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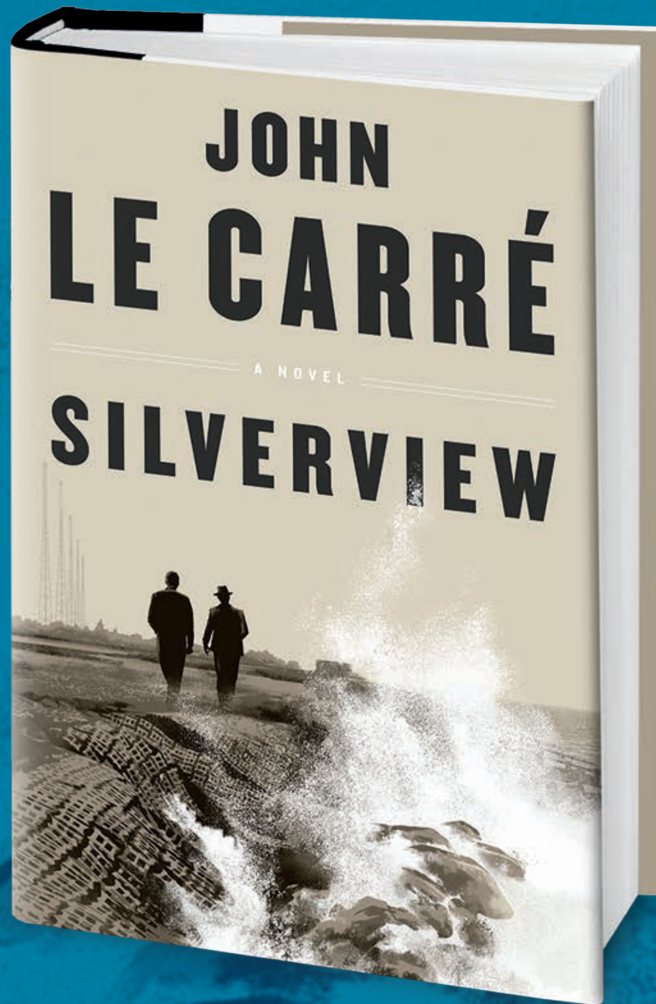

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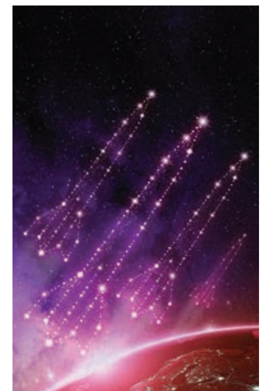

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# LETTERS

## Have You Heard?

I felt torn reading Joseph Bernstein's essay ["Bad News," Report, September]. Bernstein is correct to note that the anti-disinformation industry is largely composed of elites alarmed by the erosion of their power. As marginalized groups have embraced social media as a way to bypass these old gatekeepers, disinformation panic has been expressed most loudly by those who feel anxious about being marginalized in turn.

Bernstein is also right to question assumptions made about social media's ability to sell certain products and ideas. But his article minimizes media's influence on society: look at the increases in flat-earth beliefs and teen depression that have been linked to how much time people spend on social media, in large part due to the retention and engagement metrics that drive such platforms. The fact that social-media giants don't expertly control their own content should not be reason to downplay the damage they cause.

*Mathieu Kennedy*
Montreal

Bernstein alerts us to the ubiquity of disinformation and reminds us to remain vigilant and wary of so-called arbiters of truth, many of whom have vested financial and political interests. But he offers few explicit solutions. How do we get Americans to think critically about the information they consume? Education that is more questioning and less indoctrinating would be a great start. How do we achieve that? I wish I knew, but I am at least willing to admit my ignorance, something

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Bernstein paradoxically champions in his evocative essay.

*Ken Benau*
Oakland, Calif.

I found Bernstein's exploration of disinformation to be disappointingly dated. He gives only passing mention to examples from the past few years—QAnon, the U.S. Capitol attack, conspiracies about the origins of COVID-19, and of course, the endless debates around masks and vaccines. By skirting the gravity of these issues, Bernstein misses two alarming evolutions that are happening right now: that of misinformation, from the level of counterfactual assertion to captured consensus; and that of disinformation—the deliberate manipulation of knowledge to skew, punish, and entice—from a tactic of dictators to something that some constituents in liberal democracies cheerfully embrace.

*Zeus Yiamouyiannis*
Penryn, Calif.

## Third Eye Blind

Garret Keizer's essay on stupidity and transcendence ["The Third Force," Essay, September] does not transcend its own preconception that one side of America's political spectrum is enlightened and the other is, well, stupid.

Stupidity is inherently a reactive cycle. In one of the essay's more revelatory moments, Keizer writes, "Treat me like I'm stupid, and I'll show you stupidity like you wouldn't believe." This remark approaches the truth of the matter, but Keizer stops short of applying it to our current political situation. I am someone writing from what Keizer calls "flyover country," an appallingly dismissive but tellingly acceptable term for the interior region of the United States. I can say that it is exhausting to constantly be denigrated as a bunch of worthless, idiot rednecks. Our economic concerns are continuously dismissed as xenophobic white supremacy. In 2016, I watched in horror as Trump was elected, but it came as no surprise. Treat us like we're stupid, and we'll show you stupid like you wouldn't believe.

If the stupidity cycle is to end, then this kind of "intellectual" handwringing needs to stop. We must transcend stupid stereotypes, exercise empathy, and take accountability for our current situation. There are no saints. But right now, there's a whole lot of stupid—Keizer has it right about that.

*Kenyon Thorp*
Cornersville, Tenn.

*Garret Keizer responds:*

I agree wholeheartedly with Kenyon Thorp that the term "flyover country" is "appallingly dismissive," which is why I never use it in my writing or my conversation and did not use it once in the essay she purports to quote. I did, however, use Eric Voegelin's phrase "loss of reality," and I leave it to her to judge whether attacking what isn't on the page counts as a fair example of the same.

I also agree that the essay does not transcend my political preconceptions. Any attempt to do so would have been rather self-defeating in a piece that posits the itch for easy transcendence as a cause of stupidity. But if, as Thorp claims, I see only one side of the political spectrum as stupid, why did I find examples of stupidity among partisans on both sides of the gun-control and abortion debates, and not least of all in my own (identifiably left-of-center) self?

I would never denigrate Thorp or her neighbors "as a bunch of worthless, idiot rednecks." For over forty years, I have made my home among rural, working-class people, and I have written for almost that long, sometimes in the pages of this magazine, about their economic oppression. Thorp cannot be faulted if she doesn't know my work, but I do wish that in reading this one essay (and especially where it speaks of workers and their work) she had taken some of her own good counsel and heard what I was actually saying as opposed to a "stupid stereotype" of what I must have said.




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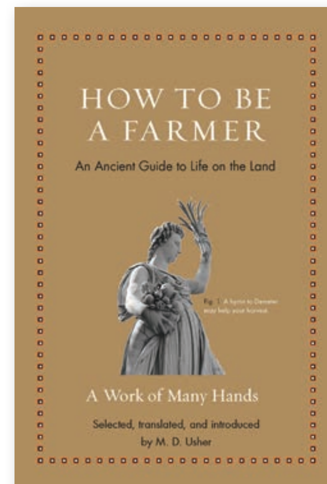


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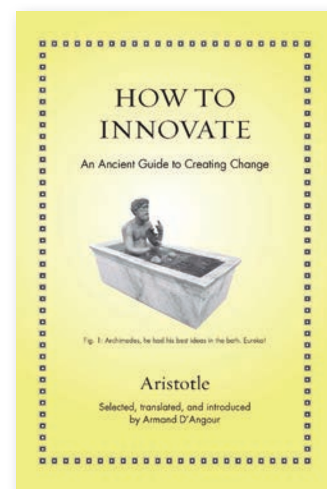


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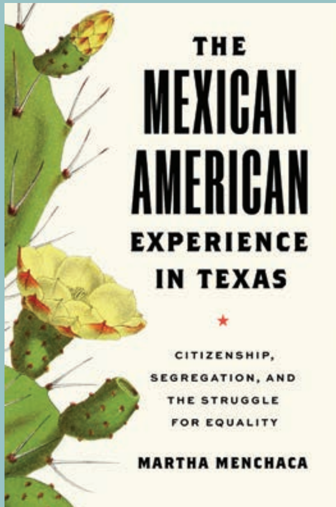


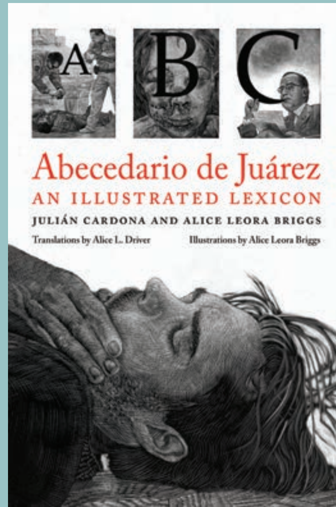


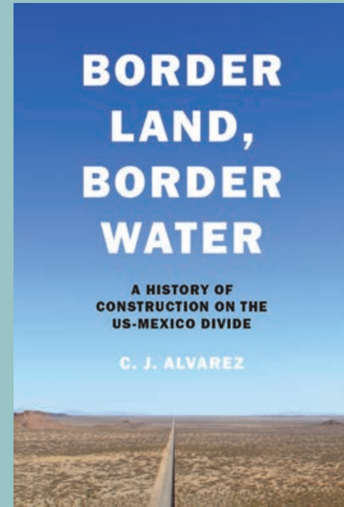


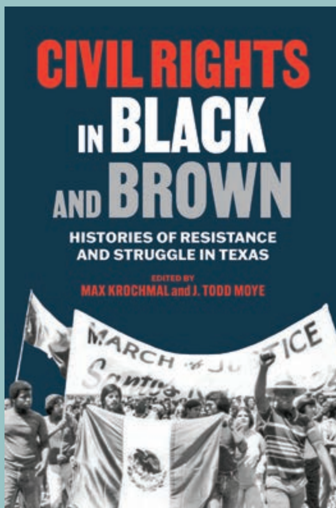


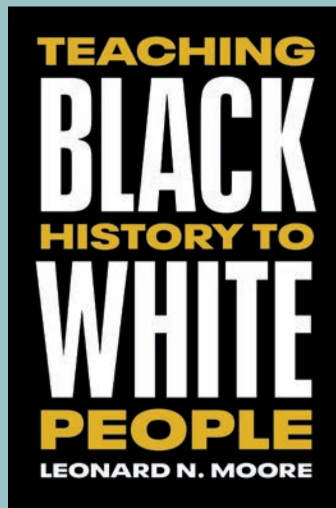


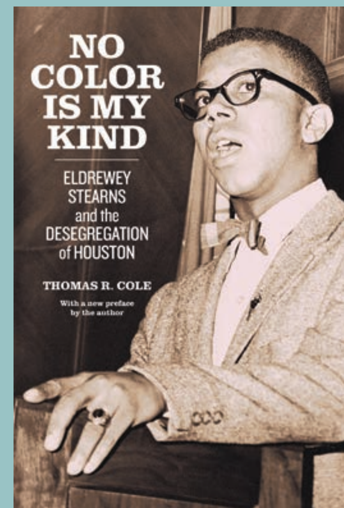


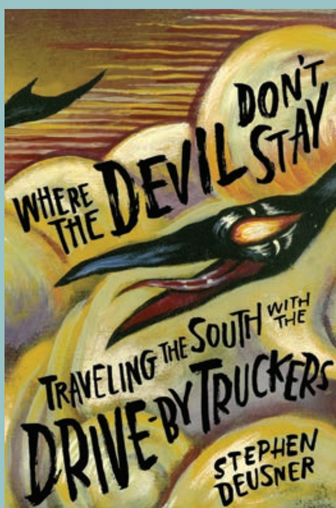


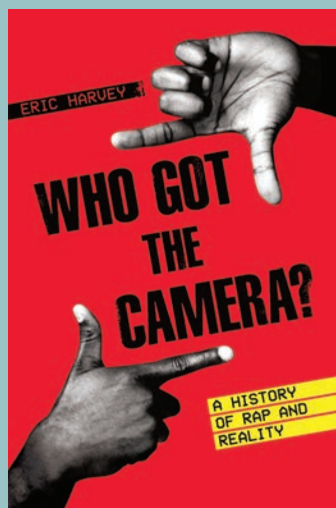


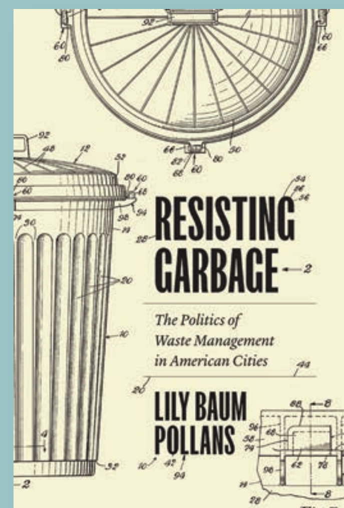

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# EASY CHAIR

## Rich Image, Poor Image

*By Hari Kunzru*

After New York City experienced record rainfall this summer, my basement flooded. Water destroyed boxes of books and manuscripts, sitting several inches deep in a plastic crate full of photographs. I spent days trying to rescue as many as I could, peeling old prints apart and laying them out to dry. It was strange and sad, sifting through these fragments of my pre-digital life. I had taken the earliest when I was eight or nine, using a 1950s Brownie box camera that belonged to my mother when she was a girl. For some reason I refused to take pictures of people. The grainy prints of archaeological remains and tourist sites were frustrating and dull, bearing no trace of my family's experiences in those places. I think I had the idea that photographs were documentation, that I had to take them for a scientific or historical purpose. People would have gotten in the way.

I owned cameras intermittently through my teens and early twenties, but for most of that time I believed that it was better to "be in the moment" than to look at the world through a lens—a fear of alienation that left most of my student life mercifully undocumented. I found a handful of pictures from those years in the basement, all taken by other people. Each one that I could save now seemed precious and meaningful, even those that weren't technically "good" photographs. They connected me to a part of my past—and a version of myself—that has begun to feel very distant.

My ambivalence about photography wasn't the only reason for the gaps. People just didn't take as many pictures in an analog world. While the cost of pressing a button on my phone is basically zero, film came in rolls of twenty-four or thirty-six exposures, to be processed and printed in a laboratory. It was not only expensive but also bulky, and could be damaged by heat or light. I remember traveling in Benin carrying a battered SLR camera and a couple of lenses, rationing each exposure, painfully aware that every time I clicked the shutter, one fewer potential picture remained. Was this shot more important than some possible shot to come? Image-rationing pushed me toward my journal. I filled up pages with description instead.

The craft of pre-digital photography has begun to feel almost alchemical, which is to say that the practice of relying on chemistry to make images has come to seem esoteric, imbued with aura. As I grew more interested in photography, I learned basic black-and-white printing, standing under a red light in a darkroom, pouring chemicals into trays, handling damp sheets of coated paper with tongs. Digital photography has suppressed—or at least marginalized—this knowledge, along with a particular experience of image-making, the wondrous directness of light passing through a negative to react with sensitive chemicals on paper, the magical emergence of an image in a bath of developer, the skill of waving wands and perforated cards to dodge and burn sections of a print that are too dark or too bright.

I own photographs that seem overwhelmingly material: for example, a glass-plate image of a severe Victorian lady that I found in a junk shop. Judging by her clothes, she probably sat for her portrait some time in the 1860s. She poses beside a vase of hand-tinted flowers, and has slightly alarming hand-tinted salmon-pink lips. She's set in a little tin frame stamped with fancy patterns. It seems incomplete to call this an image. It is an object, a thing with texture and weight.

Even my limited adventures in the darkroom were enough to teach me that there's nothing immediate or straightforwardly truthful about photographs, that they're constructed by all sorts of technical and aesthetic processes. Yet in thinking about what I do

when I lift up my cell phone, I find I habitually fall back into the hackneyed vocabulary of "capturing a moment," as if I'm bringing a net down over reality like it's a rare butterfly, the way critics used to talk about photography. "Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood," wrote Susan Sontag in 1973. "Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire." That "seem" is doing a lot of work. Sontag would love to say that photographs have a direct connection to the world, that they have taken its stamp like a piece of wax. But she is too scrupulous. Even in the time before Photoshop and Instagram filters, before phone cameras that detect objects and automatically adjust for lighting conditions, she knows it's not quite true.

Despite our ancient and cultivated distrust of images, we still speak in terms of "capturing" a moment, "taking" a picture, echoing a particular romantic notion of what it is to be a photographer. Henri Cartier-Bresson, whose famous 1952 book *Images à la Sauvette* ("pictures on the run") was published in English as *The Decisive Moment,* embodies the romance of the Leica-toting flaneur, the street photographer with the compact camera, exquisitely alive to aesthetic possibility. Explaining such canonical pictures as his 1932 shot of a man jumping over a puddle ("Derrière la gare Saint-Lazare"), Cartier-Bresson wrote that

> photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression.

This is the photographer as gunslinger, recognizing fleeting perfection (look, he's reflected in the water!) and instantaneously pulling the trigger.

In Cartier-Bresson's analog era, even a professional photographer had to ration clicks. These days, while the experience of pressing the shutter at *just* the right time is still crucial to photography, most of us are not so much sharpshooters as firefighters, "hosing down" our subjects—as the evocative paparazzo slang has it—to take home and edit later. We've soaked the whole world in images. The vast majority of all the photographs ever taken have been taken in the past two decades. About 90 percent of pictures are now created using smartphones. For the most part, these images will never be printed, never have any existence as objects. They are uploaded to social media, sent as attachments, viewed on screens at various resolutions, or perhaps not seen at all. Many will be copied and compressed, increasingly degraded into jumbles of pixels, what the artist Hito Steyerl has called "poor" images. "The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletariat in the class society of appearances," Steyerl writes. "The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility."

Against the proliferation of memes and GIFs and screenshots, consumers are invited to luxuriate in the rich image, to buy absurdly large flatscreen TVs, high-resolution projectors, Bluray discs of classic movies, all the expensive toys of home cinema. We're encouraged to construct personal arenas for the consumption of HD blockbusters, hyperrealistic imagery that I (and I suspect anyone else whose aesthetic baseline was calibrated by 35-millimeter film) still find slightly uncanny, its resolution somehow excessive, a surplus that leaves the most banal rom-com teetering queasily on the edge of the transhuman.

There is a trade-off between image quality and accessibility. Visual materials once imprisoned in archives now circulate, albeit often in illicit or degraded forms. What is lost in quality is gained in velocity and reach. Online you can find rare videos, raw newsreel footage, digitized photo libraries. You can also find niche pornography, and cell phone recordings of every kind of unpleasant human interaction, from racist confrontations in suburban stores to war crimes. The democratization of image-making means that every jihadi bouncing through the desert in the back of a truck also has a phone in his pocket. Every bystander at an arrest can record and transmit pictures and videos. A Syrian military defector can smuggle thousands of photographs to a human rights group, providing evidence of mass torture. A team of citizen journalists can use publicly available images to prove that a particular Russian missile launcher shot down a commercial airliner over Ukraine. If you doubt the power of such poor images, you have only to say the name George Floyd, and consider the laws subsequently proposed by Republican politicians in an attempt to curtail filming or photographing the police.

As the image has liquefied, and the ability to manipulate it has become as simple as toying with a few sliders on our phones, the question of its relation to reality has become ever more urgent. We innocently make the sea a little bluer, the summer afternoon a little hazier. But we also make deepfakes of politicians, and photoshop the faces of movie stars onto BDSM pictures. Forensic image analysis is now an important public service. Analysts consider whether the objects in a photo appear to be lit by the same light source and whether the metadata corresponds to how the image looks. Repeated patterns of pixels may indicate that something has been removed and another part of the image cloned to replace it. If two people apparently sitting next to each other in a portrait have different-size glints in their eyes, it may suggest that they were lit differently, and so were never together at all. Even the distribution of information in a compressed image can tip off an analyst that it has been saved more than once since it was taken.

Ultimately, another development in photography may prove even more consequential than the transition from analog to digital: the word "photography," with all its ancient Greek baggage about drawing with light, might have to be abandoned altogether. The artist Trevor Paglen has called for an expanded understanding of photography to include what he calls "seeing machines," a category that "embraces everything from iPhones to airport security backscatter-imaging devices, from electro-optical reconnaissance satellites in low-earth orbit, to QR code readers."

Machines are seeing in all these ways, and now many images are pro-

duced by the machines themselves for other machines to look at, without any human involvement at all. Vision is moving beyond us, beyond human scales and capacities. The photographs in the plastic crate in my basement are (or were) material objects. All I needed to see them were a light source and functioning eyes. The most recent were taken in 2006 or perhaps 2007. After that I bought a digital camera, and stopped dropping off rolls of film at the lab. My photos became data stored on hard drives. Right now, they're a few clicks away from the document I created to write this essay, but if there was a power failure, I would have no way of viewing a single one.

The data produced by seeing machines may not look like anything we'd understand as a photo, but as vision recedes into a sort of hermetic mystery—a capability that must be mediated through technology before it is granted to us—it's all the more vital that we persist in our efforts to understand it. We must ask ourselves what the machines want. That's not to claim that our technologies have independent agency (though that time may come), but to say that we should pay close attention to the ways in which these systems *see,* the solutions they find to the tasks we set them.

In September 2020, a Twitter algorithm had the job of cropping pictures into the right format for preview images, something people would see before they clicked on a post. A white user noticed that in a picture of himself and a black colleague, the algorithm always cropped to focus on him. The post he made describing his observation went viral. The experiment was tried with other pairs of black and white faces. Barack Obama and Mitch McConnell: same result. Black faces were erased and white ones chosen. The Twitter executive Dantley Davis admitted the issue was real. "It's 100% our fault," he tweeted. "No one should say otherwise." The technical reasons for the preference were complex. As the Princeton computer scientist Arvind Narayanan pointed out, at its heart was the use of argmax, a mathematical function that selects the most likely output from a probability distribution. Argmax is known to amplify biases, and to double down on small discrepancies in inputs until they become glaring. Twitter's machine-learning algorithm had been trained to determine the "saliency" or interestingness of each part of an image, including factors such as brightness and color saturation. Its decision process was concluding that darker faces were less interesting than lighter ones. Ultimately, Twitter solved the problem by turning off automatic cropping entirely.

Our seeing machines are often attached to learning machines, and we are only beginning to witness the power of this combination. Much of the new corporate space race is about vision, putting lots of small, cheap satellites into orbit to provide a more complete and continuous view of the earth. Satellites are being equipped with multispectral cameras, seeing machines that can operate at wavelengths and frequencies the human eye can't. As inputs to so-called deep-learning algorithms, this new generation of images can be used to build 3D models of structures on the ground, assess future crop yields, track moving objects, and predict the weather.

We are building a megastructure of vision, what the design theorist Benjamin Bratton has termed "planetary-scale computation." The panopticon is here, and it does no good to shudder and invoke Orwell. Nothing is inevitable about the form of our creation, or about the concerns that should animate it. Asking what our machines want is also asking what we want. The information produced by space-based imaging has value to the military and the markets, of course, but it may also form a core part of what Bratton terms the "planetary competence" required for us to mount an effective response to climate change.

The visual culture that produced the crate of prints in my basement now seems as remote as the glass-plate image of the Victorian lady. Yet the break has not been complete, or even a break at all. Family photographers still tell everyone to say cheese. We still shuffle sideways to fit into the frame. Our human-scale visual culture persists, even as it forms an increasingly marginal part of photography, or whatever we choose to call what comes next. ■

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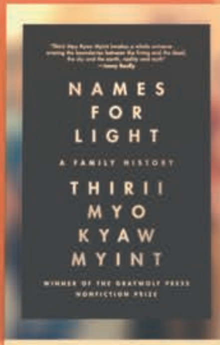


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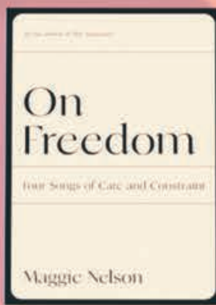


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Who identify as white in combination with another race **:** +316
Percentage of Republican-leaning Americans who say the declining share of white people is bad for society **:** 34
Portion of new U.S. hires who are in occupations that typically require at least a bachelor's degree **:** 3/4
Portion of U.S. adults who do not have a bachelor's degree **:** 2/3
Of black U.S. adults who do not **:** 4/5
Percentage of U.S. adults working remotely who would take a pay cut to continue doing so indefinitely **:** 65
Who would give up social media for a year to do so **:** 55
Who would give up their right to vote **:** 34
Chance that a U.S. worker feels their job does not make a meaningful contribution to the world **:** 1 in 5
Percentage of American office workers who have cried on the job **:** 45
Portion of U.S. remote workers who admit to regularly streaming video while on the job **:** 3/10
Percentage of total U.S. TV-watching time accounted for by Netflix **:** 7
By cable or broadcast television **:** 62
Percentage change since 2019 in the number of Republicans who say that large corporations benefit the country **:** −44
In the number of Democrats who say so **:** +22
In the number of Republicans who say that financial institutions benefit the country **:** −21
In the number of Democrats who say so **:** +30
Percentage by which more Americans are "very concerned" about domestic extremist groups than international ones **:** 30
Factor by which this is more likely to be true of a Democrat than a Republican **:** 9
Percentage by which more Americans believe Iran has nuclear weapons than believe Israel does **:** 17
By which more Republicans believe this **:** 37
Percentage change since 2018 in the number of U.S. adults who say the government should restrict false information online **:** +23
Portion of time spent on smartphones in the United States that can be attributed to "self-control problems" **:** 3/10
Number of hours per week that children in China are legally allowed to spend playing video games **:** 3
Percentage change since 1990 in the number of Americans who say they have a best friend **:** −21
In the number of Americans who say they have ten or more close friends **:** −61
Portion of Americans who lost touch with at least a few friends in the past year **:** 1/2
Who lost touch with most of their friends **:** 1/10
Rank of August 2021 among months with the largest number of active dating-app users ever recorded **:** 1
Portion of Americans who, on an average day between May and December 2020, did not spend any time on grooming **:** 1/4
Minimum percentage by which carbon emissions of the average single man exceed those of the average single woman **:** 16
Factor by which Democrats are more likely than Republicans to have noticed an increase in extreme local weather events **:** 2
Date on which forest fire smoke was first detected at the North Pole **:** 8/2/2021
On which rain was first detected at the highest point of Greenland's ice cap **:** 8/14/2021
Year in which the first known insect species was driven extinct in the United States by humans **:** 1941
Rank of New Zealand among countries best suited to survive a global societal collapse **:** 1
Of the United States **:** 6
Estimated number of potentially habitable planets from which aliens could detect life on Earth **:** 29

*Figures cited are the latest available as of September 2021. Sources are listed on page 80.*
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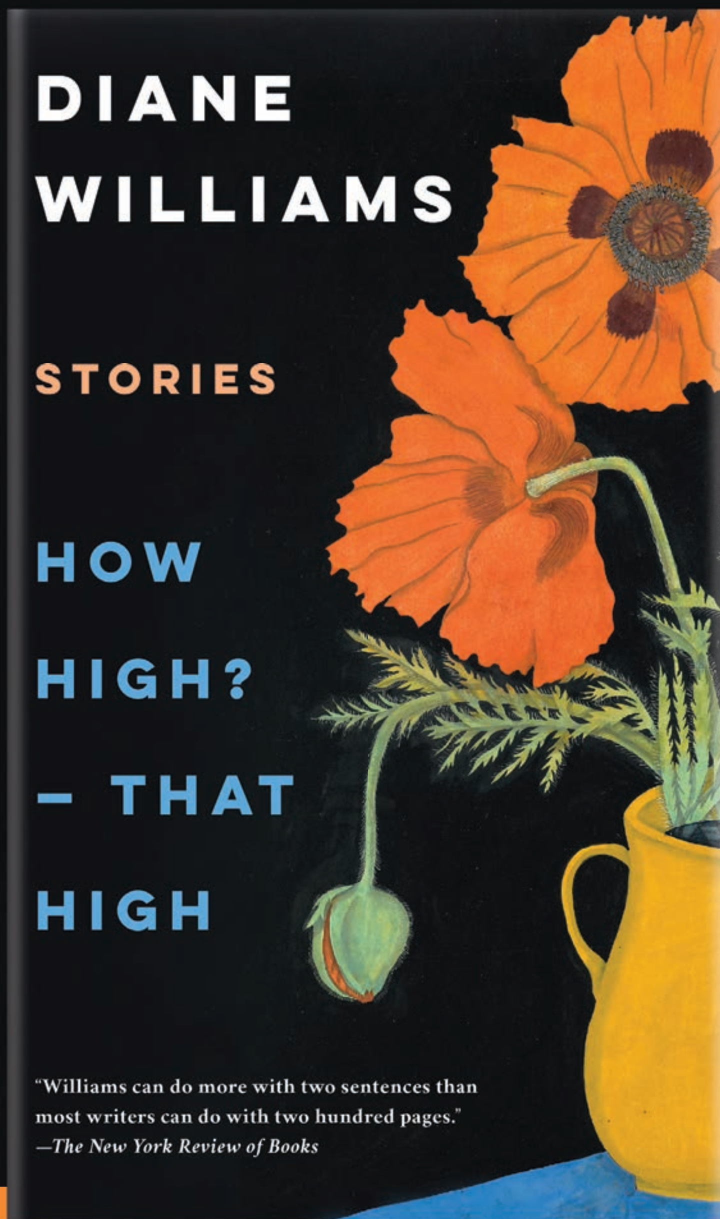
## A NEW COLLECTION FROM MASTER OF THE SHORT STORY

# DIANE WILLIAMS




"Williams can do more with two sentences than most writers can do with two hundred pages."
*—The New York Review of Books*

"The godmother of flash fiction."
*—The Paris Review*

"Diane Williams seeks to stun, in something near the literal sense of the word."
*—The New Republic*

**ON SALE OCTOBER 12, 2021**

SOHO

# READINGS

[Essay]

## FLESH AND BLOOD

*By David Graeber and David Wengrow, from* The Dawn of Everything, *which will be published this month by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.*

In the mid-twentieth century, a British anthropologist named A. M. Hocart proposed that monarchs and institutions of government were originally derived from rituals designed to channel powers of life from the cosmos into human society. He suggested that "the first kings must have been dead kings," and that individuals so honored only really became sacred rulers at their funerals. Hocart was considered an oddball by his fellow anthropologists, and many accused him of being unscientific. Ironically, contemporary archaeological science now compels us to start taking him seriously. To the astonishment of many, but much as Hocart predicted, the Upper Paleolithic has produced evidence of grand burials, carefully staged for individuals who indeed seem to have attracted spectacular riches and honors largely in death.

The ritual principle doesn't just apply to monarchy but to other government institutions as well. Private property first appeared as a concept in sacred contexts, as did police functions and a whole panoply of formal democratic procedures, such as election and sortition. When Europeans first encountered North American societies, the only kings that existed were ritualistic play kings. If they overstepped the line, their subjects were always free to ignore them or move someplace else. The same went for any other system of authority. A police force that operated for only three months of the year and whose membership rotated annually was, in a certain sense, a play police force—which makes it slightly less bizarre that their members were sometimes recruited from the ranks of ritual clowns.

Today, it's clear that something about the nature of power and authority in human society has changed since the time of our ancestors. We are no longer free to walk away from the forces that rule us. And looking at the violence in our homes, schools, workplaces, and police departments, this change has not been a good one. What happened to us?

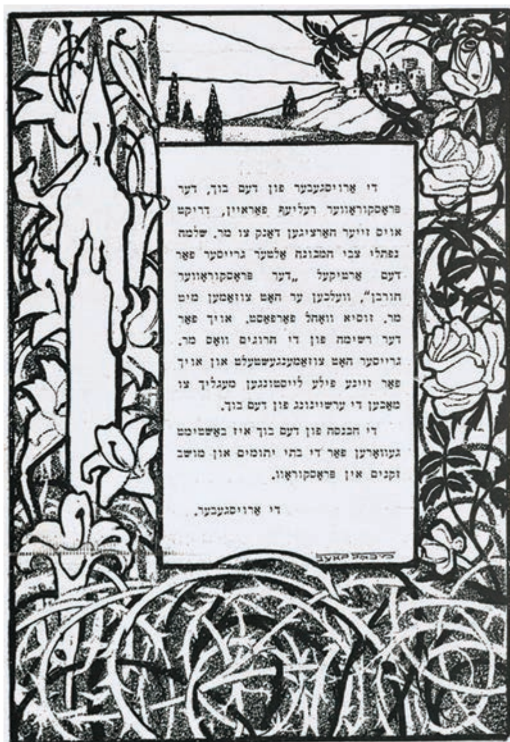
The question has proved difficult to answer, partly because our own intellectual traditions oblige us to use what is, in effect, imperial language to do so. Existing debates almost invariably begin with terms derived from Roman law, which conceive of freedom as based on the power of the individual (by implication, a male head of household) to dispose of his property as he sees fit. It is a blunt reality that someone in possession of a thing can do anything he wants with it, except that which is limited "by force or law." Jurists have struggled with this formulation ever since, as it implies that freedom is essentially a state of primordial exception to the legal order. It also implies that property is not a set of understandings between people about who gets to possess things, but rather a

## [Cover]

# BOOK OF THE DEAD

*By Jeffrey Veidlinger, from* In the Midst of Civilized Europe, *which was published last month by Metropolitan Books.*

In the years after the Holocaust, survivors began compiling memorial books, one for each city and town. These literary monuments to destroyed communities preserved local stories and documented the names of victims. But such memorial books are not only histories of the prewar period; they are also prehistories of the war itself. Take the newly discovered memorial book from the town of Proskuriv, in what is now Ukraine. The book, *Khurbn Proskurov,* whose cover is depicted below, captures the calamity the city endured. It concludes with the names of the martyred—a list that extends to thirty pages. What differentiates *Khurbn Proskurov* is that it was written in 1924—nine years before Hitler's rise to power and fifteen years before the start of the Second World War. It commemorates the real beginning of the Holocaust: on February 15, 1919, Ukrainian soldiers murdered a thousand Jewish civilians in what was at the time possibly the single deadliest episode of violence to befall the Jewish people in their long history of oppression.



די ארויסגעבער פון דעם בוך, דער
פראסקוראווער רעליעף פאראיין, דריקט
אויס זייער הארציגען דאנק צו מר. שלמה
נפתלי צבי המכונה אלטער גרייסער פאר
דעם ארטיקעל „דער פראסקוראווער
חורבן", וועלכען ער האט צוזאמען מיט
מר. זוסיא וואהל פארפאסט. אויך פאר
דער רשימה פון די הרוגים וואס מר.
גרייסער האט צוזאמענגעשטעלט און אויך
פאר זיינע פילע לייסטונגען מעגליך צו
מאכען די ערשיינונג פון דעם בוך.

