

The Future Washington Consensus

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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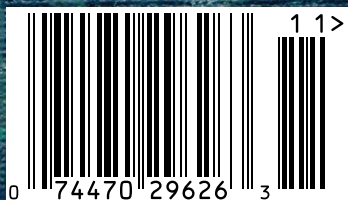
NOV./DEC. 2019

**THE FUTURE
WHAT IT WAS LIKE**

**PRIVATE
SCHOOLS**

THEY'RE PROBABLY INDEFENSIBLE

**FACEBOOK
KEEP IT OR DITCH IT?**



NOTES & GESTURES

THE EDITOR REGRETS

The Editor regrets that he did not reply to your correspondence. By the time it was read, your queries were moot. The Editor regrets the tardiness of the print edition. The correct weight of paper is almost impossible to source and he was forced to go Abroad in search of extra stock. The Editor regrets what he said to you beneath the balustrade. You did not deserve it, he did not mean it, and it was most out of character. The Editor regrets how little he has changed, given the promises he made last year. His resolutions are all broken, and will be remade anew. The Editor regrets the demise of that kitten. He

did not realize it had crawled under the cushions. The Editor regrets the many times he told lies, as well as several times he told the truth. The Editor regrets having become an editor at all sometimes. The Editor regrets the effect his choice of words had and wishes he could eat them alive. The Editor regrets violating the dress code. The Editor regrets the stain he left in your car. The Editor regrets the consequences of his poor translation of your message. The Editor regrets not wearing gloves today. The Editor regrets that fateful night. The Editor regrets not having done more to stop this.

A CURSE ON THOSE WHO DO NOT RENEW

A False Beard For Every Occasion



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*have you no
DECENCY?*

Ask A Manatee

"How do we stop human conflict?" — Margot, Age 8

Dear Margot,

I am not sure why you are writing to me. What could a manatee possibly have to say on the subject of human conflict? If I asked you how I should go about wooing a manatee of the opposite sex, or which kinds of seagrasses were most delicious this season, would you have an intelligible response? (This is a rhetorical question, do not answer it.) You would not, because you have no knowledge of manatee life. Likewise, I am both oblivious to and indifferent toward the problems of human civilization. I do not know why you kill one another. We manatees do not do that. We have never even *thought* of doing that. Do you know that manatees are the only marine mammals that eat nothing but plants? We do no harm to other animals. We are gentle and loving. We practice pure Socialism, and it works. Why can you, with your vastly superior brains and productive capacities, not do the same? Heaven knows. Frankly, I hold your entire species in the utmost contempt. Your arrogance is unsurpassed among the various fauna. You destroy all that you touch, and while we have left you entirely alone you have killed my fellow creatures by the multitude. Solve your conflicts? No, I don't think I shall. You solve them, Margot, if they concern you so much. I, with my peers, will continue to live peaceably beneath the waves, disturbing nothing and no one. Please do not write to me again.



- A Manatee

twenty-five

EGG DISHES

*in order of tastiness
from most to least*

BRICK A L'OEUF

EGG IN A HOLE

CHAWANMUSHI

EGGS BENEDICT

SHAKSHUKA

OVER-EASY

**EGG-SANDWICH -
OVER MEDIUM**

**EGG SANDWICH -
SCRAMBLED
(ON A CROISSANT)**

SCRAMBLED

POACHED

TORTILLA ESPANOLA

ONSEN EGG

SOFT BOILED

KHACHAPURI

**OMELETTE - WITH
FILLINGS**

OMELETTE - FRENCH

AJITSUKE TAMAGO

TAMAGOYAKI

SUNNY-SIDE UP

SCOTCH EGG

BAKED

EGG SALAD

HARD BOILED

OVER-MEDIUM

DEVILED EGG



Philosophy Department

WHAT IS A MAGAZINE?

Since the founding of *Current Affairs* in the early part of the last century, a persistent reader complaint has been the absence of serious Philosophy in these pages. We say what things are, but we do not question what it means for a thing to be in the first place. The *Current Affairs* question is "What is?" but the Philosopher demands "What is the meaning of is?" It is said that without meta-analysis of this sort, the pages of this magazine become unintelligible. How can one sensibly discuss a concept without having interrogated it.

For instance, we publish a magazine. And yet, have we ever truly asked: *what is a magazine?* We confess that we have not. Thus how is it possible for us to say that we have published one? Let us, therefore, address the question head on: the essence of a magazine is *not* that it contains a series of pages with words, and is released bimonthly. An irregular newspaper could satisfy such a definition. No, the essence of a magazine is its glossiness. If the pages are matte and scratchy, you do not have a magazine. If they are sleek and shimmer, you do. This is the nub of it.

We trust that readers will be satisfied at this first installment of the Philosophy section. We hope that in branching into metaphysics we might begin to attract a more academically-inclined readership. Please write to us with your Philosophical Observations.

Philosophy Puzzle of the Month:

**IS A BIRD A PROCESS OR
A THING?**

ANSWER IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

Correspondence

To Whom It May Concern, I find your publication to be a beacon of journalistic light amongst a sea of corporate-controlled rags, masquerading as truth on newsprint. One need only digest the thesis of the Herman/Chomsky opus, *Manufacturing Consent*, to appreciate the content of your organization's media. The pervasive lack of news outlets' tabling of ideologies has projected subjective, indoctrinated news coverage, bereft of veracity into the realm of social mores.

I am eternally grateful for your team's unfettered journalistic integrity. The antithesis of the filth-laden prose that consistently and with impunity not only "buries the lead," but also the factuality of subject matter, your team executes with tenacity (notwithstanding the backlash you undoubtedly receive). As a young man about to embark on a 27-month volunteer trip to Zambia through the Peace Corps, I wanted to personally express my gratitude for your work prior to departing. I hold you in high esteem with the individuals behind *truthdig* and *truthout*, and I intend to pledge funds to all when possible.

Keep fighting the good fight. And win.

Kind Regards,
Beau Mehdi Jarfi

"Strike against war, for
without you no battles can be fought.
Strike against manufacturing shrapnel and gas
bombs and all other tools of murder. Strike against
preparedness that means death and misery to millions
of human beings. Be not dumb, obedient slaves
in an army of destruction. Be heroes in an
army of construction."

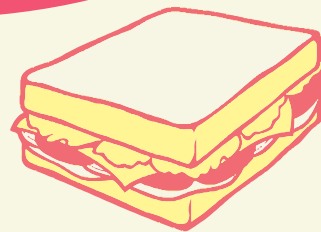
-Helen Keller

SANDWICH OF THE MONTH

* as an official-
ly pro-animal
publication
Current Affairs
must recom-
mend the use
of substitute
non-animal
bacons

*bacon**
cream cheese
HP sauce
black pepper

Please direct all
complaints about
this month's choice
of sandwich to
Contributing Editor
and Podmaster
Aisling McCreo,
whose selection
this was



IT IS YOUR PATRIOTIC DUTY

To Get Eaten By

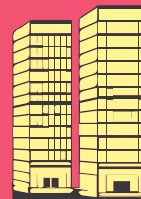


*The Current
Affairs Secret
Handshake*

**DO YOU
KNOW
IT?**

How Do The Buildings Stay Up?

*A Current Affairs
Special Report*
IN OUR NEXT ISSUE



**YOUR HAT SHOULD BE
AS BIG AS YOUR HATRED
FOR INJUSTICE** (and no
bigger)

A Tribute

TO FALLEN COMRADES

A new report on the state of the press is dire:

"In January, over a thousand journalists lost their jobs as layoffs hit Gannett, BuzzFeed, AOL, and HuffPost. Vice laid off 250 employees in February; New York Media laid off 32 employees in March; in April, G/O Media let go of 25 people. New Orleans' *Times-Picayune* let go the entire staff, 161 employees, in May after the newspaper was sold to a competitor; in August, *Pacific Standard* shut down after a decade of publishing. No company or sector of news was spared. NBCUniversal laid off 70 employees in two rounds of layoffs in August and September. Spin Media Group cut 29 jobs in September and January; Cox Media Group, which owns the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, announced plans to lay off 87 people in September. *Sports Illustrated* laid off more than 40 employees in October. In November, the *Toronto Star* and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had a combined 108 layoffs. Since the beginning of the year, hedge fund Aiden Global Capital killed off two of every three jobs at the 100 newspapers it owns, including the *Denver Post*... All told...3,385 journalists lost their jobs in the past 12 months."

In fact, the number might well be over 7,000. The hollowing out of the media continues, and the consequences for democracy will be dark. Each of these layoffs represents stories unreported, news that should be heard but won't be. It is difficult to understand the costs of the collapse of media because one doesn't see what isn't published, but these firings hurt us all. *Current Affairs* would like to send words of solidarity to our comrades in the press, who deserve better than this. May we someday have an economic system that correctly rewards their hard work and talent.

our gracious thanks to the

Horse Council
for sponsoring our magazine



Hello Timothy Faust

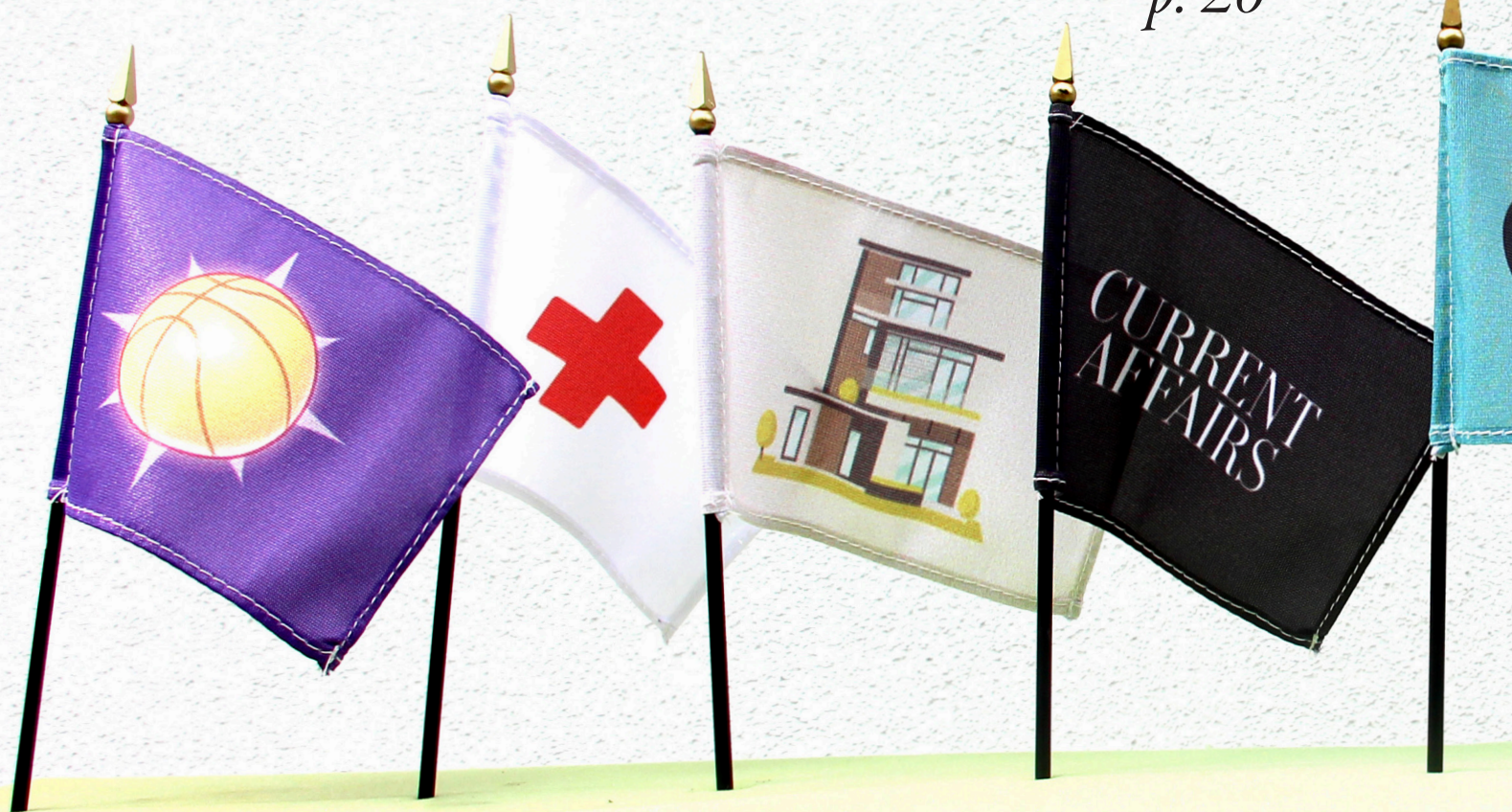
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sadness and basketball

by NICK SLATER

content warning: suicidal ideation

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY ABOUT DUMB stories. Trivial stories, pointless stories, the kinds of stories that are so self-important yet devoid of substance that you can't help but think to yourself, "Jesus, who on earth could possibly be dumb enough to enjoy *that*?" Stories that devour our hours and occupy wide swathes of our brains like molecular squatters, draining away energy from our emotional grids to power what are essentially psychological fidget spinners. Stories about frivolous things, frivolous people, frivolous worlds. Stories that behave like semi-benevolent black holes, sucking us into their infinite emptiness where time and self and the mold under the sink cease to matter.

I would like to suggest that these stories can be much more important—and undeserving of scorn—than we tend to imagine.

My motives here are selfish. You see, I have recently become aware that I—a person who prizes productivity and self-improvement and other Deeply Profound Pursuits—am addicted to a type of dumb story known as "basketball sportswriting." It's not uncommon for me to spend several hours a day reading about the Houston Rockets' defensive woes, or about Ben Simmons, who is so good at playing basketball he was just given a \$170 million contract to do so, and yet suffers from the baffling inability to score more than five feet from the hoop. If I had a life coach, they would probably say this is a suboptimal use of time. It would be hard to argue they were wrong.

In my defense, however, I have been extremely sad for the last several months. So sad, in fact, that most of my waking hours have been spent trying to ignore the voice in my head whispering, "Why don't you kill yourself already? What are you waiting for? What else do you need to see before you admit it's all hopeless?"

I don't have good answers to any of those questions. But for some reason they feel a bit less urgent when I'm reading a detailed breakdown of Milwaukee's pick-and-roll coverage. For a few brief moments, my soul stops screaming, and the sadness doesn't seem quite so dangerous.

WE ALL HAVE OUR OWN VERSION OF basketball sportswriting, an oasis of mind-numbing tranquility to which we retreat when life becomes too hideous and frightening to bear. For purposes of brevity and clarity, let us refer to these things as "anti-sadness stories," or ASSes. And while we have a (justifiable) tendency to care little for the ASSes of others, I'd like to suggest that developing a compassionate attitude about them is an important thing for us humans to do.

Drag shows, pickup trucks, seasonal home décor, autobiographies of Civil War generals, skincare reviews, dog training tips, Soundcloud rappers, wine—the world is teeming with a seemingly infinite number of ASSes, most of which (on the surface) have next to nothing in common with each other. Yet they all share a number of characteristics:

1. They come with their own elaborate set of specialized subcultures.
2. To many non-enthusiasts, they're trivial to an offensive degree.
3. Though you could, if you really wanted to, make an argument that they're Actually Not Trivial At All.
4. They're fucking trivial.
5. Their triviality is what makes them useful for healing.

How do you end up with your personal ASS as opposed to another one? Here's the bad news: it's a messy and mysterious process that defies easy explanation; you could spend years in therapy trying to get to the bottom of it without success. Now the good news: the question is irrelevant. It's not important

to understand why Story X relieves your sadness instead of Story Y. What *is* important is to understand how it does so, and how this same phenomenon is at work in the hearts of those around us.

ONE BRIGHT AND CHEERFUL FRIDAY morning last July, I returned home from the grocery store to discover that my marriage was over. The closet was half-empty, the bathroom countertop was half-cleared, and there was a little note on the table that read, “I can’t do this anymore. I’m leaving and filing for divorce.” It was less than a week before our first anniversary.

I sank into a suicidal depression. The thing about feeling that bad is that it both drains you of your energy *and* gives you the cat-like ability to not sleep a goddamn wink between sundown and sunrise. According to the nonprofit counseling service Crisis Text Line, the peak time for suicidal thoughts is 6 a.m. In my experience though, it’s really that 1:00 A.M. – 4:00 A.M. window that gets you. In moments like those, your ASS can quite literally be the difference between life and death. After crying for hours one particular night, as I struggled to get our wedding song out of my head, I Googled “scientific study on most successful suicide methods.” Much to my disappointment, the methods I had been considering—jumping from a high building, stepping in front of a bus, swallowing a full bottle of pills—were all more likely to give me non-fatal brain damage than an end to my problems. A shotgun blast to the mouth had the highest “completion rate,” but since I live in a country with fairly strict gun laws, getting my hands on one of those is neither fast nor easy. But hanging did seem like a viable option. I happen to own several dozen feet of strong, sturdy rope.

What happened next is still puzzling to me. I don’t know why

I felt an instinctual need to check *The Ringer’s* NBA blog, or spend the next ten minutes reading about how LeBron James (a player I don’t really like) could be poised to bounce back with the Los Angeles Lakers (a team I don’t really care about). Nor is it clear why I then felt compelled to pore through Magic Johnson’s career statistics, followed by the history of how the SuperSonics came to move from Seattle to Oklahoma City in 2008, then several months’ worth of tweets from ESPN senior writer Zach Lowe.

All I know is that when I woke up the next morning, I was still alive, and the sadness was a little less menacing.

WHEN LIFE HANDS YOU A divorce, a death, a loss of your job/home/cherished belief, etc., odds are you’ll be told that it’s an opportunity to grow. A chance to take a long, hard look at your life, and realize what is truly important to you. The people who tell you this will, in many cases, be kind, gentle, and genuinely concerned about your well-being. You may sometimes feel guilty about wanting to punch them in the fucking teeth.

The thing about personal growth is that it rarely happens as quickly as others would like. Many of your friends, family members, and colleagues will be quick to lend a hand or a sympathetic ear after a disaster strikes your life. Two or three months later—when you’re still slow to respond to messages, still reluctant to make jokes, still prone to unpredictable bouts of weeping—that list of People Who Care will probably be much shorter. Life goes on, the world keeps moving, with or without your enthusiastic participation.

This is where our insignificant ASSes come in handy. For weeks after my wife left, I was unable to accept the fact that my marriage had collapsed. I was, however, more receptive to the idea that the Golden State Warriors—winners of three out of the last five NBA Finals and widely regarded as the most unstoppable juggernaut in pro sports—were no longer a dynasty following the departure of superstar forward Kevin Durant. Through our ASSes, we can inoculate ourselves against the realities that would overwhelm us if we faced them head-on.

The transitive property of acceptance that ASSes bestow on us can be bewildering to others. A woman who had suffered a miscarriage might, for instance, be expected to read books on loss or grief. Were she to spend her all day streaming Korean dramas instead, some might assume she was in denial. And that could certainly be true! But it could *also* be true that one of the characters in said K-drama is going through a roughly analogous situation—one that touches on loss and helplessness—without exposing the grieving woman to the fury of pain in her own life. Her “denial” might simply be part of a healing cycle that isn’t proceeding as fast as is convenient for others, but is proceeding nonetheless. That’s the beauty of our ASSes.



They keep us connected, however loosely, to life's ever-changing flow. We need this when time freezes because we're sad, and we become encased in the amber of our memories. Tortured by the recollections of things we did wrong or didn't do at all, we risk losing our connection to the present, and to our belief in the possibility of a different future.

Your family and friends, and doctors and therapists, and spiritual guides and podcasts and self-help books will tell you a version of: "Everything changes, that's the only certain thing about being alive." And while this is an indisputable truth, it also tends to sound like bullshit. However, perhaps a 1,000 page tome on the history of Soviet tanks would help the message sink in. This may seem like a ridiculous suggestion on the surface. But imagine being an aging mechanic who was just diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. A lecture from Deepak Chopra on the ineffable flow of the universe's vibrations might not resonate with you. On the other hand, seeing the pathetic and weakly-armored T-26s of 1939 evolve into the mighty *panzer*-slaying T-34s of the war's end just might plant the seeds of hope in you again.

Of course, we sometimes use our ASSes to numb ourselves and nothing more. Sometimes denial is just denial, and planting the seed of a helpful idea is not the same as nurturing it into a full-grown epiphany. These are all true and meaningful constraints. But they're also kind of beside the point. Am I refusing to face reality as I skim box score after box score on my lunch break, my brain barely even registering that Andrew Wiggins is shooting pretty good from 3 this year before zooming on to the next forgettable factoid? Sure. But why do we have to face reality at every breathing moment? To the best of my knowledge, there's no award for Most Stoic Endurance of Anguish Without Any Attempt at Escape. Facing reality is like chemotherapy—it can be helpful, yes, but also deadly if done to excess.

It should also be said that every ASS will, from time to time, be problematic. For instance, I recently read an article on ex-New York Knicks star Kristaps Porzingis that referred to his refusal to meet with the famously cruel and inept Knicks management as "a blatant act of insubordination." The piece further suggested that, "When your boss asks for a meeting you have only one option." Curiously, while the writer found it necessary to criticize Porzingis about his lack of respect for authority, he didn't deem the rape allegations against the Latvian player worth mentioning, not even in passing, which begs uncomfortable questions about the tendency of sportswriters to ignore athletes' moral defects so long as they win enough.

Pick an ASS, any ASS, and you can spot similar reasons for criticism. Superhero movies are artistic abominations that serve as Trojan horses for the values of militaristic capitalism. Garden magazines subtly reinforce sexist stereotypes and mindless consumerism. Music reviews are often kind of racist. And while we might differ on any of these specific points—you'd be wrong, but I won't judge—the underlying premise

is indisputable: human beings are flawed and thus so are the stories we tell.

IF YOU'RE LIKE ME, YOU PROBABLY HAVE MORE instinctual empathy for some ASSes than others. (And if you're a leftist, in particular, your sympathies are probably more predictable than you'd like to admit.) Compassion is a tricky value for the left. We're often exhorted to show more sympathy for people who have already won the cosmic lottery. We're supposed to imagine how hard it was on now-Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh to have his family hear the allegations against him, or to feel tenderness toward George W. Bush for trying hard at painting. We're ordered to consider what *we* would do if Hamas fired rockets into *our* fortified colonial compounds.

Our alleged humanity gets used against us so often that it's easy to dismiss many ASSes as irredeemable and, by extension, the people who seek comfort in them. You might, for example, be able to watch a depressed Boomer on the subway read about high-end stereo equipment and convince yourself that their suffering, whatever it might be, is somehow deserved. You can always justify contempt. You can always justify anything. Whether you can live a life of constant judgment without becoming gnarled and toxic inside is another question.

The left is supposed to care about alleviating people's suffering, rather than dismissing it as a grim and inevitable byproduct of life. I think this means we have a greater responsibility than the rest of the political spectrum to get over ourselves, and fight the urge to accept certain ASSes as more valid than others. I don't mean to suggest that we should celebrate every conceivable hobby or interest as an esoteric vehicle of healing. Nor should we ignore the very real problems with many of our popular pastimes. "If it makes you happy / it can't be that bad," is a great Sheryl Crow lyric, but it's somewhat lacking as a moral guideline.

I do believe, though, that we should be open to the idea that things that strike us as vapid and stupefying might have meanings we can't quite grasp; that people who are reading, watching, listening to, talking about, or are otherwise engrossed in those things, might be anguished rather than lazy or dull. They might not be addressing the problem in the most "efficient" way, but they're doing the best with what they have, and efficiency is a hollow god anyway.

So where does this leave us? No number of Power Rankings columns or free agency roundups can stop me from feeling a surge of despair every time I find a note in my ex-wife's handwriting. When the elevator opens outside my apartment and the cats we raised together run to the door, awaiting the return of a person who is gone forever, the cleverest trade proposals can't keep my shame and loneliness at bay. I get it—my ASS cannot erase my suffering.

Still, I don't know where I'd be without it. ✦

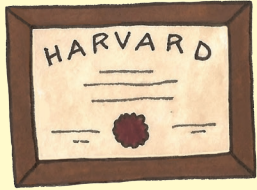
BUILD YOUR OWN CENTRIST CANDIDATE

A MESSAGE FROM THE DNC: Help! The 2020 Democratic presidential primary is in trouble, and only you can save it! We've done our best, but this time around there's no obvious centrist candidate to crown. The American public has so far responded with indifference to a host of perfectly acceptable choices such as Tobacco Lawyer Feminist, Gleeful Prosecutor Feminist, Other Gleeful Prosecutor Feminist, and Bumbling Skateboard Dad. But maybe if we mix and match some qualities, we can create a candidate that the average American voter will look at and say "man, I would love to have a beer with this person during a staged photo-op and then watch them get walloped by Trump in key Midwestern battleground states." Give us a hand! Fill out the survey—that is, please use the accessories* included with these paper dolls to put together your ideal candidate. Then mail the results back to the DNC and make your vote count!**

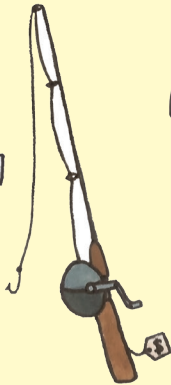
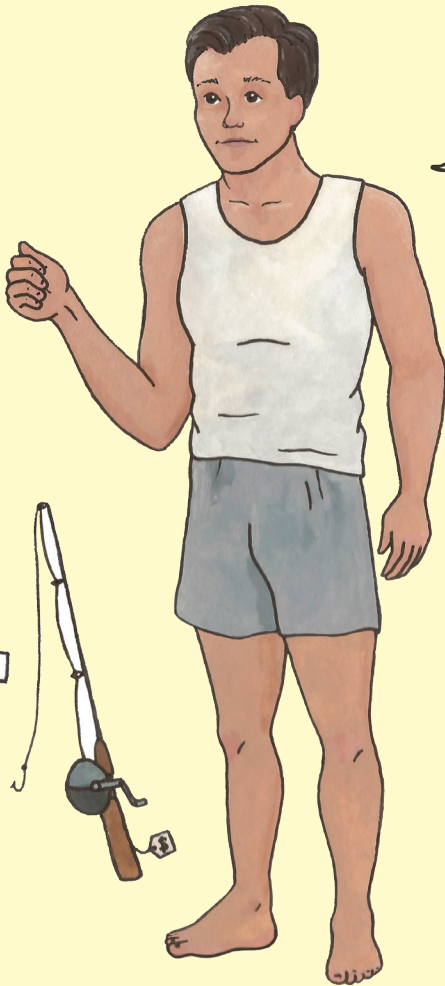


*Write-in items such as "policies" will not be accepted, but if you strongly believe the candidate should have a Corgi rather than a Labrador, please, please let us know!

