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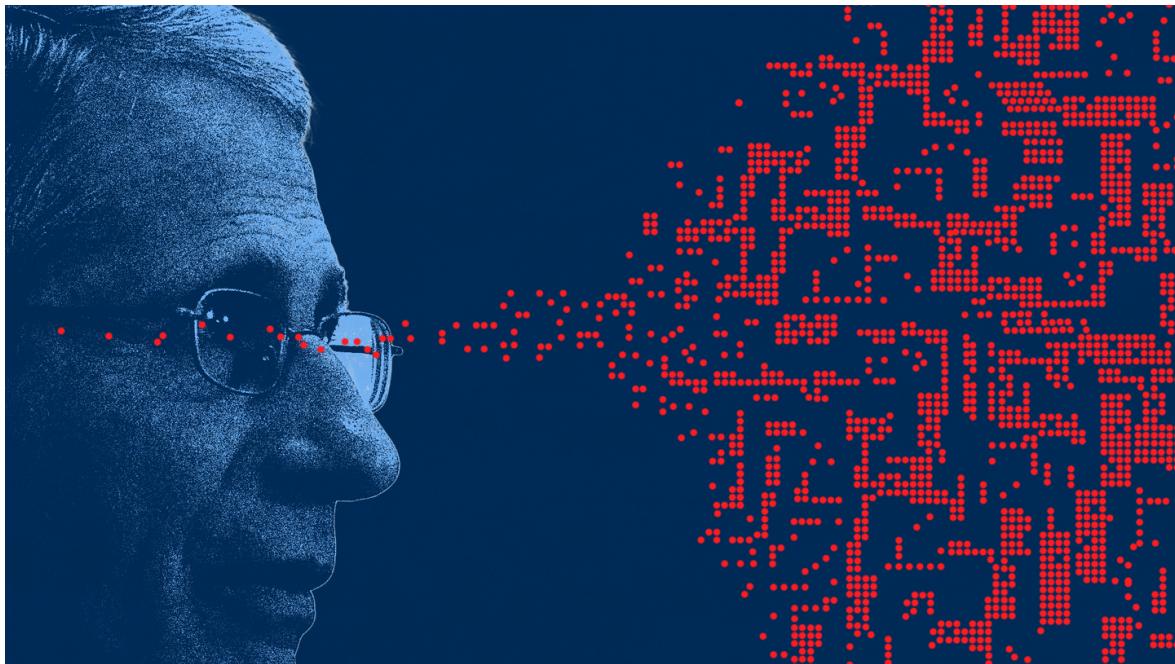
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The First Three Months

What I saw inside the government's response to COVID-19

by Anthony Fauci



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On New Year's Day 2020, I was zipping up my fleece to head outside when the phone in the kitchen rang. I picked it up to find a reporter on the line. "Dr. Fauci," he said, "there's something strange going on in Central China. I'm hearing that a bunch of people have some kind of pneumonia. I'm wondering, have you heard anything?" I thought he was probably referring to influenza, or maybe a return of SARS, which in 2002 and 2003 had

infected about 8,000 people and killed more than 750. SARS had been bad, particularly in Hong Kong, but it could have been much, much worse.

A reporter calling me at home on a holiday about a possible disease outbreak was concerning, but not that unusual. The press sometimes had better, or at least faster, ground-level sources than I did as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and reporters were often the first to pick up on a new disease or situation. I told the reporter that I hadn't heard anything, but that we would monitor the situation.

Monitoring, however, was not easy. For one thing, we had a hard time finding out what was really going on in China because doctors and scientists there appeared to be afraid to speak openly, for fear of retribution by the Chinese government.

In the first few days of 2020, the word coming out of Wuhan—a city of more than 11 million—suggested that the virus did not spread easily from human to human. Bob Redfield, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was already in contact with George Gao, his counterpart in China. During an early-January phone call, Bob reported that Gao had assured him that the situation was under control. A subsequent phone call was very different. Gao was clearly upset, Bob said, and told him that it was bad—much, much worse than people imagined.

“We don’t know what’s going on with this virus coming out of China right now,” I told the group assembled in a conference room at the National Institutes of Health. This was January 3, just 48 hours after the reporter had called me at home. The scientists sitting around the table, led by Vaccine Research Center Director John Mascola, knew what I was going to say next: “We are going to need a vaccine for whatever this new virus turns out to be.”

Among those present was Barney Graham, a gentle giant of a man at 6 feet 5 inches tall, and one of the world’s foremost vaccinologists. For years, Barney had been leading a group of scientists trying to develop the optimal immunogens for vaccines injected into the body. (An immunogen refers to the crucial part of any vaccine that generates the immune response.) They had been working with Moderna on a vaccine platform called mRNA, the result of groundbreaking research conducted over many years by Katalin

Karikó and Drew Weissman, who [would win the Nobel Prize in 2023](#). “Get me the viral genomic sequence,” Barney said, “and we’ll get working on a vaccine in days.”

At this point, an FDA-approved vaccine had never before been made using mRNA technology, and although a lot of skepticism remained, my colleagues and I were very optimistic about it. Compared with other vaccines, the mRNA process is faster and more precise. The team needed the coronavirus’s genomic sequence so that it could pick out the part that codes for the spike protein (the immunogen) and, together with Moderna, use it to make the correct mRNA.

[From the January/February 2021 issue: How science beat the virus](#)

Only a week later, on January 10, I received an excited phone call from Barney: Scientists had just uploaded the SARS-CoV-2 sequence to a public database. Barney then immediately contacted a company that produces artificial strings of genetic code. He placed an order for the nucleotide sequence, and this lifesaving product was delivered in a small test tube packaged in a FedEx envelope. The modest charge was put on a credit card.

But soon after, Barney made a sobering point: A full-blown vaccine effort, including clinical trials, was going to cost a lot of money, far beyond what was in the Vaccine Research Center’s budget. I told him not to worry. “If this thing really explodes, I promise you, I will get us more money. You just go and make your vaccine.”

About an hour into a meeting in the White House Situation Room on January 29, concerning how to evacuate U.S. citizens from Wuhan, President Donald Trump walked in. The first thing he did, to my great surprise, was look right at me.



Anthony Fauci briefs President Donald Trump in the White House Situation Room,
January 29. (Joyce N. Boghosian / White House)

“Anthony,” he said, “you are really a famous guy. My good friend Lou Dobbs told me that you are one of the smartest, knowledgeable, and outstanding persons he knows.” I gulped. Thus began my first extended conversation with the 45th president of the United States. A big, imposing man, Trump had a New York swagger that I instantly recognized—a self-confident, backslapping charisma that reminded me of my own days in New York. For the next 20 minutes, as we discussed the new virus, the president directed many of his questions my way. I had met Trump only once before. In September 2019, I had been part of a group invited to the Oval Office for the signing of [an executive order to manufacture and distribute flu vaccines](#). Prior to that, I had sometimes wondered what it would be like to interact with him. He had shocked me on day one of his presidency with his disregard of facts, such as the size of the crowd at his inauguration. His apocalyptic inaugural address also had taken me aback, as had his aggressive disrespect for the press. But at that brief signing ceremony, I had found him

far more personable than I'd expected. Of course, I had no idea in January 2020 what the months and years ahead would be like.

I had [confronted other terrible outbreaks over the course of my career](#)—HIV in the 1980s, SARS in 2002 and 2003, Ebola in 2014, Zika in 2015—but none of them prepared me for the environment I would find myself in during the coronavirus pandemic. The nation was and is extremely polarized, with a large portion of Americans reflexively distrustful of expertise. On social media, anyone can pretend to be an expert, and malicious information is easily amplified. Soon I would come to learn just how dangerous these conditions can be.

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A code red went off in my mind during the week of January 23, when I saw [photos in a newspaper showing that the Chinese government was quickly erecting a 1,000-bed prefabricated hospital](#). At that point, the virus had reportedly killed just 25 people and infected about 800, according to data the Chinese had released. *Time out*, I thought. *Why would you need that many hospital beds when fewer than 1,000 people are infected?* That was the moment I suspected we could be facing an unprecedented challenge, and my anxiety took a sharp turn upward.



Hundreds of construction workers erect a prefabricated hospital in Wuhan, January 28, 2020. (Getty)

By the very end of January, we were hearing that the cases in China were increasing by about 25 percent a day. Reportedly, more than 9,000 people were infected, and 213 people were dead. The number of infections in a single month had surpassed the 2002–03 SARS outbreak. The United States had discovered its first known case of this novel coronavirus on January 20; a 35-year-old man had returned home to Washington State from Wuhan with a severe cough and a fever. The CDC had already begun screening passengers at several U.S. airports, taking their temperature and asking them about symptoms such as a sore throat and a cough. We began to wonder: Should we recommend closing the United States to travelers from China? On January 31, seated in front of the Resolute desk, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar, the CDC's Bob Redfield, and I explained the details of a proposed travel ban to the president. He posed several questions specifically to me about whether I was fully on board with the ban. "It is an imperfect process with some downsides, Mr. President, but I believe it's the best choice we have right now," I told him. Later that day, the Trump administration announced that travel restrictions would go into effect.

The White House communications team began arranging for me to appear on news shows. The entire world was transfixed by this rapidly evolving outbreak, and I became the public face of the country's battle with the disease. This was useful, in that I could both try to calm the country's anxieties and provide factual information. But it also led to the gross misperception, which grew exponentially over time, that I was in charge of most or even all of the federal government's response to the coronavirus. This would eventually make me the target of many people's frustration and anger.

On February 11, the World Health Organization officially designated the disease caused by the novel coronavirus as COVID-19, which was now spreading relentlessly around the world. And in the midst of this, the CDC, the country's premier public-health agency, was stumbling badly.

[From the September 2020 issue: How the pandemic defeated America](#)

The agency traditionally had a go-it-alone attitude, excluding input from outside sources. Its personnel were talented and deeply committed professionals. I respected them, and many were friends. But the CDC's approach, which is based on tracking symptoms, was poorly suited to dealing with a swiftly spreading disease in which, it would later turn out, more than a substantial portion of the transmissions come from people who are asymptomatic. The CDC was slow to recognize and act on that.

Another vulnerability was the way the CDC was set up to collect data. Rather than obtaining data firsthand, the agency depended on public-health departments around the country—but those departments did not consistently provide complete, up-to-date data. Some provided information reflecting what had occurred weeks earlier, not the day before. As the disease kept spreading, what was actually happening was always far worse than what the CDC's data were telling us at the time. Public-health officials had to constantly play catch-up.

The CDC had an outstanding track record for quickly creating tests for diseases like Zika. With COVID, however, instead of immediately partnering with the diagnostic industry, it started from scratch with a test that turned out to be defective. The agency then failed to fix the defect, and

wasted even more time in developing adequate testing. February was [a lost month](#) as a result.

Although the CDC struggled, there was no mistaking the message delivered on February 25 by its director of immunization and respiratory diseases, Nancy Messonnier. She told reporters that a pandemic in the United States was no longer a matter of if but when, and that we should prepare to close schools and work remotely. “Disruption to everyday life may be severe,” she announced. Nancy did the right thing: She told Americans the truth. But not surprisingly, her statement caused a firestorm. The media erupted, and the stock market [plummeted nearly 1,000 points](#). Trump was furious.

The next day, he announced that Vice President Mike Pence would take over for Alex Azar as the head of the White House coronavirus task force. I met Pence the day he ran his first task-force meeting. He was soft-spoken and always solicited the medical opinions of the physicians on the task force. He listened carefully to our answers, often asking astute follow-up questions and never pretending to understand something if he did not. But I also picked up on little things that indicated how differently this administration operated from previous ones. Vice presidents are always publicly loyal to the president; that is part of the job. But Pence sometimes overdid it. During task-force meetings, he often said some version of “There are a lot of smart people around here, but we all know that the smartest person in the building is upstairs.”



Vice President Mike Pence addresses reporters in the White House briefing room, March 3. (*The Washington Post* / Getty)

Others joined Pence in heaping praise on Trump. When the task force held teleconferences with governors, most of the Republicans started by saying, “Tell the president what a great job he is doing.” But a couple of days after Nancy’s bombshell announcement, when I got a surprise phone call from Trump at 10:35 p.m., I did not flatter him. What I did do during our 20-minute conversation was lay out the facts. I encouraged him not to underplay the seriousness of the situation. “That almost always comes back to bite you, Mr. President,” I said. “If you are totally honest about what is happening with COVID, the country will respect you for it.” He was courteous to me, and as we hung up, I felt satisfied that he had heard what I’d said.

I was worried about community spread, and I was particularly focused on Seattle. A longtime colleague called me from the city on March 3 and told me that 380 people with flu-like symptoms had been screened in four emergency rooms. Four had tested positive for COVID, a roughly 1 percent infection rate—that may not sound like much, but it was a clear signal that

the virus was spreading among those unaware that they had been exposed. That meant the 1 percent was only a tiny fraction of what was actually already happening. When I brought this information to the task-force meeting, neither Pence nor Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin seemed to fully appreciate the seriousness of what I was telling them. While I was warning them of the impending disaster, the president was declaring outright to the press that the situation was under control. Without deliberately contradicting him, I kept repeating that things would get worse, and indeed they did.

During task-force meetings, Pence often said some version of “There are a lot of smart people around here, but we all know that the smartest person in the building is upstairs.”

Then, in one Oval Office meeting, I mentioned to Trump that we were in the early stages of developing a COVID vaccine. This got his attention, and he quickly arranged a trip to the NIH. During his visit, Barney Graham told the president that within a couple of weeks, a Phase 1 trial would likely begin. The president asked, “Why can’t we just use the flu vaccine for this virus?” It was not the first or the last time that he seemed to conflate COVID with influenza.

People associate science with immutable absolutes, when in fact science is a process that continually uncovers new information. As new information is uncovered, the process of science allows for self-correction. The biological and health sciences are different from the physical sciences and mathematics. With mathematics, two plus two equals four today, and two plus two will equal four 1,000 years from now. Not so with the biological sciences, where what we know evolves and uncertainty is common.

On March 8, I [appeared on a *60 Minutes* broadcast](#) in a segment about COVID. At one point, I told the interviewer, “Right now in the United States, people should not be walking around with masks.” I was expressing not just a personal opinion, but the consensus at the time—a view shared by the surgeon general and the CDC.

The supply of masks was already low. One fear was that there would be a stampede, and we would create an even greater shortage of masks needed by

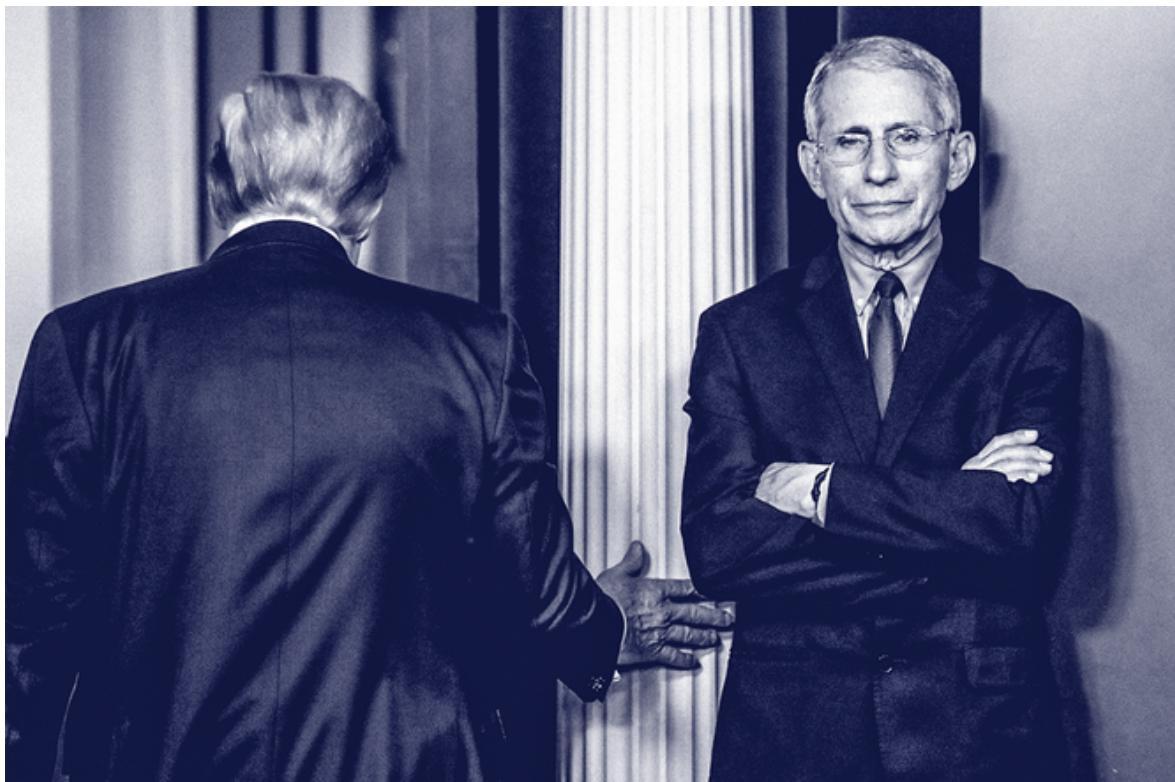
the health-care workers taking care of very ill COVID patients. Although there was accumulating evidence that the virus was spread by aerosol, this was not widely accepted, certainly not by the WHO. When additional information became available—including that the virus was readily spread by infected people who had no symptoms—we advised the public to wear masks. But this was how I became the public-health official who, very early in the pandemic, instructed people not to wear a mask. Later, my words would be twisted by extreme elements in an attempt to show that I and other scientists had misled the public, that we could not be trusted, and that we were flip-floppers.

What I came to realize is that our country is more profoundly divided than I'd ever understood. I remember a time when people expected diverse political opinions. You didn't have to agree, but you respected one another enough to listen. Now the partisanship is so intense that people refuse to even try. They ignore facts in favor of tribal politics. That's how you wind up with dangerous conspiracy theories. The controversy over masks illustrates a fundamental misperception of how science works. In reality, our understanding of COVID continually evolved, and our medical advice had to change to reflect this.

March 2020 was when COVID became frighteningly real to Americans. This was also around the time I started waking up with a jolt at 4 a.m. to stare at the ceiling with worry. I believe Trump thought that COVID would be temporary: *A little time goes by, the outbreak is over, everyone goes back to work, and the election cycle can begin.* He could not have imagined that the pandemic would go on for such a long time. I think this explains why he repeatedly asked me and others whether COVID resembled the flu. He desperately wanted the pandemic to disappear, just as flu does at the end of the flu season. Tragically, COVID was not the flu, and it did not vanish. Just the opposite. And so, with the ghastly reality setting in, Trump began to grab for an elixir that would cure this disease. Along came hydroxychloroquine.