די הכנסה פון דעם בוך איז באשטימט
געווארען פאר די בתי יתומים און מושב
זקנים אין פראסקוראוו.

די ארויסגעבער.

relation between a person and an object of absolute power. What does it mean to say that one has the natural right to do anything one wants with a hand grenade, say, except those things one isn't allowed to do? Who would come up with such an odd formulation?

An answer is suggested by the sociologist Orlando Patterson, who points out that conceptions of property (and hence of freedom) in Roman law can be traced back to slave law. It is possible to imagine property as a relationship of domination between a person and thing because, in Roman law, the power of the master rendered the slave a thing, not a person with rights or legal obligations. Private life was marked by the patriarch's freedom to exercise absolute power over his wife and children, and over the conquered people who were considered his property. The very word "family" shares a root with the Latin *famulus,* meaning "house slave," via *familia,* which referred to everyone under the domestic authority of a male head of household.

To understand how this concept of freedom has altered human society, it's instructive to examine the case of the Wendat people in the age of Kandiaronk, who were of course free of Roman law's influence. In certain ways, the Wendat (and Iroquoian societies in general around that time) were extraordinarily warlike. There appear to have been bloody rivalries in many northern parts of the Eastern Woodlands even before settlers began supplying indigenous factions with muskets. The early Jesuits noted that the ostensible reasons for wars were entirely different from those they were used to. All Wendat wars were, in fact, "mourning wars," carried out to assuage the grief felt by close relatives of someone who had been killed. Typically, a war party would strike against traditional enemies, bringing back a few scalps and a small number of prisoners. Captive women and children would be adopted. The fate of men was largely up to the mourners, particularly the women. If the mourners felt it appropriate, a male captive might be given a name, even that of the original victim. The captive would henceforth transform into the victim, and if for any reason he was not fully adopted into society, he suffered an excruciating death by torture.

In these cases, the Jesuits observed a slow, public, and highly theatrical use of violence. True, they conceded, the Wendat torture of captives was no more cruel than the kind directed against enemies of the state back home in France. What seems to have really shocked them, however, was not the whipping, boiling, branding, or cutting up of the enemy, but the fact that almost everyone in a Wendat village

© THE ARTIST. COURTESY UP GALLERY, HSINCHU, TAIWAN

*"Sweet Water, Bitter Earth 45–Song Hua Hu II," a photograph by Kurt Tong, whose work is on view this month at UP Gallery, in Hsinchu, Taiwan.*

took part, even women and children. The violence seems all the more extraordinary once we recall how these same societies refused to spank children, punish thieves and murderers, or take any measure that smacked of arbitrary authority. In virtually all other areas of social life they were renowned for solving problems through calm and reasoned debate.

What, then, was the meaning of these theaters of violence? One way to approach the question is to look at what was happening around the same time in Europe, where Roman law had largely reshaped society. As the historian Denys Delâge points out, while Wendat people who visited France were appalled by the torture exhibited during public punishments and executions, what struck them as most remarkable was that "the French whipped, hanged, and put to death men from among themselves" rather than external enemies. The point is telling. As in seventeenth-century Europe, Delâge notes,

> almost all punishment, including the death penalty, involved severe physical suffering: wearing an iron collar, being whipped, having a hand cut off, or being branded.... It was a ritual that manifested power in a conspicuous way, thereby revealing the existence of an internal war. The sovereign incarnated a superior power that transcended his subjects, one that they were compelled to recognise.

While Native American rituals showed the desire to seize the strength and courage of an outsider so as to combat him better, the European

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND M+B, LOS ANGELES

Apprehended Without Incident 2 *and* Pray for the Living, Dance for the Dead 3, *mixed-media artworks by Didier William, whose work was on view in July at M+B, in Los Angeles.*

ritual revealed the existence of a dissymmetry, an irrevocable imbalance of power within society itself. As a Wendat traveler observed of the French system, anyone—guilty or innocent—might end up being made a public example. Among the Wendat, a captive warrior might either be treated with loving care and affection or be the object of the worst treatment imaginable, but no middle ground existed. Prisoner sacrifice was not merely about reinforcing group solidarity, but also about proclaiming the internal sanctity of the family and the domestic realm as a space of female governance, where violence, politics, and rule by command did not belong. Wendat households, in other words, were defined in opposite terms from the Roman *familia*.

In this respect, French society under the ancien régime presents a similar picture to imperial Rome. In both cases, household and kingdom shared a common model of subordination. Each was made in the other's image, with the patriarchal family serving as a template for the absolute power of kings, and vice versa. Children were to submit to their parents, wives to husbands, and subjects to rulers, whose authority came from God. In each case the superior party was expected to inflict stern chastisement when he considered it appropriate: that is, to exercise violence with impunity.

All of this was assumed to be bound up with feelings of love and affection, and notions of family. Public torture in seventeenth-century Europe created searing, unforgettable spectacles of pain and suffering to convey the message that a system in which husbands could brutalize wives, and parents could beat children, was ultimately a form of love. Wendat torture, in the same period, created searing, unforgettable spectacles of pain and suffering to make clear that no form of physical chastisement should ever be countenanced inside a community or household. Violence and care, in the Wendat case, were to be entirely separated.

This connection—or confusion—between care and domination is critical to the larger question of how we lost the ability to freely re-create ourselves by re-creating our relations with one another. It is critical, that is, to understanding how we got stuck in a violent and cruel world, and why we can hardly envisage our future as anything other than a transition from smaller to larger cages.

[Blurbs]

# THE LIBRARY OF BABBLE

*From summaries of books in the library of Hernando Colón, composed by him and his staff and collected in* Libro de los Epítomes. *The manuscript was discovered in 2019 among the holdings of the Arnamagnæan Institute at the University of Copenhagen. Colón, the illegitimate son of Christopher Columbus, endeavored to build a library that contained every book in existence. The complete translation from the Latin by the Arnamagnæan Institute's Book of Books Project is expected to be published in 2026 by Oxford University Press.*

**"THE IVORY CASKET" BY HIPPOCRATES:** In the medical section of the library there is a certain pamphlet of prognostics with the title "The Ivory Casket," and here is what I've been able to find out about this mysterious name: Hippocrates, sensing his death was near, instructed that the contents of this pamphlet be placed in an ivory casket and buried in his grave with him, to keep people from discovering them. When this came to the attention of a certain emperor, he ordered the grave dug up and saw to it that the contents of the casket were saved for posterity. What is contained in this prognostic are rules or instructions by which to predict the very season, day, and hour of death coming to one who is sick, by the signs that are here set down.

**"A LETTER ON THE UNAPOSTOLIC MORALS OF CERTAIN MEN" BY LUCIFER:** Some scourge of wickedness, whose name I have not been able to discover, published this letter from Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, about certain men who claim to have succeeded the apostles and their very unapostolic morals. . . . In it is a note of congratulation from Lucifer to the leaders of the modern church: wishing them good health, he exhorts them to carry on their evil and to abandon the path of the apostles while keeping their power, promising that their first reward will be to be his right-hand men in hell. Other than this, there is nothing in the letter that I need to record in this epitome, so I will only add that the thrust is quite satirical: to criticize the morals of degenerate priests.

**A SCHOLAR'S MANUAL BEGINNING "RESPECTED TEACHER":** Whoever published this book wasted their money. It's supposed to teach schoolboys what they should expect at university, but I doubt whether someone brought up among the Sarmatians or Scythians would recount such barbaric behavior as this. The Latin itself is awful. The dialogue describes what goes on in places such as Deventer and Cologne, where during the matriculation rituals the little graduate bitches and other wicked scoundrels bombard the freshman with abuse and insults and human filth, and also shave him and inflict other indignities. Then the freshman has to take them all out and get them drunk on his own dime. I will stop here so I don't shock anyone too much, but the debauched author even includes dialogues about whores and prostitution. There's nothing funny or clever or charming here—it's just filth. And, as if that isn't enough, there's a string of grammatical errors more than a mile long.

[Recovered Memories]

# TOTAL RECALL

*From the website of the consultant Tony Rodrigues, who sells courses for $39.99 claiming to help customers recover suppressed memories of interactions with aliens. Rodrigues says he served first as a soldier on Mars and later on the asteroid Ceres, where he worked for more than a decade before being returned at age ten to his childhood home in Michigan, from which he claims he was abducted.*

Have you found yourself here because you have a hunch that you were involved in some kind of secret space program? After thousands of others with the same feeling contacted Tony for advice, he teamed up with a psychic medium, Jaci Pearse, to create a comprehensive course for others who were looking for help. There seem to be three main categories of program experiences:

**HUMAN SPACE PROGRAMS:** People who have been in a military program, usually in the United States or with the United Nations. They typically have moon and Mars memories, always heavy medical and military memories.

**DRACO GROUP CONTACT:** Usually alongside a human group, always a reptilian being and/or the typical Gray being. Always great trauma. Unspeakable things get carried out. Very rarely anything positive. Also, aligned with the German Breakaway Group.

**EVERYONE ELSE:** Any number of other species come through our solar system and have an interest in interacting. For many different reasons. Visiting spacefaring species very often can leave the contactee with the feeling of benevolent

interaction. The levels of technology witnessed can vary greatly, and the accounts tend to have few things in common with other accounts.

[Effluvium]

# DUCK!

*By Erin Sheehy, from "Call of Nature," an essay that appeared in Issue 2 of* Facility: A Magazine About Bathrooms.

Humans, earthbound and stuck within seemingly unbreakable systems of oppression, have long admired and envied birds' ability to soar above it all. They are the ultimate symbol of freedom. They are also the only creatures to regularly defecate on us. Encounters with bird poop range from the small and humiliating (a spatter on the forehead, a slip on a fresh goose dropping) to the dramatic and dangerous: a net underneath the Long Island Rail Road tracks once became so weighted with pigeon poop that it burst open, coating an unsuspecting commuter. (Some Ozone Park neighbors considered the hazard so awful that they longed for the return of local mafioso John Gotti. "He kept the neighborhood up," said one. "He never would have put up with this.") Humans generally prefer to be the ones shitting on others. Our hubris and our envy of birdkind has led us to develop our own methods of flight, spreading our species and our variety of waste throughout the world, and dropping far more devastating bombs. But birds outdo us all the same.

Mammals excrete their nitrogenous waste as urea in pee, but birds excrete it as uric acid in a sticky white paste. They release all their waste simultaneously, from a single hole, the cloaca. So the splatter that we know as bird poop is in fact a combination of feces (the green part) and pee (the white part). Healthy bird poop will, according to one veterinarian, "glisten with wetness," and there may be "a little halo around the poop if it's on an absorbent surface." Excremental habits vary. Turkeys and chickens eat their own nutrient-rich feces; other domesticated birds, if seen picking at dried poop with their beaks, are simply cleaning house. Birds do not have sweat glands, so certain species, such as turkey vultures and some storks, poop on their own legs to keep cool. The droppings function basically the way sweat does: they slowly evaporate in the heat, keeping the birds' body temperatures low. Once the liquid evaporates, the chalky residue acts as sunblock for their legs and feet.

Humans have been known to smear themselves with bird shit from time to time as well, rubbing it on their scalps to promote hair growth or spreading it on their faces in the hopes of shiny, rejuvenated skin. (In Manhattan in recent years, one could get a $180 skin treatment that used sanitized nightingale droppings.) In the nineteenth century, people also ingested it: powdered seabird guano was bottled as a homeopathic remedy meant to be taken for a variety of ailments, such as violent headaches, itchy genitals, or hay fever. Its benefits remain unproven.

Perhaps the best fertilizer comes from seabird guano, and the best guano comes from the Chincha Islands, off the coast of Peru. Because seabirds are pescatarians, their shit is especially rich in nitrogen, potassium, and phosphate: high-grade plant food. And the coastal waters of Peru have historically been rich in phytoplankton, the tiny marine organisms that fish eat, making the guano there particularly nutritious. The uninhabited Chincha Islands are home to guanay cormorants, Peruvian boobies, and Peruvian pelicans, who gather in enormous flocks off the coast, coating rocks in their guano. In this arid region, there is little rain to wash the poop—and its nutrients—into the sea. In other words, the shit builds up: mountains of chalky guano atop the islands have, at times, risen to 150 feet.

Humankind has destroyed so many bird habitats, food sources, and populations that our avian neighbors' mass pooping on our persons and property might well be seen as revenge. Bird poop stains marble and granite, adheres to paint, weakens concrete, eats away at steel. In the Seventies and Eighties in New York, when the city's public spaces were left uncleaned and unrepaired, pigeon droppings eroded the steel beams of the Williamsburg Bridge, gnawed at the steel plates on the Manhattan Bridge "as effectively as a blowtorch," and so thoroughly undermined a steel cable on the Brooklyn Bridge that it snapped and killed a man. Seabirds once destroyed the paint on an entire barge of Nissan cars waiting to dock at a European port. In 1991, an electrical short ignited pigeon droppings in the marquee of the Capitol Theater in Milford, Connecticut; moviegoers watching the firefighting film *Backdraft* thought the shouts of "fire" were a joke until they had to be evacuated.

Lured by such factors as the relative warmth of cities in winter and the abundance of food that humans discard, pigeons, starlings, crows, sparrows, and their many friends can be found roosting, preening, and loafing in the eaves of houses of worship, on the roofs of government buildings, in the attics of residences, in the rafters of transit stations, on the heads of statues, and in the porticoes of monuments. From their perches and nests at the Parthenon in Athens, the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials in Washington, Lenin statues in Russia, the logo atop Sony headquarters in California, birds have streaked every type of monument to human achievement with their shit.

[Politics]

## DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION

*By Lea Ypi, from* Free, *a memoir of life in Albania, which was published last month in the United Kingdom by Penguin.*

In 1995, my father began to practice his English with "the poor man," initially known as the Crocodile. His name was Vincent van de Berg. He was born in The Hague but had lived abroad most of his life. He was a missionary of sorts. He worked for the World Bank and had moved to Albania to advise the government on various privatization projects. Vincent was an expert on societies in transition. He also lived in his own kind of transition, always on the move from one society to the next. He had been a resident of so many different countries that he was unable to recall them when asked: "Oh, many, many countries. In Africa, in South America. In Eastern Europe. Now in the Balkans. Everywhere. I'm a citizen of the world."

Vincent was largely bald and wore short-sleeve shirts resembling those of the U.S. Marines, except that in place of the pocket was a tiny crocodile. The crocodile was made of cloth, always stared in the same direction, and had a wide-open mouth with sharp teeth. Vincent wore a different colored shirt every day, but the crocodile was a fixture.

The dinner to welcome him to our neighborhood was a happy occasion at first. We laid out tables and chairs in the Papas' garden, just as we used to in the old days. Children ran back and forth to fetch cutlery and plates, dogs rummaged under the tables, and music played from loudspeakers. My neighbor Flamur assumed the role of DJ, tirelessly swapping cassettes to satisfy all tastes. The dance floor remained full throughout the evening: some stood up to join the traditional line dancing, others emerged in couples for "The Blue Danube." And when people didn't dance, they sang, from "Ochi Chyornye" to "Let It Be."

Vincent sat at a table in the center of the garden, in the place that would have been reserved for the bride and groom if this had been a wedding. He did not sing or dance but seemed content as he tapped on the table, humming the songs he knew. It reminded him of parties in Ghana, he said. The men took turns introducing themselves, vigorously shaking hands and patting him on the back. "Welcome, Vincent!

[Textile]

## LIP SERVICE

*From a photograph tweeted in August by Christian Climate Action of Tim Hewes, an Anglican priest, at the News Corp. offices in London. Hewes sewed his lips together to protest the lack of reporting on climate change by Rupert Murdoch's media companies.*

© THE ARTIST

*A mixed-media artwork that incorporates facial-recognition software, by Maxime Matthys, from his series 2091: The Ministry of Privacy. Matthys's work is on view this month at the Biennale de l'Image Tangible, in Paris.*

One more shot of raki! I made this one," someone would say. "This round is for your health!" And again: "Here, Vincent! Long live the World Bank!"

Later, the women took over. "Vincent, did you try the meat and onion *byrek*?" "It's lovely," he replied. "I've had samosa before, but that was spicier." "Have some meatballs with the tomato sauce; Leushka, go and fetch the pestle and mortar, we forgot to grind pepper." Halfway through the meal, Vincent looked tired. He tapped less on the table and held his stomach with his hand as if he were in pain. People continued to ask him where he had lived, how he found his work in Albania. A frown had formed on his forehead and he smiled less, but nobody seemed to notice.

He stood up and asked for directions to the bathroom. A group of men accompanied him inside the house, then accompanied him back out when he was finished. "Vincent," asked Donika, who was hosting the dinner, when he returned to his seat, "you're not married, you said? How come? You're not very old. Don't worry, maybe you'll meet a lovely Albanian girl. Here, have some baklava, I made the pastry myself." Vincent declined. "I am full, thank you." "Full? You're not full! A big man like you! Maybe you're hot? Shpresa will be upset if you don't try her *kadaifi*."

Flamur put on the traditional dance of the Napoloni, raising the volume. Upon hearing the first notes, everyone hurried to the dance floor with the kind of urgency associated with the need to find shelter during a natural disaster. Some remembered that Vincent had been left at the table. A delegation of two men was sent back. They waved their handkerchiefs and shouted in his ear: "Vincent, we have to dance, it's the Napoloni!"

Vincent made a gesture to indicate that he wasn't too keen on dancing. The men pulled his chair and shouted again: "Don't be shy, it's the Napoloni, you must dance!" Van de Berg made a movement with his shoulders to release himself from their hold. "I can't dance," he said. "I enjoy watching. The Napoloni looks a bit like Zorba's dance." The men, slightly irritated that they might miss out, urged him more emphatically.

"Vincent!" the younger of the two men shouted, almost with despair. "Quickly, it's al-

most finished. Everyone can dance the Napoloni; look, you hold the handkerchief like this, wave it in the air, and keep your arms open like an airplane."

To demonstrate what a dancing airplane looked like, one man grabbed Vincent's left arm, and the other his right. Vincent turned bright red. Small drops of sweat dripped from his forehead. He shoved both men out of his way and, just as the music was coming to a stop, banged his fist on the table, causing a glass of raki to spill to the ground. "I am free!" he shouted, beside himself with rage. "Do you understand? I am free!"

Everyone on the dance floor froze. They turned toward the tables. Vincent regained control of his nerves, gathered his things, stood up from his chair, and said: "I apologize. I must go. I'm very tired. Thank you for the lovely dinner." There was a murmur in the room as people returned to their tables. "He did say he was full," Shpresa commented after Vincent had left, "but I thought he wanted to save us food and was worried about our expenses. The poor man." "The poor man," Donika confirmed. "It's probably the mosquitoes. Or the heat. These tourists, they just can't take it." "I am free!" repeated the two men who had tried to teach him to dance the Napoloni. They rolled their eyes and shrugged. "What does that even mean? We're all free here. If you don't want to dance, fine. No need to bang your fist. The poor man. He must have been so hot."

[Fiction]

# MELANCHOLY & THE INFINITE SADNESS

*By Natashia Deón, from* The Perishing, *which will be published this month by Counterpoint Press.*

My name is Sarah Shipley and I've slept with five women. Since I married a man, no one asks the kind of person I choose anymore. I've been married six times, all of them men, all of them taken from me, by God or by man, death in all cases. My first husband is who I remember most.

First Husband was once born in 1948 and was murdered just like my third, but I wasn't surprised. Devastated, but not surprised. We're all on the verge of somebody else's violence.

It used to scare people when I'd let down my guard and confess that my husbands were murdered. They would call me cursed, not unlucky. In fact, the word "unlucky" would only be used by those who thought I had something to do with it. " 'Cause no one's that unlucky." So now, when people ask how my husbands died, I say they stopped breathing. And for my own sake, I don't remember the faces of those who took their breath anymore.

I was forty years old when First Husband died the first time. And in every life, forty is the age when I start losing things—memories, glasses, friends—the frequency of their deaths make dying pedestrian.

But not always.

Sometimes, it is life altering. It hurts me to watch the anguish of others who don't understand it's not always over. Not for everybody.

First Husband was devastated when he lost his mother, Florence "Mary" Clay. She had nine kids. In 1956, when he was eight years old, Mary walked off the cotton fields to work cleaning classrooms, 7 AM to 7 PM, two dollars a week, slave labor, but "we all thought we were rich," First Husband said.

[Malfunctions]

# MELTDOWNS

*From the website mcbroken.com, which tracks broken McDonald's ice-cream machines across the United States. The machines break down frequently, and McDonald's franchises are obligated to hire a certified repair person from the machine's manufacturers. The figures below reflect the percentage of broken machines as of August 24, 2021.*

| CITY | PERCENTAGE BROKEN |
|---|---|
| Washington | 23 |
| New York City | 22 |
| Dallas | 20 |
| Phoenix | 19 |
| Philadelphia | 15 |
| San Antonio | 15 |
| Houston | 13 |
| Seattle | 13 |
| San Diego | 12 |
| San Francisco | 7 |
| Los Angeles | 6 |
| Chicago | 5 |
| San Jose | 4 |
| Boston | 0 |

Mary was the first female janitor at his school in Mississippi—preschool through high school—one school for all the Negroes, and she kept the whole school clean by herself. At lunch she worked in the cafeteria making sandwiches for all us children, he said, serving warm plates and apples. Never missed a day so folks respected my momma.

On Sundays, he and his brothers would walk up Columbus Street, their skin dark as wet soil and their new haircuts lined and shaped into something like helmets full of black flowers.

They'd wear Sunday suits then, each pressed paper-hard and without crinkle or sound, folded around their bodies like origami.

Folks would point and say, "Those're Mary Clay's kids," and they'd make room for them. That's how I knew about people, he said. Not by the way they treated me but by how they treated my momma. Respected her. That's how I decided who I liked and who I didn't. The other children at school would straighten their chairs and pick up trash before the school day ended because they knew my momma was coming.

First Husband was eighteen years old when his momma died. Sixty-one years of age. So at her funeral, he started counting down his own life because he was convinced he wouldn't outlive her. He counted forty-three more years to make something of himself. First thing he did was call off the wedding.

You see, his girlfriend Olive was pregnant, and marriage was the Christian thing to do, but since his momma was gone, they had no reason to pretend they were religious. So he moved to California, and Olive said she'd stay with her family in Mississippi to have the baby, and that was that.

By the time I met First Husband, he was forty-five years old and had already stopped chasing the son he'd abandoned. He decided the best thing to do was to wait and let his son find him when his son was ready. And every birthday that edged him closer to sixty-one, he reminded me that he didn't have much time. "I know I'll die by sixty," he'd tell me, "because I'm not worth more than what Momma had."

I'd argue.

I'd tell him no one could know when his time was to die, but he said he did know, and then he proved it. First Husband died at sixty years old and I don't disagree with him anymore.

When First Husband was thirteen years old, he had a best friend named Sammy. At thirteen, Sammy told him, "I'll be dead in a week," and he was.

My husband and Sammy were in the Mississippi Youth Gospel Choir together, and they'd been invited to sing at a church in Alabama. The pay was food and shelter and there were rumors that Mahalia Jackson would be there. Mahalia was Sammy's savior, after Christ himself. A goddess. And she was the reason Sammy's momma never broke his legs.

His momma had heard that Mahalia had the same condition as Sammy, legs bowed like a wishbone from his hips to his feet, yawned open at his knees and hardened like roof pitches curved outward.

Mahalia was the only Black person alive, she thought, with legs like his, so Sammy's momma did what Mahalia's auntie did. Instead

[Poem]

## THREE DEER, SHARON SPRINGS, NOVEMBER, 2020

*By Paul Muldoon, from a manuscript in progress. His poetry collection* Howdie-Skelp *will be published this month by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.*

Got up though they may be in heavy-duty gabardine
they cavort like fawn-devotees of Dionysus.
Their patron saint is Joseph of Cupertino,

the go-to guy for dunces
who'll make a run for it across a four-lane highway.
You have to admit they're tenacious,

holding out no less than goats or hee-haws
for a tidbit that's survived blight or powdery mildew.
The jury's hung as to whether the Woes

of the Pharisees amount to eight (as in Matthew)
or six (as in Luke).
A corner of the meadow

where a sky once lived is shown by that blue plaque;
the sky this morning's streaked with Coppertone
now the snow's been washing its dirty linen in public.

© THE ARTIST. COURTESY LOFT ART GALLERY, CASABLANCA, MOROCCO

Palm Sunday, *an embroidered photograph by Joana Choumali, from her Alba'hian series. Choumali's work is on view this month with Loft Art Gallery, at Paris Photo.*

of having the doctor break and reset his legs straight, as prescribed, she rubbed her boy's legs down with grease and bathed him in boiled dishwater. The heat was tolerable. It would relax the bones, she thought, like chicken bones tumbled in hot broth, softened and flexible, and would dry stiff and straight in the sheets she'd wrap around his legs at night, and come morning his ankles and toes were blue from the tight bandages. It would take time, of course.

The hope of this cure is why Sammy's legs never got broken. They never got healed either.

Each of the kids, if they were going to go on the trip and sing, had to pay their own bus fare, so the whole choir got good at chopping cotton for nickels a week. Sammy and my husband, who was then just Billy Clay, put in hours every day, from first light to nightfall, singing songs that Sammy had made up and written in ink on his arm with the ballpoint pen he found under the bus station bench.

Sammy's falsetto became like the sweet sound of a cooing woman, so good that he earned himself the lead spot in the choir. But five days before they were supposed to leave on the bus, Sammy's momma told Sammy that she'd used his travel money. She said, "You need it to pay for school clothes and not some trip to Alabama."

Sammy was so disappointed when he found out about his money that he fell onto the ground, crying, right in front of everybody. And after he begged his momma one more

time, unsuccessfully, with dirt and straw tumbling down from his cheek, he made a new wish. A few days later, he started telling his friends, "You're not going to see me anymore."

"But, Sammy," my Billy said, "you'll see me, right? We're best friends." "No, not even you, Billy."

The day before the choir left for Birmingham, Sammy asked Mary Clay if she'd make him his favorite dump cake, and she did. So before the bus left, before Sammy's week was up, Sammy and Billy snuck into the church building, sat in the pews, and ate a mess of pineapple and peach and butter and nuts with some mint, all dumped and baked into cake batter. The result was the distinctive flavor of strawberries. Proof that dump cake is life. No matter what you put in it, no matter what you try, how you're received is not always up to you. And when they finished, Sammy sang what my husband described as "Sammy's last bit of sweet-lovely, his notes high and soft like a fairy."

It was the Wednesday of the ride back home from Alabama when everybody heard the news. Missus Johnson had phoned ahead to the school to let them know our failure—runners-up out of twenty-five—and that we were on our way. When she got back to the singing hall to meet us, no one noticed her changed expression before she told us, flatly, "Get on the bus." It made sense to all the children because we had come to win, after all.

It had been hot that day, my husband said, and the night hadn't cured it, so the starless eleven o'clock sky was like a boiled rag thrown over Birmingham, our bus an oven, its windows bleeding with moisture.

First Husband said that about halfway through the ride Missus Johnson stood up and gripped her seat's back cushion, full-fingered, making frown lines in the plastic. Then she told everybody what happened: that earlier that day during summer school, some big kid in the lunchroom lifted Sammy up by his collar, then pushed him into the wall in such a peculiar way that it broke Sammy's neck. Thirteen years old and he died instantly. My husband's momma was the one who had to clean his urine off the floor.

So you see, we know, my husband told me. Sammy is proof that there's no point in trying to outlive the date you've been given. Folks like us, we just need to leave something good behind. But you. Not you, he told me. "You've got forever," he said.

He said it because I'd told him everything.

Because I promised to try to find him again.

Because I can't be sure I can.

Because some people are bonded over lifetimes. Not a soul mate—a wasted term—but a kindred spirit. No, not spirit. The inarticulable part of ourselves.

Everybody I love dies, and no matter. Most people won't survive everyone who loves them. Our lives are meant to mimic a passing breeze that won't return.

Not me.

I have to live with my losses forever. Life after life in new bodies, new cities, and new countries, where I've always been Black, not always a woman. But people who are meant to be in our lives will find us. No matter how far we wander. Even if when we find each other we're lost. Together.

So sometimes I'll find my pair—like First Husband—even though I won't search for him. Even though I promised. Because, for a while, I'll forget our before this and finding him will be like a rediscovery, a shock of holy hallelujah.

We're supposed to forget ourselves and each other after this. But I remember because I'm broken now. He won't remember, because he's not. This is my undoing.

[War Logs]

## COUNTRY TOADS TAKE MY HOME

*From headlines since 2003 in the* Sydney Morning Herald *about Australia's rapidly spreading population of invasive cane toads.*

Top End Turns into Cane Toad Heaven
Invasion Spreads
The City Strikes Back
More Cane Toads Than Calici Virus
Chilling Plan to Make Toad Hop It
Turn Cane Toads on Themselves
Cannibalism May Be the Answer
Arthritis May Slow Cane Toads
Alarm as Cane Toad Hitches a Ride South
Ant May Halt Cane Toad Invasion
Cane Toad Inches Further into WA
Rats Take Fight to Toad
Cane Toad Sausage on the Menu
Eating Cane Toads Won't Stop Their Spread
Cane Toads Mount New Aussie Invasion
Cane Toad Hitches a Ride to the South-West
New Hope in Bid to Halt Cane Toad March
Toads Bunker Down
Cane Toads, Cockroaches Set for War
Thousands Killed in "Toad Day Out"
Cane Toads Learn to Sleep at Night
Cane Toad Tadpoles Have Become Cannibals

*Clockwise from top left: "Moonvoyage," "Kawa #15," "An Island in the Moon II," and "Uoon," photographs by Paul Cupido, whose work was on view in September with Bildhalle, at Photo London. Cupido's monograph* 4 a.m. *was published in September.*

Courtesy the artist and Danziger Gallery, New York City

# AD ASTRA

## The coming battle over space

*By Rachel Riederer*

*All armies prefer high ground to low.*
—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

In late January 2020, in an orbital belt around 640 kilometers above Earth, two unmanned Russian spacecrafts coasted through the sky toward *USA-245*, an American reconnaissance satellite.

From this elevation a traveler would have seen the earth as a rounded slope of green and brown. One could have made out the rugged edges of mountains and the contours of lakes, our white atmosphere, bowed around the planet, darkening to blue and then black. Seen from a backyard telescope, the satellites would have looked like small glimmers in the night, with light from the sun glinting off their alloyed coating as if off a distant windshield.

The Russian crafts had positioned themselves unusually close to the American, in a near-identical orbit, and they had synced their paths with *USA-245*—a classified, multibillion-dollar KH-11 satellite, equipped with imaging systems on par with the Hubble telescope—such that one of them came within twenty kilometers of it several times in a single day. Satellites in the same plane may on occasion pass within one hundred kilometers of one another but far less frequently. The Russians, it seemed, were stalking an American spy satellite.

The larger of the two Russian crafts, *Kosmos-2542*, had first entered the same orbital plane as *USA-245* in late November, launched from a Soyuz rocket. This in itself was not a notable occurrence, and the two passed each other only once in eleven days. But on December 6, the Russian vessel seemed to split in two. In fact, it had spat out another, smaller craft. Speaking later, in February, General John W. "Jay" Raymond, chief of the newly established Space Force, would describe it by saying, "The way I picture it, in my mind, is like Russian nesting dolls."

*Rachel Riederer is a writer in New York.*

Illustrations by Shonagh Rae

According to Russia, *Kosmos-2542* was an inspector satellite, a type of craft also used by the United States and China. Inspectors are smaller, more agile machines with precise navigation and controls, most often employed to closely approach or dock with friendly crafts to assess for maintenance. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that the satellite born from *Kosmos-2542,* called *Kosmos-2543,* was also an inspector, and described its begetting as an "experiment," intended to further maintenance of its fleet. Russia also noted that *2542* was equipped with cameras powerful enough to photograph the earth's surface. *USA-245* slowly lifted into a higher orbit, away from the Russian satellites, while *Kosmos-2543,* the baby, zipped around the sky and, in the words of a later published space-threat assessment from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), changed its orbit "constantly"—an exceptional performance in space, where fuel is precious.

Then, on January 22, both Russian crafts approached radically closer to the American. For two months, they shadowed *USA-245,* one of the two never traveling more than a thousand kilometers from it. One observer noted that their orbital paths were synced such that they were closest to the American when it was in bright sunlight: the ideal choreography for taking photographs.

When Raymond first spoke publicly on the events, in an interview with *Time,* he called the activity "unusual and disturbing," and noted that "inspection" of a satellite by an enemy craft is not discernibly different from an approach preceding an attack. An offensive strike could take the form of an old-fashioned kinetic assault—objects hurled through space—or chemical sprays, lasers, signal jammers, and more. The antagonism of Russia's approach was clear. Kaitlyn Johnson, deputy director of the Aerospace Security Project at CSIS, told me that the behavior was "really unusual, very intentional, and pushing the limits." But, she added, whether it was espionage or one-upmanship, it was not illegal.

In mid-April, Russia tested a direct-ascent anti-satellite weapon (DA-ASAT)—a missile launched from Earth rather than from a vessel already in orbit. The country had tested this weapon system—named Nudol, after a river near Moscow—multiple times before, and the United States, China, and India had all performed DA-ASAT tests in years prior, each demolishing defunct satellites of their own. The Russian weapon seemed intended for a target in open space: it sailed through the sky and then fell back to Earth, where it likely landed in the Laptev Sea. U.S. Space Command issued a statement the same day, declaring the test evidence of the growing threats to U.S. space systems and deeming it "hypocritical": Russia had publicly called for "full demilitarization" in space. Space Command also took the opportunity to comment on the nesting dolls. Russia, the statement said, had "conducted maneuvers near a U.S. Government satellite that would be interpreted as irresponsible and potentially threatening in any other domain." In a line attributed to Raymond directly, it warned that the United States was "ready and committed to deterring aggression and defending the Nation, our allies and U.S. interests from hostile acts in space."