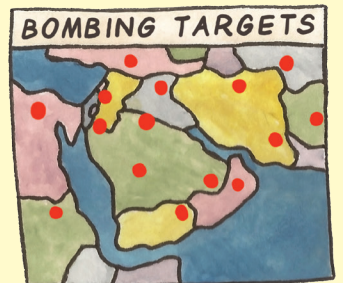
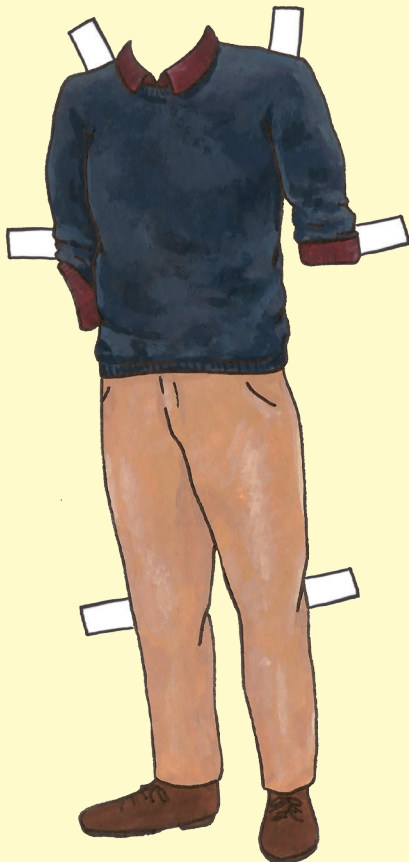
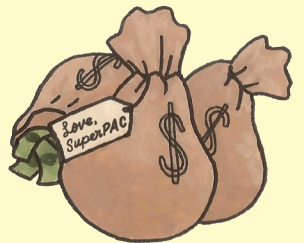
**Some restrictions may apply. Your vote may be counted for considerably less than those of essential Democratic donors who incidentally were all listed on Epstein's flight logs.



RESPONSIBLE.
RELIABLE.
RESTRAINED.
RUTHLESS.



MEMO
Dear
DISOBEDIENT
Staff,





The Politics Of EMERGENCIES

BY DANIEL WALDEN

“Let’s start with the end of the world, why don’t we? Get it over with and move on to more interesting things.”

First, a personal ending. There is a thing she will think over and over in the days to come, as she imagines how her son died and tries to make sense of something so innately senseless. She will cover Uche’s broken little body with a blanket—except his face, because he is afraid of the dark—and she will sit beside it numb, and she will pay no attention to the world that is ending outside. The world has already ended within her, and neither ending is for the first time. She’s old hat at this by now.”

—The Fifth Season, by N. K. Jemisin

EMERGENCIES ARE INEVITABLE: WE HUMAN beings are creatures of finite intelligence and limited means, living in a world subject to forces that we cannot hope to control. Our social existence takes place within and is shaped by a tightly-woven tapestry of social relationships, legal restraints, and informal hierarchies: all of these are systems of such complexity that no single person can hope to fully understand them, much less direct them. Such systems are always liable to dysfunction, and if their failures grow large or numerous enough, the result is an emergency in which every normal rule of behavior ceases to be a reliable benchmark. Emergencies are terrifying not only because they may involve loss of life or goods, but also because they annihilate the social scripts—the conventions about who to talk to in a given situation, the rules and courtesies that smooth out our day-to-day interactions—that we choose to follow or reject in the course of living our lives. It is one thing to be given a social script and choose to defy it, but it is another thing entirely to have your entire normal frame of reference smashed in a moment, leaving you without any kind of guide.

For this reason, the ethics of emergencies have occupied philosophers and political theorists for many years, and the ability of a political or social system to cope with emergencies has become a kind of litmus test for its feasibility or legitimacy. This seems at first glance to be a perfectly reasonable yardstick. After all, a large part of our goal as socialists is to alleviate human suffering, and a great deal of suffering is caused by emergency situations, ranging from natural disasters to infrastructure collapses to acts of terrorism. At the same time, we have reason to be suspicious of thinking primarily in terms of edge cases: Brianna Rennix and Nathan Robinson have written in these pages about the limits and indeed the dangers of the “Trolley Problem” so popular in introductory philosophy classes. Making emergency situations a determining metric of political or moral legitimacy runs the risk of erasing or minimizing the actual day-to-day business of politics, which is to construct and maintain social systems that allow people the genuine freedom to live well according to their dispositions and talents. When uncommon emergency situations dominate our concerns, we become obsessed with building systems that can survive at all costs, instead of thinking about how to build systems that, even if not totally impervious to destruction, will actually help people to live good lives. This is, I think, an extremely dangerous proposition.

There are several reasons why this constant foregrounding of emergencies, this “Emergency Mindset,” tends to produce systems and policies that harm human wellbeing. One obvious reason is that it can produce a kind of bunker mentality, wherein whole swaths of the population find that their basic autonomy and privacy have been abrogated by authorities who seek to avoid the repetition of some past or imagined calamity at all costs: think of the U.S. government’s increased mass sur-

veillance in response to 9/11. But another important reason is that it fundamentally means the privileging of some emergencies over others. In a profoundly unequal society, it's usually the comfortable and powerful who get to decide both what constitutes an "emergency" and which behavioral norms ought to be suspended or maintained for the duration of the crisis. Because an emergency is something that is ultimately subjectively experienced, what appears as an emergency to one person or group of people might appear as perfectly normal to another. Some emergencies experienced by the powerless are totally invisible to the powerful, while others are perceived and judged by the powerful as remote spectacles. When Hurricane Katrina hit

food. The result was an ongoing export of food for sale in foreign markets, where it could fetch higher prices for the benefit of English and Anglo-Irish Protestant landlords, while the overwhelmingly Irish Catholic peasantry starved. Relief was not forthcoming precisely because those with the power to grant it did not experience the Famine as an emergency requiring immediate relief. (*Current Affairs'* ancient enemy *The Economist* noted at the time of the Famine in 1847 that "the [Irish] people, rapidly increasing, have been reduced, by acts for which they are chiefly to blame, to a sole reliance on the precarious crop of potatoes" and concluded that "every breach of the laws of morality and social order brings its own punishment and inconvenience.")

"What suffering people experience as a traumatic crisis is, for those in power, merely the unfolding of policy."

New Orleans, for example, residents were put into situations for which no amount of foreknowledge could have prepared them. Meanwhile, far away from the crisis, barking heads on Fox News and crypt-dwelling revenants at the *National Review* were able to talk and write with straight faces about the problems of "looting," as if people attempting to save their own and one another's lives were bound to observe the sacrosanctity of the gas station and the supermarket. They were able to say and write these things because Katrina was, for them, no emergency: their own lives were untroubled by the catastrophe, and they did not identify sufficiently with other human beings to experience the deprivation, suffering, and death that followed in the hurricane's wake as something that ruptured the ethical norms of their personal existence.

THIS ULTIMATE SUBJECTIVITY OF emergencies takes place largely along class lines: we experience an emergency in proportion to our own powerlessness in the midst of the situation. This reaches its fullest expression in the ability of the powerful to create emergencies and then disavow their existence, because what suffering people experience as a traumatic crisis is, for those in power, merely the unfolding of policy. This logic played out almost perfectly in Ireland's Great Famine, during which the British Parliament largely refused to pass relief measures aimed at reducing food prices or restricting the export of

This is the deeper problem with measuring our systems based on their response to emergencies: they will respond only to those emergencies that have been labeled as such by those with the power to make that designation.

The abstract logic of "emergency ethics" has already been thoroughly developed in the field of political theory, and it's perhaps telling that its greatest exponent was the jurist Carl Schmitt, one of the most prominent thinkers of the Third Reich. For Schmitt, political sovereignty consists precisely in the power to pronounce an emergency, to decide when the normal states of law and political ethics must be suspended: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception," reads the most famous pronouncement of his *Political Theology*. For Schmitt, no set of norms or procedures can govern an emergency, and the ongoing legitimacy of all norms rests ultimately on a sovereign's ongoing decision not to suspend them: the emergency is the true reality that lurks behind all norms, held in check only by the opinion and will of the sovereign. Schmitt couches this argument in language that ultimately defends both the effectiveness and legitimacy of the Nazi dictatorship that he came to support, but his characterization illustrates just as clearly the central problem of any large-scale socio-political system: its ability to respond to emergencies rests on the people with the power to declare an emergency. If those people see no emergency, they will not declare one, regardless of what kind of suffering this brings to their fellow human beings.

Obviously I do not think that technocrats are tantamount

to Nazis, but I do think that measuring social systems only by their response to emergencies is not an objective criterion. It amounts to saying that a better system is one that recognizes emergencies in roughly the same way that I do. I am sure that there are people who think this is a perfectly reasonable criterion: indeed, the “rule by competence” encouraged by certain kinds of liberal technocrat encourages precisely this line of reasoning, suggesting that detached, sober-minded political analysts are best suited to decide what is a real “emergency” and what is merely public hysteria or an unavoidable tragedy. This is the line of thinking advanced by people who have watched too much Aaron Sorkin and believe that solving our most pressing political and social problems requires putting “smart people” in charge. At its heart, it nurses a deeply cruel and uncompromising authoritarianism. Certain people are simply better suited to rule, and those who refuse to accept rule by the best deserve whatever suffering befalls them as a result.

The subjective and experiential dimension of emergencies makes them, I think, poor fodder for abstract ethical discussions. An emergency is not merely a set of constraints: it is the experience of powerlessness caused by a situation whose scale or shock takes us far outside the space that our codes of behavior inhabit. We find ourselves in the grip of feelings that render normal thought and action impossible. Nearly everyone experiences this at some point in the form of bereavement, when the loss of someone close to us leaves us in a world that no longer makes sense without them. The thought experiment, a central tool of contemporary Anglophone moral philosophy, here shows its utter uselessness. A moment’s brief imagination fails to convey what an emergency like bereavement actually entails. That kind of immersive empathetic and imaginative work demands time and prompting: it is fiction, rather than thought experiments, that provides better ways of thinking about the ethics of emergencies.

THE IDEA OF FICTION AS AN ESSENTIAL tool of philosophy is not strictly a new one, although it was absent from Anglophone philosophy for quite a while. Most philosophy in the English-speaking world is done in what is known as the *analytic* tradition, which emphasizes the ability to state claims as formal logical propositions so as to better understand and critique them. This makes it an excellent tool for discussing ideas in abstraction, but a very poor one for talking practically about the experiential realities of day-to-day life. Martha Nussbaum, who trained first as a classicist and then as an analytic philosopher, sought to bridge this gap with her 1986 book *The Fragility of Goodness*, in which she argues that one cannot talk coherently about Greek moral thought without dealing with the material of Greek tragedy and the narrative dimensions of Greek philosophy. One of the things that tragedy deals with extraordinarily well is what Nussbaum calls “moral luck,” which is essentially our inability to protect

against what I have called “emergencies”: the situations in which forces outside a person’s control render all normal moral guidelines useless. Tragedy deals with these questions by dramatizing them onstage through the principal characters and by discussing them in the songs of the chorus. The emotional investment generated by the drama is absolutely essential, as every theorist of tragedy from Aristotle onward has agreed. Tragic drama educates us about times of crisis not by attempting to provide guidelines, but by developing our empathy and attempting to show the audience what such moments *feel* like for those who go through them. In doing so, they help us to extend that empathy and allow it to influence our idea of what sorts of emergencies demand our attention.

Drama has a unique ability to make crises immediate and emotionally weighty, while narrative fiction can provide a way of thinking about how the ethics of emergencies play out over an extended period. Perhaps one of the best such considerations in recent years has been N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy of science fiction novels. Jemisin creates a society structured almost entirely around its preparation for emergencies, located on a continent periodically wracked by environmental catastrophes called “Seasons,” which result in martial law and the murder of anyone unable to contribute to a community’s survival. This society is governed by “stonelore,” the supposedly unchanging and unchangeable precepts codified in ages past to help communities survive the Seasons. It is, in other words, a society constructed entirely in the shadow of unpredictable emergencies, and over the course of Jemisin’s three novels, she explores both the ongoing costs of such a society for its vulnerable members and the way in which such a society can arise even out of a technological and ecological utopia. It is a harrowing read: her characters endure tremendous losses and face unspeakable choices, all the while dealing with geological catastrophe so severe that they believe the very earth itself wants humanity dead. Jemisin does not attempt to justify her characters’ actions, but she succeeds brilliantly at helping her readers understand and empathize with the desperation of her characters. As the final book reaches its climax, her characters are given the power to remake their society, to turn the tables and take revenge on the society that has so violently oppressed them and those like them. There is nothing to stop them: they have ventured to such faraway places and seen such indescribable things that there is no context to guide their actions, for no one has ever been able to do what they can. They would be fully justified in remaking the world to put oppressed and persecuted people on top and leaving the rest at their mercy.

And yet they do not do so, and Jemisin does not make this a clear or easy choice. It is abundantly clear that their society does not deserve to be spared: it is built from the ground up on the enslavement of a powerful but vulnerable minority population. It considers any human life expendable if that life cannot “pull its weight” in a community. In a stunning and



*No matter who you are or
where you sit, you deserve to
read Current Affairs.*

currentaffairs.org

horrifying twist on the question posed by Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, this society builds the machinery of its flourishing not on the suffering of just one child, but the mutilation and torture of countless numbers of them. The very existence of such a society is a moral abomination, an ethical emergency of the highest order, but Jemisin's characters choose not to visit it with the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah and rebuild from the ashes. They decide this not because this society and the people who participated in its atrocities "deserve" to survive, but because such a cycle of violence and oppression can end only through either forgiveness or annihilation.

Jemisin's portrayal of such a decisive moment both illustrates and criticizes Schmitt's theory of the exception. On the one hand, Schmitt is correct to note that norms are always incomplete, and that the state of exception that lurks beneath them is a situation governed by pure decision. But Jemisin's narrative account shows us that there is something prior to decision, something other than pure will that undergirds the choices we make. Her characters' choice to save the world, to end the Seasons and not violently remake society, is fundamentally a choice made out of love. It is an imperfect love, but one that suffices to extend the characters' concern beyond themselves and enables them to make the choice to forgive and put an end to countless generations of suffering.

I think that this is what Jemisin reveals in her narrative: that the ethics of emergencies cannot be rule-bound, for emergencies always escape our attempts to codify them, but must emerge through decisions undertaken in love. This is not a word that contemporary socialists often use: it sounds, perhaps, unfashionable, like a relic from the 19th and early 20th centuries in which socialism was often intertwined with religious causes. But I don't see this as a reason to scorn the word: on the contrary, some of the religious strains of socialist thought have a much more robust articulation than their more numerous secular counterparts of what it means to act in love. One of the greatest exponents of such an understanding in the twentieth century was the Irish socialist and Dominican friar Fr. Herbert McCabe, O.P. As a Catholic, McCabe sees love not as something that makes us feel nice things about ourselves and others, but as something that demands and effects radical change in how we relate to the world. "Do you remember how Paul describes the catastrophic effects of love?" he writes. "God's love and forgiveness may make you patient and kind, not jealous or boastful; it may prevent you from being arrogant, or rude, or insisting on your own way, or being irritable or resentful, so that you do not rejoice in wrongs but only in what is right. It may make you bear all things, believe all things, hope all things." For McCabe, "the Christian demand for love and peace is precisely what motivates us to take part in the class struggle: but more than that, the gospel of love, and in particular the Sermon on the Mount, provides us with the appropriate revolutionary discipline for effective action."

Love in McCabe's sense, and in the sense that Jemisin portrays, does not mean indulging people who do wrong or allowing atrocities to continue out of good feelings for all parties involved. Quite the contrary: it demands an end to exploitation and suffering for the sake of both persecutor and persecuted. Love for the powerful, for the oppressor, does not demand that we indulge them, but rather demands all the more urgently that they be stopped from oppressing others, because having so much power over the lives of others corrodes our humanity. This is not a love we can easily retain and act on. Indeed, for McCabe it is not a human love at all, but the perfect love of God that makes these demands of us, a love that we cannot emulate on our own but must continually aspire to.

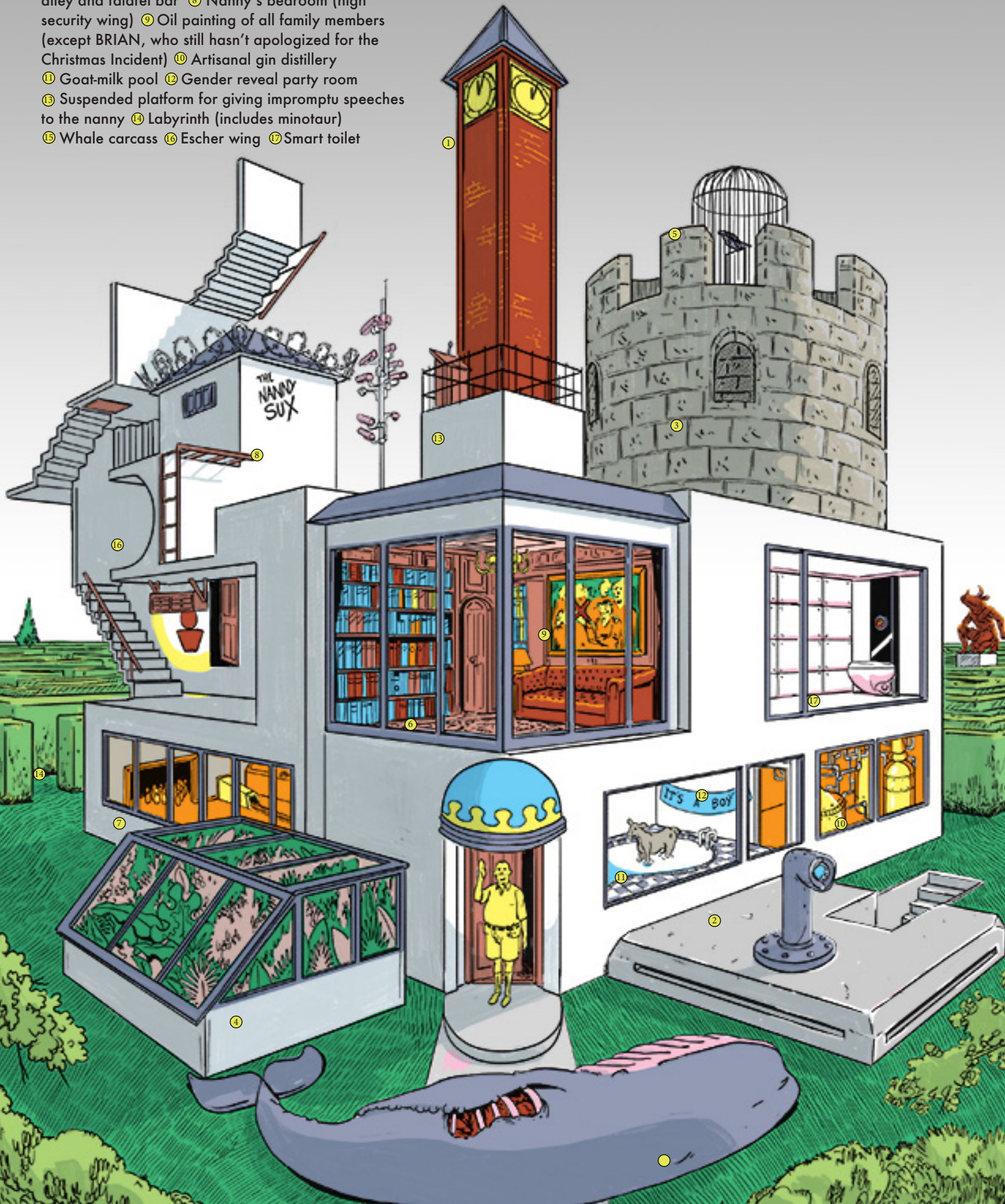
WE FIND SUCH LOVE IN ourselves fleetingly and imperfectly, but we do find it. Such transformative love breaks into our lives in the moments of rupture that Christian theology calls

moments of grace. This is the love that allows people who have suffered violent crimes to cry out against the incarceration and capital punishment. It is the love that allows a gay person fighting for LGBT rights to say that someone who voted for Donald Trump and refuses to treat gay marriages as real is nonetheless entitled to a living wage and healthcare. This, and only this, is the love through which people separated by distance and experience from one another can nonetheless regard each other's good as their own.

It may not seem practical at first glance to offer "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" as the guide for how to think about emergencies, but I think that, with further reflection, it reveals itself as the most practical advice one can give. The blinders imposed on us by literal and metaphorical distance prevent us from seeing the distress and emergencies of other people: these are distances that only love for others can traverse. And in the midst of something that could not be prepared for, something that strips from us all other guides for action and leaves nothing but our decision to act, only by acting in love can we hope to act rightly.

There are already countless emergencies facing people every day, and there will be many more to come. But as socialists, we should not be afraid to face them with love for our fellow human beings, and we should be clear-eyed about the consequences that such love brings: McCabe observes rightly that "if you do not love, you will not be alive; if you love effectively, you will be killed." The world makes martyrs of those who live most fully for the good of others, and the struggle out of capitalism will not be won without tragedy. But another Christian thinker, C. S. Lewis, offers perhaps the soundest guidance on this matter: "The only place outside Heaven where you can be safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell." ✦

- ① Clocktower ② Bunker ③ Turret ④ Exterior solarium
- ⑤ Orrery ⑥ Growlery ⑦ Interior combination bowling alley and falafel bar
- ⑧ Nanny's bedroom (high security wing)
- ⑨ Oil painting of all family members (except BRIAN, who still hasn't apologized for the Christmas Incident)
- ⑩ Artisanal gin distillery
- ⑪ Goat-milk pool
- ⑫ Gender reveal party room
- ⑬ Suspended platform for giving impromptu speeches to the nanny
- ⑭ Labyrinth (includes minotaur)
- ⑮ Whale carcass
- ⑯ Escher wing
- ⑰ Smart toilet



jacuzzis in the BATTLEMENTS *a peek into the fantasy world of* **GRAND DESIGNS**

by AISLING MCCREA
and SPARKY ABRAHAM

A HOUSE IS ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS A child ever learns to draw. You've seen the same adorable picture a hundred times: a rickety box made from four shaky lines, a triangle roof, a door, more squares for windows. A stick figure family, standing outside the house on some uncertain plane—maybe floating just above the grass, or in some blissful space in the nearby air, waiting awkwardly for their Creator to learn how to draw perspective. In the corner of the paper, the sun is shining, blessing the family and their house with uninterrupted warmth and light.

Interestingly, as soon as children start drawing recognizable pictures, they start taking cues from the images around them, and if you ask them to draw a house, chances are they will draw the stereotypical Big Beautiful House, even if it's not what their own home looks like. Kids are brimming with unique, bizarre fantasies—they want to be adventurers, pilots, dragons, firetrucks—but one of the most universal fantasies they put to paper is the big beautiful house, where the sun always shines.

It's understandable why kids pick this up. Unlike becoming a dragon or a firetruck, it is actually possible to grow up and have your own house someday. Kids see houses all the time, in real life and on TV. What's more, houses are a symbol of security and safety, whether in a trivial or more serious sense. For kids who are lucky enough to grow up in a household that is both financially and emotionally secure, the house is the place you get to go when the long, boring school day is over, where you

can play videogames with your friends and seek shelter from the rain. For kids who aren't so lucky, the dream of the house might not be about the place they're living now, but some imagined house of the future—some place they can claim for themselves, where they get to make their own rules, control their own life, keep their loved ones safe, banish those who are dangerous. At its most basic, the dream of the house is a dream about *self-determination*—a gift which all free people are supposed to have in theory, but is surprisingly rare in practice.

MOST PEOPLE DON'T REALLY GET TO choose where they live. Sure, if you're a healthy adult who isn't incarcerated, you can technically say no-one *forced* you to live wherever you are now. But can most people truly say they have absolute control—absolute freedom—over the four walls and roof that keeps them (relatively) warm at night? One in five Americans is a minor, for a start, and with a few rare exceptions, they don't get to choose their own home. Neither do the many elderly Americans, and/or Americans with disabilities, who have been deemed incapable of managing their own affairs, who may be pressured into living with their guardian, or moved into an institution; neither do the huge numbers of incarcerated people; neither do those on low or fixed incomes, who find themselves in a “take it or leave it” situation when it comes to low-quality, poorly maintained private or public housing.

(And some, of course, have no home at all.)

And those who are lucky enough to have their nominal freedom, and some money in their pocket—can they really say they have full control over the place they call home? The average worker is strictly limited in the choice of abode by their job, their income, transit links, and commuting time. If they can't make rent without roommates, they will have to balance their own desires and demands for the decoration and operation of their home with those of other people. They may be unable to get a mortgage, leaving them subject to the whims of a landlord, who not only refuses to fix the broken toilet or do anything about the toxic mold, but may even deny their tenant the small pleasures of surrounding themselves with the things they love. *Actually no, you can't put up that awesome framed poster of a tree frog. Hanging a picture frame would leave marks on the wall.* Even people in a position to buy a home aren't truly, *totally* free. Most people budget's limit them to purchase of a pre-existing building, which they may paint and garnish to some limited degree. But are they really creating their *dream* house? Is it everything they fantasized about when they were little?

FOR A PRIVILEGED FEW, THE FANTASY IS possible. Enter *Grand Designs*.

Grand Designs is a British TV show that has been airing on Channel 4 since 1999, and with almost 200 episodes under its belt, it's still going strong. (Seasons 13 and 14 are currently available in the U.S. on Netflix). Hosted by former set designer Kevin McCloud, the series follows wealthy property owners as they set about building their dream homes. This is not the humdrum world of the Property Brothers, who replace the carpet, knock down the odd wall, and consider it a "renovation" worthy of television. No, the *Grand Designs* characters dream bigger than that: they buy fallen castles and disused water towers, they hire award-winning architects to sketch out storytime palaces, they spend years and unthinkable amounts of money creating the *exact* home they want, in whatever place they want.

