves out and cook noodles on my hot plate, then slide ourselves back in and she teaches me how to braid her hair.

Although for many years I did not think of Amy as all that cute, I do now.

In the morning, I wake to find her forehead touching mine. On her face a look that says, Can I just say something?

“Good morning,” I say.

“I’m not sure I can do this,” she says.

“It is pretty tight in here,” I say.

“All my life I’ve tried to do everything right,” she says. “And now this. Here I

am, a Special Assistant, and what am I doing? Exactly the opposite.”

She is slated to Monitor *DISCO LOVE NEST* and now begins crankily costuming up from a daypack she brought along last night.

“Seeing Tom dead wiggled me out, I admit it,” she says. “Because, in a sense, we caused that. I mean, we did. We got Tom Frame kicked to death and now he rests in peace or wherever. For me? It came down to, O.K., so who do I want to see kicked to death less, Brian or Tom? And the answer was you. So I lied. And I guess now I’m just going to have to live with that.”

“You saved my life,” I say.

“God, I know, but still, ugh,” she says.

When I pull the pulley that causes the bed to slide out, guess what?

A one-time incident involving excess water presence has occurred.

Is occurring.

All kinds of junk is floating past: a cape, a fake arm, a lunchbox.

Amy, nice short disco boot perched above the ongoing water incident, purses her lips, as in, I love these boots, this is so not fair.

But step down she does. She must. Or be late. The water runs into her boots, as I take her hand, all *VICTORIAN WEEKEND*.

“Shit,” she says. “I hate this.”

A silence hangs above us, as in, Hate what, Amy?

Red Murray comes sloshing past, chasing the Swiss hat he must wear for his *ALPS RESORT* role, Mountaineer Famous for Surviving Terrible Avalanche.

No way is Red catching that hat.

Going past, he shoots me this look of, This should be easy but somehow that darn thing keeps eluding my grasp.

“These seem to be getting worse,” I say.

“What do?” Amy says.

“Nothing,” I say.

We slosh along, holding hands, and I am overcome by a powerful feeling of trusting and liking and wishing to be brought even closer to this person whose eyelashes last night flickered against mine in the night, with mine also flickering against hers, a pretty bonding thing to do with someone, especially while mating with them.

So I just say it.

“These floods,” I say softly.

And find her stopped, looking down shocked at the water flowing into and around her short disco boots.

I have put her in a bad spot. And me in a bad spot.

Have put the two of us in a bad spot.

She leans in close.

“Flood,” she whispers.

“Flood,” I whisper back.

“Stupid flood,” she whispers, a bit giddily.

Then the lights flicker and all goes dark.

“Power failure,” Amy whispers.

“*Another* power failure,” I whisper back right away, so she will not doubt for even a second that I am all the way with her.

“Visitors are coming,” she whispers sarcastically in the dark.

“So many Visitors,” I say.

The lights come back on and quickly gaining on us is Gwen Thorsen, dressed as Death, heading to the Tram, holding her Death robe up out of what, we realize, we have just called, out loud, possibly within her earshot, “flood,” after which we both uttered aloud the problematic phrase “power failure,” referring to that which it would have been best to bear silently with good grace, after which we both uttered aloud the most Regrettable Falsehood one can utter.

Gwen’s eyes narrow into these slits of: (1) Yes, guys, I heard all that just now, and (2) You two are having a thing, which is great, but, think about it, you killed Tom Frame, with whom I myself was having a thing.

In her haste to go rat us out, she drops the train of her Death robe and it trails behind her, making a temporary road of wave in the water.

“Crap,” Amy says.

And blows her whistle.

A crowd gathers, many rubbing their eyes, having only just now awoken.

“Gwen here just uttered a Regrettable Falsehood aloud,” Amy says. “Concerning what, I’d rather not say, but . . .”

Then twirls the toe of her disco boot in the water.

“I didn’t!” Gwen says. “She did! And he did. They also, both, used the problematic phrase ‘power failure,’ as well as—”

“Which, hello, you yourself just used,” Amy says.

“I used it to point out that you used it!” Gwen says. “Earlier.”

“I find this tragic,” Amy says. “Gwen, you are just playing a very weak game of turnaround.”

In Gwen’s eyes, I can see that she knows she can’t win against Amy, so well trusted by all.

“Wait,” Gwen says, frantic. “Think about it, guys. Isn’t it possible that Amy is the one—is the lying one? And not me? If they, in fact, said those things that I

just now claimed they said, and I overheard them, wouldn't this be, uh, exactly how she would, you know, approach it?"

Even though I know Gwen is telling the truth, she is telling it so nervous even I doubt it.

During the kicking that ensues, Amy gives me a look with furrowed brow, as in, Get in there, man.

I get in there. I don't kick or even foot-tap, just stand there in the early-morning-breath smell of it all, being jostled by my peers' abundant kicking.

Oh, Gwen, I think, why did you not do what I have so often done upon overhearing someone saying something I wished I wasn't overhearing, namely, pretend I wasn't hearing it?

When all is done, someone suggests that, out of respect, we heft Gwen, always a sweetheart until now, off the wet floor and set her on something higher, such as the Suggestion Box made of plastic, shaped like a giant rose, in which we may leave Suggestions, should we so choose.

We drape Gwen over the rose, which, sensing her there, goes, "Great idea! I love it!"

Because Gwen continues to be draped across it, the rose keeps saying that as we drift away.

"This is going from bad to worse," Amy says, as we approach the Tram.

"I'll say," I say.

"I suppose you think I went to the whistle too quick," she says. "Oh, God, maybe I did. But what did you want me to do? Let her go rat us out, so we could spend the rest of the day waiting to get kicked to death? Does that sound fun? Why were we talking all that crap anyway? What were we thinking?"

Looking over at her there, in her disco boots, eyes moist with tears, appearing not hot but a bit odd and out of sorts, I find myself feeling more tenderly toward her than I would were she looking all composed and hot—i.e., her moment of weakness and being flustered is calling forth feelings of wishing to protect her

from all future harm.

At the Tram, upset, she will not kiss me.

But I insist. And we do. Kiss. And continue kissing, even as she, on the Tram, must therefore slightly bend, and I must slightly jog, for us to continue kissing.

Then the Tram disappears into Tunnel Eight.

I turn to regard the Room and find it shimmering, its fake trees AutoSwaying in synch, the tinkle and glow of the many tiny lights upon the trees reflected in the delicate leaping-fish-caused ripples of the free-flowing creek, all of this saying to me, Brian, you feel bad about what just now happened to Gwen, sure, O.K., fair enough, but, for all that, is it not still a beautiful world? Which you would not even be in anymore, if not for Amy, who, at this point, has saved your life twice?

So just try to be happy.

That afternoon, those of us on Break gather as a community beneath the Egress Spout.

Before us: three silver body bags, labelled “R.S.” “T.F.” and “G.T.” respectively.

Entering with her fellow-Monitors, Amy casts a glance at me, her long shiny hair relocating, then swinging back to where it was pre-swing, her winsome glance seeming to say, Ah, sweet, you again!



*"My fortune? No, I'm off to seek one minute of privacy."*  
Cartoon by Liana Finck

Then her look grows sombre, as in, Ugh, two of those three silver bags lying there all lumpy are due in part to us.

Mr. Regis from Workhouse Effective Coördination says a few words through his little amp, re how sad it is to live out one's whole life honoring certain timeless principles, then throw that all away in one ill-advised moment, and in the name of what? Disorder? Chaos? Thus taking one's dishonor forward into all eternity.

The lights flicker, go off, come back on.

Have we found this life pleasant? Mr. Regis asks. Have we found people to be fond of, things that give us pleasure? Have we generally felt, getting up in the morning, that, if we lived within Law 6, our days would go well? Is it too much to ask that certain false, negative things not be underscored? Is it totally crazy that those who, for their own selfish reasons, insist on underscoring certain false, negative things shall be rebuked?

Al from Janitorial steps forward, picks up the "R.S." bag, disappears briskly up the Egress Spout.

Dennis from Janitorial steps forward, picks up the "T.F." bag, disappears up the Egress Spout, albeit less briskly, since Dennis is smaller than Al and Tom was bigger than Rolph.

Soon, Rolph and Tom will rest Above, in that shady graveyard near Pueblo (Colorado), depicted on the Memorial Prayer Cards now being handed out by Susan and Gabe of Consolation Services, Pueblo (Colorado) being the city under which we are approximately located.

Gwen must abide here a bit longer, until Al and Dennis come down and decide which one of them will lug her up Above.

Mr. Regis unplugs the mike from his little amp, picks up the little amp, walks sadly off, if one can be said to walk sadly while carrying a little amp.

Amy, departing, sneaks me a wave.

Oh, Life, I think, I wish you were simpler and I could have these growing

feelings of love for Amy without the countervailing negative feelings that stem from, in a sense, our having played a part in certain recent undesirable occurrences.

And find myself somewhat cursing Law 6 in my heart.

To which Life says, Why curse Law 6? Had you stayed within its sensible guidance and ratted out Tom immediately, and refrained from talking a bunch of Regrettable crap aloud with Amy right in front of Gwen, then Tom would be just as dead as he is now, as is appropriate, and Gwen would still be alive, romping around in her Death robe with that goofy crooked smile on her face as usual, and you could just be enjoying your feelings for Amy, no problem, the two of you working hard, anticipating Visitors, thinking, perhaps, of marriage, maybe, eventually, of babies, like normal people, law-abiding folks.

All of which sounds good.

But is not to be.

Guy comes up, holding a tommy gun.

“Are you by any chance Brian?” he says. “Dad mentioned you. He really got a kick out of fake-menacing you from above, I guess? I had a feeling it was you, because Dad sent me a sketch. Dad was such a talented artist. I’m Edgar Spengler, *CHICAGO GANGSTER HIDEOUT*. Rolph’s son! Sorry about the gun. I came right over from Role.”

The sketch shows me as I am when Squatting Ghoul Eight: hell-scorched shirt, fire-blackened slacks, smoldering necktie, meant to communicate that, pre-Death, I was an office worker, perhaps even Exec.

Under it, Rolph has written in calligraphy: “Edgar, this is Brian, that friend I have made.”

I tell Edgar that Rolph was a good man.

“Well, Mom and I always thought so,” Edgar says. “We truly don’t know what got into him there at the end. He was always so *sane*. Just happy, you know? Anyway, right before his unfortunate, but deserved, passing, Dad, done with Break, about to head back to *MAWS*, asked me to get this sketch to you. Then I

forgot. Oops. Kind of ironic. Oh, and this.”

Then hands me a letter. Which I step aside to read:

Dear Brian,

I sense in you a “kindred spirit.” So am about to lay some heavy truth on you.

A certain dark knowledge has been eating away at me for some thirty years now. I am old and hereby pass this troubling wisdom-flame from my cupped palm to yours. Have I told my son, Edgar, of *CHICAGO GANGSTER HIDEOUT*? No. Edgar, God love him, has always been a super straight arrow, lacking imagination, although a better heart you will never encounter, and I have always feared this would be too much for him and that, being as literal as he is, he might indeed rat me out, his own father.

Long ago, I was a teen-ager. With a ton of ornery energy. Which drove me, one night (brace yourself!), to enter and climb up the Egress Spout. True story! I had balls like a bull. In those days. Up I went, up that chrome ladder with which all are familiar, which, as you know, it is verboten to touch, much less climb, thinking, in my hubris: I’ll just see what Above is like, witnessing for myself some of what we were taught in Geography, e.g., candy stores, viaducts, rain, boulevards, football “tailgate” parties, hiking up mountains, tanning poolside, kissing one’s girl in something called “parking area behind Safeway.” I would so love to see Sky, I thought. So high and all. And those forests must be just super-green this time of season.

Climbed for forty to fifty minutes. Then, whammo, found my neck suddenly bent.

By what?

Low ceiling of rock.

That is correct: the Egress Spout goes up, yes, but as far as Egress? There is none (!). The Spout is merely a long vertical tunnel terminating in that ceiling of rock against which, as mentioned, climbing fast, I bent my neck.

What about the bodies of our beloved dead, you may ask, which, year after year, we have watched being lugged up the Spout, to Above, by Dennis and Al, and, prior to that, by Bob “Big Bob” French?

Yes, right, exactly!

Starting down, I discovered, off to one side, a cavelike room that, in my haste and the dark, I had missed on the way up, and if you’re the type to get creeped out by a big pile of silver body bags, some dating back fifty, sixty years, with a faint smell of decay, and the random skeletal arm or leg jutting out, take my advice: don’t go in there with a flashlight, as I erroneously did!

In summary, the Spout up which we all have been hopefully gazing these many years is no Spout at all, but a mere shaft leading to a sad, creepy room of the dead (!).