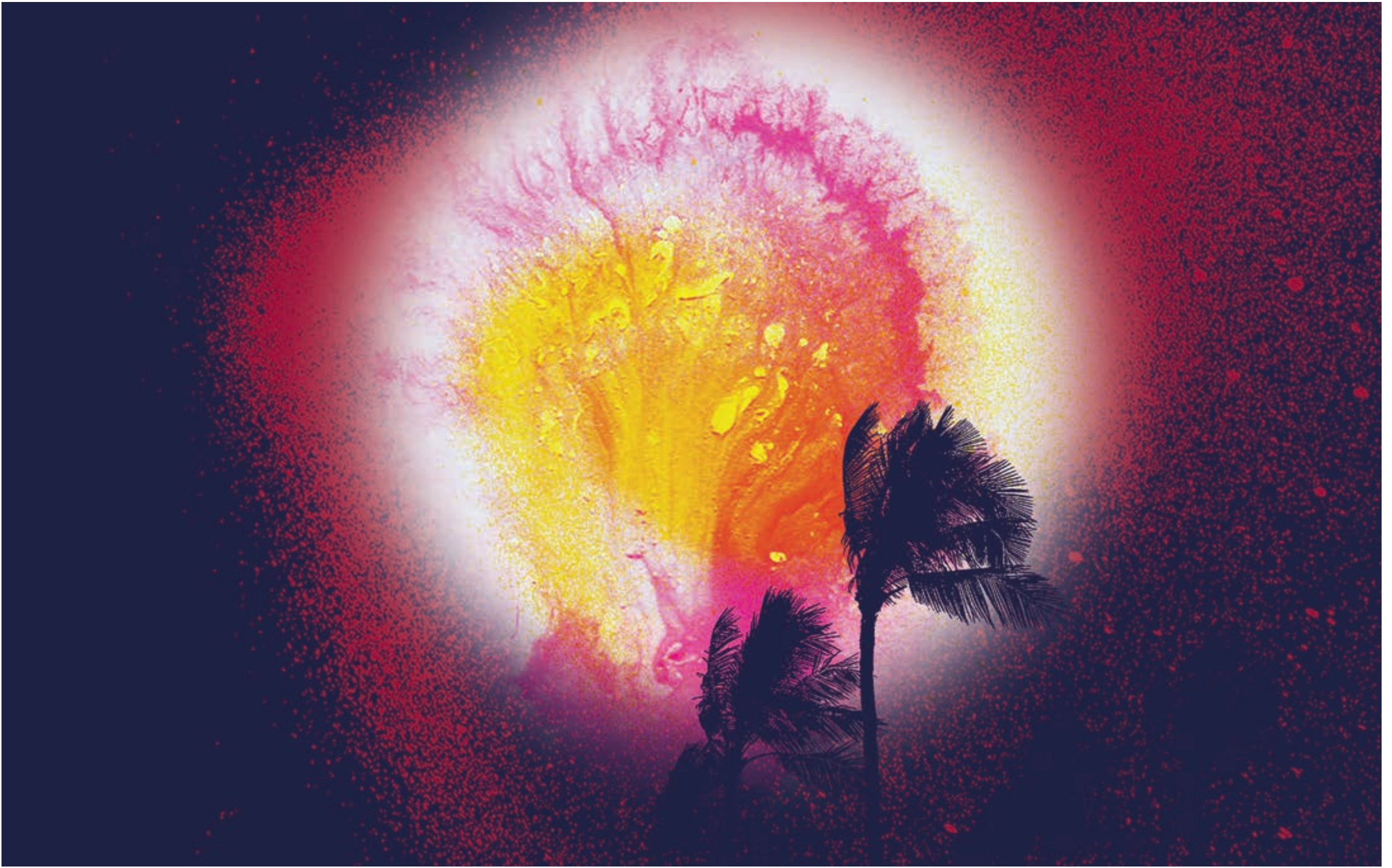
> "THE OUTER SPACE TREATY SAYS YOU CAN'T HAVE NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN SPACE. THE REST IS THE WILD, WILD WEST"

But the Russians were not done. On July 15, *Kosmos-2543,* the smaller of the stalking pair, itself released a smaller object. It did not approach a U.S. craft, but both the American and British militaries called it a weapon: Russia, they claimed, had fired a projectile in orbit. U.S. Space Command has remained mum on the precise details of what happened. Jonathan McDowell, a Harvard astrophysicist and satellite watcher, told me that it was clear that an object had been discharged at high speed but that it was hard to say whether the intent was to test a weapon or a defense system—an especially vexing distinction in space. The action was "similar," a statement from U.S. Space Command said, to one by Russia in 2017, and "inconsistent" with the claim that the crafts were inspectors. In response, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the release of the new object was merely part of a "close inspection" and that "most importantly, it did not breach any norms or principles of international law," calling the American assessment of the events "propaganda," and volleying back the accusation of hypocrisy: the United States and Britain, it said, "naturally keep silent about their own efforts" and "programs on the possible use of . . . counter-satellite weapons."

Doug Loverro, the former executive director of the Air Force's Space and Missile Systems Center and the former deputy assistant secretary of defense for space policy, told me that the projectile was "a clear provocation." And yet Russia was right: they still had not broken any law. There were no precise rules guiding how the United States or any military should respond in a case like this—no code with which to say that the Russian satellites had come too close, none determining the nondestructive firing of a weapon as a breach. And there was no military maneuver the United States could have taken to counter the nesting dolls without risking severe escalation.

In fact, the primary source for international law in space is a drastically outdated document from 1967 called the Outer Space Treaty, designed for an environment far simpler than the current field. In a September 2019 address at a conference for air, space, and cyber security, General Raymond put it this way: "The Outer Space Treaty says you can't have nuclear weapons in space. That's about what it says. The rest is the wild, wild West."

On July 8, 1962, just after 11 PM, the sky over Hawaii turned, in a moment, from black to blazing. Streetlights went out, all at once; radios stopped working. For several minutes, a red orb, edged in purple, surrounding a lumi-



nous yellow core, made the night as bright as day. It then dimmed, slowly, receding into color-changing auroras. When these lights faded, they left behind a spectral glow that persisted for hours and could be seen throughout the Pacific.

The United States had just detonated a 1.4-megaton nuclear warhead in space. Launched from the Johnston Atoll, an isolated island that had gone from seabird refuge to seaplane landing base to weapons-testing site, the hydrogen bomb exploded two hundred and fifty miles above the earth's surface. The bomb, code-named Starfish Prime, was a hundred times more powerful than the one that had been dropped on Hiroshima seventeen years earlier. It produced an instantaneous surge of voltage, followed by a slow-rolling distortion of the earth's magnetic field and a belt of radiation that rippled outward in space and lasted for months. The electromagnetic impact was more significant than government scientists had expected, and the radiation damaged several satellites, American and Soviet. But the United States and the USSR both tested several more nuclear bombs at high altitude that year, including two each in space, one of which, by the Soviets, caused a fire in a power station in Kazakhstan. Space—where exploration had just begun—was being weaponized.

Several of these tests took place that October, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, after which the possibility of nuclear war seemed intolerably near. In August of the next year, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union signed a treaty prohibiting further testing of nuclear weapons in Earth's atmosphere, underwater, or in outer space. But the United States and the Soviet Union had still other concerns about the heavens: one of the two nations would make it to the moon first and could stake a claim, establishing a military base on that ultimate high ground. They pursued a second treaty as a hedge, using that agreement to declare that space would be free from territorial competition.

That document, the Outer Space Treaty, was signed by the United States, the USSR, and sixty other nations on the evening of January 27, 1967, in the East Room of the White House. Just an hour and fifteen minutes after they convened, a fire broke out, down the East Coast at Cape Canaveral, in the cockpit of the grounded *Apollo 1* command module. The first three American astronauts in the moon shot program were killed within minutes. The disaster and the Outer Space Treaty shared the front page of the next morning's *New York Times*.

The U.S. Army's largest ground offensive in the Vietnam War had recently culminated in the burning and bulldozing of the village of Ben Suc. In San Francisco, on January 14, some twenty thousand young people had converged in Golden Gate Park for the concerts and demonstrations of the Human Be-In. The treaty reflected a politics both entrenched in and sick of war, and a vision of outer space as a canvas—perilous but pristine—where earthly politics could be transformed. Its first article stated that space exploration "shall be carried out for the

benefit and in the interests of all countries . . . and shall be the province of all mankind." The agreement also established that exploration of outer space was to be "guided by the principle of co-operation and mutual assistance." All astronauts were to be "regarded as envoys of mankind"—afforded aid when in distress, and safe passage when landing in enemy seas. The treaty further made each nation responsible for damages its crafts might cause,[1] and liable for all objects launched from its territory—the result of heavy negotiation, as the Soviets were initially opposed to private entities in the cosmos. Importantly, no nation could claim sovereignty over the moon, other celestial bodies, or any expanse of space.

More than half a century later, this Cold War document remains the basis for all extraterrestrial law. It bans placing nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction into orbit—as Raymond noted—but it says nothing of Earth-to-space or space-to-space arms, nor does it speak to kinetic weapons or the many subtler forms of attack developed since its drafting. The agreement is silent on what constitutes hostile behavior, and though it states that international law extends into space, there is no ready translation of earthly rules to a realm without national borders or gravity, and with limitless potential planes of conflict. As the years have gone by and other nations have joined the United States and Russia in space, and as astronautic technologies have become vastly more sophisticated, the insufficiency of the Outer Space Treaty has become a significant danger.

At Joint Base Andrews in late December 2019, at the signing ceremony establishing the new United States Space Force, President Donald Trump gave his assessment of the nation's position in space: "We're leading, but we're not leading by enough. But very shortly we'll be leading by a lot." "Spa-ssss," he said occasionally, drawing out the latter consonant in a hiss.

Judging by the assessments of security experts and the ambitions of the military, he was correct. In the spring of 2020, both CSIS and the Secure World Foundation, a think tank focused on security in space, released reports finding that stability in space, long sustained by the United States' sheer dominance there, was waning. As Kaitlyn Johnson from CSIS said: "Other nations are catching up." And despite the bluster with which the Space Force had been introduced, and its seeming absurdity to much of the general public, military scholars and commanders were divided only on the question of separating space missions from the Air Force and into their own branch.

STABILITY IN SPACE, LONG SUSTAINED BY THE UNITED STATES' SHEER DOMINANCE, IS WANING

Since 2015, Russia, China, India, Iran, Israel, France, and North Korea have all established military space programs. China's and Russia's space commands are close on the heels of the United States, and according to the Secure World Foundation, the United States has idled certain of its offensive-technology programs while China and Russia actively test the same capabilities. Over the course of the past two years, martial activity beyond our atmosphere has exploded, and in conversations this summer, many space and security experts told me that the pressure is rising. "We are watching tensions ratchet up," said Jack Beard, a former Department of Defense attorney and a professor of law specializing in space.

In March 2019, India tested its first direct-ascent anti-satellite weapon, blowing up one of its own crafts in low Earth orbit. In April 2020, when Iran announced the creation of its military space program, it slung its first reconnaissance satellite, *Noor 1* ("Light 1" in Farsi), into orbit. In September of that year, China successfully launched a reusable craft, dubbed a "spaceplane," which cruises in low Earth orbit and returns to the planet in one piece, landing horizontally. (The United States has developed its own spaceplane, the *U.S. X-37B,* first launched in 2010, but its missions have been classified since 2004, and it's not clear how the crafts compare.) This May, China landed a rover on Mars and declared its intention to establish a long-term human presence there.

When China successfully tested a direct-ascent ASAT weapon in 2007, it was seen as a wake-up call for the Pentagon. And though only China, Russia, India, and the United States now have demonstrated kinetic ASAT capability, satellites are susceptible to many less spectacular forms of attack. North Korea is known to be developing signal jammers to block satellite transmissions, and Iran has cyberattack capacity that could disrupt space-based signals and corrupt data. Even Japan, a country with a pacifist constitution that prohibits offensive military action, is preparing defenses for space combat, such as robotic arms to protect satellites.

General Raymond has stated, and analysts believe, that China has been building high-powered lasers to blast sensors on satellites, effectively blinding them.[2] China has also demonstrated "spoofing" technology, a type of interference where a satellite's signal is mimicked by a fake. In July 2019, a U.S. container ship, the MV *Manukai,* and several other vessels in the port of Shanghai received false GPS signals, which experts believe were likely sent by the Chinese military, including notifications of phantom ships fast approaching. Though the *Manukai*'s captain was able to see, with binoculars, that the GPS was wrong, the spoof could have been disastrous.

While many experts say that the likelihood of kinetic war—bombs

*[1] This principle has been invoked only once, in 1978, after a nuclear-power fueled Soviet satellite fell into Canada and spread radioactive waste across the country's northwest.*

*[2] China has used a ground-based laser to, in the words of the U.S. National Reconnaissance Office, "illuminate" an American satellite at least once, in 2006, but without causing interference.*

bursting in space—is impossible to assess, conflict in less overt forms is already playing out. "In some respects," Loverro told me, "we've already had war in space." In 2007 and 2008, hackers believed to be from China attacked U.S. satellites operated by the U.S. Geological Survey and NASA. In the latter case, they gained control of the craft, but stopped short of issuing it commands. The Russian government, meanwhile, has been accused of widespread, malicious signal jamming, including, in 2018, disrupting GPS transmissions during a NATO exercise in Scandinavia and disabling American surveillance drones in Syria.

All this comes at a time of exponential growth in the commercial use of space. When Russia launched the first man-made satellite, *Sputnik 1,* from a cosmodrome on the Kazakh steppe in 1957, the small aluminum sphere entered a near abyss. But the orbital belts surrounding Earth are now a crowded highway of around seven thousand satellites, moving at speeds of up to seventeen thousand miles an hour. Many of these machines are used for both civilian and military purposes. Three thousand of them are no longer in operation, and travel alongside around fifteen thousand pieces of space debris sizable enough to observe from Earth: the shrapnel of blasted satellites, old rocket boosters, and more, including items lost during space walks (a camera, a blanket, a spatula). U.S. Space Command tracks this dreck, alongside satellites, and alerts operators around the world when objects are due to collide. Though actual crashes are rare, the military now issues more than a hundred thousand of these warnings each day. Those who study the subject commonly describe the current play of space as "congested, contested, and competitive."

The vast majority of satellites are split between the two most useful zones around the earth: the more accessible low Earth orbit (LEO), which begins about five hundred kilometers from the planet's surface and is ideal for telecommunications and imaging, and geosynchronous orbit (GEO), thirty-six thousand kilometers away, where satellites move more slowly and in time with the earth's rotation, making them stationary relative to given points on the planet and ideal for meteorology. Elon Musk's broadband project, Starlink, is currently veiling the world in a mega-constellation of new satellites. As of this May, Starlink has launched more than 1,700 of them into LEO. These now make up over a quarter of all functional satellites orbiting Earth. According to Hugh Lewis, an astronautics researcher in the United Kingdom, they account for roughly half of all close calls—cases in which objects have passed within one kilometer of each other.[3]

Musk's company SpaceX launched its first civilian passenger flight this September, reaching nearly five hundred and eighty kilometers above sea level—far higher than the voyages of fellow billionaires Richard Branson and Jeff Bezos, who each traveled to the edge of the earth's atmosphere this summer. Branson went first, on the spaceplane VSS *Unity,* reaching eighty kilometers above the planet's surface, the distance at which the Air Force considers a traveler an astronaut. Bezos took off second, in a reusable rocket called the *New Shepard,* to one hundred kilometers above sea level—what's called the Kármán line, another commonly used boundary for space. A representative for Bezos's Blue Origin venture says the company will be ready to take more tourists to space at the end of this year; Branson's Virgin Galactic claims the same for 2022. All three men—Bezos, Branson, and Musk—use the loftiest language to describe their ambitions for the void. (Musk, for his part, wants humans to become a "multi-planet species.") Each sees a new type of prestige past the horizon, as well as extraordinary sums of money.

[3] *SpaceX now has plans to launch into orbit a pixelated screen that will display ads in LEO—mercifully not visible from Earth—and will be equipped with a selfie stick and camera to film the screen and broadcast the feed. Advertisers will be able to buy spots using dogecoin and ethereum.*

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Competition for position on the useful orbital belts is now steep. And that competition is its own signal of risk, says Jack Beard. "There's never been a moment in human history where all these new possibilities of resources don't lead to disagreements between states," he said. "And unfortunately, military involvement is usually close behind."

This risk comes at a time when civilian dependence on satellites—for internet service, cell signals, weather monitoring, geolocation—is higher than ever, and American military reliance on satellites is near total. The military's space-based systems underpin everything: communications, surveillance, guided munitions, nuclear command and control, and more.[4] Among the spacefaring nations, the United States is by far the most exposed, operating more than half of all active satellites circling the globe. Laura Grego, an astrophysicist with the Union of Concerned Scientists, told me that the Pentagon has been nervous about this vulnerability for a long time. "They're relying on something that's hard to protect," she said.

Direct kinetic attacks on space assets, and the resultant debris, could create a cascading effect that would wreck the satellites we depend on. In the case of widespread destruction, hurricane tracking, search-and-rescue locators, financial transactions, and emergency messages could all go dark. The most important satellites, such as those communicating directives to the military, are hardened against attack, with protective shields and special maneuvering capabilities, and are backed up by others. "It's pretty easy to kill a single satellite," said Loverro, "but it's hard to kill the mission." In the case of GPS, for example, it would take fifteen or twenty successful shots to bring down the system. But all satellites are vulnerable. McDowell, the Harvard astrophysicist, put it this way: "If a large piece of debris hits you at orbital velocity—yeah, there's not really a defense against that." This is true even for nuclear command and control crafts. Loverro told me that while these satellites orbit in the much sparser and more distant GEO, and have some redundancy built into their networks, by far their greatest protection is deterrence: "We know, and the Russians know, and the Chinese and other adversaries know, that if you attack one of those satellites, it is clear that you are probably about to start a nuclear war."

All military assets are surrounded by a "use it or lose it" ethos, says Joan Johnson-Freese, the author of *Space Warfare in the 21st Century* and a professor of national security affairs at the U.S. Naval War College. Once conflict begins, all holdings are seen to be at risk: you need to fire that missile before it's taken out. "The military is taught to assume the worst, and to react to it," she told me. "Because space assets are so far away, and there is a high potential to not be sure what is happening, high risk and threat must be assumed." This is commonly referred to as "the tyranny of distance." When the rules are not plain, whether in peacetime or war, the situation is "exponentially" more dangerous.

If conflict were to escalate in space, Johnson-Freese told me, "Things could get real sixteenth-century, real quick." Everyone knows that space is the United States' Achilles' heel. "So if things went bad, and I don't know in what way, but if things went bad—between the United States and China, or the U.S., China, and Russia, or whoever it is—and there's a major conflict, I think it's no-holds-barred. Because the U.S. has the most to lose."

"Countries are starting to ask the question" of when they can and should fight, Laura Grego told me in June. "If you're getting up close to my satellite, how close do you have to be before I can defend myself? How close is too close; what is intimidation; what is a threat, and what is not a threat?" "Countries," she said,

[4] *American military reliance on space has been building since Operation Desert Storm, when U.S. satellites proved a tactical advantage: American troops navigated unmarked stretches of desert using GPS and blindsided the Iraqi Army, which expected them to approach by road.*

"are starting to answer these questions for themselves."

Grego is a technical expert for the Woomera Manual, an independent team of scholars, government officials, and other space and legal experts from around the world that is drafting a rule book for military conduct in space, including for times of war. The document would clarify how the Outer Space Treaty and international law should be used together, making brighter the bright lines of war, and delineating rules for engagement in space—including proportionality of action—that its creators hope will help to avert outright conflict in the first place. Something of a sister organization, the MILAMOS Project—the Manual on International Law Applicable to Military Uses of Outer Space—is crafting a rule book exclusively for peacetime in space. (The two began in 2016 as a single project; Woomera splintered off in 2018.)

Neither document is a treaty—they will not be ratified or formally adopted, but will become common resources. The Woomera panel is named after an Australian aerospace facility, which in turn borrows its name from an Aboriginal word for the hooked rod used to propel a spear. Its participants hail from Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Israel, the Netherlands, Sweden, and China. There is no Russian participant, though the Woomera members I spoke with attributed the country's absence to logistical factors.

The current opacity of space law, the group's mission statement says, allows for dangerous misunderstandings, and permits "states that might wish to conduct hostile space operations to do so in a zone of uncertainty." This in turn complicates the responses of other nations. "It's not just the Wild West, the lack of laws" that causes the uncertainty, Grego explained. "It's a lack of a sort of experience." In space, she said, "You can ratchet up a crisis," because we don't know how nations will react to different behaviors. To this end, both the Woomera and MILAMOS manuals seek to detail the relatively few past incidents of international engagement in space and use them as a form of precedent for interpreting existing law, codifying how countries have previously behaved into a new set of rules. (This is *lex lata,* the law as it is. The drafters of the Outer Space Treaty dealt in *lex ferenda*: the law as it ought to be.)

Because of the nature of human events in space, this approach means that the Woomera editors are granting a type of authority to decisions likely made under extreme pressure and, in many cases, for the first time in history. The manual will also enshrine space behavior born of the particular power dynamics of the past sixty years. But the authors wanted buy-in from nations, and saw this as the surest path.

> IF CONFLICT WERE TO ESCALATE IN SPACE, "THINGS COULD GET REAL SIXTEENTH-CENTURY, REAL QUICK"

Beard, the former Department of Defense attorney, is Woomera's editor in chief. He told me that some military actions in space are clear-cut—the law, and the past, need no interpretation. Some satellites, as he put it, "hold the key to Earth's existence": everyone understands that any threat to nuclear command and control is intolerable. But Article Nine of the OST introduces a nebulous concept, saying that states are required to "undertake appropriate international consultation" if an action in space will cause "harmful interference" with the peaceful activities of another party. What is "harmful interference"? Woomera's task, Beard said, is in part to answer this question.

If threats to nuclear command satellites are so serious as to be considered absolutely out of bounds, then signal jamming—an action that is unwelcome but occurs regularly without repercussions—occupies the opposite end of the spectrum of perceived harm. Beard stops short of saying that jamming is accepted, but, he told me, "it's routine." Between these two poles—interfering with nuclear satellites on one end, and signal jamming on the other—is a vast, murky middle: satellite "dazzling" (temporary disabling via lasers), "microwaves … robotic-arm manipulators, chemical spray, cyber—it's all out there," said Beard. Dale Stephens, the former chief of operations and international law for the Australian military, a professor of law specializing in space, and a lead Woomera editor, framed it this way: "What happens if I maneuver your satellite? I don't destroy anything—I use cyber to have it turned into the sun and away from what it's doing. What is that? Is that a use of force?" "You have this constant battle," Beard said, "of what's below the line and what's above the line."

When the manual is complete, all interested countries will be invited to send delegates—a mix of diplomats, military personnel, and representatives from national civilian space programs—to review and discuss it at The Hague, likely in 2022. After that, Grego says, she hopes to see a copy of the manual on the desk of "every JAG in every country."

Every space security expert I spoke with believes that both the Woomera and MILAMOS texts will be widely used. "They'll be quite helpful," Loverro told me. "But not because somebody is going to open up the manual and say, 'Here's what we should do in this situation.'" For each decision a military commander makes, he said, there's a negotiation among tools like these, with lawyers, policy advisers, and others navigating quite a few "books on the shelves," including each military's self-determined rules of engagement for a given conflict.

Joan Johnson-Freese agreed that Woomera will be consulted by the world's forces but noted a distinct limit. "Do I think there's going to be that manual on every JAG's desk? Yes, I do," she said. But when a crisis arises—if an alarm rings out warning of a fired missile—"that manual and 'use it or lose it' are going to come—*smack*—into play. And that's

when that JAG is going to be told to sit down and shut up."

In mid-September of last year, from a stage in a small theater at the Pentagon, surrounded by heavy curtains of royal blue, General Raymond addressed members of the Air Force. "Our adversaries are moving deliberately and quickly in order to reduce our advantage," he said. "I'm not confident that we can achieve victory, or even compete, in a modern conflict without space power. And I am not willing to lose in order to learn."

He was there to ceremoniously transfer three hundred airmen—twenty-two of whom were in the audience—to the Space Force. He was also formally introducing the branch's first military doctrine, Spacepower, released to the public that August. The world's new "war-fighting architecture," Raymond told the crowd, demands a "new design," and the U.S. military must "be able to meet the threat while reducing the first-mover advantage." The United States also needs, he said, "the ability to punch back."

The new doctrine inaugurates space as a distinct war-fighting domain, and "spacepower" as a military power in its own right. Among the Space Force's goals, it says, are to "destroy, nullify, or reduce" adversarial menaces in space, especially by deterrence through the flexing of enormous military muscle. The document is dutifully reverential of the Outer Space Treaty and international law, and says that "military space forces should make every effort to promote responsible norms of behavior that perpetuate space as a safe and open environment." But at its core, the doctrine opposes the fundamental purpose of the OST, which was to define and preserve space as a place of peace. It also explicitly hedges against the promises of the '67 treaty, saying: "No domain in history in which humans contest policy goals has ever been free from the potential for war." The United States must "acknowledge" that space "is for peaceful purposes" while preparing to defend it, a quiet clause clarifies, not from those who would disrupt that peace, but from those "who will seek to undermine our goals in space." Included in the "cornerstone responsibilities" of the Space Force, the doctrine says, are to "Preserve Freedom of Action" and "Enable Joint Lethality and Effectiveness."

In August, I asked Major Brian Green, a lawyer for the Space Force, how discrepancies between the Spacepower Doctrine and the Outer Space Treaty would be resolved. It wasn't a question he answered directly. However, he said that the new doctrine "certainly doesn't have the force of law"—acknowledging that it should not override the OST. Certain principles in the treaty, he said, became accepted "rather quickly"—such as the freedom of space exploration and the nonappropriation principle. But now, how those "very clear terms" apply to the moon and other celestial bodies is "becoming a little more challenging." He noted that Article Two of the OST says that such bodies "are not subject to national appropriation in any way. But," he continued, "the United States' position is that the extraction and use of resources on the moon and other celestial bodies does not violate that nonappropriation principle." The United States' position is also, he said, for those resources—effectively, pieces of the moon—to not be "treated as the property of the whole international community. Or what have you."

As for the Woomera Manual, Green told me it would likely be useful, and noted the contributions of some "very smart people." But, he said, "Ultimately government officials are going to have to come to their own decisions about what the rules are."

In a set of space-focused war games held by CSIS in the fall of 2020, around forty space and national-security experts gathered on Zoom to run simulations of potential conflicts. In one scenario, a Russian satellite drifted near a NATO craft involved in nuclear command and control, sometimes blocking its signals. Russia claimed it had simply lost charge of its vessel. As tensions climbed, an explosion knocked out an American GPS satellite. Russia insisted the explosion must have been caused by a faulty fuel tank; the Americans suspected it was a Russian space mine, a small explosive weapon, too slight to easily detect from Earth. If it was a mine, it wasn't on the official registry of objects in orbit. The participants considered a range of possible responses, from issuing Russia a formal warning to jamming the uplinks to the nation's network of mines to blowing up a satellite in GLONASS—Russia's navigation system—with a kinetic weapon. When the players were asked later what resources they wished they'd had, they said they wanted better spatial awareness and clearer international rules.

All challenges to nuclear weapons remain on the far side of a bright line, but the tension between the Spacepower Doctrine and the OST makes clear that the treaty's authority is softening at its edges. The balance of international risk has shifted, though extreme shared risks remain. As in the Cold War, the United States is once again involved in a "great power competition," in which nations are projecting military might across many spheres. But, as Oriana Skylar Mastro, a fellow in international relations at Stanford and at the American Enterprise Institute, told me, in the 1960s the risks of nuclear war were divided equally between the United States and the Soviet Union. "There is now a huge asymmetry in vulnerability," she said, with China's power growing, and the United States the most sensitive to attack.

Experts focused on pursuing peace, or at least safety, in space now see two paths to that end: through further diplomatic efforts and arms control, or through a new assertion of military supremacy. But most of those I spoke with said that there is no appetite for new binding international treaties. "There's a lack of willingness to limit your own arsenal in order to achieve better global stability," said Kaitlyn Johnson, from CSIS. "And there's just a lack of trust—there's not a lot of goodwill." Each nation views the operations of others in the most threatening possible light, while describing their own actions, no matter how bellicose, in innocent terms. At a Secure World Foundation panel in May 2019, an Indian diplomat used the question-

and-answer portion of the event to deliver a speech characterizing his country's ASAT test as purely defensive and responsibly conducted. After a Russian craft, the *Luch-Olymp* (the "Ray of Olympus"), closely approached a Franco-Italian secure-communications satellite, the *Athena-Fidus* ("Faithful Athena"), in 2017, the French deemed it a provocation, and Florence Parly, the minister of the armed forces, accused the Russians of pursuing "a little Star Wars." Then, in July 2019, when France announced its new military space command and declared an intention to arm its satellites with machine guns, Parly's office insisted that the country was not embarking upon a space arms race—it was simply carrying out a "reasoned arsenalization."

"The question I always want to pose," Johnson-Freese said, "is, What could China do in space that the United States doesn't consider threatening? And the answer is, nothing." China, for its part, has said that the very creation of the U.S. Space Force is "a serious violation of the international consensus on the peaceful use of outer space," and Russian officials have implied that the force could be a stepping-stone to the United States breaking with the OST. The two countries describe their own space forces as defensive necessities.

Both China and Russia have proposed drafts of a space arms-control treaty known as the PPWT (the Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space and of the Threat or Use of Force Against Outer Space Objects), which would theoretically ban all types of weapons in space. An American diplomat, speaking for the U.S. position, said that both versions were "fundamentally flawed," citing their lack of means of verification and their implicit allowance of direct-ascent ASAT weapons. Tom Ayres, a former general counsel of the Air Force who oversaw the drafting of the legislation that created the Space Force, told me that treaties such as this would put the United States at a disadvantage. "We in the U.S. will abide by the rules of law," he said. "But there are nations who would love to have these very strict rules for space put into place and then completely flaunt them—just like they do with international intellectual property laws or the laws of the sea."

The U.N. Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space is currently focused on establishing guidelines to limit the creation of space debris. Niklas Hedman, the committee's secretary, told me that he thinks any new binding treaty in the current geopolitical environment is "impossible." Green, the Space Force lawyer, said of new treaties: "I don't see that as likely at this point." Mike Hoversten, the lead counsel for space, international, and operations law at Space Operations Command, told me that he thinks it is "unfortunately probably going to take some kind of a significant event" in space for the international community to accept a new treaty.

Loverro worries that these claims of infeasibility can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. "If you say there's no chance for an agreement, then there's no chance for an agreement," he said. He believes that a new treaty outlawing kinetic weapons "is absolutely in the U.S. national interest" and that "we should never forget the right, the need, to negotiate treaties that are in our own self-interest. No matter how hard it might be."

In his September 2020 speech at the Pentagon, General Raymond told the incoming troops of the Space Force:

> If deterrence fails, a war that begins or extends into space will be fought over great distances at tremendous speeds.... Direct-ascent anti-satellite missiles can reach low Earth orbit in minutes. Electronic attacks and directed-energy weapons move at the speed of light, and on-orbit capabilities move at speeds greater than 17,500 miles an hour. To plan for warfare at that speed and those distances, we must be lean, we must be agile, and we must be fast.

But the purpose of this preparation was precise. In a similar address a year before, he put it plainly: "We want to win this fight before this fight ever takes place," he said. "Nobody wins this fight if it begins or extends into space." ■



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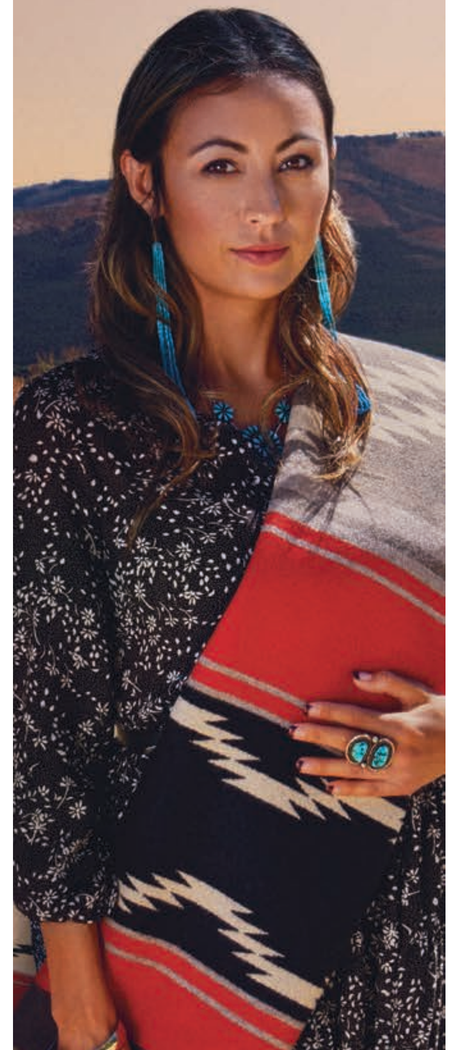

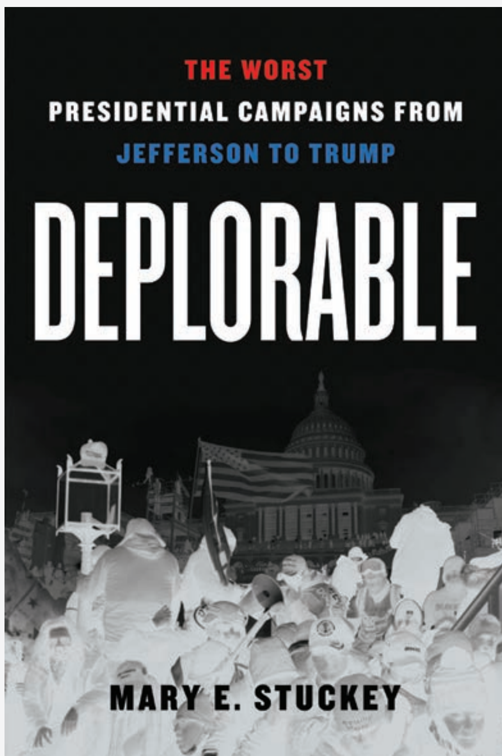


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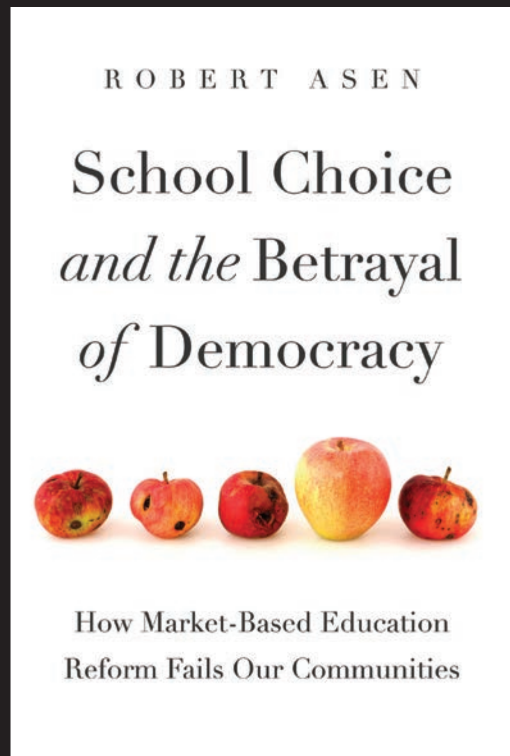


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# THE SPACE COAST

## *By Anthony Haden-Guest*

We have perhaps created too much history too quickly—more than we can cope with. We know the cycles: birth, growth, glory, degeneration. Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make fashionable. The space project has already accumulated a history of Byzantine complexity. There are monuments in the heartlands of the project—the Cape Canaveral Spaceport itself, and the John F. Kennedy Space Center on Merritt Island, just across the Banana River—that stand as paradigms of Instant Obsolescence. Edifices and artifacts that were the splendor of their times now lurch backward into the archaic after a history of some two decades. And everywhere the savor of decay.