(Side note: it is difficult to know what to call the people featured on *Grand Designs*. The word *contestant* is not appropriate, since there is no prize that they are after, and well, if you're in a position to get on the show, quite frankly you've already won. Subjects might be more appropriate. McCloud adopts an Attenborough-esque curious detachment as the subjects often fumble their way through the process of design and construction: *Observe the arrogant fool in his natural habitat. See him fire the project manager. Ah yes, this should be interesting, he is about to learn that everything has gone to shit. Oh, but now he emerges, resplendent in his triumph, playing croquet on the roof-*

top lawn, crossing the bright yellow steel bridge from traditional wing to modern wing.)

This is a show where fantasies come true. No balcony is too small, no turret too structurally unsound. The owners are not limited by the mundane expectations of the world around them; theirs is not a house that came off the factory line, but a house that they *dreamt*, a house they have conjured. Even the theme music hints at the fairytale undertones: a playful arrangement of elfin strings, finished with a ludicrous glissando. You could easily imagine it playing at a theme park, or in a children's movie about an enchanted forest. (The composer reports that some couples play it at their weddings.)

The basic structure of each episode goes like this: we are introduced to the creator, who has somehow got themselves in the position of having a piece of property and the resources to do whatever they want with it. The viewer is introduced to a virtual sketch of the creator's plan, which usually involves materials and shapes completely anathema to the surrounding homes and natural landscape, and far more guest bedrooms than any normal human might need. The show follows the homebuilding project over the course of months and years, during which time the creator will most likely encounter several unexpected obstacles, and inevitably go over budget (not that it ever seems to matter). They will make concessions, but there will be one or two aspects of the house that they have a bizarre fixation with, and will go to absurd lengths to make a reality (e.g. convincing an experimental materials lab in Switzerland to give them access to an untested new type of concrete). Eventually, the dream is realized, and they have their house (most of the time). Sometimes the results are enviable, sometimes one feels they should have just bought a nice three-bedroom for half the price—but if you're watching from a damp studio apartment, who are you to judge the tastes of these wealthy entrepreneurs?

(Well, entrepreneurs or whatever the hell they are. There is often vague talk of the budget and available funds, sometimes even bank involvement, but the source of wealth is almost never clear.)

Some of the creators are more sympathetic than others. In one cringe-inducing episode, an Irish actor buys a small mock-medieval castle, and attempts to fully renovate it without the help of an architect, and without any actual sketches. (Behold, one of the few human beings who is unwilling to draw a house). Without any apparent self-awareness, he hires and fires his contractors at random, knocks down walls in the middle of the night, and is a source of constant frustration to everyone around him. He demands jacuzzis in the battlements, and moodily intones that he will build water-spouting gargoyles with the faces of his nemeses. This episode showcases the dark side of the dream of the Big Beautiful House: a man



ABOVE: *A Grand Design attacked and pillaged by vandals.*

who becomes arrogant, monomaniacal, and ignores the needs of the people around him. (At one point, he fires his entire crew for seemingly no reason, at the height of Ireland's brutal recession.)

For another example, check out the mud house man. The mud house man set out to build a 10,000 square foot (!) home out of cob, which is an ancient straw and clay building material similar to adobe. Mud house man touted the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the material, estimating the home would be done in three months and cost £350,000. Two and a half years later, when the show aired, the house still wasn't finished. Five years after that, McCloud did a follow-up episode to check on the house. By this point it was finished, but the owner admitted that he had stopped keeping track of how much it cost. His marriage, clearly under strain in the original episode, had fallen apart, and he was living in the house with his new partner. The finished house is actually stunning and impressive if you can get past the ridiculousness of its size, and mud house man seems to think his "labour of love" was worth all the trouble. A reasonable person might have some doubts.

But a lot of the creators seem very nice, if a little weirdly

obsessive about the shape of their roof corners, or about their particular schtick. Once you get over the needling questions of *where is all the money coming from?* and *why do you need both a Dutch tulip garden AND a Japanese zen garden?*, it's easy to get drawn into the fantasy. A nice family work hard for a few years, scrape together the money for a home, and now they get to live in whatever type of environment they want—not an environment marred by the petty rules of a roommate, or a landlord, or the architect of some identikit suburban snooze-house, but by their *own* rules, whatever anyone else might think of them. It's compelling, and it makes you wonder what the world would look like if everyone could choose their own house.

It's not clear, of course, that *Grand Designs* itself gives us any idea what the world would look like if everyone could choose their own house. For all the peculiarities, much about the finished homes look very similar to each other. They tend to be sleek, modern, and minimalist. The amenities vary widely, the exteriors vary a bit, but the aesthetics rarely stray from clean white surfaces, much finished concrete, little ornamentation. Is this a feature of trends



ABOVE: A “successful” Grand Design. RIGHT: A Grand Design abandoned after cost overruns.

in time and place? It’s easy to imagine a show tracking eccentric Americans designing their own homes ending up with a lot more homes shaped like spaceships and hot dogs with interior design consisting of, e.g., as many Conan the Barbarian action figures per square foot as the laws of physics will allow. Is it a selection bias by the show? McCloud, who both hosts and writes the show, certainly has a deep affinity for contemporary design.

AND, IF WE ALL COULD CHOOSE OUR OWN house, how many people would put in the effort to create something truly unique to them? For every *thing* in the world capable of expressing something about someone’s identity, there is always a spectrum of engagement. We don’t all walk around covered in tattoos and piercings, after all. Some people have homes tastefully sprinkled with assorted items of curiosity, each with a story linking to a piece of the owner’s past. Others have impenetrable seas of items with their own unique and unassailable importance to that person. We often call them hoarders, and may think of them as hoarding things, but more often they’re hoarding stories; stories about their pasts and futures. What happened to them, and what still might, is embed-

ded into each object. Parting with any of those things can feel like discarding a piece of themselves.

Still others surround themselves with artfully coordinated but contentless Etsy fluff. Things are their lives’ staging and little else. (Are they frighteningly empty or enviably detached? Is their identity undefined, or is it so secure that it needs no anchor on their shelves?) The same goes for cars, clothes, everything else. Sure, our lack of engagement is an engagement of its own kind (no fashion is still fashion), but there is still a difference between carefully curating a look with paisley and velvet and getting whatever will do at Target. There is a difference between driving around a 1959 Cadillac and finding a reliable and economical car to get from A to B. Few of us express ourselves in every available medium.

It’s not clear whether these questions would have been more or less absurd before the 20th century. Presumably, for much of human history, most people have either lived in structures that have been around for quite a while, or that they built themselves. It may have taken suburbs, cookie-cutter property development, and Sears Roebuck kit homes ordered straight from the catalog to cement the idea of a house as a unique expression of personal identity. There can be no sneering at tract homes before tract homes exist. Our post-industrial tendency



toward uniformity and overwhelming sameness (in service of access and affordability, sure) may have been necessary to birth the need for elaborate personalization. The overwhelming feeling one gets from the subjects on *Grand Designs* is the sense of rebellion, of breaking the mold and going one's own way. For one, we're not all mold breakers by nature. At the same time, that mold itself may be more recent than is immediately apparent.

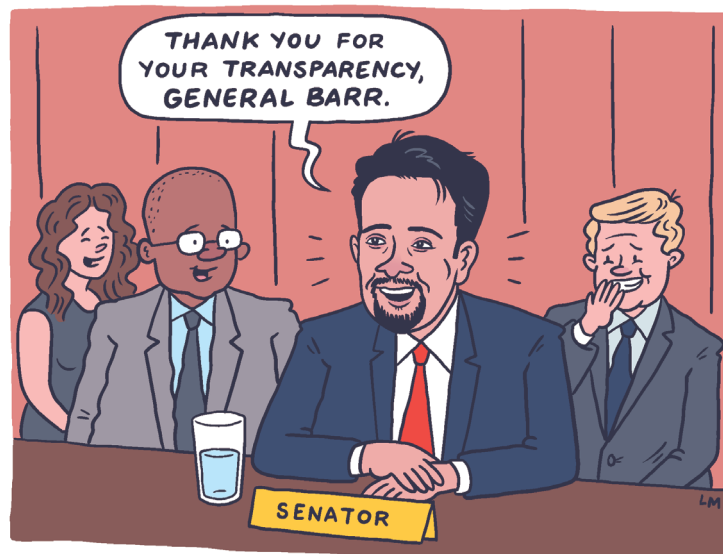
Still, an absolute mastery of the land is a powerful drug, and the appeal is obvious when watching *Grand Designs*. In one recent episode, which covered a few candidates for the *Grand Designs* House of the Year competition, a contestant was asked if he'd ever thought about selling his dream house, for which he had received several generous offers. The contestant slumped into a nearby chair and almost burst into tears. No matter how much money was involved, he would not give up his dream home, and the very thought was enough to make him cry. To people who might struggle to pay the rent every month, this attitude might seem unsympathetic—grotesque, even. But there's a fundamental need for self-determination at work that is understandable. Maybe not all of us would go so far as to build a house in the middle of nowhere out of shipping containers, but most people have experienced the desire

to have more control over the place where we sleep, eat, relax, and let our guards down. Most of us have felt frustration at an ugly stained carpet we weren't allowed to replace, or a shitty uncomfortable dorm bed, or the weird sound in the pipes that just won't go away. Living in a place that wasn't meant for you can be an oddly debilitating feeling. Sometimes, when you're moving from rental to rental, it can feel as though you're even more transient and fungible than the weird mug and the old tin of beans that were still in the back of the cabinet when you moved in.

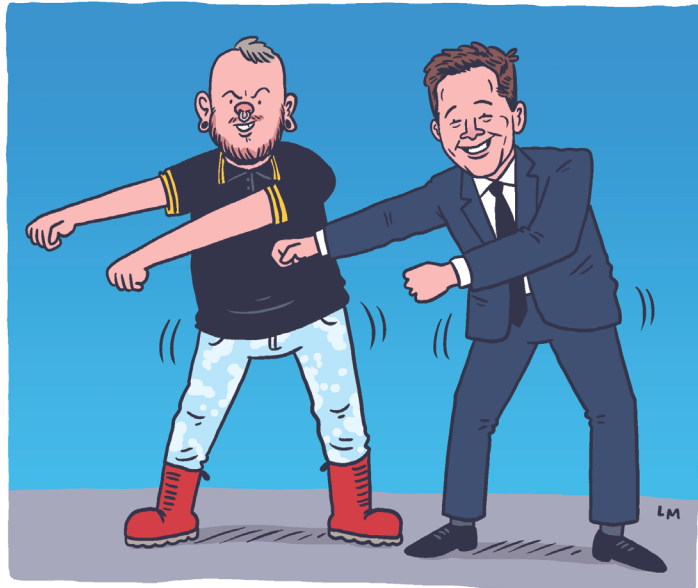
IT'S NOTABLE THAT NO MATTER HOW NICE AND QUIET and provincial the characters of *Grand Designs* appear, and no matter how often and how eloquently they repeat that they want to build something that fits into and complements the surroundings, the houses they create always *emphatically* refuse to blend in—they are loud, their shapes are unnatural, there's usually at least three different colors and textures involved. They stick out from the landscape and say “What are you gonna do about it, punk?” They're the ultimate expression of power over one's own environment. And that type of power fantasy is something we can all relate to. Even if we're still not quite sure what a “gable fronted dormer” is. ✚

HOW TO DO COMEDY THAT NEVER SPEAKS ANY TRUTH TO ANY POWER

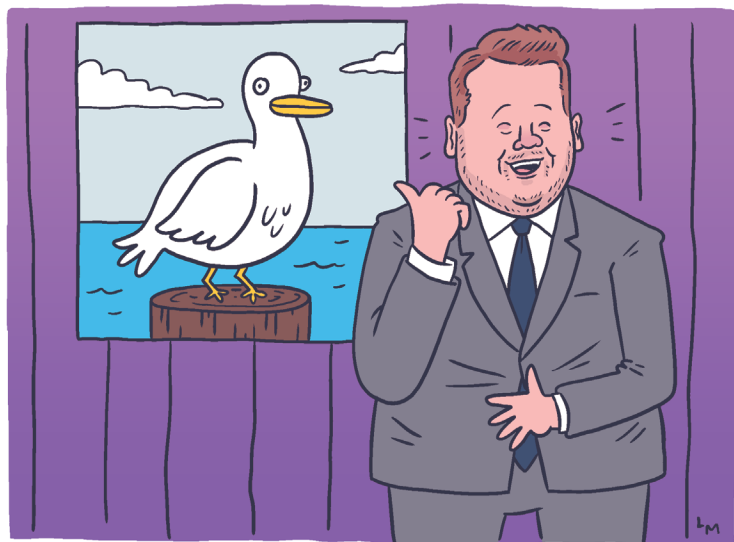
by Luke McGarry and Jason Adam Katzenstein



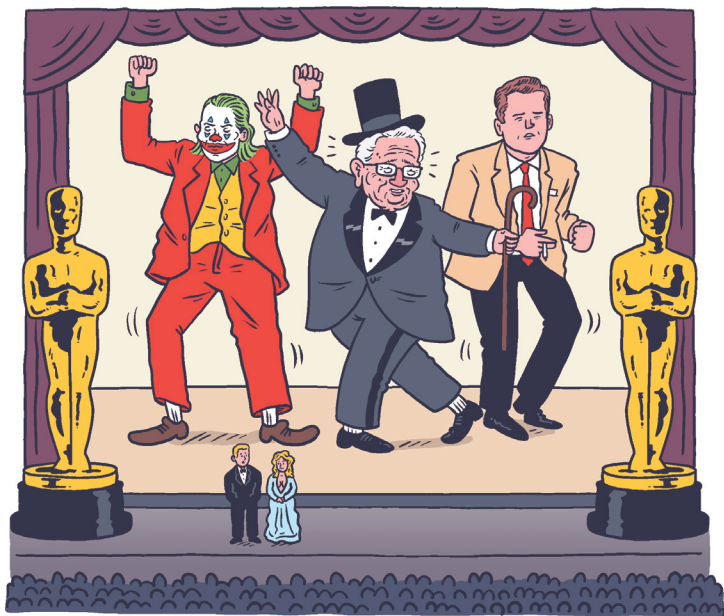
DO A SKETCH ON YOUR COMEDY SHOW
THAT IS JUST A VERBATIM RE-ENACTMENT
OF AN ACTUAL SENATE HEARING.
CAST LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA IN A SURPRISE CAMEO ROLE.



MAKE FUN OF A NEO-NAZI YOUTUBER, BUT THEN,
TO SHOW YOU'RE A GOOD SPORT, INVITE HIM AS
A GUEST ON YOUR TALK SHOW THE FOLLOWING
WEEK AND FLOSS TOGETHER.



REMEMBER CARBON OFFSETTING? DO THAT, BUT
WITH JOKE. DID AN OIL COMPANY FLAGRANTLY
LIE ABOUT THE NUMBER OF BIRDS THAT DIED
IN THEIR LATEST SPILL? MAKE A JOKE ABOUT
THEM, AND THEN MAKE A JOKE ABOUT HOW
BIRDS ARE WEIRD AND THEREFORE DESERVE TO DIE.



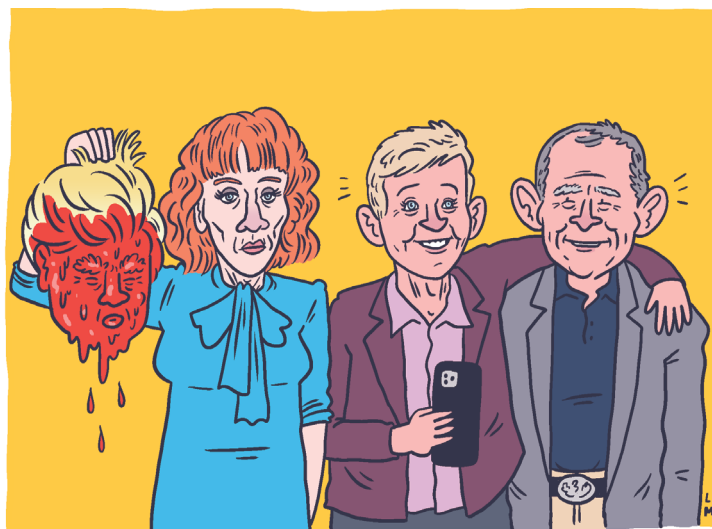
WORK A TAP-DANCING HENRY KISSINGER INTO THE COMEDY MONTAGE THAT OPENS THE OSCARS.



INSERT SOME NATIVE ADVERTISING INTO YOUR MCSWEENEY'S PIECE.



END EVERY JOKE IN YOUR STAND UP SET WITH "BUT SERIOUSLY, FOLKS, EVERYONE IN ANY POSITION OF POWER DESERVES TO BE THERE, AND I THANK GOD EVERY DAY FOR THE BENEVOLENCE OF THE FREE MARKET."



MAKE SURE TO CONDEMN HATE IN ALL FORMS, NO MATTER WHICH MILLIONAIRE COMEDIAN IT'S DIRECTED AT.



I wonder who will be the last person
to read these words.

JACOBIN

Highlights

MY AFFAIRS

THE EDITOR REFLECTS ON SIXTY YEARS IN THE MAGAZINE INDUSTRY

by Nathan J. Robinson

I NEVER MET BERNIE SANDERS MYSELF. I DID NOT THINK he would like me—Briahna Joy Gray, the White House press secretary and a former *Current Affairs* editor, had warned me that I was exactly the sort of person he would probably consider a “dilletantish flibbertigibbet.”

“Bernie doesn’t like people he perceives to be morally frivolous,” she said, in explaining why she had thought it for the best to keep me out of a “left press meet and greet” held at the White House. “Besides, *Current Affairs* should maintain its editorial independence from the administration, don’t you think?” The next day, I received a note from Bhaskar expressing surprise that he hadn’t seen me at the meet and greet. In a fit of pique I tore it to shreds and set it alight. But I did not resent his success.

I respected Sanders from what I could gather at a distance—he declined to be called “Mr. President” and was Bernie to everyone, refused to accept salutes, abolished the playing of “Hail To The Chief” (to the consternation of the Marine Corps band, which switched to James Brown classics and New Orleans jazz-funk). But I was aware that our magazine should never become a propaganda mouthpiece for the President, and I was a scathing critic of many of his positions (the halfheartedness of his immigration reform, the skittish avoidance of the word “reparations,” etc.) Our job, we felt, was to nudge him ever further to the left, which we did through editorials like “A Profile In Cowardice: Why Won’t Bernie Say ‘Nationalize?’” and “Is Bernie Too Chicken To Take On The Military-Industrial Complex?” I am reliably informed that these annoyed him personally, an accomplishment I take great pride in.

I think what surprised people most, even those of us on the Left, was that the sky did not fall. Electing Sanders had seemed

such a radical act, and yet life went on mostly as normal. The stock market wobbled and the capitalists were on CNBC all day threatening to take their money elsewhere, but Sanders was fairly astute and knew how to push only as hard as was in his power at any given time. Given clichés about socialist profligacy, one “surprise” was that Sanders was ruthlessly devoted to efficiency. Not austerity, which is quite different. But making sure the “end user experience” of government was a positive one: that the lines at the DMV were shortened, that people’s mail didn’t get lost, that tax forms were made easy to understand, that the Federal Register was pruned and simplified, that agencies spent their money well. “This government belongs to the people, and the people must not only feel represented by it, but their experiences interacting with it must be positive ones,” Bernie said in his first State of the Union. “Ronald Reagan said that the most terrifying words were ‘I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.’ That was certainly true of Ronald Reagan’s government. But this government recognizes that when a person is in need, ‘I’m from the government’ means that the fire department has showed up, or that your Social Security check has arrived, or that social workers and teachers have come to help. We are determined that it should be a relief to know that your government is out there working for you.”

The range of measures that were signed into law in the first 100 days is staggering to look back on. A nationwide \$15 minimum wage. An immediate halt to deportations. An increase to the minimum Social Security benefits. A full overhaul and upgrade of Amtrak, so that it would be a high-speed service to rival its counterparts in Japan and Europe. Mandatory paid parental leave. A network of free childcare centers, plus



a monthly childcare allowance for every new parent. The massive expansion of free senior centers, to curb the epidemic of isolation and loneliness that so many older people were suffering in their final years. A comprehensive federal plan to tackle the opioid crisis (which would ultimately be in large part funded by the colossal settlements paid by drug companies). Beefing up the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau so it could harshly crack down on predatory lending. Prohibiting water shutoffs.

This was made politically possible by a few things. First, after it became clear that Bernie would be president, a great number of Democrats who had formerly opposed him suddenly discovered they had actually liked him all along. Just as the 2020 primary candidates had all adopted pieces of Bernie's platform when it became popular, national politicians all raced to show they were "Bernier-than-thou" since this was clearly the direction of public opinion. Nobody wanted to be one of the Democrats who got in the way of the Sanders agenda, because he (and his legions of supporters) had made it clear that those who clung to "business as usual" would have targets painted on their back, with portions of the leftover Sanders war chest handed over to their primary opponents. It turned out that

Congressional Democrats were mostly not actually "centrists" so much as opportunists, and when a social movement shifted the arrangements of political power, they, too, shifted. Hence the fierce opposition that many predicted Sanders would face never quite materialized.

Importantly, though, this was because Democrats knew there was an army of millions backing Sanders, one that would name and shame them if they dared to oppose, say, free college. Sanders also made it clear that there was a "carrot" along with the threatened stick: if you *did* vote for the bill, he'd be standing next to you at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the next federal infrastructure project in your state, or the newest childcare center, a big smile on his face, talking about what a stalwart champion of the people you had always been, and how the people of your district knew they could *depend* on you to always do the right thing because that's *just the kind of person you were*. And he'd say that he was *so pleased* that you had promised never to take any more Wall Street donations, even though you had never made any such promise, and as he walked off the stage he'd wink at you, knowing you now couldn't possibly walk back the promise he had just made in your name.

This was all astute politics, but Sanders was still limited by

the small number of authentic “radicals” in Congress. In retrospect, we had not done enough during 2020 to try to overthrow some of the Democratic dinosaurs who ended up derailing important reforms (Medicare for All, codetermination, etc.) Getting rid of Pelosi helped a great deal, but Charles Schumer hung around until 2022 making a nuisance of himself. It was not until the Red Wave of 2022 that we really managed to secure the kind of powerful majority that was necessary. I do wish we had started earlier, because it meant that the first two years of the Sanders presidency had to be dedicated in part to gathering the power necessary to fulfill important parts of the agenda in the second half. Those first two years were tough, because Sanders couldn’t do as much as he needed to do, and people were watching his presidency closely, many intent on declaring it a failure as soon as they could.

But, similar to what happened under the Corbyn government in the UK around the same time, the policies became bolder as time went on. In ’23 and ’24, private schools were abolished (actually, technically they still existed, but had to accept anyone who applied on a first come, first served basis and could not charge tuition). Amazon was nationalized and merged with the United States Postal Service to form the USODS (United States Ordering and Delivery Service, later a branch of the Global Parcel & Package Service), with parts of it like Amazon Web Services spun off into private, not-for-profit cooperatives. Medicare For All was finally passed, giving every single person in the United States free comprehensive health-care (including vision and dental care), and abolishing the private insurance industry. (Many people in the industry were retrained as “patient advocates” and used their skills to badger doctors into giving patients better treatment rather than badgering patients into paying larger shares of their expenses.)

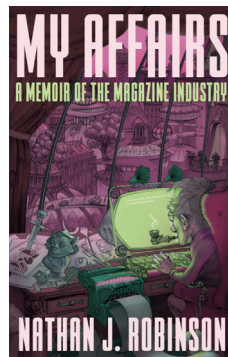
Reparations finally became a “politically viable” issue, and a bill was passed to study the question and determine what might be feasible. There were all sorts of difficulties, of course, over who exactly should be entitled to reparations and what they should get, but a pragmatic solution was reached: the necessary amount of “reparations” was defined as the sum total amount of the racial wealth gap between black and white people. So, we would know reparations had successfully been made when that wealth gap disappeared. (After all, unless one bought in to racist theories about culture or genetics, the racial wealth gap could be seen as the amount of financial damage caused by racism.) Then, a package of solutions was designed that would eliminate this gap within 50 years, not primarily by handing out checks but by targeting giant investments in Black communities and chipping away at white fortunes that had amassed over time. As we know, the target was not met, but we no longer see the truly extreme statistics of 50 years ago

(in some cities, the average Black family had \$8 in wealth while white families had hundreds of thousands of dollars). I am glad to see the Racial Justice Completion Commission at work on a serious solution for finishing our long, long overdue need to make full reparations.



AS FOR MYSELF, I HAD BEGUN TO DEVOTE A considerable portion of my time to the cause of non-human animals, who I considered the members of a kind of New Proletariat. Because they were unable to vote and didn’t own property (and we had not, at that point, figured out how to translate their thoughts), animals’ interests were then almost completely unrepresented, and they were slaughtered by the billions with barely anyone noticing or caring. I penned a book—a pamphlet, really—called *The Rights Of Man (But For Animals)*. (The British title was simply *The Rights of Animals*, because British people are dull.) My argument in the book was that the entitlement of animals to pursue their interests was as presumptively absolute as our own, and that we had no natural right to murder and devour them. Provocatively, I compared the way that our society ignored mass industrialized killing of animals to the way that German society had ignored the mass industrialized killing of human beings, though I did not go as far as the controversial anarchist pamphlet *The Meat Holocaust*, which was denounced on the Senate floor.

These were heady times, with many things happening at once. The worker ownership plan was being implemented, with corporations distributing a portion of their stock to employees each year, steadily shifting the overall ownership ratio between rich shareholders and workers. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks was killed by a falling chandelier *in flagrante delicto*, and was replaced by leftist radio host Katie Halper. I received many office visits from subscribers, who consistently informed me that *Current Affairs* had been a comforting voice of reason in a time governed by sovereign madness. ✿



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The Politics and “Pretentiousness” of Reading JAMES JOYCE

BY BRIANNA RENNIX

IN THE MEDIA, THERE HAS BEEN A GREAT DEAL of ink spilled over the matter of “the left-liberal divide.” What, exactly, is the difference between a “leftist” and a “liberal”? To what extent are these groups ideologically, as opposed to aesthetically, distinct? How far can they trust each other? Are they implacable foes with fundamentally irreconcilable worldviews? Do they have enough shared goals to make political collaboration feasible? Although I can’t presume to answer all of these weighty questions, I can state that Leftists and the Liberals do have at least one area of transatlantic common ground, and that is this: being publicly railroaded for talking too much about *Ulysses*.