We are sealed in, sealed in good down here, by a stout, permanent plug of concrete. Or perhaps a concrete/poly amalgam.

How are Visitors supposed to get down here? They aren’t. They were not, it seems, ever intended to.

We shall remain un-Visited forever.

I shit you not.

What’s it about? Why put us here? Once upon a time, bad things going on Above? Disease stuff, war stuff, famine stuff? Somebody Above thought: better set a little something aside? Like seeds? And that is us? Until such time as the bad stuff ends? Or population control? Or our ancestors were crooks, and this was their jail? Then why make it so fancy? Why the costumes, the roles, the creek, the Tram, the Bowling?

I do not know.

And believe no one currently alive among us does.

My entire adult life I have kept this to myself. I have been so lonely. Am about to blow. There are days I honestly feel like cutting my own wire with one of my spears and plummeting down from on high. But, if that does not

occur, see you soon, pal, from on high! I await your reply. Write me back asap, by way of Edgar, my son, *CHICAGO GANGSTER HIDEOUT*, who brought you this letter, although he is ignorant of its contents, and anyway has never been a big reader.

Your friend, still, I hope, despite the heavy deal I have just laid on you.

Rolph P. Spengler

I walk over and gaze up the Egress Spout, thinking, Wait, what now?

Did I know, dear reader, that few Visitors have tended to come down here, and in fact none ever has, even once, in all the days of my life? Yes, yes, of course, we all know that. But knowing it is one thing, saying it another. Why say it? Does it help? We know from bitter experience it does not. All recall with shame that period referred to as the Slough, during which, discouraged, many of us abandoned our roles entirely, casting aside accoutrements and costumes, just lolling around talking crap, arguing, kvetching, brawling, hitting Vending up for those sedative shooters called SomnoSlams, following these, sometimes minutes later, with those mini-paks of stimulant dust called the HyperHooper.

Those were the days.

Not!

Our loss of sense of purpose resulted in eight deaths across our eleven sister workhouses and the destruction of many of the cool things bequeathed to us by previous generations. One evening, that earlier described Remorseful Demon was sent tumbling down the Cliff of Unceasing Desire, emitting a sad random Remorse-groan with each slam until, finally, boinking a Ventilation Unit, it fell silent. And lay looking up with its sad Demonic eyes at those of us who had just rolled it down there, as if to say, "Colleagues, enough, fetch me forth from this foul ravine, let us begin anew. We must believe in something, mustn't we?"

Soon, as a community, we answered: Yes. Yes, we must. Believing in nothing, we are simply going nuts! Eight dead, forty wounded? Our three main Vending Stations split open and afloat in the Central Fire Pool, the Tram derailed so that, when going on Break, we had to walk darkened tracks to the Room, plus, what fun was Break when one had accrued absolutely zero Role Hours?

Hence Law 6.

And things got better.

And still are.

Always, I have wondered (we have all wondered, or have tried our best to wonder), When will Visitors come? Any day now. On a certain day. Which, when it begins, will be called, by us, at that time, today. Hence, every day, as we wake to a new today, we must assume that today may be the day! And when Visitors do come, what do we hope to do? Wow them. Perhaps blow their minds. With how good we are. In our case, the case of MAWS, how scary. How sad it would be if, after all this waiting, when our Visitors did come, we were to stink! And they were, like, It was sure hard, climbing down that long Egress Spout via that slippery chrome ladder, and now, neither scared nor wowed, we must wearily climb back up it?

But it now appears that that certain day, that longed-for today, will never come.

With a start I note I am standing at the head or foot of Gwen's silver bag.

Head.

In there somewhere is whatever is left of her goofy crooked smile.

And in a sad flash it hits me: if Visitors are never coming, Gwen, Rolph, and Tom died for naught.

Not to mention Randall "Randy" Cobb, of Food Services, who, for a hobby, maintained a database of all of our birthdays, until last Christmas Eve, when, drunk, he perpetuated the dearth-of-Visitors fallacy aloud and paid the ultimate price, and never thereafter shyly handed over a crude homemade birthday card again. Or Betty Loomis, Blood-Stirring Mistress, whose role was to stand waist-deep and keening in the Pool of Guilty Blood, who, last year, took to sitting depressed on the shore, not keening even a bit, muttering things she ought not, and who, as she was encircled, blessed and forgave us all in advance.

And others, so many others.

Sometimes in life the foundation upon which one stands will give a tilt, and

everything that one has previously believed and held dear will begin sliding about, and suddenly all things will seem strange and new.

This happens to me now.

In truth, I am filled with wonder.

Fresh air is constantly coming to us via Ventilation Units 1 through 26, and fresh water via our various Spigots, and food via the narrow Food Chutes that feed into our many Kitchens, and electric power, albeit sporadically, via those big green wires up there, bolted into the ceiling. None of that crap can be cheap, right? Hence there must be someone up there who still cares about us?

But what kind of caring is that? To drop folks in a hole, then plug said hole up?

Oddly, it is in this moment that I realize I am in love.

Because, asking myself with whom I might share these thoughts, and to whom I wish to turn, in this, my hour of need, I realize it is Amy.

Amy and only Amy.

Who, per the clock on the side of the Spout, is likely over at Dinner.

Seeking her, entering Dining, stuck behind a group from *WILD DAY OUT WEST*, I feel like going, “Oh, Jimbo, stop saying ‘I reckon,’ ” as Jimbo, whose real name is Jim but who insists on *WESTifying* it even while on Break, stands there chewing a stir-stick as if it were a piece of hay or whatnot, to look, I guess, more *WEST*?

The time for roles is done, Jimbo.

No Amy.

Why can’t these cowpokes step aside? I somewhat crossly muse. Then take a seat, as far away from them as I can get.

Honestly, I am filled with hope. What new life might we begin, free of the bothersome prospect of being Visited? Dedicated to some new task, some fresh way of being? Who might we become, sans roles, free to redecorate and un-

theme this spacious home of ours? What might come to interest us? Toward what might we redirect our considerable, until now misspent, energy?

Only too bad.

The Monitors of our Monitors are Shirley and Kiko: Shirley in the day and Kiko in the night.

It is thus rare to see Shirley and Kiko together in the same place.

Yet here they are now, ambling side by side into Dining.

Headed straight for me.

“Shirley tells me that wasn’t much of a kick you gave Rolph the other day,” Kiko says, spinning around a chair to sit in it backward.

While Shirley stays sternly standing.

“More of a nudge,” Shirley says. “With the foot.”

What a strange set of feelings I am feeling.

“Can me and Kiko buy you a Coke?” Shirley says, and offers me ten tokens.

“Have a Coke, collect your wits,” says Kiko. “You have always been, so far, fairly solid.”

I take the tokens, get up, and buy, actually, two Cokes, because today is TwoferTuesday, wherein you get two of whatever you order for the price of just one of those things.

“We’re such generally nice people, our community,” Kiko says, before I am even all the way sitting down. “Do you ever wonder why, occasionally, we’re so violent?”

“Maybe it’s because we care,” says Shirley.

“I think that’s exactly right,” Kiko says. “We live in close quarters, and hence, to preserve positivity and order, have developed a system distinguished by its rigor, discipline, and ferocity.”

Kiko's fingering her whistle, on an orange cord there around her neck.

And now sees me looking at it.

And casts a quick glance around Dining.

"Decent-sized group in here today," she says.

"Do you have anything you'd like to tell us, Brian?" Shirley says. "Anything at all?"

"We hear you're having a thing with Amy," says Kiko.

"My Special Assistant," says Shirley.

"We find ourselves having some doubts about this whole Gwen situation," says Kiko.



UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, THE VERMONT  
POSTAL SERVICE WAS PERFORMING  
REMARKABLY WELL

Glen Baxter

“With respect to Amy,” says Shirley.

“With respect to Amy’s apparent shocking lack of judgment,” says Kiko.

“Based on the testimony of two solid eyewitnesses,” says Shirley.

“Bret Freeze, Katy Freeze,” says Kiko.

“We’d like to underscore that, in terms of you, all is not lost,” says Shirley.

“You’re in position to be First Individual Forthcoming.”

“We have bigger fish to fry,” says Kiko.

“To land a giant, well-respected fish like Amy,” Shirley says, “a strong body of evidence is going to be key.”

Poor dears! It all seems so petty.

Knowing what I now know.

I slide to them, between my Cokes, Rolph’s letter.

And watch their faces go red as they read it.

“So, uh, let me get this straight, Bri,” Shirley says, sliding it back. “If I’m understanding this right. All these years, Dennis and Al have just been, what? Stashing those death bags up in this, uh, cave, or what have you?”

“Must be getting pretty crowded up there,” Kiko says.

“So crowded that whenever Dennis and Al go up there to add someone new to the mix,” Shirley says, “they basically have to heave-ho the corpse up as far as they can, onto this, what? Teetering, slippery hill of the dead?”

“Easy, kid,” says Kiko.

“And now they’re all worried that next time will be the occasion on which the deceased comes sliding down and zips over the edge and a few minutes later comes shooting out of the frigging Spout?” says Shirley. “Which, how is that *my*

deal?”

Then looks at me with eyes suddenly wet.

To my amazement.

“Well, shit, congrats, Bri,” she says hoarsely. “You’ve just joined a small fraternity, sworn to secrecy for the good of all.”

“Don’t tell Amy,” Kiko says. “Do not. The fewer folks who know the better.”

“All the more reason for her to go,” says Shirley. “For you to help us get her gone.”

Just then, guess who steps in?

“Speak of the devil,” says Kiko.

Seeing me there with Kiko and Shirley, whose forward-leaning, extractive postures must be familiar to her from the many times she herself has assumed that posture while trying to get someone to rat out a person near and dear, Amy stops in her tracks, gives me a heartbroken head-tilt, sprints out of Dining.

Kiko raises her whistle and does a double toot, meaning not “Come all, kick away,” but, rather, “Tate and/or Jacqueline, bring your Stunners, Stun Brian here, who seems inclined to get up and race after Amy.”

There follows the ear-splitting sound of an All-Alert, and Ken DiRogini, over the P.A., says an unknown individual, female, possibly Amy, actually almost for sure Amy, has just shoved Al down and illegally entered the Egress Spout, bent, apparently, on escape to Above.

Here comes Jacqueline, with her Stunner.

And down I go.

How strange to wake in Clinic, burn marks on both temples, the taste and smell of Amy and the feel of her hand in mine fresh in my mind, only to realize that she is not Above, not at all, but in that creepy cave of the dead, mulling two options equally blah: (1) Come down, be kicked to death more energetically than

usual, due to having admitted her guilt via fleeing, or (2) Stay up there among the creepy dead forever, sneaking down now and then at night to hit up Vending for food and water, which, one false move and—see (1), above.

Might I rise and join her? Make a life with her? Up there? Yes. Yes. As soon as I am not so puky. And can stay awake somewhat.

But alas.

A third option I do not imagine: that night, here comes Amy, plummeting head first down the Spout, hitting the floor with the sound a person makes when he or she has fallen from a height it takes forty to fifty minutes to attain by ladder.

In her clenched hand: a note, to me, on a page from her Monitoring Pad, which I am handed the next morning, on the sly, in Clinic, by Carver D., Shy Suitor, *VICTORIAN WEEKEND*.

“Thanks, Carve,” I say.

“It is of no import to one such as I,” he says.

Dear Brian,

I’ve been waiting for you up here but no dice. I guess that would have been too much to ask. I get why you had to rat me out. I probably would have done the same. That is just how we are.

The Spout does not lead to Above. All that’s up here? A mass grave in a cave. Tom and Rolph and Gwen are here. I could reach out and touch Gwen. There, just did. Going a little bonkers in this small space in which I find myself sitting, between her and the long drop. Checking around, have located your mom, my dad. Your dad, my mom, must be further in, as they died earlier?

It has sometimes in the past occurred to me that Above might not be real. But as I write, light of an entirely new type pours in through dozens of tiny cracks in the plug.

Everything feels broken in my head. Do you have any idea how many times I blew my whistle? I have been sitting here trying to come up with a

number. Why was I doing all that?

Sweetie, no one is coming. To see how good we have done/are doing. It is just us. Forever. Until a flood gets us or the air or food stops coming. What a joke, the way we live. The worry, the suspicion, the stress, the meanness. I keep dreaming that these dead are telling me what they would do if they could come back. What nobody has said so far: rat out more folks and kick harder when asked.

Am I a, like, murderer? Are you? I think so. Wow.

Well, no life for me. Not up here, not down there.

So.

Don't mind dying but can't bear the thought of you helping, which, us being us, you pretty much would have to, I guess.

Hey, wow, look, I'm saving you again.