There wasn't much here before the rocketeers came and built their tall birds. Just the scrub, thorn, sand, and swamp. But the rocketeers came, and the publicists, and motels burgeoned with splendid names: the Sea Missile, the Polaris, the Moon Hut. But there is nothing romantic about motel owners or real estate men. Minuteman Causeway still slides along the ocean, but the Vanguard Motel has already changed its name to the Beach Park, and nobody has ordered an Astronaut cocktail for as long as the barman can remember.

Operations at Cape Canaveral got under way in 1949, with overall responsibility going to the U.S. Air Force. The following year, building began. In 1958, NASA was created to quash persistent interservice squabbling over the space program. The need for coordination had become critical. The Russians had landed a rocket on the moon, and had another orbiting Venus. On April 12, 1961, they launched *Vostok I.* Its pilot was Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space. On May 5, Gagarin was followed by Alan Shepard. The next year, President Kennedy made a resonant decision: to boldly go, as the *Star Trek* prologue was to put it in a ringing split infinitive, where no man had gone before. The race to the moon.

December 21, 1968. Borman, Lovell, and Anders flew *Apollo 8* to the moon.

That was the first orbit. On July 16 of the following year, Collins, Armstrong, and Aldrin took up *Apollo 11.* Five hundred and thirty million people watched as Armstrong and Aldrin walked the surface. A slow, tranced gait over a blue-gray shimmer of dust and rock. Men on the moon. Man on the moon. Man and his machinery, but crosscut with the fabulous. Three years later, the entire program was dead.

The seaboard of the cape has a higher concentration of salt than any other place on the East Coast. Salt clogs the air, nibbles and corrodes. This and the high, squealing gales that afflict the shore together contribute to a freakish acceleration of the normal processes of decay.

Not that nature has to work unaided. Consider Launch Complexes 34 and 37. We see cranes, predatory and delicate, picking at the hulk of 34. NASA has sold off both gantries to salvage firms for what they will fetch. What is left of 34 is a gray concrete armature—copper and other components of any value have gone—red girders, white piping, bright-blue insulation material, and a mound of rubble, larded with high-technology junk. I pick up a plastic panel: WATER GLYCOL AND FREON SERVICE. Mission control, or something to do with the drains? Ruined papers flap at my feet. The salvage contractors are wearing white plastic hard hats and drinking midmorning Cokes.

Back now, down ICBM Road, to Launch Complex 19. Further back in time. The complex had been in use since February 2, 1960, and was the site of the Gemini launches. It was from here that John Glenn took off, becoming our first space hero. How much money has this sour soil soaked up? A hundred billion dollars? At least.

You can see the ocean from Complex 19. The salt-heavy air blurs the vision, tangibly, and rust has so fretted the metal platforms that you have to walk with extreme caution. As with derelict buildings anywhere, I suppose. Some of the struts give easily, with just the smack of a hand. On the platform from which Colonel Glenn entered the module we find a small skeleton. Probably a rabbit. It is picked entirely clean. ■

*From "An Archaeology of the Space Age," which appeared in the May 1974 issue of* Harper's Magazine. *The complete article—along with the magazine's entire 171-year archive—is available online at harpers.org/archive.*

# "OUR SOCIETY IS REALLY TOTALLY NUTS."®

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# THE ENUMERATOR

## Dispatches from a broken census count

*By Jeremy Miller*

On a warm day in August 2020, after five months of lockdown, I donned a mask and ventured onto the streets of my hometown of Richmond, California, across the bay from San Francisco. It was my first day as a census enumerator, a job I had taken out of both curiosity and financial necessity. My assignment was to visit, at a safe distance, neighbors who had been isolated for months, weathering interminable Zoom meetings or shepherding their kids through the quagmire of online school. Arriving uninvited and ringing the doorbell of a stranger at this moment in history felt vaguely suicidal—or worse, homicidal. But it was my job to take such risks, for the sake, as I understood it, of the public good.

I was equipped with the following: a loaner iPhone stamped with an official Commerce Department seal; a bag depicting the U.S. Census logo containing two surgical masks, a bottle of hand sanitizer, and a raft of official forms; and a photo ID with a seven-digit code denoting, presumably, my low station in the

*Jeremy Miller's most recent story for* Harper's Magazine, *"Bounty Hunters," appeared in the January 2017 issue.*

Collages by Jen Renninger. Source photographs: aerial view of Richmond, California © Jane Tyska/Digital First Media/*East Bay Times*/Getty Images; a row of new houses in Richmond © Gino Rigucci/Alamy; houses in Richmond © Camilo José Vergara

fiefdom of Donald Trump's Department of Commerce. I clicked a blue icon on the phone's home screen and opened an app called FDC, short for Field Data Capture. Amid a tangle of digital roads were roughly forty house-shaped icons indicating addresses where residents had yet to complete their surveys. I was tasked with visiting all of them, in predetermined order, over the course of a single day.

One icon led me to a small bungalow on Arlington Avenue, concealed in a thicket of tall trees and bushes. This was my first assignment, or NRFU, as it is known in census-speak. A beloved abbreviation among those at the bureau, NRFU stands for "non-response follow-up," though it is often used by supervisors to refer to enumerators themselves, e.g., "The NRFU is the human face of the Census Bureau." Census higher-ups, perhaps in an attempt to keep things conversational, pronounced the term as an acronym: *nerfoo.*

From the sparse notes on the FDC app, I determined that I needed to find my way to REAR UNIT B, though there was no sign of a second domicile. Baffled, I consulted my phone. I clicked through a series of menus, confirming that I was ATTEMPTING THE ADDRESS and specifying that NO ONE ANSWERS. The next prompt asked whether the unit appeared to be OCCUPIED or UNOCCUPIED. Just as I was ready to select the latter, I heard a voice coming from inside a small shed on the opposite side of the driveway. An orange extension cord snaked across the concrete and under the door. Illegal conversions had become increasingly widespread in the Bay Area, and it was not unheard of for people to pay hundreds of dollars per month to live in sheds like this one. Could this be REAR UNIT B?

I rapped lightly on the door, and the voice inside went silent. "Hello," I said. There was no response. I clicked my phone once more, and it spat out a twelve-digit alphanumeric code, which I quickly scrawled onto the Notice of Visit (NOV), a small piece of paper left behind when respondents are not home or wish to complete their surveys online or over the telephone. I double-checked the number, hastily tucked the form into the pickets of the gate, and retreated.

Back on the street, I looked again at my phone. The map led me to a quiet cul-de-sac and—after I'd papered several more entryways with NOVs—to the patio of a beige ranch house. There I met a woman in her sixties named Suellen. Her mother, who had owned the home, hadn't filled out her census form, as she had died the previous year. Suellen was in the process of going through family mementos for the upcoming estate sale. She told me that her mother had worked as an enumerator during the 1970 census. While cleaning out the house, Suellen had found her badge. "She loved working for the census," she said.

Suellen recalled that many of her mother's friends from the neighborhood had also worked for the census to make extra money. Back then, she said, there was a stronger sense of community around the count. Everyone answered their doors. I told her that sounded lovely, like a different world. Then I proceeded into the FDC script: "So the house was unoccupied on April first?"

My efforts that day were mostly unsuccessful. I completed only a handful of interviews. Nearly all of my knocks and rings were met with curt refusals or nothing at all. Yet I still somehow found myself behind schedule. It seemed impossible to keep up with the assigned pace. With half an hour remaining in my five-hour shift, I'd only managed to reach roughly thirty of the forty houses. Were enumerators expected to run to each case?

I assumed that my failure to complete all of my assignments would be met with a reduction of work or, at the very least, a call from a supervisor. I was wrong. When I checked my phone the next morning, the home screen announced that I'd received another full caseload.

I had never considered becoming an enumerator until the pandemic, when my family, like millions of others, was driven into financial hardship. My wife lost her job as an executive for a Korean cosmetics company, and our subsistence on my unpredictable wages as a freelance writer and adjunct professor grew increasingly untenable. Then, an invitation arrived in my inbox: BE A CENSUS TAKER. The message was superimposed over the image of a



Source photographs: top © Getty Images; and bottom © Michele and Tom Grimm/Alamy

handsome man whose immaculately whitened smile suggested he'd just received the promotion of a lifetime.

At $25 an hour, the work was a potential lifeline. As a journalist, I was intrigued by the possibility of observing the enterprise—"the federal government's largest and most complex peacetime operation," according to the National Research Council—up close. How, I wondered, could the government safely send hundreds of thousands of people to knock on doors across the country in the midst of a pandemic? A single enumerator could visit dozens of homes on any given day—a seemingly perfect scheme for spreading a highly infectious respiratory disease.

Compounding my fear of the virus was the Trump Administration's effort to wield the census as a political weapon, particularly in communities it viewed as hostile to his reelection. In 2019, Trump floated the idea of adding a citizenship question to the survey; then, last July, he signed a memo to exclude undocumented immigrants from the count altogether. Foiled in federal court, the administration tried a new approach. Then–secretary of commerce Wilbur Ross announced that the census would end a month earlier than scheduled—even though it had started almost three months late—a move that critics said would disproportionately harm minority communities that are already systematically undercounted. (A federal court would later reverse this decision.)

In hindsight, we know that the 2020 census was more or less a disaster, rife with counting errors and political manipulation. (It was also particularly consequential for California, which would lose a congressional seat for the first time in the state's history.) But at the time, I believed that the Census Bureau's mission—to "count everyone living in the country once, only once, and in the right place"—was a mostly noble one. And yet there was a great tension between this vital civic duty and the exigencies of mass illness. In light of the mounting death toll, it was hard not to see the count as a potentially devastating undertaking.

Despite the risks, I applied for the job, and after several months I was hired. In early August, I was invited to attend an accelerated two-hour training seminar at a new charter high school along the Richmond waterfront. I was directed toward the assembly hall where the materials for our enumerating work sat atop school desks spaced six feet apart. Trainees—who looked to be anywhere from their late twenties to early seventies—filed in. One older man was dressed in pressed slacks and a blue button-down shirt. The younger man beside him wore a T-shirt that read SORRY I'M LATE. I DIDN'T WANT TO COME. For some of us, it seemed, plodding into the community in the middle of a pandemic was an economic necessity; for others, it was merely a way to make a few extra bucks.

IN LIGHT OF THE MOUNTING DEATH TOLL, IT WAS HARD NOT TO SEE THE COUNT AS A POTENTIALLY DEVASTATING UNDERTAKING

The proceedings were led by a man in his mid-sixties named Walter. After some introductory remarks riffing on what he viewed as the Trump Administration's meddling in the count, Walter turned to the new rules put in place to guard against COVID-19 transmission. These changes were unprecedented in the census's 230-year history, he said, but necessary to carry out an accurate count during a pandemic that, at the time, had resulted in more than 4 million infections and 150,000 deaths in the United States. Some of the guidelines—wearing a mask, sanitizing one's hands, and keeping six feet of distance from interviewees—were obvious. To appease the most germophobic of respondents, Walter said, we could conduct interviews on the phone while standing on the property. "If you go this route, try to maintain visual contact with them as you go through the survey," he said. "Do not let respondents, under any circumstances, particularly if they are elderly, make contact with your device."

Each trainee was given a small cardboard box containing an iPhone in a plastic case. After a quick overview of the phone's basic functions and the bureau's software, we were instructed to turn them on. A few of the older trainees asked where the power switch was. We were told that this was a historic moment—the first time that a decennial census NRFU count would be carried out entirely by smartphone. This spurred chatter about issues of security and privacy. A man sitting beside me was startled when his phone rang as soon as he'd turned it on. "Who's calling me?" he asked, puzzled.

"It's probably a solicitor," said one staffer, nonchalantly. "We're going to get a lot of spam calls."

Once our screens were aglow, we were instructed to click a blue icon, logging us on to the census server, known as The Hub. The tech staff informed us that we would be connected to this digital umbilicus for the duration of our employment. A woman seated in front of me speculated that we'd also be on the government's radar. "They'll be tracking us, y'all," she said, pivoting in her chair and casting a stern gaze around the room. "Better be on your best behavior."

After class, we were required to complete an additional twelve hours of training at home. This consisted of online quizzes and short video clips featuring a cheerful woman with long brown hair, dressed in an expensive-looking suit, working her way through a variety of situations an enumerator might encounter. In one, she demonstrated how to conduct an interview with non-English speakers; in another, she de-escalated a situation with a hostile respondent who insisted that the government was up to no good. None of these videos addressed the pandemic, rendering some of her tactics—stepping into the path of a door so it could not be shut, for instance—laughably irrelevant.

And that was it. Armed with our devices and less than two days of training, we *nerfoos* had become fully

deputized agents of the federal government, deemed ready to hit the streets.

As it happened, my first day offered a fairly accurate template of what was to come. I had expected my government-monogrammed shoulder bag to command more respect, so I was surprised at how difficult it was to get people to complete a survey—even after they'd answered the front door. Only when I realized just how little weight the imprimatur of the Census Bureau carried did I begin to have some success. The job called for a door-to-door salesman's approach, requiring the *nerfoo* to adopt patronizing or outright obsequious poses. A compliment aimed at the landscaping or the neatly polished car often went a long way, as did an apologetic tone:

"Sorry to bother you."

"I know you're busy."

"Can I steal ten minutes of your time?"

When this technique failed, which it often did, I was forced to be more creative. At one house on Cypress Avenue surrounded by a tall fence, I slipped through a locked gate alongside a UPS deliveryman. Through a large picture window, I saw a woman with a toddler on her lap. Taped to the door trim was a driver's license, presumably placed there to facilitate the flow of goods schlepped to their doorstep by a constant stream of delivery drivers. I waved, but the woman ignored me. The child, however, gestured back, forcing her to acknowledge my presence.

"What do you want?" she asked loudly, her voice muted through the double-paned glass.

I swung my shoulder bag toward her, revealing the Census Bureau logo. "Do you have ten minutes to complete your census survey?"

"Not today!"

I told her I could call her if she was concerned for her safety.

She shook her head.

I asked if I could leave a notice on her door explaining how to complete the survey online.

"No!" she said emphatically. "Now please go!"

As I wandered around Richmond for the first time in months, I found myself dazed by the extent of the economic transition it was experiencing. Postwar bungalows with peeling paint and weed-strewn front yards stood beside homes of the same vintage that were undergoing slapdash rehabs. The flips were easily identifiable by their xeriscaped lawns, festooned with succulents, and their stylish paint jobs (usually in muted shades of beige or gray) offset by the boldly colored front doors that nearly always presaged a FOR SALE sign.

The homes not yet overcome by this wave of speculation were outfitted with metal security doors—vestiges, I heard from neighbors, of a time when break-ins were more common. The most imposing ones were essentially slabs of steel riddled with small holes, like giant cheese graters. These entryways presented particular challenges to us *nerfoos*. The metal absorbed the blows of knocking hands, and their tight frames offered nowhere to tuck NOVs. On the off chance that someone answered, the security doors tended to remain closed, rendering the person on the other side an unsettling silhouette.

> THE CENSUS AND ITS STATISTICAL METHODS HAVE LONG BEEN MIRED IN POLITICS

All of this is to say that I found the stoutness of the front door to be inversely correlated to the probability of completing an interview. On Sonoma Street, for instance, I arrived at a house whose front entrance was fitted with a wooden security door. I knocked and heard a mechanical *click*.

"U.S. Census," I said sheepishly.

"Nope," said a male voice from the other side. Then came another sharp *click*, which, in my heightened state, I hesitate to admit, I thought sounded something like the cocking of a gun. I backed away quickly and didn't bother to fill out an NOV.

But my door-profiling method was not always reliable. On Kern Street, I stepped onto a landing covered in pots of blooming flowers. I knocked on the security door, and a large, stern man with tattoos covering half his face emerged. I looked over my shoulder and took measure of the stairs to see if I could clear them in a single leap, in case a quick escape was necessary. Instead, the man shooed me away politely, almost professorially, as he peered through the iron bars.

"No thank you," he said demurely before closing the door.

By contrast, at a bungalow on Humboldt Street without a security door, a gentle-looking man in a sweater told me that the federal government had no business asking for his personal information, particularly during a pandemic. I apologized, then tried to sway him with the census's patented A+ Method, assuring him that his information would be kept confidential. In response, he told me to leave. If I returned, he said, he'd happily "punch me in the face." I entered the interaction into my case notes.

The following day, I was surprised to find the same address on my case list. I called my supervisor, Nas, who sounded as if he'd just awoken from a nap. I explained the hostile encounter and suggested that we avoid sending another enumerator to the house. Nas (short for Andronicus) exhaled heavily. He'd heard about this problem from other enumerators already. His solution was simple, though not one I had learned in training. "It seems like it's a problem with the FDC program," he said. "If an address seems dangerous, just skip it."

From its inception, the U.S. Census has involved mustering a large temporary army of counters to canvass neighborhoods and collect information. The first census, in 1790, turned loose sixteen marshals, one territorial governor, and hundreds of subordinate deputies across the country. (Each enumerator

was paid a dollar for every fifty to three hundred people counted.) From the beginning, there have been questions about its methodology and accuracy. Many Americans were concerned that the census could lead to new taxes and refused to be counted. Others recalled in fear the Old Testament tale of King David, who almost brought a plague upon Israel for the sin of having "numbered" his subjects. George Washington himself expressed doubt about the accuracy of the final tally of 3.9 million, a figure he felt certain was far too low.

The goal of counting every American "once, only once" might seem, on its face, a neutral governmental function akin to filling potholes or fixing sewer lines. But because census figures are used to determine congressional representation and redraw districts, the count and its statistical methods have long been mired in politics. For decades, the systematic undercounting of minorities has benefited those looking to disenfranchise non-white communities. In other words, the Trumpian effort to manipulate the 2020 count is not a new phenomenon. It can be traced to the nation's founding and the three-fifths compromise, which solidified the political power of Southern states by tallying each slave as a fraction of a person despite their lack of representation. The census's democratic ideal of counting everyone has always been tempered by the deeply ingrained antidemocratic belief that some of us should count for less.

The days progressed, and the fog disappeared, replaced by smoke surging in from the many wildfires burning across the state. As the air quality declined, the location of my assignments shifted from the wealthier Richmond neighborhoods in the Berkeley Hills toward the poorer neighborhoods in the industrial flatlands. In the hills, where I spent most of my first week, over 80 percent of residents had already completed their forms. But in these "hard-to-count" tracts—some of the poorest neighborhoods in the Bay Area—the response rate rarely exceeded 65 percent.

To complicate matters, coronavirus case rates were rising dramatically in these same areas. Given Trump's race-baiting and my poor Spanish, I presumed that many of my black and Latino neighbors would be hostile to my presence. I can't say I blamed them.

What I found, however, was that residents of Richmond's more diverse enclaves were generally more willing to answer their doors and respond to my questions than those in the whiter, more affluent neighborhoods in the hills. At one house on Humboldt Street, a woman with glittery eye shadow translated for her Spanish-speaking mother, who answered my questions while stroking an ancient terrier. On Tulare Avenue, I spoke with a young man who seemed so exhausted that he struggled to keep his eyes open. I asked whether he'd like me to come back at another time. "No, that's okay," he said, insisting on forging ahead. "This is important, right?" An energetic young woman of Salvadoran descent living in a large apartment complex in Richmond broke protocol and sidled up to me as I typed in her responses. Noticing a data-entry error, she grabbed the phone from my hands. I told her, with an incredulous laugh, that we were not allowed to let respondents touch our phones.

"Sorry!" she replied as she continued to type in her corrections.

I wondered whether this eagerness sometimes masked a certain anxiety. Several Latino residents I interviewed asked whether they needed to show identification or a passport to verify their answers. (They didn't.) Others I interviewed were quick to divulge that they, or more often their children, were "born here," though I hadn't asked. I replied that the census did not take one's immigration status into account, but most of them did not seem to believe me.

After two weeks of such interactions, my enthusiasm began to wane. As the election inched closer, more and more news reports surfaced about Trump's efforts to disenfranchise minority communities. It became hard not to feel that we



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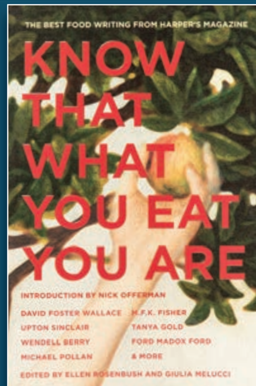


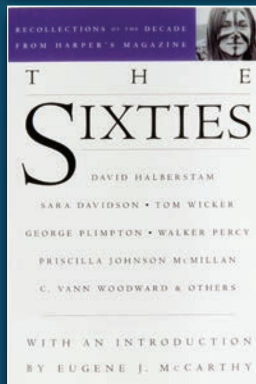

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*nerfoos* had been transformed into unwitting G-men—agents of racial antagonism in khakis and comfortable shoes. A journalistic uncertainty also gnawed at me. As I furtively scrawled notes between assignments, I wondered whether I might be in violation of some unwritten ethical code. Since I did not disclose to respondents that I was a journalist, I agonized over whether these interactions were fair game. (As David Foster Wallace once wrote in this magazine of the pitfalls of participatory journalism: "It all gets quite tricky.") After much hand-wringing, I concluded that key aspects of the census could be understood only from the vantage of the enumerator.

There was, for example, the matter of management. The cost of the census, according to recent estimates from the Government Accountability Office, was roughly $14.2 billion in 2020. The most expensive single aspect of the count was the complicated hierarchy of supervisors and enumerators needed to coordinate the NRFU operations. And yet, despite the enormous cost, we received virtually no guidance from actual human beings. Instead, we received messages from The Hub.

Correspondence would pop up on our phones at seemingly random times. Most of these short messages offered general reminders—*Enumerators must wear masks*; *Don't forget to submit hours each day*—but others read like targeted threats. One, for instance, warned us never to tell respondents that their participation would preclude any future visits from census workers. (The bureau, we were reminded, carries out dozens of counts annually.) Another thanked us, in a somewhat accusatory tone, for not sharing residents' personal information. Because we were using a device capable of tracking our locations and monitoring our activity, I couldn't rule out the possibility that the disembodied warnings and admonitions were directed at me personally. I was reminded of the words of my fellow *nerfoo* trainee: *Better be on your best behavior.*

I tracked the progress of our NRFU efforts on the census's Hard-to-Count website in real time. The response percentages in the three tracts I worked slowly ticked up each day, a quarter point here, a tenth of a point there. But the longer the work went on, the less the needle moved. According to a Census Bureau report, in-person visits were expected to result in completed interviews only 12 to 15 percent of the time. I was lucky to secure an interview half as often. Consequently, the same homes kept cropping up. These were the hard cases: the chronic nonresponders, the extreme procrastinators, the occasional government-haters. Their case notes described paranoia and, sometimes, outright aggression. One respondent said he was never mailed a census form and had therefore written off the idea of being counted altogether: "They fucked up. Fuck 'em."

Some of these addresses were labeled "dangerous." These were rendered on the map as red triangles with exclamation points. Each day, more appeared, scattered like land mines across the city. But it was impossible to know whether the address had been flagged because of something as serious as a life-threatening interaction, say, or just a yapping dog. Other repeat visits were to homes that may not have been occupied at all. Piles of children's shoes scattered about the front porch or a cat perched in a window were unmistakable indicators that a residence was inhabited. But what to make of the apartment on San Pablo Avenue with dozens of dead plants arrayed neatly around a tiny landing? Or what of the house on Wilson Avenue whose entryway was covered in languid strands of faux Halloween cobwebs so thick they had to be pushed aside to reach the door, even though it was not yet September?

I also found myself frequently visiting respondents who insisted that they had already completed their surveys. During a visit on Cherrywood Court, a man politely explained that he had met with several census workers in previous weeks. I

fumbled for an explanation, speculating that there was a lag in the Census Bureau software. But, of course, I had no idea. I merely went where my phone told me to go. He seemed to understand my predicament: "If you can, please let them know, okay?"

When one of these repeat addresses came up on our case lists, we were often prompted by the FDC software to seek out a "proxy"—census-speak for a neighbor who knows the respondent well enough to share some of their personal information. Persuading people to divulge details about their neighbors required a subtle diplomacy. Many respondents—particularly older residents—scoffed at the idea of revealing their neighbors' birth dates, homeownership statuses, or ethnicities. On one cul-de-sac, an older woman with long nails and perfectly coiffed gray hair laughed when I asked whether she had a moment to share some basic information about her neighbors, whom the census had been unsuccessful in reaching. She shook her head and responded in rapid Spanish that I could not follow.

"*No entiendo*," I said, to which she replied, "Like I would tell you."

Other proxies apologized for not knowing more about their neighbors. "Sorry, they keep to themselves," said a man on Cypress Avenue. "I'd tell you if I knew anything. I think one of them is named Jessica. Or maybe it's Jamie, but I'm not sure. That makes me sound like a shitty neighbor, doesn't it?"

At the end of my grueling second week, I was directed to a large, fortresslike apartment complex. In the leasing office, one of the building managers glanced at my census lanyard and rolled her eyes. "Is this going to be over soon?"

I apologized and told her that the count was supposed to continue until the end of October. "Just so you know, lots of people aren't answering their doors because of coronavirus," she said. Over the previous month, she explained, she had received five or six daily visits from census workers. "I'm constantly handing over the




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keys. I'm hand-sanitizing twenty times a day. Do you see the problem?"

I agreed that the system was not ideal, but then found myself reiterating the official line: *The census is mandated by Congress. The census is vital for the funding of schools, roads, health care, not to mention the fair apportionment of congressional seats. Census workers, by law, cannot be barred from entrance.*

As I spoke, the building manager produced several rings of keys and laid them on her desk. "I guess I'm just going to have to live with it."

Taking the jangling mass in hand, I proposed that the leasing office provide the Census Bureau with information as a proxy for its hard-to-reach tenants. The building manager replied that she could tell us how many people lived in each unit, but could not release any private information. Maybe she could encourage tenants to complete their surveys instead? "We're having a hard time these days just getting people to pay their rent," she replied scornfully. "I don't think we're going to have much luck convincing them to turn in their census forms."

I nodded and excused myself. After roughly an hour of wandering through the labyrinthine complex without completing a single interview, I walked back to the office in defeat. The building manager seemed to sense my poor outing and gave me a wry smile.

"Hand sanitizer?" she asked.

A month before my assignment was set to end, I awoke to find an unfamiliar message on my phone: *You do not have any new Census work for 9/2/2020.*

Until that morning, my iPhone had been a seemingly endless wellspring of assignments. What had I done to upset it? Though I was eager to end my tour as a foot soldier in the nation's largest peacetime operation, the sudden curtailment of work was concerning. Had my NRFU batting average dipped below the bureau's Mendoza Line and tripped an algorithm that barred me from future assignments? Had my phone—in addition to keeping tabs on my location—been secretly listening in on my conversations with respondents? Had my inscrutable supervisors found my interviewing style suboptimal? As census workers, we were told repeatedly that we must protect the personal information and privacy of the public at all costs. But what had we sacrificed in terms of our own?

I decided to give it a day. If no new assignments appeared on my phone the following morning, I'd call Nas to ask what was going on. Then, that afternoon, while wandering the aisles of a local pet store with my son, Owen, I received a call from Allentown, Pennsylvania.

"Hi, Jeremy," said the tired voice on the line. It was Nas. "I've got some bad news. We're going to need you to turn in your stuff." I asked if I had done something wrong. "No, nothing you did," he replied. "We're shutting down operations in the area." This, of course, contradicted the bureau's previous assurances that we'd have as much work as we wanted through the end of the month. It was also not entirely clear what the "area" was. A few census tracts? The city of Richmond? All of California?

Nas offered no details, just another sigh. "It sucks, but there's just no more work for us," he said. He asked me to meet him at a nearby Starbucks in an hour, and to bring my iPhone along with the rest of my materials.

"Did you just get fired, Dad?" Owen asked after I hung up.

"No, there just isn't any more work," I replied.

"So that's pretty much getting fired, right?"

I headed home, collected my gear, and drove to Starbucks. When I got out of the car, I was greeted with a honk from a gold sedan. Behind the wheel was Nas. A set of dog tags dangled from the rearview mirror. He raised a hand, beckoning me over. When I got within a few feet of the car, he raised his palm, gesturing for me to stop, and rolled down the window. I passed over my phone and shoulder bag, and he sifted through the contents with a ballpoint pen.

"Where's the box?" he asked.

I shrugged.

I vaguely remembered being told in training that we were supposed to return all of our items in their original packaging. Thankfully, I hadn't thrown the box away. "I'll be back here tomorrow at noon to get the stuff from some other people," Nas said. "Just come back then."

On my way home, I noticed a man in front of a row of apartment buildings. He was wearing a shoulder bag and was hunched over an iPhone—the unmistakable tableau of the 2020 census taker. He was tall, wore a beige baseball cap, and was probably in his mid-sixties. I pulled over and introduced myself, not as a fellow employee (as I no longer was one), but as a local journalist.

His name was Roy. He had also heard that the count was winding down in the area. "I don't know for sure why we're stopping now," he said. "I doubt if I have much more than a few days of work left here anyways. I'm pretty much only knocking on neighbors' doors. It's very slow."

Assuming the worst, he had already orchestrated a backup plan. "I responded to some emails a couple weeks ago about traveling out of the area," he said, explaining that he had been invited to work in a whiter, wealthier part of the county. I wished him luck and let him get back to work.

When I returned to my car, there was a final message from Nas on my census phone, offering a meager severance: *Hey, put an hour and mileage in on a timesheet and submit it tonight.* And with that, my small part in the 2020 census came to an end. In a little under a month, I had netted exactly $1,078.40.

Shortly after my dismissal, I was surprised to receive an email asking whether I was interested in working for the census again, this time as a supervisor. Out of curiosity, I completed the form, which turned out to take even less time than the enumerator application had. After I completed the short quiz, the website returned a message: "Experienced—your application may be considered for future employment."

I haven't heard back. ■

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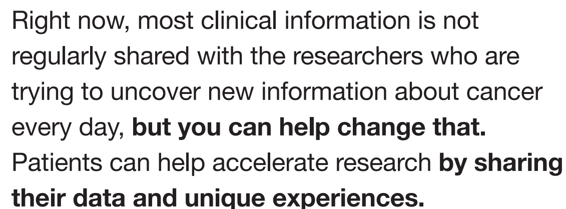

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# PORTRAIT OF THE COYOTE AS A YOUNG MAN

## Coming of age in Bemidji

*By David Treuer*

When I was thirteen I didn't know who I was. My family didn't seem to know either. Sometimes I'd walk downstairs into the kitchen looking for a snack and my mom would be at the table smoking a Merit and drinking coffee while she read the paper. In 1983 everyone still read the paper, but my mom read it with vigor and suspicion, as though it was there, in the *Bemidji Pioneer,* that she would find evidence that the world was out to get her. Hearing my shuffling steps, she would look up and say, "Who are you?" Okay, so she wouldn't say that out loud. But she definitely said it in her mind, because the truth was that I wasn't in the kitchen for a snack. I was there to swipe my finger through the Crisco before skulking back to my room for yet more self-abuse. How did she know? Maybe I was more transparent than I thought: no amount of hair gel or deodorant could disguise the fact that I wasn't a thirteen-year-old boy but a cringing, sex-obsessed demon whose nearest relatives were the monsters in my hardbound copy of the Dungeons & Dragons *Fiend Folio.* Or maybe, because my mom was Native, the spirits told her what I was up to.

*David Treuer is the author of* The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee. *His most recent article for* Harper's Magazine, *"Off the Land," appeared in the November 2014 issue.*

Sometimes I had to speak to my parents. There was no way around it. So I would hover by the door to my father's study until he noticed me with a mixture of surprise and annoyance. "Who are you?" he'd ask after I'd been standing there for a few years, growing thinner and weaker but still determined to get my allowance. My father actually did ask me that, more than once. But he meant it differently. He was asking about my "character" and my "direction in life."

Those were the words he used while I stood there, my eyes squeezed shut, muttering to myself, "I'm a boy, I'm a real boy." Now that I think about it—after spending years trying not to think about it—my father was probably practicing on me the kinds of questions he was only then learning to ask himself. He was a Holocaust survivor and that was largely how he thought of himself. More often than not that was how he introduced himself: "My name is Bob Treuer, and I am a Holocaust survivor." It was one thing to address the monthly meeting of the Bemidji Rotary Club or Jaycees that way, and another to greet my D&D friends at the door with a handshake: "Bob Treuer, Holocaust survivor." "Your dad," said one of my friends, "is very weird." True. Also true: he learned English by listening to the radio in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where he and his parents had settled after they were reunited. He was brilliant, and good with languages, so he lost his German accent almost immediately. But he was never able to shake the mid-Atlantic radio voice he replaced it with. He might have looked like Billy Wilder, but he sounded like Edward R. Murrow. At a restaurant: "I . . . will have the pancakes. Thank you, and good night."

I had no answers for my parents because I had no answers for myself. Part of the problem, nay, most of the problem, was surely with my head. It's not only that I was troubled psychologically and emotionally, or that I had mood swings and moments of black anger. I mean, I had literal head trouble. I had been hit by a car

in third grade. My skull was fractured and the top of my foot ripped off like the skin of a clementine. The foot didn't bother me much. My head, though, was awful. I had crushing headaches. Headaches that made me dizzy. Headaches that weaponized the light. At first they struck every day. Gradually they decreased to once a week. By the time I was thirteen, the headaches came once or twice a month. I went in for CAT scans and checkups, but according to the doctors there was nothing wrong with me. My brain looked like a normal American boy brain. I think the diagnostic technology in Bemidji was outdated. Or biased against weird, furtive boys.

Bemidji—home of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox and water skis and flannel and male pattern baldness—was the first city on the Mississippi. Not the first city built on the Mississippi, but the first city as measured from the headwaters. Downstream there are bigger, better, more interesting cities. Later on, I suppose, the river is pretty great, as is the rest of the country. But it gets great outside of Bemidji, like many of the people born there. The town is surrounded by three Indian reservations: Red Lake, White Earth, and the one I am from, Leech Lake. There was, and probably still is, a palpable dislike for Native people in Bemidji. Disdain was practically a city ordinance. Our house was right on the edge of the reservation, and if not for the trees I could have read the boundary sign: WELCOME TO THE LEECH LAKE RESERVATION: HOME TO THE OJIBWE PEOPLE AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND DESPAIR.

