

The Last Magazine You'll Ever Need

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$10.95

VOL. 6, ISSUE 2

MAR./APR. 2021



THE NOIR ISSUE

We've turned off the lights. Beware the beasts.





THE FIST

GREY GREY GREY GREY GREY

S M A L L W

Our Voicemail Line
Continues to Be:
(504) 867-8851

Today's
FORECAST:

intolerable
consciousness
of one's own
fragility

The Current
Affairs Luxury
Periodical
EXPERIENCE

KNOW THE
DIFFERENCE



EARTH



MOON

BLACK
HOLE

IT COULD
SAVE YOUR
LIFE.

23



Your Tree-Planting
Quota For Today.
Call When You Fill It.

AFFORDABLE
ACCESS
to magazines
for all who want them



THE THUMB

What Do You Know about hairy-nosed otters?

BBB



BRING BACK BLIMPS

THIS MAGAZINE IS FIRMLY PRO- HIMBO

The himbo is a misunderstood creature, frequently conflated with the odious "bro." The himbo shares the bro's physical form but is endearing in his cluelessness rather than menacing. The himbo is a gentle musclebound innocent. We declare outright war on the bro, but we will protect and adore the loveliest of the himbos.



Here are two himbos. These are merely representations of ideal types, not actual people. Resemblances to people you know are pure coincidence.

- ♣ They live in Southeast Asia!
- ♣ They can weigh up to 18 pounds!
- ♣ They enjoy eating catfish, water serpents, and crabs!
- ♣ Their noses are slightly hairier than those of other otters!
- ♣ They were previously believed to be extinct but that was wrong!

Get the FACTS



Magazine With A Dog

Everybody loves dogs. While there may be individual dogs possessing difficult or even downright rotten personalities, it is a well-known fact that dogs as a species are undeniably superb. It is no surprise then, that when a politician wishes to convince the rest of us that they, too,

are a human being, they find ways to be seen with a dog. Elizabeth Warren took her golden retriever on the campaign trail. Pete Buttigieg recorded an entire campaign ad about how he liked dogs and dogs like him. Joe Biden's dogs, Champ and Major, have their own

children's book. Well, reader, we too want to be liked, and if hanging out with a dog will convince people we are approachable and kind, we are willing to give it a try. A dog shall be obtained. Soon, this will no longer be a mere magazine. It will be a Magazine With A Dog.

LETTERS LIFE ADVICE

RE: "Inside The Incel":
I am technically an incel, 25 years old, and I found that piece had absolutely nothing to do with my own experiences, or the experiences of either one of my two incel internet friends. Some guys are just ugly and socially inept, and can't find a woman willing to touch them. It has very little to do with this or that intellectualized "analysis" or "context". I really wish people like you would stop trying to read the chicken entrails of third-hand accounts reported by biased "incel safarists" (this isn't a threat)

DEAR READER: We are forced to concede that your note offers persuasive evidence in support of your theory that you may be alone for personality-related reasons rather than for reasons related to social context. Thank you kindly for your "this isn't a threat" parenthetical, though we confess it raises certain questions that the parenthetical seemed intended to answer.

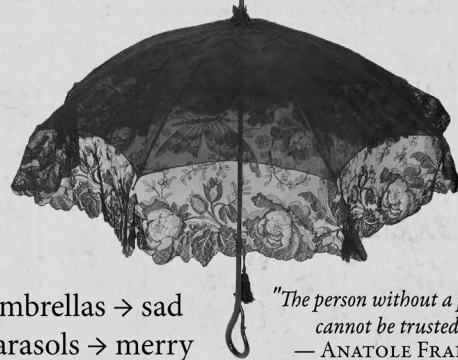
Readers frequently missives to this magazine requesting life advice. "Current Affairs", they write, "should I go to law school?" "Should I break up with my girlfriend and live on a different continent?" "Should I commit a felony if doing so would yield a substantial benefit for humankind as a whole?" We would never wish to discourage these readers. We understand that, as a magazine that knows and sees all, *Current Affairs* can offer the kind of counsel that one trusts absolutely, or at least vastly more than one trusts one's self. But reader, we must politely refrain. Wise as we may be, we cannot tell you what to do without knowing you much better than we do. And, reader, you have not yet even invited us over for dinner.

LOTTO

0 4 4 9

This is your number in the Current Affairs
LOTTO™. Should the Current Affairs
LOTTO™ occur, watch for this number.
If it is drawn, you will be the Big Winner.

PARASOL POSITION



Umbrellas → sad
Parasols → merry

"The person without a parasol
cannot be trusted."
— ANATOLE FRANCE

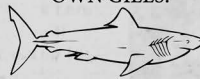
WE HEREBY
CONDEMN
THE THING

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MAGAZINE S P L E N

ON DER S

Maybe it's time to start
EVOLVING YOUR
OWN GILLS.



The magazine that
remains consistent
in its opposition to
the use of atomic
weaponry.

GESTURE 3



THE DEVIL



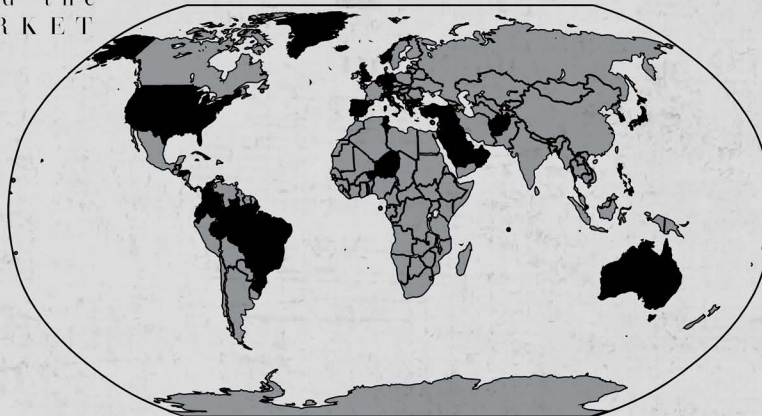
A BABY

Babies are cute. They are a mess, and they wail, and they are spongers whose expectations vastly exceed their contributions. But they are cute and they matter and it is fun to watch them. The presence of more babies in the world, all else being equal, enriches human life.

Babies and the FREE MARKET

Milton Friedman once noted that the principle of capitalist distribution was 'to each according to what they and the instruments they own produce' in the marketplace. This means, then, that capitalism objectively disfavors babies, who produce nothing except gurgles, amusing facial expressions, and mind-bogglingly colossal quantities of human shit. A baby engages in no labor, thus a baby reaps no rewards. The conclusion should be obvious: if you like babies, you should like socialism. A capitalist system is incapable of giving babies their due and will discourage their production. This is a tragedy.

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R - A N O N

It is becoming increasingly difficult for followers of QAnon to sustain their belief in the theory now that Donald Trump has left office and all of 'Q's' predictions have failed to come true. What is someone who built their identity around the movement supposed to do now? Easy: move on to the next letter. RAnon is based on the online dispatches of the mysterious entity known as R, who claims to be working high up in the Biden administration to assist Joe Biden in defeating the forces of the Deep State. R's regular postings offer unique insight into the real goings-on of Biden's day-to-day attempts to preserve democracy. A recent R-drop: *The president slumbers. Listen to Corn Pop. Pony soldiers are phony soldiers. Jan 6 was a day. Airstrike prelude. The warus was not Paul. Discern its meaning and understand all!*

SOUTH KOREA - 15 bases
ITALY - 8 bases
U.K. - 6 bases
KUWAIT - 8 bases
JAPAN - 23 bases
SPAIN - 2 bases
COLOMBIA - 7 bases
IRAQ - 12 bases

WE
PROMISE
THAT
THIS IS
NOT AN
AD
BUT IS
DONE
FROM
SINCERE
LOVE OF
SPARKLING
APPLE JUICE

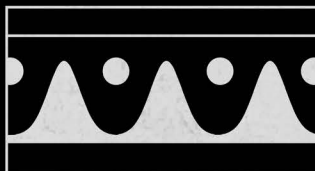
When Stephano and Luigi Martinelli decamped from Switzerland's Valley Maggia in 1850 for modern-day Watsonville, California, they could never have known that they were beginning the epic story of the world's finest sparkling apple juice brand.

Martinelli

We wish to express our appreciation for what the brothers Martinelli accomplished. In our magazine's headquarters, sparkling apple juice is the drink of choice. Classy like wine but without any of the unfortunate side effects. Cheaper, too. On any given afternoon, several editors are likely to be found in the Refreshment Parlor sipping a Martinelli's and discussing page layouts for the Spring Issue. The *Current Affairs* lifestyle is envied globally for its combination of luxury and leftism, and the presence of a Martinelli's on the table is essential.

NEW FLAG CONTEST

"Old Glory," "The Stars and Stripes", whatever you call it, nobody can deny that the flag of the United States of America is outdated, ugly, and in dire need of replacement. Therefore, we are accepting submissions for a contest to design a new U.S. flag, one that does not connote imperialism and jingoist idiocy. Winner will be printed in a future issue.



SAMPLE FLAG - Actual Colors Blue & Beige

WHEN THE NIGHT FALLS

You may notice something unusual about your issue of *Current Affairs* this month: the colors have been turned off. It is nighttime in magazine-land. This publication, usually known for the vibrancy of its pigments, appears this time in a harsh grayscale. Reader, you have a right to demand an explanation, and here is one: there was a slight mishap at the color plant resulting in all of our usual dyes running together to form an inky black stew. As opponents of frivolous waste, we resolved to make do. Hence: full B&W. We believe the results are still pleasing. Color will be restored in time for the next edition.



WE'RE DOING A NFT

The latest stupid thing to exist is the "NFT" or "non-fungible token," which we wish we did not have to discuss. You may have read about these things: art collectors are now paying vast sums of money for JPEG files, which are supposedly valuable because they contain a special code that makes them an NFT. Like any other JPEG file, they can be copied infinitely, but the collector knows that they have a special version of the file. The whole thing is related to cryptocurrency, because of course it is, and some artists have sold "works" for tens of millions of dollars. (Also, because of the blockchain nonsense, powering this bullshit takes as much energy as is used by a small country.) Reader, we are not ones to let a fad go by without doing our best to get rich off it. We begin our entry into the market by offering you, the subscriber, an official editorial NFT of your own, which we hope will soon have immense value on the secondary market. Here it is. It may look identical to other people's but it is not. It is yours. They are impostors. This is the original. Insist loudly upon this. Immense wealth will follow. Somehow. We think.

Your
NFT
DO NOT LOSE

YOU'RE OUR
FAVORITE



HOW HOT
IS YOUR
MAGAZINE?

State of the Month:
MICHIGAN



It's always
Michigan. Sorry.

E QUALITY:
N D I D



MEASURE YOUR MAGAZINE



(not to scale)

A TASTE OF THE MAG



GESTURE 4



THE RABBIT

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THE BLEAK VISION OF CYBERPUNK

BY ALLEGRA SILCOH

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN VIDEO GAMES, you've likely heard about *Cyberpunk 2077*, one of the most highly anticipated games of the decade, and also one of the most controversial. The game's bugs and many disappointments, along with its poor labor practices amid the "crunch" to release, have by now been thoroughly addressed by other outlets. Many reviews also took issue with the game's content, particularly its "punk" aka countercultural qualities (see headlines like "Cyberpunk 2077—where did all the punk go?") But having played the game I was left wondering: is it actually true that *Cyberpunk 2077*'s embrace of capitalist realism and violence represents a betrayal of cyberpunk ideals? Has capitalism indeed once again obliterated all criticism of itself as it repackages art into products it can sell us? Is the problem less the game itself and more the game's method of *production*, an enormous corporate undertaking that promised to avoid typical industry standards of overwork but nevertheless resorted to mandated six-day workweeks in order to get the game out "on time" (after three delays), rejects the cyberpunk tradition? Or, is it possible that "the cyberpunk tradition" is *itself* the issue, and many critics are wrong about what the genre's so-called ideals actually are?