Liberal darling and overgrown Student Council President Pete Buttigieg is, of course, the most notorious *Ulysses* fan on the modern political stage, having repeatedly commented on his fondness for the novel and put it on his official list of Favorite Books.¹ When asked about *Ulysses* by an *Esquire* interviewer, Buttigieg described it as an “extremely relevant” book: “it is a difficult text, but its subject matter couldn’t be more democratic. It’s about a guy going about his day for one day. ...

You’re in this guy’s head, and you’re kind of seeing life through his eyes, and at the end through his wife’s eyes. That’s how politics ought to be, too.” (Boy, politics would be a rough business if seen through the eyes of candidates’ wives! Relatedly, Beto O’Rourke has also occasionally claimed to be a fan of *Ulysses*.) The reaction on social media was polarizing: Buttigieg was enthusiastically commended by a number of fans excited by the prospect of having an “erudite” president in the White House, and dragged by an equivalent number of people questioning whether Buttigieg, or indeed any other human being, has actually read *Ulysses*. “No person on earth has ever read *Ulysses*,” wrote one internet commentator. “James Joyce probably gave it a quick skim.” Others rolled their eyes at Buttigieg’s affinity for “difficult” white male authors, and demanded to know if he had ever read a book by a woman.

But lest you run away with the idea that talking up *Ulysses* is solely the provenance of Rhodes Scholar resume-padders, the rumples, jumper-wearing leftist Jeremy Corbyn also recently spoke publically about his love of Joyce’s novel. This year, just before Bloomsday (the unofficial Joyce “holiday” on June 16, chosen because all the action of *Ulysses* takes place on June 16, 1904), Corbyn told a *Guardian* reporter that *Ulysses* was his favorite novel, recalling that “like many people, at first he found the book ‘incomprehensible’. But then ‘you stop trying to focus on the narrative and start just enjoying the vignettes.’” Like Buttigieg, Corbyn highlighted the book’s down-to-earth

¹ There is a certain Joyce-Buttigieg resemblance, which is worth mentioning. As a young man, James Joyce learned a smattering of Dano-Norwegian for the purpose of writing a fan letter to the playwright Henrik Ibsen, and rumors that he’d self-taught himself Dano-Norwegian to the point of fluency rapidly spread through his social circle.

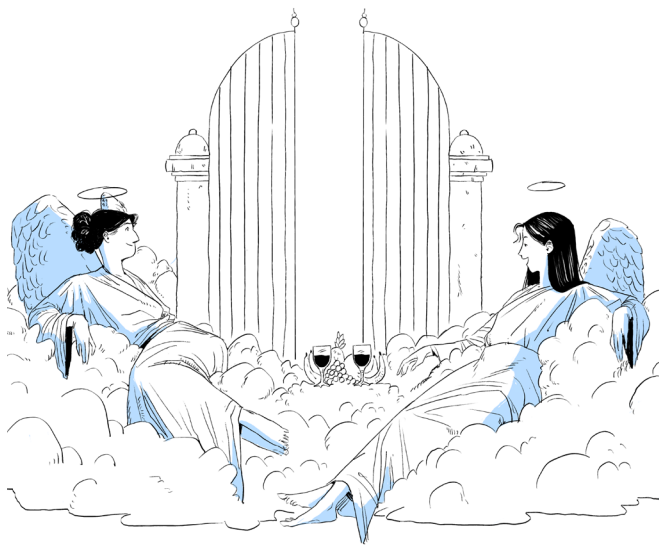
quality as a kind of political virtue: “Joyce references and richly describes what’s happening in the street. So somebody is holding forth about a big political issue and then the refuse cart goes by. Whenever there is a big political issue on, I walk around the streets in my area ... Politicians should never forget that people have lives to lead and they often have dreams they don’t talk about.” Corbyn then suggested that ordinary people should try to read and enjoy *Ulysses*, and not feel intimidated by the book’s reputation: “Read a little bit at a time and think about it and then move on, but don’t beat yourself up if you don’t understand it.” As *Jacobin* catalogued in an article entitled “*Ulysses* Truthers Are the Latest Threat to Corbyn,” these remarks inspired a slew of attacks from right-wingers and centrists questioning whether Corbyn had “really read” *Ulysses*, hinting that Corbyn—who did not attend Oxford or Cambridge, nor ultimately finish his college degree at all—couldn’t possibly have done so.

We now see the usual script that unfolds when someone claims to enjoy *Ulysses*. Interlocutors are skeptical that anyone could have finished, much less really *liked*, such a long, pretentious book, and they presume that the would-be *Ulysses* fan must be trying to *prove something* by making this obviously preposterous claim. The *Ulysses* fan, anticipating this reaction, then tries for a kind of studied nonchalance, claiming to have found the book hard but, you know, not *that* hard, insisting that it’s Actually A Totally Normal Book That Anyone Could Read If They Tried. This defensive maneuver is by no means limited to politicians: I once read an article where British comedian Stephen Fry was quoted saying that *Ulysses* was “less pretentious than a baked bean,” which was then followed by a series of hilariously indignant responses. I also love *Ulysses* very much, and, when asked to explain why, often find myself emphasizing that there are *a lot* of fart jokes in it. (This is no lie!—but there are also lengthy parts where characters are walking

around thinking about shit like “the ineluctable modality of the visible,” which is less of a crowd-pleaser.)

Let’s address each of the common claims made about *Ulysses*. First of all: is *Ulysses* a hoax? Is it just a meaningless word-jumble onto which a lot of gullible academics have imagined significances that aren’t there, or (more likely) which they *pretend* to understand because it makes them look smart? In broad terms, this accusation is, I think, easily disproven. *Ulysses*, although stylistically unusual, is a book with a linear storyline and thoroughly fleshed-out characters, with backstories, relationships, and meticulously-drawn inner lives. To the extent that people primarily identify “meaning” with things like narrative, character, and dialogue, *Ulysses* is actually a pretty conventional novel. The first six or so episodes of *Ulysses* are written in a consistent stream-of-consciousness style, remaining (mostly) inside the mind of one character at a time. The subsequent episodes are a lot weirder: although the forward momentum of the plot continues, and the characters continue to interact with each other in ways that are consistent with the things you learned about them while inhabiting their minds in the earlier chapters, each successive episode is now its own self-contained, stylistically distinct experiment, parodying various literary genres, or attempting to render musical forms in prose. These experiments are sometimes hilarious, sometimes transcendent, and sometimes (if I’m honest) incredibly tedious. But it’s pretty easy to describe what the book is “about,” what happens in it, who the characters are, what motivates them, and so on.

That said, you’d certainly be forgiven, if you were someone who only knew *Ulysses* secondhand, or had opened it up to random page, for thinking that it was just word salad. (James Joyce certainly wasn’t beyond writing such things: his final book, *Finnegans Wake*, looks something like a 30-dimensional polyglot crossword puzzle, and the commentators who attempt to describe its “plot” in any detail are, uh, really reaching.) Joyce had a lot of what my colleague Lyta Gold would probably describe as “grifter energy.” Throughout his life, he had a knack for attracting and then abusing literary patrons. One of Joyce’s last salvos, before huffily storming off into self-imposed exile from Ireland as a twenty-two-year-old, was to write a satirical verse viciously insulting every single person, famous and obscure, who had ever troubled to lend him money. (This bitch-ass ungrateful poem does contain one couplet, “Where they have crouched and crawled and prayed/I stand, the self-doomed, unafraid,” that is *pretty fucking metal* if you ignore the surrounding context.) Joyce was also constantly cooking up weird entrepreneurial schemes, briefly working as a cinema impresario (the cinema folded after a year), as an agent for Irish tweed imports in Italy (he appears to have sold exactly zero yards), and as a fireworks salesman (this venture never progressed beyond Joyce’s imagination). Joyce also worked as a theatre director in Zurich in 1918, putting on, among other things, a production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* that subsequently devolved into a bitterly acrimonious public lawsuit between Joyce and his principal actor, Henry Carr, who



“Eternal life is a nightmare so terrible that only God could have conceived it.”

wanted to be reimbursed for a pair of trousers he'd bought for the role. (Joyce counter-sued Carr for libel and the price of five tickets; the ordeal ended when a policeman showed up to confiscate Joyce's typewriter as collateral for court costs, and was persuaded to leave with half the cash in Joyce's wallet instead.) Even after the publication of *Ulysses* cemented Joyce's public reputation as a literary giant, he often talked about the book as if it were a kind of long con. "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant," Joyce told one reader, "and that's the only way of ensuring one's immortality." To another, he declared: "The demand that I make of my reader is that he should devote his whole life to reading my works."

So: *Ulysses* isn't meaningless, but its own author seems to acknowledge that it is, at least partly, a book designed to frustrate easy comprehension. So what about this other claim that *Ulysses* fans often make, that it's really just a Normal Book anyone could read if they tried? This, I think, is also overstating the case a bit. *Ulysses* is an incredibly dense and bizarre book: even the more "realist" opening chapters aren't especially straightforward, as the characters' minds jump fluidly from one topic to the next, sometimes lighting on fragments of memory whose full context won't be revealed until later, sometimes on an obscure literary reference, sometimes on a popular ad jingle or long-gone Dublin landmark that no one outside turn-of-the-century Ireland could possibly be expected to recognize. This isn't to say that you need some specific educational pedigree to understand *Ulysses*. Plenty of teenagers and adults without a college education have deeply loved the novel, and I've certainly met Ivy League types who didn't understand or like it nearly as well as they pretended. But it's really not for everyone. For some people, the amount of excruciating mental labor they have to put in to follow the story vastly outweighs any pleasure they might get from Joyce's prose. I think about how furious I used to get at people who told me I would "enjoy" calculus once I understood it, when even the simplest calculus problem made me feel as if a small, angry rodent were shredding my brain-tissues from the inside. I imagine the experience of trying to read *Ulysses* feels this way to many people.

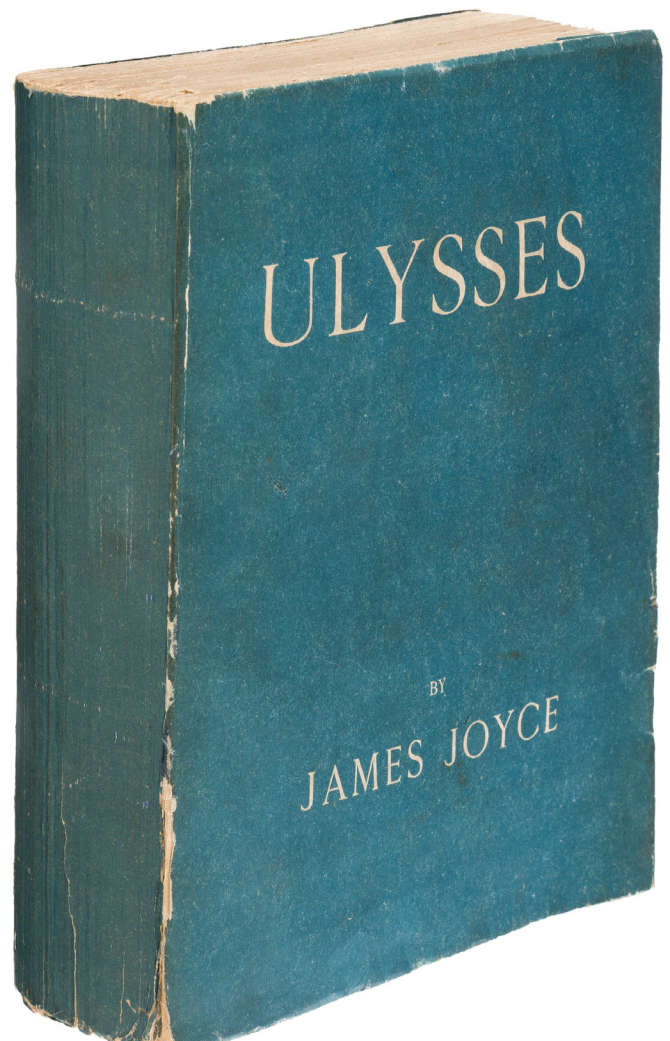
But it's also worth mentioning that Joyce, for all that he claimed (maybe facetiously, maybe not) to have written his book primarily to confound literature professors, also very much wanted his book to be read and loved by non-academics. ("Well he had a FUNNY WAY OF SHOWING IT, THEN," you might say, and you're not wrong.) One of Joyce's great frustrations was that his wife, Nora Barnacle—a working-class girl who had been a hotel chambermaid before running away to

the continent with Joyce—flatly refused to read a word he had written. "Why don't you write sensible books that people can understand?" she complained to him. An excerpt from a desperate letter that Joyce wrote to Barnacle on this topic, while she was away visiting her family in Ireland, provides a glimpse of the exhausting (if titillating)² drama that literally every minute of living with Joyce must have been:

Evidently it is impossible to describe to you the despair I have been in since you left. Yesterday I got a fainting fit in Miss Beach's shop and she had to run and get me some kind of a drug. Your image is always in my heart. O my dearest, if you would only turn to me even now and read that terrible book [Ulysses] which has now broken the heart in my breast and take me to yourself alone to do with me what you will!

(These histrionics proved completely ineffective: Nora never read *Ulysses* in her entire life.)

Joyce does perhaps seem to have felt that more intuitive and obvious readings of *Ulysses* were more valuable than the elaborate puzzle-solving that he prescribed for his devotees. In a letter to a friend, the writer Katherine Mansfield described a dull evening spent watching Joyce and her husband wind each other up into a frenzy about the intricacies of *Ulysses*, causing her to give up the book as a hopeless enterprise: "I've read the



2. In another, much more famous series of letters, Joyce wrote to his wife about a whole series of naughty things they apparently liked to do together, including cunnilingus, buggery, fart-smelling, scat, dominance play, finger-fucking (of him, by her), and watersports. Although Joyce's letters to Nora are filled with memorable lines, like "you had an arse full of farts that night, and I fucked them out of you," it is a historic tragedy of massive proportions that Nora's half of this correspondence—which she herself initiated—has been lost.

Inside Stephen Dedalus' brain:

The grainy sand had gone from under his feet. His boots trod again a damp crackling mast, razorshells, squeaking pebbles, that on the unnumbered pebbles beats, wood sieved by the shipworm, lost Armada. Unwholesome sandflats waited to suck his treading soles, breathing upward sewage breath, a pocket of seaweed smouldered in seafire under a midden of man's ashes. He coasted them, walking warily. A porterbottle stood up, stogged to its waist, in the cakey sand dough. A sentinel: isle of dreadful thirst. Broken hoops on the shore; at the land a maze of dark cunning nets; farther away chalkscrawled backdoors and on the higher beach a dryingline with two crucified shirts. Ringsend: wigwams of brown steersmen and master mariners. Human shells.

Inside Leopold Bloom's brain:

His eyes un hungrily saw shelves of tins: sardines, gaudy lobsters' claws. All the odd things people pick up for food. Out of shells, periwinkles with a pin, off trees, snails out of the ground the French eat, out of the sea with bait on a hook. Silly fish learn nothing in a thousand years. If you didn't know risky putting anything into your mouth. Poisonous berries. Johnny Magories. Roundness you think good. Gaudy colour warns you off. One fellow told another and so on. Try it on the dog first. Led on by the smell or the look. Tempting fruit. Ice cones. Cream. Instinct. Orange-groves for instance. Need artificial irrigation. Bleibtreustrasse. Yes but what about oysters. Unightly like a clot of phlegm. Filthy shells. Devil to open them too. Who found them out? Garbage, sewage they feed on. Fizz and Red bank oysters. Effect on the sexual. Aphrodis. He was in the Red Bank this morning. Was he oysters old fish at table perhaps he young flesh in bed no June has no or no oysters. But there are people like things high. Tainted game. Jugged hare. First catch your hare. Chinese eating eggs fifty years old, blue and green again. Dinner of thirty courses. Each dish harmless might mix inside. Idea for a poison mystery. That archduke Leopold was it no yes or was it Otto one of those Habsburgs? Or who was it used to eat the scruff off his own head? Cheapest lunch in town. Of course aristocrats, then the others copy to be in the fashion.

Odyssey and am more or less familiar with it but Murry [Mansfield's husband] and Joyce simply sailed out of my depth. I felt almost stupefied. It's absolutely impossible that other people should understand *Ulysses* as Joyce understands it. It's almost revolting to hear him discuss its difficulties. It contains code words that must be picked up in each paragraph and so on." Joyce, however, recounting the same evening in a totally unconnected letter to a different correspondent, evidently came away with the exact opposite impression: "Mrs. Murry understood the book better than her husband," he wrote.

So: if we agree that *Ulysses* can, in fact, be read—should it be? Is it worth anyone's time? Why are politicians with worldviews as divergent as the former McKinsey consultant Buttigieg and the longtime Marxist backbencher Corbyn both citing *Ulysses* as a book with useful lessons for the present political climate? It's interesting that Buttigieg and Corbyn both see the exact same thing in *Ulysses*: it is a book about and for the everyman. One of the central characters, an ad salesman named Leopold Bloom, is indeed popularly imagined as an "everyman" character, although this has always puzzled me a little, given that so much of the plot of *Ulysses* involves Bloom being mocked and ostracized for his Jewish ancestry. Bloom is also a character struggling with a very particular kind of grief—the death of one of his children—and his thoughts are often consumed by a host of unusual, remarkably gender-fluid sexual desires. Bloom is an "everyman" in the sense that he is middle-class, but in most other respects he's an outsider in the society in which he lives. The other main character, a poet-turned-reluctant-schoolteacher named Stephen Dedalus, is a fairly exact replica of Joyce as a twenty-two-year-old, and spends most of his time thinking about death and Thomas Aquinas, which is perhaps not *incredibly* relatable to most readers.

Part of the reason, perhaps, that Buttigieg and Corbyn can casually impose the same content-less "people are just people" reading on *Ulysses* is that it's *not* a very political book, really. There's some ongoing mockery of the idiocies of both empire and

nationalism throughout *Ulysses*, but the book is primarily interested in the relationships between characters on an intimate scale, and doesn't have much to say about larger social structures. (In fact, one of the few characters who explicitly complains about public health inequities, Stephen Dedalus's frenemy Buck Mulligan, is portrayed as grandstanding and disingenuous.) The closest thing to a political "moral" that we see is Bloom's somewhat halting statement while arguing with an anti-Semitic Irish Nationalist in a pub: "Force, hatred, history, all that. That's not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it's the very opposite of that that is really life... Love... I mean the opposite of hatred."

In real life, Joyce had socialist sympathies, although these were of a somewhat hazy kind. As a young man in Ireland, he attended a few socialist meetings, but was generally scornful of all political creeds, treating the socialists, Irish nationalists, and Unionists amongst his social set with more or less interchangeable irony. Between 1905 and 1907, while living in Europe, he occasionally described himself as a socialist; as his life progressed, his politics, to the extent he had any, seem to have settled into a kind of free-floating pacifist anarchism. "As an artist I am against every state," he wrote. "Of course I must recognize it, since indeed with all my dealings I come into contact with its institutions. The state is concentric, man eccentric... Naturally I can't approve of the act of the revolutionary who tosses a bomb in a theatre to destroy the King and his children. On the other hand, have these states behaved any better which have drowned the world in a bloodbath?" We can perhaps see these rather noncommittal politics reflected in *Ulysses*—but we're looking for muffled traces of a vague original, so who's to say. Joyce himself disliked very much the idea that anyone would search for a lesson in *Ulysses*. "The pity is the public will demand and find a moral in my book," he told a friend, "or worse they may take it in some more serious way, and on the honor of a gentleman, there is not one single serious line in it."

I honestly think that both Buttigieg and Corbyn likely cited *Ulysses* as their favorite

book because it *is*, in fact, their favorite book. It's not a book that particularly supports or refutes either of their political visions; it's not the kind of favorite book that makes you seem especially relatable or interesting; the subset of undecided voters who are driven to the ballot-box by the revelation that a politician enjoys reading dense modernist novels is surely vanishingly small. For all that the book is very long, and for all that Joyce as a human being embodied some of the most irritating and unlikeable characteristics of the *auteur*—the level of unquestioning support he required from his friends and family, particularly women, was truly unpleasant—*Ulysses* is extremely loveable to some people. I love *Ulysses* for its little embedded mysteries, its bad puns, its vivid descriptions of food, its compassionate treatment of human frailty, its astonishingly multi-layered lyricism, and, yes, its fart jokes. I've now reread it so many times and in so many places that each episode of the book is overlaid with vague sense-memories from various moments in my life over the past twelve years: *Circe* lying on my stomach in my sister's apartment, plastered to the floor with

summer sweat; *Hades* hiding over lunch period in my high school's library; *Wandering Rocks* in the waiting room of the hospital where my oldest niece was born; *Proteus* comfortably drunk in a bathtub in North Carolina; *Calypso* comfortably drunk in a small restaurant in Rome; *Penelope* curled up in the window-seat of my drafty freshman dorm room. (Additionally, while perusing photostats of James Joyce's notebooks at my college library—as one does—I found the word “Rennix” written very clearly in Joyce's handwriting, so I'm still waiting to be drawn into the rogue wormhole/civilization-destroying time paradox that explains this.)

While I think *Ulysses* is a Marmite of a book—which some people intensely like and others intensely hate, for perfectly unimpeachable reasons of Taste—I don't think that it's easy to tell if you are the sort of person who will like reading it, unless you try! Jeremy Corbyn's suggested method of dipping into the book a little at a time, and not getting bogged down on stray sentences you don't immediately understand, is a very good one. I have my own list of additional suggestions for the *Ulysses*-curious.

Some Ways to Read *Ulysses* (If You Want To Read *Ulysses*)

1. Find a thematic hook: *Ulysses* contains allusions to a thousand topics, some of them obscure in the scholarly sense (i.e. random texts you've never heard of), others obscure in the sense that 21st-century internet memes will one day be obscure (i.e. contemporary political slogans, advertisements, etc.) But there are some overarching topics that the book returns to frequently, and if you have some background knowledge on any of these things, I think it makes it a lot easier to move through the book. The big one, of course, is the *Odyssey*: the book is loosely structured around the narrative of the *Odyssey*, with Leopold Bloom standing in for Odysseus and Stephen Dedalus for Telemachus (although they aren't direct analogues). *Hamlet* is, arguably, equally significant as a framing device: Stephen Dedalus envisions himself as a kind of Hamlet-figure and talks about Hamlet *fucking constantly*; and anxieties about fathers and infidelity pervade *Ulysses* generally. Background knowledge of Irish history, politics, and mythology will also get you pretty far. I gather that being knowledgeable about the history of music, and opera especially, will also unlock a lot of things, but that's not something I personally know much about. There are probably other hooks I'm not thinking of! These are just some of the big ones.
2. Don't use a “guide to *Ulysses*”; just pull up the Wikipedia summary: There are a number of very thorough *Ulysses* guidebooks out there that will offer you a thousand interpretations of every word in the book. It's not uncommon for college courses that teach *Ulysses* to assign a guidebook alongside the main text. I think this is a bad idea! Forcing yourself to try to understand every possible allusion significantly diminishes the pleasure of reading (at least for me). The feeling that you're missing crucial things with every sentence will also start to make you feel discouraged. You *don't* have to understand every single reference on the first pass, *or ever*, to enjoy *Ulysses*. That said, it's not cheating to look things up. I think it's a good idea to pull up a basic plot summary of *Ulysses*, broken down by episode, that you can refer to when you get lost. Sometimes just knowing the geography of where the hell different characters are in Dublin at any given time will make the story clearer.
3. If you want, read a biography of James Joyce: Joyce biographies are a kind of extended-universe bonus pack for *Ulysses*, not unlike reading *The Silmarillion* as a companion to *The Lord of the Rings*. I read Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce* between my second and third re-readings of *Ulysses*. (This is the longest and probably most thorough Joyce biography in existence, although I want to flag that Ellmann is a rather sloppy historian and gets various things wrong. Email me if you want to hear my incredibly boring and irrelevant rant about “the Tower Incident.”) Since a lot of the characters in *Ulysses* are heavily modelled after real people Joyce knew (to the point that Joyce was pathologically afraid of returning to Ireland, for fear that one of his former acquaintances would shoot him dead), knowing the details of Joyce's life will immediately make *Ulysses* a thousand percent clearer. The “death of the author” crowd may not care for this method, preferring to take the book on its own merits, which is fine! But I actually think that knowing about all the petty rivalries and betrayals teeming beneath the surface of *Ulysses* is super fun. (If you are motivated to devote significant time to *Ulysses*, a biography is a better companion than a litcrit guidebook, in my opinion.)
4. Read it the first time fast, then a second time more slowly: Again, getting over-entangled in *Ulysses*' strange minutiae on your first pass is a sure way to lose interest. If you have the time and energy, I recommend a breakneck, marathon read of *Ulysses*, stopping for nothing, ignoring all uncertainty. Then, if you didn't completely dislike it, reread it more slowly, taking in an episode at a time at whatever pace you like. Once you're familiar with the book as a whole, a lot of things that seemed confusing before will fall into place naturally; you'll start to notice new patterns and resonances that weren't clear the first time, which can be incredibly satisfying.
5. If you don't enjoy it, put it down—but maybe pick it up again a few years later?: The first time I tried to read *Ulysses*, I got through the first five chapters. They were—fine. I sort of understood them, but I didn't really enjoy them, and I wasn't looking forward to reading more. I abandoned the attempt. Two years later, I tried again, and this time, my brain was *on fire with delight* and I was unable to put the book down. Who knows why? These things are mysterious. So, keep in mind that *Ulysses* may deserve a couple chances.
6. Read with a friend, if you can find a willing victim: I read *Ulysses* the first time all the way through at the same time that my sister was reading the book for her grad program. Reading simultaneously helped us pace ourselves and gave us lots to talk about. If we were in the same room and working on the same episode, we would read the funny bits out loud to each other. You and your reading buddy can pool your mental resources (you may understand or enjoy different references), talk through confusing parts, and, as needed, rail about the parts you think are stupid or boring.
Life is certainly far too short to spend much time reading things you hate—but it's also too short to spend pretending not to love the things you love. I think we all have a tendency to over-analyze each other's artistic proclivities, trying to infer deep truths about people's personalities from their favorite books and films, which then, in turn, encourages a self-conscious curation of the sort of “favorites” that you think will make you seem impressive, or nonthreatening, or seductively inscrutable, or whatever your preferred public angle may be. (This has been going on since the dawn of time, but has perhaps been made worse by the internet age.) Who wants to spend their limited time on earth alternating between painful states of suppressed enthusiasm and feigned interest? I think it's rather charming that Buttigieg and Corbyn were honest enough (or tone-deaf enough) to admit that they love *Ulysses*. In the distant socialist future, when the would-be Joyces of the world are freed from their wage-making drudgeries, we might hope for many more such absurd and extravagant books—as well as, for those that want them, plenty of sensible books that people can understand.