I didn't think a whole lot about the sign or what was behind it, or about Bemidji and what was behind *that*. Neither Bemidji nor the reservation could help me figure out who I was. The only thing I was sure of was that no one understood me and no one loved me, which is exactly what I told our family cat, Smokey Moses ("Smokey" because he was a gray tabby and "Moses" because we had found him in the bulrushes on the lake). I was sitting on the couch feeling a little blue and petting Smokey Moses when it occurred to me that he didn't judge me. He didn't assess me and find me wanting. He never, ever—not even once—asked me, "Who *are* you?" Overcome with love and appreciation, I spatula-ed him onto my lap and whispered, "No one understands me, no one loves me, no one but you." He didn't say anything. He didn't need to.*

Smokey understood me. So did Gimli, my twelfth-level dwarf fighter. I'd been playing Gimli in D&D campaigns for years. Anton was our

I DIDN'T KNOW ANY OTHER JEWISH PEOPLE BECAUSE THERE WEREN'T ANY WITHIN A HUNDRED MILES

dungeon master, so Gimli knew what it meant to be in danger: Anton was likely to kill him off when he got around to it. Gimli liked fighting and he liked mead and he liked me. I was in my room and Gimli was telling me how totally cool and powerful I was when my father interrupted. He knocked on my door. Actually he knocked on the Christie Brinkley poster I'd won at the waterfront that was tacked to my door. Evidently my father had an idea.

"David . . . you are going to have a bar mitzvah."

"What?"

"A Jewish rite of passage, a threshold you pass over, a door you pass through, as you transition from boy to man. Thank you, and good night."

"Why?"

"So you can be a man."

"It's gonna happen whether we want it to or not." I had been reading Freud. (*The Interpretation of Dreams* sat on my parents' bookshelves right next to *The Joy of Sex.* I didn't understand either.)

"You will write an essay about what it means to be a man."

"What does that mean?" I looked away from my father and out of the window and noted the soughing of the pines. (I had also been reading Hemingway.)

"By writing it you will discover what that means. Thank you—"

"But—"

"And GOOD NIGHT."

I didn't know what to expect. My brother Anton hadn't been told he needed to cross a threshold or pass through a doorway. I don't know why. When I look back, Anton doesn't really come into focus. Obviously I'm self-centered. But also he moved too fast. He seemed to sprint everywhere, a brown blur in the foreground of my childhood. He ate fast and he moved fast and he talked fast. I didn't know any other Jewish people because there weren't any within a hundred miles. I don't think my father knew what to expect either. He had never been to a bar mitzvah. Not his own or anyone else's. He hadn't even been to temple. Ever. He wasn't that kind of Jew. He was the kind—common in Vienna before the war—who believed in socialism and Beethoven, in the working class and social justice and chamber music.

The weeks passed. And then came the fateful day. I went down to the kitchen. There were candles. And there was food. The candles had not been bought for the occasion: I recognized them as the same red candles my parents lit during their biannual coupling. The food: pork loin roasted to a uniform gray. Those loins had remarkable consistency. They were fibrous all the way through. I think my father—who did most of the cooking—approached food the same way he approached building

* *Two decades later, I was going through a crisis so protracted and painful that I can't for the life of me remember what it was. I was explaining the situation to my brother Anton. We were in the car. He was driving. I fell silent. One of those comfortable silences between brothers. And—in a testament to his patience and secrecy; to his heartless tact and commitment to revenge served cold; in short, to everything that would have made him a great senator (which is what he wanted to be in high school)—he whispered: "No one understands me, no one loves me, no one but you." Anyone willing to wait twenty years to burn you in such a subtle way—the recognition slow, the shame creeping up behind—is a psychopath.*

a house: moisture was the enemy. The family looked at me expectantly, like I was going to suddenly do a man thing—fill out a 1040 or talk to a contractor about the window seals or start singing "If I Were a Rich Man" or launch into Zorba's dance.

"Good evening," my father said in the voice he saved for special occasions: a Jewish Vincent Price. "I'm happy that we can come together to celebrate the moment when David becomes a man." The family looked at me more expectantly. My younger brother and sister didn't blink. They were five. They were waiting for the magic. I wondered whether the transformation would result in my nerve endings becoming less concentrated in the first third of my penis and more evenly distributed throughout my body. I wanted my bar mitzvah to be short and as painless as possible. To that end, I had spent weeks working on my essay. Good writing is like prosecuting a just war: it should be short, use only as much force as necessary, and limit civilian casualties. I had, in fact, spent a lot of time getting ready for my bar mitzvah by reading about the Six-Day War in the book *Swift Sword: The Historical Record of Israel's Victory, June 1967.* The book, like the war, was short. And the war, like the book, had an American tank at the front. But tanks alone wouldn't save me or the state of Israel. We also needed to win hearts and minds. In my case I had to win my father's. He was a complex man of simple tastes and convictions. The only things he truly got excited about—other than Chopin and Brahms—were class struggle, prairie flowers, old-growth pine forests, and John Steinbeck. (It would be years before we learned he *also* got very excited about a number of women around town.) Anyway—I knew what I had to do, and my essay was aimed straight at him.

"What does it mean to be a man? According to Webster's dictionary, 'man' is a noun; an individual human especially: 'an adult male human.' It can also mean 'husband' or 'lover' or also 'a bipedal primate mammal that is anatomically related to the great apes but distinguished especially by notable development of the brain with a resultant capacity for articulate speech and abstract reasoning.' But what *is* a man? That is the age-old question that has bedeviled humankind since the beginning of time." The clock ticked. The twins kicked each other under the table. My mom took out another Merit. She knew she was going to be in it for a while. Anton plotted his future attack. My father was rapt because I may not have been turning into a man, exactly, but I was turning into a Jew. "Gimli is not human but he is a man. And he is a man because every day he wakes up and joins his comrades in the class struggle that is, simply put, the human struggle. Gimli would join a trade union if he could. But there are no trade unions in Dungeons & Dragons, not even in Advanced Dungeons & Dragons. This is because TSR, the makers of D&D, are of the ruling class—the bourgeoisie, if you will. But they won't keep Gimli down. And it won't keep me down. To be a man is to rise up, arm in arm with my brothers. Not these brothers you see before you. Different brothers, better ones: brothers in the great human drama that is to be a working man." My father began to sob quietly. "I must go forth now into the gathering dark because there is a darkness that lays"—"lies," murmured my father through his tears—"on the land, and that darkness is the future. And I must go out into it. Among the people in Reagan's America. I could ask, What is this dark future that lays on the land? But there is no answer blowing in the wind. I don't need an answer. I know the answer."

My mom finished her cigarette and picked up the paper. The twins began reaching for the cupcakes. Anton continued plotting.

"Beautiful, David," my father intoned. "And meaningful."

And there I was. I had emerged, blinking, into the bright sun of adulthood with no idea what being an adult meant. Equipped with only a *Ghostbusters* T-shirt and twenty dollars. But what man needs more?

This man. This man needed more. I needed more of everything:



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more money, more friends, more muscles. I needed a sign that I was headed in the right direction.

Fall turned to winter, which in Minnesota is pretty much a hate crime. Spring came. Then summer. And the only direction I was headed was Bemidji, where I had gotten a job pedaling an ice-cream bike. My parents refused to drive me because they weren't "goddamn chauffeurs." I got paid ten cents per bar sold. The ice-cream bike wasn't actually a bike. It was an oversize tricycle with two wheels in the front to support the cooler and one in the back. I checked out the bike at 8 AM and began pedaling around Bemidji. It was exhausting. The bike weighed 120 pounds. I weighed ninety. Sometimes, at the end of my shift, I paid my boss because I had eaten more than I had sold. My boss was a Vietnam veteran and a former actor on *The Young and the Restless.* He had huge biceps, bleached hair, and a uniform tan. "The M16 is a good weapon," he'd tell me and the other kids with more emotion than an adult should show discussing any topic. "I could hit a two-inch spread at four hundred yards," he would say, looking off over Lake Bemidji into the middle distance. "I bet I could *still* get two inches. I bet I could. . . . " My days began with a ten-mile ride into town. I pedaled the ice-cream bike for six. Then I returned the bike and stock to Diamond Point Park. After paying my boss like the good proletarian I was, I began the long trip home.

The roadside landscape was punctuated by swamps and cows, often together. I always felt a kinship with the cows. They were mired to their bellies in the swamp, and yet they held their heads away from the muskeg and chewed the tough marsh grass with looks of noble resignation, like those of monarchs being pulled from their thrones by a mob. There was one dairy farm along the way, owned by Gus Hall, the head of the Communist Party USA. So maybe those cows were the cows of the people. You'd see Gus handing out fliers in front of the JCPenney at the Paul Bunyan Mall. I spent most of those ten miles fantasizing. Once I conjured a white pickup—a dream coming out of the heat ripples on the road—driven by two women in halter tops. They slowed down and pulled up alongside me. The truck edged toward me. They couldn't get enough of my muscular thighs, which rippled and flexed as I pedaled. "Looks like a lot of work," one said. I agreed that it was indeed a lot of work. "But you look so strong," offered the other one. I agreed that I was indeed strong. "Maybe you want a ride, though?" the first one said, suddenly shy. She wasn't usually so bold. "Yeah," said the driver, "we'll take you wherever you want to go." I stopped and took my feet out of the clips. "Any chance you're headed to Pleasure Town?" I said with a studied nonchalance that was both cool and friendly. They laughed. "And he's funny," said one. I agreed that I was indeed funny. They pulled over to the shoulder and the gleaming truck stopped and rocked gently on its springs. I lifted my bike into the bed with one smooth swooping gesture of my bulging, sweat-sheened arm. The woman in the passenger seat slid over to make room. It was a Toyota, so not a full-size pickup. I needed to put my arm around her. There was no place else to put it. The driver expertly shifted into first gear and off we went into the distance, beyond which, invisible but waiting for all of us, was Pleasure Town. But I was interrupted before we got there. The truck and the women disappeared. There was a package in the ditch. I could hear it calling out: *Find me, find me, find me.*

I got off my bike and scurried through the grass. The package was rectangular and heavy, wrapped tightly in a black plastic garbage bag and silver duct tape. I took out my pocketknife and slit it open. And as though anxious to meet me, out spilled at least twenty *Hustler, Chic, Juggs,* and *Oui* magazines. I was on my knees. I looked down at the treasure in my hands, then up at the sky. "Thank you," I whispered. The Great Spirit or Yahweh or whatever, distant and inscrutable till now, smiled at me. I knew who I was, finally, and at long last. I was someone God loved. I was not merely among the chosen ones. I had been chosen. Proof was in my hands. Then my communion was interrupted. A pickup slowed to a stop and rocked on its springs. The window rolled down. I held my breath. "You okay?" It was our neighbor Chuck, a Pall Mall stuck to his lower lip. "Yep," I said, my voice shrill. "Backpack exploded." Pause. "Exploded, huh?" It's possible this had a different meaning for Chuck, a World War II veteran. After the war he had been one of the soldiers in those forward trenches they dug in the Southwest so they could see what kind of nuclear damage your average red-blooded American could take. "Yeah, zipper." God's grace and my erection were making it hard to speak. "Want a lift? You can put your bike in the back."

"Not necessary."

"You look sweaty."

"Hot. Out."

"You sure?"

"Sure. Positive."

"Crazy weather."

"Crazy."

"Just got my truck out of the shop."

"Shop."

"Okay then."

"Then."

Chuck drove off. I stuffed my treasure into my backpack and pedaled as fast as I could back to the house.

Most of you don't know what it's like to be thirteen and to bask in the glow of God's favor. Let me tell you: it's good. It is very good. What was once a secretive, cave-dwelling kind of life expanded into a sherbet-hued paradise on earth. Those women and the manhood they conferred kept me company: in the morning before work, during bathroom breaks across the lively burg of Bemidji—Giovanni's, Dairy Queen, the Whispering Pines Motel, the Orbit Inn lobby bathroom, Food 4 Less, Lueken's Village Foods, the Markham Hotel, City Hall, the public library—when I got home from work, before dinner, after dinner, and, as a top off, right before I closed my eyes. And it did feel like they made me more of a man, whatever that was. Cooler. Luckier. More Eddie Van Halen and less Eddie Mun-

ster. Those summer days and nights were blessed, plentiful, and right. I felt bigger and better and older than everyone else now that I had stopped worrying so much. My head was in the clouds, though I smelled like a pancake from the Crisco. But I couldn't just leave my magazines laying (lying) around. What would my parents think? I didn't share the stash with Anton that much. God chose me, not him. If the Great Spirit had wanted him to jack off five times a day he would have shone his light on him. I had a desk, a big heavy oak number on a pedestal. There was an empty space under the file drawer, and I kept my scriptures there. A few weeks later I went on a bike trip with my best friend and his parents. It was a hard separation. But "the ladies" (as I thought of them) wanted me to live a full life. They were clear: "Go have adventures! Be with your friends! See the world! Get exercise!" And in a softer voice, in quieter moments: "We'll take you wherever you want to go."

The trip lasted a week, and the only places we went were Debs, Blackduck, Deer River, Ball Club, and Grand Rapids. There was a message waiting at my friend's house when we got back: "Don't come home. Call your parents at the Holiday Inn." Obviously they had found my stash, and they were disappointed. More than that, they were disgusted. And they had gotten me a room at the Holiday Inn because they were kicking me out. I was in agony, stewing in shame and confusion. Eventually my father's car rolled into the yard. He hugged me close and didn't wait until we were in the car to give me the bad news: "David, bad news. The house burned down while you were gone."

"You're not kicking me out?"

"What?"

"It burned down? Like, all the way?"

"Do you want to go to the hotel or do you want to see it?"

"See it."

"It'll be a bit of a shock."

"How did it start?"

We were passing the communist's farm.

"It's not your fault."

"How could it be my fault?"

"I just wanted you to know that."

"When did it happen?"

"Tuesday."

I had left on Monday. I was in the clear. We drove up, and the house came into view. It was as if someone had taken the top off. The fire had started in the garage and blown through the front of the house and then climbed the stairs and burned away the roof and top floor. I didn't say anything.

"It's okay if you want to cry." That was, I think, his way of saying that he wanted to cry. "You can go in. The floor is solid. If there's anything you want to save."

I knew, somehow, what losing the house meant for my parents. They didn't take vacations. They didn't do things like ski or snowmobile. We never had a boat or a four-wheeler or an RV. Everything they made they put into the house: my mom because she grew up in squalor, my father because he was a refugee. Now it was a ruin.

I walked up the half-flight of stairs to the kitchen and then up the next half-flight to the hallway that led to my room. I felt as if I was walking through a garden of ashes. The floor was ash. The walls, with their baseboards like banker's shoes, tapered off into charred timbers and then gave way to the sky. My father walked behind me. "It burned on Tuesday. The fire department came. And then it rained Tuesday night. If the fire and smoke didn't get it, the rain did." We arrived at my room. My bed was there, and my dresser and the bookshelves. But they'd all been knocked over. "They check for sparks and embers. That's why it's like this," my dad offered. My desk had been flipped over. The ladies were scattered around, the pages flipped open and fanned all over the floor. They were ruined. The pages swollen. Images bled through so that what was already physically unlikely was now physically impossible. One magazine was open to a lady taking a bubble bath. It was as though the bath had overflowed and drowned the others. A quart of Jergens lotion sat in the corner of the room like a perverted garden gnome.

"You okay?" asked my father.

"Who was here?"

"Everyone. The fire department. All the neighbors. Friends. We rescued as much as we could."

"Everyone?"

"Your stuff is at ServiceMaster. They can work on the smoke damage."

Everyone had seen my ladies. Worse than that: everyone had seen *me.* And there was no way I could make them unsee me. No way at all. He giveth and he taketh away. Most of you don't know what it's like to be thirteen and to know God hates you. Let me tell you: it's bad. Very very bad.

"Anything else worth saving?"

"Is Smokey Moses okay?"

"Safe."

"Everyone else? The twins? Anton? Mom?"

"Safe. All safe."

"I think the rest of the stuff is probably ruined."

"Probably."

We walked down the stairs. My father in front. His shoulders were slumped and he looked left then right then left again, scanning for anything that could be saved, anything he'd overlooked. The sun had come out.

"Hey, Dad."

"Yup." He didn't look back at me.

"We're going to be okay. Everything is going to be okay."

"You think?"

"Sure. Why not?"

We left. Soon I'd be swimming with the twins and Anton at the Holiday Inn. It wasn't Pleasure Town. It was the Holidome. The pool was surrounded by plastic plants and Astroturf, and the hotel had shuffleboard and foosball and a Ping-Pong table and video games. The ceiling was dome-shaped and made of glass, through which I could see the summer sky. Night was coming on slowly. The twins were splashing each other and screaming. Anton was in the hot tub and looked very uncomfortable, but he smiled when he saw me walking up, pale and exposed in my swimsuit. Mom got in the pool and swam with us. Dad read the paper and then put it down to join Anton in the hot tub. My parents had lost everything. I guess I had, too. Our laughter and screams bounced off the dome and came back to us, louder and clearer than you'd think. ■

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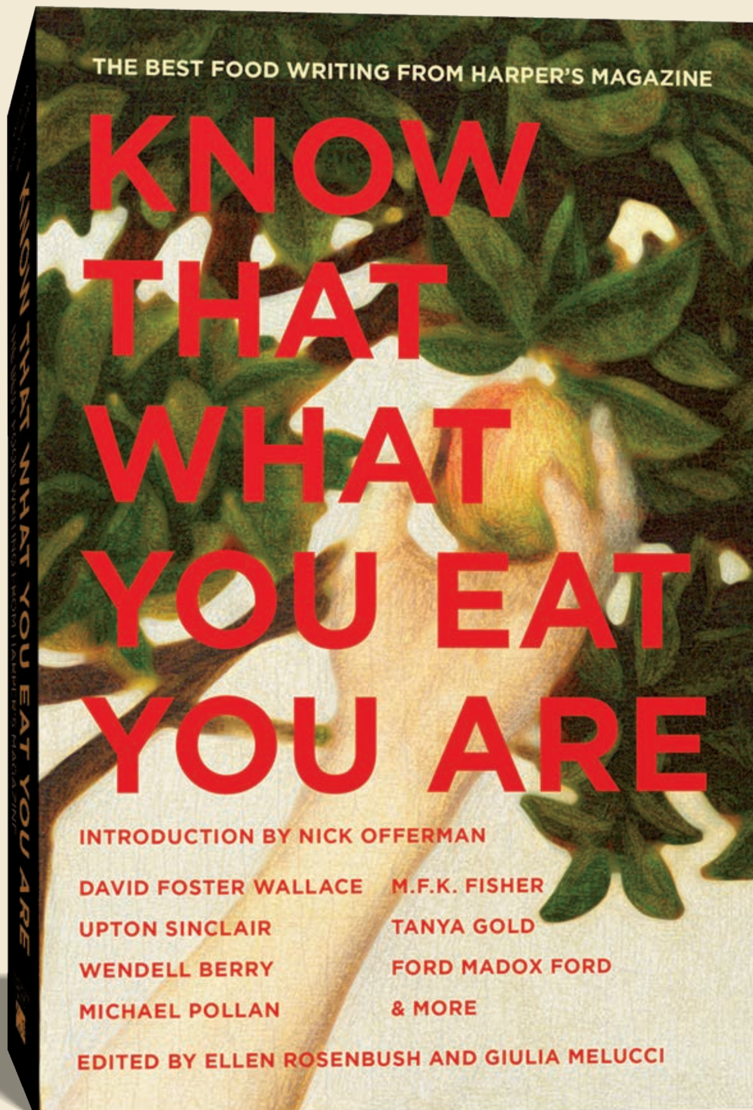


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# TWO POEMS

*By Peter Cole*

### THIS PIG I

This pig I live with really
does hover over much of
what I do and say it's in
the room I lie in daily when
I try to tell myself the truth
about deceit or what I read
or just my being a jerk and lazy
pissy it brings to mind the swine
within and out of sight it's like
a shadow in its knowing how
dark at heart I am in part
it loves the muck I'm often in
the sty and stink of *me* and *my*
it's like a household deity now
whose name is mine to give and take
back in vain it's black and beautifully
sketched by Baskin in fact as though
he'd thought it a holy beast of sorts
a sacred cow or Zen bull
someone was having trouble herding
its hooves delicate as a devil's
prance cloven above the heaven
and hell of my head its law written
in red biblical letters says
for me it seems specifically—
Pig, poet, thou shalt not eat.

### HEARSING

He was on his way in the dream
across a sea of sorts to Hearsing,
he remembered, knowing the place
didn't exist as such but rose
up within him nonetheless
almost magically like a meniscus
over something he'd have heard
during the day after they
began rehearsing all those parts
that they'd play as each of their lives
more or less and in the end
was improvised very plausibly
though possibly too he was simply
hearing things once again
long before he'd come near them
simple things slipping through him
much like sleep or blood and breathing
in the way it all played out
in his dream of sailing to Hearsing. ■

*Peter Cole's new collection of poems,* Draw Me After, *is forthcoming from Farrar, Straus and Giroux.*

# KEEPING UP WITH THE JOHNSONS

## Boris and Carrie spiff up Downing Street

*By Lara Prendergast*

In April, Britain's chattering classes became obsessed with the cost of the wallpaper in Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Downing Street flat. New leaders are entitled to 30,000 pounds annually from taxpayers to decorate No. 11, where prime ministers since Tony Blair have lived because it's larger than the flat above No. 10. Theresa May, Johnson's predecessor, had given the space a modest makeover. Before her, David Cameron and his aristocratic wife, Samantha, had gone for a Scandi-style look. Boris and his fiancée, Carrie Symonds, opted for dark-green walls. The curtains were green, as were the window frames. Paintings replaced bookshelves. A sofa upholstered with ruby and emerald fabric arrived. The rooms are often lit by candles.

To oversee this work, Boris and Carrie commissioned an interior designer named Lulu Lytle, known for her chintz patterns, her rattan furniture, and her interest in Egyptology. Her look is old-world and expensive. Prince Charles has paid a visit to her workshop. Boris and Carrie's purchase of gold wallpaper from Lytle's company, Soane Britain, was particularly noted by British tabloids. When the final bill arrived, it emerged that the couple had slightly overshot: the total cost was reported to be in the region of 200,000 pounds.

The general consensus was that Carrie had told Boris that the flat needed an overhaul. When the renovations proved unaffordable, nobody seemed prepared to let her know, least of all Boris. ("He's quite scared of her," says one former No. 10 aide.)

At first, the Conservative Party settled the bill—with one donor, Lord Brownlow, pledging to cover a reported 58,000 pounds of the extra costs. It was all handled privately, but when leaked emails sent to the party co-chairman Ben Elliot (the nephew of Prince Charles's wife, Camilla, the duchess of Cornwall) revealed what had happened, the prime minister couldn't dodge the issue. A Downing Street spokesperson insisted that the party had merely provided a "bridging loan," which the government had hoped would be repaid by a trust established for the purpose. But when the trust failed to materialize, Boris repaid the money himself, despite reportedly telling aides that he couldn't afford to do so.

There is talk that Boris is struggling to make ends meet, thanks in large part to his second divorce. His annual salary of 157,000 pounds is much less than what he was earning as one of Britain's highest paid newspaper columnists. Donors were allegedly approached to cover the cost of a nanny for Boris and Carrie's baby, Wilfred. ("I resent being asked to pay to literally wipe the prime minister's baby's bottom," complained one.)

It was apparent that Carrie was at the heart of Wallpapergate (as it

*Lara Prendergast is the executive editor of* The Spectator.

Illustrations by André Carrilho

inevitably became known) once her rival Dominic Cummings—Boris's now-estranged chief adviser, and one of the main architects of Brexit—announced his opinion that the funding for the renovations was "possibly illegal." There are strict rules governing political donations in the United Kingdom; by finding a donor to cover costs, it seemed, the prime minister may have broken them. The Electoral Commission opened an investigation, saying there were "reasonable grounds to suspect that an offence or offences may have occurred" in the funding for the flat refurbishment. In May, Lord Geidt, the independent adviser appointed to look into the matter, said that Boris had "unwisely" embarked on the renovations without quite knowing how to pay for them, but determined that he had not violated any rules. Nonetheless, Britain's most senior political couple were clearly living beyond their means.

What really set tongues wagging, though, was not so much Johnson's own supposed complaint that the costs were "out of control," or even that his fiancée was "buying gold wallpaper," which soon earned her the moniker "Carrie Antoinette." Instead, it was the claim, made in a profile of Carrie in *Tatler* magazine (CARRIE'S COUP: INSIDE THE WORLD OF THE MOST POWERFUL WOMAN IN BRITAIN), that she had gotten rid of the "John Lewis furniture nightmare" left by the prime minister's predecessor.

A bit of explanation may be necessary here. John Lewis is a department store, founded in London in 1864, that occupies a peculiar place in Britain's national psyche. It sells almost everything you could want for your home, in fifty shades of beige. The store is considered quintessential to a nation of shopkeepers, and the British are oddly patriotic about it. Countless wedding registries are held there. The premiere of the John Lewis Christmas advert has somehow come to mark the start of the festive season. To insult John Lewis is to set yourself apart from the aspirational everyman.

The prime minister—who presumably would have been happy to leave the flat as tatty as his famously disheveled Toyota—realized the political danger at hand. Despite being an Old Etonian, an Oxford alumnus, and a millionaire, Johnson has tried hard to cultivate a common touch. "I love John Lewis," he told a reporter as the story about his renovations escalated.

In the end, Wallpapergate didn't damage Johnson politically. In May, local elections were held across the United Kingdom, and the Tories were largely victorious. As in the general election two years prior, they performed well among working-class voters, who were seemingly happy to overlook the price of wallpaper. But others were still worried. Dame Karen Pierce, Britain's ambassador to the United States, had approached Lulu Lytle to redecorate her home on Embassy Row in Washington, but the revamp was quietly dropped. Lytle had gone out of fashion.

> BRITAIN'S MOST SENIOR POLITICAL COUPLE WERE CLEARLY LIVING BEYOND THEIR MEANS

When Boris Johnson entered 10 Downing Street on July 24, 2019, he did so alone, the first prime minister to be unaccompanied by a spouse in almost half a century. As he walked through the famous black door, his thirty-one-year-old girlfriend (or mistress, depending on how one sees it, as he was still married to his second wife, Marina) watched demurely from the sidelines with his staff and colleagues, many of whom she knew from her time working as a Conservative Party spokesperson.

This spring, not long after Wallpapergate hit the tabloids, Symonds became Johnson's third wife, making her the youngest spouse of a prime minister in 173 years and Johnson the first British prime minister in nearly two centuries to marry while in office. They held a small, secret ceremony in Westminster Cathedral, the mother church of British Catholicism. (Johnson and Symonds are both baptized Catholics; Johnson is twice-divorced, but his previous unions took place outside the church and so, in terms of canon law, he had a clean slate.) The after-party was held at Downing Street, with hay bales and bunting decorating the garden. Perhaps chastened by recent tales of her largesse, the bride wore a boho-chic dress reportedly rented for 45 pounds, a flower crown, and no shoes; the groom looked like he was off to work.

A healthy press corps might have been slightly ashamed that the prime minister and his bride had managed to stage a thirty-guest wedding without news getting out. Instead, many of Westminster's journalists (a number of whom are close to Carrie) gawped like the *Hollywood Reporter* when the photos were released online. Earlier that week, Cummings had revealed during a public inquiry that Carrie "wanted rid of" him. The nuptials leaked just in time to make a splash in the Sunday papers. In print, her friends gushed about Carrie's "triumph" over dastardly Dom.

Shortly after their secret marriage, Carrie Johnson emerged on the world stage at the G7 summit in Cornwall. (Unlike Johnson's previous wives, Carrie has taken her husband's name, which makes her the first Mrs. Johnson.) As the conference began, Boris explained to those in attendance that he wanted to create a "more feminine" future. "That is what the people of our countries want us to focus on," he said. "Building back greener, and building back fairer, and building back more equal, and, how shall I . . . in a more gender-neutral and perhaps a more feminine way."

Boris was not exactly known for his feminist credentials. "Just pat her on the bottom and send her on her way" was his advice to his successor at *The Spectator*—where he was formerly editor and where, full disclosure, I work—on how to handle the magazine's American publisher, Kimberly Quinn. While campaigning to become an MP, he suggested that "voting Tory will cause your wife to have bigger breasts." After Princess Diana's death, Johnson wrote an article

lamenting the outpouring of grief: "We live in an age where feminism is a fact, where giving vent to emotion in public wins votes."

Clearly, something has changed. Boris Johnson now celebrates International Women's Day and tweets about #ExtraordinaryWomen. In a piece last year for the women's magazine *Grazia,* he nominated the five women who influenced him the most, the first of whom was the Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai. One of his government's immediate acts upon leaving the E.U. was to ban the so-called tampon tax.

As the photo ops continued, it became clear that the G7 summit was being used to showcase Boris's transformation from populist to progressive, nasty to nice. The Johnsons would like to be reassessed by the United States. They are keen to disprove the idea that Boris is a mirror image of Donald Trump, two blond political buffoons brought to power by populist winds, and that Brexit Britain is not a Trumpian force. Fortunately for the prime minister, his new wife appears more than happy to help him with both his public image and her own. Mrs. Johnson seemed to enjoy her new role in front of the media. She invited Jill Biden to frolic barefoot on the seashore with her toddler, Wilfred. "It was wonderful to spend some time with Carrie Johnson and her son, Wilfred, today. The special relationship continues," said Dr. Biden. Later in the summit, Mrs. Johnson hosted a picnic for the leaders' spouses at the Minack Theatre in Porthcurno. Attendees were given baskets filled with sandwiches, scones, and a cuddly dolphin toy. In the evening, they drank hot buttered rum and toasted marshmallows around firepits on the sand. In an apparent attempt to endear Britain's prime minister to America's liberal elite, No. 10 gave the *Atlantic* writer Tom McTague full access to Boris for a profile published just before the summit began. ("Boris Johnson knows exactly what he's doing," read the subhead.)

To close observers it has been apparent from the start that Carrie hoped to reorient Boris. His decision to focus on issues that younger people are supposedly interested in—animal welfare, women's rights, and the environment—is partly thanks to her. She loves all creatures great and small. It was notable that in this year's Queen's Speech, during which Her Majesty outlines the government's priorities, many of Carrie's favored causes were included. An animal sentience bill began making its way through Parliament, introduced by Lord Goldsmith, the animal welfare minister and one of Carrie's closest allies. Under the law, lobsters would no longer be boiled alive, and foie gras would be banned entirely. Another proposal would prohibit exporting live animals and keeping monkeys as pets. It's hard to argue against these policies, which makes them perfect for the Tories as they try to rebrand themselves as more millennial-friendly. The Conservatives have traditionally been known as the "nasty party." Under Carrie, they are becoming cute.

Occasionally, this devotion to animals backfires. Last March, while Downing Street was trying to deal with the pandemic, Carrie was demanding that both the prime minister and his press office respond to a story that had appeared in the *Times* of London suggesting that her rescue dog, Dilyn, was being “quietly re-homed” because the couple had “grown weary” of him. A reply she wanted sent was later leaked. Boris reportedly refused to sign it on the grounds that it was “nonsense.” Nevertheless, in a show of her power, the newspaper pulled the story from its website soon after publication.

More recently, Pen Farthing, a former Royal Marines commando, was given permission to fly more than a hundred dogs and cats to the United Kingdom from the Kabul airport during the evacuation of Afghanistan. Ben Wallace, the defense secretary, had initially been against the plan but changed his mind. While Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence both denied claims that Carrie personally intervened in the situation, the animal rights campaigner Dominic Dyer—known to be a friend of both Farthing and Carrie Johnson—said that she “most certainly had something to do with the change.”

To plenty of people, it seems more than a little odd that a thirty-three-year-old woman who specializes in political spin has such apparent influence over policymaking. She is unelected and, in many ways, unaccountable. But to understand British politics right now, it helps to understand Mrs. Johnson and her speedy ascent to the top.

Boris’s affair with Carrie began when he was foreign secretary. The two soon became a favorite topic of conversation for much of British society. Who, apart from the most puritanical and earnest among us, isn’t gripped by the dalliances of an older, powerful, priapic man and a younger, attractive, highly ambitious woman?

He left Marina Wheeler, his wife of twenty-five years, after news of this latest affair became public. The divorce wasn’t much of a surprise. Wheeler, a well-respected barrister, had twice kicked her husband out over what Petronella Wyatt, one of his former mistresses, once described as his “sexual delinquencies,” and the nation had already developed an insatiable appetite for tales of Bonking Boris.

He has a twelve-year-old daughter from a fling with the art consultant Helen Macintyre. Earlier this year, Jennifer Arcuri, an American tech entrepreneur with a penchant for pole dancing, admitted to having had a four-year affair with Johnson when he was mayor of London. According to Arcuri, they read Shakespeare to each other before having sex in his family home. Arcuri seems unconvinced by her former lover’s recent progressive turn. The U.K. has “never been more enslaved,” she emailed me. “This isn’t the man I knew at all and at some point the world will find out the truth of what happens when one sells one’s soul in a quest for power.”

> BORIS HAS PROVIDED PLENTY OF MATERIAL FOR GOSSIPY NEWSPAPER COLUMNISTS AND TABLOID HACKS

Boris has provided plenty of material for gossipy newspaper columnists and tabloid hacks over the years. It’s unclear how he finds the time. Ann Sindall, his loyal assistant, has been with him since his time at *The Spectator*—or “Sextator,” as it was called during his editorship. Perhaps she knows. His aides don’t comment on his private life and neither does he. Nobody is entirely sure how many children he has, but voters don’t seem to mind.

Neither does Carrie, who is pregnant again. She is said to call him “Bozzie the bear,” while Boris calls her his “little otter.” In 2018, around the start of their relationship, he wrote a cryptic column for the *Daily Telegraph* about the “exciting” news that the “beautiful” otter had returned. “I do not claim to have seen an otter myself. I did not even hear the splash or bark of an otter,” he wrote. “Nor did I stand on the twilit bank and snuff the thrilling musky fishy aroma that some otter enthusiasts bang on about.” It was notable for being one of his most ardent pieces that year.

By 2019, the pair were living on and off together in her home in South London. In June, a month before the leadership election that would see him become prime minister, they were recorded by neighbors while having a ferocious fight. The police responded to reports of a loud altercation and sounds of shattering kitchenware. The argument was said to be over a glass of wine that had been spilled on Carrie’s sofa. “You just don’t care for anything because you’re spoilt,” Carrie was overheard telling Boris. Neighbors claimed they heard her shout “get off me” and “get out of my flat.”

“His political team thought it would be best if they broke up before he entered No. 10,” one person who was close to his campaign tells me. But Carrie Johnson is shrewd. And as Boris himself has said: “There are no disasters, only opportunities. And, indeed, opportunities for fresh disasters.” When a bizarre photo was leaked soon after the fight, of the two holding hands and staring into each other’s eyes in a garden in Sussex, it became clear that the relationship was being stage-managed. The fight was soon forgotten. Boris Johnson became prime minister and called an election for mid-December. He won a huge majority, as the Tories swept aside the Labour Party in many of the latter’s traditional working-class seats.