Trump began hearing from the Fox News star Laura Ingraham and others who were promoting the drug as a COVID treatment. People have long taken hydroxychloroquine to prevent or treat malaria. It is also used to treat inflammatory and autoimmune diseases such as lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. Soon Trump began touting it to millions of worried Americans at

our now-daily press briefings. But there were no clinical studies proving that this antimalarial drug would alleviate COVID. And it might even hurt people. The president seemed unable to grasp that anecdotes of how hydroxychloroquine might have helped some people with COVID did not translate into solid medical advice. This is when I realized that eventually, I would have to refute him publicly. This was not the White House I had known, and I'd been advising presidents since the Reagan administration. The differences were going to dramatically affect the way I could do my job. "Hydroxychloroquine doesn't work," I told reporters. After that, they would inevitably ask me if I agreed with something Trump had said, such as the idea that COVID would disappear "like a miracle." I would then have to respond with the truth: "Well, that's not going to happen."



Trump departs a daily coronavirus briefing, March 26. (Jonathan Ernst / Reuters / Redux)

I took no pleasure in contradicting the president of the United States. I have always had a great deal of respect for the Office of the President, and to publicly disagree with the president was unnerving at best and painful at worst. But it needed to be done. I take very seriously a statement in the first

chapter of *Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine*, of which I have been an editor for 40 years: “The patient is no mere collection of symptoms, signs, disordered functions, damaged organs, and disturbed emotions. [The patient] is human, fearful, and hopeful, seeking relief, help, and reassurance.” This compels me to always be honest; to be unafraid of saying that I do not know something; to never overpromise; to be comforting, yet realistic. Admitting uncertainty is not fashionable in politics these days, but it is essential in my work. That’s the beauty of science. You make a factual observation. If the facts change, the scientific process self-corrects. You gather new information and data that sometimes require you to change your opinion. This is how we better care for people over time. But too few people understand the self-corrective nature of science. In our daily press conferences, I tried to act as if the American public were my patient, and the principles that guided me through my medical career applied.

There is a widely circulated photo of me from a White House press briefing on March 20, in which I put my hand to my forehead in response to a comment the president had made. That day, Trump was especially flippant. He was standing with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, making one provocative statement after another. Then he said, “Secretary of State Pompeo is extremely busy, so if you have any questions for him right now could you do that because … I’d like him to go back to the State Department or, as they call it, the ‘Deep State’ Department.” I had a moment of despair mixed with amusement. I put my hand to my forehead to hide my expression. This is when things began to get difficult for my family and me.

In late March, officials monitoring the dark web started to see a considerable amount of hostility and threats directed toward me. The problem was that a hard-core group saw me as a naysaying bureaucrat who was deliberately, even maliciously, undermining Trump. They loved and supported the president and regarded me as the enemy. To them, my hand-to-forehead moment validated what they already believed about me.



Fauci while Trump speaks at the March 20 coronavirus briefing (Erin Schaff / *The New York Times* / Redux)

As a result, I was assigned a security detail. For years, AIDS had made me a target, but that was largely before social media. Back then, I used to get one or two insulting letters a month, mostly homophobic rants, sent to my office at the NIH. Now my family and I were barraged by emails, texts, and phone calls. I was outraged that my wife, Christine, and our daughters were harassed with foul language and sexually explicit messages, and threatened with violence and even death. I was angry and wanted to lash out. But these direct expressions of hatred did not distract or frighten me. I did not have time for fear. I had a job to do.

My training as a physician in a busy New York City hospital had taught me to push through crises and fatigue, to not feel sorry for myself. During the pandemic, Christine also insisted that I balance the demands of work with taking care of myself. (“You are going to bed at a decent hour, you are going to eat regular meals, and you are going to carry a water bottle,” she said in a way that left no room for argument.) Her advice helped me get through everything that followed.

But in the ensuing years, I also came to realize that addressing the root cause of our country's division is beyond my capabilities as a scientist, physician, and public servant. That doesn't mean I've given up hope that the country can be healed. I believe scientific education is more crucial now than it has ever been in American history. Children should learn what the scientific process is, how it works, and that it self-corrects. Most of all, I believe we need to reclaim civility. To do so, we need to understand that we're all more alike than we are different—that we share common goals for ourselves and for our communities. We need to learn to talk to one another again. And we need to figure that out before the next pandemic hits.

This article was adapted from Anthony Fauci's book [On Call: A Doctor's Journey in Public Service](#). It appears in the [July/August 2024](#) print edition with the headline "The First Three Months."

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The Koala Paradox

Can Australia find a way to protect its most beloved animal?

by Katherine J. Wu



Emerson is one of roughly 350 koalas admitted annually to Northern Rivers Koala Hospital, in New South Wales, Australia.

Ten-month-old Emerson fixed his big brown eyes on me and yawned. Still groggy from a nap, the koala rubbed his face, then stuck out an expectant paw. The nurse escorting me through his enclosure smiled. “He’s looking for his milk,” she said.

Four months earlier, when Emerson was admitted to Northern Rivers Koala Hospital, in New South Wales, Australia, he was so small that volunteers had to feed him with a syringe, dribbling formula into his mouth, his fury body swaddled in a towel. Now healthy and about five pounds, he was one of the most effortlessly anthropomorphized animals I had ever come across. With his big nose and round-bodied floofiness, his shuffling movements, his droopy eyelids and eagerness to cuddle, he seemed like nature's ultimate cross between a teddy bear, a bumbling grandpa, and a sleepy toddler.

"The first thing I tell my volunteers when they come here to start is: 'You will not be cuddling these koalas,'" Jen Ridolfi, the volunteer coordinator for Friends of the Koala, the nonprofit that runs Northern Rivers, told me. But sometimes even the most stoic get attached. Many koalas spend months here; volunteers call them "dear," "sweetie," and "love." I watched one volunteer lean down to coo at a male named Gigachad. "I just want to kiss his nose," she said, before quickly assuring me that she wouldn't. Even FOK's veterinary staff will occasionally pat the backs of koalas during routine checkups or slip a hand into the paw of an animal under anesthesia.

Ridolfi is vigilant about volunteers for a reason. Of the roughly 350 koalas admitted annually to Northern Rivers, only about a third survive. Chief among the threats they face is chlamydia—yes, *that* chlamydia—a bacterial infection that in koalas, as in humans, spreads primarily via sex, and can cause blindness, infertility, and other severe, sometimes fatal complications. Car collisions and dog attacks are not far behind. Koalas are also vulnerable to cancers, fungal infections, herpes, parasites, kidney problems, mange, and a retrovirus that might leave them immunocompromised.

These acute perils are compounded by more chronic ones: habitat destruction; genetic fragility; and climate change, which fuels heat waves, droughts, and wildfires that scorch the trees that koalas live in and eat from. "The biology of the species has been hammered by humans," Edward Narayan, a biologist at the University of Queensland, told me. Some koala populations have, in recent decades, fallen by 80 percent. In 2022, [Australia's federal government declared the animals endangered](#) in Queensland, New South Wales, and the Australian Capital Territory, essentially the eastern third of the country.





Top and bottom: A koala is treated for a chlamydia infection at the hospital.
(James Bugg for *The Atlantic*)

Koalas are far from Australia's most endangered animal—they're not even its most endangered marsupial. (Pity the Gilbert's potoroo, a rat-kangaroo the size of a guinea pig, and the very rare and very whiskered northern hairy-nosed wombat.) But if there's any creature that people are motivated to save, it's the koala. Since 2019, the Australian government has dedicated the equivalent of about 50 million U.S. dollars to conserving the species, far more than it has allocated to animals in greater peril. Koalas are a national icon and, like many other charismatic megafauna, a boon for tourism. Plus people just seem to connect with them in a way they do with few other animals.

But the places where koalas prefer to live—lush, coastal regions—are also the places that human beings find most hospitable. Which means that even an animal this beloved may test the limits of what people are willing to sacrifice to save another species.

Maria Matthes can spot koalas in trees even while driving 50 miles an hour down roads riddled with potholes. “Did you see them?” she asked me. “There were at least five koalas, just down that stretch.” (I had seen zero.) Matthes, an ecologist who works with Friends of the Koala, grew up naming the koalas that loafed around in her backyard. Now she spends her time surveying wild koalas. When she spots a sick one, she sets out to trap it.

The day we met, Matthes was attempting, for the third time, to snare Dumpling, a koala that had been lurking for weeks on the property of her friends Jo Walton and Peter Boucher. Dumpling was clearly not well. She looked frail. The fur on her rump was wet and stained reddish brown—an indication that she suffered from an inflammatory condition called cystitis. Matthes had seen these signs before: Dumpling had chlamydia, and she'd had it for a while. In all likelihood, Matthes said, the bacterial pathogen had spread to her reproductive tract, lining it with cysts that can be as big as oranges. At this stage of the disease, Dumpling was likely dehydrated and in serious pain, struggling to move or even eat.

Sexually transmitted infections have never been just a human problem: Dolphins have genital herpes; pigs exchange brucellosis; rabbits, notoriously promiscuous, get syphilis. For the most part, STIs are not hastening the decline of entire species. But for koalas, chlamydia is a scourge. They lack

immunity to the pathogen, which [some researchers suspect was introduced to koalas by imported livestock in the 18th century](#). Retroviral infections, too, may be speeding the spread of the deadly disease.

At FOK, the majority of koalas admitted with chlamydia must be euthanized shortly after they arrive. Among those that receive treatment, fewer than half survive: The drugs that kill the pathogen can also destroy koalas' fragile gut microbes.

The threat of chlamydia is also growing as the disease seeps into just about every corner of the species' northern range. In 2008, scientists tracking one population around the town of Gunnedah, New South Wales, which calls itself the "koala capital of the world," found chlamydia in less than 10 percent of the koalas they tested. Now the disease is thought to be present in nearly every koala there; within just a few years, researchers expect Gunnedah's population to entirely disappear.

Peter Timms, a microbiologist at the University of the Sunshine Coast, and his colleagues have been developing a chlamydia vaccine that's now being administered to small numbers of koalas in Queensland and New South Wales on a trial basis. It can't prevent infection, but it does seem to curb the disease's severity. Vaccinating a fifth of one koala population, Timms said, appears to have improved survival by at least 60 percent.

[Read: We vaccinate animals more than ourselves](#)

The vaccine is still in limited supply, though. Northern Rivers Koala Hospital receives just 100 doses a year; when I visited in March, the facility had only 10 left for the next four months. Jodie Wakeman, a veterinarian at FOK, saves the shots for young, healthy animals, which likely have many reproductive years ahead. I watched Wakeman administer doses 91 and 92 to two male joeys—Droplet, who was recovering after falling from a tree, and Kelso, who came in with a mild-enough case of chlamydia that it left no lingering damage, and was now disease-free. In late April, Emerson received one too.

But vaccines can't help animals that have already been infected for months or years—which ended up being the case for Dumpling, who finally crawled

down into her trap about a day and a half after Matthes set it. An exam at Northern Rivers confirmed what Matthes had guessed: a bladder burning with cystitis, and a reproductive tract so full of cysts that it was no longer functional. A veterinarian euthanized Dumpling and later handed the body back over to Matthes, at her request.

Dumpling's death shook Jo Walton, who had named the koala and taken dozens of photos of her. Matthes, Boucher, and Walton buried Dumpling, arms crossed over her little chest, in Boucher and Walton's garden, murmuring their regrets about not finding her earlier.

On her own property, Matthes estimates that she has buried about 30 koalas over the past two decades, a practice she started after finding one too many dead koalas on the roads near her home. Sending them to the landfill "doesn't feel right," she said, "especially when they are a koala I know." She is particularly tender with the ones that were killed by dogs or cars. "I am sorry humans are so careless," she tells them, before lowering their bodies into the dirt.



Maria Matthes, an ecologist who works with Friends of the Koala, estimates that she has buried about 30 koalas on her own property in two decades.
(James Bugg for *The Atlantic*)

Millions of koalas are thought to have lived in Australia before Europeans colonized the continent in earnest. Starting in the 19th century, though, eager to meet demand for koala pelts from clothing makers abroad, settlers hunted so many of the marsupials that they were eventually driven to near extinction, particularly in the south. By the 1930s, [the koala-fur trade had been halted](#), but already, koalas were running up against another human desire: land. Today the country's koalas number only in the hundreds of thousands, by most estimates; some argue that the real count is even lower. And as Australia's human population continues to grow, protecting the animals exclusively by setting aside new, people-free habitats for them becomes more difficult. "It's naive to think that that's ever going to happen," Deborah Tabart, the chair of the Australian Koala Foundation, told me.

About 30 years ago, Tabart and her colleagues were mapping prime koala habitat, and they could see how little was left. Particularly in the northern part of the species' range, the animals were being squeezed between new highways and housing developments to the east and agricultural fields to the west. But one choice area in New South Wales overlapped with a nearly 900-acre tract of land owned by a developer Tabart knew, and she successfully talked him into [creating the country's first koala-friendly subdivision, called Koala Beach](#). Homes would be built only on land that had already been cleared—about a quarter of the area, room for 500 houses—and residents would have to abide by a variety of rules meant to foster coexistence with koalas and some two dozen other rare or endangered species. The plan, Tabart said, was to "squeeze the humans in, and let the animals have the bush." She hoped it could be a model that other developers would follow.

People have made their priorities clear: They do love koalas. They also love cars and dogs.

Before I visited Koala Beach, I imagined an overgrown, semitropical utopia that would illustrate the extreme measures required for us to live alongside these fragile marsupials. When I arrived, though, I was struck by how much the neighborhood looked like a typical suburb. The speed limits were lower here, yes, and block letters painted prominently on Koala Beach's roads warned NO CATS no DOGS, but there were still plenty of cars. The koala-friendly measures were subtle: On the sidewalk outside many of the houses,

I saw a species of gum tree that koalas are known to eat, and several streets terminated in a miles-long tangle of uninterrupted forest. (Each household in Koala Beach is required to pay the equivalent of about 140 U.S. dollars a year to help maintain the wild land.) I spotted several koala-themed mailboxes, but never, to my disappointment, any actual koalas. They were around, though: Irene Timmins, who moved to Koala Beach nine years ago, told me that residents reported sightings “quite frequently now,” at least by endangered-animal standards. “Maybe once every couple of weeks.”



A mailbox in the Koala Beach housing estate, in New South Wales (James Bugg for *The Atlantic*)

In the 1990s, when just a few dozen nature-loving residents lived in the development, Koala Beachers were generally happy to forgo cats and dogs as pets, and to build fences with at least a foot of clearance off the ground, so a koala could pass through. Now essentially all of the 500 homes in the estate are occupied—some by buyers who were more attracted to the new houses and coastal location than to Koala Beach’s commitment to biodiversity. It’s become common, Timmins said, to see cars speeding down the streets, and about half the fences have been built or retrofitted to sit flush against the ground. At least a few people have snuck pet dogs into the estate, Timmins said, one of which she thinks may be owned by some of her neighbors. They deny it, she said. “But I’ve got the picture.”

[Read: Australia will lose to climate change](#)

Koala Beach never took off as a model for sustainable development; according to Tabart, it is still Australia’s only designated koala-friendly subdivision. How much it has actually helped its namesake animal is also unclear. No one I spoke with was able to tell me, for instance, how many koalas live there—let alone whether their numbers have increased since the koala-friendly regulations went into effect. “I have lost faith in Koala Beach,” Tabart said. The development itself will probably still be around in another 30 years. “Whether the koalas are there,” she said, “I don’t think so.”

Government conservation plans have set aside swaths of protected koala habitat, but many of the experts I spoke with said that the land isn’t nearly enough. Koala Beach was meant to be the compromise—a tacit acknowledgment that humans wouldn’t cede all of the untouched forest necessary for koalas to live apart from us. But humans made their priorities clear: People do love koalas. They also love cars and dogs.



A koala can grind through more than a pound of leaves a day; in Cape Otway, trees have been stripped bare and died as a result of the marsupials' appetites. (James Bugg for *The Atlantic*)

In other parts of Australia, koalas face a threat that's almost unimaginable in Koala Beach: overpopulation. French Island, about a 15-minute ferry ride from Stony Point, in the southern Australian state of Victoria, is home to about 140 humans and, by residents' best estimates, at least 35 times as many koalas. Veronica Shannon, who has lived on French for the past three years, sees dozens most weeks, several of them in the grove of trees a few hundred feet from her front door. In late February, she sent me a photo of a hulking male perched on her deck that a few days earlier had startled her awake when he rapped his claws on her bedroom window.

French is one of the country's most koala-rich tracts. The animals were introduced to the island in the 1890s by locals, in an attempt to halt

population declines during the still-rampant fur trade. Safe from foxes and other mainland predators, the island's koalas became so numerous that conservationists eventually began using them to repopulate other areas in the country's south. Down there, koalas haven't had to contend with the same sweep of urbanization that has reshaped the continent's east coast; they seem to be less troubled by both chlamydia and retrovirus. Overall, the region's koala population is large and stable enough that, were koala declines to be averaged across the entire country, any official listings for endangerment would probably disappear.