Miscellaneous Other Imps and Dyvvils



Captor Terrarum

Whenne thou art one day Late with the Rente
thife Incubus demandeth a pound of Human
Flefhe with Intyreft but whenne the Heate hath
broken in Wintre the Incubus is on Vacatyon in
Bermuda for Thre Weekes

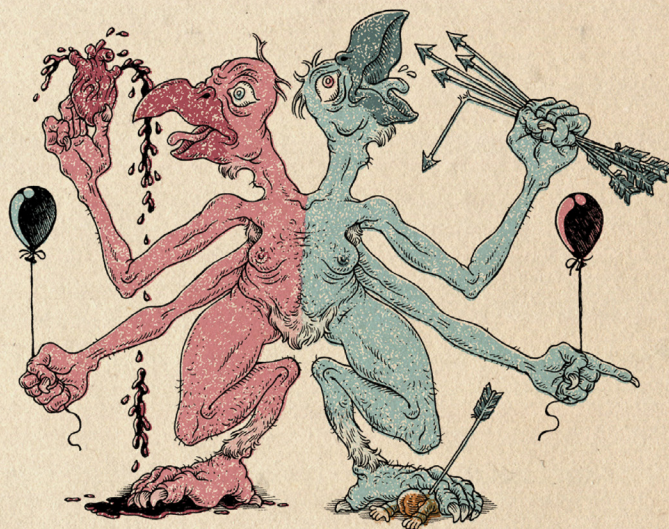
Nexus Omnium

Anciente prophesies bespeake of a myghtie
Deuourer who poffeffeth Eyes to peare into the
very Soulle & Eares to heare euery ydle whisper
of the Hearte. Befpeaking Benewolence, thife
fpirit craues onlie Attenfionne, Lucre, & the
Refpecte of the abffolute Worfte



Spectator Genitalium

Thife Daemon maketh newe Parents to
byfeue that from the Privy Partes of their
Childrene at Byrthe their Deftinyes may be
redde; & thus incyte the hableffe Progenitors
to diuers actes of cruewelty - fromme
the Destructyon of Manores to the burnt
facryfye of Granddams - in proppytiatione
of the dark godde yclept Gender



Diabolus Ambitionis

Whenne under the
influenfe of this
Daemone - mofte
common and infidious
- the Heirs of
respectable Burghers
be come Consultants
or Minnifters of the
Iawe in paid Seruyce
to Merchant Prynfes.
Yet they yclaim they
wilt worketh yet in the
Intereste of the greatre
Publick; euentuallie



ЖУХΦИΣΤΕ&∂∏+VONXNУW&XAN



The Problem Of **PRIVATE SCHOOLS**

BY SPARKY ABRAHAM

OUR MYSTERY BEGINS WITH MY HOMETOWN of Santa Barbara, California, which has some of the best public schools in the country. This isn't just hometown pride speaking: they really are top-notch public schools. And why shouldn't they be great? Santa Barbara is an extremely wealthy area. Residents include Oprah, Rob Lowe, Ellen Degeneres, Jeff Bridges, and Kevin Costner. The median home price hit a million dollars way back in 2004. It dipped during the recession (all the way down to \$845,000) but has since recovered and is now over \$1.2 million. Santa Barbara's well-funded public schools tend to place in the top quartile of schools in California, and doubtless outperform many private schools in other towns. No one would call the schools in Santa Barbara "bad." They are manifestly good.

What a blessing, you might think. Sure, it costs a fortune to live there, but good public schools! Free, high-quality public education is a huge asset—it's a major determiner of property values in the first place. Oh—you might think—how wonderful to be free from the private/charter/magnet/public battles,

** The dirty secret of education in Santa Barbara—and of everything in Santa Barbara, and of everything in America—is segregation. When I was in high school there were stark achievement and social divides between the roughly equal populations of white and Latinx students. Administrations have been "combatting" this for decades, but in the mid-2000s there was still a strong sense that students were split between college-track and not, and those groups matched racial/ethnic lines very closely. That being the case, travesty though it is, outcomes for white students in Santa Barbara public schools are even better than those reflected in the school-wide numbers. And yet the private school crowd is made up of mostly white students.*

free from planning kindergarten applications at birth to set up your kid for the application for elementary school in order to put them in the best position to get into the right middle school, which is so important for getting them into a good high school, which of course is essential for admission to the right college, which will be basically required for their law school application. No need for any of that in Santa Barbara. You can just go sign 'em up.' But here's the mystery: Santa Barbara also has a *thriving* industry of private schools. Parents pay nearly \$32,000 a year for their kids to go to high school at Laguna Blanca. They pay \$27,000 to send their kids to tiny Anacapa, a school with an enrollment of only 36 students (grades 7-12). Or they pay \$65,500 to send their kids to the Cate School (though for this price you also get to board them at school, a blessing of its own).

The question is *why*? Why would parents spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on private schooling for their kids when they could have perfectly adequate—even exceptional—public school for free? Is this just rich people's foolishness? Are they getting their money's worth? And if they *are* getting their money's worth, what does that mean for everyone else?

EQUALITY

Here's a statement I think everyone would agree with: no child deserves a lower-quality education just because their parents have less money. Okay, maybe not everyone would agree.

There are probably some people who think children's deservingness is an extension of their parents' deservingness, in some sort of debased karmic retribution or the curse of a prosperity-minded God. And surely someone out there has the right combination of naive credulity and moral confusion to have the opinion that rich kids are more likely to be "intelligent" and therefore deserve more resources.

But I have to hope these views are rare, or at least so obviously based on the just-world fallacy as to be easily refuted. When it comes to adults, it's easy (but still wrong) to cast judgment based on life choices and say things like "if you wanted adequate housing you should have found a way to make more money." But this argument doesn't really hold up for kids. Rich kids have generally done nothing different in life than poor kids, other than being born wealthy. There is no credible, non-eugenics-based argument that one group is more deserving than the other. So it's reasonable to think that poor kids deserve just as good an education as rich kids.

But of course, deserving or not, poor kids *don't* get an education equal to rich kids. They *really* don't get one. Within the public school system there's no clear agreement on how to measure "quality" of education, but everyone acknowledges that rich areas tend to have very good public schools and poor areas tend to have very bad ones. (Compound this inequality if you're talking about rich white areas and poor Black areas, or poor Latinx areas, or poor Native areas.)

TO THIS MIX, LET'S ADD PRIVATE SCHOOLS. Private schools, as a concept, put some of our core democratic and ethical principles in tension with each other. People worry, often very thoughtfully, about whether they are perpetuating inequality if they choose to send their kids to "good" private schools instead of the local "bad" public schools. And some people reasonably think that private schools are standing in the way of public schools getting better, especially in big cities. But there's an open debate over whether parents are to blame as individuals for making the "best" choices for their children, or whether the social pressure to send children to public school really exists at all. As an opinion writer recently put it in the *Wall Street Journal*, "when parents move their child to a private school, no one accuses them of sabotaging public schools."

Except that when parents move their child to a private school, they *are* sabotaging public schools. They are doing so by draining the public school of resources: their own time and participation, as well as money. In the 15 (and growing) states that offer school vouchers, every student who leaves public school takes public money with them. On top of that, every child who leaves public school for private school chips away at public education's legitimacy as an important and necessary institution, and gives conservative lawmakers more ammunition to take money out of the public school system. But private schools are sabotaging public schools in a deep-



er way, too. The problem lies in the very existence of private schools. If parents are willing to pay for their kids to go to private school, this must mean they perceive some greater value in private school than in public school. And this, in turn, means one of two things: either the parents are wrong and they're getting ripped off (i.e. this is indeed rich people's foolishness), or they're right and we have an educational system that cannot be morally justified. Both of these are bad outcomes.

There are some possible counterarguments here, but most of them are wrong. First, you might say that there's a difference between the quality of *education* and the quality of the other things people get at private schools. Maybe private schools are like social club substitutes for parents, who just want to have their kids in the same small environment together. And if, let's say, the public school down the street doesn't have lower test scores than the private school, then what's unequal about this? Quite a bit, as it happens. The networks that kids form in school—the people that they're surrounded with, whether peers or adults—and the relative affluence or poverty around them largely determine life outcomes. (The schools themselves love to tout this!) There can be no “separate but equal” along class lines any more than there can be along racial lines. The rich kids will inevitably get more *value* out of their private school education, if not in terms of test scores then in terms of connections, aspirations, ambitions, and self-worth.

The same goes for amenities. For example, you might say that so long as test scores are equal between private and public schools, it isn't any kind of moral problem if rich parents want to pay to send their

kids to schools with 5-star meals and a rock climbing wall. But the idea that the quality of food and recreational activities aren't important parts of education is far off the mark. Every aspect of kids' environments at school and at home shape their ability to learn and grow. And, as above, having a rock wall and excellent meals at one school and not another *says something* to the kids of those respective schools about their relative worth, something that they may internalize forever.

A somewhat better counterargument is that equality is impossible to achieve. Even if every kid in the country were to attend perfectly equal public schools, rich parents would always be able to do *more* outside of school. Rich kids would still eat better at home and bring better food for lunch. They would be able to pay for violin lessons and rock walls and anything else that the school didn't provide. If parents were really committed, maybe they'd pull their kids out of school altogether and hire top scholars to tutor their kids individually, like young aristocrats. So long as we have differences in wealth we will inevitably have differences in education, and therefore—the argument goes—we shouldn't waste time thinking about the particular unfairness of public versus private education at all.

This might be true, but it's rather nihilistic, and not very useful. If we're going to presuppose that the world will always be unequal, or that we should do nothing about unjust systems until the revolution comes and society magically equalizes itself, then we might as well not do anything at all.



FINLAND? PINOCHET?

So what *is* to be done? One answer: abolish private schools. Finland already did it in the 1970s. Everyone in Finland attends public school, all the way up from kindergarten through college and graduate school, if they choose to pursue higher education. And educational outcomes in Finland are spectacular, consistently ranking near the top of international assessments and far outperforming U.S. students. Cuba has a similar system with similar results: consistent outperformance of its peer countries that have not abolished private school. Both countries present a ready contrast to a heavily privatized nation like Chile. Thanks to education privatization efforts undertaken by the murderous dictator Pinochet, around 50 percent of students in Chile attend private schools. (In the United States, around 10 percent of students attend private schools.) Chile also lags far behind its peers, particularly Cuba, in both student performance and class integration within schools.

The idea of doing away with private schools comes up from time to time in U.S. educational discourse. In 1922, Oregon passed a law requiring all children to attend public schools. However, in a strong showing for corporate rights, the Supreme Court sided in 1925 with private schools who sued to block the law. The Court held, rather incredibly and without much in the way of precedent, that while the state can compel kids to go to school, compelling them to go to *public* school is an unreasonable interference with their parents' liberty.

Nonetheless, the idea continues to bubble up. Last March, the *Atlantic* ran a long story by Julie Halpert which conducted dueling thought experiments: what if the United States banned private school? What if it banned public school? But, as with most of the private versus public discourse, much of the discussion was spent in the weeds of differences between how private and public schools work *now*. That is, Halpert notes that private schools have more resources, smaller classes, and more teachers. She also notes that public schools have more transparency, more accountability, and more rights (especially for disabled students). Private schools can be more flexible in their assessments of students, but can also discriminate. Public schools can be forced to integrate, but are beholden to standardized tests.

But very little about the *nature* of public schools and private schools demands these divergences. There's no reason that public schools couldn't have a very low student-to-teacher ratio, or lots of resources, or smaller classes. There's nothing inherent about public schools that requires us to govern every aspect of childrens' lives according to data-driven metrics. We aren't required to have a Race to the Top.

We don't even need standardized tests. As Pasi Sahlberg, a former Finnish education official, has explained in his book and to multiple media outlets, Finland has no standardized tests at all except for an optional one at the end of high school.

There are no national curriculum standards. Every teacher creates tests and manages grades according to their own discretion. The teaching profession is well-paid and very selective. There are specialty schools for children with different needs, all of which are public. In many ways, Finnish public schools resemble American private schools. And it's working very well for them.

Now it's time for the standard conservative objection to any adoption of Nordic-style policies: *this would never work in America because we are too racially and economically diverse for our [public schools] to function as well as [Finland's]*. It's an absurd argument, of course. Forcing schools to integrate reduces racism and improves performance. Who's to say Finnish schools wouldn't be even better if it were a more racially diverse country? Also, Finland is demographically similar to Norway, which has private schools and significantly underperforms Finland.

Another objection: private schools are too entrenched in the American system to be rid of them. It would be too big a change. But Finland hasn't always had public-only education. As I mentioned earlier, the Finnish system was implemented in the 1970s, and in fact it was done with the explicit goal of achieving educational equity. Finland didn't abolish private school solely to improve educational outcomes; it was to make manifest the principle that all children are equally deserving of the best possible education. Finland abolished private schools to make things more equal, and in doing so they also improved the quality of their education considerably.

WHAT ABOUT THE ANARCHISTS?

There's another and much more compelling objection to the abolition of private schools, however. In an all-public system, there is very little escape. If you are, say, an anarchist, you might not like the idea that education is solely controlled by the state. In fact there's a solid line of anarchist educational thought, beginning with William Godwin and running through contemporary writers like Jonathan Kozol, that public education will always serve the powers that be. In 1793, Godwin wrote that "government by its very nature counteracts the improvement of the individual mind," and that if education is left up to the government, then that government "will not fail to employ [education] to strengthen its hands and perpetuate its institutions." This sentiment is echoed by all your anarchist favorites: Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin all insisted on the separation of child and state.

Francisco Ferrer, a major figure in child-centric education, puts a fine point on it: "Rulers have always taken care to control the education of the people. They know better than anyone else that their power is based almost entirely on the school, and they therefore insist on retaining their monopoly on it." Ferrer, a major international figure in the beginning of the 20th century, founded the Modern Schools in Spain, a

series of educational institutions which were run on anarchist principles. These Modern Schools were co-ed, nonreligious, and experience-based. They didn't teach reading until children were around 10 years old, and instead focused on experiences and exploration. They also partnered with local universities to offer enrichment for parents and others in the community, and often served as publishing houses for activists and scholars.

The Modern Schools were necessarily private. Something like a public school existed at the time, but it was gender-segregated, run by the church, and represented everything that Ferrer's educational philosophy had reacted against. Modern Schools were funded by tuition, which was charged on a sliding scale according to parents' income. Ferrer himself was famously murdered by firing squad in 1909 for challenging the Spanish government's (and church's) monopoly on the educational system: i.e., for challenging public school with a private alternative.

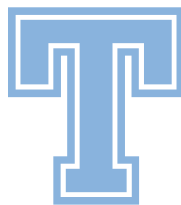
After his death, Ferrer's followers around the world opened up their own Modern Schools, but over time the movement fizzled. The two notable Modern Schools in the United States (located in New York City and Stelton, New Jersey) both struggled financially. The facilities were lacking—Margaret Sanger's daughter caught pneumonia in the freezing dormitory at the Stelton school—and both closed permanently in 1953.

But the concerns over the role of government in education—and the desire for anarchist alternatives—has not disappeared. Jonathan Kozol's book *The Night is Dark and I Am Far From Home* is a searing indictment of the way the U.S. public education system instills fear, impotence, and complacency into children. In Kozol's view, the primary purpose of the public education system is to teach children that they have no power to be moral actors in their own lives, let alone to alter the power structures around them. This extends not just to political helplessness, but to active engagement in atrocities. Of the My Lai massacre, Kozol writes:

"It is not the U.S. Army that permits a man to murder first the sense of ethics, human recognitions, in his own soul: then to be free to turn the power of his devastation outward to the eyes and forehead of another human being. Basic training does not begin in boot camp. It begins in kindergarten."

Rather than learning how to effectively leverage their power as citizens, students are taught an anodyne version of American history. They're encouraged to engage in politics by doing things like writing hopeless and useless letters to their legislators, and patting themselves on the back for their efforts. When they graduate, they are both numbed and comforted by their own powerlessness—a powerlessness that itself is an illusion. Kozol uses the example of the rich white students who care passionately about racism and poverty, and could instantly shift the policy landscape by putting their own privileged bodies on the line, for example through a hunger strike or refusal to seek medical care. But these things never occur to them, and this is by design. Kozol systematically examines every aspect of public schooling in America, from curriculum to culture

to discipline, and arrives at what he believes is the purpose of our government-sponsored educational system: what we learn in public school is to ask permission for the revolution. Or, as Noam Chomsky describes public education: "You're not supposed to think, you're supposed to obey, and just proceed through the material in whatever way they require."

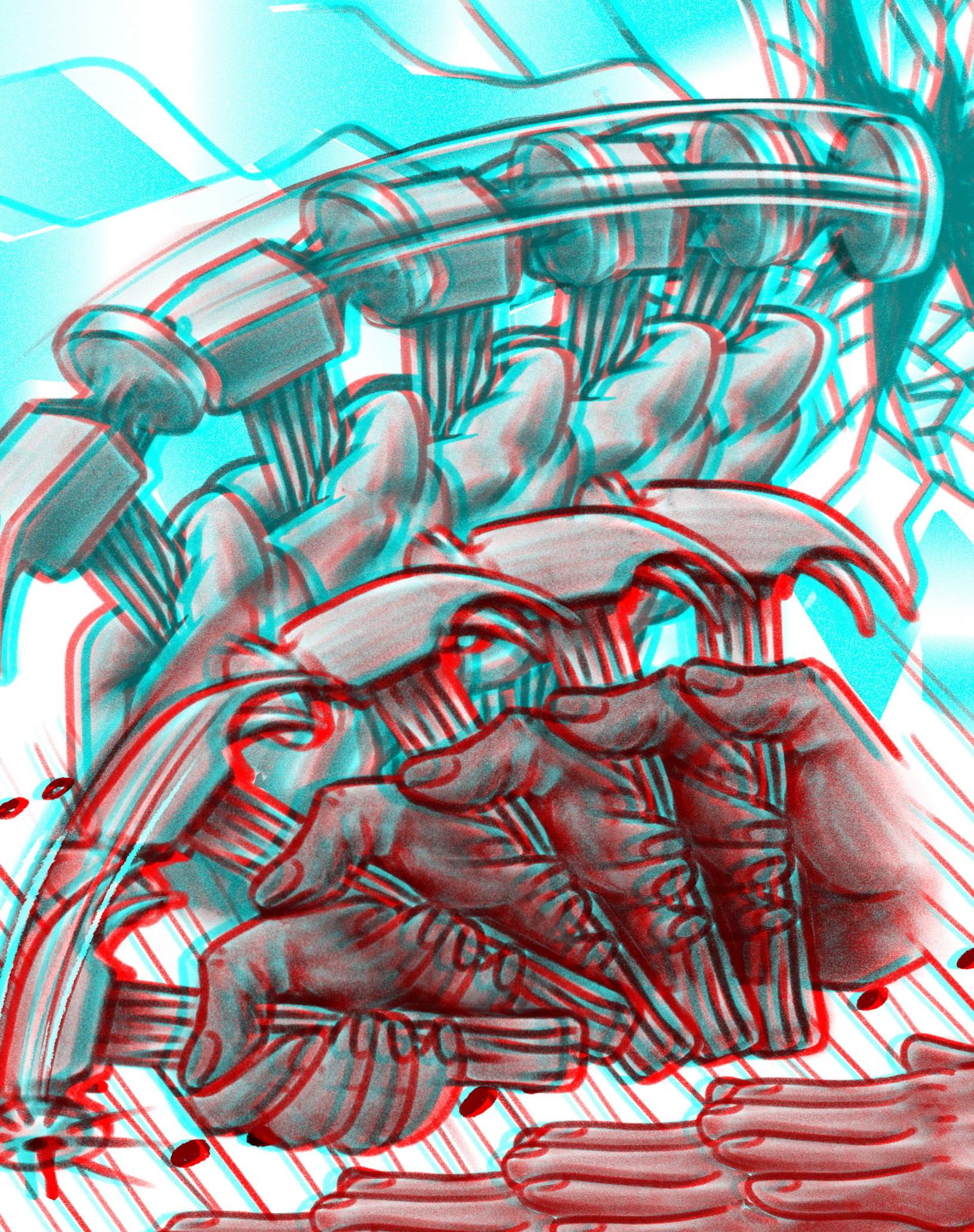


THE ANARCHISTS, AS USUAL, HAVE A POINT. Public school, particularly in the United States, has largely been a site of indoctrination. There is some geographical variance in terms of how extreme (and racist) this indoctrination is, but I doubt there's any public school in the country where you will learn as much about Eugene Debs as Henry Ford, or as much about John Brown as John Wilkes Booth.

The curriculum can be improved, the day restructured, the demands for docility and complacency tamped down. But even when we feel the state is doing well by our children, it will still have its own interests. And, particularly in the United States, governmental policies are fickle and subject to change. We will continue to have elections, and it may be impossible to truly insulate the educational system and process from the whims and prejudices of the public.

And, though I was initially somewhat dismissive of Julie Halpert's point about the flexibility of private schools, she may be onto something. Like Finnish schools, we can create a public schooling system that will de-emphasize or do away with standardized tests. But can a publicly accountable system be flexible enough to try out new pedagogical methods and theories? The various progressive education movements in the United States—Montessori, Waldorf, etc.—have been accomplished as private schools. Ferrer's own Modern Schools, and their successors in the United States, were private institutions that charged tuition on a sliding scale according to families' means. Our most effective educational reformers have felt it necessary to go outside of the government's system. Can we trust the state, which has a monopoly on violence and coercion, to teach our children to challenge authority?

Maybe, maybe not. I'm not willing to concede just yet that it's impossible to design some kind of system that will be state-supported but still free and flexible enough to offer a wide range of different educational experiences, all fostering independence of mind. Building an ideal system is a somewhat utopian question anyway. Right now, as American schools re-segregate, as majority Black and brown schools turn into miniature prisons, as children lose recess and music and art classes to spend more time with Scantrons, as performance falls and misery rises, as generations of children fare worse than their parents, as the wealthy get wealthier and find ever new ways to separate themselves from the people on whose backs their wealth is built, Finland might not be utopia, but it looks like a pretty damn good start. ✦



can we save facebook

BY YASMIN NAIR

BY THE TIME YOU READ THIS, THERE IS SURE TO have been another Facebook scandal. New revelations of Facebook's wrongdoing seem to hit the press with the regularity of Lena Dunham's *faux pas*-and-apology cycles. What will it be this time? Perhaps the social network has been using its data to unscrupulously wheedle money out of elderly people for the last ten years. Perhaps it has been secretly colluding with dodgy pet "shelters" to extract information from pet chips, using that data to target Facebook users with ads for equally dodgy pet food made out of the animals killed and ground up in the basements of said dodgy shelters. Perhaps it's something even worse.

My hypotheticals may sound shockingly overblown, but Facebook's own actions have given reason for cynicism. Consider that Facebook once ran an undisclosed experiment on users in order to test a theory about "emotional contagion." (Does sad content make you sad? *Why yes*, said your five-year-old niece. Not sure we needed a study to prove that.) And, of course, Facebook infamously exposed the personal data of 87 million users to Cambridge Analytica, a conservative political consulting firm. The company has admitted that it tracks users' locations even if they think they have opted out of location-tracking, and Facebook was fined a record \$5 billion for its violations of user privacy rights. The company had so many scandals last year alone that *Wired* ran a story called "The 21 (And Counting) Biggest Facebook Scandals of 2018."

Mark Zuckerberg's apologies for these infractions always end up sounding like bits out of Monty Python: *Oh, gosh, yes, that's a problem. Yes, we sort of knew we had a problem, and you've now found out it was a problem, and we're so, so sorry that you found out about it. Which is to say, of course, we're sorry there was a problem, but also that you found out about it. Can we fix it? Yes, of course, we can. Have we? Well, of course, we're making every attempt to make sure we come up with an ideal solution. This has been a learning process for us all, and we thank you so very much for telling us you think this is a problem.*

Facebook is becoming like the problematic cousin who found your social security number, embezzled your funds, and still keeps insisting that he didn't mean it, really, he didn't. (Then you find out that

he's been pulling the same shady shit all over town for years. And then you find out that there's shit you didn't even know of. *In other countries.*)

Nearly a third of the world's population is on Facebook, with 2.41 billion subscribers worldwide (in contrast, Twitter has a mere 333 million users). India leads with 270 million, the U.S. second and Indonesia in third place. These vast numbers of users, all of whom can be targeted with personalized advertising and kept hooked with personally-tailored newsfeeds, are what keep Facebook profitable for Zuckerberg, today the eighth-richest man in the world (and possibly the most influential). Facebook also owns Instagram, Whatsapp, and Oculus VR. In effect, Facebook now controls a sizeable chunk of the platforms that allow people to share information and images of themselves. So much of what is transmitted into our minds flows through its channels. Of course, despite Facebook's ubiquity, we may never actually know exactly how many people are actively using it for anything more than, say, keeping up on friends' cats or grandchildren or posting popular memes of the day. But none of that matters in terms of the numbers, which keep the advertising revenue flowing.

Is social media worth it? In studying Facebook, is it possible to come to a verdict that's neither Luddite nor completely celebratory? Facebook has managed to disrupt, in ways both good and bad, our sense of the world itself, seeming to diminish distances between people and events. It has contributed to the erosion of the formerly clear distinctions between the public and the private. And its illusion of worldwide comity erases the evidence of the massive digital gulf between entire populations of the world and even inside countries. In the US alone, large numbers of people have severely restricted access to the internet based on factors like race and income.

Facebook's history can be murky. It is a story that has been retold countless times, most famously in the movie *The Social Network*, but much of it will be bound up for eternity in Non Disclosure Agreements (all of which benefit Mark Zuckerberg). We know that it began as a college networking tool with insidious aims, namely ranking women on their beauty. From these humble misogynistic origins in the freshman dorms of Harvard sprang a vast network en-

WHY WON'T YOU DEBATE ME?

A quick and handy guide to when "debate" is acceptable and useful.



circling the globe and seemingly infiltrating all aspects of our lives.