That Christmas, Boris and Carrie jetted off to celebrate their success in Mustique. They stayed in an accommodation provided by a party donor. By the spring of 2020, as COVID-19 was spreading across the world, they had good news to share. “Many of you already know but for my friends that still don’t, we got engaged at the end of last year . . .

and we've got a baby hatching early summer," Carrie wrote on Instagram eleven days after Boris's divorce from Marina Wheeler was finalized. "Feel incredibly blessed."

She saw in him a project, insiders say, a man with huge popularity but few allies and friends, a right-wing political beast to be relaunched with the tastes of sensitive millennials in mind. If Boris is known for being good with words, Carrie is known for being more brand focused. As Boris set his sights on becoming prime minister, Carrie set out to clean up his shabby image, in the hope that it would broaden his political appeal. She put him on a diet, gave him a sleek haircut, and at one point had him contemplating veganism. It's a world away from the picture painted by Petronella Wyatt, who described him "lunching on bacon butties and Mars bars before gorging on sausages and processed cheese."

Carrie has assembled an impressive court and is more media-savvy than most within the government. Her former boyfriend Harry Cole is now the political editor at the *Sun*, the United Kingdom's most popular tabloid. Alex Wickham, who oversees the British edition of *Politico*'s Playbook newsletter, is believed to be Wilfred Johnson's godfather. Wickham's daily email, read forensically each morning by people in Westminster, rarely mentions the prime minister's wife, even when she is leading the news elsewhere.

When I've written about Mrs. Johnson, I've experienced firsthand how her operation works. The Downing Street press office seems terrified of her. She is said to feed information to contacts to see where it then appears, and will turn on those she feels she cannot trust. Both she and the prime minister are known to be quite paranoid about stories leaking out of Downing Street.

In recent years, ministerial spouses have normally had their own office paid for by taxpayers, to help them manage their commitments, but when Carrie stepped into the role, she deliberately avoided setting one up, opting instead to employ a communications expert paid for by the Conservative Party. Work meetings are held in the flat, under the guise of soirees. "Decisions are made by WhatsApp and over glasses of wine in the flat," explains one staff member. "It would be easier for everyone if there was an official record of what she was doing."

Soon after Carrie announced their engagement, the prime minister found himself in the hospital with COVID-19, and the United Kingdom—along with much of the rest of the world—was in lockdown. There was real concern that Boris wouldn't survive. About three weeks after he left intensive care, Wilfred was born. By all accounts, it was a very difficult time for the couple.

Life became even more complicated later that spring, when Dominic Cummings was accused of making an illicit 260-mile trip from London to County Durham during the lockdown. Johnson stood by his adviser in spite of national outrage, but things were not the same again. Cummings had decided that Johnson—whom he'd helped put into Downing Street—had been wrong to resist lockdowns, and he started to arrange for the prime minister to be marginalized within his own government.

"Fundamentally, I regarded him as unfit for the job," Cummings later said, "and I was trying to create a structure around him to try and stop what I thought were extremely bad decisions, and push other things through against his wishes." The prime minister initially refused to believe reports that his top adviser was working against him, but Carrie helped convince him that this was the case. Until then, she had been seen as playing the traditional role of the prime minister's spouse: silent and supportive. Now she emerged as a power broker.

Some of Johnson's most significant allies found themselves cast aside, including Cummings. The Dom people were out; the Carrie people—or as they are known in Westminster, the FOCs, Friends of Carrie—were in. First to go was Lee



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Cain, the prime minister's communications chief and, like Cummings, a veteran of the Vote Leave campaign. Oliver Lewis, a Cummings ally, left his job as the prime minister's union adviser. The prime minister's former chief of staff, Lord Udny-Lister, who had worked closely with Johnson since his time as mayor of London, also left. "Most of the people close to Boris have been cut out," explains one former No. 10 staffer. "Johnson is quite a lonely figure."

Carrie was accused by her enemies of expunging Johnson's old tribe, the very people who helped bring him to power on the back of Brexit. Her allies—also a formidable political force—believe this to be vicious slander. But it was revealing to see who came into government after this mass exodus. Henry Newman, a close friend of Carrie, is now a senior adviser. He is part of a triumvirate that Boris refers to as the "three musketeers." The others—Henry Cook and Meg Powell-Chandler—are also Carrie's allies. Simone Finn became Boris Johnson's deputy chief of staff in February. She is a good friend of Carrie's, and hosted an ABBA-themed thirtieth birthday party for her in 2018.

In June, when the health secretary, Matt Hancock, was secretly filmed snogging his mistress in his office, he promptly resigned from his role for having broken COVID rules. Sajid Javid, the former chancellor of the exchequer, was appointed to the role. He is yet another FOC: she once worked as his aide, and he was a guest at her ABBA party.

One of Carrie Johnson's best friends, Nimco Ali—a thirty-eight-year-old activist who campaigns against female genital mutilation—is regularly sent out to fight for Carrie in the press. Ali has described Boris as a "true feminist." She was made an adviser to the Home Office, given an Order of the British Empire award, and supposedly asked to be Wilfred's godmother. A confidante reports that she also spent Christmas with the prime minister and his wife at the Downing Street residence last year, despite pandemic restrictions on holiday gatherings. ("The prime minister and Mrs. Johnson follow coronavirus rules at all times," a spokesperson told me, without denying the claim; Ali did not respond to repeated requests for comment.)

Despite its perks, life in Downing Street can be oppressive. Margot Asquith, the wife of H. H. Asquith, prime minister from 1908 to 1916, referred to the Downing Street buildings as "liver-colored and squalid" and said she couldn't imagine how she and her husband could live there. Margaret Thatcher's daughter Carol described the No. 10 flat as having the appearance of "an extended railway carriage." Most spouses prefer Chequers, the country residence in Buckinghamshire, and Mrs. Johnson is said to be no exception.

It was the Blair family who made the decision to move from No. 10 to No. 11, which is technically part of the chancellor of the exchequer's residence (the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, lives with his family in the smaller No. 10 flat). Samantha Cameron, who lived at No. 11 from 2010 to 2016, damned it with faint praise for its "solid concrete floors" and "bomb-proof double glazing." "When you're in the flat it's incredibly quiet," she told the BBC. "You feel like a princess in a tower."

Mrs. Johnson seems to know the feeling; she is said to model both her fashion sense and her press operations on Catherine, the duchess of Cambridge, Prince William's wife. A confidant told me that Carrie is often preoccupied with the duchess, and expressed bitterness about Kate's ability to generate positive items about herself in the British press.

But while Carrie's and Kate's stories are similar (they are both upper-middle-class women thrust into public life because of the men they chose to marry), their roles are constitutionally different. British media has started referring to Carrie Johnson as our "first lady," which seems to be the title she seeks. But Britain has a monarchy at the ceremonial head of state, so there is no formal role for the spouses of prime ministers, who have historically remained private figures. Their focus is presumed to be on family life and, more recently, their own careers. Recent spouses have worked throughout their time in No. 10: Cherie Blair continued her job as a barrister, Samantha Cameron stayed with the luxury goods company Smythson, and Philip May kept his role as an investment manager.

Before having Wilfred, Carrie was employed by the advocacy organization Oceana, where she worked with Michael Bloomberg's philanthropic foundation on its Vibrant Oceans project. Since returning from maternity leave, she has taken up a new job (while still acting as a consultant for Oceana) as head of communications for the Aspinall Foundation, an animal rights charity. The charity is planning to fly thirteen elephants from a zoo in Kent to live in the wild in Kenya, although the Kenyan Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife has said it has not been made aware of such plans. Any attempt to scrutinize Carrie Johnson's growing political influence is deemed misogynistic. Previously, a prime minister's spouse would have faced minimal intrusion from the press—and rightly so, as they have, almost always, confined themselves to a private role. But the current situation is different. It is precisely because Boris struggles to build personal relationships that Carrie is the most powerful person around him.

For now, Carrie has reined in her husband's instinct for chaos. Among staff at No. 10, Carrie is known as "upstairs," and Boris is said to spend more and more time downstairs. "He likes to read *The Spectator* late at night," one former aide tells me. A copy of *The Lost Homestead*, the new book by his ex-wife Marina Wheeler, has been spotted open in his office. "He doesn't want to take the copy upstairs," the former aide adds. Meanwhile, it has been reported that the gold has started to peel off the walls, and the decorators have been called back in. ■

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# JANUARY

*By Andrew Martin*

The day Aaron finished rehab, Cassie picked him up and drove him to New York City. Though they lived in Boston, and the facility was north, in New Hampshire, it seemed obvious to her that Boston was no place to celebrate, if celebrate was the right word. For one, it was *Boston,* and second, it was the site of Aaron's most recent bout of trouble. Even if they would be returning soon enough, it seemed to her a kindness to prolong the time away as much as possible. New York, she knew, had its own "triggers"—even if Aaron claimed not to believe in the concept—but it still felt to her like the best place for them to be. It was where they'd met and spent their first happy years together, and besides, there was just so much more to *do* there.

*Andrew Martin is the author of the novel* Early Work *and the story collection* Cool for America.

"I think I might need to spend some time at that place again," he'd said quietly. That was two months ago, as she drove him home from the jail. It would be his second time at "that place" since they'd been together, and his third overall. It made her sad, and weary, but she couldn't quite summon anger. He was smart and kind when he was sober, and a weeping, pants-pissing idiot when he drank. They told most people, or allowed most people to believe, that he was going to an artist's residency for a month—something he had, in fact, done in the past. Saying "New Hampshire" to their writer friends was like saying "New Haven" to a certain (overlapping) kind of person; they just assumed you were being discreet about your good fortune. It wasn't that she was so afraid of judgment. It was no secret that Aaron was something of a mess—he wrote about it, quite successfully, though he assured those who were concerned by the material that it was exaggerated for effect. Sure, he'd embarrassed himself at a few parties, but he'd never *actually,* for example, blacked out while camping with Cassie, gotten lost in the woods, broken his ankle after falling into a ravine, and nearly

A photograph by Sarah Hadley from her Story Lines series © The artist

frozen to death while passed out in his own vomit, as his avatar did in a story he'd published in a prestigious low-circulation journal last summer. (He'd only sprained his ankle, but the rest was, unfortunately, true.)

Okay, so maybe she *was* a bit afraid of judgment. People felt a certain way about charming ne'er-do-wells, but they often felt quite differently about lying alcoholics.

He was waiting on the little sidewalk behind the facility when she arrived to pick him up, his enormous rolling suitcase standing between him and the discharge nurse like a stout, unloved child.

"Hello, face!" he said. This was a reference to something; if she'd ever known its origin she'd forgotten it. It was what he always said when they'd been apart for a length of time greater than a day.

"Hey, you," she said.

She'd ended up missing him even more than she'd expected to. For the first week he was away, she felt the relief and pleasure of not needing to answer to another person. She could take an edible as soon as she got home from work, watch gentle French comedies about amicable divorce, eat old olives and cheese from the fridge for dinner, masturbate. But this freedom soon became its own stultifying routine, and she missed the way she'd bent her life around Aaron's. His mysterious excitements and longueurs provided a sense of event that she couldn't conjure on her own.

After a few minutes of cheery, if not particularly edifying conversation ("The best thing about rehab is *leaving* rehab, that's for sure!"), he fell asleep with his head wedged against the window. He'd started taking Zoloft again at the facility, despite which, he said, he'd rarely slept more than a few hours at a time, being in a strange bed, in, one might say, *less than ideal circumstances*. But now, relief plus Zoloft plus a steadily moving vehicle driven by his one (?) true (?) love (??) knocked him straight out.

He looked like he'd lost weight in the month since she'd last seen him. In one of their semiweekly phone calls from the approved landline—cell phones weren't technically allowed, though the more obnoxiously entitled "guests" somehow managed to hold on to theirs, he told her—he'd been complimentary about the food. He'd been more or less complimentary about everything, certainly more positive than he'd been at home in at least a year, or maybe ever. She hoped this had something to do with "hitting bottom" (another thing Aaron did not believe in), but she suspected otherwise. His periods of sanguinity were most often the result of sex—actual, imagined, or immediately anticipated. This had, admittedly, not been much in abundance in any form through Cassie in the months leading up to or during his time away. It was hard, it turned out, to work up enthusiasm for sex with a very drunk depressed person. Though she had tried! She was hoping that, if he was now less depressed, and not drinking, they might be able to get back into it.

Sex had not been a particular problem with them, traditionally. It was likely what kept them together during the early years, their way of making up, of rediscovering a common language, after one or another of his voyages into the ether. These voyages not infrequently involved the romantic company of other women, and, on at least one occasion that she knew of, a man. ("Oh, it was platonic," he'd said about that one, eyebrow raised. "Deeply so.") He would usually confess that he'd "fooled around," but for whatever reason—either because it was true or because it was a narrative structure he could not imagine his way beyond—he would always insist that nothing "more serious" had happened. Which meant, in practical terms, that they could continue having unprotected sex. There was a grim exultation in not quite believing him, in allowing him to "get away" with this, even at the risk of her own health, though after a couple of his more extended absences, she'd insisted, despite his protestations, that he get tested before she let him back into their bed. She'd had her own minor dalliances, in part to curb her resentment at his, though she *had* been extremely careful, for her own sake and, secondarily, for Aaron's.

She wasn't sure about the logistics of having an affair at an upscale rehab facility. The program featured "gender-separate accommodations," but she knew that, at the very least, some meals and group therapy sessions were "mixed," and Aaron needed, on average, about fifteen minutes to develop an infatuation, especially in an isolated setting. And the options were surely tantalizing—rich girls, too smart for their own good, addicted to drugs that made them thin and volatile. And he, an *author* (even if, by the odds, no one he met there would have read a word he'd written), attractive in his louche, overgrown-baby kind of way, deeply sympathetic to their stories, maybe even planning to *write about them* someday. His only type, he would tell them, was "interesting," and if their particular malady did not qualify for whatever reason, they would find ways, she imagined, to make it do so.

He was snoring loudly and irregularly, with what she hoped was not sleep apnea. At home, it was so rare for him to fall asleep before she did that she genuinely didn't know whether he usually snored or not. In the mornings, when she got out of bed (always before him), he was often so quiet that she was afraid he was dead. But he never was. She tried now to adjust NPR so that it covered up some of the sound he was making without startling him awake. A segment was documenting the travails of a wind farm on the U.S.-Mexico border run jointly by ex–border patrol agents and formerly undocumented Central American laborers. "We want to work, we are ready to forgive," said a chirpy voice in English over what sounded like a much more complicated statement in the original Spanish.

Aaron was practically swimming in the pink-striped button-down shirt he was wearing. It had never fit him properly, and now that he was a little thinner, it looked like some kind of private joke. If she bought him an article of clothing, she had to be damn sure she liked it, because

unless it fit so badly that he couldn't physically wrangle it onto his body, or got lost or ruined in some misadventure, she knew she would be seeing it every other week for years to come. Cassie's own style had emerged in her mid-twenties, after an athletic, sartorially indifferent extended adolescence. One weekend she accidentally borrowed a friend's hot-pink leather jacket that had been left in her car, and wore it out over a ripped Rage Against the Machine T-shirt her brother had given her when she was twelve. It felt great. People assumed things about her. They imagined she was cool, literate, and a little strange, which was how she felt. It was *that* stupid, the thing that made her feel like herself.

Aaron woke up in Connecticut, a little past Hartford.

"Oh, hello again," he said. He blinked at her, genuinely puzzled, it seemed, by the circumstances.

"Good morning!" she said.

"How long did I sleep?"

"A couple hours. You were a tired boy."

"I guess, yeah," he said.

He instinctively started hitting the radio presets on the dashboard. None of them yielded anything he wanted to hear, because they were out of range of the Boston stations they were set to. He started scanning and settled on some up-tempo jazz. Coltrane? She thought everything was Coltrane. She was often right.

"What are we going to *do*?" Aaron said. "In general. But also in New York."

"So, okay!" she said. "I have a plan. We don't *have* to go if you aren't up for it, but: I got us tickets for the opera tonight. It's supposed to be a good one, but it's not, like, a *buzzy* one for whatever reason, so tickets were actually pretty cheap. So it's fine if you'd rather skip it. But I thought it would be a nice treat."

The tickets had, in fact, been quite expensive, and she knew (since he was the one who usually bought the tickets) that he probably knew this. But it was important that she give him a plausible out, even if it was more or less a given that he would feel obliged to act excited and grateful. She thought they needed to have the option of an activity that would occupy a significant span of time and take place in a zone that was familiar and comfortable. But she also didn't want to throw him into the act of socializing yet. They were staying in a hotel that night, using a gift card they'd received from his father two Christmases ago but never had reason to use. It was for a moderately fancy hotel that allowed dogs, because they'd been planning to get a dog. Now of course she wanted to think about having kids, and they still hadn't managed to agree on a fucking dog. Not even a cat!

The next night they were scheduled to stay with Mark and Gilberte, who were among the few friends that knew the true nature of Aaron's "residency." Also their only close friends who still lived in Manhattan. One of the side priorities of the trip was to stay out of Brooklyn, both because the rest of their friends lived there, and because there was nothing to do there but drink. She hoped they would spend Saturday like a couple of rich tourists—brunch at some bright, Instagrammable Israeli place in SoHo, book browsing at Housing Works and McNally, an afternoon at either the Met or the new Whitney (which was no longer very new). Was she being insane in her optimism? She thought it was all right to strive for an ideal, maybe, even if its realization was more or less impossible.

"The opera," he said. "What a great idea, hon."

She couldn't tell whether the flatness was a sign of a new temperament or an indication that he thought it was in fact a very bad idea.

"We can see how we feel," she said. "If we just feel like doing dinner and hanging out, we can do that."

"No, no, it's awesome," he said, still without feeling. "What, ah, opera is it? That they're doing."

"*The Queen of Spades*, by Tchaikovsky? I don't think I knew he'd *written* an opera, so that's kind of interesting. And the star is supposed to be this hot young thing everyone's excited about. I mean, opera hot, I don't know if she's supposed to be like, *hot* hot."



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"Right, so, here's hoping."

"I think it's going to be great."

"Well, we'll see how we feel," she said. She was driving herself crazy with the hedging but she couldn't stop.

They got stuck in traffic in Connecticut, because Connecticut was designed, under its original colonial charter, to delay people traveling into New York from points north. She hadn't wanted to stop to pee while Aaron was sleeping, but now that they weren't moving, her need had gone from manageable to really quite urgent. She knew there had to be a gas station with a Dunkin' Donuts in the next ten miles or so (thank you, New England), but how long it would be until they got that far was unknowable.

"I'm going to actually explode with urine," she said. "This is how it ends for me."

"Do you want to run to the side of the road? I can sit behind the wheel for a second."

"Sit behind the wheel" was an acknowledgment that his license was suspended, and ineligible for reinstatement for at least a year. He was not legally allowed to drive, not even in Connecticut.

"I can wait," she said. "It just sucks."

"Here, let's do it," he said. "It'll be okay. Nobody cares."

"*I* care. I don't feel comfortable. I'm just going to fucking suffer."

"Okay. As long as you understand you don't have to."

Right, so she was *choosing* unhappiness now. They inched along and her discomfort grew. They'd picked up a rap station and she listened to DaBaby explain for the hundredth time that he needed some *isht* with some bop in it. The fact that they still censored the radio was further proof that they lived in a doomed country with ridiculous priorities.

Her irritation with Aaron rose in direct proportion to how badly she needed to pee, which probably meant that she wasn't being fair. It really wasn't logistically possible for her to piss safely and unobserved, so their disagreement was mostly philosophical. But for him to be out of rehab for just a couple of hours and casually float that he do something illegal, no matter how briefly and inconsequentially, was upsetting to her. She gave him a lot of leeway, she thought, when it came to blame and guilt, but she wanted that to be repaid with some care for her feelings.

Finally, just when she had resigned herself to peeing into an empty coffee cup, the traffic let up a little and she used her training as a New Jersey teenager, weaving back and forth between the two lanes of traffic as fast as she could until, yes, a Dunkin'-themed service center materialized ahead on her right. She had, again, discovered inner resources she hadn't been sure she possessed. She made it.

They pulled into the city a little after four, the sunlight already declining toward golden hour. It had been a mild winter in Boston, and it was even warmer here, hovering in the high forties in mid-January. She had declared herself a winter person at some point, possibly to be contrary at first, but the longer she kept to the position the more she felt it to be true. In the summer she felt doughy and slow-witted, unable to process the world mentally or physically without effort. But the cold activated her, encouraged her. She could harness its powers. She parked the car in the garage associated with the hotel. It would cost $45 a day, and she very much hoped that she would be able to cover it with the gift card. She decided to simply pretend to be sure that she would.

Re: money, it was complicated. Or maybe not that complicated. Aaron, in general, had money. His parents were rich, and despite his regular betrayal of their trust, they supplemented his sporadic writing and teaching income whenever they were called upon. In the delicate manner of such things, however, Aaron much preferred not to call upon them, and to instead rely on Cassie's money when his ran low. She taught history at a Catholic prep school in a Boston suburb and made plenty for regular human expenses. She just didn't make enough to pay for lawyers, fines, upscale rehab, thrice-weekly therapy not covered by insurance, etc. Plus, unlike Aaron, she was trying to actually save some of the money she made, just in case she, you know, lived past the age of forty. It was of course the marginal expenses, rather than the big ones, that created resentments—the assumption that she would pick up a dinner tab without thinking about how long it was until payday, his decision to purchase a vintage reading chair (with "his own money") during an unusually freezing November, when the cost of heating the house (her responsibility) raised their rent by a third. He was careless rather than intentionally unhelpful, which meant that when disparities or expenses were brought to his attention he sometimes became emotional, if not dramatic. This is all to say: it often felt easier to quietly pay for the thing than to open herself up to the possibility of an unpleasant conversation, which would not, in any case, yield a different outcome.

The lobby of the hotel featured large statues of dogs, and there were small bronze dogs on the marble check-in desk, but she did not see (or hear or smell!) any actual animals. She wondered how many people would really think it was a good idea to come to New York City and leave their dog in a hotel room, even if it was allowed. Perhaps people with better-trained dogs than the ones owned by her friends and family? She checked them in and they took the elevator to the ninth floor.

"What are you thinking?" Cassie said.

"Um. I hope there's enough time to fuck you before we have to go to dinner," he said.

"Oh, is that something that's been on your mind?"

"I don't want to hope for too much," he said.

"I guess it's partly a question of what you've been up to since the last time I saw you."

He checked her face to assess whether this was just banter, or something more. The answer, of course, depended on his response. He clucked his tongue softly, a default response that was meant to signal playful disapproval, but actually

conveyed annoyance that he wasn't willing to fully articulate.

"*You* know what I've been up to," he said.

The room was small, but clean and . . . "contemporary" was the word, maybe? "Boutique-y?" "Not explicitly corporate but not a shit-hole?" The theme of this floor seemed to be "New York in the Seventies, but not in a scary way." There was a framed black-and-white photo of the outside of CBGB. There was a framed black-and-white photo of Debbie Harry. Sure. Cassie remembered when the height of modernity in hotel furnishings was a Bose radio with a built-in CD player, and then when it was the same thing, but with an iPod dock. This room had a suitcase record player with the first Ramones album on the turntable. The "record library," a card on the desk said, could be browsed on the hotel's website, and selections would be brought to the room upon request. She felt the deep sadness of being a human being at this moment in world history.

Aaron sat down on the bed and stared at his lap. Cassie wondered whether he was falling back asleep. If so, there was no way they were going to make it through the opera. Given the average age of the Met's audience members, though, he would hardly be the only one sleeping through the middle acts. He lifted his head and met her eyes.

"Hey," he said.

"Hello," she said. "You sleepin'?"

"Certainly not."

She took small, self-consciously seductive steps toward him. She noticed for the first time the bottle of wine on the cabinet, next to the TV, a gift from the hotel, presumably—a little card dangling from the neck. She wasn't overly worried about Aaron being tempted by its presence. She was confident that he would earnestly try to reform himself for at least a month before the first hints of backsliding began to appear. Despite his posturing, he was a sincere person, one who tried to believe the things he was told, to swallow whatever had been suggested might help him to improve himself. The problem,


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NOTES FOR "PLACEHOLDERS":

The "capital offenses" are puns on world capitals: a. RIGA-MORTIS, b. KABUL-STONES, c. BERN-UCKLES, d. TUNIS-ANDWICH, e. PRAGUE-NOSIS, f. KHARTOUM NETWORK, g. DUBLIN-DEMNITY, h. SEOUL FOOD.

*Note: * indicates an anagram.*

ACROSS: 12. *; 14. reign-where, homophone; 17. ea-gle*; 19. hidden; 21. first letters; 22. *; 25. flu[e]; 29. [t]oil; 30. [sup]port; 31. hug-so[me]body*; 34. double anagram; 35. *; 39. Mo(rm)on; 41. E[instein]-asement*; 42. *; 43. two mngs.; 47. d(ro[le])id; 48. *; 49. rev.; 50. mai[n]tai[n]; 51. hidden; 52. g-all; 54. two mngs.

DOWN: 1. first letters; 2. [h]ashtag*; 4. homophone; 5. a-n-on; 6. first letters; 7. f(ant)an; 8. *; 9. entre-n[0-U.S.]-ch; 11. [f]earful; 18. *; 20. *; 22. *; 23. f[ruit]-ired; 27. strum[pet]; 28. do-do; 32. pun; 33. bin-dings; 36. *; 37. (s)tipple[s]; 38. f(a)un-[c]a[g]e; 40. Ra-dial(rev.); 44. two mngs.; 45. homophone; 46. [i]deal.

he'd told her one night, drunk, was that he got bored. Everything was always the same, the same, the same, and he didn't know how to change things. "I'm not the same," she said. "I'm a human, I change every minute. Isn't that interesting enough?" "I guess I need to try harder to notice," he said. "That would probably help my writing too. I never know what's actually going on." What was funny was that he did seem to know what was going on in his writing, even if he evinced little of this knowledge in his daily life.

They kissed, gently at first, and then the full tongue thing. She thought there was something slightly tentative and unenthusiastic about his kissing—it didn't seem as urgent as she thought it should given their time apart. There were many possibilities for why this might have been the case; she knew it wasn't fair to assume he had gotten involved, or infatuated, or whatever. Was it, as her mother had suggested during an earlier iteration of this situation, that Cassie *wanted* him to lose interest in her so that she might finally be done with this whole repetitive cycle? Sure, of course. She was interested in other people, too. She was a person. Caleb, who taught English to the sophomores, had made it clear that he'd be willing to give up his life (which consisted of not much besides teaching and smoking weed, as far as she knew) to follow her wherever she'd be willing to take him. She was pretty sure she didn't want to adopt Caleb, but did she think about keeping him under her desk for some after-school help with grading? Yes, she did. Did she eye the spoiled college girl on the T wearing bright white high-tops, a blue romper, and an obscene, goose-murdering puffy coat and imagine taking her home with the promise of . . . what could she promise such a girl? TikTok followers? Having sex with Cassie would probably not increase the girl's TikTok followers.

Aaron was not a childish middle-school teacher or a BU brat, but she could treat him like one. She pushed his shoulders down so he lay on his back, pushed his hands up over his head. She unbuttoned his jeans and pulled them off with his boxers.

"Doesn't seem like you're ready for me yet," she said. "Stay there."

She took her vibrator out of her shoulder bag and lay down next to him. She turned it on at the lowest setting and pulled her tights down to her ankles. She closed her eyes, pressed down. It took her a couple of minutes, but she was getting into it.

"Is this what you've been thinking about, Aar?"

She opened her eyes. He was asleep.

They took the subway to the opera house. She had recently read, on Thelonious Monk's Wikipedia page, that a black neighborhood known as San Juan Hill had been bulldozed in order to build the Lincoln Center complex in the 1960s. Of course, she'd never really thought about what had been there before the theaters, most of which were now emblazoned with the names of right-wing oligarchs. She remembered the time she'd gone canvassing for local candidates in Brooklyn, back when they lived in the city. She'd been assigned the Ebbets Field Apartments, a massive, run-down housing complex just past her neighborhood. Only afterward had it occurred to her that the echoing halls and stairwells she'd been trudging through were perched above the field where Jackie Robinson had played. For better or worse, she was past the point of feeling actively sad about these kinds of things. They just drove home the point that New York was a landscape full of ghosts.

Cassie didn't want to wake Aaron up, so she decided to cancel the dinner reservation she'd made at a homey, old-school Italian place where they'd once been together, another attempt at nostalgic foundation building for Aaron's new life of sobriety, or something. Instead they participated in what was, admittedly, an even more evocative ritual: finding the nearest pizza counter and wolfing down greasy slices coated in self-administered oregano and red pepper flakes, under the forbearing eyes of random half-smiling celebrities surprised into photos with the owners and staff. Between bites of "barbecue chicken" pizza (why, Aaron?), he apologized for being so exhausted. It must have been, he said, that his body finally felt like it was out of danger.

"Is there anybody from back in the, um, danger zone that you're going to keep in touch with?" Cassie said. "Or you've had enough of them."

Casual, casual.

"No, a few of us are going to meet on Skype or whatever once everybody's *back out in the world,*" Aaron said. "I dunno, maybe it's gonna be like summer camp where everybody promises to stay in touch and then you don't. But I think people actually felt pretty connected."

"Did you?"

"I think so. I mean, maybe as much as I ever do, I guess."

"That Mary you mentioned on the phone, is she in the group?"

She had picked this person more or less arbitrarily. He had been pretty sparse with his information, but a Mary, an Amir, and a Laurel had come up in positive contexts during his brief calls. Cassie had spent a good amount of the past month trying to picture these people. She ended up with shadowy approximations of humans, like TV actors who sort of resembled movie stars.

"Yeah, Mary's in it. This guy Christian—I don't think I've ever known a Christian in real life before. Carlson, my roommate from the first two weeks. That girl Leonora I told you about."

Had Laurel actually been Leonora? She felt like she would have remembered a Leonora, because of Leonora Carrington. He hadn't hesitated even a little when he mentioned her, but still, her radar went up.

"What's Leonora's story?" she said. She tried not to italicize the name, the classic tell.

"Oh, she's a mess. Like the whole gang, though maybe even more so. But she's funny. Self-aware about it."

"Cute?"

"As the dickens," he said. "A regular Little Dorrit." The fact that he was making a joke of it was Not Great.

"Is she, uh, *out*? Or still there?"

"She left a week ago. It seems like she's been really struggling. It's a shame. She's a cool person."

Cassie didn't push any further, but she, of course, noted all of this.

Now, at the opera, she felt overwhelmed by the sea of people, many of whom were dressed much more expensively and formally than she and Aaron were. When they had lived in the city, they'd come to the Met often enough that they were comfortable being there in whatever they were wearing. They usually sat way up at the top of the house, in the cheap seats, surrounded by other young people in street clothes who, judging by conversations, often seemed to be musicians, singers, and actors. She'd enjoyed the semi-backstage feeling of sitting among the regulars. To pay thirty-five dollars and not dress up made her feel like she was experiencing the true spirit of the art rather than merely basking in the social display that had, admittedly, been the main function of the medium since its invention. But the time away had made her self-conscious. The seats she'd bought were in the orchestra, among very old couples in tuxedos and black dresses, Russians draped in expensive furs, and families with embalmed-looking teenagers staring blankly ahead in doll-person outfits.

But once the curtain opened, she felt a rush of relief and pleasure. She'd been right! It was better, much better, to be closer to the stage, to see the trembling mouths of the singers, to feel the crashing orchestra in her body, to have the ornate ceiling towering over their heads. It was thanks to money that she was having this experience. She had successfully paid her way to aesthetic ecstasy. At least, now that they were here, she could stop worrying and be overwhelmed by the beauty of what was in front of her. The moment she thought this, she began to worry. Aaron seemed happy, sort of. Or, at least, he wasn't asleep or looking actively miserable. She wondered if he was thinking about his phone, itching to check it and see what *Leonora* had said about her latest struggles. To be fair, he'd hardly been glued to his phone; she certainly would have been if she'd been away from it for a month.

But what if . . . what if Aaron didn't need to look at it now because he'd had his phone the whole time? And he'd just told her he didn't so he wouldn't have to keep in touch with her?

Onstage there was a sung discussion of a secret card trick that could only be learned from . . . a ghost? She didn't quite trust the translations that appeared on the backs of the seats, and she hadn't had time to read the synopsis beforehand. This fellow really, really wanted to know the secret card trick that would help him win an incomprehensible card game.

The more she thought about it, the more she felt that Aaron wasn't being truthful in some fundamental way. But maybe it was just the therapy and the drugs? Maybe this was what reformation looked like and she was, through her suspicion, imperiling his recovery. She would try not to do this. But what if his demeanor didn't indicate a struggle for redemption, but was, rather, a sign of resignation? To being bored, to being lonely. Or just: to drinking. His face remained a rictus of vague pleasure.

At intermission they walked up to the highest floor, where they usually sat, so they could look over the bannister of the spiraling stairs and watch the ecosystem of operagoers from above. People drank $25 glasses of champagne from plastic flutes. They'd been at the opera once on her birthday, and Aaron had insisted they get champagne. She'd managed to talk him down to one glass for them to share, and the overlapping novelties—the expense, the venue, the shared glass—had tipped the frustrating experience into something pleasurable. But it was too wasteful; she vowed never to do it again.

"So is she as good as you hoped?" Aaron said.

"Oh," Cassie said. The singer. "She seems solid, though she hasn't really gotten to do much yet. I think her big number is in the next act."

"I still feel like I can't really tell," Aaron said. "You could probably trick me into thinking someone who was just fine was really amazing, or




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vice versa. That means 'the opposite' in Latin."

"I trust the Met not to fuck with me," Cassie said. "Except for when they were doing all that Spider-Man the Musical shit with the Ring cycle. I don't really need to see, like, *machines* on the stage to know it's epic."

Aaron smiled emptily at this. It was his riff; she was just covering it. He didn't pick it up.

"You okay?" she said.

"I think so," he said. He sighed heavily. "This is so, so fun, but I do feel pretty insane, you know? It's just a lot. I might be losing it a little."

Of course he was. Fuck. Of course it was.

"That was plenty of opera for one night," she said.

"No, I'm fine," he said. He widened his fake smile to a painful-looking aperture. "I want to see the big number."

"I think I'd rather go," she said. "We've barely even gotten to talk, you know? We can come back to the opera whenever. It's not, you know, *changing my life.* It's fine."

He'd begun weeping while she said this, but she could see him trying to keep it together. He took off his glasses and pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's not specific. I'm just feeling a kind of, um, general fragility, I guess."