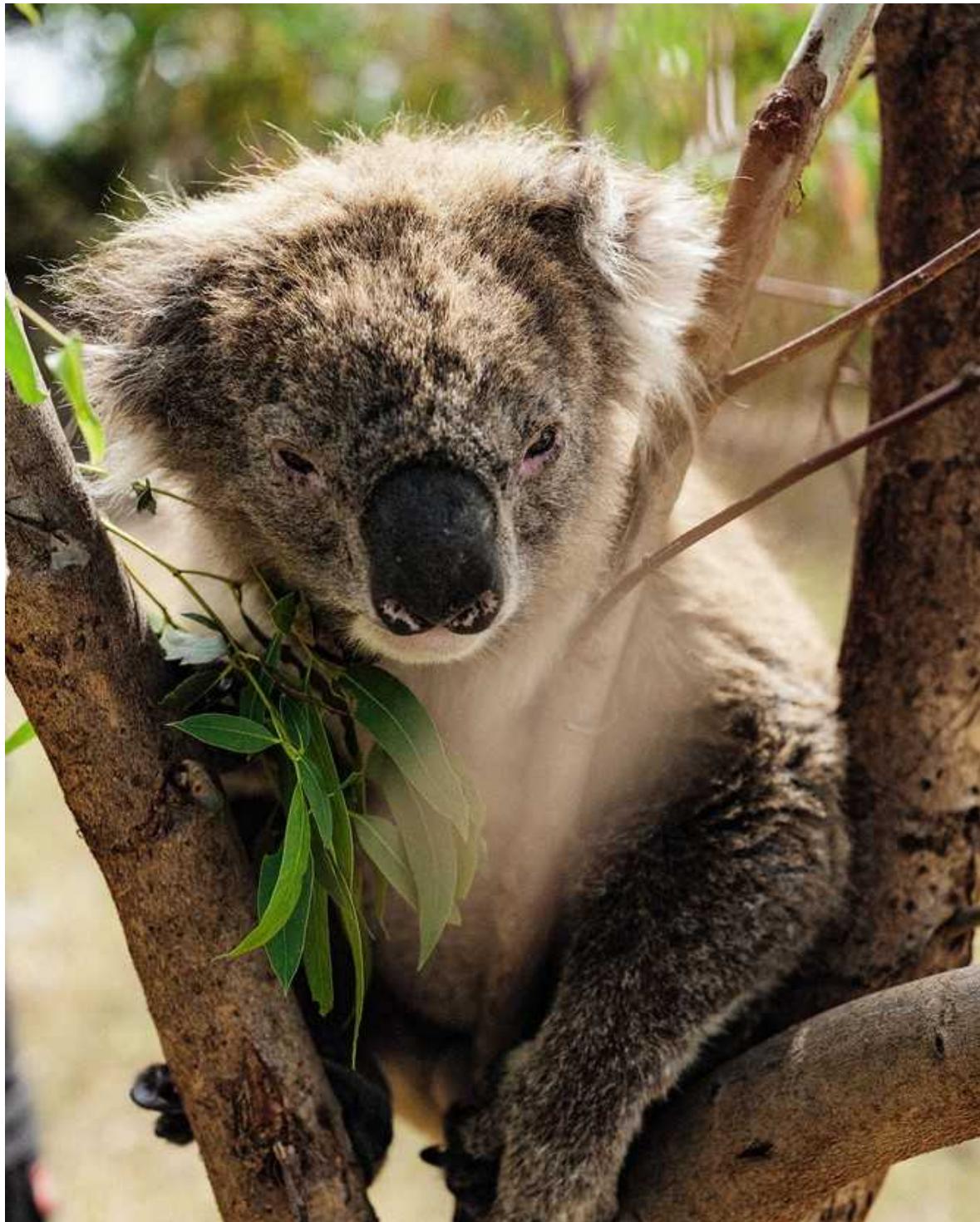
Some locals on French, including Shannon, delight in the koalas that traipse across their property and slosh through the surf near the ferry dock. Southern koalas look different from northern ones: They're browner, fluffier, and weigh about twice as much. And unlike the wary animals to the north, French's koalas don't seem to mind humans. A co-owner of the island's Eco Inn, Phil Bock, showed me an adult male koala that was dozing at eye level in a stumpy tree, barely fidgeting even when Bock cooed at him from inches away.

Southern koalas have been cast as inferior, less attractive versions of their counterparts to the north.

Other residents, though, see the koalas as a nuisance. During the animals' mating season, in the spring and summer, [many evenings ring with males' piglike grunts and growls](#), followed by females' wailing shrieks. And it's nearly impossible to satiate the appetites of thousands of animals that can each grind through more than a pound of eucalyptus leaves a day. Noel Thompson, a local farmer whose family has been on French Island for 130 years, drove me to a small grove of trees he had planted on his ranch and counted off the half a dozen or so that, thanks to the "bears," no longer had leaves, and never would again: "Dead, dead, dead, dead, dead, dead." Thompson's cousin Lois Airs told me she had dedicated years to planting and caring for French's trees, many of which koalas then stripped bare. She likes koalas, she said, but French long ago surpassed its threshold for too many.

That sentiment is also common in Cape Otway, Victoria, a forested triangle of coastline where a small cohort of French Island koalas was reintroduced

in the 1980s—and quickly boomed, gnawing its way through the region's manna gum trees. The streets here were once shaded by a magnificent canopy, thick enough that it was difficult to see through. Now entire stretches of road are lined with dead trees, their trunks twisted and dry, their bark a ghostly white. Where birds and frogs and rodents once chirped and croaked and chittered, the forest is silent, save for the sounds of passing cars. Visitors regularly ask what fire or disease killed the trees.



Some people in southern Australia see the local koalas as a nuisance. (James Bugg for *The Atlantic*)

Researchers can't say for certain why the koalas so stubbornly stuck to Cape Otway's trees. But by 2013, scientists were documenting parts of the area with koala densities 20 times higher than what's been observed in healthy populations elsewhere; people began to snap photos of a dozen koalas crammed into a single tree. Maybe the animals preferred the local leaves, or couldn't stomach other ones; maybe they had no options for a better habitat. They might have even inherited some behavioral quirk from generations of inbreeding. Whatever the reasons, even as the branches grew barren, the koalas refused to vacate.

Read: When conservationists kill lots (and lots) of animals

Desley Whisson, who studies koala overabundance at Deakin University, in Victoria, recalls that emaciated koalas ended up crawling around at the base of trees, gnawing on bark and chewing on grass just to try to fill their bellies. Eventually, the state dispatched a team of veterinarians to euthanize dying koalas—some 1,400, according to the official tally. Other animals simply starved. Frank Fotinas, who co-owns a local campground called Bimbi Park, told me that the whole region “stunk of death for months and months.”

To control overly abundant populations, officials have moved koalas to new homes, given them contraceptive implants, and, as needed, euthanized sick animals. But both in Cape Otway and on French Island, locals think current efforts are failing to keep the numbers in check. Airs would add a more efficient option—a regular cull. “Thank you,” Thompson said. “Absolutely.”

Still, Airs and Thompson are acutely aware that any mention of culling koalas tends to spark backlash. Government officials cull wallabies and kangaroos as a matter of course. But koalas are still treated as more sacred, and killing a healthy one hasn't been legal in Australia for nearly a century.

In an optimistic future, southern koalas could repopulate the species' northern range, just as French Island koalas helped repopulate the south—a possibility that some researchers are already planning for. But shifting koalas around isn't as simple as it sounds. Even translocating koalas *within* a forest can be harmful to an animal, because their gut bacteria are so sensitive to dietary changes; cross-country migrations may simply not be possible. And scientists remain unsure why Australia's northern and southern koalas

are so different. If genetics is part of the reason southern koalas have fewer problems with chlamydia, for instance, then those animals might be able to help their northern relatives. But the disparities could also be explained by quirks of the environment, different strains of the bacterium or the immunocompromising retrovirus, or chance. Mingling north and south might speed chlamydia's spread, or even import southern diseases north, accelerating the timeline on which the entire species vanishes.



A wild koala in the Northern Rivers region (James Bugg for *The Atlantic*)

The idea of southern koalas repopulating the continent assumes, too, that those koala populations are healthy and stable. But “the story that koalas are ‘not endangered’ down south … is absolute rubbish,” Flavia Santamaria, a koala researcher at Central Queensland University, told me. The entire region has only a handful of truly ultradense populations. Most other koala communities in southern Australia remain in decline.

[Read: The bleak future of Australian wildlife](#)

Across the country, climate change is only further challenging koala survival. Pilliga, a vast stretch of forest in New South Wales, was once a haven for thousands of koalas, enough that researchers considered it a kind of emergency reservoir. Now, thanks to a rash of fires and droughts, the koalas appear to be all but gone, probably for good. Farther south and west, extreme temperature spikes are taking their toll: During a brutal heat wave in March, I visited the Adelaide Koala & Wildlife Centre on a day when most of the koalas brought in were admitted with suspected heat stress. Locals have found the animals discombobulated and languishing at the base of trees, sometimes so desperate for water that they’ll crawl into backyards to sip whatever liquid they can from pools and dog bowls.

As northern populations continue their rapid decline, the south will account for even more of the world’s remaining koalas. But some people seem to think less of southern koalas: They’ve often been cast as inferior, less attractive versions of their counterparts to the north. Several experts have also dismissed the koala population in the south as being too inbred to serve as an insurance policy for the entire continent. Some southern koalas, for instance, have wonky jaws or testicular abnormalities. Perhaps attitudes will shift as the years wear on; southern koalas, after all, could someday be the last ones the world has left.

There will never be a single correct way to save koalas—not when the species’ problems are so diverse and humans cannot agree on what the animals most need, or even whether they *are* in need. Some people in the south treat koalas not as a species under threat of eventual extinction but as easily expendable “tree lice” or “tree pigs.” Earlier this year, a farmer in

southwest Victoria was fined after he hired contractors to bulldoze his blue-gum plantation, injuring and killing dozens of koalas; recently, loggers allegedly cleared land on South Australia’s Kangaroo Island with koalas still in the trees. “I’ve seen people hit them with cars and not stop to check if they’re okay,” Kita Ashman, an ecologist at World Wide Fund for Nature in Australia, told me.

Emotions can cloud decisions in the other direction, too. Jen Ridolfi, the volunteer coordinator, and Jodie Wakeman, the veterinarian, said that at FOK, some rescuers still break down in tears every time they bring a sick or injured koala in. On occasion, people will even get combative with Wakeman, insisting that they know what’s best for “my baby.” I asked Wakeman if her job sometimes feels like that of a pediatrician, managing the emotions of parents. She laughed sadly. “Yes,” she said. “Sometimes it does.”

While in Adelaide, I watched the Koala & Wildlife Centre’s veterinary staff examine one very sick koala, a 12-year-old female named Amethyst, while she was under anesthesia. An abdominal scan revealed crystals in her kidneys—a telltale sign of severe renal disease; the vet treating her also suspected that she had chlamydia in her urogenital tract. After a few moments of silence, a member of the staff shuffled me toward the koala enclosures, where the next patients were being kept. Perhaps the team didn’t want me to watch them decide to euthanize Amethyst, or see the black body bag into which they’d load her corpse. But I learned of her fate soon enough: In the koala dormitory, I saw a volunteer slip in, walk to the whiteboard on the front of Amethyst’s cage, and erase her name.

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The Harlem Renaissance Was Bigger Than Harlem

How Black artists made modernism their own

by Susan Tallman



Aaron Douglas, "Still Life," n.d. (Courtesy of the Met / © 2024 Heirs of Aaron Douglas / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY)

Sometimes it's the sleepers that stay with you. In "The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism," a sprawling exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it was a watercolor still life by Aaron Douglas. Born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1899, Douglas may be the most recognizable Black artist of the 1920s and '30s. His appealing blend of Art Deco and African American affirmation enlivened books, magazines, and public spaces in his heyday, and paintings such as his grand Works Progress Administration cycle, *Aspects of Negro Life*, at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library (now part of the Schomburg Center), have kept him visible ever since.

The watercolor, though, feels a world apart from his luminous silhouettes and vivid storylines. It houses no heroic figure pointing toward the future, no shackles being cast off. Instead we get leafy branches splaying out from a pot beneath a tattered picture hung askew on a wall. The branches might be magnolia—it's hard to tell—but art nerds can recognize the crooked picture-within-a-picture as a loose rendering of Titian's [The Entombment of Christ](#) (circa 1520), which has been in the Louvre for centuries. Turner copied it there in 1802, Delacroix around 1820, Cézanne in the 1860s. Douglas would have seen it when he was studying in Paris in the early 1930s.

The Titian might have attracted his attention for many reasons—its display of crushing grief and unvoiced faith, its sublimely controlled composition, or the warm brown skin that Titian gave the man lifting Christ's head and shoulders, usually identified as Nicodemus. The Titian connection is not highlighted at the Met, but in its own oblique way, Douglas's watercolor encapsulates the most important lesson this show has to offer: Art's relationship to the world is always more complicated than you think.

Organized by Denise Murrell, who, as the Met's first curator at large, oversees projects that cross geographical and chronological boundaries, this exhibition [has a lot on its to-do list](#). It wants to remind us of Harlem's role as a cultural catalyst in the early 20th century, while showing that those creative energies extended far beyond the familiar reading list of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, beyond literature and music, beyond the prewar decades, and beyond Upper Manhattan. It wants us to understand that Black American artists were learning from European modernists, and

that European modernists were aware of Black contributions to world culture.

The exhibit showcases an abundance of mostly Black, mostly American painters and sculptors, as well as pictures of Black subjects by white Europeans, documentary photographs, film clips of nightclub acts, and objects by artists of the African diaspora working in locations from the Caribbean to the United Kingdom. Like an exploding party streamer, it unfurls in multiple directions from a starting point small enough to hold in your hand—in this case, the [March 1925 special issue of the social-work journal *Survey Graphic*](#), its cover emblazoned with “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,” heralding a new cultural phenomenon.

That issue, edited by [the philosopher Alain Locke](#), contained sociological and historical articles by Black academics along with poetry by the likes of Hughes and Jean Toomer. James Weldon Johnson, the executive secretary of the NAACP, offered an essay on the real-estate machinations that had made Harlem Black, and W. E. B. Du Bois contributed a parable highlighting the Black origins of American achievements in domains including the arts and engineering. The German-immigrant artist Winold Reiss provided eloquent portraits of celebrities such as the singer and activist Paul Robeson, along with those of various Harlem residents identified by social role in the manner of August Sander photographs—a pair of young, earnest *Public School Teachers* with Phi Beta Kappa keys dangling around their necks, a somber-faced *Woman Lawyer*, a dapper *College Lad*. All of this made manifest the galvanizing assumption that what Black Americans possessed was not a culture that had failed to be white, but one rich with its own inheritances and inventions; its own brilliance, flaws, and challenges. And Harlem was its city on a hill.

Working as an art teacher in Kansas City, Missouri, Aaron Douglas saw *Survey Graphic* and moved to New York, where he worked with Reiss and was mentored by Du Bois. When Locke expanded the *Survey Graphic* issue to book length (his pivotal anthology, [The New Negro: An Interpretation](#)), Douglas provided illustrations.

Locke and Du Bois were the intellectual stars of Black modernity, and they believed in the power of the arts to transform social perception. But where

Du Bois once said, “I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda,” Locke was intrigued by the indirect but ineluctable workings of aesthetics. A serious collector of African art, he saw its severe stylizations and habits of restraint as a flavor of classicism, as disciplined in its way as Archaic Greek art, and hoped it might provide “a mine of fresh *motifs*” and “a lesson in simplicity and originality of expression” to Black Americans.

Locke also took note of how European artists, bored with the verisimilitude, rational space, and propriety of their own tradition, had become smitten with Africa: how Picasso claimed the faceted planes of African masks as the starting point of cubism; how German expressionists enlisted the emphatic angularity of African carvings in their pursuit of emotional presence. They might be woefully (or willfully) ignorant of African objects’ original contexts and meanings, but, as Locke recognized, an important bridge had been crossed. Something definitively Black was inspiring the foremost white artists in the world.

No artist fulfilled the twin mandates of clear messaging and savvy, African-influenced modernism more successfully than Douglas. The style he developed took tips from the easy-to-read action of ancient-Egyptian profiles, the staccato geometries of African art, and the flat pictorial space of abstraction, and he put that style to work in narrative pictures designed to inspire hope, pride, and a sense of belonging to something larger than oneself. Du Bois might have called it propaganda, but under the name “history painting,” this kind of thing had constituted the most prestigious domain of pre-20th-century art. Think of Jacques-Louis David’s *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), Emanuel Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), and John Martin’s cast-of-thousands blockbusters like *The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1822).



Aaron Douglas, *Let My People Go*, circa 1935–39 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 2015 / Image

Courtesy of the Met / © 2024 Heirs of Aaron Douglas / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Let My People Go (circa 1935–39) is one of several majestic Douglas paintings included at the Met. Its design began as a tightly composed black-and-white illustration for James Weldon Johnson’s 1927 book, *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (in addition to running the NAACP, Johnson was a poet). Even within the more expansive space of the color painting, *Let My People Go* has a lot going on: Lightning bolts rain down from the upper right; spears poke up from the lower left as Pharaoh’s army charges in, heedless of the great wave rising like a curlicue cowlick at center stage. Slicing diagonally across all of this action, a golden beam of light comes to rest on a kneeling figure, arms spread in supplication. It’s a John Martin biblical epic stripped of Victorian froufrou, a modernist geometric composition with a moral.

Ambitious Black artists hardly needed Locke to point them toward Europe. “Where else but to Paris,” Douglas wrote, “would the artist go who wished really to learn his craft and eventually succeed in the art of painting?” Paris had the Louvre, it had Picasso and Matisse, it had important collections of African art, and for decades, it offered Black American artists both education and liberation. William H. Johnson arrived in 1926, Palmer Hayden and Hale Woodruff in 1927, Archibald Motley in 1929. Henry Ossawa Tanner, in France since 1891, was a chevalier of the Legion of Honor. The French were not free of race-based assumptions, but their biases were more benign than those institutionalized in the United States—enough so that Motley would later say, “They treated me the same as they treated anybody else.”

One of the great pleasures at the Met is watching these artists feel their way in a heady world. The setting for Motley’s bright and bumptious dance scene *Blues* (1929) was a café near the Bois de Boulogne frequented by African and Caribbean immigrants, where he would sit and sketch into the night. The subject is unquestionably modern, as are Motley’s smoothed-out surfaces and abruptly cropped edges, but the gorgeous entanglement of musicians and revelers—the chromatic counterpoint of festive clothing and faces that come in dark, medium, and pale—recalls far older precedents, such as Paolo Veronese’s *The Wedding Feast at Cana* (1562–63), the enormous canvas at

the Louvre that people back into when straining for a glimpse of the *Mona Lisa*.



Archibald Motley, *Blues*, 1929 (© Estate of Archibald John Motley Jr. 2024 / Bridgeman Images / Image courtesy of the Met / Photo by Juan Trujillo)

Woodruff and Hayden took up the theme of the card game, closely associated with Cézanne but also a long-standing trope in European art and African American culture. In Hayden's *Nous Quatre à Paris* ("We Four in Paris," circa 1930) and Woodruff's *The Card Players* (1930), the teetering furniture and tilted space set up a pictorial instability that can be seen as a corollary of social pleasure and moral peril, or just the reality of odds always stacked against you. But whereas Woodruff's jagged styling in *The Card Players* nods to German expressionism and the African sources behind it, the caricatured profiles in Hayden's *Nous Quatre à Paris* call up racist antecedents like Currier and Ives's once-popular *Darktown* lithographs.

Beautifully drawn in watercolor, it remains a stubbornly uncomfortable image some 95 years after its creation.

William H. Johnson, for his part, spent his years in Europe mostly making brushy landscapes with no obvious social messages. Paired with a woozy village scene by the French expressionist Chaim Soutine, an early Johnson townscape at the Met looks accomplished and unadventurous. But with his wife, the Danish textile artist Holcha Krake, Johnson developed an appreciation for the flat forms and dramatic concision of Scandinavian folk art—a reminder that Africa was not the only place where modernists searched for outsider inspiration—and when he returned to the States, he began working in a jangly figurative mode with no direct antecedent. The dancing couples in his *Jitterbugs* paintings and screen prints (1940–42) may look simple and cartoonish at first glance, but those pointy knees and high heels are held mid-motion through Johnson’s brilliant machinery of pictorial weights and balances.