Personally, while the philosophical questions asked by many works of cyberpunk can be worthwhile and entertaining to

contemplate, I've found even the most notable entries in the genre to be ultimately shallow and unsatisfying. In these books, movies, and games, the aesthetic has a tendency to become king. And despite its supposed counterculture aspirations, cyberpunk clocks a lot more hours as a power fantasy than as an insightful commentary on society, technology, consciousness, and authority. It's not just any power fantasy either: it's specifically about and for Cool Guys, set against a lurid background of working-class and feminine suffering.

It's not always easy to pinpoint what cyberpunk actually *is*. Most critics agree the genre originates from the novel *Neuromancer* by William Gibson, but definitions can range widely. In the broadest sense, cyberpunk is a sci-fi literary tradition, in which inequality, corruption, or outright corporate hegemony figures prominently in the worldbuilding, if not always in the immediate plot. You can often recognize a cyberpunk story by its rainy neon cityscape aesthetic, its frequent use of cybernetic body modifications, and/or the virtual rendering of cyberspace.

The rainy neon cityscape originates from the 1982 film *Blade Runner*, itself based on the 1968 proto-cyberpunk novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick. The book invented the concept of androids—both book and movie ask what it means to be human, using the trappings of film noir and imagined future technologies to create the fertile ground in which the anti-heroes and gritty "dystopias" of cyberpunk would grow,

THE BLEAK VISION OF CYBERPUNK

in a stark departure from the generally more optimistic sci-fi of the 1960s and 1970s. Through *Neuromancer* (1984), *Altered Carbon* (2002), and *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), much of this established blueprint remains the same.

Much of this blueprint can be summed up by the slogan “low-life high tech.” Low-life means the denizens of the shadows cast by looming city towers. Low-life means street food, crime, police, ads, ads, ads, and sex work. Low-life means drugs and prostitutes in virtual snuff films. Low-life means you have been everywhere and seen it all. Low-life means you win with violence.

High tech means entering cyberspace virtually, cybernetic implants, unlimited new bodies for your hard-drive brain to live on. It means immortality and mega corporations ruled like dictatorships. It means *haves*. And where there are *haves*, of course there are the *have-nots*, the low-lives.

Case, the protagonist of *Neuromancer*, and Takeshi Kovacs of *Altered Carbon* (the popular novel by Richard K. Morgan and now a Netflix series) are two excellent examples of cyberpunk’s classic Cool Guy anti-hero who comes from the slums but still navigates the high-tech world of the *haves*. These guys aren’t just cool, they’re *so cool* they are sociopathically detached from the suffering around them, they can fight or cyberhack their way out of almost every problem. And they merely have to *look* at a

woman before she’s desperate to fuck them.

Altered Carbon is particularly interested in its protagonist’s sexual prowess, and in the body parts of all the women that surround him. Richard K. Morgan writes women in a way that suggests he may never have met one in real life:

“Exuberant breasts strained the fabric of the leotard...I became abruptly aware that I was swinging a hard-on like a firehose...Mrs. Bancroft’s breasts jiggled with her steps under the thin material of the leotard...pneumatic teenagers...the head of my penis swelled abruptly with blood.”

The prose isn’t the only thing that mistreats women. Join me on a whirlwind chronological tour of the ways that *Altered Carbon* obsessively dramatizes the sexualization and victimization of women and girls!

1. Girlfriend Sarah sprayed with bullets, dead, page 6.
2. Kovacs investigates Leila Begin, a prostitute who was severely beaten by Mrs. Bancroft, the wife of the client who hired him (the beating caused a miscarriage), page 96.
3. Investigates death of Elizabeth Elliott, prostitute, page 103.
4. Kovacs sleeps with Mrs. Bancroft, page 139. (The sex



itself is weird: Mrs. Bancroft exudes an empathy drug from her pores when aroused which lets them experience a kind of double sex, but the whole vibe is ruined by a complete lack of chemistry and the repeated use of the word “cunt” which, given the generalized misogyny of the book, reads more like a tired insult than anything that might be misconstrued as hot.)

5. Catholic prostitute Louise is tortured and killed for her part in aiding Kovacs’ investigation, page 157. (In *Altered Carbon*, a human consciousness can be “re-sleeved” in a new body, but Catholics are opposed to this form of immortality on religious grounds, meaning that Louise experiences a genuinely real form of death.)
6. Kovacs is captured and virtually forced into a female “sleeve” (yes, all symbolism applies), page 164. Upon becoming a woman, Kovacs’ literal first words are about his breasts and how he’s about to start his period. Oh, and then the bad guys torture him by ramming a hot poker up the vagina—page 169—in a virtual setting which is meant to evoke the Middle East and Islamic culture for no clear reason.
7. Goes on murder rampage to avenge his and Louise’s torture and her Real Death, page 185.
8. Kovacs learns his rich immortal employer has a Madonna/Whore complex so he has to abuse prostitutes about it, page 213.
9. Girlfriend Sarah (she died on page 6 but it’s cyberpunk so her consciousness is still alive) is threatened with eternal virtual torture to force Kovacs to comply with the evil villain’s plan, page 323.
10. Kovacs sleeps with Kristin Ortega, more or less the only woman in the story he hadn’t slept with yet, page 348.
11. Kovacs gets Irene Elliott, mother of dead prostitute Elizabeth and cybercrime doer, out of virtual torture prison, page 360.
12. Something about justice for Hinchley (yet another murdered prostitute), page 382.
13. Ortega is kidnapped, page 413.
14. He rescues Ortega, page 418.
15. He clones himself so one of him can take Mrs. Bancroft up to her sex island to distract her, page 443.
16. A. Dog. Is. Brutalized, page 477. (Unclear if sexually or otherwise, it occurs offscreen and you only see the aftermath but I will burn the entire fucking planet down.)
17. Honestly I stopped keeping track for a while...
18. Before Kovacs goes back to his homeworld, he gives Irene Elliott money to get her daughter Elizabeth Elliott out of virtual prison and re-sleeved, after Elizabeth was viciously murdered because prostitute (see #3), page 516.



OVACS IS ACTUALLY A BIG DAMN hero in the book, of a sort. He faces both politically and physically powerful foes; he is usually trying to rescue and get justice for victimized people. He has brooding thoughts on the military (“*Military training takes the natural order and fucks with it. It breaks down any resistance to psychopathic behavior at the same time as it builds fanatical loyalties to the group*”), power (“*like all men of power, when he talked of prices worth paying, you could be sure of one thing. Someone else was paying*”), war (“*...the reflex of long-held hierarchy is usually enough to overcome fear of a combat death. That’s how you fight wars, after all—with soldiers who are more afraid of stepping out of line than they are of dying on the battlefield*”), and what happens when you digitize the consciousness (“*What we thought of as personality was no more than the passing shape of one of the waves in front of me.*”) The book certainly doesn’t pass the Bechdel Test, but the women are at times interesting, clever, strong, and formidable. When I label the book misogynist, I am not implying that the female characters are necessarily poorly written, or that Kovacs himself is a misogynist (although...). The problem is the narrative itself, which consistently places female characters in harm’s way, does violence to them, invents situations where they must be rescued or avenged, objectifies them, and insists that they are helplessly drawn to Kovacs—all to fulfill a camouflaged power fantasy for the male reader. This is not punk, or countercultural in any way: it’s just plain old reactionary misogyny.

The fact that Kovacs is trying to catch a misogynist killer, rather than personally murdering the sex workers himself, doesn’t make the story somehow feminist. No matter how heroically a white knight rides to the rescue, or how loudly a narrative declares that *violence against women is wrong, only VILLAINS torture women*, the audience still takes away the *framing*, the background assumptions of the narrative. In a novel, the events that are depicted and the language that gets used about them is not accidental. We subconsciously absorb these elements as we’re ripping through a plot, too often accepting them as *reality* rather than questioning them as authorial choices. Of course you, dear reader, would never dream of mutilating a whore and tossing her body out of an airship, or impaling a virtual woman with a hot poker in her vagina, or hoping for your lover to be kidnapped so you can heroically rescue her. If you read this book, there’s a good chance you only absorbed without noticing the psycho-horny descriptions of women, and didn’t really think about how many times Richard K. Morgan decided to make women’s suffering the device which propels Takeshi Kovacs into heroic acts. (I read enough Sci-Fi/Fantasy dudes’ blogs to assure you that at least a handful of people took absolutely no notice whatsoever.) Morgan, by the way, claims he doesn’t understand accusations that the hot-poker-in-vagina-torture scene is sexist. He’s insisted in an interview that violence against women makes him

really mad, actually. He, like many of his readers, simply accepts that violence against women must happen, and then heroic men must murder people about it.

What we choose to assume and accept tells us a lot about the culture we live in and our own individual psychologies. If I had read *Altered Carbon* five years ago when I was less attentive to underlying narrative assumptions, I probably would have liked it. I expect I would have been alarmed at the violence but treated it as a requirement of dystopian literature. I would have proclaimed that the ghastly prostitute murders were clearly derided as *bad* by the narrative, and excused it as the driver of the plot. But did you know there are entire books out there that do not murder whores even *one single time*? Did you know that there is a way to launch a plot without a long-legged dame being in trouble?



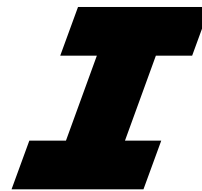
CONSIDER THE INCREDIBLE NOVEL *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin, where a physicist from a utopian-ish anarchist society on the moon visits a capitalist planet. Among the capitalist “propertarians,” the physicist Shevek is told the following about women: “Can’t do the math; no head for abstract thought; don’t belong. You know how it is, what women call thinking is done with the uterus! Of course, there’s always a few exceptions, God-awful brainy women with vaginal atrophy.” Another person tells him, “A beautiful, virtuous woman...is an inspiration to us—the most precious thing on earth.”

Shevek is baffled by this. In his anarchist utopia, women are not only scientists, they can do any job they like! Gender and sexual identity have not been completely abolished on the moon, but the equality and autonomy of its inhabitants is beautifully portrayed by Shevek’s blunt confusion over the sexism he encounters. When a doctor says men are physically stronger than women, Shevek replies, “Yes, often, and larger, but what does that matter when we have machines? And even when we don’t have machines, when we must dig with the shovel or carry on the back, the men maybe work faster—but the women work longer. Often I have wished I was as tough as a woman.” Upping misogyny in this form—and indeed, showing that an alternative to capitalist society is possible—is far more radical than just about anything offered up by cyberpunk.