The ways the platform changes, so much and so rapidly, can cause concern and even panic. Every now and then, as after the Cambridge Analytica scandal, hordes of users will threaten to leave, disgusted at the corporation's blatant cavalier disregard for user privacy in favor of profits. But many will inevitably return. We are like mice that flounce off into the nearby woods, determined to make it to The Great Yonder, only to realize that there are more crumbs and a familiar warmth to be found back inside the house. Because say what you will—and we must say a lot—about the evils of Facebook, it has come to *define* the idea of a social network and changed human communication entirely. To declare it Evil Manifest and disconnect yourself entirely from it means cutting yourself off from others, and can be damaging to your professional life.

Facebook *has* made life easier in obvious ways. For instance, it provides a simple way to advertise events. It's relatively easy to create an event page, dress it up with a snazzy image or two, and get the word out quickly to any number of people (how many of those who mark "attending" will actually show up is another question). It does also offer a way to read news items from sources we might not otherwise see, and has helped build audiences for alternatives to the mainstream press.

However, given that the content of your feed is determined by secret proprietary algorithms beyond your control, Facebook remains completely in charge of the content *and* can pull the plug on alternative outlets anytime it chooses. At one point, Mark Zuckerberg unilaterally announced that the network would be emphasizing pet photos over political news, in order to make people happier, a move that threatened to immediately damage the revenues of media outlets that depend on clicks from Facebook links. Nobody has any meaningful veto power over decisions like this. There is no other comparable social network to go to, no market competition. You either stay on Facebook and accept its terms, or you go off the grid.

In fact, journalists, writers, and some other professionals find that they *have* to maintain accounts in order to make connections with others in their fields. The very existence of *Current Affairs* depends in some ways on Facebook, and the company's decisions about how to display content directly affect the success of this magazine. (If you are reading this article digitally, it might well be because it showed up in your feed, i.e. because Facebook decided to show it to you.)

It's disturbing that Facebook's financial incentives are determining what people see, because what's good for Facebook might not always be good for journalism. Stories are often displayed—as they are now on many media sites themselves, including the *New York Times*—in order of "popularity." But popular isn't the same as important, and many excellently-researched and well-written pieces are banished to the digital Hades at the bottom of the page. It should be obvious that many of the pieces that need promoting are precisely the ones that *don't* get clicked on, the ones that should keep popping up over and over until people give in and click rather than the ones they physically cannot keep themselves from reading (e.g. the ones with cats and Trump). The current formula is topsyturvy: the articles that least need promotion receive the most of it. As a result, everyone ends up talking about the same few topics whose popularity has snowballed—or rather, everyone ends up talking about the fact that everyone is talking about how everyone is talking about the stories.

Facebook comes to shape the world of many professional writers. My own career would not exist without social media. As magazines and newspapers fold and devolve and vanish into the ether, it's harder to maintain any kind of profile as a writer without a palpable social media presence. But a "profile" isn't just a page you put up and leave. It must be maintained judiciously and tended with fresh Content (indeed, beginner writers are often advised on techniques for successful Tweeting and Facebooking). Of course, one must be careful: tweet and argue or "engage" with people all day long and you'll end up with little work, and perhaps even spur a backlash or microscandal that forces you to drop out temporarily. But use social media in the (mysterious) Right Way, and you can build up recognition and a degree of readerly interest and loyalty—and often, attract editors who might ask you to write for them.

Is it all a rather cheap and tawdry to make a living? The horror, the horror, of admitting that writing is a profession, not a calling! But only legacy publications like the *New York Times* still employ columnists like Friedman, Dowd, and Brooks who can effectively write the same article over and over and over again until the end of time (or of the *Times*). These hallowed sinecures (with their offices—they have actual offices!) are rare. Some writers are like high-end escorts who earn enough to live in penthouses and dine at the finest restaurants. Writers like me, on the other hand, are the forty-dollar hustlers on social media's alleyways, standing on the corner of Hype and Promise ceaselessly peddling our wares, poking our heads into the windows of every passing car: "Hey, honey, wanna see my Hot Take?" We make our living on the streets, and since Facebook is the new public square, that's where you'll find us plying our trade.

Of course, it's all supposed to be about "friendship." One does not make Facebook acquaintances: there are Followers and there are Friends and there is nothing in between. Many grumpily complain that Facebook has rendered the word "friend" meaningless—on the platform it describes everyone from close relatives to people one met once at a party (or never met at all) and accepted only so as not to make unnecessary enemies.

But concepts like "friendship" are themselves hardly static and unchanging. There have been types of passionate same-sex friendship in previous ages that strike us oddly. Relationships like that between Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Fry Speed—passionate friends who exhibited physical and emotional ardour unbounded by the requirement of remaining "just" friends—lead some overly eager members of the LGBTQ community to claim them as gay and lesbian lovers, and it was not uncommon for same-sex friends to sleep together without being sexually involved. In an *Atlantic* article about Facebook friendships, "How Real Are Facebook Friends?" Jacoba Urist points out that "relationship dynamics in the 21st century" have shifted enough that it is actually possible for us to maintain strong ties with a range of people we may not even meet at first, or even ever.

The paranoia about Facebook, too, might not be fully warranted. The force of Facebook's newness, and the changes it has brought about, compels many who study it to imagine that all is death and doom, and that there is no escaping the void created by this ghastly new machinery of surveillance and snakery, against which we can form no resistance. But if we try to think about Facebook in pro-

ductive ways, we should be willing to critique the critiques of Facebook. Certain kinds of anti-Facebook paranoia may be the product of an unfruitful elitist mindset, one common both on the right and among liberals.

Consider Siva Vaidyanathan's book *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. The title itself indicates a belief in classic liberal principles: there is something that exists called "democracy," a term that's used throughout the book to indicate an untroubled (and untroubling) vision of a mass of people all working towards some commonly held goals. Facebook has served to "disconnect" us from each other and thus thwarts the attainment of this Democracy with a capital D. Vaidyanathan is critical of Facebook and its surveillant data mining but he also, bafflingly, insists that:

"...the very institutions we have carefully constructed and maintained to filter out nonsense and noise and to forge consensus of thought and action are withering. This has occurred over just a few decades, from that moment in the late twentieth century when it seemed the Enlightenment had finally prevailed and democracy, freedom, pluralism, and universal dignity just might have a chance to flower."

This is a simplistic view of history and one oddly at variance with our understanding of actual history. Our institutions have always produced nonsense and noise, not filtered them. And while they have indeed forged "consensus of thought," the proper term for that is "manufacturing consent," the pernicious way in which elite media institutions have molded public opinion to support often horrific state policies and the interests of rich capitalists. Facebook, thank our Cat Overlords, has provided a space where we can have more open discussions with one another.

Vaidyanathan is generous to Facebook's motives even as he is critical of its effects. He writes that "Facebook was not originally created to be a company" but to "accomplish a social mission — to make the world more open and connected." And yet later, he writes, of the disastrous foray of Facebook into India, that "[Sheryl] Sandberg and Facebook certainly meant well. But they were dealing with a society they did not understand, and one in which many of its citizens do not mean each other well." The fact that Facebook openly colluded with Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India who has been implicated in the genocide of Muslims, seems to bother him not one bit. Over and over, Vaidyanathan nurtures the illusion that Facebook and its founders and chief officers like Sandberg *really just meant well* even as he dissects the deep surveillance strategies of the corporation. It's a peculiarly schizophrenic approach to a capitalist entity: the idea that a corporation means well even as it wreaks havoc upon personkind.

THE FILM *ALIEN* IS ABOUT A DYSTOPIAN WORLD where Earth—practically ruled by the Weyland Corporation—mines the universe for ever more profits and where one of its marauding/exploring ships runs into a frightening new species with acid for blood.

The creature is thus invulnerable, because wounding it does far more damage to its enemies. It's also a shapeshifter, lodging inside humans in its embryonic state and bursting out of them when ready. Its only function is to look for new hosts to carry it to new planets where it can reproduce until it has sucked all their resources from them, before moving on. At one point, the robot Ash—planted by Weyland to bring the creature back to Earth for

military research purposes—speaks admiringly of the creature as "the perfect organism." He goes on, "Its structural perfection is matched only by its hostility... I admire its purity. A survivor... unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality."

Capitalism is the Alien, obviously. Corporations follow the ruthless logic of maximizing profit and power to any end, however destructive. What Facebook destroys, it destroys because it is operated in the interests of its owners rather than its users, "unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality." But Siva Vaidyanathan wants us to think about capitalism differently, as something that can be reformed, perhaps even given a heart. He writes about how "doing good" is what "inspired" Whole Foods CEO John Mackey, ignoring Mackey's ardent anti-union politics and his desire to make lots of money.

It is not surprising that Vaidyanathan is an ardent supporter of Hillary Clinton and is wedded to the idea that she lost the election because of Russian interference—a theme that comes up a fair bit in the book—rather than conceding that she was a dreadful candidate who didn't think she even needed to show up in places like Wisconsin to argue for her own candidacy. If we keep listening to people like Vaidyanathan, we're bound to be devoured by capitalism. (Unlike the Alien, however, it may not make its way off to another planet: it will languish and die here, taking us with it.)

Vaidyanathan has become *the* critical voice on Facebook and social media, with a regular column in *The Guardian* and regular interviews and podcasts, though there are other, much better books on Facebook and the history of social media. These include Jason Silverman's *Terms of Service: Social Media and the Price of Constant Connection* which, unlike *Anti-social Media*, has no illusions about the depth of Zuckerberg's cynicism and profiteering—the book's epigraph is Zuckerberg's description of account-holders as "idiots" who give him their data. John Cheney-Lippold's *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of our Digital Selves* is a deep, historically inflected examination of the very idea of the "algorithm" and how social media mines our data. Yasha Levine's *Surveillance Valley: The Secret Military History of the Internet* gives us, well, the secret military history of the internet, adding a layer of complexity to its



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origin stories. These authors, at the very least, hold a fundamental suspicion of the way capitalism uses social media.

It's unfortunate, then, that Vaidyanathan's peculiar mix of cheerleading and funk about our loss of "Enlightenment values" gains so much more attention. But Vaidyanathan is part of an intellectual tendency in media criticism that has long had currency. It's telling that he claims the late New York University professor Neil Postman as a mentor and intellectual role model. Postman's 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, became a classic in a genre of media criticism that sees television as worthless and manipulative—and sees viewers and consumers of the same as dupes whose minds are empty vessels, ready to be filled with garbage assumptions and opinions as long as they are all presented vivaciously and entertainingly. Postman may not be much cited these days, but this type of media analysis defines the liberal response to, say, FOX News, in which a direct line is drawn from the mouth-foaming conservatism seen on the channel and the vituperative politics of exclusion and hatred among those identified as Trump voters.

The paranoid view of media, technology, and pop culture can also be seen in, for instance, Tipper Gore's ultimately successful even if highly ridiculed campaign to slap "Parental Advisory" stickers on audio recordings deemed offensive. Postman's view influenced approaches towards video games and resulted in the long-lasting and deeply damaging view that watching violence creates violent behaviour. Little to no attention is paid to the several cultural and political reasons that lead to an increase in violence, and—as might be expected—Tipper Gore's campaign was not very subtly racialised: the music most often targeted as unsuitable has inevitably been genres like rap and hip hop.

What Postman contributed is an immensely influential idea that popular culture is an inherently debased and debasing form of production. That ideological slant has crossed over to the realm of scholarship that looks at social media. It's a schizophrenic idea that pays no heed to the many contradictory ways in which we consume and use social media (After all, Siva Vaidyanathan's columns in *The Guardian* are mostly shared online through social media.) The Postmanesque view of social media and culture requires us to believe that consumers are dupes whose very emotions can be manipulated easily to evil ends (recall Facebook's interest in "emotional contagion"), and that perhaps we ought to all spend more time reading books in print and only watch films by Jean-Luc Godard and Satyajit Ray.

As Silverman, Cheney-Lippold, and Levine, and others point out, we *do* have reason to be paranoid. Our information is being stored and used in ways that are perplexing and arcane, potentially allowing financial predators to access and control our most intimate lives. But social media is here, and it's here to stay. Even if, say, Twitter, disappears tomorrow, something else is bound to replace it (Facebook, often mocked as a venue for the aging, is doing fine in a world where people actually do age and end up wanting more than conversations in less than 140 characters with anonymous eggs). What do we do with social media and our paranoia?

Paranoia is a built-in feature of the state, as is our understanding that we are always being infiltrated or being preyed upon from the inside. But paranoia need not be a destabilizing fear that freezes our work and sends us packing like Luddites, obsessed with the latest conspiracy theories. Instead, it can simply mean that we keep interrogating the state and the nature of our social institutions. If we give in to paranoia, we forget that the goal is not simply to *avoid* the ma-

chinery by going "off the grid" or "underground" or using tools like Signal as go-arounds. Our end goal is to destroy the machine itself.

How might social media bring about that end? How might paranoia play a role in activism and organizing and in creating a better world? Civil rights activists marched knowing full well they were being surveilled and, worse, that they would more likely than not be brutalized and killed by police. The same has been true of all revolutionary movements, whether in India or South Africa or Algeria. In 1999, protesters of the World Trade Organization shut down the city of Seattle and smashed the windows of Starbucks, faced by cops whose body armour and riot gear were so insidious that they effectively became worldwide images of state repression.

LET US VISIT A NIGHT IN NEW YORK CITY IN 1972, when thousands gathered to support a Black radical socialist feminist who had been declared an enemy of the state. She stood on the stage and exhorted the audience to rise up and bring about a socialist America. She was behind a four-sided panel of bulletproof glass as she spoke, because she and her supporters knew fully well that she was under threat of assassination from the state and white supremacists.

The woman was Angela Davis and the evening part of a campaign simply titled "Free Angela." Millions across the world, in countries far and wide, responded, at a time when social media was not even imagined as a possibility, when people had to pick up actual telephones connected to wires in the ground and send telegraphs to get movements going. What sparked such deep and profound support for Davis was not the desire to be part of a cool movement but a long series of historical connections made over several decades, long before Davis was even born.

Is it possible to create such an event of such momentous importance today? The fact that protesters around the world *use* social media to spread the news and update each other on safety and strategies does not mean that Twitter or Facebook or Whatsapp are singular causes of revolution: Twitter once shamelessly took credit for the "Arab Spring"—a view that has since been mocked out of existence. Social media is a tool, and it is admittedly a tool that also opens its users to the most cynical and often dangerous forms of data mining, as Cheney-Lippold amply documents. But it's here to stay, and paranoia and contempt about and for it get us nowhere.

The paranoia that rules much of what constitutes a critique of Facebook is unproductive because it is so rarely tied to an actual demolition of capitalism itself, which is why so many of the popular figures who criticise surveillance and social media are not anti-capitalists or anti-authoritarians. How might we recover social media so that it serves our ends and not its own? For starters, we can have a healthy cynicism about them without holding them in contempt. We might then devise ways to wrest control of social media and turn its platforms into public entities. Consider the public library: seeded by millionaire philanthropists like Carnegie Mellon, these institutions did not even begin as free public libraries. Today, when run well—like the new and spectacular one in Helsinki—a public library becomes the social and cultural hub of a community: it becomes the place where revolutions take root and spring forth. If Facebook were cured of its rapacious ways—if we extracted the Alien from within the host body and threw it back out into space—it might still become something useful to us, instead of something that uses us. ♣

A T L A S O F T H E

APOCALYPSE

text by **SAM MILLER MCDONALD** map by **NICK SIROTICH**

Every day we get news of a thousand-year flood here, a region-wide wildfire there, record-breaking heat in France, a freak snow-storm in the Sahara, a dozen species hurtling toward extinction in Britain, new tropical diseases in sub-Saharan Africa, sinking islands in Oceania, and the draconian, cruel treatment of climate refugees in Germany, or Italy, or the United States that is all too historically familiar.

It can be easy to slip into the narrow tunnel vision that classifies each of these tragedies as distinct, isolated events. But they're not. It can be comforting to focus all our attention and resources toward putting out a fire here or abolishing an authoritarian agency there or erecting a new seawall over here, believing that these actions will fix anything. But they won't. It's tempting to forget about one unprecedented hurricane as the next one bears down upon some other unlucky city. But we mustn't.

Instead, it's vital that we connect all of these catastrophes and view them as they are, as the product of one common source: fossil fuel economies. It's as important to connect past events with present and future ones as it is to connect spatially disparate climate disasters—those happening in Europe with those in Africa or Asia—and to see that it all shares the same cause. The climate and ecological crisis is one all-encompassing calamity. It's not, as many institutions across the political spectrum would have us believe, just one political issue among many others. It is the map on which all issues play out. It is the epoch in which all dramas will unfold. If we don't cure the disease, treating the symptoms individually simply won't work.

To help us remember that these disastrous events—past, present, and future, all across the world—are connected and share one common source, here's an Atlas of the Apocalypse. This map attempts to give a sense of the kinds of disasters that have occurred and will continue to intensify according to their geographies and ecologies. These are not worst-case scenario future impacts: They are things that have already happened and things that are certain to happen even more frequently and intensely given the changes that have already been baked into our atmosphere. Perhaps seeing all of these impacts together on one map can help give us the perspective necessary to do the epic work of halting this catastrophe before it halts us forever.

NORTH AMERICA

WEST: droughts, wildfires, extreme heat, more extreme storms and tornadoes, border crises, sea-level rise, landslides, extinctions

SOUTH: tropical disease expansion, floods, extreme hurricanes, border crises, sea-level rise, extinctions, crop yield losses, political instability

MIDWEST: more extreme tornadoes, floods, droughts, tropical disease expansion, sea-level rise, extinctions, crop yield losses, resource conflicts

NORTH: permafrost melt/methane bombs, wildfires, sea-level rise, floods, extinctions, polar ice melt, glacier melt, disease vector expansion, border crises

SOUTH AMERICA

ALL OVER: mass forest diebacks (Amazon), wars and civil wars, desertification/savanna, genocide of indigenous groups, floods, droughts, famines, mass extinctions, sea-level rise (coasts), expanding diseases, border crises, resource conflicts, mass carbon bombs from deforestation, extreme heat, glacier melt (Andes), crop yield loss, extreme hurricanes, extensive coral reef bleaching and death, displacement, political instability, climate dictators

EUROPE

NORTHERN/WESTERN: extreme heat, floods, droughts, wildfires, extinctions, sea-level rise, resource conflicts, tropical disease expansion, political instability, air quality decline

SOUTHERN/EASTERN: border crises, droughts, extreme heat, extinctions, resource conflicts, tropical disease expansion, political instability, wildfires, air quality decline, climate dictators

AFRICA

NORTH: droughts, expanding desertification, sea-level rise, extreme heat, famines, displacement, political instability, resource conflicts

WEST: extinction, floods, sea-level rise, crop yield loss, forest diebacks, resource conflicts, extreme heat, displacement, disease expansion, air quality decline, wildfires, desertification

EAST: glacier melt, sea-level rise, crop yield loss, extinctions, climate dictators, resource conflicts, extreme heat, famines, displacement, tropical disease expansion, air quality decline, wildfires, desertification, extreme storms

SOUTH: crop yield loss, sea-level rise, extinctions, border crises, extreme heat, famines, displacement, tropical disease expansion, air quality decline, wildfires, desertification

ASIA

EAST: sea-level rise, extreme heat, extreme storms, droughts, floods, crop yield loss, disease expansion, displacement, border crises, extinctions, air quality decline

SOUTH: small island loss and inundation, sea-level rise, extreme heat, displacement, droughts, wildfires, flooding, extreme storms, glacier melt, resource conflicts, extinctions, invasive species expansion, forest diebacks

MIDDLE EAST: extreme heat, sea-level rise, droughts, desertification, crop yield loss, border crises, resource conflicts, displacement, air quality decline, political instability

AUSTRALIA

ALL OVER: mass coral bleaching and death, desertification, droughts, sea-level rise, extinctions, extreme heat, crop yield loss, political instability, indigenous genocide, wildfires, displacements

ANTARCTICA

ALL OVER: polar ice melt reducing albedo effect, glacier melt, extinctions, permafrost melt/methane bombs, sea-level rise

OCEANUS

ALL OVER: mass extinctions, acidification, deoxygenation, reducing solar radiation, changes to oceanic circulation and chemistry

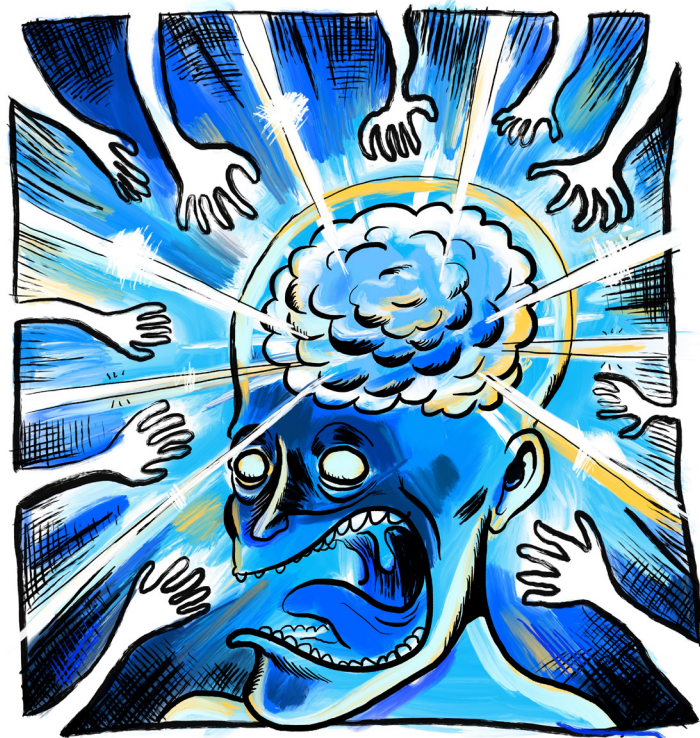




Diversions of Empire

U.S. Paranoia about the “Islamist-Socialist-Narco-Jihadi” Menace

BY BELÉN FERNÁNDEZ



ON THE LAST DAY OF JULY, US IMMIGRATION and Customs Enforcement (better known as ICE) tweeted out an alert for a “most wanted fugitive.” The target was one Tareck El Aissami, Venezuela’s Minister of Industry and National Production, whom the United States has branded a “specially designated narcotics trafficker” (“SDNT”). The tweet was accompanied by the hashtag #MostWantedWednesdays, lest anyone think this was not some serious shit. Twitter users were warned to “not attempt to apprehend [the] subject” on their own.

Notorious right-wing news site *Breitbart* quickly grabbed the ball and took off with it, proclaiming El Aissami the “Hezbollah ‘bag man’ running Venezuela’s oil industry.” The source of this particular allegation was the self-styled “terrorism expert” Dr. Vanessa Neumann, one of a coterie of characters currently dedicated to exploiting a lucrative niche: the forcible fusion of America’s international enemies into a single, terrifying monster, whose power and reach successfully provide a justification for U.S. militarism worldwide. Call it #WhackjobWednesdays(AndEveryOtherDay).

This strategy is not new. During the Cold War, the United States needed to portray communism as a direct threat to the nation in order to justify its policy of arming a cavalcade of right-wing dictators and death squads from El Salvador to Argentina. Back then, the communist monster was said to manifest itself in various ways—like the purported Sandinista-Palestinian-Soviet-Cuban-Iranian-Libyan-East Ger-

man-Bulgarian-North Korean scheme to attack the United States from Nicaragua, dutifully exposed by Ronald Reagan in 1986.

Nowadays, some of the old nemeses remain, but the monster has shapeshifted to reflect today’s imperial interests in the so-called U.S. “backyard” and beyond. With both the Iranian government and Lebanon’s Hezbollah occupying a prominent position in U.S. crosshairs, what better way to help validate the brutal sanctions on Iran, U.S.-backed Israeli bellicosity, and other American machinations in the Middle East than by visualizing the Iranian-Hezbollah duo right on America’s doorstep? Even better when you can link them to Venezuela, or some other thorn in the side of empire.

LET’S START WITH THE ABOVE-NAMED “TERRORISM expert” Vanessa Neumann, a Caracas-born writer, political theorist, wealthy socialite, (and Mick Jagger’s ex-girlfriend), whose CV now also includes service as the “Official Representative of Pres. Juan Guaidó to the United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland, and the International Maritime Organization.” (Guaidó, of course, is the politician who spontaneously anointed himself leader of Venezuela in January 2019, but who has not yet managed to dispense with the actual Venezuelan president, Nicolás Maduro, despite financial and other encouragement from the United States.)

Neumann’s LinkedIn profile defines her as an “entrepreneurse” (seriously) “with extensive relationships to identify reliable

partners and bridge relationships across Western Hemisphere industry and governments.” She also served the pre-Chávez Venezuelan oil industry, in addition to doing other cool things like being an “academic reviewer for the U.S. military’s Special Operations Command (SOCOM) teaching text on counter-insurgency in Colombia.” This year, her entrepreneur-ship landed her in the spotlight at the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, where she argued against the Prohibiting Unauthorized Military Action in Venezuela Act on the grounds that Venezuela was “facing a massive starvation—that rivals that of Ethiopia, Somalia, and Darfur.” She also claimed that continued unrest would cause Venezuelans to flee the country, and those escaping citizens were likely to join up with ISIS in Trinidad and Tobago. “We [Venezuelans] have already been invaded,” Neumann declared, and “our slaughter is at the behest of nefarious foreign powers.” Hence, she argued, the United States should permit military action in Venezuela, because such “international assistance” could help wrest “territorial control” away from a bevy of “non-state armed groups” including the Colombian paramilitaries FARC and ELN as well as Hezbollah.

In a May article for Saudi Arabia’s Al Arabiya English website, Neumann threw herself wholeheartedly into her position as Monsterfinder-General, asserting that Maduro had allowed the finance department of Venezuela’s state-owned oil company to become a “money laundering mechanism for everyone from Iran to the FARC to Russian organized crime.” In particular, Neumann emphasized the “blood ties” that bound Hezbollah to Venezuela, in the form of “bag man” and SDNT Tareck El Aissami, who is of Syrian-Lebanese heritage (need we any further proof?!). Given—as Neumann insists—that Hezbollah and Venezuela are clearly partners in the drug trade, there’s a danger that Hezbollah would “seek to keep Maduro in situ through asymmetric or terrorist operations.”