William H. Johnson, *Jitterbugs V*, circa 1941–42 (Courtesy of the Met / Hampton University Museum Collection)

There is more than a soupçon of *épater le bourgeois* in much of this, aimed not just at the buttoned-up white world, but also at the primness of many members of the Black professional class. Langston Hughes, [writing in The Nation in 1926](#), expressed his hope that “Paul Robeson singing Water Boy ... and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies” might prompt “the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty.”

The pursuit of that glimmer accounts for one of the Met exhibition’s most remarkable aspects—its preponderance of great portraiture. There are portraits of the famous, portraits by the famous, portraits of parents and children, and portraits of strangers. Some are large and dazzlingly sophisticated: Beauford Delaney’s 1941 portrait of a naked, teenage James Baldwin in a storm of ecstatic color is a harbinger of the gestural abstractions that Delaney would paint 10 years later. Some are tiny and blunt, like the self-portrait by the self-taught Horace Pippin, celebrated as “the first important Negro painter” by the art collector Albert C. Barnes because of his “unadulterated” ignorance of other art.

This abundance is remarkable because portraiture was not central to European modernism or to 20th-century art in general. Never the most prestigious of genres (too compromised as work-for-hire), the painted portrait had lost its primary *raison d’être* following the advent of photography in the 1830s and never really recovered. Modernists went on drawing people, but instead of providing a physiognomy to be followed, the sitter was now a toy to be played with. Picasso’s drypoint of the Martinican poet and activist Aimé Césaire is representative, looking very much like a Picasso and not much at all like Césaire. (The Met’s wall text refers to it as a “symbolic portrait.”) The title of the wonderful Edvard Munch painting in the show originally emphasized the polygonal slab of green scarf at its center, not the identity of Abdul Karim, the man wearing it. We might well be curious about Karim—Munch apparently encountered him in a traveling circus’s ethnographic display, and hired him as a driver and model—but Munch wants to lead us away from the distractions of biography and toward color, form, and paint. It was a common ploy. James McNeill Whistler, after all, titled his famous portrait of his mother *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1*.

For Black artists and audiences, the situation was different. Painted portraits have always been an extravagance, their mere existence evidence of the value of the people in them. But after 500 years of Western portrait painting, Black faces remained, Alain Locke wrote, “the most untouched of all the available fields of portraiture.” The American Folk Art Museum’s “*Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Absence in the Early American North*”—which overlapped with the Met show for a month before closing in March—aimed to fill in that lacuna, with rare commissioned portraits of 19th-century Black sitters, more numerous examples of Black figures (often children) presented as fashionable accessories in portraits of white sitters, and still more dispiriting mass-market material, like a pair of *Darktown* lithographs showing grossly caricatured Black couples attempting to play tennis.

Against this background, portraiture—the quintessential celebration of the individual—could serve a collective purpose. Far from merely gratifying the vanity of a sitter or the creative ego of an artist, it was a correction to the canon, offering proof of how varied beauty, character, or just memorable faces can look. The subject mattered, regardless of the style through which he or she was presented. Laura Wheeler Waring was no avant-gardist—her blend of precision and moderately flashy brushwork gives *Girl in Pink Dress* (circa 1927) the demeanor of a society portrait. The arrangement is conventional: The sitter is seen in profile, hair in a flapper bob, a spray of silk flowers tumbling over one shoulder like fireworks. But that shade of pink, which might look simpering on a blonde, acquires visual gravitas on this model. She does not smile or acknowledge the viewer. For all her youth and frothy attire, she owns the space of the canvas in no uncertain terms. The dress is frivolous; the picture is not.

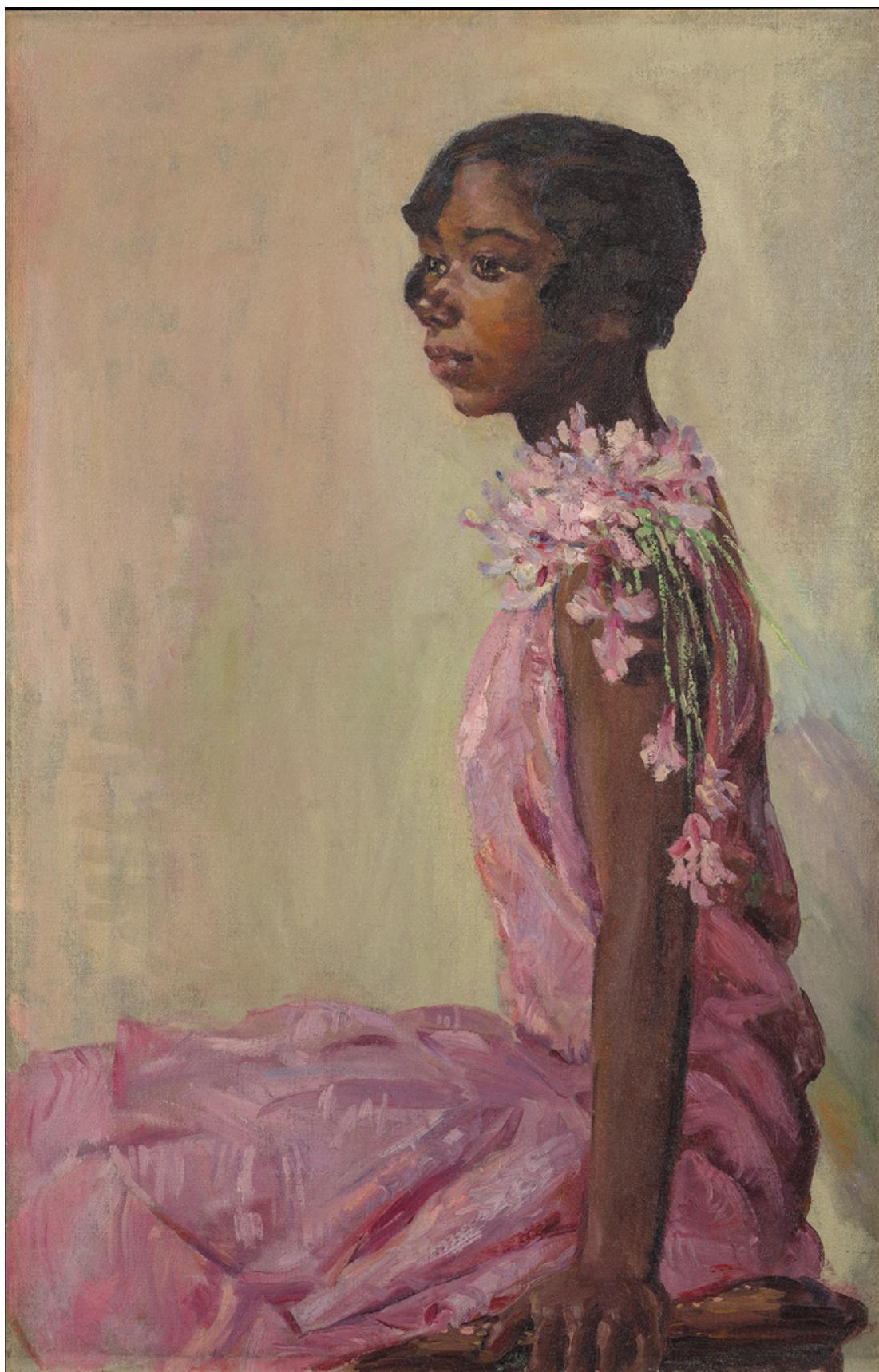
Far from merely gratifying the vanity of a sitter or the creative ego of an artist, portraiture was a correction to the canon, offering proof of how varied beauty, character, or just memorable faces can look.

Waring, like Munch, does not give us a name to go with the face. For modern artists—whether Black or white, male or female—models, most often young women, were an attribute of the studio, there to be dressed up and arranged like a still life with a pulse. At the Met, they look out at us

from frames next to titles that point to their hats and dresses, their jobs and accessories. In some cases, an identity is discoverable—Matisse's *Woman in White* (1946) was the Belgian Congolese journalist Elvire Van Hyfte; Winold Reiss's *Two Public School Teachers* are thought to have been named Lucile Spence and Melva Price—but many remain anonymous. They are decorative markers for something larger than themselves.

In contrast with Waring's *Girl in Pink Dress*, Henry Alston's *Girl in a Red Dress* (1934) is stridently modernist, reducing its subject to elemental forms. The erect pose could have been borrowed from a Medici bride, but the elongated neck and narrow head and shoulders were inspired, we are told, by reliquary busts of the Central African Fang people. For Alston, neither European modernism nor Fang tradition was a mother tongue, which helps give the picture its modern edge. He is less interested in the distinctive features of a living individual than in how those features might serve new relationships of form and color.

Other artists, notably the watercolorist Samuel Joseph Brown Jr., succeed in inducing portraiture's most magical effect—the eerie sense of a real person on the other side of the frame. His *Girl in Blue Dress* (1936) leans slightly forward, hands casually clasped, a half smile of anticipation on her lips, like someone rapt in conversation. The play of light and the puddled blues and browns are beautifully handled, but the appeal is also social: She looks like someone who would be fun to know.



Laura Wheeler Waring, *Girl in Pink Dress*, circa 1927 (Laura Wheeler Waring Family Collection / © Laura Wheeler Waring / Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photo by Juan Trujillo)

Black portraiture also carries special clout because of the existential consequences that physical appearance can have in Black life. It was at the core of race-based slavery, and perception of color, which is a painter's stock in trade, retained its ability to dictate life's outcomes. Picasso and Matisse might be cavalier about skin tone—painting faces in white and yellow, or green and blue for that matter—but many Black artists recognized it as an optical property riddled with storylines. William H. Johnson gave each of the girls in *Three Children* (circa 1940) a different-colored hat and a different tone of face. Waring (whose self-portrait resembles my third-grade teacher, a middle-aged woman of Scandinavian extraction) addressed the complexities of color and identity in *Mother and Daughter* (circa 1927), a double portrait whose subjects exhibit the same aquiline profile but different complexions. Archibald Motley's *The Octoroon Girl* (1925) is rosy-cheeked and sloe-eyed, perched on a sofa with the frozen expression of someone expecting bad news. (Motley had a gift for capturing this kind of social discomfort.) The title, which points to the existence of one Black great-grandparent, all but dares the viewer to bring a forensic eye to her face, her hands, the curl of brown hair escaping from under her cloche.

It's worth noting that for a show about Black culture in the first half of the 20th century, "Harlem Renaissance" gives little space to the continued horror of lynching, the everyday brutality of Jim Crow, and the nationwide rise of the Ku Klux Klan, which reached peak membership around the time that Locke's *Survey Graphic* was published. Only a handful of works explicitly address either violence or what Hilton Als, [writing about the show in *The New Yorker*](#), called the "soul-crushing" realities of the 1920s for Black people. (The most wrenching of these pieces is [*In Memory of Mary Turner as a Silent Protest Against Mob Violence*](#), a 1919 sculpture by the Rodin protégé Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller.) The emphasis here is on agency and survival, not trauma.

Here, too, the portraits operate as a reservoir of weighty meaning, especially those of elderly relatives. Some sitters, like Motley's Uncle Bob, were old enough to have been born into slavery. All are endowed by the artists with as

much dignity as the conventions of portraiture can muster. Uncle Bob is wearing the plain clothes of a farmer, but is seated like a gentleman, pipe in hand, with a book and a vase of flowers at his elbow. John N. Robinson's 1942 painting of his grandparents (titled, with curious formality, *Mr. and Mrs. Barton*) is filled with the hypertrophic detail of a Holbein painting, and as in a Holbein, everything signifies: Mrs. Barton's look of sober patience; Mr. Barton's suit, tie, and wing-tip shoes; the oak table and the sideboard with its pressed-glass pitcher and glasses; the framed studio photographs of what must be their great-grandchildren on the wall.



John N. Robinson, *Mr. and Mrs. Barton*, 1942 (Clark Atlanta University Art Museum. Atlanta Art Annuals. 1945.004.)

William H. Johnson's *Mom and Dad* (1944) departs from tradition in style, but not in purpose. His gray-haired mother faces us from her red rocking

chair, hands folded, eyes wide with something like worry. His deceased father presides from his portrait on the wall behind her, his handlebar mustache and celluloid collar decades out of date, but lasting evidence of respectability. These people don't show a lot of laugh lines, nor the haughtiness endemic to so much society portraiture. Instead there is poise and forbearance, along with the knowledge that they weren't bought cheap.

Harlem was pronounced the "Mecca of the New Negro" 99 years ago. That cultural renaissance is as far from us today as the contributors to that *Survey Graphic* issue were from the presidency of John Quincy Adams. The Met's is not the first big show to survey Black artists' achievements in that era, but it is the most ambitiously global, a quality that makes that vanished world feel more familiar than we might expect—a place where Black artists move back and forth across the Atlantic, absorbing every influence on offer, coping with questions of identity, and struggling to make ends meet. Against this, the abundance of photographs—the marching men in bowler hats, the marcelled ladies who lunch, the couple posing in raccoon coats with their shiny roadster like Tom and Daisy Buchanan—works to remind us of the temporal distance that painting and sculpture can collapse.

Attempting to define modernism is a thankless task. But a few years ago, the painter Kerry James Marshall offered this observation: "Modern is not so much an appearance or a subject matter. It is, indeed, a process of always becoming and a negotiation for attention between the contemporary artist's ego and the legacy of previous masterworks." At its best, what "Harlem Renaissance" provides is a chance to witness that becoming, to peek at those negotiations in progress, through the work of artists whose achievements have, in many cases, been insufficiently celebrated. Which brings us back to that Aaron Douglas still life.

History painting went out of vogue in the 20th century because modern art stopped believing in simple stories. Douglas's narrative paintings, beautifully designed and eye-catching though they can be, are throwbacks—spectacular, efficient, impersonal engines for delivering public-service messages. The still life is different. Sure, the sloping magnolia branches and off-kilter Titian conform to his love of diagonals on diagonals. But the things represented are not abstractions; they are objects that lived in the real world—the leaves are curled and brown in spots; the margins of the Titian

are torn and stained. What is pictured isn't a lesson, but a meditation on learning, and on the many ways that meaning can make itself felt.

Douglas was a native Kansan. It is possible that Titian's Nicodemus echoed, for him, the abolitionist song "[Wake Nicodemus](#)," whose hero, a slave "of African birth," was the namesake of a Kansas town founded after the Civil War by the formerly enslaved. Or maybe Douglas just loved that painting in the Louvre. Or both.

This article appears in the [July/August 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Harlem Renaissance Was Bigger Than Harlem.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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What America Owes the Planet

Climate reparations would hold the globe's biggest polluters—including the United States—responsible for their actions. They might also be the best hope those nations have for saving themselves.

by Vann R. Newkirk II



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

Before Kyoto and Paris, there was Chantilly. In early 1991, diplomats, scientists, and policy makers from around the world arrived at a hotel conference center near Virginia's Dulles International Airport, which is

famously far from everything. The delegates had been tasked with creating the first international framework for confronting climate change. An ill omen shrouded the proceedings: Virginia was in the grip of a then-record heat wave, with highs of 70 degrees in early February.

The convention unfolded over the course of five sessions and 15 months. For the most part, the attendees weren't debating whether human industry caused global warming. Rather, their mission was to figure out what to do about it, given the preponderance of the evidence that existed even two generations ago. European delegates wanted to establish binding limits on the emissions that each country could produce, which the American representatives immediately shot down. (At the time, the United States was far and away the largest carbon emitter of any country in the world.) There was almost no international accord at all, until the Japanese delegates promoted a weak proposal with no binding emissions targets, which the U.S. accepted.

The big players had made their statement: They would not oblige themselves to prevent climate change. But a faction of smaller countries had come determined to try to make its mark, too. The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), a group representing dozens of, well, small island states, led by the tiny Pacific nation of Vanuatu, consistently pushed for more ambitious policy. These nations also devised a novel framework, one through which those most affected by climate change would receive funding and support from the countries that had done the most to change the climate. That framework never made it into the final agreement. But history's dissents can be road maps for the future.

Wealthy countries seem eager to ease their conscience, not to make real commitments to the countries most exposed to climate disaster.

Thirty-three years later, both emissions and global temperatures have increased faster than expected. Crises that were objects of conjecture in 1991 are upon us: We are witnessing [extreme weather events](#), [acidification of the oceans](#), [aggressive sea-level rise](#), [megadroughts](#), [megafires](#), and an [inexorable onslaught of heat](#). These issues tend to be much more destructive for AOSIS nations and other developing countries than for the U.S. and other major economies.

Climate policy, in America and abroad, has also genuinely transformed since 1991. The United States still rejects binding emissions targets, but emissions have been falling since 2005, owing to steady progress in emissions rules, renewable energy, and, recently, wide adoption of electric and hybrid vehicles. Following decades of pressure from AOSIS and from other countries, at the United Nations' 27th Conference of the Parties (COP27) on climate change, in 2022, the U.S. even [voted to create a fund](#) through which wealthy nations can help support countries defined as “vulnerable” to climate change.

American support of that program, however, has thus far been nominal at best. Across the world, many otherwise bold sustainability programs merely nod at the necessity of providing direct, debt-free aid to endangered states. (Most climate funding takes the form of loans that increase the debt burdens on already distressed economies.) Wealthy countries seem eager to ease their conscience, not to make real commitments to the countries most exposed to climate disaster.

As the global effort against the climate crisis still struggles with scale and pace, world leaders should rethink their ordering of priorities. The AOSIS proposal represented a radical new way of looking at climate change, one that emphasized accountability. American policy makers have been hostile to this idea, which has inspired a broader movement known as climate reparations, and it remains controversial elsewhere. But climate reparations aren’t just the fairest way to compensate small nations like Vanuatu. They may also be the only way we save ourselves.

The Vanuatu document is remarkable in its prescience. Years before the majority of Americans even believed that climate change affected them, the AOSIS delegates [wrote that](#) “the very existence of low-lying coastal and small vulnerable island countries is placed at risk by the consequences of climate change.”

Back then, the coral reefs around the Seychelles had not yet been destroyed. Hurricane Maria had not yet plunged Puerto Rico into a year of darkness. Salt water was not yet regularly flooding Bangladesh’s mustard fields. But there were warnings. Caribbean fishermen had reported drastic climate-related changes to fisheries as early as 1987. In 1989, Hurricane Hugo

rampaged through the Caribbean and the U.S., flattening towns and displacing thousands of people on its way to becoming, at the time, the single costliest hurricane in history—a preview of today’s stronger, more volatile storms. Audre Lorde, who’d retired to St. Croix, [wrote of her experience with Hugo](#): “The earth is telling us something about our conduct of living, as well as about our abuse of this covenant we live upon.”