Misogyny isn’t just a fault of *Altered Carbon* specifically: it’s a regular theme of the low-life cyberpunk narrative. The main story of *Cyberpunk 2077* involves a kidnapped girlfriend, plus a sex worker who is sold to a “ripperdoc” for parts and *then* sold to virtual porn producers to film a snuff film that users can experience firsthand. The big boss battle is against a cyborg named Adam Smasher who calls a woman a “fuckable cut of meat” in an early cutscene. (You see, violence against women is *bad*, be-

cause the evil cyborg said so. Now watch this immersive virtual snuff film.) Seedy, exploitative sex work is featured everywhere in *Cyberpunk 2077*, just as it is in *Altered Carbon*. The critically acclaimed *Blade Runner* too has its share of misogyny: Harrison Ford’s character Rick Deckard is a predator who aggressively and forcibly does not take no for an answer (this is known as sexual assault, but the scene is framed by director Ridley Scott as seduction). *Total Recall* (1990), an arguably cyberpunk adaptation of another Philip K. Dick story, is famed for its sexualized scenes with Sharon Stone (who is murdered), a prostitute girlfriend on Mars, and an iconic three-breasted prostitute (who is murdered). HBO’s *Westworld* also—sigh, you guessed it—features murdered android prostitutes. Eventually, you have to wonder whether some people just want to write stories about murdering women they pay for sex.

But while other cyberpunk films like *The Ghost in the Shell* (1995), *Akira* (1988), *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019), *The Matrix* (1999), and *RoboCop* (1987) may not be quite as guilty of employing these sexist tropes, each is a power fantasy in its own right. *The Matrix* is an easy one to peg. It doesn’t share the neon Hong Kong aesthetic of many other visual cyberpunk media, but the outsider misfit hero gains godlike powers which enable him to bend the virtual false reality to his will. Again, the “punk” qualities seem to be lacking—beyond aesthetics, and the *Matrix*’s arguable interpretation as an allegory for being transgender—what exactly is counterculture or radical about this storyline?



IT’S NOT POSSIBLE IN CYBERPUNK TO really look beyond aesthetics, because the aesthetic *is* cyberpunk; cyberpunk is an aesthetic. Style is so pivotal to the genre that the character creation rulebook for the *Cyberpunk* role-playing game specifically advises “style over substance.” The low-life setting doesn’t by any means *need* to enable sexist writing and worldbuilding—the prostitutes themselves could easily be the unmurdered heroes—but the depiction of some people as helpless victims and some as powerful villains is mostly accepted as a fact of life. This accepted fact creates the main tension in the majority of cyberpunk stories: the endless, unresolvable struggle between the haves and the have-nots.

The financial and physical inequality in these worlds ranges from slightly-more-awful-than-most-capitalist-countries to unequivocally dystopian levels of fucked-up. Corporations war against each other in the background of many cyberpunk narratives, a thematic warning that leaving too much power and technology to mega-corporations will inevitably end in the common man being treated as an expendable resource, dying young while the rich fight each other and live forever.

As the villain of *Altered Carbon* says, “Human life has no val-

EXCELLENCE



WALLET CHAINS
BY HAUTE SUJETTE™

ue...[people] are *abundant*, Takeshi...Real human flesh is *cheaper* than a machine.” Now, as a leftist, I absolutely gobble up criticism of capitalism. I will eat it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I paused and screamed over the *Family Heart Center* ad in the opening of *RoboCop*: “[a new mechanical heart] qualifies for the Health Tax Credit.” But pointing out the problems of capitalism is easy—even the *New York Times* manages to do it on occasion. What’s next, though?

Cyberpunk 2077 wasn’t all delays, disaster, and misogyny: its strength is in its story, particularly the inclusion of the anti-capitalist character Johnny Silverhand. Voiced by and modeled after *Matrix* alum Keanu Reeves, Silverhand is a deserter “Rockerboy” who was killed while nuking the evil Arasaka corporation’s headquarters, and whose personality now lives inside your protagonist’s head thanks to a mission gone wrong. Now here is a punk character in every respect! We learn that Silverhand deserted the military along with many others when they discovered how the government had manipulated them into the Central American Conflict. Seeing that the corrupt mega-corporations profited from the war by selling arms to both sides, Silverhand started a rock band to expose corruption. Actual literal punk rock. Oh, and as I mentioned, *he did a terrorism in an attempt to end the corporate wars*.



UT AT THE END OF THE DAY, how often in cyberpunk do the have-nots, the low-lives, triumph over the haves? Johnny Silverhand is punk personified, but does he succeed in overthrowing the corporations? No.

In fact, there is *no* ending of the game in which your character, V, can live, or for that matter one in which the evil Arasaka corporation is toppled. You can only make choices which result in V dying immediately or in six months’ time; you can assault Arasaka but all characters are grim-faced about how pointless these actions will be in the face of the mega-corporation’s enormous resources. Silverhand actually seems more interested in being *correct* about corporate corruption, and getting revenge for his own death, rather than in trying to improve the lives of everyday people. This, too, might be punk, but it’s precisely the kind of *cool* that subsumes anything productive.

In *Altered Carbon*, Kovacs’ actions result in the passage of important legislation to prevent the most egregious of crimes that take place in the novel, but Morgan’s carefully built, deeply unjust society is left completely unharmed. Kovacs heroically helps many of the characters he encounters throughout the book, but what of the other thousands and millions who suffer the same oppression, whom he couldn’t save? In *Neuromancer*...fuck, I have no clue, I could not understand that book at all, but it did not appear to involve anything like a Maoist uprising. *Johnny Mnemonic* may be the best cyberpunk offering in this regard: the movie, written by William Gibson, ends with Keanu Reeves

(with the help of a military dolphin, I shit you not) exposing the big bad corporation Pharmakom for withholding the cure to a terrible disease, and broadcasts the cure to the whole world. It’s a simple ending to a silly film, but at least the resolution materially helps *all* the oppressed people of Earth, not just the protagonists. The movie’s final image is the Pharmakom headquarters being set aflame by the public. Good for them.

Could it be that I just hate dystopias? Are these even dystopias? Or are they merely more of the grimdark worlds that increasingly populate our HBO lineups and Young Adult book fairs? In a 1992 essay “The ‘New’ Romancers” literary scholar Carol McGuirk argued that cyberpunk literature like *Neuromancer* is “SF noir,” *not* dystopian. Dystopian literature does not mean endless misery, or an evil civilization that can’t be overcome. McGuirk explains:

A test to determine whether a gloomy work of soft science fiction is dystopian or SF noir is to look at the uses of a catastrophic setting. The humanist author furnishes some account of the issues that led to holocaust, the currents in human civilization threatened by social collapse, and the struggles of the hero to survive in and perhaps even transcend an arena of drastically reduced possibility... By contrast...SF noir...stylizes and elides such factors; readers are presented instead with random episodes of violence, perpetrated by turns against or by the protagonists.

In SF noir, humanism’s focus on heroic capacity is replaced by a central focus on psychic mutilation, used to set a stylized atmosphere.

SF noir, as McGuirk defines it, presents problems and no solutions. These stories raise philosophical questions about power and class and identity they often do not develop, or resolve. There *is* a question of preference here—whether you like to consume SF noir or dystopian literature (or utopian or high fantasy or romance or memoir) you can and should read and watch anything you like! But it was with a sigh of relief that I read McGuirk’s words and could see the rationale behind my *own* preferences crystallize. I do not want to read about the mutilation of women in hopeless, hyper-capitalist futures. I would prefer to read stories like Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, where the problems of our own society are unflinchingly displayed in a manner that creates not just psychic pain, but also new thought and new hope for what human beings are capable of, and for what society can look like. The limits of imagination extend so far; why accept fictions that merely negotiate with their grim and unchangeable settings rather than imagine new explanations, new solutions, new kinds of characters and modes of life, even in dark situations? McGuirk points to style itself as the culprit:

Stylized noir protagonists experience their sorrows as extrinsically caused and largely irreversible, so they can achieve neither the bitter enlightenment of the tragic hero nor the final triumph of the epic hero...In SF noir the final destination of narrative is not satire, tragedy, epic, or humanistic utopia/dystopia...In many of these texts the only hero is style.

That is to say, the purpose of cyberpunk isn't to examine capitalism or the boundaries of life versus death amid the rain and neon: the purpose is the rain and the neon itself, the stylized presentation of the psychic pain of a broody protagonist. Of course, there's nothing wrong with enjoying this aesthetic: if cyberpunk is your style, please feel free to enjoy it responsibly! I personally love the cyberpunk anime film *The Ghost in the Shell* (1995), which is hauntingly beautiful and manages to explore the sorts of questions about human consciousness and the nature of artificial intelligence that cyberpunk is supposed to be famous for, and it does so in such a personal and powerful way that it feels as though it belongs in a category of its own.

The Ghost in the Shell was remade in 2017, in a live action flop by DreamWorks and several other mega-studios. Any genre can have its popular narratives and aesthetic trappings co-opted, diluted for the masses by corporations looking to cash in on the hottest trend. But a genre whose *only* hero is style is especially vulnerable to such commodification. And far too much of cyberpunk has been bent on making low life (and the violence against women and hopeless struggle against capitalism inherent in it) look as cool as possible. Corporations will sell cool without looking twice at the side effects. Le Guin said it best in the foreword to her 2001 *Tales from Earthsea*:

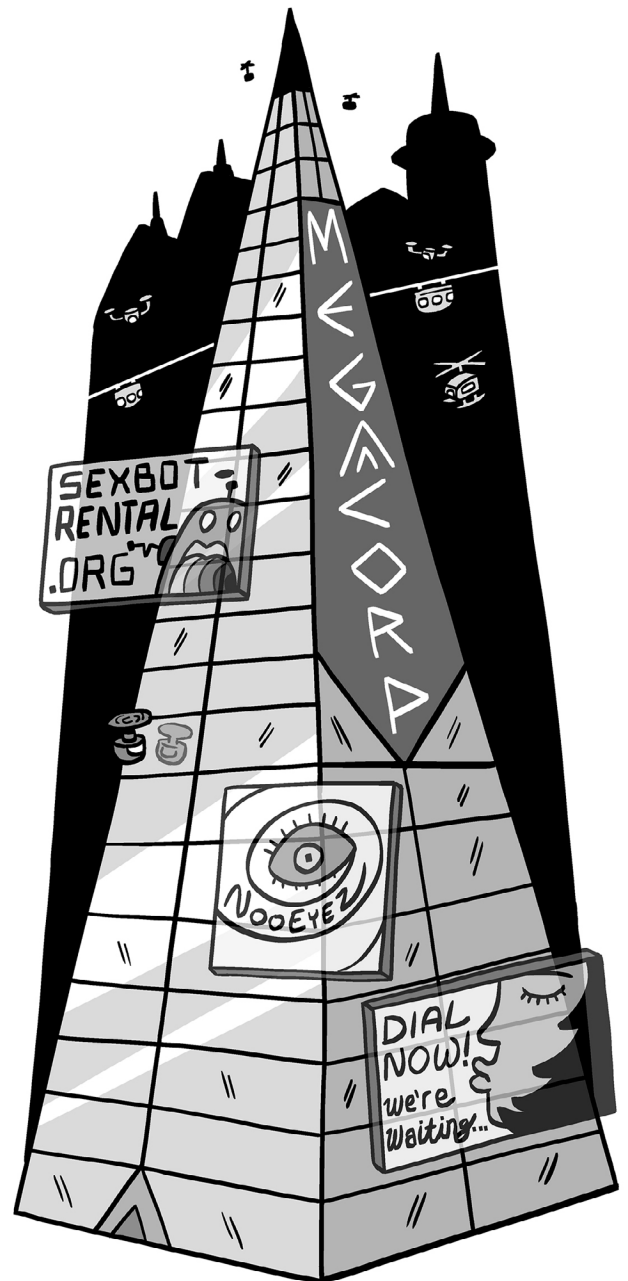
So people turn to the realms of fantasy for stability, ancient truths, immutable simplicities. And the mills of capitalism provide them. Supply meets demand. Fantasy becomes a commodity, an industry.