XO

A

Every day starts out as a certain day, dear reader, which, when it begins, we call today. Hence, every day, as we wake to a new today, we must assume that today may be the day. For what, though? That is what is unknown, that is what I must find out, and quickly now: for what will each of my coming todays henceforth be for?

For Lunch, Shirley and Kiko send in steak, pudding, four Kit Kats, a milkshake. Plus a note: "Sorry re Amy. For the best, though painful. BTW: we feel you would make a fine Monitor. Appealing, we hope? Otherwise your outlook is grim. To be frank."

"Yes, please," I write at the bottom, and eat heartily, then send the note back on my cleaned plate.

But I will not become a Monitor.

I have Amy's letter, Rolph's letter. I have these notes I have written to you, dear reader.

Upon my release, I will rise, go to Copy Services, make Copies of these, go forth, leave Copies on every fake stump in the Room, each chair in Dining, in the Coat Check of disco, the stables of *NOW WE JOUST*, the saloons of *WEST*, on the seats of the Tram, as it speeds in its unceasing arc, from *LOVEFEST*, *CALI CREEK*, in the north, to *DREAMY MAINE SUMMER*, in the south, so that all may know the truth and be moved to ask, perhaps in some quiet moment, Is this world that we have made (which, for the soundest of reasons, we made, along the way, quite harsh) a world in which lovers may thrive?

Though I will not live to see it, and dread the kicking that must come, may these words play some part in bringing the old world down. ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

## **Florida Postcard**

- [A Florida Demographic That Could Swing the Election](#)

[November 9, 2020 Issue](#)

# A Florida Demographic That Could Swing the Election

Black men in Newtown, in Sarasota, discuss the appeal of Donald Trump and their indifference toward Joe Biden.

By [Charlayne Hunter-Gault](#)

November 2, 2020

Toward the end of the 2016 Presidential campaign, a political canvasser working in the predominantly Black community of Newtown, in Sarasota, Florida, engaged a young man in conversation. “Why should I register to vote?” the man said. “Ain’t nothing happened for me in the past eight years.” Barack Obama’s two terms were followed by a historic decline in voter turnout among Black people, and Donald Trump carried Florida by 112,911 votes.



Fast-forward to 2020, on a Sunday afternoon in Newtown, where Biden/Harris signs dotted the porches of small cinder-block houses. Five men sat on a bench, their casual demeanor betraying no awareness that they are viewed as a key variable in the election, and are a demographic that Trump is courting, with claims that he's making the criminal-justice system more equitable.

The men on the bench all served time in prison. One of them, heavyset, with an armful of tattoos, did twenty-nine years. He had voted early, and would say only that he had not voted for Trump: "The way he talked to people, the way he talked to the news representatives, when he talks to Blacks . . ." His buddies nodded. "But, if he loses, it won't be because Biden was better, but because they don't like Trump."

Convicted felons in Florida who have completed their sentences can vote, under the state's Amendment 4, but only after five to seven years and the payment of all back fines.

A recent Hill-Harris poll of Florida voters found that thirteen per cent of Black respondents planned to vote for Trump. (In 2016, Trump won only eight per cent of the Black vote in Florida, according to an exit poll conducted by NBC.) The President's gains among Black voters can likely be attributed specifically to Black men. In September, a Nationscape survey of likely voters found that, although at least eighty-seven per cent of Black women planned to vote for Biden, only seventy-six per cent of Black men planned to do so. (According to Gallup, Trump's approval rating among Black men is also eight points higher than it is among Black women.) Jim Messina, who ran President Obama's reelection campaign, told this magazine, last week, "If Biden can win Florida early on Election Night, it's over."

A few blocks away, a dreadlocked man in his thirties was tidying up a sidewalk café that he owns. He hasn't been out of prison long enough to be able to vote, but he said he wouldn't vote even if he could. He has views, though. "I like Donald Trump," he said. "He is now pushing people with power out. Like Jeffrey Epstein." He didn't elaborate on how he believed Epstein had been brought to justice. He thinks that Trump is being unfairly criticized about his taxes. "He paid some money, something like seven hundred and fifty dollars," he said. "He was a businessman, and, when you learn about business, you learn about what not to do." He went on, "I mean, the Amazon guy didn't pay nothing,

and he made billions.”

Several doors down, another man was working on some electrical wiring at a landmark house. He also has not been out of prison long enough to be able to vote, but he said that, if he could, he wouldn’t choose Trump. About the Democratic candidates, he said, “They should be reversed. Harris on the top.”

Over at the Salvation Army Center for Worship, a man named John Battle was taking a break from a service. Inside, several dozen other people, mostly former addicts and men who had been incarcerated, sat close together, without masks. Brought up in orphanages, Battle was a football star in high school, but in his twenties he ended up on the streets, and then in prison. Now forty-six, he has been out for only a few months, so he can’t vote, either. Among his friends, he said, “a lot like Donald Trump because he is straightforward. They believe the other guy is about raising taxes and taking away Social Security, and a lot of them are on it, and a lot get disability.”

As for the way the government treats Black people, he said, “They are always putting a ‘pause’ on things. Even with the stimulus. I got out on May 7th and filed for it, and I was told because I was in prison I can’t get it yet. And white guys I know filed in June and July and immediately got their checks. And when I called I was told, ‘There is nothing we can do.’ ”

Edward James III is a thirty-year-old community organizer and teacher at the Visible Men Academy, a school near Sarasota for Black and Hispanic boys, many with fathers who are incarcerated. He is unhappy that so few of the Black men he talks to are supporting Biden. “I do understand where people are coming from when they say their lives had not changed under President Obama,” he said. “If you’ve been caught in a cycle of generational poverty and you’ve never really been anywhere. You’re still poor. You’re still having run-ins with the police. You’re still seeing violence. You’re still seeing death. You’re still seeing drugs, right?” He went on, “If your everyday life is focussed on: How do I keep my lights on? How do I send money to my brother in prison? How do I make sure my daughter is not sexually assaulted by the man down the street? You’re not thinking about things at the federal level. I get where they’re coming from, but it’s very misguided.”

Trump, he continued, is “preying on Black people the same way he preys on poor, uneducated white people. He preys on their racism and tries to get them to

vote against their own interests. Now, I haven't heard many Black men say they're voting for President Trump, but I will say there's not that much excitement for Biden." For some, he said, "I think he's just flat-out uninspiring. A lot of people put their trust and dreams in Obama, and their lives have not changed." He got a dreamy look in his eyes. "But still—Barack Obama! Once you've had filet mignon, everything else is like chopped liver." ♦

## Fresh Starts

- [Shep Smith's Fresh Start](#)

[November 9, 2020 Issue](#)

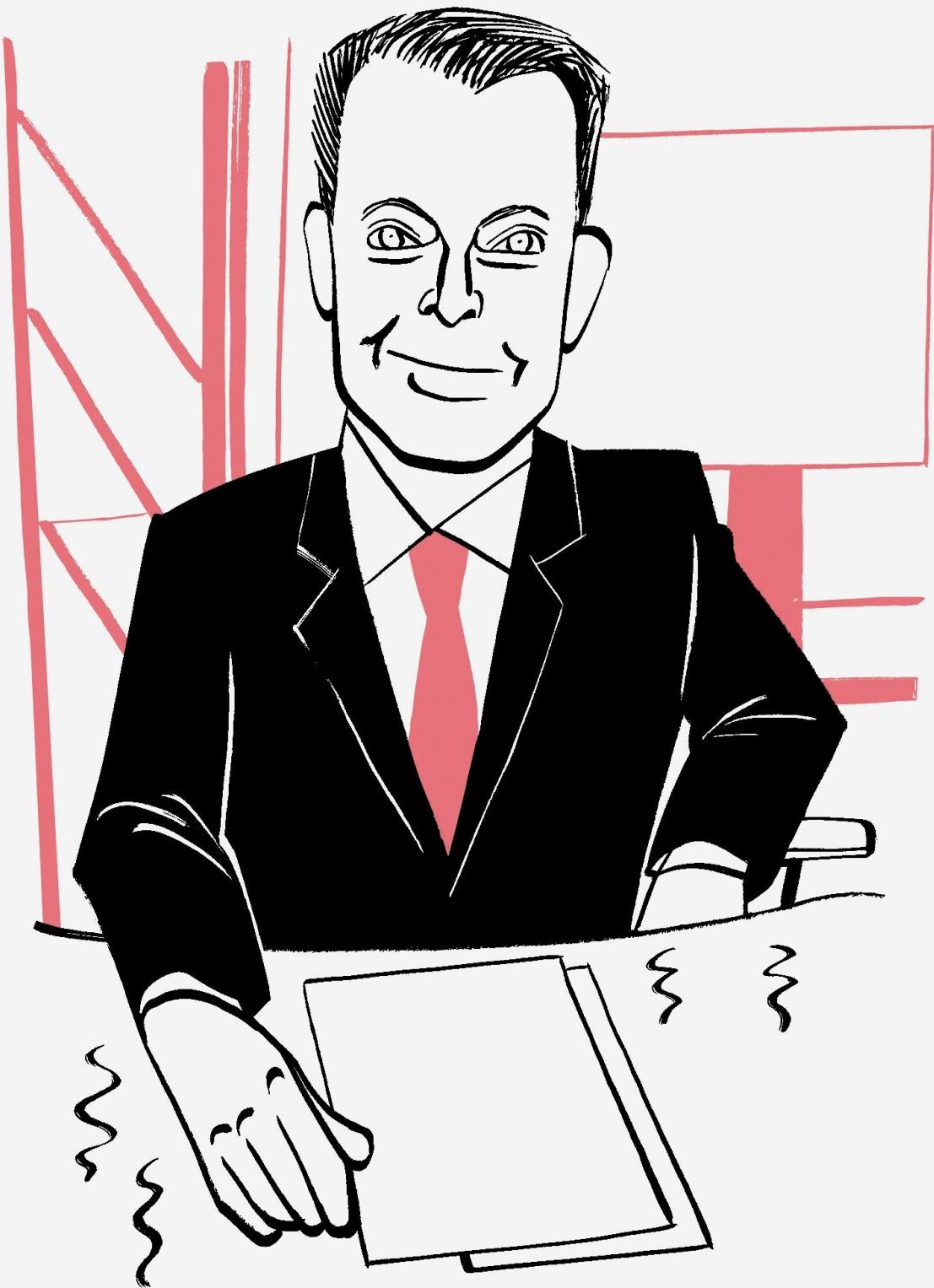
## Shep Smith's Fresh Start

A year after quitting Fox News, the anchor, now at CNBC, is wide-eyed and cheery—like Kimmy Schmidt if she had escaped from a right-wing news network rather than a doomsday cult.

By [Tyler Foggatt](#)

November 2, 2020

“How’s Shep Smith doing?” President Trump tweeted earlier this year, in the same way that one might ask whatever happened to Tobey Maguire, or to Dunkaroos. For twenty-three years, Smith worked at Fox News; he was the host of “Shepard Smith Reporting,” one of the few nonpartisan programs on the network, which aired at 3 P.M. on weekdays. Smith was one of the first people hired by Roger Ailes, Fox News’s founding C.E.O., and he stuck it out through the network’s various kerfuffles, from Ailes’s sexual-harassment scandal to the breakup of Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes. He tolerated abuse from Trump, who gave him the moniker “low ratings Shep Smith.” And, after coming out as gay, he put up with viewers demanding that his show be cancelled. Then came Tucker Carlson, the channel’s new 8 P.M. guy. One evening, Carlson mocked Smith on the air, implying that the daytime host had a liberal bias. Two weeks later, Smith resigned, just over a year after the network had extended his contract—a reported fifteen million dollars annually.



That was a year ago. “I’m doing great,” Smith said the other day, over Zoom. “I feel like I have a new lease on life.” Wearing a blue shirt and AirPods, he was wide-eyed and cheery—like Kimmy Schmidt if she had escaped from a right-wing news network rather than from a doomsday cult.

Last month, Smith returned to television as an anchor for CNBC, the business-news network owned by NBCUniversal. (“They were into this novel concept of trying to do a newscast that’s about the news and eliminating opinion from it,” he explained.) His show, “The News with Shepard Smith,” is just Shepard Smith delivering the news. “We feel kind of like explorers,” he said, of his team, “but we’re recharting territory from long ago.” He was Zooming from what he called his “*COVID* office,” at the CNBC headquarters, in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey—a bare-bones space with Clorox wipes, Poland Spring water, and P.P.E. strewn about. “I haven’t done anything to it,” he said. “I came in here, and a couple of days later we were on the air.”