The Vanuatu document is still one of the best commonsense approaches to the politics of climate. To AOSIS, the carbon emissions causing climate change were nothing more than pollution, no different from coal ash or smog. And the document identified industrial nations, with America in the vanguard, as the polluters. This may seem like a straightforward statement of fact. Too often, however, the source of the problem is obscured in the climate debate.

[Read: To hell with drowning](#)

In recent years, it’s become fashionable to talk of the Anthropocene, a proposed epoch of geologic time, like the Middle Jurassic, in which *anthropos*, or man, is the main force shaping the natural world. There is no question that people have had a massive effect on the Earth’s ecosystems and its changing climate. But to focus on the role of humanity is to overlook the fact that some humans bear far more responsibility than others.

Over the recorded history of industrial emissions, 20 corporations, such as Chevron and ExxonMobil, as well as state-owned energy companies in places like China and Saudi Arabia have been responsible for more than half of all cumulative carbon emissions, a share that has actually risen to more than 60 percent since 2016. From 1990 to 2020, the cumulative emissions of the United States and the European Union member states, which together account for about a tenth of the global population, were higher than the combined emissions of India, Russia, Brazil, Indonesia, Japan, Iran, and South Korea, which account for about 30 percent of the global population. (Even within the nations that emit the most carbon, the burden is not shared equally—according to a 2020 study, the wealthiest 10 percent of American households account for 40 percent of the country’s carbon output.) Leaders in the oil and gas industry have understood climate change as human-driven since at least 1982, when Exxon’s own researchers helped link carbon

emissions and rising temperatures, meaning they knowingly made decisions that led to this crisis. (Exxon has denied that its models—which proved remarkably accurate—represented foreknowledge of climate change.) It would be more precise to call our present epoch the Exxonocene.

Recognizing this reality, the AOSIS proposal called for industrialized countries to implement green energy and technology in developing countries, and to create a “loss and damage” fund to compensate countries for future costs stemming from climate change, including permanent climate-related losses of land, habitats, and population, as well as damages that could be remediated.

[Read: The West agreed to pay climate reparations. That was the easy part.](#)

The loss-and-damage plan was modest, in its way: Its demands were purely forward-looking. It did not address the historical carbon pollution that was already heating up the world in 1991, or the devastation already absorbed by island states from sea-level rise, deforestation, disrupted fisheries, and heat.

In the years since the AOSIS proposal, other thinkers took up the Vanuatu framework and proposed more ambitious programs of recompense. In 2009, the legal scholar Maxine Burkett, who is now a White House climate adviser, made one of the first comprehensive calls for industrial states to compensate the “climate vulnerable.” For Burkett, climate vulnerability arises both from exposure to hazards such as hurricanes and sea-level rise, and from a lack of resources and resiliency to deal with those threats.

Because of the geography of colonialism, these two kinds of vulnerability often intersect. In Haiti, for example, French colonizers imported African slaves to clear-cut ancient forests, and then ruthlessly exploited the colony’s natural and human resources for generations. After the descendants of those slaves rose to power in the late 18th century during the Haitian Revolution, France imposed hefty indemnities on the new nation for the war, and centuries of isolation and intervention by the United States further eroded social and economic structures. Given its location, Haiti would always have been affected by hurricanes and sea-level rise. But the United States’ and France’s emissions have supercharged those threats, and their exploitation of Haiti has left it less capable of defending itself.

For Burkett, addressing climate change in these places requires not just loss-and-damage-style funds, but also compensation and assistance for climate disruption that has already been inflicted—true reparations. Such efforts could take different forms, with different levels of ambition. The UN could create a vehicle through which wealthy countries pledge a percentage of their GDP to developing countries. Or an individual country might heavily tax—or even nationalize—its private oil and gas industry and pledge some or all of the proceeds to its own climate-disadvantaged citizens and to neighboring countries for climate-adaptation projects. Beyond direct monetary payments, some commentators argue for no-cost installations of sustainable-energy technology and infrastructure. Writing in *New York* magazine in 2021, David Wallace-Wells [advocated for reparations in the form of a massive investment by industrial countries in carbon-capture technology](#)—essentially paying to reverse the historic emissions that have so devastated other nations.

But compensation is only part of reparations’ importance. Burkett argues that the very act of acknowledging a debt is key to the process as well, for the sake of both the polluter and the polluted. This acknowledgment makes clear that the global community is interested in the survival of the most imperiled states. Moral leadership by America would also put pressure on China and India, the two rising carbon powers, to acknowledge their own roles in this crisis. In the game of global opinion, at least, no country wants to look like the climate-change villain.

Perhaps the most important component of any kind of reparations is a commitment by the offender to stop offending. Embracing reparations would incentivize wealthy nations to set aggressive emissions targets and meet them. A true reparations program thus wouldn’t be an ancillary charity attached to other solutions, but the overarching climate policy itself.

This spring, weeks of torrential downpours inundated Rio Grande do Sul, a prosperous state in southern Brazil. The resulting floods were some of the worst in the country’s modern history, leaving nearly the entire state submerged. After surveying the damage, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva appeared distraught. He [issued a remarkable statement](#). “This was the third record flood in the same region of the country in less than a year,” he told *The Washington Post*. “We and the world need to prepare every day with

more plans and resources to deal with extreme climate occurrences.” He also said that wealthy nations owed a “historic debt” to those affected by climate change.

Brazil is itself a major emitter of carbon, but it has also been a leader in pushing for a serious commitment to the loss-and-damage fund that was finally established at COP27. The United States had long been the biggest opponent to any such program, but it was outflanked by China and a group of developing countries—including Brazil—and ultimately voted for the fund.

As Americans, we have a choice: to continue on our current path, or to take responsibility for our actions.

That, however, vote came with conditions. The U.S. later pushed to establish the fund for its first four years within the World Bank, where it holds a lone veto, and also made contributions voluntary, instead of binding. My colleague Zoë Schlanger reported in 2023 that Sue Biniaz, the deputy special envoy for climate at the State Department, said she “violently opposes” arguments that developed countries have a legal obligation under the UN framework to pay into the fund. So far, the U.S. has mostly shirked responsibility, pledging only \$17.5 million to the fund. (Germany, by contrast, has promised \$100 million.)

[Read: Climate reparations are officially happening](#)

If this is the commitment the U.S. is willing to make to loss and damage, it’s difficult to imagine the country adopting a true reparations program, which would require legislation that would not pass in our currently polarized Congress, and would also be immediately reversed by any future Republican president. Yet if American policy makers somehow come back around to making actual policy, they’ll find that, far from being an extreme notion, reparations are an eminently practical one. Climate change is already prompting the movement of millions of people across borders, which in turn has led to the rise of autocratic leaders who pledge to keep those displaced peoples out. As climate change continues, the most vulnerable nations will fall first, but their collapse will not be contained. Sooner or later, the walled American garden will also wither in the heat.

An American embrace of climate reparations would create mutual obligations between disconnected hemispheres of the world, and break the climate-policy gridlock among wealthy countries. And despite the enormous cost of paying for past and future damage, those costs would be far lower than the price of failure. A recent study in *Nature* estimated that wealthy countries owe poorer countries a climate debt of almost \$200 trillion. In 2020 and 2021, G20 countries alone allocated upwards of \$14 trillion in stimulus spending to counteract the economic effects of COVID. A similar commitment to climate reparations by 2050 would address our climate debts, save millions of lives in the developing world, and give many countries a chance to adapt.

As Americans, we have a choice: to continue on our current path, or to take responsibility for our actions. For at least the immediate future, wealthy Americans will be protected from the worst of the climate crisis. This comfort is seductive, but ultimately illusory. To survive, we will have to, as the philosopher Olúfémí Táíwò says, begin to think “as ancestors.” It has proved difficult throughout history to convince Americans to engage in this kind of long-term thinking, but there have been exceptions. The Civil War gave way to an overhaul of the Constitution for posterity. The Great Depression helped birth our modern social safety net. The space race gave us the moon. Now we can choose to give our children the Earth.

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The Magic of Old-Growth Forests

Photographing some of the oldest— and largest—living organisms on the planet

by Clint Smith



Aspen (Pando), Utah III 2023 (Courtesy of Steidl Publishers / Yancey Richardson Gallery)

When I was a boy, I loved climbing the old oak trees in New Orleans City Park. I would hang from their branches and fling my legs into the air with unfettered delight. I would scoot my way up the trees' twisting limbs until I was a dozen feet off the ground and could see the park with new eyes. These

were the same trees my mother climbed as a young girl, and the same ones my own children climb when we travel back to my hometown to visit. Live oaks can live for centuries, and the memories made among them can span generations.

For his most recent project, *Old Growth*, the photographer Mitch Epstein traveled around the United States to document some of the country's most ancient trees: big-leaf maples, eastern white pines, sequoias, redwoods, birches. Definitions vary, but Epstein considers old-growth forests to be areas that have been untouched by humans and allowed to regenerate on their own terms. Much of this land in North America has been destroyed in the centuries since European settlers arrived on the continent; Epstein wants his photographs to call attention to what remains, [in order to protect it](#).

One site Epstein visited on his journey was Utah's Fishlake National Forest, where he spent time with Pando: a collection of 47,000 aspen trunks connected to the same root system. Covering 106 acres and weighing about 13.2 million pounds, Pando is one of the largest living organisms on the planet. Epstein has written that it "creates an illusion of infinity."

The trees in *Old Growth* have been around for at least hundreds of years, some for more than 3,000. According to [a recent federal report](#), the biggest threat that American old-growth trees face is destruction by wildfires, which are exacerbated by climate change. Indeed, [a warming planet](#) poses risks to trees of all ages and in all settings. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina killed 2,000 trees in City Park. Future storms, made more intense by climate change, could soon make such destruction seem quaint. It might feel like the time has passed for us to change course, but Epstein insists that's not the case. "How did we get here?" he asked me, "and how do we find a way to realign our relationship to the resources that we have been graced by here on Earth?"

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The Most Influential Climate-Disaster Thriller of All Time

Twister captivated America and sparked a subgenre. Its director thought it could never be remade. Can Twisters conjure the energy of the original?

by Shirley Li

Lee Isaac Chung was a junior in high school in 1996 when he and his father walked into a theater in Fayetteville, Arkansas, to watch a movie about tornadoes. Chung was skeptical of the premise. *How could you make a whole movie about this?* he wondered. *If a tornado comes, you just run and hide.*

Throughout his childhood, when tornado season descended upon rural Arkansas, Chung would head outside to gaze at approaching storms. He found the buildup irresistible—the darkening skies, the shifting temperatures, the way the air itself seemed to change. “I would stay out there until it started raining,” he told me recently. “The adults are grabbing all the stuff, and I’m just standing out there, like . . .” He demonstrated: neck craned upward, eyes open wide, arms outstretched as if ready to catch the clouds.

Generally, though, a tornado warning meant boredom more than thrills. The first time his family heeded one, they piled into his father's pickup truck at two in the morning, ready to leap out and duck into a ditch if a twister got too close. Waiting inside the truck, Chung fell asleep. The funnel never arrived. Hours later, he woke up and asked his sister if the whole experience had been a dream.

But that day in 1996, the movie *Twister* mesmerized him. He watched a vortex tear apart a drive-in theater and a cow get lifted into the air, mooing mournfully as it soared. More than anything, Chung was compelled by the movie's storm-chaser heroes. Like his boyhood self, they were awestruck by the uncontrollable forces before them. Unlike his family, they rushed toward the danger.

Chung was compelled by *Twister*'s storm-chaser heroes. Like his boyhood self, they were awestruck by the uncontrollable forces before them.

[Twister captivated America, too.](#) It was the [second-highest-grossing movie of the year](#) (behind *Independence Day*) and helped launch a series of climate-centric movies—*The Perfect Storm*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *2012*—that swallowed fishing boats, leveled cities, and demolished landmarks.

Directed by Jan de Bont, who'd previously made the thriller *Speed*, *Twister* arrived in the golden days of CGI: Dinosaurs had been resurrected in *Jurassic Park* (1993), and one year after *Twister*, a massive ocean liner would splinter into the sea in *Titanic*. De Bont made the most of the rapidly improving digital tools, while also relying on the analog special effects of his earlier career. “When things fell from the sky, there were real things falling from a helicopter,” de Bont [told an interviewer last summer](#). “If you film a car escaping a tornado in a hailstorm, it was real ice that came at us. It’s a movie that cannot be remade.” Perhaps not, but nearly three decades after *Twister*'s release, the film is getting an update called *Twisters*—and Lee Isaac Chung is directing it.



Lee Isaac Chung in May 2024 (Photograph by Philip Cheung for *The Atlantic*)

Chung is an unlikely choice for the job. His previous movies have mostly been quiet character studies. In his debut feature, 2007's *Munyurangabo*, two friends [travel across Rwanda years after the genocide there](#). Without depicting the violence in their families' past, Chung traces how unspoken pain frays their friendship. Despite stellar reviews—Roger Ebert called *Munyurangabo* a “[masterpiece](#)”—what followed was a decade of making micro-budget indie movies. Then, in 2018, Chung accepted a job teaching filmmaking, believing that his time behind the camera was coming to an end. But first he wrote one more screenplay, in which he set out to tackle “the thing that matters to me the most”: the story of how his parents, South Korean immigrants, built a home in a place they struggled to fully understand.

Minari (2020) is [based on Chung’s childhood in the 1980s](#), when his father settled their family in Arkansas to start a farm. The movie, which ends in a devastating fire that nearly destroys the livelihood the family has worked so hard to build, is a delicate portrait of the sometimes bitter realities of chasing the American dream. It was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, and Chung was nominated for Best Director and Best Original Screenplay.

Chung recognizes how bizarre it must seem that his follow-up project is *Twisters*. He remembers seeing online commenters wondering what he could possibly get from taking on such popcorn fare, aside from a sizable paycheck. But his decision to make *Twisters* is a surprise, he told me, only to people who haven’t seen his work. “You know,” he said, smiling, “*Minari* is like a disaster movie, but on a smaller scale.”

In the original *Twister*, Jo Harding (played by Helen Hunt) is a professor who reunites with her estranged meteorologist husband, Bill (Bill Paxton), to test out his prototype for a new tornado-data-gathering device on a uniquely powerful cyclone. Part of the movie’s appeal is the infectious camaraderie of its ragtag crew of storm chasers (including two played by Philip Seymour Hoffman and Alan Ruck). But *Twister* is a thriller, not a character study—backstory and dialogue are mostly in service to the action.



Bill Paxton and Helen Hunt in *Twister*, 1996 (Everett Collection)

To get the job directing *Twisters*, Chung had to pitch his vision for the film to its producers, including one of his childhood heroes: Steven Spielberg. Chung explained that he imagined the movie as something more than a frenetic natural-disaster story. To him, the original *Twister* was a comedy of remarriage between Hunt's and Paxton's characters; he wanted *Twisters* to draw its own tension (and occasional levity) from the shifting interpersonal dynamics at its center.

The new movie centers on Kate (Daisy Edgar-Jones), a meteorologist traumatized by a past brush with a particularly vicious tornado. When she returns to Oklahoma to help a former classmate, Javi (Anthony Ramos), on a mission to plant data-tracking radar devices near tornadoes, she struggles to overcome her fear of the storms that are now her life's work. Little by little, her bond with Javi and her evolving friendship with Javi's rival storm chaser, Tyler (Glen Powell), help her rediscover her purpose. "The twisters are there to challenge the characters, drawing out their fears and testing their courage," Spielberg told me in an email. "Isaac and I talked about the power of these storms as background for the characters to explore their relationships."

Of course, the movie only works if it also delivers the pulse-quickenng action of the original, a style of directing that Chung had to learn. To prepare, he studied how action-film directors he admired—including de Bont and [Top Gun's Tony Scott](#)—used long lenses and shaky camerawork to heighten the “pure energy and intensity” of their set pieces.

Chung understood, too, that a movie about tornadoes would land differently in 2024 than in 1996. Although *Twisters* is far from a climate-change polemic, Chung, who majored in ecology and evolutionary biology at Yale, sought to base his film in an atmosphere of heightened anxiety about extreme weather. Kate's mother (Maura Tierney), a hard-bitten farmer, is convinced that there are more tornado outbreaks than ever before. Chung incorporated actual climate science as well, foregrounding new technologies that have emerged alongside the global rise in extreme-weather events. Javi's mission to create three-dimensional maps of tornado structures using

radar data, for instance, is based on a real initiative to improve weather-forecasting models.

One morning in April, I visited Chung at his office in Los Angeles, where he was editing the movie. In the hallway hung a poster displaying the [Enhanced Fujita scale](#), which measures a tornado's intensity from EF0 to EF5—EF5 being, as any *Twister* fan knows, the kind that rips telephone poles from the ground and sends tractors hurtling through the air. With the film's release date approaching, the staff had added a magnet reading We Are Here to the chart as a way to track their collective stress level. When Chung and I walked by the poster, he slid the magnet a smidge closer to EF0. It was a tranquil day.

The making of *Twisters* was less serene. Though the funnels themselves would be inserted digitally, Chung pushed to film in Oklahoma so he could shoot overcast skies during tornado season. But this meant that actual tornadoes caused frequent delays, forcing cast and crew to halt production and hunker down until a storm passed.

And then, two months into the shoot, Chung faced a personal tragedy: His father died suddenly. He was devastated; he'd chosen to make *Twisters* in part because his father had loved the original. The Hollywood strikes started soon after his father's death, giving Chung time to mourn. When he returned to set, he found it helpful to carve out moments to pray—for his family, and for perspective on the daily challenges of filmmaking. He'd grown up religious, attending church regularly, and he took solace in prayer. "It crystallized for me on *Twisters* that I had to rely on faith a lot more," Chung said. "I do feel like I surrender to something much bigger than me."

The more tumultuous things became on set, the more Chung found he had to let go. As Steven Yeun, who played the patriarch in *Minari*, told me, Chung "is someone who has control and is willing to relinquish control at the same time."



Steven Yeun (*left*) in *Minari*, 2020 (Josh Ethan Johnson / Courtesy of A24)

In some ways, Chung’s movie is a classic thriller in the *Twister* mold. It’s undeniably fun, with harrowing, windswept action scenes. Chung channeled de Bont in mixing computer animation and practical effects—including pelting actors with real ice—to re-create the visceral feel of the original. But he was also at pains to make his own movie. He told me he had to dissuade his crew from inserting distracting callbacks to the old film. “Everybody has been trying to sneak a cow into this movie, and I’ve been systematically removing them,” he said with a laugh. He kept just one blink-and-you’ll-miss-it shot of flying livestock for hard-core fans to find.

The final film feels distinctly Chung’s. *Twisters* dramatizes the turbulence of his characters’ relationships, and their individual arcs of self-discovery, as much as the building storms. Daisy Edgar-Jones recalled how much thought Chung put into Kate’s trajectory—his determination, “amongst all of the kind of fun and the thrill, to also find that really human story of a person who’s grieving and who’s dealing with PTSD and heartbreak.” On-screen, she conveys an unusual vulnerability and depth for a thriller heroine.