Commodified fantasy takes no risks: it invents nothing, but imitates and trivializes. It proceeds by depriving the old stories of their intellectual and ethical complexity, turning their action to violence, their actors to dolls, and their truth-telling to sentimental platitude. Heroes brandish their swords, lasers, wands, as mechanically as combine harvesters, reaping profits. Profoundly disturbing moral choices are sanitized, made cute, made safe. The passionately conceived ideas of the great story-tellers are copied, stereotyped, reduced to toys, molded in bright-colored plastic, advertised, sold, broken, junked, replaceable, interchangeable.

What the commodifiers of fantasy count on and exploit is the insuperable imagination of the reader, child or adult, which gives even these dead things life—of a sort, for a while.

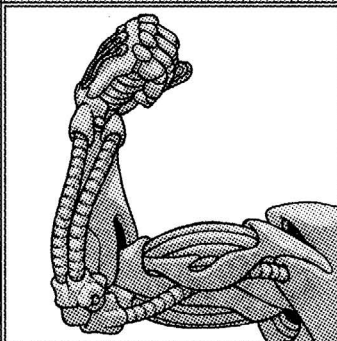
Has *Cyberpunk 2077* really betrayed a literary tradition that “once stood out as a vital genre of anti-capitalist fiction,” as Ryan Zickgraf said in *Jacobin*? Or is it merely the interactive logical conclusion of a genre that has always put the neon silhouette of a very cool dude holding a gun before any meaningful dialogue about society? There's a scene in *The Ghost in the Shell*—a beautiful, eerie, and isolating moment—where the protagonist, a cyborg with a heavy metal body, goes diving in the sea. Afterward, she explains to her partner why she takes the risks that she does—she is searching to understand who *she* is when she is a mix of memories, information, cybernetic implants belonging to the government. Who would she be if she quit her secretive

government job, returning the implants they installed throughout her entire body and mind? Who would she be if her consciousness expanded into the vast network of information she can access and process at superhuman speed? The interrogation of the unanswerable questions of what it means to be human, and not human, is perhaps the best cyberpunk has to offer. It's *Blade Runner*'s famous “tears in rain” scene, where a hunted android replicant appears all too human as he faces his planned expiration—aka, his death. These are the kinds of stories worth telling, where humanity, identity, authority, capitalism, and revolution become questions to explore, not certainties to accept. This is where real counter-cultural fiction can be found. ♣

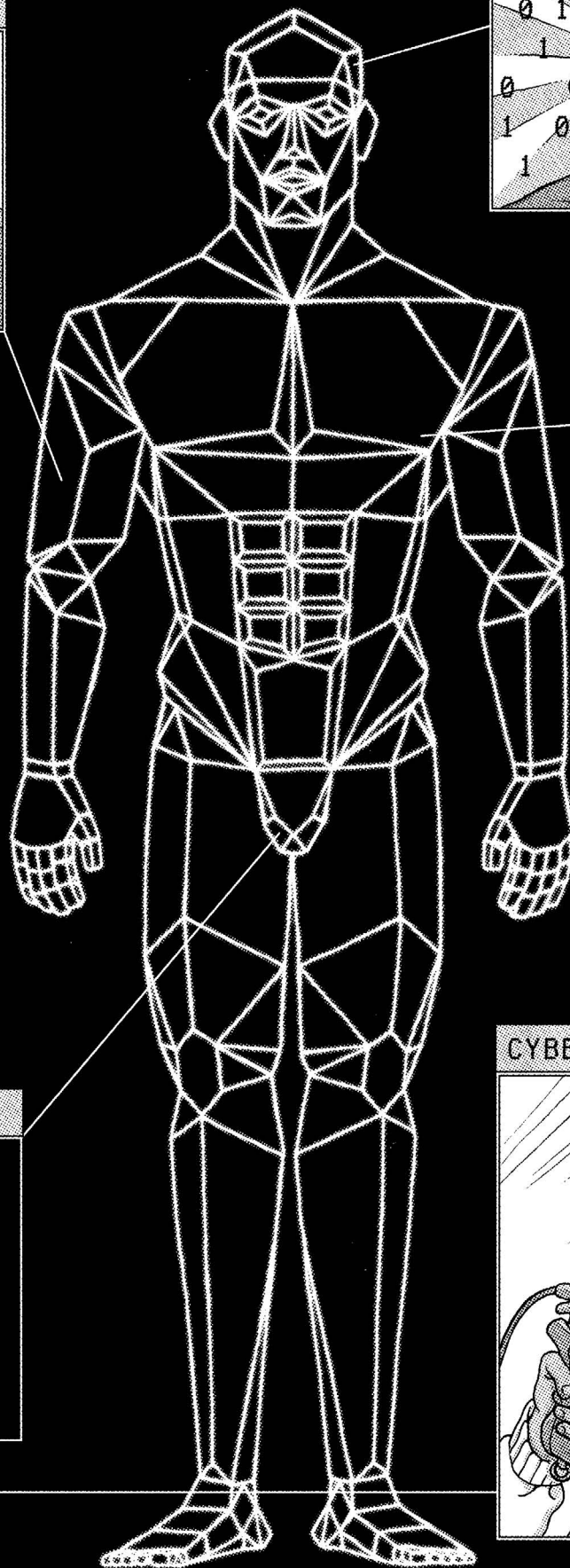


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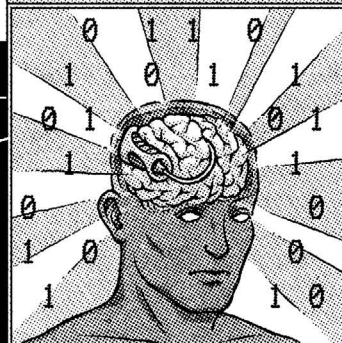
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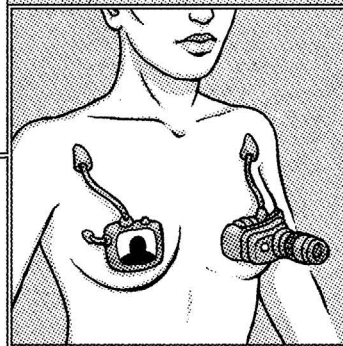
CYBER_ENHANCEMENTS



HAKPRO_BRAINCHIP



PASTIE_CAM

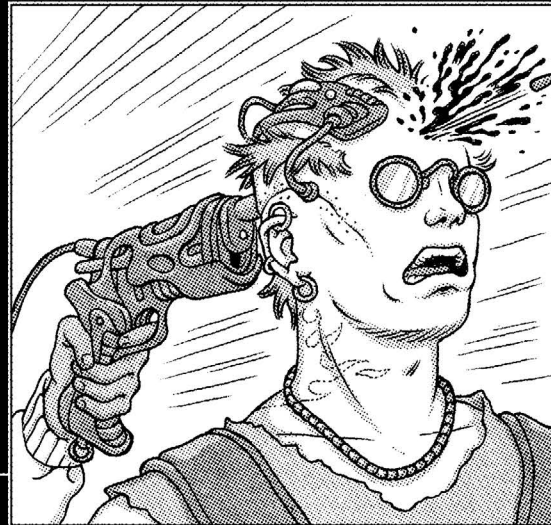


- 4. YOUR EX-GIRLFRIEND
- 5. YOUR EX-GIRLFRIEND'S CORPORATION

KATAN



CYBERPISTOL

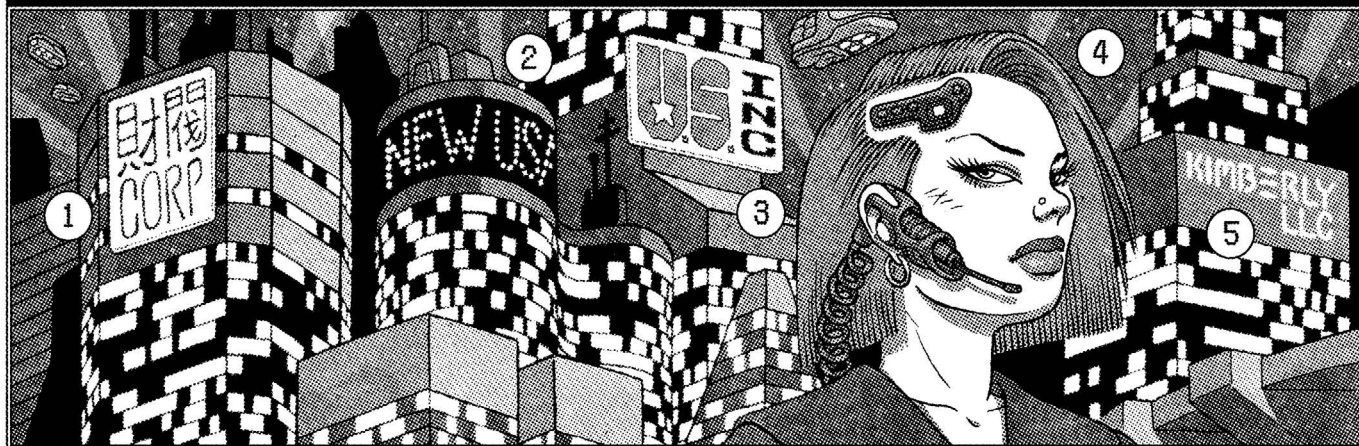


ERROR!

ERROR!
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WAYS_TO_KILL

CHOOSE_YOUR_VILLAIN



1. MEGA CORPORATION
2. THE GOVERNMENT
3. GOVERNMENT CORPORATION

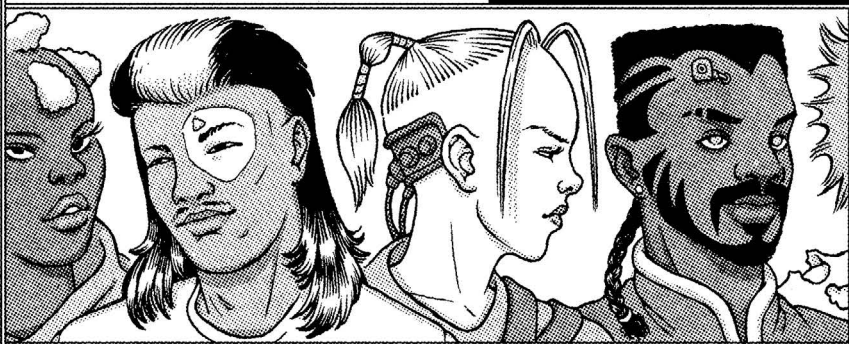
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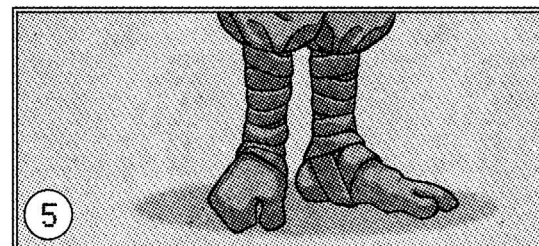
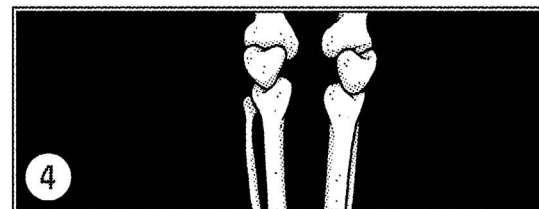
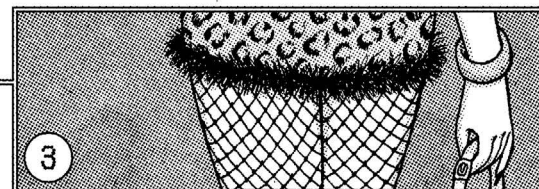
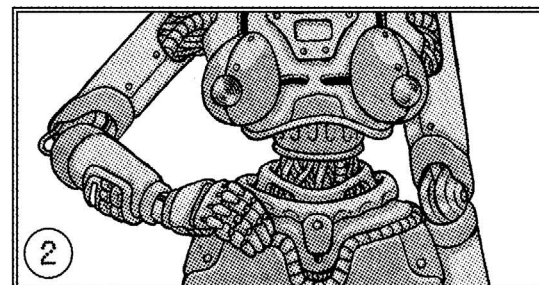
1. AI
2. ROBOT
3. SEX WORKER
4. DEAD
5. NINJA



CHOOSE_YOUR_HAIRCUT



GIRLFRIEND_CUSTOMIZATION





LIBERTARIAN REX

by Devin Thomas O'Shea

WITH *THE FOUNTAINHEAD* IN ONE HAND AND a chess board in the other, Rex Sinequelfield returned to St. Louis in 2009, trumpeted as “The King” coming home to the Midwest. *St. Louis Magazine* gushed that the libertarian billionaire was going to “use his millions to show the Show-Me State [Missouri] how to succeed.” He was going to privatize the water, defund the public schools, sell off the airport, abolish the earnings tax, outlaw tenure for Missouri teachers, and bring about the libertarian utopia. Yes, Libertarian Rex was coming home to reign as king of flyover country, where the politicians are cheap and the Koch-style AstroTurf money goes a long, long way.