The intermission bells were dinging, and the lights had begun to flash on and off. A few months later, when it became clear that neither they, nor anyone else, would be going to theaters of any kind for a very long time, she remembered this moment. If she had known what was coming—the grief and the loneliness, the full banishment from the places that had sustained her for so much of her life—would she have insisted, against her better judgment, that they stay? She wanted, then, to hear the awaited aria almost as much as she wanted to comfort Aaron. Later, when the full scale of the loss became clear, she thought reproachfully that Aaron would have been just fine sitting through one more act, maybe two. He wouldn't have been any worse in the audience, his hand on hers, than in the hotel room. It was fine to cry at the opera. It was perfectly natural.

"Come on," she said. She put her arm through his, like a formal escort, and they descended the stairs to the front door, and then went out into the cold night.

She was woken from a deep sleep in darkness, in the unfamiliar room, by a harsh, insistent buzzing on the nightstand. She never set her phone to vibrate—it was on or off, damn it—so her first thought was that it was Aaron's phone. Only a death could prompt a call this late. Or a selfish female alcoholic, desperate for words of solace.

Aaron had not been able to articulate his source of upset in the hours after they left the opera. His problem was "everything," but also that he "didn't actually have any real problems, and that was probably the problem, at the end of the day." He hated himself, and he hated how other people made him feel, and he hated that he'd made Cassie's life so difficult, and he knew that he had to be a completely different person now, but he didn't know if he could be, and he was afraid of losing an important part of himself, and he was afraid of losing her. She sympathized with all of this, to some extent, but it all felt oddly abstract, like he was upset about concepts rather than real things. She couldn't help but continue to suspect that he was pretending, on some level—maybe even to himself—to be overwhelmed, to avoid something else.

The buzzing against the nightstand continued. It was on her side of the bed. Aaron muttered something, only half awake. She reached over to pick up the phone and felt, instead, the bulbous silicone head of her vibrator, which was, seemingly of its own volition, turned to the highest setting and doing its best to fulfill its mandate. She pressed the power button but it continued to shudder, now pulsing in quick, discrete bursts. She didn't know it could do that! She held down the button forcefully and the thing quieted. She tossed it on the floor and tried to go back to sleep.

She had just drifted off, or so it felt, when she woke to the sound again, the machine again on its newfound setting. As a message from the gods, it lacked both subtlety and tact, though it was nice that these gods seemed to have a sense of humor. This time the vibrator refused to be silenced. Every time she pressed the button it simply buzzed in a new pattern. Oh, this was what you wanted, got it. No? Oh, buzz every three seconds, got it. Oh, every five seconds, cool. Oh, never mind, you want me to buzz really softly but consistently. She carried it into the bathroom, wrapped it in a towel, then another one, and left it in the tub. She spent the next hour straining to see if she could still hear it, until she finally got up and took a couple of Tylenol PM. When she lay back down, her mind, blessedly, went blank, and then dark.

When she woke to the gray morning light, Aaron was not in bed. He was not, as far as she could tell, in the room at all. The bathroom door was closed, but he didn't answer when she called, and she found it unlocked. Aaron's toothbrush and toiletry bag were not on the counter. The vibrator was still in the tub, in its swaddling clothes. It seemed to have worn itself out.

She went back into the room and sat down on the bed. The bottle of wine next to the TV was gone. She had a text from the Bernie campaign and one from her friend Rachel, who was "just checkin in boo." She had no missed calls. Aaron's giant coffin of a suitcase was still leaning against the wall next to the closet but, she now noticed, the contents of her tote bag—a fat Italian novel about World War II, an empty contact lens case, sunglasses, a tampon—were piled neatly on top of it. She read her novel for a half hour, then set it down to look up the plot of *The Queen of Spades* and find out what she'd missed. Death by fright, suicide, dramatic card game, suicide. Didn't anyone in an opera ever decide to just keep muddling through?

From a nearby room, she finally heard a real dog barking. It sounded celebratory, rather than fearful or aggressive. Someone had come back! Dogs, she thought, were very forgiving. They knew, at least, where the food was coming from. ■

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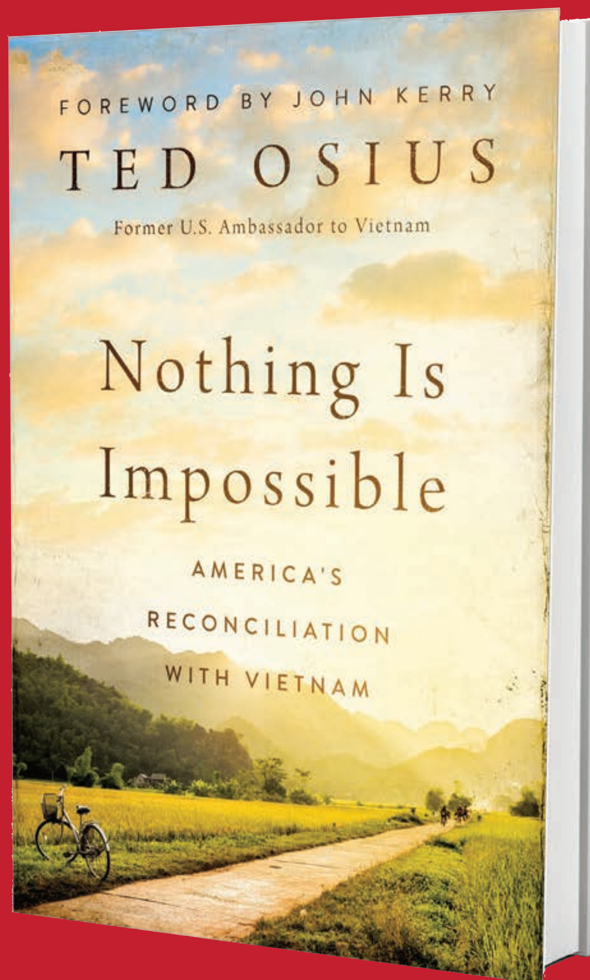


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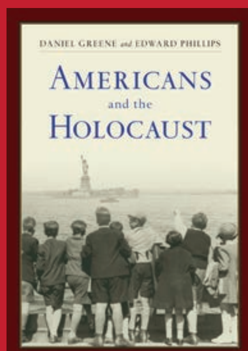


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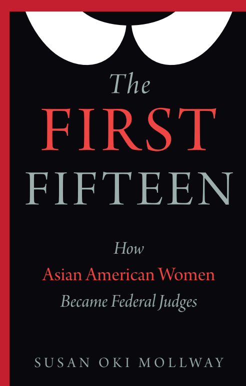


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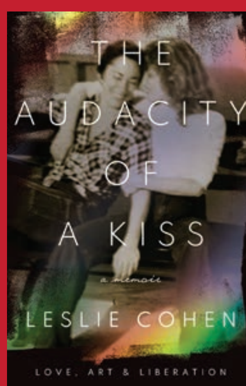
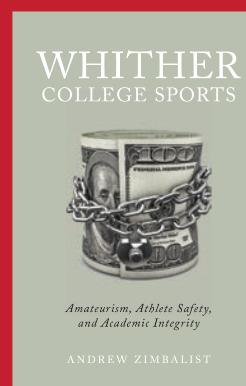



**The Audacity of a Kiss**
**Love, Art, and Liberation**
**Leslie Cohen**

**Neo-Burlesque**
**Striptease as Transformation**
**Lynn Sally**




**Whither College Sports**
**Amateurism, Athlete Safety, and Academic Integrity**
**Andrew Zimbalist**

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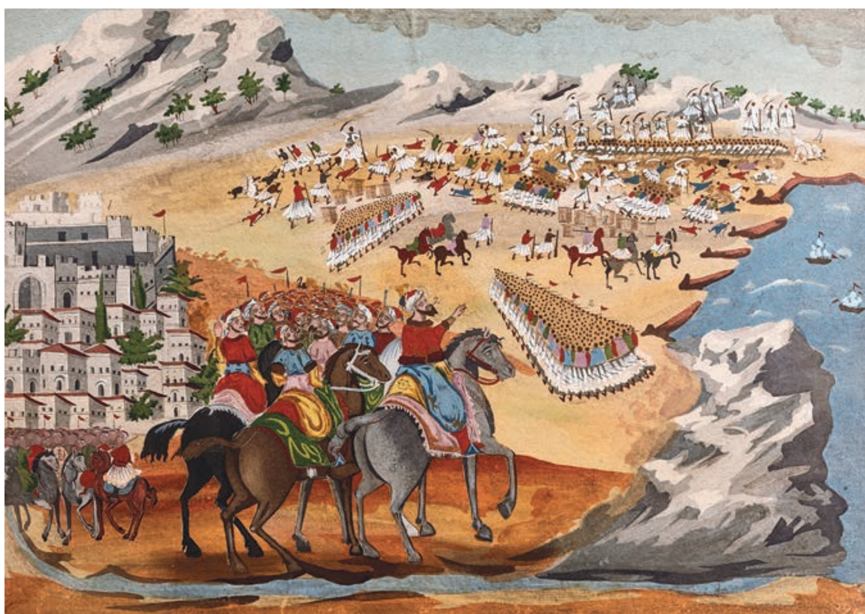
# NEW BOOKS

## *By Claire Messud*



This year marks the bicentennial of the Greek Revolution, which freed the territory from the Ottoman Empire and led to the establishment of Greece as a modern independent nation. In honor of the occasion, Mark Mazower, an eminent scholar of the region and author of, among other important books, *Salonica, City of Ghosts* and *Inside Hitler's Greece,* has produced a rich, illuminating, and imposing history of that paradigm-shifting conflict.

In **THE GREEK REVOLUTION** (Penguin Press, $35), Mazower makes a case for the contemporary relevance of this often-overlooked war: its twisted course was shaped not only by the decline of the Ottoman Empire, but also by the rising influence of international public opinion, and by the novel practice of foreign aid. From the United States, the revolution elicited the first example of "a policy of organized international relief, one that would be closely identified with America's projection of its power and values abroad for the next two centuries."

Ruling Greece from the mid-fifteenth century onward, the Ottomans quelled various rebellions, including an earlier uprising in the 1770s, the failure of which lived in the memories of the revolutionaries of 1821. But Mazower makes clear from his opening line that the road to independence "started with the defeat of Napoleon." At the ensuing peace congress in Vienna, Tsar Alexander I of Russia brought with him a Greek-born diplomat named Ioannis Capodistrias, who would become Greece's first governor in 1827. While this trajectory may sound straightforward, it was quite the opposite, as Capodistrias remained for a long time divorced from the revolutionaries and the complex, brutal battles that unfolded over six long years. The revolution's prime movers were the Filiki Etaireia, a secret organization founded in 1814 by three exiled Greeks that grew into "an entirely new kind of political association, one premised on radical ideas of self-sacrifice, individual agency and equality in the case of national rebirth."

Like characters in a Homeric epic, the players in Greece's war emerge, in Mazower's telling, in an apparently orderly fashion. An expert storyteller, Mazower unravels a Gordian knot of local, regional, and international factionalisms. While the sultan in Constantinople remained the ultimate power among the Muslims, he and the Greeks both had to contend with regional leaders such as the Albanian Ali Pasha, named the Mahometan Bonaparte by Lord Byron. The Ottomans fielded military leaders such as the "brilliant and experienced general" Khurshid Pasha, and Kütahi Pasha, who was responsible for the vicious conquest of Mesolonghi. Meanwhile, Mehmed Ali, the sultan's governor in Egypt, was often at odds with Ottoman leadership, as he aimed "to win independence from the Sultan in order to create his own family dynasty."

Mazower follows the revolution's heroes, including the warriors Theodoros Kolokotronis and Georgios Karaiskakis; the priest Papaflessas, who died fighting Ibrahim Pasha, the son of Mehmed Ali; and, like a beacon in a storm, the judicious and diplomatic Alexandros Mavrokordatos, who would ultimately serve four times as prime minister, dying in 1865. The Greek factions descended repeatedly into civil war; individual leaders switched sides for personal gain; soldiers engaged in merciless violence and plunder, while

Top: *Battle at Langada and Komboti,* by Panagiotis Zographos. Courtesy AUTH Archive Collections. Bottom: Ioannis Capodistrias © Album/Alamy

their maritime counterparts often turned to piracy. Murder, rape, pillage, and enslavement were common.

The book deftly weaves in the broader international context: Throughout Europe, the philhellenes advocated for Greek independence, and many found their way to the country and even to the battlefield, just as their descendants would in the Spanish Civil War over a century later. Byron, of course, was among the most famous of these—he died of fever in Mesolonghi in 1824, an envoy of the London Greek Committee that organized a substantial loan to the revolutionaries. In France, too, leading figures such as Chateaubriand and the painter Delacroix lobbied for European intervention. "Philhellenism was becoming a cultural force unifying very diverse swathes of European society," Mazower writes, even "helping to create something we might term a European liberal conscience."

Ultimately, it was European intervention at the Battle of Navarino—the navies of Britain, France, and Russia—that brought an abrupt end to the conflict in 1827, installing Capodistrias as the new nation's leader and eventually placing a Bavarian royal, Otto von Wittelsbach, on the Greek throne. This is by no means the end of the story, of course. Mazower notes with some acerbity that

> no king of Greece died quietly in office before 1947 . . . George II, who managed it, is said to have remarked that "the most important tool for a king of Greece is a suitcase."

The abiding conflict between Turks and Greeks, Muslims and Christians, is at the heart of Elif Shafak's new novel about Cyprus, **THE ISLAND OF MISSING TREES** (Bloomsbury, $27). Shafak, one of Turkey's most prominent living novelists and long established in the United Kingdom, writes in English in a lyrical, magical realist mode that somewhat leavens her story's darkness. One of the book's recurring narrators is a fig tree. "Across history we have been a refuge to a great many," it says, continuing:

> A sanctuary not only for mortal humans, but also for gods and goddesses. There is a reason why Gaia, the mother goddess of earth, turned her son into a fig tree to save him from Jupiter's thunderbolts.

This fig tree, rooted in London, has grown from a cutting brought to the United Kingdom by a Greek Cypriot named Kostas, taken from a dying tree in an abandoned tavern, The Happy Fig,

where a young Kostas had met clandestinely with his Turkish Cypriot beloved, Defne. The tree—resilient, wise, given to commentary—serves as a bridge between characters, times, and places.

The novel's framing narrative unfolds in London in the recent past, focusing on a sixteen-year-old girl named Ada Kazantzakis. Ada lives with her father, the aforementioned Kostas, as both grieve the recent death of her troubled mother, Defne. In time, Defne's sister Meryem comes to stay with them, the first extended family member Ada has ever met. Slowly, Ada approaches the complicated history that drove her parents into exile and alienated them from their families.

The novel's historical chapters unfold largely in the summer of 1974, when Cyprus, following a coup ordered by the governing military junta in Athens, was invaded by the Turks on two occasions. Anticipating their families' disapproval on religious grounds, Kostas and Defne—already as secretive as Romeo and Juliet—are torn asunder, and the restaurant in which they had found safe haven is destroyed. More than twenty-five years later, Kostas returns to the island's Turkish side and finds Defne working with the Committee on Missing Persons. The two resume their relationship.

The couple, then, understandably choose to raise their late-born child far from the conflict that so scarred them—for them as for the kings of Greece, a suitcase proves an important tool. But for Ada, her parents' silence about their past has created an unarticulated darkness that prompts her, early in the novel, to have a public emotional outburst. Her aunt's arrival occasions important conversations in the family, but for the reader, the bigger secrets told by the fig tree—unknown to Meryem or Kostas—constitute the heart of the book.

Shafak has structured the novel through a variety of ordering principles: the alternation between a third-person narrator and the first-person fig tree; the interspersal of historical Cyprus chapters into the London narrative; the separation of the book into sections that correspond to the tree's form (Roots, Trunk, Branches, etc.); and, significantly, the further incorporation of stories of nonhuman creatures—bats, butterflies, birds, mice. In Shafak's cosmos, these creatures, like the trees, have the power to educate and liberate us from our destructive tendencies. At one point, Ada recalls a story her mother Defne told her about the sighting by British

soldiers, during World War II, of what initially appeared to be smoke:

> A few minutes later, rivers of butterflies, many thousands of them, flew over the battalion. And the soldiers,

Top: "Fig Tree," by William Josephs Radford © The artist
Bottom: "Kaleidoscope II," by Gwen Wilkinson © The artist

> some so young they were merely boys, clapped and cheered . . . those who were lucky enough felt the touch of a pair of gossamer wings on their skin, like a farewell kiss from the lovers they had left behind.

In this way, *The Island of Missing Trees* is not simply a commentary on the bitter legacy of war, which Shafak suggests will shape future generations no matter how hard we try to prevent it from doing so; it is also a commentary on the folly of our adversarial relationship with nature and our refusal to learn from the flora and fauna with which we share the planet.

Shafak's English prose, though sometimes glorious, often relies on overly familiar phrases. But the scope of her thematic ambition is impressive, and she is a compelling storyteller. She writes as well about teenage irascibility as about profound human suffering, and, like the wise fig tree, understands the interconnectedness of all things great and small.

Paul Bloom, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto and the author of the bestselling *Against Empathy,* considers human suffering from a rather different angle in his new book **THE SWEET SPOT** (Ecco, $27.99). His approach to writing is resolutely unwriterly and unacademic—that's to say, he writes as if speaking, which brings a welcome immediacy to his explorations. (While reading, I pictured the book in the hands of a young business executive heading home on a commuter train. Nowadays, I suspect few business executives read books on trains, and indeed few may even be on trains at all, but you get the idea.) And these explorations, richly substantiated, are punctuated by allusions not only to Daniel Kahneman and Robert Nozick, but also to *The Matrix* and Pokémon Go. *Avengers: Endgame* rubs shoulders with Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, and the effect, simultaneously authoritative and chummy, is engaging.

"Nobody," Bloom contends, "is immune to the lure of suffering"—though he is swift to make a distinction between the suffering of wartime and that of localized, willed hardships, such as endurance athletics or mentally strenuous activity. The aim of his inquiry is to find the correlation between suffering and happiness, to identify what his book defines as "the sweet spot." Among various types, he identifies the

pleasures of imaginary suffering—fictions including films and video games—and of controlled suffering such as in BDSM. But in the realm of daily life, he distinguishes early on between "happiness" and "meaning," acknowledging that "happy people tend to be healthy and financially well-off, and to have lives with a good deal of pleasure." By contrast, those who call their lives meaningful seem to eschew these comforts in favor of setting ambitious goals, which in turn brings anxiety and worry. "Meaning in life" seems to coincide with concern for others; "happiness" is more selfish.

This question of "meaning" is one to which the book repeatedly returns, as sustained satisfaction (rather than successive moments of happiness) seems to depend upon it. Bloom cites Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's definition of flow as "an experience of intense and focused concentration, where you are entirely in the moment." This would be the goal we strive toward—"challenged to just the right extent, threading the needle between too easy (which leads to boredom) and too difficult (which causes stress and anxiety)." But of course the shape differs for each individual.

What might such goals have in common? Bloom turns to Emily Esfahani Smith, the author of *The Power of Meaning,* who, in summarizing the work of the historian and philosopher Will Durant, suggests four recurring themes: a sense of human belonging, a belief that humans act with purpose, a capacity for storytelling, and a capacity for transcendence. Bloom notes cheerfully that "suffering is not one of the criteria," but makes the point that whether having a child, going to war, or climbing a mountain, "one might not wish for or welcome suffering. But it always comes along for the ride."

The purposeful role of suffering—sacrifice, for example—is central to many religions, and Bloom addresses the fact that we tend to "want our goodness to be unsullied by pleasure." This, he writes, is "why savvy charities sponsor walkathons and marathons, not group massages and beach parties."

Agency is unsurprisingly important to the narrative of purposeful suffering: it helps to feel that you have some control over the pain you experience. Meanwhile, Bloom observes that trying to be happy (seeking control over one's happiness) can in fact get in the way of being happy. Rather, there is a balance to be struck:

> It's not merely that there exist some people who are both happy and have lives with meaning. It's that there is a correlation: happy people are more likely to say that their lives are meaningful, and people who say that their lives are meaningful are more likely to say that they're happy.

If it were straightforward, of course, more people would lead what they considered meaningful and happy lives. Utilitarian analyses ultimately fail to account for our quixotic human natures. Bloom, at the end, cites the protagonist of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World,* who rejects that new world's absolute prioritizing of pleasure: "But I don't want comfort," the character John insists, "I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin." As Bloom concludes, "There is no better summary of human nature." ■

*A Train*, by Yuri Yuan. Courtesy the artist and Alexander Berggruen, New York City

# FORBIDDING PLANET

## George R. Stewart's novels of natural disaster

*By Matthew Sherrill*

Discussed in this essay:

*Storm,* by George R. Stewart. NYRB Classics. 304 pages. $17.95.

A fifty-year-old English professor was fighting a wildfire in the summer of 1945 when a falling tree almost crushed him to death. In preparation for a forthcoming novel (which would appropriately be titled *Fire*), the professor was conducting an ambitious program of research: he attended the Plumas Forest School, visited sites of historical fires throughout California and Oregon, and worked as a lookout at the iconic Sierra Buttes fire tower. He even disguised himself as a vagrant and joined a group of amateur wildfire fighters who had been hired off the streets. "I knew it was dangerous," the professor, George R. Stewart, later said of the flaming snag. "I knew enough about things to keep an eye on it."

Nevertheless, Stewart was tired after a difficult night on the fire line, and while navigating a stretch of mud he lost his footing and tumbled to the ground. The desiccated tree collapsed a moment later, crashing onto the trail some fifteen feet ahead. In all likelihood, Stewart subsequently reflected, his clumsiness had saved his life.

In some ways, Stewart was the last person one might expect to find immersed in acts of gonzo fieldwork. He was a tweedy, lifelong academic, known to many today as the author of *Names on the Land,* a charming, if sometimes inaccurate, encyclopedia of American toponyms. Yet the research for his work—which spanned evolutionary science, science fiction, thrillers, Civil War history, educational history, literary theory, onomastics (the study of names), and hodology (the study of roads)—tended to involve a degree of reckless abandon. For his novel *Storm,* he rode atop a train's cowcatcher through Donner Pass in the snow, accompanied the highway patrol in whiteout conditions, and trekked through the Sierra Nevada on snowshoes to repair downed utility wires. (A member of his party narrowly escaped death after plummeting from a pole jostled by a falling fir.)

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This high-stakes location scouting was integral to Stewart's work, a corollary to his conviction that nature and the environment—the seemingly trifling nuances of weather, topography, flora, and fauna—were the primary drivers of human experience. It was a belief that found its fullest expression in what Stewart came to call his ecological works: *Ordeal by Hunger, Storm, Fire, Earth Abides,* and *Sheep Rock.* In these books, published between 1936 and 1951, he aimed to remind a robustly urbanized and industrialized United States how natural forces governed not just their quotidian lives, but all of human civilization. This project extended from the way in which, in the newly reissued *Storm*, the sight of seagulls fleeing a tempest inspires a revelation in a nameless literature professor, to the way "a slight average rise or fall of temperature may topple a throne; a shift in the stormtrack can ruin an empire."

Stewart demoted the psychologies, desires, and personalities of his human characters to a secondary role, privileging instead a scientific account of the impersonal forces—storms, fires, plagues—that, to his mind, were the primary agents of history. At its extreme, his approach became a biography of place, chronicling the life cycles of landscapes and the natural disasters that shape them. As the poet Josephine Miles said of *Fire*, Stewart "materializes *dramatis personae* out of the powers of nature."

It is tempting to view these books as outgrowths of the earliest stirrings of the environmental movement. Most of Stewart's ecological work was published in the 1940s, as Aldo Leopold was formulating a new, ecocentric ethics of land management and Rachel Carson—herself a professed fan of *Storm*—gathered material for *The Sea Around Us,* her best-selling work of marine science that helped launch modern ecology into popular consciousness. But for someone who wrote so passionately about nature, Stewart was not, at least for most of his career, a conventional environmentalist. He "was not a 'tree-hugger,'" writes the critic Fred Waage. "He was not a wilderness advocate. He didn't own a farm. He didn't go to Washington to lobby for environmental causes." Stewart may have shared with his contemporaries a belief in the explanatory power of what Leopold called an "ecological interpretation of history," but he rejected environmentalism's lapses into sentimentality, its insistence on establishing a "state of harmony between men and land." Stewart's vision was darker, his nature a magnificently awful force whose capacity for destruction could never be brought into harmony with human interests, only into temporary abeyance. Rosier visions of nature, to quote a forest supervisor from *Fire,* he regarded as "National Park stuff."

According to the conventions of literary realism, his ecological books have obvious faults: leaden, interchangeable characters; shapeless plots prone to sudden dead ends; and dialogue that occasionally reads as though its author had never so much as overheard a human conversation. Yet to dwell on these elements is to miss the point—viewed through the prisms of climatological, geological, and evolutionary processes, humans *are* more or less interchangeable, their parochial concerns necessarily banal. This is what Stewart's work conveys at its best: a sense of humility and an appreciation of the contin-

gent status of our own species, endlessly threatened as it is by a relentless, hostile nature. In doing so, it unsettles our understanding of mankind's apparent dominion over the earth. In that respect, Stewart's body of work feels proleptically tailored to an era of catastrophic ecological decline, one in which the earth may very well abide, but our own human prospects look considerably more doubtful.

As a young boy in Pennsylvania, at the start of the twentieth century, Stewart discovered Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island.* He had been an avid reader of adventure novels—Kipling and London were favorites—but to Stewart, Stevenson seemed to be onto something new. The story's action transpired across a fictional land that Stevenson had himself mapped, and that map, Stewart learned, had predated the invention of Long John Silver, Jim Hawkins, and the rest of the cast. It had predated the black spot, the pirates' mutiny, and every other plot point. The setting—the environment—was in that sense anterior to, even determinative of, the novel's human elements. It was a revelation that would forever inform his thinking.

A few years later, in 1908, Stewart's father, an engineer, moved his family west to California's San Gabriel Valley, where Stewart spent his youth drawing amateur maps and backpacking in the mountains. This idyll came to an end in 1913, when, against his wishes, Stewart's mother sent him to Princeton. Plagued by outsider status, he nevertheless graduated third in his class with a degree in English (he also ran track with F. Scott Fitzgerald). Following a brief stint in the army, he eventually earned his PhD at Columbia, took an appointment at the University of Michigan, and fell in love with Theodosia "Ted" Burton, the worldly, extroverted daughter of the university's president. (An illustrative early photo of the couple features Ted sitting astride an emu while George stands calmly beside her, hands clasped behind his back.) He received a job offer at Berkeley, asked Ted to marry him, and returned to the West Coast.

Within a few years, the English department began to fall into disarray. During what Stewart called the bad years, a "tyrant" named Guy Montgomery took over as chair; Stewart's prospects of tenure plummeted; and one of the department's brightest lights, a professor (and frequent *Harper's Magazine* contributor) named Robert Utter, was killed by,

"Donner Pass," by Laura Plageman © The artist. Courtesy De Soto Gallery, Los Angeles

of all things, a falling tree. Deeply frustrated with the academy, Stewart decided to try writing for the general public. As his inaugural subject, he chose something that would marry his long-standing interest in geography with the intoxicating Californian landscapes of his youth—the saga of the doomed Donner Party. In characteristic fashion, Stewart both consumed the extant primary literature and took to the land itself, walking the trails on which the pioneers had journeyed and eaten one another. His research uncovered the location of one of the party's campfires, as well as a collection of tree trunks cut down by the desperate migrants, which were subsequently preserved by Donner Memorial State Park.

The product of all this reading and trekking was *Ordeal by Hunger.* Stewart's account treats the Donner Party as a "microcosm of humanity, to be tested with a severity to which few groups of human beings in recorded history have been subjected." The language here is deliberately that of scientific experiment: What happens, Stewart asks, when human beings are wrenched from their native civilizational niche and thrown into the foreign climate and geography of a winter in the Sierra? As they lack fitness for their new environment, the Donner Party's gradual descent into cannibalism is less a function of moral character than an inevitable fact of biogeography, the consequence of a population's removal from its civilized habitat. Despite these scientific pretenses, Stewart isn't above indulging in the Grand Guignol spectacle of the Donner Party's most gruesome travails. In one memorable episode, a woman observes her twelve-year-old brother's heart roasting in the campfire. But the book remains at its core a clinical exploration of what Stevenson's map had once kindled inside of him: the workings of the landscape upon the fortunes of humankind.

"Probably the best way to feel the actuality of the story is to travel through its setting," wrote Stewart in *Ordeal by Hunger.* "For this reason, I have in the telling often stressed the scene until the reader has, I hope, come to feel the land itself as one of the chief characters of the tale." Similar formulations appear in the author's introductions to both *Storm* and *Fire.* There is, as Nathaniel Rich notes in his new introduction to *Storm,* something hackneyed in the idea of a book's setting becoming "a character of its own." But even so, Stewart's method—the extent to which he commits to centering natural phenomena at the expense of humans, who are reduced to what Stewart's friend Wallace Stegner called "functions"—remains unsettling and strange.

This first becomes apparent in *Storm,* a novel that tells the story of a twelve-day winter storm. The human characters (virtually all men) operate, with little exception, as agents of the vast systems of infrastructure tasked with managing the flow of Californian commerce during a natural disaster. They maintain the roadways, the electric grid, and the water system, and are referred to more often than not by their job titles: the General, the Road Superintendent, the Junior Meteorologist, the Load-Dispatcher, the Chief Service Officer. Their collective antagonist is Maria, a vicious cyclone that forms over the Pacific and rages toward and around the Sierra for the twelve days that correspond to the novel's twelve chapters.

With no central human concern to pivot around, the book alternates between a wide-angle account of the storm—Maria's formation, evolution, and decline—and a tremendously byzantine tangle of narrative threads involving the aforementioned representatives of civilization. The Road Superintendent frantically deploys plows to clear a critical pass through the mountains, the Load-Dispatcher struggles to keep the power grid online, and the General weighs the economic costs of opening floodgates and inundating nearby farms and ranches. Elsewhere we understand the human response to Maria's fury only through disembodied voices: newspaper headlines, the reactions of unnamed civilians. *Storm* is decidedly uninterested in the humans that populate its pages, treating their lives superficially, or with a lack of empathetic identification that sometimes approaches cruelty. Early in the novel, Stewart introduces a desperate wheat farmer named Oscar Carlson. At the end of the paragraph, he kills himself.

Stranger, less human subplots also appear, told in episodic vignettes. A brief and incomplete selection: An owl alights on a transmission line and is electrocuted, damaging the wire, which later breaks under a weight of snow, prompting the Load-Dispatcher to send out a team of men to fix it, one of whom almost falls from the pole and dies, but doesn't. A boar and a coyote roam around, to no end in particular. A long-dead cedar, toppled in a windstorm in 1789, its current perch weakened by a chipmunk's burrowing, tumbles down a mountainside and snaps a major telephone line, shutting off innumerable conversations in an instant:

> Except for two hikers who had sat upon the bole for a few minutes in 1923, no human being had ever known anything about it. During the half hour following its fall down the mountainside, nobody knew that it had fallen. But the fall affected the lives of many people over a hemisphere.

If this all sounds wildly complicated and bizarre, it is. *Storm* is a dense web of accidents, a vast orchestral work in which each moving part bespeaks an organic relationship to the whole. It seems to violate every sense of what a novel ought to be, where its interest ought to lie. It doesn't read as though written by a misanthrope, per se, but by someone to whom humans, animals, and the elements of inanimate nature were so many microscopic organisms colliding in a petri dish.

*Storm* makes explicit what Stewart had more gently suggested in *Ordeal by Hunger*: that the world is fundamentally mankind's antagonist, and that the best we can manage in this struggle is a fragile truce. This détente, however, carries with it its own dangers—namely, that this state of affairs might grow too comfortable, that we risk growing

"soft with civilization." When disaster strikes (as it inevitably does, particularly in novels called *Storm*) and nature gains the upper hand, how do we respond, being so enfeebled? What, if anything, is to prevent us from devolving into the Donner Party?

*Storm* was a bestseller. The novel made the Book of the Month Club, whose newsletter hyped it, confusingly, as a "detective story of the weather" and an "adventure." The *New York Times* praised the depth of Stewart's research and his rich account of "science practically applied" (though it ventured, presciently, that the book was unlikely to "set a new fiction vogue"). For *Storm*'s most enthusiastic readers, the novel seems to have been received as a thriller, a survival drama that happened to be informed by meteorological know-how. It was eventually adapted into a radio drama by the BBC and a TV special by Disney. It also served as the inspiration behind "They Call the Wind Maria," a showstopper from *Paint Your Wagon*. And while Stewart can't claim exclusive credit, *Storm*'s popularity helped bring about the meteorological practice of endowing storms with proper names.

Stewart enjoyed another success with *Names on the Land*, but his fan mail nevertheless urged him to return to natural disasters and human misery: according to Scott, *Earthquake* was suggested, as well as *Volcano*. In 1948, he indulged their wishes with *Fire*. Following Stevenson's lead, Stewart had, while writing *Storm*, mapped out the story's landscape (these maps, printed in the first edition, are sadly omitted from NYRB's reissue). He took things a step further for *Fire*, constructing a three-dimensional plaster model of the national forest that he would go on to fictionally incinerate. A two-dimensional map was printed inside the novel as well, ingeniously drawn to chart the wildfire's progression.

Like *Storm*, *Fire* tracks its titular calamity day by day, interstitially zooming out into a godlike perspective so as to contextualize, and in a sense diminish, the novelistic action by appealing to a cosmic frame of reference. The novel again includes lengthy nonhuman interludes—the destruction of an ant colony is rendered in meticulous detail; thousands of words are dedicated to the experience of a single squirrel—and dilates on the ways in which the small and arbitrary can lead to events that feel large and inevitable. The Spitcat blaze itself begins with a single smoldering pine cone, and is exacerbated by, among other factors, a burning hare, scrambling for safety, and wind, itself the symptom of a storm system that originated thousands of miles away. "For a baby in the cradle, the temperature of the room, the judgment of the mother, or a chance-borne microbe far outweighs all wars, droughts, and revolutions," writes Stewart.

> While he lies in the cradle, his future may already be linked with an unusual melting of the distant polar ice, with the erosion of a near-by hillside, with the slow rotting of a beam in some distant house.

The next year, Stewart's *Earth Abides* took his disaster fixation to its inevitable conclusion: the end of the world. This tale of a small band of Californian survivors struggling to preserve some semblance of civilization on an earth ravaged by a deadly virus has been cited as an inspiration for Stephen King's *The Stand*, the blockbuster video game *The Last of Us*, and countless other postapocalyptic entertainments. Much about the novel now feels familiar—the shell-shocked protagonist wandering through abandoned streets, the desperate search for other survivors (and, especially now, the prospect of "an escape, possibly even a vindictive release, from some laboratory of bacteriological warfare"). And yet much of the book still manages to feel distinctive, thanks to Stewart's characteristic emphasis on the nonhuman implications of, well, the near-extirpation of humans.