Chung also gives the movie a vivid sense of place. He pushed to stage scenes on a farm and at a rodeo, spaces he remembered from his youth. After leaving Arkansas, Chung had discovered how often people misunderstand rural America; he wanted to depict the toughness and resilience he'd seen during his childhood, "to get this right for back home." In one scene, Glen Powell told me, Chung asked him to say the word *home* as if his character, a researcher and YouTuber who frequently drives straight into the middle of storms to livestream the chaos, was surprised by how much the idea meant to him. "It became the seed I built a lot of my character off of," Powell said. The movie, he added, "is really about pride in this place, pride that you stay in a place in which danger can fall from the sky at any point."



Daisy Edgar-Jones, Anthony Ramos, and Glen Powell in *Twisters*, 2024
(Melinda Sue Gordon / Universal Pictures / Warner Bros. Pictures & Amblin Entertainment)

Before a screening at the end of April, Chung asked the sound team to incorporate more seasonal bug noises—crickets, grasshoppers—into a sequence of Kate driving home to her mother's farm. As the new mix

played, Chung felt transported to his childhood as well as to the moment when he'd filmed the scene last summer. It had been his father's birthday, he told me, and they'd spoken on the phone. Watching the scene again, he was hit by a wave of emotion. "I just lost it while I was watching the movie, and I kind of felt like, *Well, I needed that,*" he said. "I needed to realize how personal this thing is to me."

Around the postproduction offices, Chung has sketched several doodles of the film's characters, peeking out cheerfully from the corners of whiteboards. On the wall in one office, his 10-year-old daughter added her own stick figure: Chung admiring a tornado, a grin stretching across his face. In her rendering of her father, his arms are outstretched, as if he's about to catch the twister himself.

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Stop Trying to Understand Kafka

His parables aren't supposed to make sense.

by Judith Shulevitz



The rabbis of the Talmud taught in parables, fanciful tales meant to illustrate moral principles. *To what may a parable be compared?* one of them once asked, that being the form of most rabbinical questions. *To a cheap candle used by a king to find a gold coin. With just one modest anecdote, you may fathom the Torah!*

Jesus taught in parables too—which is not surprising, given that he was also a rabbi of sorts. *Why do you speak to the people in parables?* his disciples ask him in Matthew 13:10–17, after he has just preached one to large

crowds. *Because they don't understand them*, he responds, offering one of the most mystifying explanations in the Gospels: *Seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear*. But you disciples, Jesus says, addressing his loyal followers, rank among the initiated and know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, so you do understand my parables, and can learn from them: *To he who has, more will be given, but from he who has not, more will be taken.*

Franz Kafka wasn't a rabbi, exactly, but he is the [high priest of 20th-century literature](#), and he also wrote in parables. In a brief one called "On Parables," he asks, in effect, what they're good for. Why do sages feel obliged to illustrate their principles with tales, requiring their listeners to, as he puts it, "go over" to another world? Kafka answers: The sages don't mean that we should go to "some actual place," but rather to "some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore cannot help us here in the least." In short, even the sage can't articulate the meaning of his own parables, and so they're useless to us. "All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible."

The rabbis say that parables teach Torah. Jesus says that only the seeker for truth can understand parables. Kafka says no one can. It's a strange claim for a storyteller to make. To what may Kafka's pessimism be compared? To his parable "An Imperial Message." A dying emperor entrusts a messenger with a message meant for you and you alone. The man is strong; he clears a path easily through the gathered throng. But the crowds and the courtyards multiply: "He is still pressing through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he prevail; and were he to succeed at this, nothing would have been gained: he would have to fight his way down the steps; and were he to succeed at this, nothing would be gained." And so it goes for thousands of years. And you? You "sit at your window and dream" of the message that never comes.

Kafka died a century ago this year at the age of 40, and since then a mighty industry has arisen to deliver all of the messages that Kafka said would never be delivered. Interpretation requires context, and so the enigmatic missives that he sent from his alternate universe are always being claimed by one tradition or other. Many German writers, including Thomas Mann, greatly admired Kafka's prose; Kurt Tucholsky, Weimar Germany's leading

political commentator and cultural critic, called it “the best classical German of our time.” This was a high honor for a Czech writer, and the German Literature Archive [fought to acquire a trove of his manuscripts on the grounds that he was a great German writer](#). Kafka’s [first English-language translators](#), Edwin and Willa Muir, theologized him as a Christian pilgrim in search of salvation. John Updike praised him for escaping narrow sectarianism: “Kafka, however unmistakable the ethnic source of his ‘liveliness’ and alienation, avoided Jewish parochialism.” Nonsense, Cynthia Ozick retorted: “Nothing could be more wrong-headed than this parched Protestant misapprehension of Mitteleuropa’s tormented Jewish psyche.”

[From the September 2018 issue: Adam Kirsch on who gets to claim Kafka](#)

On the whole, Ozick is right. Kafka couldn’t have avoided his Jewish parochialism had he wanted to, which he didn’t. The bourgeois Jewish Prague he was born into aspired to assimilation but couldn’t pull it off, defeated by a rising roar of Czech anti-Semitism. His parents never quashed the traces of their shtetl childhood. Kafka himself had no formal Jewish education, but in his 20s, he developed a passion for Jewish culture. He embraced Yiddish theater, moved in a circle of Zionist intellectuals, steeped himself in Jewish classical texts—Bible, Talmud, Kabbalah—and Hasidic folklore. By the end of his life, he had a decent command of Hebrew.

The rabbis say that parables teach Torah. Jesus says that only the seeker for truth can understand parables. Kafka says no one can.

But Ozick is also wrong. Kafka is universalist in his particularism. His themes—alienation, shame, exile, tradition and the lack thereof, revelation and the lack thereof, the crushing power of the law—are both very Jewish and post-theological, the leitmotifs of our time. Kafka’s stories are Jewish the way the Old Testament is Jewish. That is, it’s also Christian, and it speaks even more generally to the human condition, and to a great deal besides that. Both Kafka and the Bible are inexhaustible sources of meaning because they overflow any box we build around them. They exist on a plane of Western consciousness so formative of ours today that they seem to come from everywhere and nowhere.

As it happens, Kafka writes in a biblical manner. The Hebrew Bible's authors exerted a subtractive force on him. His protagonists are not flat, exactly, but not round, either. Like Joseph, Moses, the patriarchs and matriarchs, they don't engage in introspection, which is not to say that they lack interiority, just that we don't hear about it. And Kafka starves his prose until it is as stark as scripture. He uses a limited vocabulary, abstains from metaphor, and stints on the random details that create what the literary theorist Roland Barthes called the "reality effect."

Kafka's friend Max Brod once regaled him with the overwrought language of a supernatural tale he was reading, and he replied with a line of poetry that expressed his idea of beauty: "The smell of wet stones in a hallway." (That's from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "The Conversation About Poems," 1903.) Over the years, Kafka's settings became ever more generic and abstract—figurative deserts, as it were. So when Kafka homes in on some striking particular, such as the fleas on the doorkeeper's collar in the story "Before the Law," the absence of other details makes that one radiant with meaning.

A curious feature of Kafka's prose is that, pared down though its lexicon may be, it resists translation. There's a good reason for that. Dictionaries supply more definitions for basic words than for those of greater complexity because simpler ones are the roots of vast family trees of words; plain language signifies promiscuously. How, as a translator, do you convey a multitude of implications as well as a narrow contextual meaning at the same time?

The Czech novelist Milan Kundera gave a famously dyspeptic answer to that question: The translator should translate humbly. In a 1993 essay, he berates those who try to liven up Kafka's deceptively dull, repetitive prose to conform to conventions of literary excellence. "Every author of some value *transgresses* against 'good style' and in that transgression lies the originality (and hence the *raison d'être*) of his art," Kundera writes. Translators don't want to sound colorless, so they're willfully colorful; Kundera disdainfully calls this "synonymizing."

Mark Harman, who has translated Kafka's *Amerika: The Missing Person, The Castle*, and now a new collection of selected stories, does not

synonymize. The most consequential simplification in the volume is a small fix. He changes the title of the novella we know as *The Metamorphosis* to *The Transformation*, a literal translation of the German title *Die Verwandlung*. *Transformation* is one of the story's important repetitions. Kafka uses it again in the very first sentence: "One morning when Gregor Samsa awoke in his bed from restless dreams he found himself transformed into a monstrous insect."

Putting *transformation* back into the title opens up new dimensions in the story—new, that is, to English-language readers. *Metamorphosis* doesn't just mean change; it means a change in form or structure. It carries an echo of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, whose characters undergo bodily transmutations into things, animals, and plants. By getting rid of the morphological implication, Harman reveals less concrete transformations. Before Gregor Samsa woke up as a beetle-like creature, he supported his family, which must now become self-sufficient because he can no longer work. His sweet, sheltered sister gets a job at a shop and gains the confidence to adopt a forceful tone with her parents. His father, a defeated man since his business failed, goes to work as a factotum in a bank, wearing a blue uniform with gold buttons. The uniform instills in him a quasi-military pride. The stronger the family gets, the more it neglects the monstrous Gregor; his sister grows actively hostile toward him. As Gregor's situation declines, the family's improves. There is not one transformation, but many.

The unspecificity of *transformation* also retains a crucial mystery: What exactly does Gregor turn into? Kafka insisted that the question go unanswered. Fearing that an illustrator might propose to draw Gregor, Kafka wrote to his publisher, "Not that, please not that! ... The insect itself cannot be depicted. It cannot even be shown from a distance." If the title no longer tells us that Gregor has taken a new shape, we can't be sure that he really has, as opposed to, say, that he is suffering a hallucinatory dysmorphia or the misfortune of having been thrust into some other, abhorrent, hybrid reality. Perhaps we all have an insect nature. We're talking about an animal fable here.

Another challenge for a translator is *Ungeziefer*, the unrepresentable creature that Gregor turns into. How to convey the correct shade of meaning, and set up a later ironic reversal? *Ungeziefer* means "vermin." That's an insult, not

an entomological term. It refers to any living thing deemed loathsome—bugs, yes, but also mice (which terrified Kafka) and people. Some German Bibles use *Ungeziefer* for the creatures that swarm Pharaoh's palace during the fourth plague. Hitler used it for Jews. (Kafka was mercifully dead by then.) Various translators have used *vermin*—“a monstrous vermin,” “some sort of monstrous vermin”—but somehow the phrase is always awkward. The difficulty, in English, is that *vermin* is primarily a collective noun; you can't really say that Gregor woke up as “a vermin.”

[From the July/August 2013 issue: Is Franz Kafka overrated?](#)

Harman offers “insect,” because Kafka called Gregor that in his letter to his publisher. *Insect* is vague but not vague enough; it leaves out the element of revulsion and makes the new Gregor too identifiable. The poet and translator Michael Hofmann settled on “cockroach”—a mistake. Vladimir Nabokov, who knew his arthropods, demonstrated conclusively that Gregor could not have been a cockroach: “A cockroach is an insect that is flat in shape with large legs, and Gregor is anything but flat: he is convex on both sides, belly and back, and his legs are small.” There is no perfect solution.

The ironic reversal that *vermin* makes possible hinges on repetitions of *Zischen*, “hiss.” It first appears on the day of Gregor’s transformation. His father, enraged that the *Ungeziefer* has come out of his room, drives him back into it with a walking stick and the loud hisses, *Zischlaute*, of a wild man or beast, *ein Wilder*—the *wild* in *Wilder* suggesting something feral, excluded from human society. The horrible, insistent hissing—variations on *Zischen* occur twice more in the scene—terrifies Gregor. Weeks later, in acute pain from an apple lodged in his back after his father threw it at him, Gregor grows furious at his family, which is squabbling violently, and hisses loudly at them. (They ignore him.) That Gregor is now hissing loudly tells us that he has been reduced to his father’s level. He has become *ein Wilder* too. And that raises the most important question in the novella: Who was the *Ungeziefer* all along—Gregor or his father?

Repetitions like *hiss* and *transform* are good examples of a biblical technique written about extensively by two of Kafka’s contemporaries, the great Jewish philosophers Martin Buber (Kafka’s friend) and Franz Rosenzweig, who rendered the Hebrew Bible into a beautifully Hebraized

German. Their theory of biblical style turned on the notion of key words that were repeated, with variation, throughout a scene or across a book; when strung together, these form the basis of a “higher meaning,” as Buber put it. They must be translated very carefully, according to the philosophers, because they effectively serve as conduits from the surface of the text to a subterranean narrative, often with important spiritual undertones. Miss one, and you may miss the whole story.

Kafka’s best-known parable is probably “Before the Law,” which appears in *The Trial* but is sometimes also published as a stand-alone story. Harman illustrates the importance of key words—this time by negative example. Here, Harman uses the same word throughout when he should have noted a very subtle shift at the end. A doorkeeper stands before the law. A man from the country comes and asks to enter. Harman translates the request as one for “admission,” but the German word, *Eintritt*, is more neutral than that. It means “entry”—literally, a stepping-into. *Eintritt* does not anticipate the need for the doorkeeper’s explicit permission. But the doorkeeper says no, he cannot go in.

The man importunes the doorkeeper again and again. The years go by, and the man is on the verge of death. Just before he dies, he asks the doorkeeper one last question: “Everyone strives towards the law … How is it that during those many years no one except for me requested admission?” Harman’s “admission” is now a translation of *Einlass*, and a correct one: *Einlass* does indeed convey the sense of being let in, admitted, by someone—the doorkeeper in this case. In other words, a straightforward request to enter has degenerated into an abject plea for permission. By failing to register the slight yet telling shift from *entry* to *admission*, Harman glosses over the debasement of the man’s spiritual condition.

So is God evil? a friend asked Kafka. Not at all, Kafka said. He just has bad moods.

The doorkeeper then answers the man’s question with one of the most memorable paradoxes in literary history: “Nobody else could be admitted here since this entrance was intended for you alone. I shall go now and close it.” If the entrance was always meant to be his, does this mean that he had never needed to ask to enter in the first place, let alone beg for permission?

One could dream up endless interpretations; in *The Trial*, the parable occasions a confounding display of exegetical prowess by a priest. One thing we know for sure, however, is that we will never know for sure. The messenger never arrives. The door slams. As the cultural critic Walter Benjamin [wrote in an essay on Kafka](#), “His parables are never exhausted by what is explainable; on the contrary, he took all conceivable precautions against the interpretation of his writings.”

It would be foolish to claim that Kafka learned his metaphysical wordplay from Jewish texts alone. He read widely: Gustave Flaubert, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. He admired the understated prose of Anton Chekhov and Heinrich von Kleist. He read literary magazines that published cutting-edge work, too. Still, his regular reading of the Bible—nightly, during some periods of his life—contributed a laconic quality to his classical prose that doesn’t make him anachronistic; it makes him original. From 1912 to 1924, when other modernist writers were embracing Freud, and James Joyce was experimenting with stream of consciousness, Kafka was choosing surface over depth psychology. Or, you might say, he was keeping the same tactful distance from his characters as the biblical narrator did from his.

Jews and Christians are People of the Book, preoccupied with narrative and language—with the truths they provide access to, the conversation with God they facilitate. By the time Kafka began to reach for his tradition, however, truth and God had been swamped by radical doubt. The conversation was no longer to be had. To ask was to be denied an answer: The door is closed.

Benjamin recounts a famous anecdote told by Max Brod: Kafka said to him that people are “nihilist thoughts that came into God’s head.” So is God evil? Brod asked. Not at all, Kafka said. He just has bad moods. Still, is there no hope outside this world? Kafka smiled and offered up another of his paradoxes: “Plenty of hope—for God, an infinite amount of hope—only not for us.” In other words, we’re on our own—though at least we have Kafka to tell us that. He may have turned a literary form that once bound a people to their God into a notice of his absence, but remarking on God’s absence is also a way of making him present. And we have the parables. That’s not hope, exactly, but it’s not nothing.

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The Real ‘Deep State’

Lobbying firms have disguised their influence so well that it’s often barely visible even to savvy Washington insiders.

by Franklin Foer



On March 18, news broke that Donald Trump intended to restore the disgraced lobbyist Paul Manafort to the ranks of his campaign advisers. In any other moral universe, this would have been an unimaginable rehabilitation. Back in 2016, as revelations about Manafort's work on behalf

of pro-Kremlin politicians in Ukraine began appearing in the press, even Trump considered him a figure so toxic that he forced him to resign as chair of his campaign. Two years later, Manafort was locked up in federal prison on charges of tax evasion and money laundering, among other transgressions. His was one of the most precipitous falls in the history of Washington.

But at this stage in that history, it's not remotely shocking to learn that the revolving door continues to turn. By the end of Trump's term, Manafort had already won a presidential pardon. His unwillingness to cooperate with Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation had earned him Trump's unstinting admiration: "Such respect for a brave man," he tweeted. Now it seemed that Manafort's loyalty would be rewarded with the lobbyist's most valuable tool: the perception of access, at an opportune moment.

In early May, under growing media scrutiny for international consulting work that he'd reportedly been involved in after his pardon, Manafort said that he would "[stick to the sidelines](#)," playing a less visible role in supporting Trump. (He'd recently been in Milwaukee, part of meetings about this summer's Republican National Convention programming.) But if Trump wins the election, Manafort won't need 2024 campaign work officially on his résumé to convince corporations and foreign regimes that he can bend U.S. policy on their behalf—and he and his ilk will be able to follow through on such pledges with unimpeded ease. A second Trump term would mark the culmination of the story chronicled by the brothers Luke and Brody Mullins, a pair of energetic reporters, in their absorbing new book, [*The Wolves of K Street: The Secret History of How Big Money Took Over Big Government*](#).

[From the March 2018 issue: Franklin Foer on the origins of Paul Manafort](#)

As Trump dreams about governing a second time, he and his inner circle have declared their intention to purge what they call the "deep state": the civil service that they regard as one of the greatest obstacles to the realization of Trump's agenda. What they don't say is that the definition of the deep state—an entrenched force that wields power regardless of the administration in the White House—now fits the business of lobbying better than it does the faceless bureaucracy. This is the deep state, should Trump

emerge the victor in the fall, that stands to achieve near-total domination of public power.

Lobbying, like Hollywood and Silicon Valley, is a quintessentially American industry. The sector took root along the K Street corridor of gleaming glass-and-steel buildings in downtown D.C. during the 1970s. Though accurately capturing the scale of its growth is hard, a study by George Mason University's Stephen S. Fuller Institute reported that, in 2016, the "advocacy cluster" [employed more than 117,000 workers in metropolitan Washington](#) (that's more than the population of Manchester, New Hampshire). In theory, lobbying is a constitutionally protected form of redressing grievances. Businesses have every right to argue their case in front of government officials whose policies affect their industries. In practice, lobbying has become a pernicious force in national life, courtesy of corporate America, which hugely outspends other constituencies—labor unions, consumer and environmental groups—on an enterprise now dedicated to honing ever more sophisticated methods of shaping public opinion in service of its own ends.