One decade later, in the smoking wreckage of initiatives like Better Together, with acres of libertarian cash on fire and former lackeys in federal prison, Sinequelfield seems ready to retire. It’s rumored that he doesn’t do much these days except distance himself from his former shell company, Pelopidas, and play online chess. He also reportedly enjoys chicken salad sandwiches from the local upscale grocer, and spends his afternoons pulling a “Benko Gambit” against Vietnamese teenagers on chess.com.

Sinequelfield had big ideas, lots of money, and believed, with the conviction of an apostle, that he could turn St. Louis into a libertarian paradise. So what happened to the Randian billionaire chess master?

Should you find yourself facing off across the checkered tiles, with Rex Sinequelfield using 10 knights and seven bishops, and you on the other side with a couple tarnished pawns, here are some tips on how to stave off the attacks of your local libertarian billionaire.

TIP #1: *Get them talking.*

THE BIGGEST ENEMIES OF LIBERTARIANISM MIGHT BE libertarians publicly speaking about their ideology. Rex doesn’t give many interviews, especially since 2012 when Sinequelfield had

to apologize for claiming public schools were the Klan’s idea. In what he claimed was a quote from a former Missouri judge, Sinequelfield said, “...a long time ago, decades ago, the Ku Klux Klan got together and said how can we really hurt the African-American children permanently? How can we ruin their lives? And what they designed was the public-school system.”

This isn’t the only time Sinequelfield has revealed the ahistoricism, bizarre logic, and smug cruelty of his libertarianism. In his “The Return of the King” coming-home interview of 2009, with the 2008 recession fear on everyone’s mind, *St. Louis Magazine* asked Sinequelfield about a quote by *Slate*’s Jacob Weisberg. Weisberg had remarked,

A source of mild entertainment amid the financial carnage has been watching libertarians scurrying to explain how the global financial crisis is the result of too much government intervention rather than too little... their heroic view of capitalism makes it difficult for them to accept that markets can be irrational, misunderstand risk, and misallocate resources...

“There’s a lot of emotionalism in that,” Sinequelfield replied. “If you read it carefully, you see him start ranting and raving,” Sinequelfield goes on: “It’s hard to stay cool right now. This is a time of great stress. If the typical working person isn’t a little bit scared, they’re not normal.”

So, what should a normal, terrified, statistically debt-laden, possibly unemployed, downwardly mobile citizen do during a recession? “Stay cool,” Rex said.

According to Sinequelfield, there’s nothing to be done about the ominous disparity between rich and poor. “It’s just a matter of statistics,” he explained. “As the sample size grows, the extremes will get farther apart. While the poor are getting richer, someone is going to get extremely rich; the upper end is not bounded.” You don’t have to be a communist to reject Sinequelfield’s self-justification here. It was a bad look to sit on a golden throne in 2009, with the subprime mortgage crisis and the African American community losing half its wealth, and say,

“...the market is supremely efficient, and its forces can only improve education and other public enterprises. Taxes are disincentives, so anything taxed will decrease: income, spending, business. Government’s job is to protect our rights and get out of the way. Ours is to be disciplined and patient, work hard, trust the market ... and hold back the tears.”

When Sinefield says it's the government's job to protect "our rights," it's unclear if he realizes how rarely that happens. It doesn't seem like he's talking about the "rights" of an out-of-work machinist, or a debt-laden grad student, or a seasonal farm worker, or the teenager imprisoned for low-level drug crimes, or the homeowners left underwater by mortgages while the banks were bailed out instead. But here in lies one of the more dangerous things about Sinefield and many billionaires like him: he doesn't see the discrepancies in his argument as discrepancies at all. He believes that he—and the market—are 100 percent right all the time. In fact, Sinefield has a comic book origin story to explain why.

TIP #2:

Evaluate your libertarian menace; understand them psychologically.

JUST LIKE MY OWN IRISH-IMMIGRANT GRANDFATHER TOM O'Shea, Sinefield was surrendered to the care of an orphanage as a boy. St. Vincent's Orphan Home is located in Normandy, Missouri, and now receives generous funding from the libertarian king's coffers. Raised by nuns along with his brother, Rex slept in a big dorm room with a narrow bed. His father had died of an aortic aneurysm and his mother couldn't financially support the children.

As kids, my mother and her sisters also spent time within the church-dominated child services of St. Louis. It's difficult to recover documents that account for those years, and almost no records survive of my grandfather's childhood. Horrible things can happen to children in the darkness of these systems accountable to none but The Lord; we know that the nuns of St. Vincent, at least, enforced discipline with a stick.

Discipline and hard work led Sinefield toward life in the priesthood; he entered a seminary for three years but stayed interested in the stock market, much like his mother. After abruptly leaving the seminary for unclear reasons, he did a stint in the finance corps at Fort Riley during Vietnam. It was an interesting time to be entangled in the nexus of war and finance: the Vietnam war buried the United States in so much debt that President Nixon gave up America's symbolic control of the world's currencies, and on August 15th, 1971, the dollar became decoupled from the gold reserves in Fort Knox. This was just one part of the "Nixon Shock" measures, which together plunged the global banking system into a new universe of unbacked currencies and financial instruments which Rex would learn to game.

After the finance corps, Rex attended the University of Chicago, where libertarian dogma is brewed and genocidal dictator Augusto Pinochet is noted for his pro-freedom stance toward the market. Here, Sinefield's former passion for The Word of God seems to have been converted into belief in the intrinsic efficiency of the world's stock and bond markets. They are, he said in 2009, "the only thing that creates order in the universe."

In the early 1970s, Sinefield developed the first market-weighted index fund "in the galaxy." His wife Jeanne, a fellow U. Chicago grad and talented mathematician in her own right, may have been involved; it's also possible that John McQuown at Wells Fargo actually beat him to it. One way or another, over the next 30 years, Sine-

field became extraordinarily wealthy. In 2008, he gifted \$300 million to the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business, right before returning to Missouri, ready to be crowned king and wage a holy crusade on state taxes.

TIP #3:

It helps if your town is deadlocked in century-old problems that can't be easily solved.

FROM SPACE, LOOKING AT THE GRAY CEMENT LUMP OF St. Louis set in the bend of the Mississippi River, you might not be able to see St. Louis' entrenched divisions. But there's a well-documented, world-historic, racial divide between north and south plus a divide between county and city, separating east from west and further shattering one of the most segregated urban spaces in the country. This separation has existed for a long time, dating back to the City-County Divorce of 1876.

In practice, each county municipality in St. Louis is a jagged shard of glass, arguing its own contracts, funding its own firefighters, regulating its own cops, hiring five administrators to do the job that one would perform in a more rationally-devised system. Each municipality has its own public schools, mayors, garbage disposal systems, on and on. Some are glorified tracks of highway plus a Galleria shopping mall; others contain all the McMansions. Clayton is an Arch-less rival downtown commercial district. Other municipalities have outlier infant mortality rates that are closer to Serbia's than the rest of the United States.

Many engaged residents who want to see this local chaos resolved agree that the county fiefdoms should unite with the old power downtown—St. Louis City is constantly strapped for cash since white flight swept the tax base out west. Most of the current city budget goes to the cops, who can't seem to do a single thing about St. Louis crime no matter how many rocket launchers are added to the squad cars. In 2021, \$208 million will go to the Metro PD, while just over \$30 million will go to "Human Services" (homeless relief, youth and family need, veterans), \$12.7 million will go to health and hospitals, and crime will remain high.

Rich county residents, on the other hand, often frame uniting as a "bail out" for St. Louis City, playing up the invisible line between *them* and *us*. The city is said to be dangerous, dirty, not like it used to be, careless with money, have a crime problem: all obvious racist code for "Black people live there." And yet, when asked where they hail from, everyone in the wealthy suburb of Chesterfield lies and says they're from St. Louis, born and raised.

Although St. Louis' political divisions ended up contributing to Sinefield's downfall, the area is already a paradise for wealthy libertarians. Don't like the property taxes over in Maplewood? Go check what the offer is in Richmond Heights, two blocks over. The big winners of the city-county split tend to be billion-dollar companies, giant hospital complexes, fickle developers, and snooty universities. But the police benefit too: in a balkanized county, cops with anger issues get kicked out of an okay department and start work at another uptown a week later, in a Blacker neighborhood.

Darren Wilson, the officer who murdered Michael Brown, wanted to work in one of the 50 municipalities in North County—the poorer, Blacker part of St. Louis—as a career move: “If you go there and you do three to five years, get your experience, you can kind of write your own ticket,” Wilson told the *New Yorker* in 2013. Most of his job up north was to “issue countless traffic tickets and ordinance-violation citations.” In these poor municipalities, the revenues from tickets and citations pay the local bills. These mini-cities remain constantly cash-strapped; the police officers themselves aren’t paid very well, earning “as little as ten dollars an hour.” The president of the Missouri Fraternal Order of the police told the *New Yorker* that “the low pay can create ‘unprofessional police officers,’” adding, “You get what you pay for.”

A merger would consolidate these municipalities, forcing a single set of rules under one administration. In theory, you could bring the accountability of the McMansion prep-school district to the occupied apartheid zones where cops write tickets and clean up after shootings (if not carry them out themselves). This is reformist rather than radical—ideally the police ought to be replaced with unarmed mental health professionals and social workers trained in de-escalation with a robust social safety net to back them up—but it would still be easier to move one unified St. Louis in this direction rather than 90 headstrong clans. At the least, a merger would adjust the city’s population to reflect reality. A *lot* of people live in the greater St. Louis area—the city is the size of Houston, and is never treated that way by state or federal authorities, especially when it comes to aid and investment.

In 2009, it seemed like The King agreed. The stars aligned in the proper constellations, the unobtainable crested the horizon...and then it all fell apart, because the city’s situation remains complex and difficult to solve.