At CNBC, the big names are Mark Cuban (of “Shark Tank”), Jim Cramer (of “Mad Money”), and Jay Leno (of “Jay Leno’s Garage”). “We’re mostly a business place,” Smith said, “and all of the discussion around here is about data and stocks and money. I didn’t know how to fit in at first. I was trying to do that same thing for which I have muscle memory, in a place that has no muscle memory for the thing that I do.”

What are the advantages of the move, aside from not having to worry about his more popular colleagues roasting him on air? One is that Smith has a prime-time slot. (CNBC’s past prime-time programs have included “Deal or No Deal” and “Make Me a Millionaire Inventor.”) But, as Smith pointed out, for many Americans, prime time is dinnertime. He imagines that many of his viewers watch his show while they eat, and so he has designed it accordingly. “As they’re having their meal, we want to sort of present our metaphorical meal of the day,” he said. “Here’s the interesting stuff, the ‘gee whiz’ stuff. Here’s the important stuff. Here’s the stuff that’s hard to swallow. Here’s something kind of fun, maybe to share with your friends. And here’s something kind of soothing, like a nice glass of wine. Maybe something inspiring, you know? We’re all lacking for inspiration.” (That night’s headlines included “*FIRE FATIGUE*,” “*EXTREME WEATHER*,” and “*MAN FINDS GIANT JELLYFISH WHILE RUNNING ON FLORIDA BEACH*.”)

The ratings haven't been so good. "The News with Shepard Smith" is in last place for its cable-news time slot, garnering fewer than three hundred thousand nightly viewers. ("Tucker Carlson Tonight" recently broke a cable-news record, with an average nightly audience of 4.3 million.) "Who knows if we'll ever get a boatload of viewers," Smith said. "But I know that we're gonna put together something that, when the day is done, I'm gonna sleep well."

He doesn't watch his competitors' shows. "I get really stressed out by all of the yelling at each other about how mad everyone is," he said. "I know you're mad —this is clear. You on the left and you on the right and those of you stuck inside, you're all angry. I get it. So everybody's about to vote and we'll move on. I like thinking about, Are our votes going to get counted? Is this going to be fair? We're diving into data on what's happening in Pennsylvania, what's happening in Texas right now, in Harris County. Can you vote? Is your vote gonna count? These are the things I care about. I don't care about people yelling at each other. I've had enough. I can't take any more yelling." ♦

## If U Cn Rd Ths

- [A Speed-Reading App Condenses the Jeffrey Epstein Saga](#)

[November 9, 2020 Issue](#)

# A Speed-Reading App Condenses the Jeffrey Epstein Saga

The book-summarizing service Blinkist tried to distill Ghislaine Maxwell’s four-hundred-and-sixty-five-page court deposition into a bite-size slab, and skipped the sex toys.

By [Antonia Hitchens](#)

November 2, 2020

Hours before the final debate between Donald Trump and Joseph Biden, a federal court unsealed the four-hundred-and-sixty-five-page transcript of a deposition given by the British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell in 2016, about the sex-trafficking ring she allegedly ran with Jeffrey Epstein. Those trying to manage their daily news-bingeing couldn’t have known in advance to budget hours for both of these unnerving events. Blinkist, a book-summarizing subscription service with sixteen million users, caters to people who prefer not to sift through nearly five hundred pages. “Almost none of us have the time to read everything we’d like to read,” the app’s Web site says. Blinkist’s “expert readers” mine nonfiction titles to distill them into fifteen-minute audio slabs of what they call “key insights”; recent top downloads include “Fire and Fury,” by Michael Wolff; “Political Order and Political Decay,” by Francis Fukuyama; and “Becoming,” Michelle Obama’s memoir.



The service eliminates the vicissitudes of normal reading; as one user put it, “By playing Blinkist books at 2x normal speed I can squeeze in a book while standing in line, riding in an Uber or as a bedtime story. I just want the information, not to be the author or be forced to see through his or her eyes.” Even “The Ethics of Ambiguity,” by Simone de Beauvoir, and Immanuel Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason” have been boiled down into bullet points, a SparkNotes for high-functioning grownups. Take the extracted essence of Joe Biden’s “Promises to Keep”: “Falling in love gave Biden the courage to pursue his ambitions”; “Slowly, Biden became more engaged in his work in the Senate.”

After the release of the Maxwell deposition, Blinkist employees convened a war room at the company’s headquarters, in Berlin; three of them sat around a table next to a whiteboard, drinking tea and contemplating how they’d condense the Epstein saga. Recent projects included two books about the Harvey Weinstein trial; “The Education of Brett Kavanaugh,” by Robin Pogrebin and Kate Kelly; and “She Comes First,” an instructional treatise on female orgasm by Dr. Ian Kerner.

The company had considered Blinking the Mueller report and decided that the task was too difficult, but it had a go at Maxwell’s testimony. Erik Niklasson, the company’s content producer, said, “Sometimes we do very abstract books. Our tone is hand-holding, like: Bear with us, this gets a bit complicated. We use repetition and disclaimers. And context is so important.” He added, “I don’t get cultural references sometimes. I’m from Sweden.”

“Our star writer found this pretty tough,” Thomas Anderson, the company’s head of English content, said of the Maxwell transcript. “Compared with a nonfiction book, there isn’t too much concrete information in there.” Despite the salacious nature of the case, he said, the key insights are “a bit bland.” The Blinkist summation makes no mention of a basket of sex toys, a detail that other news accounts of the deposition highlight.

Here’s a Blinded version of the Blinkist distillation: “The first key insight is: Ghislaine Maxwell claims that Virginia Giuffre is a liar. ‘Lies,’ ‘liar,’ ‘lied,’ ‘lying’—the words appear again and again throughout the deposition. During the afternoon session, however, allegations of Virginia’s mendacity appear in a dense cluster—thirty-four times in a mere thirteen pages.”

Jonathan Arac, the former chair of Columbia's English department, said, "This is a new version of an old way of reading." He recalled the approximately ten-line summary of Homer's *Odyssey* in Aristotle's *Poetics*: "Aristotle invented the idea of the unity of a work as defined by its plot. The plot as the soul of the work, the component that gives it its integrity and wholeness. Plato didn't seem to understand this. He probably wondered, Is Homer writing about how to drive a chariot? Or how to slaughter an ox? Aristotle says the poet knows how to make a plot."

Arac went on, "We choose to have someone else do it for us because we assume this is an experience we don't have time for." In the nineteenth century, he noted, Edgar Allan Poe argued that modern life was so busy that the short story was the right form for it.

A new app, Instaread, condenses fiction titles: one can experience "The Fountainhead," "1984," or Jonathan Franzen's latest, "Purity" (which clocks in at five hundred and sixty-three pages), as a twenty-six-minute audio summary. Franzen, who has not checked out the whittled-down version, said, "My own approach is to talk knowledgeably at a party about a book I've never even cracked or read the dust jacket of—it's the tried-and-true approach." He added, "The trend has been towards the tweet, so, at this point, spending more than twenty minutes actively engaged with a complete work of something seems like a step forward. I'm hard pressed to deplore it."

Sarah Allison, a professor of English—and a pro-summary Victorianist—is the author of "Reductive Reading: A Syntax of Victorian Moralizing." Of Blinkist, she said, "It's the *TED-talk-ification* of nonfiction." But is a summary of the 9/11 report or the Maxwell deposition enough? "It could be that, as a cultural document, the most important thing you need to know is: how was it summarized?" she said. "Though, of course, these days, sometimes that's memes or hot takes." ♦

# **Onward and Upward with the Arts**

- [How New York City Ballet Took On the Pandemic](#)

[November 9, 2020 Issue](#)

# How New York City Ballet Took On the Pandemic

With its season—including “The Nutcracker”—cancelled, the company created a video series that asks, What can dance, so dependent on bodies sharing space, become in the age of social distancing?

By [Michael Schulman](#)

Photography by [Michael Avedon](#)

October 29, 2020



Four dancers slid their feet into the shallow reflecting pool on the north side of Lincoln Center. Wide and tranquil, the pool is situated between David Geffen Hall, where the New York Philharmonic no longer plays, and the Vivian Beaumont Theatre, where actors no longer act. Just to the south, past a grove of London plane trees, is the Metropolitan Opera, where sopranos no longer sing “Madama Butterfly.” Detractors of Lincoln Center have compared the place to a mausoleum, but the absence of artists—and audiences—has made its hulking marble structures particularly sepulchral.

Nevertheless, on this fall morning, something lively and strange was happening. The dancers stepped onto the pool’s concrete floor, scattered with good-luck pennies, like explorers toeing virgin terrain. Instead of pointe shoes, they wore waterproof booties, the kind used by windsurfers. The water came up to their calves. They were pleased to find that the bottom wasn’t slippery; one dancer noted that it had a “sandpaper grip.” The choreographer Andrea Miller waded in after them. “One small step for man,” she said, through a blue paisley mask. “One giant leap for New York City Ballet.”

In normal times, City Ballet performs at Lincoln Center’s David H. Koch Theatre. But the *COVID-19* pandemic has made that, too, a mausoleum. The spring season was cancelled in March, and then the fall season was as well. For many months, the dancers were separated from the dance. Millions of dollars in revenue were lost. Then, this summer, the company came up with a plan: it would make five short dance films by five choreographers, shot outdoors on the Lincoln Center campus and around town. The result, which has just premiered online, is called “New Works Festival,” but the title doesn’t convey all its paradoxes. What does dance, which depends on bodies sharing space, look like in the age of social distancing? What is ballet outside the proscenium, and without audiences? Then, there are practical quandaries. Can you pirouette on wet concrete—in a mask? How do you choreograph over Zoom?

Miller, one of the five choreographers, had put a lot of thought into these questions. “I always like limitations, to some degree,” she told me. Allowed to select up to four dancers, she had chosen four. (“I just feel like we’ve done a lot alone.”) They had rehearsed in Riverside Park, but this was their first day transposing the steps to the water. Miller and her dancers had checked in at the Geffen stage door, where they answered a questionnaire (“Do you have a fever?”) and got their temperatures taken via thermal scan. In the plaza, for

hygiene reasons, they were not allowed to immerse themselves in the water. And they had to stay six feet apart, a choreographic challenge for Miller.

She also found it liberating. With her own company, Gallim, Miller has done site-specific work, including a flash mob at Grand Central Terminal and a piece at the Temple of Dendur. Before the pandemic, N.Y.C.B. had commissioned her to create a piece for its Fall Fashion Gala (cancelled), and she had been plotting to entice the seventy-two-year-old company into using more nontraditional spaces. Now it had no choice. “It’s freeing for those of us who’ve been trying to get people to believe in it,” she said with a laugh. “All of a sudden, they’re, like, ‘Yeah, this is great!’ ”

Miller watched the dancers perform what she called a “jig” around “Reclining Figure,” the bronze sculpture at the center of the pool. Her piece was surf and turf, moving from the grove to the pool, and would be filmed in a single shot. As the dancers, two men and two women, practiced entering the water, they instinctually shifted into épauletement, tilting their cheekbones up in a way that George Balanchine, the company’s founder, likened to asking for a kiss on the cheek. But Miller told them to flatten their bodies; she wanted them to look stoic, hieroglyphic. “Almost like a monk,” she instructed. The empty Lincoln Center had reminded her of a temple. “Without people, without prayer, it’s just stones,” she said.

As she rehearsed a solo with Indiana Woodward, the two men, Harrison Coll and Sebastián Villarini-Velez, sat poolside. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve wanted to put my feet in this water?” Coll said. Miller had set the dance to “Manifiesto,” a sombre guitar ballad by the Chilean protest singer Víctor Jara, and she had translated the lyrics for the dancers early on. In 1973, Augusto Pinochet’s regime had imprisoned and tortured Jara at Chile Stadium. Before executing him, the guards smashed his fingers and then mocked him by handing him a guitar. “In this song, he’s saying, ‘I don’t sing because I have a beautiful voice or because my guitar sounds good. I just sing because it’s my soul. It’s who I am,’ ” Villarini-Velez said. “This pandemic has forced us to shape our identities beyond our profession. Because we start at such a young age, it defines us. It’s good to step back and ask, Why do we dance? I’ve thrived during this time, because it’s allowed me to appreciate things like this. It’s more than just the parts, the bows, the claps.’ ”

“We’re so used to working in studios, having a mirror and really analyzing every

part of our shapes and our lines,” Coll added. “Through this process, we’ve never been able to look at ourselves once. Everything about this piece is freeing. We’re usually rehearsing in a building that doesn’t have windows! We’ve been outside, and people will stop and just watch. You get a sense of how the city has reacted to not having art.”

“There was this elderly woman in her wheelchair,” Villarini-Velez recalled. “She had her caretaker stop. She kept pointing at us and touching her heart.”