BUT IS THERE ACTUALLY ANY EVIDENCE THAT Hezbollah is involved with drugs in Venezuela? Several media outlets including the *New York Times* have claimed as much, though FAIR, the media watchdog organization, has denounced the *Times*’ reporting in particular as unverifiable U.S. government propaganda. The historian and investigative journalist Gareth Porter told me some years back—with regard to U.S. efforts to bust Hezbollah in tandem with alleged Lebanese-Colombian drug kingpin Ayman Joumaa—that “the problem with the kind of declarations issued by U.S. officials vaguely claiming financial links between an alleged drug lord and Hezbollah is that they are completely lacking in transparency.” In other words, no real proof of collaboration is provided and there is absolutely no way to verify these claims. Porter contended that, “in the absence of more clear-cut evidence, one must suspect that the alleged link is nothing more than [the two groups]

having some dealings with the same bank in Beirut.” Nonetheless, any allegations of narco-conspiracy between U.S. enemies tend to be treated in the media as unquestioned fact.

Hezbollah itself happens to be a devout Shia organization which claims to fiercely oppose sinful behavior such as, you know, drug trafficking. As Lebanese scholar Amal Saad, author of *Hezbollah: Politics and Religion*, commented to me, “the U.S. media and ‘terrorism experts’ who together make up the terrorism industry uncritically reproduce unsubstantiated allegations [from] official sources,” seeking in part to destroy what legitimacy Hezbollah may have “by detracting from its Islamic religious credentials and tarnishing it with drug money.”

Consider the 2017 denunciation of Hezbollah by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA), who labelled the group “one of the top terror threats in the world,” and asserted that the Lebanese party was an entirely Iranian creation, which the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) had recently “implicated... in a multimillion-dollar drug traffic and money laundering network that spanned four continents and put cocaine ultimately on the streets of the United States.” Royce had encountered Hezbollah himself in 2006, when his visit to Haifa happened to overlap with Israel’s ruthless 34-day war on Lebanon. From Royce’s perspective, the primary victims were the Israelis: “There were 600 victims from Haifa in the trauma hospital who were being treated as a result of the [Hezbollah] attacks on civilian neighborhoods.”

Studiously left out of Royce’s crime scene report, however, were the Lebanese victims. The Israeli military slaughtered an estimated 1,200 people in Lebanon during the war, the majority of whom were civilians. And Hezbollah, it bears underscoring, didn’t materialize out of nowhere; rather, its origins lie in the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon that killed—according to much reliable reporting and to Noam Chomsky himself—some 20,000 Lebanese and Palestinians. In this case, too, the vast majority of the dead were civilians. In his book *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*, veteran Middle East journalist Robert Fisk recounts Israel’s phosphorus shelling of West Beirut that summer, when patients began arriving at Barbir hospital “still on fire.” He quotes one doctor on the predicament of five-day-old twins who were brought to the hospital dead: “I had to take the babies and put them in buckets of water to put out the flames. When I took them out half an hour later, they were still burning. Even in the mortuary, they smoldered for hours.” Royce does not mention any stories like this one, let alone label them as what they are: state terrorism.

As for the currently unverified accusation that Hezbollah has been “putting cocaine on U.S. streets,” this is perhaps a good time to bring up the United States’ extremely verified habit of putting cocaine on its own streets—and supporting what some might possibly call “narco-terrorism.” The most infamous example is of course the Contra episode of the 1980s, in which U.S.-backed right-wing militias engaged in what Noam

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Chomsky has described as “a large-scale terrorist war against Nicaragua.” These militias, as it turns out, were at least partially funded by cocaine smuggled into the United States. One of the results: a crack cocaine epidemic that devastated Black communities in South Central Los Angeles. (But hey, some streets are more important than others.)

The Contra episode was not the first of its kind. As one *New York Times* op-ed indicates: “The CIA Drug Connection Is as Old as the Agency.” Published in 1993, the essay describes “CIA ties to international drug trafficking dat[ing] to the Korean War.” During the Vietnam War, heroin from a refining lab in Laos was allegedly “ferried out on the planes of the CIA’s front airline, Air America... Nowhere, however, was the CIA more closely tied to drug traffic than it was in Pakistan during the Afghan War [referring here to the Afghan-Soviet war from 1979 to 1989].” In Honduras in the 1980s, meanwhile, historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz recalls that SETCO, an airline owned by Honduran “drug king” Juan Ramón Matra-Ballesteros, was “dubbed the CIA airline.” Not only did SETCO assist in the Contra supply effort, “it also, famously, made drug runs.” And let’s not forget the CIA’s collaboration with drug-trafficking Cuban exile mobsters in efforts to assassinate Fidel Castro—or the CIA’s decision to conduct LSD experiments on its own unwitting citizens in the 1950s.

The list goes on. And yet, thanks to the beauty of imperial logic, the United States’ repeated partnership with known drug traffickers, from Panama’s Manuel Noriega (described by *Reuters* as a “CIA spy turned drug-running dictator”) to Colombia’s Álvaro Uribe (who, prior to becoming president of the country, appeared on none other than a U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency list of major narco-traffickers) has not at all impeded the deployment of a so-far unsubstantiated narco-accusation against Hezbollah.

As for why the whole “narco-terror” label has recently become so popular, it’s worth revisiting Pulitzer Prize-winning

journalist Ginger Thompson’s 2015 *New Yorker* report: “Trafficking in Terror.” In it, she quotes a former senior money-laundering investigator at the U.S. Department of Justice on how the post-9/11 transfer of resources “out of drug enforcement and into terrorism” meant that, for the DEA, narco-terror “became an ‘expedient way for the agency to justify its existence.’” In fact, the new crime of “narco-terrorism” was introduced in the 2006 iteration of the Patriot Act, and enabled the DEA to “claim... victories against Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, the Taliban and the FARC”—victories that naturally didn’t come without appeals to Congress for more money.

As Thompson documents, however, a close examination of the cases the DEA chose to pursue revealed a disconcerting pattern. “When these cases were prosecuted, the only links between drug trafficking and terrorism entered into evidence were provided by the DEA, using agents or informants who were paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to lure the targets into staged narco-terrorist conspiracies.” Proof—or the existence of actual narco-terrorist conspiracies—wasn’t essential. But anyway, at least the DEA didn’t go hungry.

INDEED, THERE’S NO SHORTAGE of “experts” and analysts ready to swear to the powers that be in Washington that Hezbollah is in bed with this or that Mexican cartel. Tony Duheume, author of such works as the self-published *The Mullahs & Hezbollah - Iran’s tools of oppression & hegemony in the Middle East and beyond*, warns that Hezbollah is “well-established in Mexico” and that “it has aligned itself to the ultra-violent Los Zetas drug cartel,” right in “Donald Trump’s backyard.” The Clarion Project, a D.C.-based organization that claims to “expose how Islamists...threaten Western values” cites testimony accusing Hezbollah of collaboration with the Sinaloa cartel—the very same Sinaloa cartel that, as a 2014 *Time Magazine* writeup detailed, secret-

ly worked with the DEA for more than a decade. Oops. (The Clarion Project is mainly concerned with Islam, but their map of extremist organizations also includes anti-Muslim extremists, on the basis that “[t]heir activities unwittingly contribute to the Islamist cause.” It is very generous of the Clarion Project to conclude that Islamophobic bigotry and violence is also bad, if only because it makes Muslims more defensive of Islam.)

Other intriguing trivia trotted out in support of Hezbollah’s alleged links to the drug trade include that “Venezuela’s geographic proximity to West Africa make[s] it an ideal launching pad” for the transatlantic movement of drugs. This bit of wisdom was presented to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations by former United Press International Bureau Chief in El Salvador Douglas Farah, who had perhaps not recently consulted a map. He’s since been one-upped on the creativity front by Nathan A. Sales, State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism, who in 2018 broadcast the existence of a “Hezbollah pig farm in Liberia,” which, given the Islamic prohibition against eating pork, seems rather unlikely.

In a 2011 dispatch titled “The New Nexus of Narcoterrorism: Hezbollah and Venezuela,” the aforementioned “expert” Vanessa Neumann drew attention to a “main transportation route for terrorists, cash and drugs... aboard a flight commonly referred to as ‘Aeroterror.’” According to Neumann’s “own secret sources within the Venezuelan government,” Aeroterror’s flight route was Tehran-Damascus-Caracas-Madrid; it would “leave Caracas seemingly empty (though now it appears it carried a cargo of cocaine) and returned full of Iranians, who boarded the flight in Damascus, where they arrived by bus from Tehran.” It was not explained why the Iranians couldn’t simply have boarded the plane in Tehran rather than sit on a bus for 1,747.8 kilometers (a 20-plus hour trip).

TO BE SURE, THE POSSIBILITY OF AIR travel between Caracas and Tehran has long been a point of obsession for those concerned with the new Islamo-Socialist-Narco-Jihadi Menace. Back in 2009, Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon sounded the alarm: “We know that there are flights from Caracas via Damascus to Tehran.” Precise details, though, have tended to vary from fearmonger to fearmonger. In a 2011 Fox News piece entitled “Hugo Chávez’s Scary Anti-American Campaign Takes to the Skies and Stops Off In Tehran,” Roger Noriega—the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State and current fixture at the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute—made a claim that the Venezuelan airline Conviasa was responsible for operating “Aero-Terror.” Linking Caracas, Damascus, and Tehran, the flight was said to be “a critical tool for Iran and Venezuela and their allies among terrorists and drug traffickers”—transporting “Hezbollah recruits from

throughout South America” and “components for missile systems.” The arrangement sounded decidedly less scary in a 2007 WikiLeaks cable from William R. Brownfield, then-U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela, stipulating that the Caracas-Tehran flight was “best understood as a symbolic manifestation of the cozy Chávez-Ahmadinejad alliance” and that its inauguration “provided a stage for both Iran and Venezuela to thumb their noses at the United States.” Brownfield would go on to become Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

Roger Noriega, for his part, was also the brain behind the 2010 *Foreign Policy* exposé about “Chávez’s Secret Nuclear Program,” in which we learned that “it’s not clear what Venezuela’s hiding, but it’s definitely hiding something—and the fact that Iran is involved suggests that it’s up to no good.” Unfortunately, WikiLeaks would play the party pooper here too, thanks to a cable authored by John Caulfield, the U.S. embassy chargé d’affaires in Caracas: “A plain-spoken nuclear physicist told Econoff that those spreading rumors that Venezuela is helping third countries (i.e. Iran) develop atomic bombs ‘are full of (expletive).’”

Then there’s the version of “Aeroterror” and other threats provided by Matthew Levitt of the exuberantly pro-Israeli Washington Institute for Near East Policy. In his 2013 book *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon’s Party of God*, he contended that Iran Air flight 744—this time operating between Caracas and Tehran, with stops in Damascus and Beirut—functioned as a delivery service to Venezuela for members of Hezbollah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, other “Iranian agents” and intelligence personnel.

With his *Global Footprint*, Levitt has done us the dubious favor of amassing in one place all of the kooky talking points on narco-terror and related subjects—an encyclopedia of propaganda, as it were. Among the greatest hits is the issue of narco-tunnels. Because “the terrain along the southern US border, especially around San Diego, is similar to that on the Lebanese-Israeli border,” Levitt writes, drug cartels have “enlisted the help of Hezbollah” in the art of cross-border tunnel construction. Never mind a *New Yorker* investigation into *narcotúneles* in the San Diego area, the first of which was built by the Sinaloa cartel in 1989 (i.e. when Hezbollah was tied down in Lebanon with the civil war and Israeli occupation): “Since then, Sinaloa has refined the art of underground construction and has used tunnels more effectively than any criminal group in history[,] specializ[ing]... in infrastructural marvels that federal agents call supertunnels.” Hezbollah is nowhere to be seen.

“Relatedly,” Levitt continues, “law enforcement officials from across the Southwest are reporting a rise in imprisoned gang members with Farsi tattoos”—a military-cultural analysis of which U.S. Representative Sue Myrick (R-NC) had performed back in 2010, when she determined that the body art

on gang members “implies a Persian influence that can likely be traced back to Iran and its proxy army, Hezbollah.” (There are no other potential explanations offered, including the possibility that these gang members just believe that Farsi looks cool). The Tucson Police Department, Levitt stresses, also detected “alarming implications” of these tattoos “due to Hezbollah’s long standing [sic] capabilities, specifically their expertise in the making of vehicle borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs)” — since, as everyone knows, it’s a slippery slope from tattoos to

bans invaded Venezuela,” Hezbollah also possessed “active cells there,” with the “Iranians... impacting the people of Venezuela and throughout South America.” The upshot: “We have an obligation to take down that risk for America.” The following day, it was the turn of U.S. Southern Command Admiral Craig S. Faller, who warned the Senate Armed Services Committee that Iran’s “proxy Lebanese Hezbollah maintains facilitation networks throughout the region that cache weapons and raise funds, often via drug trafficking and money laundering.”

“Reality is not what we’re after here. The goal, rather, is to convert Hezbollah/Iran into a direct, existential threat to the homeland itself...”

explosions. And if this weren’t enough, a clothing patch was also discovered near the U.S.-Mexico border depicting “a plane flying head-on into skyscrapers.” But as even the narco-hysteria-prone website InSight Crime noted around the same time, “reports of Hezbollah working with criminal groups in Latin America... appear to be largely unsubstantiated.”

Meanwhile in the world of Levitt, not only does Hezbollah preside over a “foothold in Mexico”, the organization has also set up shop in the United States proper, where it has been linked to “food stamp fraud, misuse of grocery coupons, and sale of unlicensed T-shirts.” At the very least, T-shirt sales must be a nice change of pace for Hezbollah from activities back home, where cross-border incursions by the U.S.-backed Israeli military have included a brutal 22-year occupation of south Lebanon and periodic massacres of civilians. (The last major showdown was back in 2006, but Israeli officials continue to devote much time to warning of bigger and better wars yet to come.)

But again, reality is not what we’re after here. The goal, rather, is to convert Hezbollah/Iran into a direct, existential threat to the homeland itself, and to thereby encourage an increasingly antagonistic U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis international obstacles to empire. Granted, it’s not like Donald Trump requires much help in the realm of these connections, having already detected swarms of “criminals and unknown Middle Easterners” mixed up in that “National Emergency” [sic] known as the Central American migrant caravan. Who knows how many of these migrants might have been sporting a plane-into-skyscraper clothing patch?

Other members of the Trump crowd have delivered similarly stellar performances. In February, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo informed Fox Business that, not only had “the Cu-

And yet despite the continuous churning out of breathless reports about Hezbollah’s “multimillion-dollar drug-trafficking business in Venezuela with the collaboration of FARC and Mexican cartels”—or Iran and Hezbollah’s ability to smuggle “drugs, arms, and, if necessary, chemical and biological weapons” across the U.S.-Mexico border—the Trump State Department itself reported in 2018 that there was “no credible evidence indicating that international terrorist groups have established bases in Mexico, worked with Mexican drug cartels or sent operatives via Mexico into the United States.”

As for that “most wanted fugitive,” Venezuelan minister and SDNT Tareck El Aissami, the *New York Times* has taken it upon itself to reveal some tantalizing “Secret Venezuela Files” passed along by undoubtedly impartial observers “recount[ing] testimony from informants accusing Mr. El Aissami and his father of recruiting Hezbollah members to help expand spying and drug trafficking networks in the region.” At some point in the piece, we learn that, actually, “whether Hezbollah ever set up its intelligence network or drug routes in Venezuela is not addressed in the dossier,” but it’s safe to surmise that’s not the takeaway the average reader will extract. In the FAIR post about the *New York Times*’ uncritical repetition of U.S. government propaganda, the authors point out that the *Times* piece even “admits that Washington ‘never revealed the evidence’” of El Aissami’s allegedly neck-deep involvement in the narcotics trade. Nevertheless, bit by bit, the case for future U.S. wars on narco-terrorists grows stronger, normalized and justified in the public consciousness, simply by constant repetition of unsubstantiated claims.

Speaking of drugs, the late Québécois journalist Gil Courtemanche once wrote: “Propaganda is as powerful as heroin; it surreptitiously dissolves all capacity to think.”

Isn’t it time, then, to consider trafficking in propaganda a crime? ✚

Wheel of OUTRAGE

Congratulations! You've given up, and we respect that. You've stopped pretending to be an original thinker, once you realized it's much more respectable--and lucrative--to simply be labeled an original, iconoclastic, dangerous thinker, while still holding the same beliefs as basically every other wealthy and powerful person in the Western world. That's right: you've sold out, you've bought in, you've become an official, card-carrying member of the Intellectual Dark Web. (We loved your *New Yorker*/*New York Times* profile, by the way! Way to pose broodily in front of a fern!) But as you'll find out going forward, it's tough to maintain that sober tone of "I'm just asking risky questions, and for that I'm being silenced" when you are in fact not asking risky questions and are the furthest thing from silenced. To help you out, *Current Affairs* has created a handy IDW Wheel of Outrage. Spin it every day to find out what you're furious about today, and how you can rebrand your (masculine, rational, grounded) outrage as a measured response to the (feminine, hysterical, absurd) outrage of your frequently imaginary internet opponents! Go ahead. Give it a spin. Find out what cultural issue you can bookend with native advertising for your patented herbal dick-strengthening supplements today!





THE LAST ROUND

by AISLING MCCREA

“**F**ORE!” HE HOLLERED, AND THE FIGURES in the distance limped away into the trees. David McAllister wiped his brow with one of the his-and-hers argyle face towels he’d received for his thirtieth wedding anniversary. The wife was gone, but the towel was still good. McAllister took a moment to appreciate the sun’s scorching rays. It must have been about a hundred degrees, and not a single cloud in the sky. It really was shaping up to be a beautifully hot day, just like yesterday, and just like every other day of that summer.

A thought prickled at the back of his mind: Shaun would have loved this weather. When Shaun was a small boy, right from the time he could walk, there wasn’t a single sunny day that went by where he wasn’t swimming lengths in the pool, or shooting hoops with his friends. A natural athlete, just like his old man! Although David himself had never been on a sports *team*, per se. He just wasn’t a team sort of fella. In high school—all the way back in the *Stone Age*, as he used to tell Shaun—he’d been a champion football player, but ended up quitting in his senior year. Yes, football was a blast, but being on a *team* brought on all sorts of stress. Suddenly you couldn’t just have fun anymore, because instead of fun, you had obligations. Do this, practice that, show up on time, don’t let down the others. Where was the fun in that? What’s more, you had

to spend all that time with people you didn’t choose, and often people from *those* parts of town, as his mother had put it. (God rest her soul, McAllister thought, the things she said weren’t exactly the kind of things you were *meant* to say socially, but she was from a different generation and there was no point arguing with her about it. And besides, she was just saying what everyone was thinking.)

No sir-ee, David McAllister was not a team player. He was more of a self-made man, a rugged individual, a *leader* of men rather than a face in the crowd. But he always thought of himself as an athlete, all the same. He just preferred sports where you played solo, man against man, in a grueling, no-holds-barred competition for the top spot—that was the American way! That’s why for him, the ultimate game was golf. No team, no relying on other people. Just you and your clubs and your caddy and your cart.

(Well, there were no caddies at Las Palmas Golf Resort and Spa. Not anymore. But it couldn’t be helped—good-quality staff were thin on the ground these days. No wonder the course was looking a little...under-maintained.)

McAllister selected a 5-iron and lined up his shot, relieved that the weird figures further up ahead had hurried away. What were they *doing*, anyway? He highly doubted they were members. Dagsby, the old club president, would never have stood for this sort of thing. If Dagsby had seen interlopers on the

course he would have had them all shot. Of course, he would have lacked the strength to pull the trigger himself, given that he was ninety-four years old when circumstances had forced him to retire. But until all that...*unpleasantness*, age had never stopped him from presiding over the club with the vigor, passion and discipline which that sacred position required. Truth be told, McAllister missed Dagsby almost as much as he missed his own son.

(*Whack*, went the club.)

Not just Dagsby, either. Though Las Palmas was still a first-rate course, McAllister couldn't help but feel it wasn't quite the same without his buddies. He missed Johnson, who always had a new set of knee-slapping jokes every week. (Sometimes they were a little un-PC, but frankly people needed to lighten up about that type of humour. Johnson was an equal-opportunity offender. Sometimes he even told jokes about Scotsmen, and McAllister was part Scottish himself, yet he didn't mind at all.) He missed Jimmy Carsdale, whose wife made world-beating lasagna, and whose mistresses never minded if you took a peek down their blouse. He even missed Bobby O'Shea, even though the rat bastard had cheated him out of the club championship title two years in a row. Sometimes, when he played this course, he felt a sharp needle of pain, in a place that wasn't his knee or his back or his weird messed-up left foot, and he realized for an ice-cold moment that he was lonely.

Still, there was no point complaining (as he'd said to his family countless times). Things were the way they were, and you couldn't make them be any other way, even if you tried. And besides, why gripe when the sun's out? McAllister fed his club back into the bag and hauled himself into the cart. He turned the engine on, beaming with pleasure as the *rat-a-tat* faded into a faint little purr. As he drove on to meet his ball, he started drumming his own little tune on the steering wheel, though he kept having to stop to mop the sweat off his brow. A real scorcher, yet again. Yes, it really was a beautiful day.

“WHAT THE FUCK DOES he think he's doing?”
“Ssshhh, keep it down. He's going to hear you.”
Foxtrot put down the binoculars, and gestured to Bravo that he needed water. Bravo looked at him with silent fury. Foxtrot had already drunk his daily allowance of water, and now he was after hers? It wasn't *her* fault if he couldn't manage himself. Four moderate sips for breakfast, then two sips every three hours. Everyone knew the score.

“Pleeeeeeaaase, B. I'm so thirsty.”

“Foxtrot, we're all fucking thirsty.”

“Just a mini-sip. C'mon. I'll trade you some of my protein powder.”

It was a bullshit suggestion and they both knew it. Protein powder was a useful nutrient to have on hand when rations got especially low, but it was a pain in the ass to ingest unless you absolutely had to for energizing purposes. Without water, it just became a sullen dry clump in your mouth.

No one wanted the goddamn protein powder.

Bravo rolled her eyes. “I'm never doing this for you again.” She pulled out her flask, unscrewed it, and poured one sip's worth into the cap. She knew how much to pour, because she had marked gradations on the cap, one per sip.

Foxtrot lifted the flask cap to his lips with both hands, holding the sip in his mouth for a few seconds before he swallowed. One time, he'd traded supplies with some guy who was Japanese-American, and somehow they'd ended up talking about Japanese tea ceremonies. The guy had explained how the central theme of tea ceremonies was appreciation, which was reflected in all the gestures and movements of the ritual. You were supposed to hold the cup with both hands, lift it with reverence, and turn it a certain number of times to show your appreciation for the beverage. Well, Foxtrot certainly appreciated his fucking beverages now.

Bravo peered through the thicket, lifting a branch with her little finger the smallest possible amount. The figure had already spotted them, and screamed some unintelligible curse at them, but once they'd hurried into the trees, he hadn't pursued them. Instead, he'd stayed where he was, at the top of the hill, looking down at the treeless stretch in front of him.

She couldn't figure him out, the strange figure in the colorful pants. Presumably the spot on the hill was a useful vantage point, and he was using it to survey the land and plan his next move. That made sense. But then he'd done several things that neither she nor Foxtrot could understand in the slightest. First, he'd taken a long metal object from a case, something that looked like a weapon. At this, they'd panicked, and started hurriedly discussing a counterattack plan. (They were good at counterattack plans by now—maybe five or six times in the past year, they'd been ambushed by bandits for their water and medical supplies.) But then, instead of coming after them, the figure had swung the weapon over his shoulder, and used it to hit a small object lying on the ground. The object had gone flying, and landed on flat burned-out dirt near some sort of sand dune. (How the hell did a place like this get sand dunes, anyway? She'd heard of the dunes out east, way out in the places most squads never dared to go. But here they looked strange and out of place, an alien intrusion.) Then, after this bizarre display, the figure had gotten in a vehicle and driven in the direction of the object. Bravo had seen vehicles before—their shells strewn the streets of abandoned towns and cities—but she was too young to have ever seen a working one, one you could actually *drive*. And weren't vehicles usually bigger? None of this made any sense.

Bravo turned to ask Foxtrot what he made of the whole situation, only to see he was slacking off again.

"Foxtrot! Stop staring at the damn cup and get back to keeping watch. It's not going to magically produce more water, believe me."

"Where's Sierra? Can't he take over the watch? The sweat around my eyes is pooling in the binoculars, and it's really starting to sting..."

"Don't be such a baby. We're in the shade here, you can't be sweating that much. And Sierra's not here, I sent him to scout. If there's one of these weirdos here, who knows how many more there could be."

Foxtrot wiped the crevices of the binoculars with his shirt, though it didn't make much of a difference since his shirt was dripping sweat like the rest of him. Blinking the burning salt away, he pressed the binocs to his face: "Eh...looks like he's getting out of the vehicle, and heading towards whatever that thing was...uh...looks like a ball."

MCALLISTER GRINNED TO HIMSELF AS HE pulled his scorecard from the back pocket of his snazzy, yet surprisingly comfortable pants. This was shaping up to be his best game yet! Granted, he had fudged the numbers a little on some of the earlier holes, but after all, who was to know? He *could* have gone three under par on hole five, if he'd really wanted to. This was the score he deserved, really, based on an objective assessment of his own abilities.

He looked at the scorecard and frowned, holding it to the unforgiving light. He knew it—cheap, poor-quality card, little better than paper. Probably made in China, just like everything was these days. He had a lot of experience with these things, since he'd been a senior manager at a paper company, back in the days before the *unpleasantness*. He could tell the card was no good, because it was starting to turn soft and fall away in his hands. No good, no good at all! Granted, his hands were a little sweaty—well, a lot sweaty, and the corners were nearly soaked. Still, a proud American company would never have turned out this type of junk. He was frankly a little embarrassed on the part of the club, for purchasing from a sub-par supplier. He would have recommended his own company as a supplier, if the club had still been fully operating. Come to think of it, why *hadn't* they used his company? Probably that bastard Bobby O'Shea had had something to do with it.

He loaded himself into the cart again, and turned on the engine. Only this time, it wouldn't start. *Rat-a-tata, rat-a-tata...* then nothing. Goddammit. It was maybe the twentieth or thirtieth cart this had happened to. Whenever a cart broke down, he just dumped it and took another one, but he was close to running out of carts. Was no one refilling the stupid things?