In the late '60s, only about 60 registered lobbyists were working in Washington. Most businesses, during the decades of postwar prosperity, didn't see the point in hiring that sort of help.

The forerunners of the modern lobbyist were Tommy "The Cork" Corcoran, a member of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's brain trust, and Clark Clifford, who ran President Harry Truman's poker games. Both men left jobs in government to become freelance fixers, working on behalf of corporate behemoths (the United Fruit Company, for example, and General Electric). Mystique was essential to their method. Corcoran kept his name out of the phone book and off his office door. If a company was bothered by a nettlesome bureaucrat—or wanted help overthrowing a hostile Central American government—they were the men ready to pick up the phone and make it so.

But Corcoran and Clifford were anomalous figures. In the late '60s, only about 60 registered lobbyists were working in Washington. Most businesses, during the decades of postwar prosperity, didn't see the point in hiring that sort of help. Management was at peace with labor. Corporations paid their taxes, while reaping ample profits. Then along came Ralph Nader, a young

Harvard Law School graduate who ignited the modern consumer movement. By dint of his fervent advocacy, he managed to rally Congress to pass the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act in 1966, which led automakers to install headrests and shatter-resistant windshields. Nader, a scrappy upstart, single-handedly outmaneuvered the great General Motors.

[From the October 1966 issue: Elizabeth Drew on the politics of automobile safety](#)

Slow to register an emerging threat, corporate America sat complacently on the sidelines while an expansive new regulatory state emerged, posing a potential obstacle to business imperatives: The Environmental Protection Agency was established in 1970, followed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration the next year, and the Consumer Product Safety Commission in 1972. Meanwhile, in 1971, a lawyer in Richmond, Virginia, named Lewis Powell urged a counterrevolution, writing a memo that called on the corporate world to build the infrastructure that would cultivate pro-business intellectuals and amass political power to defend the free market. Later that year, Richard Nixon named him to the Supreme Court.

A figure from outside the conservative orbit became the ground commander of the corporate cause in the capital. Tommy Boggs was the son of the legendary Hale Boggs, a Democratic congressman from Louisiana. The Great Society was, in no small measure, Hale's legislative handiwork, and Washington was in Tommy's blood. (As a boy, he ran House Speaker Sam Rayburn's private elevator in the Capitol.) He saw how he could become a successor to Corcoran and Clifford, but on a far grander scale. After a failed run for Congress in 1970, he devoted himself to expanding the lobbying firm Patton Boggs.

Boggs mobilized a grand corporate alliance (including television networks, advertising agencies, and food conglomerates) to roll back the liberal state—and then ferociously used his connections on his clients' behalf. M&M's and Milky Way (he was working for the Mars candy company) were among the beneficiaries of a major victory. Jimmy Carter's Federal Trade Commission had threatened to regulate the advertising of candy and sugar-heavy cereals directed at kids. Boggs sent the deputy editor of *The Washington Post*'s editorial page, Meg Greenfield, material about the horrors of this regulation.

The newspaper then published an editorial with the memorable headline “[The FTC as National Nanny](#). ” Senators thundered against the absurdity of the new vigilance. The FTC abandoned its plans.

Boggs ignited not just a revolution in American government, but a cultural transformation of Washington. Before his ascent, patricians with boarding-school pedigrees sat atop the city’s social hierarchy, disdainful of pecuniary interests and the ostentatious flaunting of wealth. Boggs, very highly paid to work his wonders, rubbed his success in Washington’s face. He would cruise around town in one of the firm’s fleet of luxury cars with a brick-size mobile phone plastered to his face, a cigar dangling from his mouth.

The story that unfolds in *The Wolves of K Street* features an ironic twist: Liberal activists figured out how to mobilize the public to care about important issues and how to inspire them to become democratically engaged. K Street fixers saw this success, then adapted the tactics to serve the interests of corporations. In the Mullinses’ narrative, this evolution found its embodiment in Tony Podesta. An activist who came of age during the anti-war movement of the 1960s and a veteran of George McGovern’s 1972 presidential campaign, Podesta made his name running the TV producer Norman Lear’s group People for the American Way, a progressive counterweight to Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority. In 1987, Podesta helped rally the left to sink Robert Bork, Ronald Reagan’s Supreme Court nominee.

Not long after, Podesta left the world of public-interest advocacy and began to sell his expertise—at first primarily to liberal groups, then almost exclusively to businesses. Using the techniques he learned while working with Lear, he specialized in deploying celebrity figures to influence public attitudes, counting on citizen sentiment to in turn sway politicians. To block the FDA from regulating vitamins in 1993 (his client was a group of dietary-supplement manufacturers), he cut an ad with the actor Mel Gibson that depicted a SWAT team busting him at home for possessing vitamin C. “Call the U.S. Senate and tell them that you want to take your vitamins in peace,” Gibson said in a voice-over.

With stunning speed, Podesta—a bon vivant who went on to amass one of Washington’s most impressive private collections of contemporary art—had gone from excelling in impassioned advocacy to becoming promiscuous in

his choice of client. To fund his lifestyle, the Mullinses write, he helped Lockheed Martin win approval of the sale of F-16s to Pakistan, even though the Indian government, another client of the Podesta Group, opposed the deal. He represented the tire manufacturer Michelin and its competitor Pirelli. Over the objections of his staff, he joined forces with Paul Manafort to polish the image of Viktor Yanukovych, the corrupt pro-Kremlin politician who ruled Ukraine until a revolution ousted him in 2014.

As K Street boomed, the Mullinses show, its denizens remade American life well beyond Washington culture. They report that the firm Black, Manafort, Stone, and Kelly, also a central player in their book, aided the Australian magnate Rupert Murdoch in overcoming regulatory obstacles and extending his corrosive media empire in the United States. In the '80s, the firm became masters at deregulating industries and securing tax breaks for the powerful—\$130 million for Bethlehem Steel, \$58 million for Chrysler, \$38 million for Johnson & Johnson—helping to usher in an age of corporate impunity and gaping inequality.

The Wolves of K Street is full of cautionary tales about the normalization of corruption. Revolving-door practices—leaving government jobs and parlaying insider connections into lucrative lobbying work—became part of the system. Meanwhile, the culture fueled fraudulent self-aggrandizing of the sort on lurid display in the sad case of a relatively fringe figure named Evan Morris. A kid from Queens who first arrived in town as a college intern in the Clinton White House, he quickly grasped that K Street represented the city's best path to power and wealth. He scored a coveted job at Tommy Boggs's firm while in law school, arriving just as lobbyists became essential cogs in a whole new realm: the machinery of electioneering.

The McCain-Feingold Act of 2002—campaign-finance legislation intended to wean the political system off big donors—prevented corporations and individuals from writing massive checks to political parties. Unable to rely as heavily on big donors, campaigns were happy to outsource to lobbyists the arduous job of rounding up smaller contributions from the wealthy: Lobbyists became “bundlers,” in fundraising parlance. As a 20-something, Morris proved to be one of the Democratic Party’s most exuberant solicitors, promising donors VIP access to events that he couldn’t provide, or

intimating that he was asking on behalf of Boggs himself, which he wasn't. Despite his relative inexperience, he managed to schmooze with the likes of Chuck Schumer and Hillary Clinton.

He went on to work for Roche, a Swiss pharmaceutical giant, and hatched a kind of campaign that he described as "black ops." Amid the bird-flu outbreak of 2005, the Mullinses write, he began urging the government to stockpile the antiviral medication that Roche produced. He hired consultants to promote news stories that stoked public panic about the bird flu. He compiled studies touting the benefits of the drug, including some written by people who had at one point received money from Roche. The government bought more than \$1 billion worth of the antiviral.

Morris's job was to bend perception—and he also tried to bend the way that Washington perceived him. In 2009, he was hired to head the Washington office of Genentech, a Roche subsidiary. He became relentlessly acquisitive: three Porsches, multiple Cartiers and Rolexes, humidors filled with the finest cigars. Apparently, many of Morris's extravagant purchases were bought with Genentech's money, including a condo in San Francisco and a GMC Yukon.

Such a brazen scheme didn't escape his superiors' notice. While being presented by investigators with damning evidence of his malfeasance, Morris left the room to take a bathroom break and never returned. That afternoon, he went to the Robert Trent Jones Golf Club in Gainesville, Virginia, which he had paid a \$150,000 initiation fee to join. That night, he retreated to a quiet corner of the club grounds and shot himself with a Smith & Wesson revolver. He was 38.

Yet such downfall narratives feel strangely dissonant. Although a handful of lobbyists may suffer a dramatic tumble from grace, the industry itself does nothing but boom. Each time a new reform surfaces, aimed at curtailing K Street's power, influence peddlers figure out how to exploit the rules for greater influence and profit. Although Trump promised to drain this swamp, the swamp flourished. From 2016 to 2018, spending on K Street [increased 9 percent](#), rising to \$3.5 billion.

Washington lobbying firms have ballooned into conglomerates, resembling the multinational corporations that hire them. K Street currently consists of data analysts, pollsters, social-media mavens, crisis managers, grassroots organizers. Lobbying firms are one-stop shops for manipulating opinion—and are experts at image management, including their own: Their employees' business cards identify them as "consultants" and "strategists," now that everyone associates lobbying with sleaze.

Lobbying has disguised itself so well that it is often barely visible even to savvy Washington insiders. The Mullinses tell the story of Jim Courtovich, the head of a boutique public-relations firm and a close collaborator of Evan Morris's. Courtovich's business plan featured splashy parties that attracted top journalists and other prominent figures with whom he hoped to trade favors. Mingling with the media, the Mullinses write, Courtovich encouraged stories that might help his clients; in one case they cite, the goal was to damage a Saudi client's rival. Starting in the fall of 2015, many such gatherings were hosted at a house his firm owned on Capitol Hill; presumably, the reporters who attended them had no idea that Saudi investors had financed the purchase of the building. In 2016, the authors note, Courtovich began working for the Saudi-government official who would later allegedly orchestrate the murder of *The Washington Post*'s Jamal Khashoggi, a colleague of the journalists he assiduously cultivated.

As lobbying has matured, it has grown ever more adept at turning government into a profit center for its clients. Even Big Tech, which once treated Washington with disdainful detachment, seems to have felt the irresistible, lobbyist-enabled pull of chunky contracts with the feds. Such possibilities were part of the pitch to Amazon, for example, to erect a second corporate headquarters in Crystal City, Virginia, enticed by the prospect of pursuing multibillion-dollar contracts with the likes of the CIA and the Pentagon. (Amazon has said that political considerations played no part in the company's decision.)

For eager beneficiaries of government largesse—not to mention for their equally wolfish facilitators—a second Trump administration would represent a bonanza, unprecedented in the history of K Street. Trump's plan to overturn a bureaucratic ethos that has prevailed since the late 19th century—according to which good government requires disinterested experts, more

loyal to the principles of public stewardship than to any politician—opens the way to installing cronies who will serve as handmaidens of K Street. The civil service, however beleaguered, has acted as an imperfect bulwark against the assault of corporate interests. Its replacement would be something close to the opposite. The hacks recruited to populate government departments will be primed to fulfill the desires of campaign donors and those who pay tribute to the president; they will trade favors with lobbyists who dangle the prospect of future employment in front of them. This new coterie of bureaucrats would wreck the competence of the administrative state—and the wolves of K Street will feast on the carcass of responsible governance.

This article appears in the [July/August 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Industry That Ate America.”

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Rachel Cusk's Lonely Experiment

First she abandoned plot in her fiction; now characters must go.

by Nicholas Dames



Start, as one tends to do in Rachel Cusk's writing, with a house. It is not yours, but instead a farmhouse on the island property to which you have come as a renting vacationer. It has no obvious front door, and how you enter it, or whether you are welcome to do so, isn't clear. You are, after all,

only a visitor. Built out in haphazard fashion, the house seems both neglected and fussed over, and as a result slightly mad. A small door, once located, opens to reveal two rooms. The first, although generously proportioned and well lit, shocks you with its disorder, the riotous and yet deadening clutter of a hoarder. As you navigate carefully through it, the sound of women's voices leads you to a second room. It is the kitchen, where the owner's wife, a young girl, and an old woman—three generations of female labor—prepare food in a clean and functional space. When you enter, they fall silent and seem to share a secret. They consent to rather than encourage your presence, but here you will be fed. Of the first room, the owner's wife comments dryly that it is her husband's: "I'm not allowed to interfere with anything here."

This is a moment from *Parade*, Cusk's new book, and like so much in this novel of elusive vignettes, it can be seen as an allegory about both fiction and the gendered shapes of selfhood. After reading *Parade*, you might be tempted to imagine the history of the novel as a cyclical battle between accumulation and erasure, or hoarders and cleaners. For the hoarders, the ethos is to capture as much life as possible: objects, atmospheres, ideologies, social types and conventions, the habits and habitudes of selves. For the cleaners, all of that detail leaves us no space to move or breathe. The hoarder novel may preserve, but the cleaner novel liberates. And that labor of cleaning, of revealing the bare surfaces under the accumulated clutter of our lives and opening up space for creation and nourishment, is women's work. Or so Cusk's allegory invites us to feel.

Gustave Flaubert once notoriously commented that he wanted to write “a book about nothing”; Cusk wants to write a book about no one.

Whether or not the typology of hoarder and cleaner is useful in general, it has licensed Cusk to push her style toward ever greater sparseness. For the past decade, since 2014's *Outline*, Cusk has been clearing [a path unlike any other](#) in English-language fiction, one that seems to follow a rigorous internal logic about the confinements of genre and gender alike. That logic, now her signature, has been one of purgation. The trilogy that *Outline* inaugurated (followed by *Transit* and *Kudos*) scrubbed away plot to foreground pitiless observation of how we represent, justify, and unwittingly betray ourselves to others. Each of these lauded novels is a gallery of human

types in which the writer-narrator, Faye, wanders; finding herself the recipient of other people's talkative unburdening, she simply notices—a noticing that, in its acuity and gift for condensed expression, is anything but simple. Cusk's follow-up, 2021's *Second Place*, is a psychodrama about artistic production that sacrifices realistic world making for the starkness of fable.

Read: Has Rachel Cusk reached the limits of the English sentence?

Now, in *Parade*, the element to be swept away is character itself. Gustave Flaubert once notoriously commented that he wanted to write “a book about nothing”; Cusk wants to write a book about no one. No more identities, no more social roles, even no more imperatives of the body—a clearing of the ground that has, as Cusk insists, particular urgency for writing by women, who have always had to confront the limits to their autonomy in their quests to think and create. The question *Parade* poses is what, after such drastic removal, is left standing.

If this sounds abstract, it should—Cusk’s aim is abstraction itself. *Parade* sets out to go beyond the novel’s habitual concretion, to undo our attachment to the stability of selfhood and its social markers. We are caught by our familiar impulses; trapped within social and familial patterns and scripts; compelled, repelled, or both by the stories of how we came to be. What if one didn’t hear oneself, nauseatingly, in everything one said and did, but instead heard something alien and new? This is Cusk’s negative theology of the self, a desire to imagine lives perfectly unconditioned and undetermined, no longer shaped by history, culture, or even psychological continuity—and therefore free from loss, and from loss’s twin, progress. It is a radical program, and a solitary one.

To be concrete for a moment: The book comes in four titled units. Its strands are not so much nested as layered, peeling apart in one’s hands like something delicate and brittle. What binds them together is the recurring appearance of an artist named “G,” who is transformed in each part, sometimes taking multiple forms in the same unit. G can be male or female, alive or dead, in the foreground or the background, but G always, tellingly, gravitates toward visual forms rather than literary forms: *Parade* is in love with the promise of freedom from narrative and from causality that is

offered by visual representation. We remain outside G, observing the figure from various distances, never with the intimacy of an “I” speaking to us. G is sometimes tethered to the history of art: *Parade* begins by describing G creating upside-down paintings (a clear reference to the work of Georg Baselitz, though he goes unnamed); a later G is palpably derived from Louise Bourgeois, the subject of an exhibition that figures in two different moments in the novel. Yet G tends to float free of these tethers, which threaten to specify what Cusk prefers to render abstractly.

[From the January/February 2017 issue: Rachel Cusk remakes her fiction in *Transit*](#)

Cusk imagines a series of scenarios for G, often as the maker of artworks viewed and discussed by others with alarm, admiration, or blasé art-world sophistication. When the shape-shifting G moves into the foreground, shards of personal life surface. As a male painter, G makes nude portraits of his wife that lurch into grotesquerie, imprisoning her while gaining him fame. As a female painter, she finds herself, as if by some kind of dark magic, encumbered with a husband and child. Another G abandons fiction for filmmaking, refusing the knowingness of language for the unsolved innocence of the camera: “He wanted simply to record.” Whatever changes in each avatar—G’s gender; G’s historical moment; whether we share G’s thoughts, see G through their intimates, or merely stand in front of G’s work—the differences evaporate in the dry atmosphere that prevails in *Parade*. G, whoever the figure is, wants to disencumber their art of selfhood. So we get not stories but fragmented capsule biographies, written with an uncanny, beyond-the-grave neutrality, each of them capturing a person untying themselves from the world, casting off jobs, lovers, families.

People on their way out of their selves: This is what interests Cusk. From a man named Thomas who has just resigned his teaching job, putting at risk his family finances as well as his wife’s occupation as a poet, we hear this: “I seem to be doing a lot of things these days that are out of character. I am perhaps coming out of character, he said, like an actor does.” The tone is limpid, alienated from itself. “I don’t know what I will do or what I will be. For the first time in my life I am free.” Free not just from the story, but even from the sound of himself, the Thomasness of Thomas.

Parade's hollowed-out figures have the sober, disembodied grace of someone who, emerging from a purification ritual, awaits a promised epiphany. The female painter G, having left behind her daughter with a father whose sexualized photographs of the daughter once lined the rooms of their home, is herself left behind, sitting alone in the dark of her studio: This is as far as Cusk will bring her. They've departed, these people, been purged and shorn, but have not yet arrived anywhere, and they stretch out their hands in longing for the far shore and lapse into an austere, between-worlds silence. Cusk observes an even more disciplined tact than she did in *Outline*. If regret lurks in their escapes—about time wasted, people discarded, uncertainty to come—Cusk won't indulge it. She seems to be not describing her figures so much as joining them, sharing their desire, a kind of hunger for unreality, a yearning for the empty, unmappable spaces outside identity. The result is an intensified asceticism. Her sentences are as precise as always, but stingless, the edges of irony sanded down.