In the pool, Miller frowned and told Woodward, “It’s not working.” The movements that she had created on land felt “alien” in the water, so she decided to redo the solo. She dunked her hair in the water and improvised. By the time they filmed, the dancers had learned entirely new choreography, including a pas de deux for Woodward and Coll, which was permitted only because the pair have been dating for two years and had been quarantining together, on Ninety-fourth Street.

This was already supposed to be a year of reinvention for N.Y.C.B., after a period of turmoil. In 2018, its longtime artistic director, Peter Martins, retired while under investigation for allegations of physical and sexual abuse against dancers. Martins, who had led the company since Balanchine’s death, in 1983 (he and Jerome Robbins were “co-ballet-masters in chief” for the first six years), denied the allegations, and the investigators could not corroborate the claims against him. Not long after, a nineteen-year-old former student at the School of American Ballet, the company’s affiliate conservatory, discovered that her boyfriend, a principal dancer, had shared explicit images of her with other male dancers and a young donor. She sued the dancers, the school, and N.Y.C.B., which she blamed for creating a “fraternity-like atmosphere.” Last month, a New York Supreme Court judge dismissed nearly all her claims.

The company tried to turn the page. In February of last year, it announced that Jonathan Stafford, a ballet master who’d been appointed as the interim head, would assume artistic leadership, with Wendy Whelan, a former star ballerina, overseeing programming and commissions as the associate director. Whelan, the first woman to hold a permanent artistic leadership position at the ballet, went on a listening tour of the hundred company members, “trying to let them know that I see them as more than just a body,” she told me. She was eager to bring in more contemporary choreographers, especially women and people of color. At the start of this year, she was busy commissioning future pieces by such

choreographers as Miller, Jamar Roberts, Pam Tanowitz, and Sidra Bell, who was to be the first Black woman to choreograph for the company.

Plans changed. In March, as the coronavirus spread and N.Y.C.B. projected that cancelling its spring season meant the loss of eight million dollars, it committed to paying its employees through May. The dancers retreated to their apartments or went home to live with their parents, keenly aware that ballet careers don't last forever. Whelan, whose husband has a heart condition, moved with him to their house upstate. She figured that the company would be back by winter, a lucrative time that includes the cash cow "The Nutcracker." "We felt a little lucky," she said.

By June, it was clear that there would be no fall season, no "Nutcracker." Like the Met, the company made taped performances available for streaming, so that audiences could catch up on "Ballo della Regina" from home. There were devastating human losses. Clem Mitcham, the theatre's longtime head of security, died of COVID complications, as did a member of the marketing staff. The company moved its training courses to Zoom, which opened up unanticipated hurdles. Flooring was an issue. "If you're on linoleum or a rug or a wood floor, you can't really work your footing the same way as if you had a Marley dance floor," Whelan said. The company sent six-by-six-foot strips of vinyl flooring to each dancer. Teaching online had its benefits, though. "I can actually see everybody on a screen—I don't have to walk around the room," Whelan said. "I had a panic attack the first time I did it, but I've found a way of kind of loving it." Her mission had been to help drag the company into the new decade. Now it was simply to keep everyone dancing. Was it possible to do both at the same time?

During the summer, Lincoln Center asked the company to help "enliven the plaza" by creating a short film for Pride Month. The result was a ballet solo performed in front of the central fountain, which was lit up in rainbow colors. Whelan expanded the idea to the five socially distanced ballet films, corraling four of the choreographers she had already commissioned, as well as Justin Peck, the company's resident choreographer. Suddenly, bringing in outsiders who had worked on street corners and at other unconventional sites seemed prescient.

Like Miller, Jamar Roberts was drawn to the reflecting pool as a location. "I'm very interested in tension," he told me. "I like to imagine that the air is thick. It

gives the body more resistance. Or the air is thin, and you slip through it.” His piece, “Water Rite,” a staccato solo for the dancer Victor Abreu, was prompted by a quotation from the jazz saxophonist Archie Shepp. “He referred to jazz as being a lily that grows in spite of the swamp, meaning that it is a music that comes out of oppression,” Roberts said. “I was inspired by that, just thinking of the time that we’re in now. In the midst of such a shitty time, so many beautiful things are being made. Kids are being born. We’re still able to make dance. So this water here represents the swamp, and Victor is the lily.”

Sidra Bell gravitated to the lawn that swoops up from the plaza to the top of a glass-walled restaurant, overlooking Sixty-fifth Street. Bell had been quarantining in White Plains with her father, the composer Dennis Bell, who wrote a string quartet for her piece. “I was rehearsing in the living room, he was composing in the basement,” she said. Bell has an architect’s eye, and she told me that she wanted to play up “the rough edges and the angles” of Lincoln Center, as well as the “skewing and warping” of its reflective surfaces. Her piece, “pixelation in a wave (Within Wires),” features four dancers in skintight monochromatic suits, sometimes dancing at different elevations; their rolling backs and sharp movements make them look like statues in a sculpture garden. As in Miller’s piece, two of the dancers are a couple, and they start the piece with a duet. Romantic pairings within the company, a fraught topic in the past few years, are now an unexpected asset.

The choreographer Pam Tanowitz said that she “fell in love” with the band shell in Damrosch Park, in the southwest corner of Lincoln Center. Her piece, a solo for Russell Janzen, an N.Y.C.B. principal, is a sad-funny meditation on schlepping. Janzen wanders the plaza with his company-issued Marley mat rolled up over his shoulder, trying and failing to unfurl it on inconvenient surfaces. At one point, he changes costumes inside a Calder sculpture, the pandemic having deprived him of a dressing room. Tanowitz, a Bronx native who talks about ballet with the daintiness of a New Yorker trying to catch a cab at rush hour, told me, “Ballet dancers like to make everything look pretty. I like everything messy.”

Choreography is usually taught through the body, limb to limb, hip to hip. But working with Janzen over FaceTime had forced Tanowitz to be more verbal. “I would say to him, ‘Arabesque, shimmy, stay to the right, take two steps from the first ballet you were a principal in,’ ” she recalled. “Instead of saying, ‘Do this shape. Copy me through the computer.’ ” She incorporated the Marley mat after

watching him practice with it in a garage. During rehearsal, she led Janzen through his entrance over the grassy pavilion, which had been sprayed with white circles to help sunbathers keep their distance from one another. Nearby, two little girls were eating cookies, and one said, “The energy in the sun is kind of getting weaker, so eventually the sun will pop, and then it’ll turn into a black hole and it’ll suck in all the planets!”

Overhearing her, Tanowitz said, “This should be the text for our film.” Janzen, in a sweatshirt, unrolled his mat on the grass and tried dancing on and around it. He was worried that the lawn might be slippery if they shot in the morning. “I’ll bring a towel to wipe the grass,” Tanowitz said.

Trailed by two costume designers, they walked over to the Met, where Janzen danced within the ribbed wall of the opera house, then to the side of the Koch, where they used a steel barricade as a ballet barre. “Ballet shoes aren’t protective enough for the cement,” Tanowitz told the costumers. “Does it look weird with sneakers?”

“If we want his feet to have articulation, he could wear white leather ballet shoes,” one of them offered.

Janzen changed shoes and hopped onto the band shell’s stage. “Can I take off my mask?” he asked. Maskless, he rehearsed his final routine, which Tanowitz had peppered with allusions to Tchaikovsky and to Schumann’s “*Davidsbündlertänze*.” Tanowitz said, watching, “I feel lucky that I even have opportunities to make something.”

Christopher Grant, a twenty-five-year-old member of the corps de ballet, stood at the center of a handball court, on a covered pier in Brooklyn Bridge Park. Lower Manhattan sparkled in the background. He wore stretch jeans, sneakers, a red jersey, and a blue Adidas mask, more or less the same outfit as some people shooting hoops nearby. When the time came, he wiped his brow, handed his mask to a production assistant, and started to dance.

It was the first day of shooting for Justin Peck’s piece, four intercut solos that unfold across the city. Peck had chosen the handball court for its “contemporary” feel, he told me: “I didn’t want it to look like nineteen-sixties New York City.” The next day, he’d shoot in Chinatown, outside Nom Wah Tea Parlor, a dim-sum restaurant where his grandfather used to take his father and uncle when they

were kids.

Peck and Grant reviewed the steps: an athletic sequence of leaps, développés, chugs, enveloppés, arabesques, and faillis, all of which would be danced on concrete and captured in a continuous dolly shot. Grant mirrored a twirl off Peck's body, as crew members watched. (Everyone had been thermal-scanned on arrival.) For music, Peck had chosen Chris Thile's upbeat anthem "Thank You, New York." Before they began, Peck told Grant to forget about the camera: "Think about what New York means to you." Grant was born in Queens and lived in Jamaica for a spell, before moving back to the city at age seven. The last time he had danced for an audience was in January, in "Allegro Brillante." "This is me showing joy that I'm getting to dance again," he told me.

If Grant had a dance partner, it was Brandon Taylor, the key grip, who had to push the camera along a dolly track in time with the dancing. He wore a T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up, revealing tattoos. "I've dollied about three thousand concerts," Taylor assured the cinematographer, Jody Lee Lipes. "Don't worry, buddy. I'm a light touch!" But it was tricky; the dancer and the camera had to appear as if in conversation. Peck, who sat behind the camera as it rolled across the track, gave Taylor a hand signal when Grant was about to go into a propulsive leap, so that Taylor could speed up—a mechanical pas de deux.

After five or six tries, they got the timing right. Between takes, Peck would tell Grant to flick his leg more in his rond de jambe, or to dial down moments so that the explosive ones would feel bigger. As they were about to do another take, a stout man in a cap wandered through the court, oblivious. The crew waited as he sauntered out of frame. Taylor laughed: "Not a fuck given."

In early October, the four other pieces were filmed at Lincoln Center. They were directed by Ezra Hurwitz, a dancer turned filmmaker, whose credits include Smirnoff ads and a Sufjan Stevens music video. Chatty and quick on his feet, Hurwitz knew his grand pliés and his battements and could translate them to Steadicam operators. On a Saturday, Victor Abreu, the lily in the swamp, stood in the reflecting pool in a mustard shirt. A crane pointed a camera toward his face, swooping and gliding in response to his movements. Hurwitz, pacing, asked what time it was. They had to finish before the sun disappeared behind the Met.

Standing nearby was Chris Van Alstyne, the technical director for the Koch

Theatre, who was acting as the *COVID* compliance officer. He had trained over Zoom, through an L.A.-based course designed for movie and TV shoots, and had a rolling cart stocked with hand sanitizer, masks, gloves, wipes, and face shields. When he saw people too close together, he would politely ask them to spread out, like a chaperon at a prom. Everyone wore a mask except for the dancers, who had all taken PCR tests. At one point, Hurwitz asked two dancers in Bell's piece to inch closer together, so that they could both fit in the frame, and someone had to remind him that this wasn't allowed.

The crane rose high above Abreu, capturing his spinning, splashing body from a bird's-eye view. "Cut!" Hurwitz yelled. Roberts, the choreographer, observed quietly, occasionally reminding Abreu to look up, not at his feet, while running through the water. They filmed until dinner, and Abreu was soaked up to his shoulders. "I do not envy you," Hurwitz told him. "But you're going to look beautiful, like Poseidon."

Earlier that day, Harrison Coll and Indiana Woodward had filmed the *pas de deux* in Andrea Miller's piece. "I'm so excited to be here and working," Coll said, packing up, "but it's sad to think that I don't know when the next time this is going to happen is."

The couple had given up their New York apartments, and the next day they were flying to California, to stay with Woodward's parents. "There was just no way we could pay our rent without a salary," Coll said. While furloughed from the company, they would collect unemployment, or maybe teach remote dance lessons. "I'm from the city, and I've never lived anywhere else, so it's weird for me," Coll said. "When the company has stable employment for us, we're going to be back in a flash." ♦

---

## More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign

exploit the pandemic to maximize profits.

- Meet the high-finance mogul in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to live and work in now?

# Poems

- [“Flatline”](#)
- [“Mt. Rushmore”](#)

[November 9, 2020 Issue](#)

# Flatline

By [Margaret Atwood](#)

November 2, 2020

*Audio: Read by the author.*

Things wear out. Also fingers.  
Gnarling sets in.  
Your hands crouch in their mittens.  
Forget chopsticks, and buttons.

Feet have their own agendas.  
They scorn your taste in shoes  
and ignore your trails, your maps.

Ears are superfluous:  
What are they for,  
those alien pink flaps?  
Skull fungus.

The body, once your accomplice,  
is now your trap.  
The sunrise makes you wince:  
too bright, too flamingo.