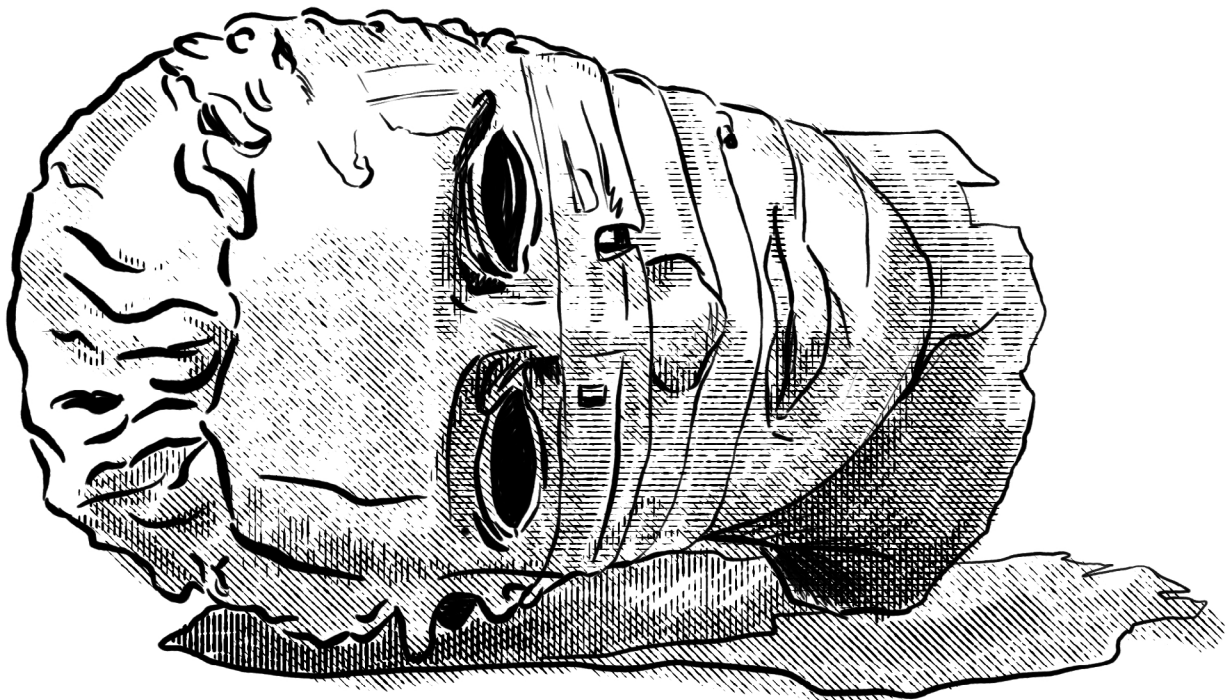
Also, everyone involved in his scheme was a moron.

TIP #4:

Raw money can only get your libertarian billionaire so far.

SINQUEFIELD ACTUALLY BACKED THE CITY-COUNTY MERGER, though for the worst possible reasons. Thinking long-term, he hoped that once he consolidated the region, he could achieve the castling move that Sam Brownback did in 2010. As the *New Republic* reports, once Brownback had captured the Kansas governor’s office, he *...established an Office of the Repealer to take a scythe to regulations on business, he slashed spending on the poor by tightening welfare requirements, he rejected federal Medicaid subsidies and privatized the delivery of Medicaid, and he dissolved four state agencies and eliminated 2,000 state jobs...He was advised by the godfather of supply-side economics himself, the Reagan-era economist Arthur Laffer, who described the reforms as ‘a revolution in a cornfield.’* Of course, the cornfield revolution has been a disaster for Kansas. Especially if you’re a fan of either good schools or roads.

The point of Koch-style influence is to buy everyone and everything. Lobby, spend, finance—\$10-million-dollar PACs are built to support single-ballot initiatives with libertarian goals like abolishing teacher tenure in Missouri. However, it doesn’t always work. Your think tanks can put out reports urging St. Louis to privatize the water, your P.R. shell company can push “Right to Work” legislation with slick ads, but money doesn’t guarantee that your initiatives will pass. The Sinquefield-backed “Right to Work” bill was absolutely crushed in 2018 thanks to the rock-hard will of Missouri union power. Medicare was expanded in 2020 despite at least \$160,000 in Rex checks. Twice,



Sinquefield failed to privatize St. Louis' Lambert Airport, the city's primary asset, despite giving \$600,000 in-kind donations to pro-privatization groups in one year's attempt.

But since day one, Rex's archenemy has been public education. The idea of public education is a nightmare in the libertarian dreamland where I.Q. is the only metric that can properly assess the worth of a mind. From there, you can work your way back through the sadistic logic of the American education system's emphasis on testing, and come to the conclusion that low test scores are the fault of dumb kids and the nanny state. Schools, in the libertarian view, should be independent laboratories of supply-and-demand knowledge; the first moves Sinquefield ever made juiced the charter school lobbying machine. (He's also poured tens of millions into state elections including Todd "If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down" Akin.)

In 2006, laying the groundwork for his effort to take control of St. Louis politics, Sinquefield put a man named Travis Brown in charge of Pelopidas LLC, his public relations group. Pelopidas is the favorite hatchling of a brood of Sinquefield-funded "interest groups" sporting cursed names like Missourians for a Better Economy, The Show Me Institute, and the one that I interned for in 2012, the Children's Education Alliance of Missouri (CEAM).

I found out I worked for Rex about mid-way through an unpaid internship at CEAM. (Look, I needed an internship to graduate from Mizzou, and who would have thought this alliance of pro-education children could have a dark side?) I never met The King or Travis Brown, but then, I was a bad intern. Only a select few got invited out to Sinquefield's 1,000 acre farm in Westphalia, Missouri for a chat about the future. I was better suited to stuffing envelopes with instructions for the local aldermen, lobbying for changes in the education system that, at the time, I didn't understand.

In 2012, I worked an open house for a CEAM program called "Parent Academy" where the group had convinced itself that predominantly African American parents of public-school kids would give up their Saturday to come hear a presentation from a charter school lobbyist. "I don't understand why everyone is so afraid of vouchers," I heard one lawyer whisper to the other as we mulled around an empty conference hall downtown. One family showed up, grabbed some free donuts, and booked it.

White flight and the Catholic Church beat Rex to the privatized education punch decades ago. St. Louis County's billion municipalities work to keep local money extremely local—the poor parts of the city have failing publics and failing charters, while the rich parts like Clayton have private prep schools and deluxe publics. All of this is because local taxes stay within shattered municipality lines, and the poor stay poor, and the rich have it all.

A 2015 *This American Life* episode about school funding noted that Michael Brown's senior year in the Normandy School District had bleak prospects: "[The district's] points for academic achievement in English—0, math—0, social studies—0, science—0, points for college placement—0. It seems impossible, but in 11 of 13 measures, the district didn't earn a single point. 10 out of 140 points, that was its score. It's like how they say you get points on the SAT just for writing your name. It's like they got 10 points just for existing. Normandy is the worst district in the state of Missouri."

Remember, St. Vincent's Orphanage—Sinquefield's boyhood home—is in Normandy. Separated by decades, King Rex and Michael Brown grew up down the street from each other. But instead of seeing

the potential city-county merger as a way to bolster and redistribute tax money to needy districts, Rex saw the merger as a way to erase all the lines and turn everything into St. Vincent's—or, more specifically, the godless exploitative charter school version.

TIP #5:

Check out who your libertarian billionaire put in charge of the dirty work.

BETTER TOGETHER" WAS A NONPROFIT STARTED IN 2013 to push a state constitutional amendment which would merge city and county; an amendment that was supposed to be on the November 2020 ballot. The board of Better Together consisted of 18 people (including George W. Bush's ambassador to Turkey, for some reason). King Rex was only listed as a "supporter" on the now-defunct Better Together website. However, a keen detective could locate an important clue just by sniffing around the Better Together headquarters: the nonprofit split a literal office with Pelopidas.

Rex's problem was always P.R. There was a sort of generalized feeling in St. Louis government that "*you can't get anything done without Rex*," and while it can be read as fawning admiration for the power in one man's hands, it also makes Rex sound like a supervillain. The problem with Better Together was that Sinquefield had to manage far too much at once. He had to signal to the business interests in St. Louis: "This merger could happen now that I want it to, come to the bargaining table," but at the same time, he had to assure the public, unions, and community advocates: "Don't you worry. I, your feudal regent, have your best interests at heart."

We can thank the graceless rollout of Better Together on the man Sinquefield hired to carry out his will. Here's where your city can get extremely lucky the way St. Louis did: your local billionaire savior may trust a nimrod like Travis Brown to spend the money.

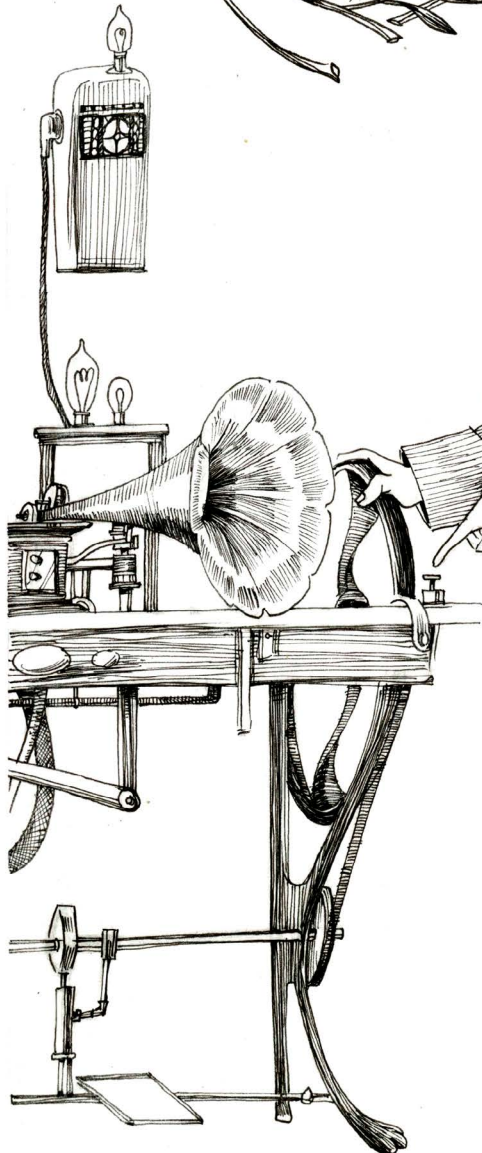
Travis Brown wears bright pink ties, expensive suits, and tends to spend 11 million when he's bringing in only 10. He's stocky with thinning hair and beady eyes, resembling nothing so much as an assistant high school football coach. In 2013, Brown "wrote" a book called *How Money Walks*, featuring a libertarian murderer's row of Introduction writers—Arthur Laffer and Sinquefield himself included. As Lee Fang describes it in *Politico*, the book argues, "questionably, that people are driven away by high income taxes and move instead to places with little to no income taxes." Brown (or his ghostwriter) insists that this is a good thing—billionaires should move to the Midwest, to anti-worker Right-to-Work states, or sponsor Right-to-Work legislation themselves. Purge the heathen unions, install your anti-tax Crusader kingdoms.

At the Pelopidas' headquarters, Brown became fixated on the extra rooms in the office. He bought lava lamps for one, and told everyone he was going to "turn it into a sex room." The employees turned the other empty space into a mother's room for the women who had babies to bring to the office, and Brown said he was going to turn this room into a lactation room with a camera installed so he could watch. Also, after a dispute with one employee, Travis brought a triple-barrel shotgun to work the next day to "prove a point."