No more carts, and no more caddies either. Really, he hated to admit it but Las Palmas had gone downhill lately. He couldn't help but notice it. In his darkest moments, he had even considered abandoning his membership, and finding another place to play. The Grand Paradiso had an excellent course, with ocean views, and he had fond memories of playing there most of his honeymoon. (He still didn't understand why his ex-wife had gotten so mad about that. Earlier that year she'd gifted him a shirt that said "I'd Rather Be Golfing", so she couldn't exactly have been surprised that he'd wanted to spend their honeymoon on the links.)

Sighing theatrically, he lifted his clubs onto his shoulder and began trudging towards the next hole. Look on the bright side, he thought to himself. It sure was hard work carrying his own clubs in the heat, but he was still strong as a mule! And it really wasn't that much of a chore to walk a beautiful course like this. He surveyed the vast stretches of green land before him—admittedly, somewhat less green than it used to be—and smiled.

He thought of all the great times that he'd had in this place, and realized what a silly overreaction it would be to rescind his membership over a couple of maintenance issues. The Grand Paradiso was nice, sure, but the Las Palmas course was his *home*. He'd played there as a young entry-level associate, he'd played there as a reliable middle manager, and he'd played there as a beloved senior manager. He'd even been playing the day Shaun was born, and the day Shaun was taken away from him too. So, he concluded—and here he felt a strange spike of anger, a resentment pink and bubbling like a fresh burn—he'd be *damned* if he'd stop playing now. Leave? Leave? He would never leave.

"I don't get it. He hits the ball, he goes towards it, he hits it again. Sometimes he pushes it into a hole with the stick."

"Whatever it is, doesn't look like he's too concerned with us."

Still hidden in a thicket of trees, Bravo and Foxtrot were feeling a little more safe, but also increasingly baffled. The figure did not appear to be a danger to them, but they couldn't help



but be curious as to what he was getting out of the situation. And why did he never walk in the shade? Didn't he understand the risks of heat exhaustion?

There was a rustle in the distance, and for a moment they panicked and picked up their weapons, but then they recognised the familiar sound of Sierra's footfall, and relaxed.

"Thank God you're back. You were away a long time."

"Yeah, this place is huge, it's fucking weird. Didn't see anyone else though."

"Did you find anything good? Food? Water?"

"Nope, sorry. It's all just...open land. And sand. And some parts covered by trees, like this one."

"Who the hell would create a space like this?"

Sierra shrugged. "Must have been designed pre-Turn. We used to have all kinds of weird shit."

wasn't bothering them. All he wanted was to hear some of Sierra's stories. Everything pre-Turn was so fascinating. A time when it was cool and watery enough that people actually *enjoyed* the sun? No rations, no bandits, flowers everywhere?

Sierra reached for the binoculars, which were lying discarded on the ground. The other two were familiar enough with the strange man's patterns, and were satisfied to watch him with the naked eye. "So did you figure out who this guy is? What he's doing?"

"He doesn't seem to be doing anything," Foxtrot replied. "He's hitting a ball with a stick. Just that, over and over. Sometimes he uses the stick to push the ball into a hole."

"Freaky," said Sierra, but as the words fell from his lips he started to remember something.

"Yeah well, at least he's not trying to hurt us. I still don't get why the land has these big ditches full of sand though."

"We just couldn't get him to understand it. Even when the grass started drying up, even when the others left, even when the whole club shut down. He would just come here and play like nothing was wrong."

"But it was easier to plant trees back then, right? So why would they leave almost all this space open, without shade? What about heatstroke? Dehydration?"

"It wasn't as hot back then. And there was a whole bunch of water."

Foxtrot turned towards Sierra, while Bravo looked away. Foxtrot loved that Sierra was old enough to know this kind of stuff, even envied him for it. But for Bravo, hearing about the time before the Turn was just uncomfortable. She was secretly relieved she was too young to remember it.

Sierra leaned against a tree, looking pensive. "I dunno, it feels familiar. I think it might have been a park or something."

"A park?"

"Yeah, like a big outdoor space for everyone to hang out in. You'd spend time with your friends, there'd be lots of flowers and grass, you could sit in the sun, play games."

"You'd sit in the sun on *purpose*?"

"Ssshbb, you guys," Bravo hissed. "You're getting too loud."

Foxtrot mumbled an apology through his cracked and oft-bitten lips. Bravo was invaluable: intelligent, cautious, a good fighter. Her quick thinking and careful planning had saved his life more than once. But did she always have to be *on*? They were in a safe spot, and the weird guy with the stick

Sierra's heart dropped into his stomach. Big ditches full of sand. In the middle of nowhere. It wasn't the first time he'd been puzzled by this.

Daddy, what's the sand for? Can I play in it?

That's called a bunker, son. And no, you can't play in it. They're for screwing over Daddy's golfing buddies so he can take home the big trophy.

"Y'okay, man? Sierra? Sierra, you okay? Is it heatstroke?"

"I've been here before", Sierra whispered. The sounds clogged his mouth like dry protein powder. "When I was a kid. I've been here before."

"You mean you were here *pre-Turn*? No way. So what the hell is this place? Is it a park?"

"No. Not a park. It's called...it's called a golf course."

"Golf? Like the NATO alphabet?"

"It was a game...my dad used to play it all the time..."

Foxtrot couldn't believe it. "This whole place is for a *game*?"

Bravo raised an eyebrow. "Seems like a stupid game to me."

"I didn't realize because it looked so different...before the Turn, this was all green...these shadeless areas of dirt, they were all bright green—"

"You're talking *shit*, Sierra," Bravo interrupted. "Stop filling Foxtrot's head with ideas. You must be misremembering—"

even pre-Turn there's no way this amount of land would be set aside for some ridiculous *game*, I mean the sheer volume of *water* you'd need to keep a place like this green..."

(Foxtrot's eyes were like saucers. So much water. So much water.)

Bravo had already turned back to studying the figure, confident that Sierra was just a little confused from the heat. But Foxtrot noticed the changes in Sierra's face, and went to comfort him. Sierra was always so courageous, so strong, the fastest runner and the best fighter, but now he looked so weak and helpless, like a child.

"Y'okay, buddy? You want to sit down for a second?"

This got Bravo's attention, and she started to worry for Sierra. He was the oldest and largest member of their party, a natural athlete, and they'd be totally screwed if he was out of action for some reason. When she looked to him, he seemed frightened and confused. He was trying to bring the binoculars to his face, but his hands were trembling.

Foxtrot didn't know what was happening to Sierra, but he could see he wanted to use the binoculars. He'd never seen Sierra like this before, and it was kind of scary. On instinct, he placed a hand on Sierra's arm, which was trembling, gently guiding the binocs towards his face.

Sierra pressed his face against the eyepieces. "Th...that's my dad."

AH, TO REACH THE 18TH HOLE! A REAL shame the clubhouse was closed, but it wouldn't have been the same without Dagsby and the rest of his buddies anyway. David McAllister tallied up his scorecard (as much as he could, given that it was soaked through with his sweat) and took a moment to congratulate himself on a game well played. He hadn't quite beaten his personal best, but given the ridiculous situation with the cart and the lack of caddy, it was only fair to assume he'd been distracted, put off his game. The course was looking a little worse for wear, too, like it was in need of a good watering. That couldn't have been good for putting. The crispiness of the grass probably affected the movement of the ball. That was why hole 8 had taken him six strokes when it should only have taken five. And then there were the weird intruders he'd seen a couple of hours before. After he'd hollered at them to get out of the way—honestly, what kind of dummies wandered onto a golf course and just walked across the fairway without paying attention to their surroundings?—they'd just run off into the trees, and he hadn't seen them since.

Up to no good, most likely. Probably loafing around or doing drugs instead of getting a damn job. Young people, thought McAllister, had absolutely no sense of responsibility.

“WHEN THE TURN CAME, HE COULDN'T accept it.”

Sierra was looking calmer now, but still considerably worse for wear. Bravo had even given him two extra sips of water.

"I was pretty young, so I don't remember it that well. But whenever the topic of the Turn came up in our house, he would just go on these rants...he kept saying it was all alarmism, that the new generation were always looking for something to complain about, that they just needed to go to work and be a productive member of society, like him."

"He doesn't look too productive to me," Bravo said. Foxtrot shot her a glance, and in an unusual reversal of roles, she apologized.

"And when it got really bad...well, we just couldn't get him to understand it. Me and my mom, we tried, but he just kept acting like everything was normal. Even when it started getting hotter, and the water started running out. Even when people started deserting their homes, even when the disasters got worse and worse...he just kept coming here, every opportunity he could. Even when the grass started drying up, even when the others left, even when the whole club shut down. He would just come here and play like nothing was wrong. Eventually my mom got sick of it and we left. That was the last time I saw him, until today."

"Jesus. But you must have been young. Are you absolutely sure that it's him?"

Sierra nodded almost imperceptibly. "I don't remember his face. But he's wearing the same shirt he was wearing the day that we left him here."

"The same shirt?"

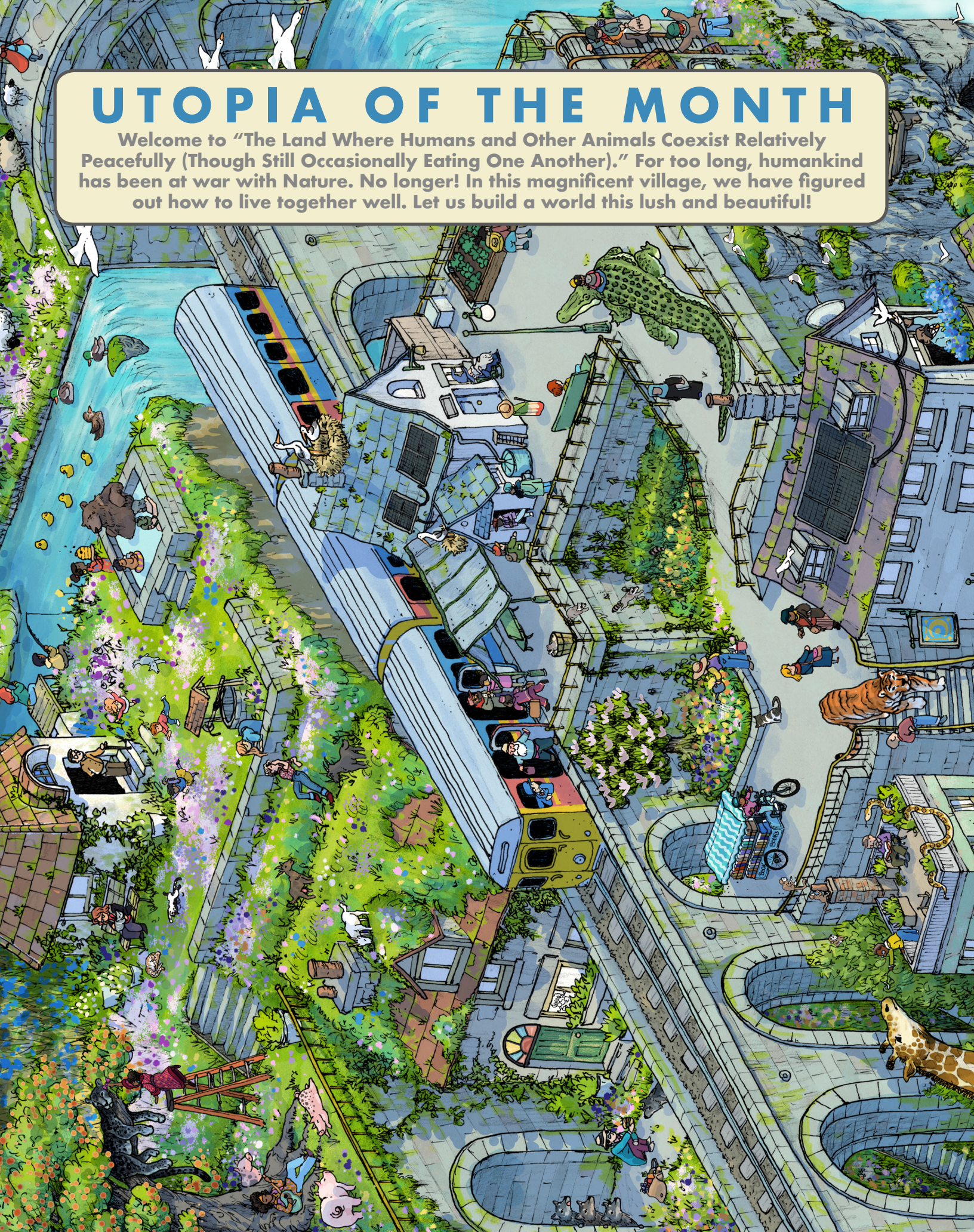
"Yeah. My mom got it for him for Christmas one year. It says 'I'd Rather Be Golfing.' ♣



“Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow.”

UTOPIA OF THE MONTH

Welcome to "The Land Where Humans and Other Animals Coexist Relatively Peacefully (Though Still Occasionally Eating One Another)." For too long, humankind has been at war with Nature. No longer! In this magnificent village, we have figured out how to live together well. Let us build a world this lush and beautiful!







BARBARA EHRENREICH

on Medicine, Macrophages, and Megafauna...

LYTA GOLD: *I am recording this episode from the home of Barbara Ehrenreich, that's the legendary writer and leftist organizer, who is also one of my personal heroes. This is really exciting for me. Thanks for letting me invade your home today.*

BARBARA EHRENREICH: Ohh, thank you for invading my home!

LG: *In Natural Causes, you go after these myths that surround death and our wellness culture. Why do you choose to bust that particular myth of wellness?*

BE: I was at the age where you got Medicare, and the medical system wants to extract as much as it can from you, so I was always being told by doctors that I should undergo this test or that test. And I started questioning these things, one after another, driving the doctors nuts, but also thinking: do I want to spend my time doing this? Okay, suppose you find something bad, how can you fix it? Do you have something? What are you recommending?

LG: *You are very critical in the book of these unnecessary tests like mammograms or PSA [prostate cancer] tests....*

BE: I say in the book what professional organizations say, which is: don't do the PSA test, because the hazards of getting of getting a false positive are so great. Same with mammograms. You could be forced to have a biopsy, which is surgery, where you are put under complete anesthesia and a chunk of your body is taken out — and usually for no purpose.

LG: I wouldn't be surprised if you got some negative push back, and people would get upset with you.

BE: Why is this woman trying to kill us?!

LG: *But the idea is that if something is wrong, you will know it is wrong, and you will go to the doctor.*

BE: I say: you should know that this is questioned, and the number of things like mammograms and colonoscopies is way out of line with that of comparable countries.

LG: *There's this moral judgment that goes into it, there's this idea that if you fail to prevent something it's your fault.*

BE: In this country, in our culture, we have transformed the whole notion of morality from how we treat other people and so on to how *healthy* are we. How *healthy* is our behavior, I'm so sick of that, and I get it from so many friends. You know, "so-and-so is so good at her diet", or "so-and-so doesn't take care of herself". This should not be where we locate our moral judgments.

LG: *There's a real connection that you draw in the book between this theme of having control over your body, and the rich people who promulgate these ideas. When you are elucidating intellectual history you are not just—these are not just random ideas, there are people who espouse them for a reason. They've got names, they've got bank accounts, there are good reasons why they do this. They do it to make money, and they do it to enforce certain kinds of class structures too.*

BE: Are you thinking of people like Gwyneth Paltrow? Well, the model of wellness that she and others of her ilk propagate is basically a kind of consumerism. You should have these products, you should be rubbing them into your skin, you should be curating meals, and every item that you consume should be justified in some way.

LG: *In Bright-sided you talk a lot about this positive thinking, tracing the origins of it and what a cult it is and how much—people go to these mega-churches and they really buy into the prosperity gospel, and they think they can just wish themselves rich. And you have this great quote in Bright-sided from T. Harv Eker, from Secrets of the Millionaire Mind, and he tells you to place your hand on your heart and say "I admire rich people, I bless rich people, I love rich people, and I am going to be one of those rich people."*

BE: Yeah, yeah. I didn't know about positive thinking until I had breast cancer and started looking into the anthropology of the whole pink ribbon cult, and going to all the available websites, reading all the pamphlets and books about how you will get better if you think positively, if you are sure your outcome will be good, which just infuriated me beyond belief. You are saying to people: it's your own fault. So many people die thinking that they are to blame because they failed to think positive enough, not just with breast cancer but with other cancers. That's just cruel.

LG: *Yeah, and you point out there is no science whatsoever to support this idea.*

BE: Oh, there is a whole brand of pseudo-science of positive psychology.

LG: *It's fascinating how many aspects of our lives of our lives, the positive thinking, the victim blaming, how much of that touches health, wealth, all of these different parts. It is so ingrained. I have heard people say variations of 'happiness is a choice...' It's just bizarre how common it has become, and with remarkably little pushback, I would say.*

BE: I guess I would blame psychology itself, the more mainstream psychology, for its extreme individualism. If you talk to a therapist, you are going to be talking about yourself. They are not going to want to hear about class and race and gender except for how *you* are dealing with these little obstacles. There is no way of seeing things in a more social or collective way, which is what we have to do. You can't just look at the individual.

LG: *In Natural Causes you talk about mindfulness... a trend that you point to that has been created by Silicon Valley and also solved by them. Because everyone is so busy, they are so distracted, but mindfulness came along, and mindfulness could be sold as a product.*

BE: Yes, you have to pay attention, it's true—but pay attention to what? I mean, if you are a working parent, as I always was and am, what do you do? Do you finish writing the email to the boss, or do you pick up the toddler screaming on the floor? Mindfulness does not answer that question for you. It doesn't even answer the question, the bigger question: why are you being put in that position? Why isn't there childcare? Why are your hours so long? I can't stand it. I do get emotional about these things because they are—there is so much entitlement and there is so much class privilege built into it. I first encountered this in the Bay Area, from a rich lady who happened to be my landlord for a few months, and I had never heard the word before but she told me to be very “mindful” over the precious *objet* she had in the apartment. It was just Martha Stewart kind of crap, but I had never heard that. I saw and began to identify that it was kind of a rich people's thing.

LG: *One thing you really bring up is it sort of came from Buddhism, but it has been really shorn of all meaning and value.*

BE: My son actually pointed out—he had gone through a little Buddhist phase in college—and he said, it's Buddhism but without the idea of transcendence. The idea of transcendence and transcending the self into a different relationship with the world and the universe, you won't find that with mindfulness.

LG: *The tech tycoons of Silicon Valley, these are the men who are regarded as having great scientific minds, and being these brilliant scientists, and that they dabble in this weird pseudo-mysticism...no one seems to notice that there is anything weird about that.*

BE: Yeah, it's odd because Silicon Valley has a heavy population of engineers, and people are fed some smattering of science in their background, but they don't even seem to have noticed studies that show that a few minutes of intermittent meditation from your app do nothing. Or even longer periods of meditation, let's say like ten minutes. You'd do just as well in terms of having a glass of wine with a friend, or taking a long walk, something like that. They created the problem in so many ways, with all these devices, but they haven't found the solution.

LG: *It's interesting that there is a real lack interest in actual science, and the process of science.*

BE: Yeah, they seem to be extremely vulnerable to hucksterism. I mean some of the characters that got the mindfulness movement off the ground; one of them actually was a former clown in the UK. I can't

remember his name but he's in there. Makes me think I could walk in there and sell them something.

LG: *It does make you tempted to try and get in on this grift.*

BE: What are we doing?

LG: *And I read a lot about this idea of mind uploading, biohacking, and I have these very earnest young men telling me this is a thing that is going to happen, that all of our minds are going to be uploaded to a cloud. And as I was reading Natural Causes, you mentioned how doctors are taught to think of the body as inert, because they are taught on cadavers, and on cells that are dissected and put on a slide. It feels as though there is a connection there, as though the body is something that can be conquered and hacked, and even the mind is something that can be conquered and hacked, and the idea of the body being dead.*

BE: I think so. I mean, it's a very deep philosophical issue that I tried to raise in *Natural Causes*. It comes from this fundamental notion of western science for hundreds of years now, that the natural world is dead, and the only agency in the natural world is ourselves, and then that monotheistic God, who is so far away. So yeah, the body just becomes dead matter to be manipulated or poisoned with various kinds of things. And I am calling for a whole different approach, the growing science that individual cells in the body have agency.

LG: *That absolutely blew my mind. Macrophages specifically, they don't have consciousness exactly but they do have volition of a sort.*

BE: This was a total surprise to me. When I was a graduate student in cell biology, nobody for one moment would have uttered the phrase “cellular decision making.” Now it's a subject of international conferences. There's a recognition that in some sense—maybe decide is not the right word, I don't know—but it's not that different from the analogy I gave of me walking down a crowded sidewalk: I'm getting a lot of information all the time, is someone going to bump into me, am I going to get run over by a car, whatever. Just as a macrophage is constantly getting signals from other cells in the body, and then these signals have to be integrated in some way, for me that might be the decision to walk a little faster or get out of the way of somebody or something. For a macrophage, it might be “get out of here” or “come to where we are, there is something good to eat over here”.

LG: *They are big cells, they are immune system cells?*

BE: Yeah. “Macrophage” means “big eater.”

LG: *Pretty descriptive. So, one of the things you talk [about], which is completely horrifying, is macrophages gather outside of a cancer. And initially, the idea was that they must be trying to help, they must be trying to eat the cancer cells, but they are very much helping the cancer spread and that's part of how a metastasis happens.*

BE: I had done my graduate work on macrophages with the firm idea they were the good guys. It is their job to rush over and eat a bacterium or a virus. They are our defense. So scientists near the beginning of the twentieth century began to observe macrophages crowding around tumors. Surprise: we now know that they actually conduct individual cancer cells into the bloodstream, where they can go onto colonize other areas of the body, and we know this because of these remarkable developments in microscopy, the ability to observe individual cells in the body. I'm so amazed, but that is what is fun.

LG: *Well that is one of the remarkable things—you have a PhD in cellular biology, you've studied quite a lot. You are a scientifically minded person; things change all the time. You get new information, we learn new things.*

BE: [Doctors] get stuck in their paradigms and that's very frustrating to me, because there are so many things in my readings of science [where] everybody should be throwing up their hands and saying we gotta start all over and integrate this. But nobody wants to leap out in front and be identified as being a nutcase, in case anything doesn't work out.

LG: *You talk a bit about this idea of the unitary self...that is what mindfulness is meant to do, you the individual are meant to locate yourself in yourself, and your control over yourself. It's just that this paradigm isn't true. It doesn't make any sense scientifically.*

BE: I talk in *Natural Causes* about the rise of the idea of the self, because this is not something that our species is born with. But the idea that there is some kind of hard core of Barbara-ness in me, distinct from you in your own kernel of selfness...it arises slowly; in the book I said I was tracing it to the seventeenth/sixteenth centuries. Now, I would go back further because of what I am working on now. For some reason, and it had to do with Donald Trump—partly because I needed to escape, I needed some way, and since I can't do the self-care wellness thing that was being recommended to Democrats at that time, I got really interested in paleographic cave art. And I can't explain exactly why, but it had to do with Trump's narcissism. I thought: narcissism, where does it come from? Because there is the swollen self that eats everything else up, and I noticed in paleographic cave art there are very few human-type creatures...you know about this?

LG: *It's usually deer; it's usually prey and predators.*

BE: Yeah, right. Megafauna, the experts call them. The human-like creatures have no faces, they are stick figures, no faces. So that pushes back the invention of the self to much earlier. Now I would put it more around the Bronze Age.

LG: There is this idea of a soul, is that similar enough or is that different?

BE: Well the soul is a self that is defined by another entity, a deity, and our connection to that hypothetical being. The self is something that we should be able to apprehend without that idea.

LG: *That's a good distinction, I like that a lot...I think is a good time to segue actually into what is my favorite book of yours, which is *Living with a Wild God*.*

BE: Yeah, so there are people who felt very encouraged and liberated by the book, and there are people who thought I had gone completely round the bend.

LG: *It's a really special book, a really unusual book...you talk about how as a teenager you experienced a kind of extreme solipsism, which I think a lot of teenagers go through, but I think you are really honest about it in the book, which I think is the difference...That solipsism is so much like that excessive focus on the self, this cult of the self and the wellness cult we hear about...You talk about, and I have a quote here from *Living with a Wild God*, "my adolescent solipsism is incidental compared to the collective solipsism our species has embraced for the last few centuries in the name of modernity, a world view in which there exists no consciousness or agency exists but our own."*

BE: Pretty tragic.

LG: *Yeah. That was very resonant today when I reread this, because with climate change that comes up so much, that we are causing all of this damage, and we are causing this damage because of this collective solipsism. Like we are the only living beings that matter.*

BE: Oh God, yeah. This is the kind of thing that keeps taking me back

to the Paleolithic. Because people really did not distinguish between the human and the animal, say thirty thousand years ago.

LG: *What do you think made the change that made us lose that relationship with animals, being part of the world?*

BE: Well, we killed them. I mean that's why there are so many books stacked in [my] living room about megafauna. I mean this is a big, big question. How much of the disappearance of the megafauna—how much was it climate change or something else? But it is pretty incontrovertible that wherever humans went, they wiped out species. In North America, the extinction of so many creatures seems to come about around the time of the arrival of humans from Asia. That's one argument. That we did it and one of the reasons we did it was through overkill. Because what are you going to do if you are a little band of primates running after bison? You can use fire and noise and a flint-tipped spear, or you can drive them over a cliff—and there such collections now of bones of herbivores at the bottom of cliffs, and they were killing far more than they needed to eat. It was the easiest way to kill them...

But that's what made us dominant, ultimately. It's that we could fight predators by banding together. You don't do so well if the leopard shows up at the fireside and everybody drops their baby and climbs a tree. That group is not going to exist very long. But when you learn to form a ring around the most vulnerable members of the group, and confront the predator that way, you've got a chance.

LG: *You talk about how one of the things that got you out of your solipsism was partly these experiences you had, but also, as you wrote, "I fell in love with my comrades, my children, my species."*

BE: Yeah, the experience of the 'movement' as we called it. Having to go out on the streets and talk to people as I handed them leaflets or whatever, organizing meetings and things like that.

LG: *Do you think that there's a way in which it can also bring about this sense of the world of being alive, that we can connect those ideas?*

BE: It should be part of our morality—a respect for the natural world and for non-human animals and so on, as well as our love for each other and our species. And it's not there. I'm really distressed about what's happening right now.

LG: *Do you have any recommended actions, any organizing tips, things people should be doing?*

BE: Whatever is handy, do it. Whatever you can get your neighbors and friends to join in with, do it. +



"I can feel everything."

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