What Cusk has relinquished, as if in a kind of penance, is her curiosity. Even at its most austere, her previous work displayed a fascination with the experience of encountering others. That desire was not always distinguishable from gossip, and certainly not free of judgment, but was expressed in an openness to the eccentricities of others as a source of danger, delight, and revelation. These encounters appealed to a reader's pleasure in both the teasing mystery of others and the ways they become knowable. In *Parade*, Cusk seems to find this former curiosity more than a little vulgar, too invested in what she calls here "the pathos of identity."

Nothing illustrates this new flatness better than "The Diver," *Parade*'s third section. A group of well-connected art-world people—a museum director, a biographer, a curator, an array of scholars—gathers for dinner in an unnamed German city after the first day of a major retrospective exhibition of the Louise Bourgeois-like G. The opening has been spoiled, however, by an incident: A man has committed suicide in the exhibition's galleries by jumping from an atrium walkway. (It is one of the novel's very few incidents, and it occurs discreetly offstage.) The diners collect their thoughts after their derailed day, ruminating on the connections between the suicide and the art amid which it took place, on the urge to leap out of our self-imposed restraints—out of our very embodiment.

Their conversation is detached, a bit stunned, but nonetheless expansive: These are practiced, professional talkers. The scene is also strangely colorless. In discussing the hunger to lose an identity, each speaker has already been divested of their own, and the result is a language that sounds closer to the textureless theory-Esperanto of museum wall text. The director weighs in: “Some of G’s pieces, she said, also utilise this quality of suspension in achieving disembodiment, which for me at times seems the furthest one can go in representing the body itself.” Someone else takes a turn: “The struggle, he said, which is sometimes a direct combat, between the search for completeness and the desire to create art therefore becomes a core part of the artist’s development.”

It is politely distanced, this after-suicide dinner in its barely specified upper-bourgeois setting, and all of the guests are very like-minded. The interlude generates no friction of moral evaluation and conveys no satiric view of the quietly distressed, professionally established figures who theorize about art and death. What one misses here is the constitutive irony of the *Outline* trilogy, the sense that these people might be giving themselves away to our prurient eyes and ears. One wants to ask any of *Parade*’s figures what anguish or panic or rage lies behind their desire to cease being a person—what struggle got them here.

If *Parade* feels too pallid to hold a reader’s attention, that is because it tends to resist answering these questions. But abstraction’s hold on Cusk isn’t quite complete, not yet, and she has one answer still to give: You got here because you were mothered. The book comes alive when Cusk turns to the mother-child relationship—a core preoccupation of hers—and transforms it into an all-encompassing theory of why identity hampers and hurts, a problem now of personhood itself as much as of the constraints that motherhood places on women. Every one of *Parade*’s scenarios features mothers, fleeing and being fled. Between mother and child is the inescapable agony of reciprocal creation. The mother weaves for her child a self; the child glues the mask of maternity onto the mother’s face. They cannot help wanting to run from what they’ve each made, despite the pain that flight exacts on the other. And so, pulling at and away from each other, mother and child learn the hardest truth: Every escape is bought at the expense of struggle and loss for both the self and someone else. Cusk is, as always, tough; she insists on the cost.

This is where *Parade* betrays some sign of turbulence beneath its detachment. [The novel's concluding section](#) begins with the funeral of a mother, of whom we hear this, narrated in the collective “we” of her children: “The coffin was shocking, and this must always be the case, whether or not one disliked being confined to the facts as much as our mother had.” A knotty feeling emerges in this strand, sharp and funny—the angry rush of needs caught in the act of being denied, both the need for the mother and the need to be done with her. It is the closest *Parade* comes to an exposed nerve. We both want and loathe the specificity of our selfhood. Cusk understands the implicit, plaintive, and aggressive cry of the child: Describe me, tell me what I am, so I can later refuse it! That is the usual job of mothers, and also of novelists—to describe us and so encase us. By Cusk’s lights, we should learn to do without both; freedom awaits on the other side.

It may be, though, that the anguish of the mother-child bind feels more alive than the world that comes after selfhood. The problem is not that Cusk has trouble finding a language adequate to her theory of the burdens of identity—the problem may be instead that she has found that language, and it is clean indeed, scoured so free of attachments as to become translucent. *Parade* wants to replace the usual enticements of fiction—people and the story of their destinies—with the illumination of pure possibility. As such, the novel seems designed to provoke demands that it won’t satisfy. *Be vivid!* we might want to say to Cusk. Be angry; be savage; be funny; be real. *Be a person.* To which her response seems to be: *Is that what you should want?*

This article appears in the [July/August 2024](#) print edition with the headline “A Novel Without Characters.”

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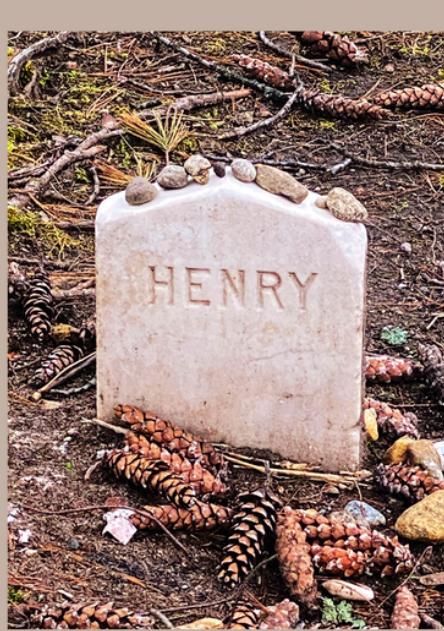
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-

In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World

Returning the planet to some sort of climate equilibrium is a universal interest.

by Jeffrey Goldberg



Henry David Thoreau's grave, Concord, Massachusetts (Jeffrey Goldberg)

Loyal readers of this magazine know that we are preoccupied with matters of climate change, and that we worry about the future of our home planet. I appreciate (I really do) Elon Musk's notion that humans, as a species, ought

to pursue an extraplanetary solution to our environmental crisis, but I believe in exploration for exploration's sake, not as a pathway to a time share on Mars.

So we at *The Atlantic* are focused intensely on, among other things, the relationship between humans and the natural world they currently inhabit. We have a long history of interest here. The great conservationist John Muir [more or less invented the national-parks system](#) in *The Atlantic*. John Burroughs defended Charles Darwin in our pages. Rachel Carson wrote her earliest essays, [about the sea](#), for us. And, of course, *The Atlantic* published [much of Thoreau's finest and most enduring writing](#).

In our lead essay this month, our senior editor Vann R. Newkirk II argues that [America owes a debt to other nations](#) for its role in accelerating climate change, and that paying this debt may be the best way for the world to save itself. “For at least the immediate future, wealthy Americans will be protected from the worst of the climate crisis,” he writes. “This comfort is seductive, but ultimately illusory.”

Climate change is one reason I asked our staff writer George Packer, the author of the National Book Award-winning [The Unwinding](#), to identify a place that could somehow stand in for America’s fundamental quandaries, hypocrisies, and powers of self-correction and improvement. Against his better judgment (he doesn’t like the heat very much), Packer found himself returning again and again to Phoenix, where, he became convinced, the future is being determined—not merely our political future, but our relationship with the natural world, on which our survival depends. [Packer's cover story](#) possesses the grand sweep, capacious reporting, and powerful insight our readers expect from him.

Although he appreciates Phoenix and understands it in a complicated and not-unhopeful way, I think Packer would have preferred the assignment we handed our science writer Ross Andersen, who visited Greenland to investigate the technological means through which it may be possible to save otherwise-doomed glaciers. His article, “The Glacier Rescue Project,” is fascinating, and especially important in a moment when too many people believe that catastrophic sea-level rise is inevitable.

The Atlantic has large ambitions and a peripatetic staff, so when we heard that Australia's koalas were suffering from both climate change and chlamydia, we quickly dispatched Katherine J. Wu, a staff writer (and a microbiologist), to Adelaide and beyond to bring back a report. I believe this marks the first time that marsupial chlamydia has been covered in *The Atlantic*. Wu's story is a revelation, illustrating the difficulty that even wealthy nations have in protecting their most prized species during a period of climate instability.

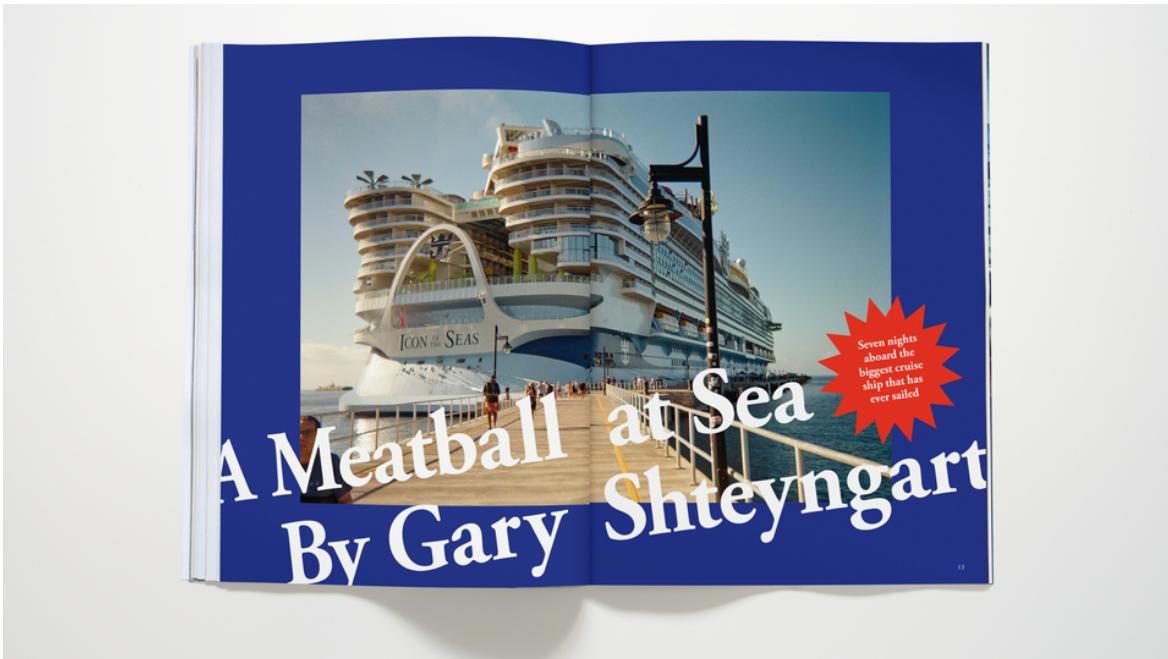
Me, I went to Walden Pond. I visit occasionally, walking the path that starts behind Ralph Waldo Emerson's house and ends up near the pond's big parking lot and little beach. Thoreau would be surprised by Walden Pond today: more visitors, much more noise. The noise could get worse soon. A proposed plan to radically expand a nearby airport for private jets has conservationists and preservationists worried that an appreciation of the sanctity and history of Concord is not unanimously shared. One doesn't have to live like Thoreau to understand that wealth comes in many forms—in the wildness of the world, for instance—and that returning the planet to some sort of equilibrium is a universal interest.

This editor's note appears in the [July/August 2024](#) print edition with the headline "In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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‘I Will Never, Ever Go on a Cruise’

Readers respond to our May 2024 issue and more.



A Meatball at Sea

For the May 2024 issue, [Gary Shteyngart spent](#) seven nights aboard the biggest cruise ship that has ever sailed.

I’ve never written a letter to the editor before, but rare are the times I’ve read an article more hilarious, brilliant, and incisive than Gary Shteyngart’s on his escapades at sea. I was moved, entertained, and wowed by his keen observations. But mostly I’m grateful to him for reinforcing a promise I made to myself: I will never, ever go on a cruise.

Jennifer Ripley
Menlo Park, Calif.

I laughed out loud several times while reading Gary Shteyngart's account of his experience on the inaugural voyage of the Icon of the Seas. As someone passionate about cruising, I recognized the truth in much of what Shteyngart wrote. I'm also a travel agent, and the thought of sailing on the Icon fills me with dread. So many people! I tell my clients that cruising is for everyone, but not all cruise lines are for everyone.

There are a few aspects of cruising that I think the author missed, though. My son is a full-time wheelchair user and an avid cruiser. It's hard to imagine how he would see the world if not on a cruise ship. On today's modern, accessible vessels, the indignities that he and other people with disabilities might suffer every day at home are largely absent.

We love cruising because of the staff. The pride and care that crew members take in providing excellent service is evident. We love to ask about their family at home, and we tip them generously. We hope that Shteyngart did the same.

Kathleen Moylan
Worcester, Mass.

Once upon a time, I was a travel writer. As someone who still revels in the wonder of travel 15 years after leaving the field, I found Gary Shteyngart's article about the Icon of the Seas disappointing. Travel writing as an artistic form has been in jeopardy for years, and I fear that articles like Shteyngart's demonstrate why.

Travel writing doesn't have to follow well-worn formats or cast its subjects in a favorable light. But it should create a sense of place. No travel writer worth their salt would ever wallow in misery and disdain, as Shteyngart does here. A travel writer shouldn't judge those around them or put themselves at the center of the story; the job of a travel writer is to look at an experience and see its value. When I worked as a travel writer, if I ever found myself in

an experience I disliked, I tried to understand why others around me enjoyed it and then worked to reconcile those two perspectives.

We travel writers are a specific brood. We have internalized that our work is not about us. We know we are guests in the places we visit. There is a degree of respect that a travel writer must have if they hope to see a place clearly. Those have to be table stakes.

Kim Palacios

San Ramon, Calif.

It is disconcerting that, only four months after *The Atlantic* [devoted an entire issue](#) to the dangers of a second Donald Trump presidency, the magazine published a story that seems designed to confirm the central argument of Trump's political movement: that blue-state elites despise ordinary Americans and see no value in their way of life. Like Trump's speeches, Gary Shteyngart's humor is littered with name-calling and childish insults; the "reprobates" and "bent psychos" who spend their money on cruises are mocked for their weight, their clothes, their hobbies, their tattoos. Despite the fact that some of these "psychos" are, as Shteyngart notes, veterans who have served their country, he concludes that his fellow cruisers have no "interior life" and are thus unworthy of attention from a member of the "creative class" like himself. If Trump is reelected in November, part of the blame will lie with those, like Shteyngart, who seem to have retreated so far into their progressive bubbles that they have become the mirror image of the MAGA faithful.

Andrew Miller

New Orleans, La.

Gary Shteyngart's colorful essay from the world's largest cruise ship makes snobbery an art form. What did he expect? Cruise-ship builders take chunks of Las Vegas, Branson, and Disney and put them on a platform that moves through the water. Never have I entertained the idea of taking a trip on one, but thousands of Americans do it regularly, most of them solidly middle-

class in wealth and taste. Most Americans would prefer to watch the Mets play the Marlins than the Met play Mozart.

During my cruising years—on the Navy’s big gray ships, in the 1960s—officers and crews were a mix of Americans from everywhere and every social strata. One chief petty officer was an outspoken socialist; one of my commanding officers was a paranoid member of the John Birch Society. The crews of the ships I served on joined the middle class upon discharge, and some of them probably cruise and talk football and eat bad food and vote for Donald Trump. What a shame that Shteyngart couldn’t connect with them. He might have learned something. I did.

Earl Higgins
River Ridge, La.

Gary Shteyngart replies:

What fascinated me most about my fellow cruisers—many of whom were from blue states and were not MAGA diehards—was their lack of curiosity. They were more than happy to eat food that reminded me of a Yalta cafeteria in my Soviet youth. They laughed themselves silly when a comedian made fun of “shithole countries” (although the African woman and her husband next to me walked out). To Andrew Miller’s point, I think it is precisely this kind of passivity and incuriosity that lets a nation forgo its long tradition of democracy and, through either malice or inaction, allow a tyrant to take charge. To Earl Higgins’s comment, I tried to connect desperately, almost pathologically, with my fellow cruisers. Sadly, there was not one outspoken socialist or paranoid member of the John Birch Society to be found. Indeed, it was the blinkered blandness of my fellow cruisers that drove me to despair. In the end, I began to respect the alcoholics and degenerate gamblers I met. They, at least, had a story to tell.

A Study in Senate Cowardice

Republicans like Rob Portman could have ended Donald Trump’s political career, [Jeffrey Goldberg wrote](#) in The Atlantic’s May 2024 issue. They chose

not to.

Good journalism should make its audience angry. And Jeffrey Goldberg's detailing of the rank hypocrisy of the Republican senators who talked tough but folded like cheap suits when it came time to vote to convict Donald Trump for his role in the January 6 insurrection should incite anger in every reader who cares about this country.

Particularly fitting is Goldberg's word choice about their behavior—*pathetic, greasy*. I hope history remembers and repeats the names of those senators who could have stopped a threat to democracy and decency but instead caved to Trump.

Steve Schild

Winona, Minn.

Jeffrey Goldberg's article holding certain Republican senators to account makes a valid point. However, it is easy to picture the current GOP leadership retaliating with baseless impeachment proceedings against their opposition, setting a destructive precedent that could undermine and diminish the United States. Goldberg calls that argument "pathetic," but probably some of those senators who voted nay believed Trumpism would eventually pass; they followed the rule of law and looked ahead hopefully to a future generation of quality leaders for whom the nation would matter more than any individual.

Michael E. Zuller

Great Neck, N.Y.

Behind the Cover

In this issue's cover story, "[The Valley](#)," George Packer reports from Phoenix and the surrounding Salt River Valley. Packer argues that the Valley's problems—climate change, conspiracism, hyper-partisanship—are America's, and that its fate may presage the nation's. The cover evokes a

landscape that is getting hotter and drier, and a future that is blurry. This is a place where American optimism and ingenuity are being put to the test.

— Peter Mendelsund, Creative Director

Corrections

“Democracy Is Losing the Propaganda War” (June) misstated the subtitle of Anne Applebaum’s latest book. The full title is *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World*. “The Great Serengeti Land Grab” (May) misstated the distance between Sharjah Safari park and the Pololeti Game Reserve. The Sharjah Safari park is 2,000 miles northeast of the Pololeti Game Reserve, not 5,000 miles north. “Clash of the Patriarchs” (May) mischaracterized Roman Emperor Constantine’s policy toward Christianity. Although Constantine favored Christianity over other tolerated religions in the empire, he did not impose it on his subjects.

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

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Poetry

- [**Mojave Ghost**](#)

Mojave Ghost

by Forrest Gander



Looking for their night roost, tiny
birds drop like stars into the darkened dead trees
around me. I thought

dreams were like water, that we
can't smell anything there. And then you visited me,
your body whole again
but the must of extinction on your breath.

This poem was adapted from Forrest Gander's forthcoming book, [Mojave Ghost: A Novel Poem](#). It appeared in the [July/August 2024](#) print edition.

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