What brought an unhinged flimflam man like Brown into Sinquefield's orbit? Sinquefield wanted to mold the city in his image, and had

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- Make trivial demands of it
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IT HEARS
EVERYTHING

all the money to do so, but cities are complicated. The old aristocracy in St. Louis is a cacophony of interests by themselves—to manipulate them you need help, you need consultants, you need people who know how to get things done, or pretend they do. Brown knew the area, he was good at spending money, and he used his employer like an ATM. Every Christmas, Brown would blow \$80,000 to \$120,000 on an annual party at a fancy hotel. Clients and employees dressed to out-dazzle each other, while Rex and Genie Sinquefield would show up for a quick walk-through. Rex would wear blue jeans and look uncomfortable, and at the end of an hour, The King would Irish goodbye. Brown's party would go on, promising a win so long as the cash kept flowing.

TIP #6: *Learn from your comrades' cities.*

IN FEBRUARY OF 2019, ST. LOUIS ALDERWOMAN MEGAN Green analyzed the Better Together proposal on a long flight to D.C. The proposal sounded great as a sound bite; the city and county would merge, redundancy would be cut so that there weren't 90 different waste removal contracts, it even seemed like wealth would be redistributed on some level. Then Alderwoman Green read the earnings tax clause, and saw a dark future for her city.

What she saw was Flint. Five years previously, in an effort to run the

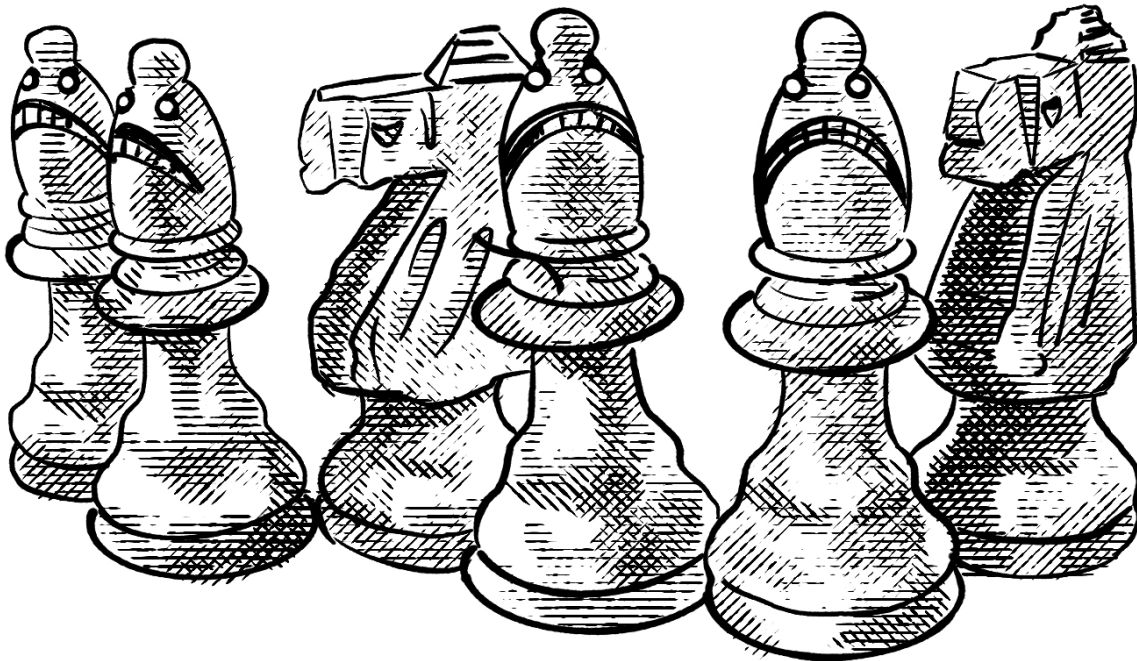
1. Incidentally, it's unclear who named the P.R. firm, but Dr. Mallory Monaco Caterine, the Classics Club Faculty Advisor at Tulane University, notes that Pelopidas was primarily a military commander whose "greatest accomplishments are liberating Thebes from a Spartan-backed oligarchy and restoring it to democracy." He was "the commander of Thebes' Sacred Band, an elite military group consisting of 150 pairs of (male) homosexual lovers." It isn't clear if Sinquefield or Brown were aware of the meaning of the name:

Michigan city more like a business, Flint had tapped its polluted river to save money transitioning to a new water system. However, as John Patrick Leary summed up succinctly in *Jacobin*,

Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) failed to add a crucial corrosion control chemical—standard in large municipal systems—that prevents lead from leaching out of old service lines... Michigan's state environmental regulatory agency oversaw the distribution—for roughly six hundred days—of water that was virtually guaranteed to poison the children of its seventh largest city."

Green connected the dots on Better Together's St. Louis proposal, and realized it was structured around taking power out of elected local control, and placing it in the hands of a debt service board like Flint's. Not only would the plan remove the city mayor from power, and make County Executive dipshit Steve Stenger the uber-mayor of St. Louis until 2024, it would also phase out the earnings tax over the course of decades, cutting the city's tax base dramatically. The Better Together pitch said uniting would save money for everyone, and thus pay for the tax cut; uniting would create \$40 million in new revenue over 10 years and save taxpayers a whopping \$250 million per year by 2026. But those numbers were obviously inflated. The point wasn't to save money: it was to cripple the tax base as in Brownback's Kansas, so that year after year, services all over St. Louis City and County would continue to run aground, and privatization would be forced through a debt servicing board, no matter what the public wanted.

The chess pieces were in place, but between the work of Alderwoman Green and legal experts like Nahuel Fefer at Arch City Defenders, the maneuver was discovered in time. Better Together, Green and Fefer realized, was a gambit to manufacture a perfect budgetary storm, one exacerbated by zero earnings tax revenue. In addition, a piece of the proposal that initially looked like an improvement—local control for the police department, meaning that all the cops in the city would be accountable to people who live in the city—was yet another move in Sinquefield's game. Guess how many lawsuits are brought against St.



Louis police officers? It's a lot. And the city would be responsible for paying out all of them.

Once Better Together was underway, it wouldn't matter if the savings never racked up. That could be written off as an "oopsie-daisy, we miscalculated the numbers." The whole point was to push St. Louis into a crisis; using the brutality of the city's own cops, and a tax-cut crusade, the inevitable financial crisis would open the door to members of the business Illuminati who would be happy to step in and take all those public schools, parks, water system, bridges, and the airport off overburdened public hands. The debt servicing board would facilitate the sell-offs; every school would become a charter, and the valley would bloom, just like Flint, just like Kansas, just like Pinochet's Chile.

TIP #7: *Hope that Team Libertarian can't keep their mouths shut.*

IN MARCH OF 2019, JOHN GASKIN III OF THE ST. LOUIS County NAACP held a press conference announcing his organization's endorsement of the Better Together plan. This endorsement was supposed to be a major point in the proposal's favor: important representatives from the region's most disenfranchised group were on Sinquefield's side. But, Gaskin also admitted at the press conference that he had quit a job in order to take up a paid position advocating for Better Together. Yikes—that was supposed to be a secret.

Many state and local Black leaders had already been wary of the plan championed by rich white people, and suddenly there was a lot of smoke pouring out of the building.

Things really started popping off as it turned out everyone around the St. Louis County Executive was wearing a wire. Public advocates watched Steve Stenger's shady property deals with that eerie feeling you get when powerful people are hosting a fire sale between themselves. And Stenger—who, again, was supposed to run the city if Better Together went through—didn't seem like a great worker. The County Executive "...occasionally showed up for work—even if dressed in shorts and a T-shirt just to play video games." Then the recordings dropped, and Sinquefield's would-be super mayor got busted for pay-to-play schemes, bribery, and watching too much *Sopranos*:

"How 'bout that motherfuckers? I don't show up to the Council meetings. I don't do fucking shit. I've been sitting at my house for the past two months fucking raising money and then won by 20 percent! The world's a fucked-up place." — Steve Stenger

It sure is, in more ways than one—Stenger is serving four years in what *Forbes* calls one of "America's cushiest prisons."

With Better Together mostly dead, Rex must have been irritated at another lost piece in a game that should have been easy. At this point, Travis Brown took one more run at the crown jewel in the city's asset portfolio—airport privatization canvassers tried gathering enough signatures for their campaign by telling St. Louisans that privatization would help the city and the airport, but this too fell through thanks to grassroots push-back from SEIU Local 1 and the mobilized activists from groups like STL Not For Sale. And there was no general buy-in from the people of St. Louis themselves, who either a) don't care about changing ownership of the airport, or b) had wised up to the King Rex routine.

Already on thin ice, and accused of writing five-figure checks to himself, Brown went too far in late summer 2020. Using a buddy's shell company—Metropolitan Strategies and Solutions—Brown pushed for a petition to recall Alderwoman Cara Spencer, a Warren Democrat and a loud opponent of the airport deal. The recall failed, Brown failed to get Better Together on the November 2020 ballot, and Brown's dirty and useless tricks put Rex over the edge. Sinquefield publicly cut ties with Pelopidas, yelling, "I don't know those guys," on the way out the door.