After a lifetime of tangling,  
of knotted snares and lacework,  
of purple headspace tornados  
with their heartrace and rubble,  
you crave the end of mazes

and pray for a white shore,  
an ocean with its horizon;  
not, so much, bliss  
but a flat line you steer for.

No more hiss and slosh,

no reefs, no deeps,  
no throat rattle of gravel.

It sounds like this:

[November 9, 2020 Issue](#)

# Mt. Rushmore

By [Clarence Major](#)

November 2, 2020

*Audio: Read by the author.*

We're about thirty miles outside Rapid City, South Dakota,  
at Keystone's Black Hills or call it Lakota Paha Sapa.  
We're here for Borglum's big faces.  
They're granite and long-standing under the sun.  
They're sun-baked and whipped by rain  
and loved by tourists.

George gazes into an endless distance.  
Tom's sight is set high, bravely staring down the light.  
Teddy's in sombre introspection  
and Abe's in a trance.

Is George daydreaming his youth at Popes Creek  
or age eleven getting his first slave,  
a man called Trumbull, or is George daydreaming  
the comforts of Mount Vernon  
or the future of America?

Is Tom remembering the importance of dissent  
or the frail nature of democracy  
(Benjamin's "if you can keep it")  
or the swish of Sally Hemings' dress hem  
or Easton's freedom  
or is he daydreaming Shadwell's countryside  
or the future of humanity?

Is Teddy riding roughly, galloping really,  
or thinking about his parks  
or a Square Deal for everybody  
or railroads or the future of nature?

Is Abe remembering that first telegraph  
or his boat and its title or wrestling days  
or the new Secret Service or is he thinking  
about the future of Africans in America  
and the future of America?

# **Pop Music**

- [The Disappearance and Cryptic Return of Salem](#)

# The Disappearance and Cryptic Return of Salem

The band, which perfectly evoked a certain strain of American scumbaggery, is not interested in anything as boring as redemption.

By [Carrie Battan](#)

November 2, 2020



When it comes to assessing contentious cultural moments, only time can provide the perspective needed to hone one's judgment. We revise and clarify our understanding of trends and phenomena in hindsight: scandals become milestones, controversies become delights, lowbrow artifacts become national treasures, "major" works feel expendable. In retrospect, disco was actually a complicated and musically significant genre; Kanye West's monologues were never the brilliant orations we took them to be.

But hindsight has offered little clarity in the case of Salem, a trio of petulant electronic musicians who rose to notoriety a decade ago, stirred up a sandstorm of intrigue and consternation, and promptly disappeared from sight. Formed by twentysomething burnouts from Michigan and Illinois, the band included two scraggly tattooed producers and vocalists, Jack Donoghue and John Holland, and the keyboardist and vocalist Heather Marlatt. (Marlatt is no longer working with the group.) Their music was a heavily distorted fog of blown-out samples, slurring vocals, and allusions to drug use and the occult. The sound was compelling, but often clouded by their shenanigans. Donoghue and Holland enjoyed cultivating a messy public image: Donoghue famously blew off an interview with the *Times*; when they did manage to engage with the press, the conversations could be outrageous and lurid. They gave such drowsy, lacklustre live performances that even their most passionate fans sometimes booed them off the stage. Salem's first EP, issued in a run of five hundred highly coveted white-vinyl pressings, in 2008, was called "Yes I Smoke Crack." This kind of behavior might simply have seemed like obnoxious spectacle if the music were not such a perfect evocation of a certain strain of American scumbaggery—a tone poem that captured the melancholy and the absurdity of a life lived at rock bottom. These musicians were in constant dialogue with the void and having fun with it.

The group brought new energy to a corner of the indie-music world that had gone slack. At the time, a genre of sensuous, lo-fi synth music called chillwave was gaining prominence. A subset of bands that included Salem began making music that sounded like a reaction against chillwave's perceived tepidness and its oppressive . . . well, chillness. This was the heyday of the music blogosphere, which was fixated on the invention of microgenres. Salem's cohort was designated as "witch house," for its spooky style. Witch house had in common with chillwave a tendency to put vibe before substance. But, whereas chillwave hushed listeners into tranquillity, witch house had an unsettling undercurrent that

jolted them awake in adrenalized terror. “Demons speak to me, so that’s who I’m leaving with,” Donoghue raps on “Sick,” a standout track on the album “King Night,” from 2010, his vocals pitched down to resemble a devil’s.

Whether you found Salem to be profound, or profoundly unlistenable, probably depended on what kind of mood you were in, and what you’d absorbed from the reams of vitriolic or fawning essays written about the group. Some critics believed that its members were musically unsophisticated hacks or blustering jerks, or that they flippantly drew inspiration from rap music without self-consciousness. If you revisit old writing about Salem, what’s most striking is the sheer volume and enthusiasm of the discourse. One critic described it as “the worst new band in America,” made up of people “too stupid to function as humans, let alone musicians.” Another characterized the *début* album as “sick . . . not just in the sense that it’s outstandingly good but in the fact that it seems extremely unwell.”

But, as young provocateurs peddling seedy, highly stylized mischief, the trio earned attention from a rarefied segment of the creative class. Michael Stipe and Terence Koh attended an early gig, and Givenchy used Salem’s music for a runway show, in 2011. Kanye West recruited Donoghue to work on his album “Yeezus.” The band remained obscure to most people, but it forecast a number of musical currents, including the eerie, spastic sounds of pop experimentalists, and hip-hop’s turn toward the drugged-out and emotional. Then, in 2011, Salem abruptly stopped making music, for reasons that are still obscure. (Its members are not the type to explain themselves.)

To no one’s surprise, Salem is not interested in anything so dull as a redemption narrative. The band makes this plain on “Fires in Heaven,” its first album in ten years, which came out at the end of October. “Ask me what I’m doing with my life / Ain’t got shit to tell,” a voice announces menacingly on “Capulets,” the bracing opening track. “I don’t have to apologize for shit, that’s another day.” It’s difficult to tell, exactly, who’s speaking, because Donoghue and Holland heavily modulate their voices and sometimes affect a Southern drawl, making them sound more like Houston rappers than like white indie kids from the Midwest. This sleight of hand, which has become quite common recently, allows them to avoid vulnerability, and to shape-shift into alternative identities, access to which they probably haven’t earned—another form of provocation that they’re unwilling to surrender after ten years.

Musically, “Capulets” is classic Salem. The group draws as much from Catholic liturgical music and Gregorian chant as from anything contemporary. (Its biggest song, “King Night,” from 2010, is a screeching interpolation of “O Holy Night.”) On “Capulets,” Donoghue and Holland riff over a lo-fi recording of Sergei Prokofiev’s “Dance of the Knights.” Salem tends to use its pieces as loud, blunt instruments to stir up sensation. This puts it in a lineage of mood-minded musicians that includes the shoegaze artists the Cocteau Twins, the sludgy post-hardcore band Slint, and the narcotic producer DJ Screw. The tracks on “Fires in Heaven” are less like songs than like bursts of melodrama. The record, despite occasionally feeling sloppy and slight, is potent—full of nightmarish energy, bravado, and mysticism.

In the final years of the band’s hiatus, Donoghue reëmerged on Instagram, posting cryptic snapshots. The images had an improvised feel, but, together, they revealed a peculiar, American-gothic sensibility: a dead deer on the side of the road; a sinister flock of crows perched on an electrical wire; a grizzly, bearded man in a tank top shaking a hailstorm of apples from a tree; a raucous religious gathering. Similarly, Salem’s music is a scrapbook of dispatches from the fringes of a nation under siege. This allows the band to evoke horrific events more vividly than if they were described head on. On a song called “Crisis,” a young woman frantically pleads for forgiveness. “It was a mistake,” she screeches. It becomes clear that the song is about a search for a missing person in opioid-addled America: “All up on the news because they say they can’t get you / Walmart parking lot, supposed to forget you.” Donoghue’s raps make it sound as if he may be implicated, and still at large. “I hate it, I hate / Never learning from lessons,” he says. “I hate it / But I should have died on that pavement.”

“Fires in Heaven” has arrived without the antics that attended the group a decade ago. A snippet of “Capulets” first appeared in May, in a mix broadcast on an independent London-based radio show. The song offered no clues about how the members of Salem have experienced the past decade. Their music remains oblique: a bit scary, frustratingly opaque, but absorbing nonetheless. For those who listen closely, there are a few detectable emotional shifts on the album. Occasionally, the sound becomes cleaner and bigger, more celestial than hellish: the lead single, “Starfall,” has the wide-eyed quality of a movie soundtrack. Here and there, Holland and Donoghue’s real voices pierce the thick fog, shifting the mood from nihilistic to yearning. On “Old Gods,” one of them begs, “Give me one more chance to set you free.” For a group possessed of such

deadened world-weariness, it's a startling offer of hope. ♦

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

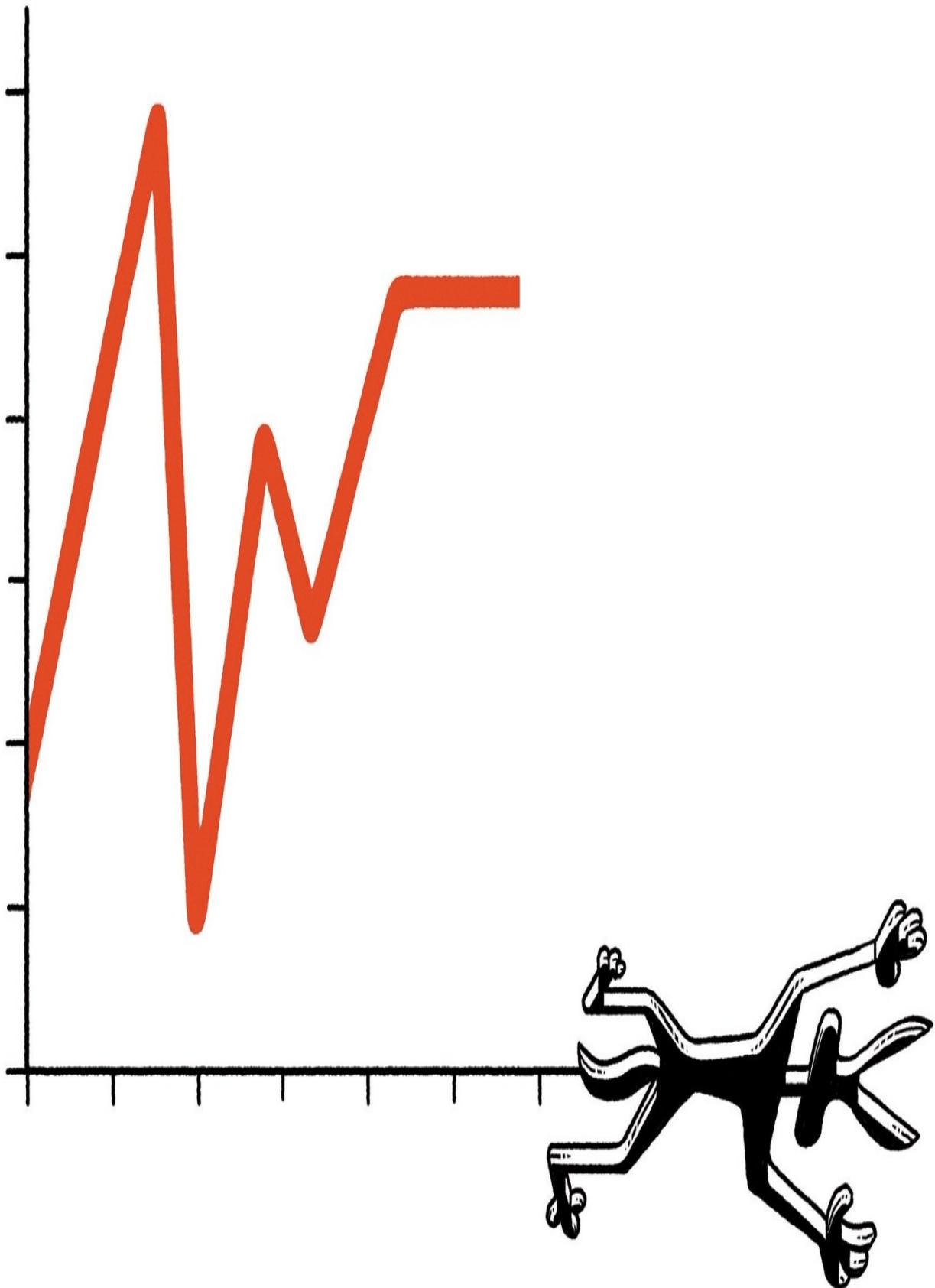
- [Wile E. Coyote, Republican Strategist](#)

[November 9, 2020 Issue](#)

# **Wile E. Coyote, Republican Strategist**

By [Nicky Guerreiro](#) and [Ethan Simon](#)

November 2, 2020



The California Republican Party has admitted responsibility for placing more than 50 deceptively labeled “official” drop boxes for mail-in ballots.