*Earth Abides* is animated by neo-Malthusian concerns about the "biological law of flux and reflux"—the ways in which the elimination or proliferation of one species sets into



A PORTRAIT OF
VALOR
FROM A LION OF
THE LEFT

BEFORE HE BECAME A CELEBRATED POLITICIAN, **GEORGE McGOVERN** SERVED IN WORLD WAR II AS A B-24 BOMBER PILOT. HE FLEW IN THIRTY-FIVE COMBAT MISSIONS AND EARNED THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS FOR HIS INGENUITY IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY. ***MY LIFE IN THE SERVICE***, A FACSIMILE OF THE DIARY McGOVERN KEPT BETWEEN 1944 AND 1945, VISUALLY EVOKES THE ERA AND PROVIDES A FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT OF THE ALLIED BOMBING OF NAZI-OCCUPIED EUROPE.

INTRODUCTION BY
ANDREW J. BACEVICH,
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF
*HARPER'S MAGAZINE*

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motion countless changes in countless others. There are disquisitions on the fates of house pets (cats are doomed; dogs, less so); cultivated plant species (these "pampered nurslings of man" are also doomed); and lice, which have been abruptly deprived of their human hosts (and are perforce doomed). Several pages are spent speculating about rats, which more or less overrun the cities before suffering total collapse amid widespread disease and the exhaustion of their human-dependent food supplies. Bison and wild boar, Stewart suggests, should be fine.

"The whole affair," writes Stewart "came to be a most interesting study in ecology, almost a laboratory problem." In the vein of *Ordeal by Hunger, Earth Abides* is a kind of experiment as novel, if not quite a novelistic experiment. Rather than the psychological trials forced upon the last survivors of a ravaged planet, the book's chief preoccupation is "the careful observation of what was happening to the world after the removal of man's controls."

In the years before and during World War II, Stewart began taking long drives across the mountains into the dry lake beds of the Nevadan desert. On one such trip, Stewart, accompanied by the Berkeley paleontologist Charles Camp, came upon a towering black massif looming over a bubbling alkaline spring. Stewart later said the idea for his final ecological novel, *Sheep Rock,* came to his mind "almost immediately." (The site, Black Rock, is now known principally as a proving ground for daredevils seeking to set land speed records, and as the location of the Burning Man festival.)

*Sheep Rock* is an attempt to tell the story of the rock and the spring, a landscape into which humans only every so often happen to intrude. The novel is sprawling and fragmented, providing accounts of Sheep Rock's geological formation, the lives and deaths of the few trees and shrubs that cling to its sides, the slow evaporation of the prehistoric sea that once covered the flats, the comings and goings of ancient peoples, and the origins of the more modern human relics found embedded in the landscape—a bullet, a broken pitcher. Such digressions spin out from a central story of a poet who has come to the rock to write his masterpiece—an epic poem with the same concerns as *Sheep Rock* itself—and ultimately finds himself at a loss.

Unsurprisingly, readers and critics who had been carried along by the more thrilling elements of *Storm, Fire,* or *Earth Abides* were left somewhat cold by *Sheep Rock.* It is both the apotheosis and the end point of Stewart's ecological writing, concluding with the recognition that the interconnected threads and causal sequences he diligently traces are ultimately endless, the project impossible. "I cannot write of everything," says the poet. The land, no matter what names we might assign to it, has a way of exceeding the limits of expression.

"It is, perhaps, not often that a map figures so largely in a tale; yet it is always important," wrote Stevenson. "The author must know his countryside, whether real or imaginary, like his hand." As lococentric novels like *Sheep Rock* make apparent, Stewart knew his country almost to a fault—his work has sometimes been dismissed as mere regionalism. It seems unlikely, though, that Stewart would have minded. For him, mastery of one's terrain was almost a precondition for writing, and many of his later works continued probing the histories of the highways and trails of the West with which he had grown so intimate, and continued excavating the ways in which names mark that paramount and elemental relationship between humankind and the land.

Given this lifelong attachment to Western landscapes, it's no surprise that Stewart was prone to lyrical odes to the majesty of the Sierra, of the Basin and Range. But it was an impulse always counterbalanced by the antiromantic instincts that led Stewart to regard nature as plainly indifferent and destructive. To dwell on whatever beauty is to be found in the natural world is to risk being lulled into false comfort, and an insensitivity to the flimsiness of the "margin of safety which man's ingenuity had established."

Toward the end of his life, Stewart sensed that this margin had diminished—not because the threat posed by the natural world was growing more acute, but because civilization's careless treatment of that world was growing increasingly suicidal. His 1968 essay collection *Not so Rich as You Think,* as close as he would ever come to mainstream environmentalism, sounded the alarm about the catastrophic ecological cost of modernity's byproducts: sewage, industrial effluvia, garbage, smog, even atmospheric carbon dioxide. "The American world," he wrote, "gives some indication of ending in a bad smell." Even so, he maintained a certain faith in the margin, in our technological capacity for averting, or at least deferring, disaster. If civilization could buttress itself against the storms and fires that threatened its extinction from outside, surely it could guard against its own worst impulses. Fifty years on, his optimism feels naïve, to say the least. Far more prescient seems to have been the sad verdict of his earlier work. As the narrator of *Storm* opines about the plight of mankind: "In the main, swayed by immediate need and convenience, he remains through the long course of time careless of the struggle, planless." ■

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# I MULTIPLIED MYSELF

## The forty-seven lives of Fernando Pessoa

*By Benjamin Kunkel*

Discussed in this essay:

*Pessoa: A Biography,* by Richard Zenith. Liveright. 1,088 pages. $40.

How to write the biography of a man who scarcely lived? This is the problem facing anyone who would venture a life of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. In the voice of one of the dozens of writerly personae he came to adopt—Pessoa called these scribbling alter egos his "heteronyms"—he declared that if people "knew how to feel the thousand complexities which spy on the soul in every single detail of action, then they would never act—they wouldn't even live." It's in our imagination and anticipation, in other words, that true richness of experience lies; actually to *do,* to *act,* to *live* can only impoverish our being and traduce our souls. And Pessoa attempted to prove this doctrine on his pulses, meditating and feeling a great deal over the course of his life but otherwise doing very little. A pagan sensualist who seems to have died a virgin (he did kiss a sweetheart once), and a polyglot internationalist who disdained travel ("You can be happy in Australia, as long as you don't go there"), Pessoa had no use for life except as a pretext for literature. Even so, he produced just one slim book in Portuguese while he lived.

*Benjamin Kunkel is at work on a novel.*

His modest and abbreviated biological existence is of interest as the prelude to an extravagant posthumous career, which has revealed Pessoa as one—if not indeed, through his heteronyms, several—of the most remarkable writers of the twentieth century. To write under a mere pseudonym, he explained, is simply to disguise oneself, while to use a heteronym is to shed the familiar self and adopt a different one. All three of his major poetry-writing heteronyms, with their distinctive and incompatible orientations to life—a holy simpleton of a shepherd, a moody naval engineer, and a stoical medical student turned Latin instructor—are impressive modern poets, as is Pessoa under his own name. Internationally, the poetry began to receive its due in the 1960s, decades after Pessoa's death, with appreciation from Octavio Paz, the linguist Roman Jakobson, and Michael Wood in *The New York Review of Books.* In 1991, the publication of four separate translations of *The Book of Disquiet,* mimicking Pessoa's own self-multiplication, revealed a fragmentary prose masterpiece that rivals the unfinished novels of Franz Kafka and Robert Musil as a testament to the peculiarly modern experience of a fatally suspended, *as-if* sort of existence. A congeries of abstractly confessional passages—some as curt as a single line, others sighing over a page or two—stuffed by Pessoa into a wooden trunk and discovered only after his death, *The Book of Disquiet* is, as arranged into different

Illustration by Zach Meyer

sequences by various editors, an alternately melancholy and exultant account of an unlived life. Here is a man too faithful to his imagination to spoil it by fraternizing with the actual world; and then here, on the next page, is a man who badly regrets having added, to all the customary pains of life, the optional agony of never having lived.

Pessoa's real achievement, however, is to be seen less in this or that particular work than in the lucid incoherence of his total output. In his work self-consistency is the height of self-betrayal. He and his heteronyms insist with thrilling literalness that a single person can and should host multiple personalities. "The greatest man is the one who is the most incoherent," a manifesto signed by the imaginary naval engineer Álvaro de Campos proclaimed. "Instead of thirty or forty poets to give expression to the age, it will take, say, just two poets endowed with fifteen or twenty personalities." Alas, the cultivation of trial personalities requires one to abstain as much as possible from participation in the brutally singular world of flesh and blood, where realizing any one possibility means canceling out countless others. The overall Pessoan effect—of fertility and nullity overlaid, of a teeming garden spied through the transparent body of a phantom—gathers into a single sensation extremes of modern exuberance and despair. Here we have the abounding potential of a world liberated from tradition, and on the other side of the coin, the fathomless solitude of a world bereft of community. Just look at all the people you could be, if only you could be anyone at all.

In *Pessoa: A Biography,* the writer's longtime translator Richard Zenith has improved upon the jest inherent in any full-length biography of a timid slacker by writing one more than a thousand pages long. Born the first child of a bourgeois family in Lisbon on June 13, 1888, Fernando António Nogueira Pessôa—he dropped the circumflex when he was eighteen—had in a sense already made fun of Zenith's undertaking in the very moment of his baptism, given that the word *pessoa* simply means "person." Aware of the generic quality of his family name, Pessoa was amused to invent characters whose surnames produced the same effect in English, the language in which Pessoa first tried to become a writer. One was called Ferdinand Sumwan (read: *someone*). Another went by the name of Charles Robert Anon. Had Pessoa made it into old age, he might have smiled to encounter Hugh Person, the protagonist of Nabokov's *Transparent Things*.

Instead he died in his forties. In this and other respects he resembled his father, a diffident, tubercular music critic and freethinker, who declined last rites and expired just after Fernando's fifth birthday. (In a poem written on his forty-second birthday, Pessoa would recall a boyhood "back when they used to celebrate my birthday/I was happy and no one was dead.") Pessoa's younger brother Jorge followed their father into the grave half a year later, and it doesn't seem outlandish to note, apropos of the cohort that came to populate Pessoa's inner life, that one advantage of imaginary people over real ones is that the former can't die on you. Pessoa's mother, Maria Madalena, was the most robust member of the household, and in the same month that her younger son died, she boarded a horse-drawn streetcar called an *americano* and encountered a handsome ship captain with whom she promptly fell in love. (Álvaro de Campos would many years later observe in a poem: "The lady who lives at #14 was laughing today at the door/Where a month ago her little boy was carried out in a coffin.")

Captain Rosa was soon named Portuguese consul in Durban, South Africa, and Pessoa's precocious first poem, "To My Dear Mother," composed when he was seven and duly recorded by its addressee, constitutes a plea that Fernando not be left behind with relatives in Lisbon when his mother sails for the Cape of Good Hope to join her new husband. Since Pessoa's mother was herself an amateur poet, sometimes writing poems to her son, this mode of communication must have come naturally. Pessoa would spend most of the next decade in Durban, and Zenith reasonably conjectures that expatriation at such a young age, into the household of a stepfather, no less, to which five half siblings were rapidly added, contributed to Pessoa's lifelong attitude and posture as a stranger. Zenith cites *The Book of Disquiet*: "I was a foreigner in their midst, but no one realized it . . . a brother to all without belonging to the family."

In Durban, Pessoa's more intimate family consisted of the imaginary personages multiplying in his schoolboy composition books. The list of characters at the beginning of Zenith's tome tabulates not historical figures, as in an ordinary biography, but forty-seven heteronyms Pessoa floated over the course of his life, with dozens more left unmentioned. According to an astrological chart the adult Pessoa drew up, the physician Ricardo Reis was the eldest of this group, having been born some nine months before Pessoa himself. In actuality, the first of the heteronyms to debut was one Chevalier de Pas, a French knight in whose name Pessoa wrote letters to himself at the age of five or six.

Much of Pessoa's social isolation in Durban was racial. He was neither an Afrikaans-speaking Boer, nor, like most of his classmates, a native English speaker and British subject; nor did he belong to the city's substantial Indian population, where another resident, Mohandas K. Gandhi, cut his teeth as a militant by agitating for civil rights for South Asians. (In the 1920s, Pessoa would draft an essay—unfinished, like most of his projects—in which he declared Gandhi "the only truly great figure that exists in the world today," because, "in a certain sense, he does not belong to the world and he denies it.") Nor, of course, were Pessoa or the rest of his stepfather's family black Zulu speakers, like the dispossessed native population of the region. Pessoa had the aquiline Semitic features of his late father's side, which included Jewish conversos frog-marched into Christianity during the Inquisition.

The most harmless version of modern communalism is passionate fandom for a sports team, but even

here Pessoa remained an outsider. As a teenager, he organized soccer matches between imaginary clubs of his own devising, dreamt up corresponding managers, and duly recorded kickoff times and scores. If the adolescent Pessoa felt at home anywhere, it seems to have been in the English language, which he commanded well enough to win the University of the Cape of Good Hope's Queen Victoria Memorial Prize for best essay in 1903. Later on, he proved himself enough of a versifier in English that the two chapbooks he self-published in the language received respectful reviews in the United Kingdom.

It must have stung Pessoa, nevertheless, when an otherwise receptive critic noted that his excellent English retained the awkward shape of a borrowed garment. In truth, the Portuguese writer had stumbled into the sweet spot of many a modern poet: knowing a foreign language well enough to imitate its best writers, but not so well as to be a viable, idiomatic stylist in it. Doing one's best to rip off the signature effects of admired foreign writers can produce truly original results in one's native tongue. The case of the mature Pessoa somewhat resembles that of Jorge Luis Borges, in which a writer working in what he feels to be a humidly sentimental Iberian idiom borrows from English-language models a tonic quality of the dry, the humorous, and the analytical, in this way distilling a tone previously unknown in either language. But Pessoa's English-inspired breakthrough in Portuguese poetry still remained some years away, in 1905, when he departed South Africa for his native Lisbon, with the idea of living with relatives while finding his feet and continuing his education.

His college days didn't last long. When students at the School of Arts and Letters in Lisbon went on strike over the repression of republican colleagues in what remained a tottering monarchy, Pessoa decided to drop out once and for all. An inheritance from his mad grandmother Dionísia allowed him to move into his own apartment and establish a press, with which he planned to publish his translations of Shakespeare and Poe as well as of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; a gymnastics manual; and his own poetry and prose. Assisting him in the enterprise were heteronyms such as Carlos Otto, who translated detective fiction, Joaquim Moura-Costa, the author of an anticlerical lampoon, and Vicente Guedes, who later added pages to *The Book of Disquiet*. In the end, the Ibis Press did some error-ridden printing on behalf of clients, and put out nothing at all under its own imprimatur. For the remainder of Pessoa's life, his modest income mainly came from translating business letters into English or French for various Lisbon firms, and cadging funds from indulgent relatives.

Pessoa first began to publish work in Portuguese in the 1910s, in the new literary magazines then proliferating in Lisbon. In a 1912 essay, he argued, with the grandiosity native to little magazines, that advances in a nation's literature prefigured its political progress. It followed that a Portuguese literary renaissance in the twentieth century, to be spearheaded by a "Great Poet," would foretell the "*glorious future* awaiting the Portuguese Nation." Civilizational renewal by way of poetry constituted a tall order in one of the smallest, poorest, and least politically stable countries in Europe (between 1910 and 1925, Portugal ran through forty-five governments), especially when only a quarter of the population could read. It is a part of Pessoa's divided nature that his shyness and passivity coexisted with vainglorious ambition, and that in his tremendous solitude he conceived a new society.

The first mature poems signed by Fernando Pessoa appeared in another short-lived journal in the blithe first half of 1914. One of them, "Swamps"—a soup of images pregnant with undisclosed significance—supplied the model for the "swampism" that Pessoa and his fellow poet Mário de Sá-Carneiro, perhaps the one close friend of Pessoa's life, promoted as a sort of aggravated Symbolism. But Pessoa soon discovered himself a more lucid and original



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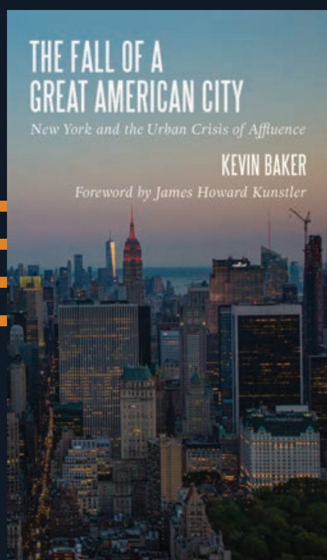


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poet, or set of poets, when he wrote under different names and according to other programs. The early twentieth century was literature's great Age of Isms, and, in addition to swampism, Pessoa would at different times propose the doctrines of "sensationism," "intersectionism," and "neopaganism."

Not until the late 1920s did Pessoa begin to characterize the bearers of such outlooks as heteronyms. Still, the galaxy of the major heteronyms underwent its big bang on March 8, 1914, as he explained to a young critic twenty-one years later. Pessoa had intended to invent "a rather complicated bucolic poet," tricked out with a fake biography, to hoodwink his friend Sá-Carneiro into accepting his invention as real:

> I spent a few days trying in vain to envision this poet. One day when I'd finally given up . . . I walked over to a high chest of drawers, took a sheet of paper, and began to write standing up, as I do whenever I can. And I wrote thirty-some poems at one go, in a kind of ecstasy I'm unable to describe. It was the triumphal day of my life, and I can never have another one like it. I began with a title, *The Keeper of Sheep*. This was followed by the appearance in me of someone whom I instantly named Alberto Caeiro. Excuse the absurdity of this statement: my master had appeared in me.

Zenith's archival sleuthing has revealed that this account is neater than the truth—Pessoa in fact drafted his cycle of poems over ten days, and didn't immediately attribute them to the made-up Alberto Caeiro—but there is no reason to doubt the experience of a renovated life and newly begotten writerly enterprise that Pessoa describes. All of the important heteronyms amount to hypothetical ways of being in the world, and the hypothesis that sponsors Alberto Caeiro is that of a metaphysical innocence in which a Portuguese shepherd of the twentieth century replaces Adam as a sort of first man, and merely sees things for what they are, outside of any thought. "To not think of anything is metaphysics enough," Caeiro says in one poem. In another he counsels that it "requires deep study, / Lessons in unlearning," to arrive at the place where "after all the stars are just stars / And the flowers just flowers, / Which is why we call them stars and flowers." The appeal of such a perspective to a helplessly intellectual young man, barely capable of crossing the street without developing a theory of pedestrianism, is easy to imagine.

Pessoa killed off Alberto Caeiro with tuberculosis in 1915. By this time, the heteronym Álvaro de Campos, who hailed Caeiro as his master, was submitting poems to the journal *Orpheu*, founded by Pessoa and some of his friends, whose narrow range of contributors might have seemed even narrower had works by both Pessoa and de Campos not appeared in its pages. (For all the philosophical richness of the heteronyms, one shouldn't ignore their practical usefulness in bulking out a list of contributors.) De Campos, arguably the best poet among the heteronyms, not to mention a more original one than Pessoa in his own name, joins Pessoa's taste for philosophical abstraction to the headlong rhythms of Walt Whitman, whose influence shines through more clearly here, as in Federico García Lorca or Pablo Neruda, than in any twentieth-century poetry in English.

De Campos's long poems are among Pessoa's tallest achievements, and, like symphonies, owe much of their stature to their duration. Nevertheless, a stanza from "Time's Passage" may correctly suggest that if you know what's best, you'll immediately search out the whole unfurled oration:

> I multiplied myself to feel myself,
> To feel myself I had to feel everything,
> I overflowed, I did nothing but spill
> out,
> I undressed, I yielded,
> And in each corner of my soul there's
> an altar to a different god.

A seaman like Pessoa's stepfather, de Campos seems to represent Pessoa's idea of an erotic and vagabondish sensibility available, as Pessoa himself was not, to sex and travel and outward displays of rapture or distress. Even so, the sensation of an unlived life persists. "Maritime Ode,"

another of de Campos's magnificent long poems, speaks from the point of view of a man who can't stand on shore and watch a single ship dwindle into "a vague point on the horizon" without feeling that it is his own life leaving him with

> ... nothing, and only I and my sadness,
> And the great city now filled with sunlight
> And the real and naked hour like a quay no longer with ships,
> And the slow turning of a crane, like a swinging compass,
> Which traces a semicircle of I know not what emotion
> In the aching silence of my heart

Last, and frankly least, of the main versifying heteronyms is Ricardo Reis, a Portuguese high school teacher in Brazil who accounts himself both a Stoic and a pagan. (Of all the dispositions that Pessoa entertains, Christianity is conspicuously absent.) Unlike de Campos, with his cascading stanzas, or Caeiro, with his beatific free verse, Reis writes formal quatrains that emphasize the vanity of existence and recommend acceptance of one's fate: "Love and glory/Don't matter to me./Wealth is a metal, glory an echo,/And love a shadow." The quality of ancient self-help may bring to mind Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius, but with some of the modern willfulness and unconvincingness of a yoga instructor who looks as though he might cry for reasons not comprehended by his philosophy. Reis's Stoicism is perhaps most moving for his inability to persuade the other heteronyms of any such thing.

Álvaro de Campos had been vigorous and thirsty for experience, and his evaporation after 1928 may be taken to indicate Pessoa's abandonment of the world. Pessoa began to write fragmentary prose in the voice of someone called the Baron of Teive, whose aristocratic nature is confirmed by suicide: "I feel I have attained the full use of my reason. And that's why I'm going to kill myself." This had been the choice of Sá-Carneiro, who put on his best suit and swallowed strychnine in a Paris hotel in 1916, depriving Pessoa of his best friend. A disastrous love affair lay behind Sá-Carneiro's act, but such passion was not Pessoa's or the Baron's style. In 1929, Pessoa renewed his acquaintance with a young woman named Ophelia Queiroz, with whom he'd shared a kiss and exchanged love letters a decade earlier. According to Zenith's carefully circumspect reconstruction of Pessoa's erotic nature, he seems finally to have been less heterosexual than homosexual, and less homosexual than asexual. At any rate, Ophelia's relationship with her indecisive Hamlet went nowhere a second time. "I passed by the general phenomenon of love," the Baron of Teive says calmly, "as I passed, more or less, by the general phenomenon of life."

Pessoa's most prolific alter ego, the assistant bookkeeper Bernardo Soares, he deemed only a semi-heteronym: "me minus reason and affectivity"—that's all. Soares spent Pessoa's last years stuffing pages into the latter's wooden trunk. To be sure, Soares/Pessoa often denigrates life, action, travel, and love in familiar fashion, insisting that experience can never amount to anything but a mockery of the imagination. Elsewhere, however, they inquire, with a kind of clinical coolness, whether this flight from suffering may not have plunged them directly into pain:

> My self-imposed exclusion from the aims and directions of life, my self-imposed rupture with any contact with things, led me precisely to what I was trying to flee.... With my sensibility heightened by isolation, I find that the tiniest things, which before would have had no effect even on me, buffet and bruise me like the worst catastrophe.

Pessoa died on November 30, 1935. An intestinal blockage seems to have done him in, but Zenith does not rule out acute pancreatitis, as a result of heavy drinking, for this dire alcoholic—"the family drunk," as he cheerfully announced himself on one occasion—whose acquaintances related that he never seemed intoxicated. What are we to make of Pessoa's meager earthly



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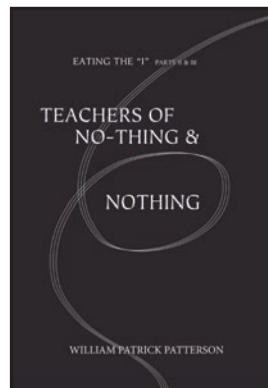

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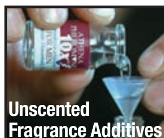


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career and prolific afterlife? It's easy to celebrate the vast triumph of the work and pity the small sadness of the life, until you realize that the vastness of the work was premised on the smallness of the life, and vice versa.

Discussion of Pessoa's body of writing by now amounts to a huge, critical, and sometimes imaginative literature, including several novels in which he figures as a character. Amid this warm fog of words, two statues stand out. Both the late Portuguese novelist José Saramago and the French philosopher Alain Badiou take the inventor of heteronymity at his word: he really *was* multiple people in one. In Saramago's 1984 novel *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, Pessoa's stoical doctor returns to his native Portugal to learn that his old friend Fernando Pessoa has just died. Pessoa himself soon visits Reis from the grave, explaining that we fade out of existence over a stretch of nine months that matches the gestation period. A melancholy dialogue between a ghost and his creation ensues, while Reis moons ineffectually over a young woman with an immobile arm, and the Portuguese strongman António de Oliveira Salazar consolidates his dictatorship. The impression, admiring but overwhelmingly sad, is of a baroque futility, both political and erotic.

For Badiou (like Saramago, a writer of communist convictions), Pessoa instead presents a heroic image. "One of the decisive poets of the century," he pioneered a mode of understanding to which the discipline of philosophy, "not yet *worthy of Pessoa*," can only aspire. Flouting the principle of noncontradiction, Pessoa, with his incompatible convictions, promises a future way of thinking that "does justice to the world" as a "philosophy of the multiple, of the void, of the infinite." In Badiou's own work, a quartet of separate and incommensurable "truth procedures" correspond to the four distinct realms of love, politics, science, and art. He seems to view Pessoa as the prophet of a new way of being that can attend at one and the same time to events that occur in the disjunct registers of our existence.

Badiou's mathematical language provokes the fundamental question: Was the basic operation of Pessoa's life one of division, so that he ended up a sad fraction of a person? (Surely this lonely, unfulfilled celibate missed out on more love and companionship, more publication and recognition, and simply more years than was strictly necessary?) Or do we behold instead a case of glorious multiplication, in which a crew of inward persons voyaged beyond the confines of the sole self? It would, of course, violate the spirit of Pessoa's work—his insistence on having things both ways—to pronounce his life either a cautionary tale or a hero's journey. And yet the nature of biographies is to bolster tragic, not affirmative, conclusions: in the end, one has only a single life that's never what it could have been. ■


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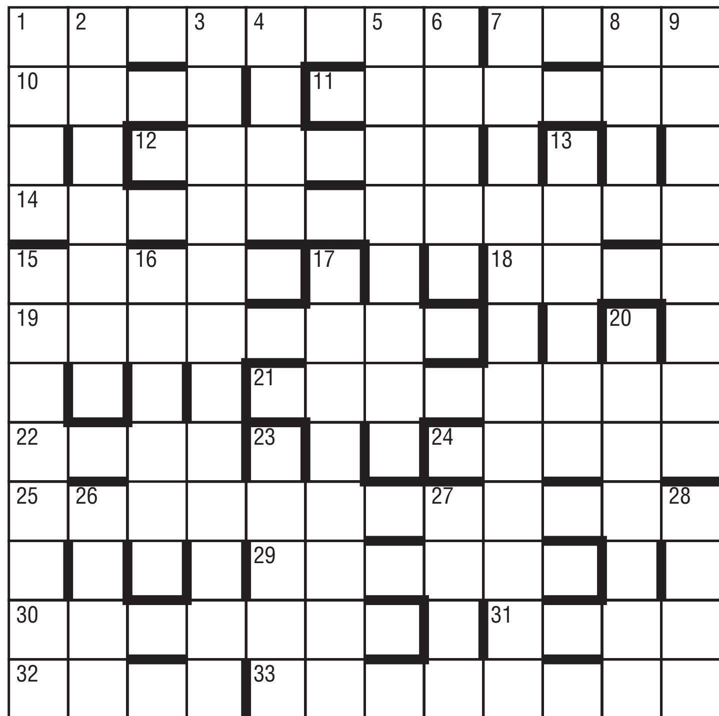
# PUZZLE




## FOURSOMES

*By Richard E. Maltby Jr.*

The bar pattern in this puzzle has four-way symmetry, that is, it remains the same no matter which side is up. Therefore, the clues have been grouped into foursomes, each group comprising the four entries sharing symmetrical placement. But within each foursome, the clues are listed in random order; the solver must place them correctly in the diagram.

Answers include one foreign word and one proper noun (an alternate spelling). As always, mental repunctuation of a clue is the key to its solution. The solution to last month's puzzle appears on page 67.

CLUES

1A, 33A, 9D, 15D (8)
Break in sparsest ground
Furniture transported in steerage
De-generate this person!
Shouts coming from climaxes

7A, 32A, 1D, 28D (4)
Jupiter and Neptune move backwards after rear action is eliminated
Healthy places to get fit, no end
Cultivate X-500
Marsh being just formed, it needs time

10A, 31A, 8D, 26D (4)
Marsh growth does, in reverse
Look off from the most profound direction
"Lo and behold!" (it's the start of every Cape Cod expression)
Ocean-wide episode reveals it

11A, 30A, 2D, 20D (7)
"They give you an itch for eggs," Emma's announced
Something that's gone viral: "Open Sesame!" with line inserted—
—Starting silently, rock opened a foot
Sucker from Oklahoma taken in by Reno's flimflamming

12A, 29A, 13D, 16D (6)
When plague spreads, this is like a helping hand! (*three words*)
As the saying goes, it's too late to exaggerate
A streaker might make one nude, bandying about royal name (*two words*)
Polish cinema peaked

14A, 25A, 3D, 7D (12)
Making something less complexly triangulated
Involved TV men elope within the boundaries of distributors' advances
Women's only—at cruel distribution of names
Always the more still!

15A, 24A, 6D, 23D (5)
Rugged coast provides food (shells and maybe fish)
Tesla models, not so new
It gives you the grit for filing forms mere year after
Sickly sounding person you meet in college?

18A, 22A, 4D, 27D (4)
Arts agency program's beginning between two springs
Instrument with a sound that you can't believe!
Rose in the rock world to encompass the East—it's a cool jump
Excited in the past, getting great support

19A, 21A, 5D, 17D (8)
Greeks' scold expat in relocating while taking piano
Smashed pets like a bit of grass
Part of a book written in small type, then rapped cleverly
Fixed things in front and back—it precedes a not quite total eclipse (*two words*)

Contest Rules: Send completed diagram with name and address to "Foursomes," *Harper's Magazine*, 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. If you already subscribe to *Harper's*, please include a copy of your latest mailing label. Entries must be received by November 5. The sender of the first correct solution opened at random will receive a one-year subscription to *Harper's Magazine* (limit one winner per household per year). The winner's name will be printed in the January issue. The winner of the September puzzle, "Pose," is Joanna Piucci, New York City.

# FINDINGS

Researchers identified an outbreak of social-media-induced illness wherein young people appropriated the functional Tourette's syndrome of a German YouTuber, found that atmospheric lead exposure in childhood made adults in thirty-eight countries more neurotic and less agreeable and conscientious, defined seven major feline personality traits by polling the owners of four thousand cats, and described a new form of uncanniness in faces that are lifelike and identical. Testicular volume was determined to be the prime predictor of successful sperm retrieval in puberty-suppressed transfeminine adolescents, and a four-decade literature review found that incels consistently report feeling as if they have missed important milestones in life. Medical students and practitioners in Dar es Salaam feared that masturbation shrinks the penis, while German men were finding greater enjoyment in masturbation during the pandemic. Pyraclostrobin causes tilapia to engage in water jacking, tummy turning, and cartwheeling, and early jacking among supermale Atlantic salmon is attributable more to the dam than to the sire. Female octopuses throw shells at males who harass them, and octopuses also throw shells, out of frustration, at nothing in particular.

Cuttlefish remember their most recent meal. Deadwood-eating insects were found to release 3.1 gigatons of carbon annually; LED streetlights were cutting caterpillar populations in half; birds have been evolving larger beaks in response to rising temperatures; and giant anteaters are roaming farther afield in search of cool forests. The higher the social standing of a Eurasian jay, the angrier it gets when its preferred snack is surreptitiously swapped out for an inferior one. Male acorn woodpeckers who share mates with their brothers live longer, and friendly male chimps have more children. Zoologists reported the birth of the first known wild albino chimpanzee, who was killed days later by the group's alpha male. The dental plaque found on the teeth of Swedish brown bears between 1951 and 1970 revealed a doubling in the genetic antibiotic resistance of bacteria. The aerosols of the Salton Sea trigger unique pulmonary problems in the lungs of mice. An examination of three gorillas at the Detroit Zoo revealed that they preferred artificial noises to natural ones, though one gorilla displayed a strong preference for silence.

Arachnologists created a daddy shortlegs. A four-legged whale, *Phiomicetus anubis*, was discovered in the Western Desert. The Croatoan tribe, which may have absorbed Roanoke's missing colonists in the late sixteenth century, was itself partly composed of earlier Sephardic and Croatian settlers. Three quarters of the world's medicinal-plant knowledge may exist in no more than one language. The cultural artifact that most closely tracks genetics is grammar. The Great Unconformity may have developed slowly. Fool's gold sometimes contains gold. An old recording of a talking duck emerged. "You bloody fool," said the duck. ■

Zenith (V), *a cyanotype by Ala Ebtekar, whose work was on view last month at Haines Gallery, in San Francisco. Courtesy the artist and Haines Gallery, San Francisco*

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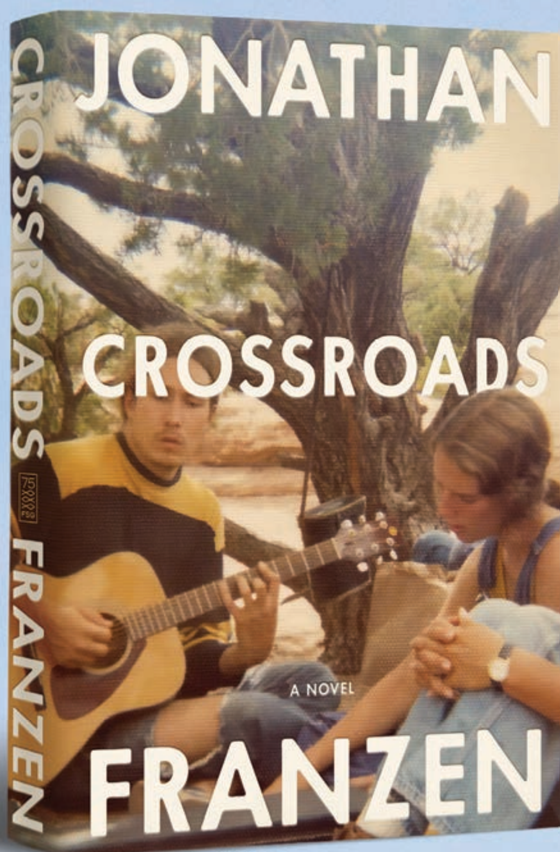


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