—*The Times*.

Gentlemen, allow me to introduce myself.

My name is Wile E. Coyote, and let me just say that it’s an honor to be meeting with the Committee to Reelect President Donald Trump, both as a lifelong Republican and as a connoisseur of high jinks. Your schemes to purge the voter rolls, gum up the Postal Service, and plant fake ballot boxes are some of the Looniest and Tooniest I’ve seen in American politics. But, if we want to win this election, we’re going to have to get a lot more creative.

Closing polling places in Democratic-leaning precincts was a good start, but have you considered painting a trompe-l’œil polling place onto the side of a cliff? When people show up, excited to vote, at eighty miles an hour, they will be flattened. And if—as is sometimes the case—a voter is somehow able to pass *through* the cliff face, you must not try to give chase. I’ve learned this the hard way.

Your online disinformation campaigns are laudable, but disinformation isn’t just for Facebook. What about a few well-placed signs along the side of the road? “*ELECTION CANCELLED*”? You just won Iowa. “*NEXT BALLOT BOX—300 MILES*”? Texas is ours. “*FREE BIRDSEED*”? Game over. Democrats love birdseed.

Take my home state, Arizona. Years of demographic change and an unpopular President have turned it into a battleground. But it doesn’t have to be. What if we put the polling place at the end of a shaky rope bridge? When the Roadrun—I mean, when the voter—goes to cast a ballot, we cut the ropes and send him plummeting to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. We can do this several million times. If you find yourself *also* standing on the bridge when you cut the ropes—well, I’ve been there, brother. That’s just the price of freedom.

Now, I know what you’re probably thinking: Is any of this legal? In a word, yes. Ever since the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act, there is effectively no legal limit on how zany, ill-conceived, or harebrained a voter-suppression

tactic can be. You can do almost anything to voters these days. Using an industrial-sized rubber band to launch them into the next county? That's protected speech. Punching them with a boxing glove affixed to the end of a giant spring? That's what the Framers envisioned. Dropping a grand piano on a voter's head? In the state of Florida, that's called "standing your ground."

I don't need to tell you all how important it is that we win. I am an unequivocal supporter of the right to bear arms. Also bombs, catapults, giant bows that shoot me in place of an arrow, and rockets you can ride on. A Biden Administration would surely pass common-sense gun reform and end all the fun. I am a staunch opponent of gun reform, and an even stancher opponent of common sense.

And don't get me started on the Supreme Court. Obviously, we're all thrilled that the passing of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg has opened up a seat for Amy Coney Barrett, a personal hero of mine. She hasn't responded to my dozens of letters, but I'm certain that she'll make reproductive rights disappear, even if she doesn't use the Acme invisible paint that I mailed her. But why stop there? Have you considered sawing a giant circle in the floor beneath Justice Sotomayor's chair? Maybe a 6–3 Court will finally rule on my pending case: *Wile E. Coyote v. the Law of Gravity*.

Take my advice, and we should be cruising to a comfortable win come November 3rd. One word of caution, however. If on Election Night things are looking good, by no means should you look straight into the camera while rubbing your hands together in evil glee. This always, and I mean always, backfires. And don't even think about tying on a bib and licking your chops. Put on a goddam tie. This party used to stand for something. ♦

# **Sketchbook**

- [\*\*Driver's Exam \(The Written Part\)\*\*](#)

November 9, 2020 Issue

# Driver's Exam (The Written Part)

By [Roz Chast](#)

November 2, 2020

## **Tables for Two**

- [The Pandemic-Proof Atmosphere of the Odeon Outside](#)

[November 9, 2020 Issue](#)

# The Pandemic-Proof Atmosphere of the Odeon Outside

With its makeshift patio, the restaurant has managed to preserve its signature sense of social hierarchy along with classic bistro dishes, Martinis, and opportunities for people-watching.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

October 30, 2020



The death knell has been rung, in recent months, for both jeans (luxury sweatpants have deposed them) and New York City (“The hot dog stands outside of Lincoln Center? Finished,” claimed a much tweeted August op-ed in the *New York Post*). And yet one afternoon not long ago, as I was having lunch outside at the iconic Tribeca restaurant the Odeon, a young woman walking by caught my eye. She wore a crop top, a furry jacket, and jeans, which I suspected were brand new, on account of a detail I had never seen before: not one but two waistbands, a sliver of bare midriff visible between them. She was managing, despite the surgical mask pulled down to her chin, to strut.



*The social hierarchy of the outdoor dining area—with the most desirable tables directly in front of the restaurant, and the least desirable around the corner, on a quieter side street—is as comforting as the squarely decent French-bistro-style food. Photograph by Eric Helgas for The New Yorker*

Before my lunch and a subsequent dinner at the Odeon, which turned forty in October, I had avoided eating anywhere with table service, even outdoors. If it were up to me, restaurants would be closed for anything other than takeout and delivery until the pandemic is contained significantly. Such a drastic measure would be contingent, of course, on sustained government aid, for both affected businesses and their employees. Instead, the government has failed the hospitality industry miserably. When I decided to go to the Odeon, it was as much out of curiosity as it was an impulse to offer support. How does an establishment whose appeal is primarily atmospheric adapt to the unsexiest of safety protocols?

Inside, the scene was less than enchanting. Before using the bathroom, I was asked to step up to a thermometer to have my forehead scanned. Most of the tables had been removed from the normally crowded, often celebrity-filled dining room, leaving behind the wistful air of a beloved apartment on moving day. Outside, signs reminded diners to wear masks when engaging with servers (who never take theirs off). Tables were separated by sheets of plexiglass and protected from traffic by wooden barriers topped with Astroturf.



*Clockwise from left: the Odeon's beloved French fries, with spicy mayo; steak frites; frisée salad with lardons, croutons, and a poached egg.* Photograph by Eric Helgas for The New Yorker

And yet I was heartened and amused: because the Odeon is on a corner, the restaurant has tables not only in front of its façade, on bustling West Broadway, but also around the side, on a sleepy stretch of Thomas Street. This means that even the makeshift patio has its own Siberia, as a dining room's least desirable section is known. One particularly unlucky couple sat within swinging distance of the door to the kitchen, through which produce is loaded and line cooks emerge for cigarette breaks.

The abiding social hierarchy was as comforting as my dirty Martini, extra olives, and the squarely decent food. The menu consists mostly of French-bistro classics —a snarl of frisée spangled with lardons, croutons, and blue cheese; a peppery strip steak—with a smattering of curious but now familiar outliers, including Buffalo-chicken dumplings and a “purple sticky rice bowl” topped with kale and avocado. I was tempted by the soothing blandness of a recent addition to the entrées, though it seemed meant for a child: “orecchiette, plain, with butter or olive oil.”



*Safety measures include a request that guests wear masks when engaging with servers and required temperature checks for anyone who enters the premises. Photograph by Eric Helgas for The New Yorker*

In prime seating territory, a duo of stylish middle-aged women wore nearly identical Breton-style striped shirts. A younger twosome asked for a pair of the restaurant's signature baseball caps with their check. A leashed dog lifted its enormous, boxy head as its owner was presented with an aromatic hamburger and a bouquet of golden French fries, wrapped in crisp butcher paper in a metal cup. (When the fries temporarily disappeared from the menu, in late summer, the Web site Artnet News described "a salty spud stick drought that has sent Tribeca's artists, writers, and dealers into a full-on tailspin, the world they once inhabited ripped to shreds.") A group of thirtysomethings celebrating a birthday plucked a bunch of eerily fresh-looking calla lilies out of a public trash can. The attached note, on customized stationery, read: "Dear NUGGLETON, I've missed you sooo much! That nis [sic] why I gotteded [sic] you these flowers. PLEASE TELL ME ALL ABOUT YOUR TRIP. Love, Trip." New York lives. (Dishes \$12-\$38.) ♦

# The Current Cinema

- [Matriarchs of Steel in “Let Him Go”](#)

[November 9, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Matriarchs of Steel in “Let Him Go”**

Formidable mothers face off, in a brutal Western about two families struggling to keep pace with the machinations of fate.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

November 2, 2020



A trick is played on us, near the start of “Let Him Go.” We are in Montana, in 1961, and a young man, James Blackledge (Ryan Bruce), has just died, after being thrown from his horse. He leaves a widow, Lorna (Kayli Carter), and a baby son. Now we see James’s parents, Margaret (Diane Lane) and George (Kevin Costner), preparing for a solemn occasion. George, gruff and grizzled, used to be a sheriff, but he stands there like a schoolboy while Margaret ties his dark tie for him. (One of many signs that this will be a mothering movie.) We presume that they are bound for James’s funeral, but no: some three years have passed, and Lorna is getting married again, this time to a fellow named Donnie Weboy (Will Brittain). The wedding feels like a wake.

“Let Him Go,” which springs from Larry Watson’s [novel](#) of the same name, was written and directed by Thomas Bezucha. He likes to toy with our expectations, as the wedding scene proves, yet the toying has nothing blithe or puckish about it; rather, we sense the characters struggling to keep pace with the machinations of fate. (Note to any producer requiring a [Thomas Hardy](#) adaptation: call Bezucha.) One day, Margaret sees Donnie slapping Lorna and cuffing the little boy—Jimmy, the Blackledges’ only grandchild. Soon afterward, without saying farewell, Donnie takes his wife and stepson and heads to North Dakota, to be with *his* family. Margaret, fearing for Jimmy’s welfare, doesn’t hesitate. She sets off in pursuit, packing her Chevrolet station wagon with essentials: a skillet, a loaded pistol, her husband, and an iced Bundt cake in a tin.

The film is low of mood and cleanly told. The dialogue, at times, is whittled to the core. “You thought you’d need it?,” George says of the gun. “I didn’t want to find out I did and not have it,” Margaret replies. The only trouble is that, in “[Man of Steel](#)” (2013), and again in “*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*” (2016), Costner and Lane played Jonathan and Martha Kent, the terrestrial parents of Clark. They were by far the best thing in those movies, grounding the more risible flights of fancy, and now, as “Let Him Go” unfolds, you can’t help wondering: Where’s the guy in the blue pantyhose? Who let *him* go? I kept waiting for Costner to store that pesky Kryptonite in the barn, behind the weed killer, or for Lane to iron the pleats in a nice red cape.

This is Diane Lane’s movie, all the way. She is as poised as ever, and she can switch on the charm, but she radiates a force of purpose that will not be muffled or repelled, and it’s fascinating to see Costner, so accustomed to saddling up as a leading man, dismount and back away. “We’re not young, Margaret,” George

says, aware of what his wife has in mind, and trying some friendly dissuasion. “We’re not old,” she answers, and, at her prompting, they track Donnie, Lorna, and Jimmy to a secluded ranch. This is the homestead of the Weboy clan, presided over by Blanche Weboy (Lesley Manville) and her gang of devoted—and frankly terrified—sons. So now the film has two mothers of steel, squaring up to each other, and two formidable actresses, of radically different styles, face to face. Batman v. Superman? Stop squabbling, kids. Stand back. This is women’s work.

When we first meet Blanche, she is hidden by a hanging lamp, but we see a puff of smoke from her cigarette, and we hear the drawl of her greeting: “I hope you like pork chops.” If you were alarmed by Manville as the hero’s sister in “[Phantom Thread](#)” (2017), watch her dig her scarlet nails into this role, way out West. So muted is the rest of “Let Him Go” that Blanche seems to hail from another film entirely—to be exact, from Sam Fuller’s “Forty Guns” (1957), in which Barbara Stanwyck, likewise, was a matriarch before whom strong men quailed. She and Blanche both have tight blond curls, though Blanche goes one better, as she and her boys pay a nocturnal visit to the Blackledges, in a motel. Blanche has an axe in a sack, but she also wears a head scarf, as if she were out shopping for groceries. Still to come: a showdown of blood and fire, and the one point, I’d argue, at which “Let Him Go” takes a seriously false step. It is George who girds himself for the final reckoning, but it ought to be Margaret. Her grief has driven this fable. She should be the one to end it.

Can a movie, no less than a person, suffer in lockdown? Happening to catch “Spider-Man: Far from Home” (2019), on TV, I was struck by how lost it seemed, like a child in a crowd. Such a product was hardly designed to make sense, but on the big screen, at least, it roughly cohered, glued together by sheer spectacle. Squeeze it into your living room, peel away the zap and the pow, and what remains? A pitiful excuse for a drama, I’d say, with Peter Parker touring the old world—Venice, Prague, Berlin—in a last well-meaning gasp of American imperialism. In cinemas, the film took more than a billion dollars. At home, it took two hours out of my day, and I’ll never get them back.

The [Marvel franchise](#), bereft of its proper arena, is like a travelling circus without a tent. Short of knocking on people’s doors and asking them to babysit the tigers for an afternoon, what can be done? And who will pay the clowns? Meanwhile, at the quieter end of moviegoing, where the numbers are less elephantine, the question of a sustainable business model is equally urgent.

Exhibit A: [Béla Tarr](#)'s "Damnation," which dates from 1988, and which is now—restored and revived, in a fresh print—enjoying a wide release. A virtual one, that is. You can't, alas, take your seat at Lincoln Center, the Roxie Theatre in San Francisco, or the Film and Television Archive at U.C.L.A., but you can log in to their respective Web sites and, for a limited period, see the movie at an hour of your choosing. I recommend half past one in the morning, with a bottle of Hungarian moonshine close to hand.

"Damnation" is a quickie. It lasts a couple of hours—a mere sprint for anyone who ran the marathon of Tarr's "Sátántangó" (1994), which goes on for seven hours and nineteen minutes. It was in "Damnation," however, that the director first displayed a complete command of Tarrying: the long slow take, defined, as often as not, by a stately procession of the camera—right to left, left to right, and haring along like a tortoise. Others have mastered a similar grace; what distinguishes Tarr is his patience. He tends to offer us a prolonged look at a place before anything happens there, and then, once the action is over, he will loiter and gaze, in tranquil suspense, in case anything else turns up. It rarely does.

And what of *our* patience? In movie theatres, this is not a problem. I sat through "Damnation" years ago, and sneaked not a single glance at my watch. The film is in black-and-white, and in every intervening shade of gray—fog, mud, raincoat, rain, bare skin. The sounds are no less sharply etched; when a man named Karrer (Miklós B. Székely) has a shave, we flinch at the razor's rasp. The effect is one of hypnosis, as we slide into Tarr's sepulchral thrall. He beats time, and we follow. Such obedience, I would argue, is impossible in a domestic environment. Even if we kill the lights, there is always the risk of the doorbell, the temptation to pause, and the sideways drift of our thoughts. No hypnotist can practice his art under such conditions. When Karrer enters a bar called the Titanik, on a foul night, and finds a singer (Vali Kerekes) crooning, "It's finished, it's all over," I no longer surrendered, as I had done in the cinema, to such fatalistic gloom. Into my head, instead, came another low dive, in "The Naked Gun 2½: The Smell of Fear" (1991), where the crooner begins, "I'm feeling blue," and the camera surveys, on a wall behind the wretched customers, a row of calamities: the San Francisco earthquake, the Hindenburg, the Lusitania, and Michael Dukakis.

Yet all is not lost. Though much of the magic drains out of "Damnation" on the smaller screen, an unexpected bonus is revealed. Tarr is seldom prized as a storyteller, yet I noticed, for the first time, how neatly his plot is woven into the

texture of the tale. Karrer has an affair with the singer, and arranges for her husband to go out of town, on a smuggling mission. In one typically elegant composition, lifted straight from [Antonioni](#)'s "L'Eclisse" (1962), we spy Karrer on one side of a stone column, and a woman on the other side. What I'd forgotten—or maybe failed to realize in the cinema, so overwhelming are the demands that the movie makes on our senses—is that Karrer is outside a police station, and that he will later go back there to inform on the smuggler. "Damnation" hails from the putrescent end of Hungarian Communism, and Karrer is exuded by that system. I used to think he was a lover, a boozier, a moper, and a sorry sight. Now, viewed in the age of streaming, he's a rat. ♦

# The Theatre

- Reënacting the Trial of a Black Woman Convicted of Voter Fraud

# **Reënacting the Trial of a Black Woman Convicted of Voter Fraud**

“Why Would I Dare: The Trial of Crystal Mason,” a show about a woman accused of voter fraud, echoes Langston Hughes’s “The Ballot and Me.”

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

November 2, 2020

THE BALLOT AND ME

The Negro's Part in Suffrage

An

Historical Sequence

by

Langston Hughes

Negro Americans---you, we---are very much a part of this democracy. We're 15 million---and our vote counts. From the national to the local level, your vote counts. It counts in more and better jobs---in diplomatic posts abroad to local political patronage. It counts in education, in housing, in civil rights, in cleaner streets, in better garbage collection. The vote has value. Don't neglect your right to vote. Don't waste it. Don't forget it.

Maybe all of us would value the right of suffrage more if we stopped to look back a moment at what the struggle for the vote has cost. Back in the Middle Ages few people had control over their own lives, let alone over the land or the country. Kings and barons and chiefs and over-lords ran everything and everybody. Then came the Magna Carta in 1215 in England, and almost 400



Just about four years ago, on Election Day, 2016, a woman named Crystal Mason went to her local polling place, in Rendon, Texas, to vote. She couldn't find her name on the rolls, and so, with the help of a volunteer poll worker, she filled out a provisional ballot. That's a sequence too common for drama; many of us will experience it this election. But Mason had recently returned home after more than two years in prison, having been convicted of tax fraud, a nonviolent felony. She didn't believe that she was ineligible to vote. A few months later, she was arrested, and faced the prospect of five more years in prison, for fraudulent voting.

"Why Would I Dare: The Trial of Crystal Mason," a reading directed by Tyler Thomas, presented by the Commissary, Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre, and New Neighborhood, is a straightforward virtual reënactment of the trial to convict Mason. The show is sparsely designed. Mason's lawyer (Shane McRae) and the prosecutor (Peter Mark Kendall) wear bland, workaday suits as they ask their questions over Zoom. Crystal Dickinson, who plays Mason, sits answering in a comfortable-looking living room, with a child behind her, dawdling on the couch—a subtle but powerful reminder of the trial's high stakes.

Mason's story is rife—like much else that parades under the parasol of democracy—with absurd and sordid inversions: here's a woman clambering back up the ladder of respectability, a menace to no one, whose apparent fault is not knowing when *not* to participate in her society's betterment. Entire waves of history, decade after decade of struggle, ardently aimed at the high dignity yet humble mechanism of the vote, fail to figure in her favor: she ended up on the wrong side of the law, lost years of life with her family, and now her so-called freedom is a grim hall of mirrors. Right is wrong. Ordinary duty is death. The trial, especially once the prosecutor takes over the questioning, boffo in his belligerence, is a series of humiliations. A couple of Mason's neighbors testified against her, claiming to have seen her scrutinize the provisional ballot's fine print—along with its warning to felons—before defiantly trying to vote. "It's safe to say that you can definitely read and write?" the prosecutor asks, feigning sweetness.

Dickinson plays Mason's bureaucratic panic well. She often speaks too quickly or too vaguely when trying to recall her actions at the polling place. The lawyers and the falsely kind judge (a convincing Peter Gerety) try to slow her down; after all, the court reporter can't transcribe what she can't hear clearly. What

these well-off functionaries don't quite understand is that Mason knows that choreographed procedures like this one—trials, hearings, arraignments, applications, check-ins, inspections, appointments—are potentially fatal. Nobody seems sufficiently stricken by how stupid this all is.

The professionals bend the court's strictures, so harsh on Mason, under the soft pressures of genteel manners. For them, court is a kind of play: let's just find those pesky instructions and take a look at the rules. The normal business of objections, sustainments, and approaches to the bench here seems like an upper-class dance, sinisterly comic and unlearnable by the likes of Mason, who grows increasingly befuddled. "Why would I dare?" is her plaintive refrain. Why would she risk more time away from her family—she's already missed so much of her children's childhood—just to cast a Presidential vote, in Texas, of all places?

Mason, who is eventually convicted, stands in for anyone for whom the organs of society have presented themselves as a succession of formidable obstacles. Here, on display, in courts and prisons, is the unpretty gunk of liberal democracy.

Watching "Why Would I Dare" reminded me of Langston Hughes, our playwright of Black cultural celebration and slow civic advancement. One of the many ironies of his hugely variegated body of work is the difference in attitude and affect between his poems and his plays. In every grade of elementary school, I was asked to memorize some part of Hughes's disappointed anthem from 1936, "Let America Be America Again":

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Crystal Mason—who is still facing the time earned by her attempt to vote and works as a voting-rights advocate—could plausibly sing my favorite stanza:

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?  
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?

The millions shot down when we strike?  
The millions who have nothing for our pay?  
For all the dreams we've dreamed  
And all the songs we've sung  
And all the hopes we've held  
And all the flags we've hung,  
The millions who have nothing for our pay—  
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

Hughes's mastery of American sentimentalizing rhetoric and his irony regarding the country's actual workings sit in stark equipoise. "The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies," so flagrantly on display today, served as a great, gray background against which Hughes could scrawl in bright contrasting color his chiding reminders of the country's ideals. In his plays, though, Hughes often dangled before his audience the opportunity to hum along more earnestly to America's major-key tune. He specialized in "gospel plays," boisterous, schmaltzy pageants like "Black Nativity," a Blacked-up retelling of the birth of Christ, and "Tambourines to Glory," the story of women preachers that landed on Broadway in 1963.

Those musical plays were belated announcements of Black music's arrival on the mainstream stage. In a lesser-known pageant-play, "The Ballot and Me: The Negro's Part in Suffrage," Hughes tells a parallel story: the long trudge toward true voting access for Black Americans. The play, completed in 1956, in time for the Presidential contest between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson, is a series of monologues and speeches, given by actors portraying protagonists in the acquisition of the vote, among them Reconstruction-era Black congressional representatives, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass. They deliver snippets of real speeches as well as imagined banter, strung together by a narrator, directly to the audience. "Negro Americans—you, me—are a part of this democracy," the narrator says, "and our vote counts. From the national to the local level, *your* vote counts."

"I see no chance of bettering the condition of the freedman until he shall cease to be merely a freedman and shall become a citizen," Frederick Douglass thunders. Sojourner Truth sardonically reminds the men that the path to suffrage for Black women was rockier still: "I believed everybody should vote, black and white, men and women! And I said so." The effect of the speeches, knit together, is to raise activist pleadings to the level of art; the voices cohere into a frank and only

slightly cheesy unity. At the end comes a chant: “Vote! Vote! Vote!”

It’s often said that theatre, given its association with Athens, first bloomed under democracy. My own initial impressions of democracy were a kind of spectacle, directed by my mother. She would sweep open the curtains that hid New York’s old voting machines and let me in on the secret of her ballot. I’d pull the little levers next to the names of the candidates she pointed out, and together we’d pull the big, loud lever, cranking out her citizen’s voice. This was one of the most important things you could do, she would say. Someone—many someones—had won that right for me.

I wonder what kind of exhortation Hughes would make of a story like Crystal Mason’s. He might have turned to verse again, and observed the stubborn recurrence of trouble—and the necessity, again, for struggle:

From those who live like leeches on the people’s lives,  
We must take back our land again,  
America! ♦

# Table of Contents

[New Yorker Magazine](#)

[A Reporter at Large](#)

[Why Trump Can't Afford to Lose](#)

[Annals of National Security](#)

[How a C.I.A. Coverup Targeted a Whistle-blower](#)

[Art](#)

[Pay Phones Turned Into Public Art, in “Titan”](#)

[Books](#)

[Does Knowing God Just Take Practice?](#)

[Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)

[Searching for Refuge After the Second World War](#)

[Comment](#)

[The Trouble with Election Projections](#)

[Coronavirus Chronicles](#)

[How the Coronavirus Hacks the Immune System](#)

[Dept. of Polls](#)

[In a Wisconsin Cookie Poll, Trump Wins by a Landslide](#)

[Fiction](#)

[“Ghoul”](#)

[Florida Postcard](#)

[A Florida Demographic That Could Swing the Election](#)

[Fresh Starts](#)

[Shep Smith's Fresh Start](#)

[If U Cn Rd Ths](#)

[A Speed-Reading App Condenses the Jeffrey Epstein Saga](#)

[Onward and Upward with the Arts](#)

[How New York City Ballet Took On the Pandemic](#)

[Poems](#)

[“Flatline”](#)

[“Mt. Rushmore”](#)

[Pop Music](#)

[The Disappearance and Cryptic Return of Salem](#)

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

[Wile E. Coyote, Republican Strategist](#)

[Sketchbook](#)

[Driver's Exam \(The Written Part\)](#)

[Tables for Two](#)

[The Pandemic-Proof Atmosphere of the Odeon Outside](#)

[The Current Cinema](#)

[Matriarchs of Steel in “Let Him Go”](#)

[The Theatre](#)

[Reënacting the Trial of a Black Woman Convicted of Voter Fraud](#)