TIP #8: *Never assume the war is over.*

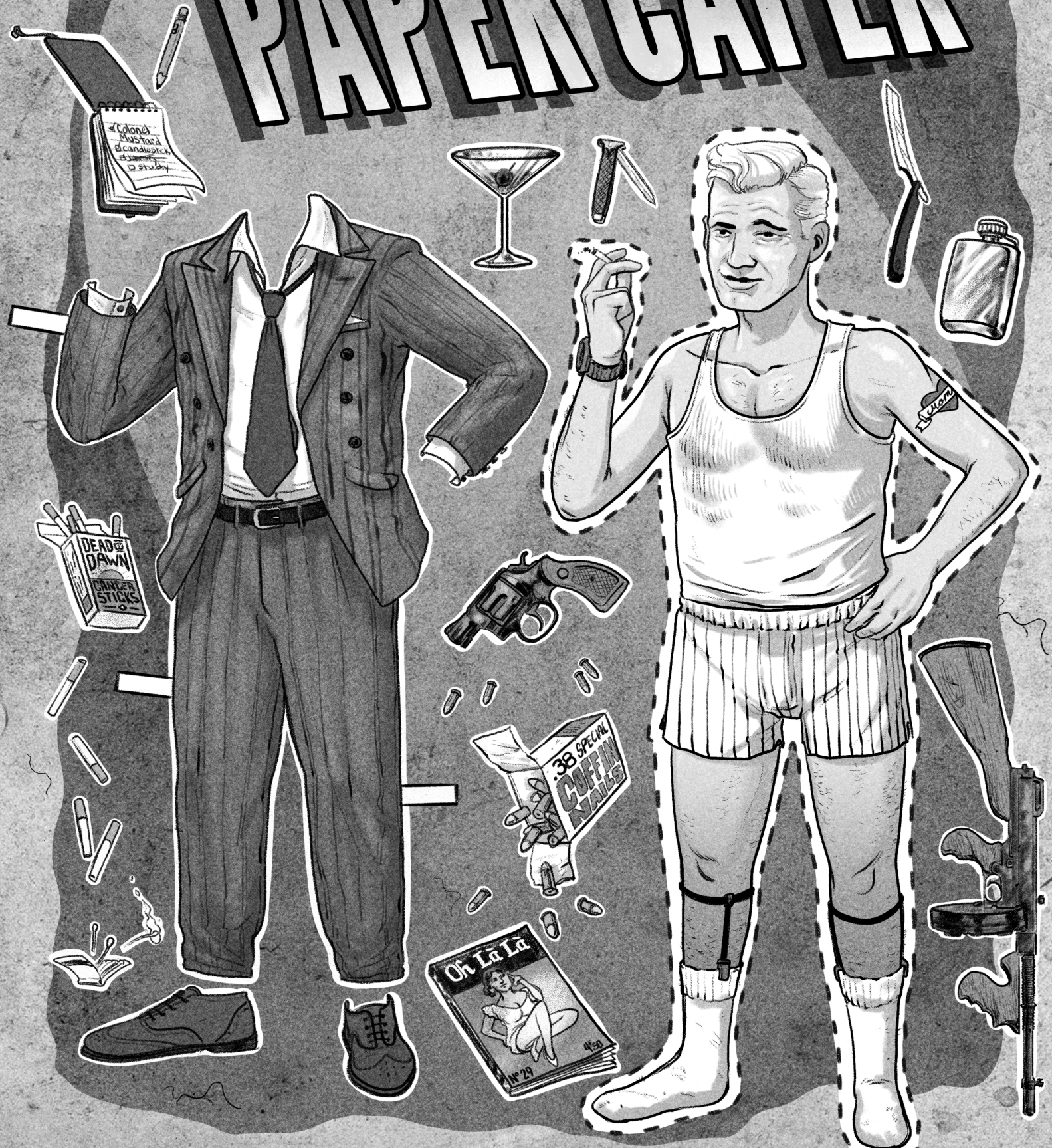
SINQUEFIELD HAS HAD ONE SUCCESSFUL ST. LOUIS SCHEME: he's made the city the "Chess Capital of the World." The King's passion project has now eaten up every building at one of the most trafficked cultural centers in the city, ejecting 80-year-old restaurants and one of the oldest LGBTQ coffee shops in the state, Cartel Coffee (which had much better ice cream than coffee). Now you can watch masters play at the World Chess Hall of Fame, and if you want expensive food on-par with a fancy hospital cafeteria, just walk next door for a bite at Rex's Kingside Diner.

Sinquefield may have been unable to implement a full revolution in St. Louis, but the city and county remain flush with his money. In many ways, Sinquefield is part of an old guard: the product of the George W. Bush years, the golden age of libertarian billionaires where Iraq war fervor channeled seamlessly into the Tea Party movement and No Child Left Behind. Sinquefield's most amazing achievement by far has been to saturate Missouri with dark money; no one knows how many people have cashed a Rex check, but one way or another, if you're in Missouri politics, you probably have.

And there are plenty of other Rexes in the country. Just as Travis Brown pitched in *How Money Walks*, rich people have infested states like Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Michigan, cutting taxes, wrecking public schools, and backing right-to-work legislation. Koch Industries operates out of Wichita, in socially strip-mined Kansas. In Missouri, Sinquefield may appear to have failed: he's an almost 80-year-old man with chicken salad mayonnaise on his keyboard in his Central West End mansion, playing online chess within earshot of the briefly-famous gun couple of July 2020. To many St. Louisans, Rex is regarded as a villain like the McCloskeys. St. Louis may have become a world chess capital, but that doesn't mean most St. Louisans love chess. St. Louis loves beer, baseball, and Nelly; family cooked meals and a depression-era cheese called Provel which tastes like plastic in a good way. St. Louis wants the Chrysler plant to come back, and for the future to seem liveable.

CAN YOU PLAY A FAIR GAME IN THE WORLD CHESS Hall of Fame, inside a building you own, in an organization dependent upon your finances? Maybe that's why Sinquefield prefers to play against those Vietnamese teens on chess.com. Rex has not always been rich, and he's aware of how many problems St. Louis really has, but he seems to have convinced himself that his strategy is the only way to make things better, and has tried to rig the game accordingly. With all the advantages in the world, he loses constantly, but I suspect he still hopes to win in the long run, just like Flint, Kansas, and Chile. ♣

THE CASE OF THE GREAT DOLL PAPER CARPER







the NOIRS of MELVILLE

BY CIARA MOLONEY

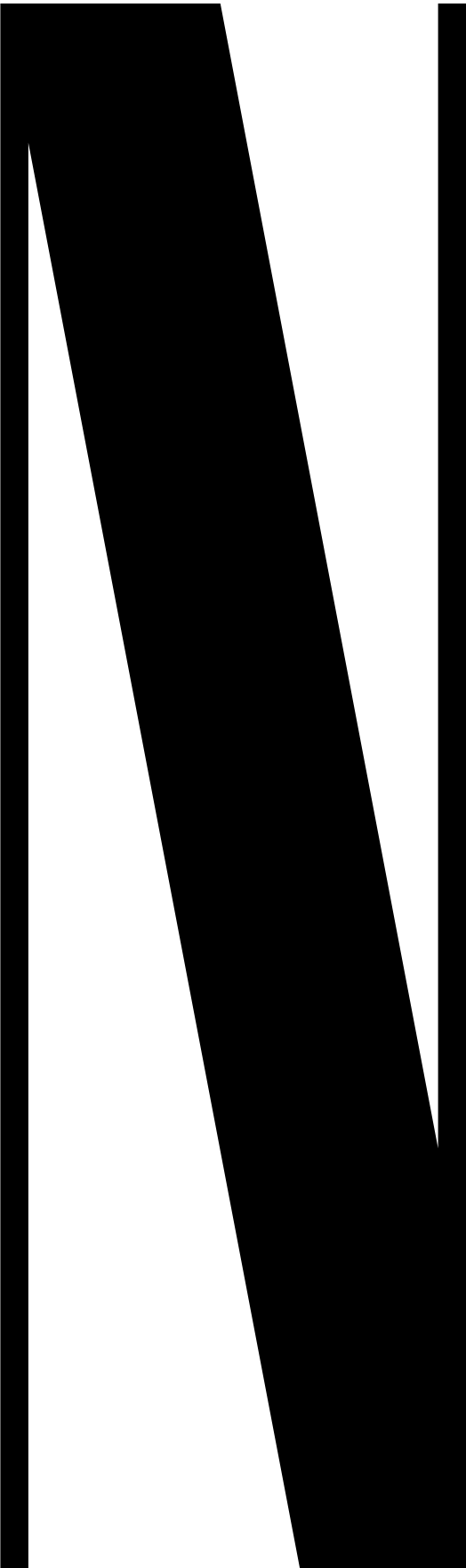
FILM NOIR IS AN elusive, amorphous thing, something you recognize when you see it but is incredibly difficult to pin down. There are things you can point to that you expect from film noir—plots from hardboiled crime fiction, cinematography from German Expressionism, private eyes, and femme fatales—but nothing firm.

Paul Schrader wrote that film noir is defined by its tone—a fatalistic, hopeless one—but even that is slightly too specific. More than a genre, a style or a tone, noir is a vibe: something's film noir if it feels like it is, and any definition is an attempt to backfill a reasoning. When classic films noirs were being made in Hollywood, the industry wasn't con-

sciously making film noir, the way people consciously made westerns—as James Naremore outlines in *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, the idea was only defined retrospectively. The dozens of tropes, stock characters, and shooting styles that make up film noir don't have a standard arrangement, or even an obvious connection to one another, but through the act of repetition, they collectively acquired new meaning. Film noir is fall guys, cynical detectives, down-and-out boxers, and struggling writers; it's shadows cast from Venetian blinds, rain on a city night, low angle shots and first-person voiceover narration; it's Humphrey Bogart looking as cool as possible while smoking a cigarette.

Noir has been homaged, referenced, and parodied so much that every part

of it is cliché. Even if you've never seen a classic noir, you would instantly recognize it, assimilated into your consciousness from a lifetime of sketches and sitcom or cartoon parodies. I'm sure this makes the thing itself off-putting for a lot of people: it's worn-out and hackneyed, or at the very least, something you've basically already seen before. It's an assumption I still catch myself making after being proven wrong a hundred times: so many of my favorite films I first knew through *Simpsons* episodes that parodied them. But when I finally get around to the culture I've already assimilated through parody, the thing itself isn't diminished at all: there's a clear and obvious reason it stuck around enough to become part of the general consciousness decades later. Clichés become clichés for a reason (yes, even this one).



NOIR WAS PIONEERED IN HOLLYWOOD, BUT MORE than that, it could only have been pioneered in Hollywood, something new produced from the melding of the talents of film artists who had fled countries across Europe due to the rise of fascism. It became popular and ubiquitous for reasons very particular to its time; at the height of enforcement of the Hays Code—the self-censorship code of the major Hollywood studios—film noirs provided thrills and titillation by skirting its bounds: if crime and sex outside of marriage could only be depicted if the characters were duly punished, that meant you *could* depict crime and sex, as long as you tacked on an unhappy ending. Noirs could be made at any budget, and owed their ubiquity in part to being in practice mostly low-budget affairs without major stars. But what made the great ones great then is much the same as what makes them great now: clockwork-plotted detective stories, the much missed art of cigarette acting, and some of the best cinematographers ever to do it.

The classic noir period was during the 1940s and 1950s, but noir has continued to re-appear in new forms, new arrangements, right up to the present day—sometimes in sci-fi dystopias (*Blade Runner*), paranoid conspiracy thrillers (*Klute*), as a tormented passion (*Bad Lieutenant*), and even a Christmas black comedy (*Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*).

Then there's the work of director Jean-Pierre Melville: devoted to classic noir even as he recontextualizes and deconstructs it, Melville feels like a bridge between all that noir was and all that it would become.

Born Jean-Pierre Grumbach, he adopted the name Melville in tribute to Herman Melville while fighting in the French Resistance. After the war, his application to become an assistant director was denied, and so he decided to make films independently, setting up his own film studio in Paris. His directorial debut, *Le Silence de la Mer*, is the story of a man and his niece who refuse to speak to a German soldier occupying their home during the Nazi occupation of France, adapted from a novel for which Melville didn't secure the rights. It was made on a tiny budget, and takes place almost entirely in a single room. Melville's independence helped pave the way for the French New Wave—indeed, when Jean-Luc Godard was having trouble editing *Breathless*, it was Melville who suggested he cut directly to the best parts of the shot, inspiring Godard's innovative use of jump cuts. But mostly, Melville was a genre filmmaker, through and through. If film noir is mostly a vibe, nothing feels quite as noir as Melville's crime films. "I like the American *films noirs* better than anything," he told *Sight and Sound* in 1968, and that love saturates his work, defines his aesthetic.

Particularly in the middle of the 20th century, there was a fascinating triangular cinematic relationship between the United States, Europe, and Japan, most clearly in genre pictures. Distinct traditions were in constant interplay with one another, creating a truly international cinema without sacrificing the specifics of national context. America's global cultural domination had come into its own after the war, and European and Japanese filmmakers took these American forms they knew so well and made them their own. (And, for once, Americans looked back: thanks to the 1948 antitrust case which ended studios' control of theaters, foreign and independent films became bona fide hits in the United States.) Westerns are the



other genre Silver and Ward identify as wholly American, but the history of the western sprawls across the globe, with particular roots in Italy—home of the spaghetti western—and Japan, where samurai movies repurposed the tropes and structures of American westerns. Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* is an unauthorized Italian remake of *Yojimbo*, an Akira Kurosawa samurai movie, channeling both Japanese and American influences into something all its own, creating an entirely new style.

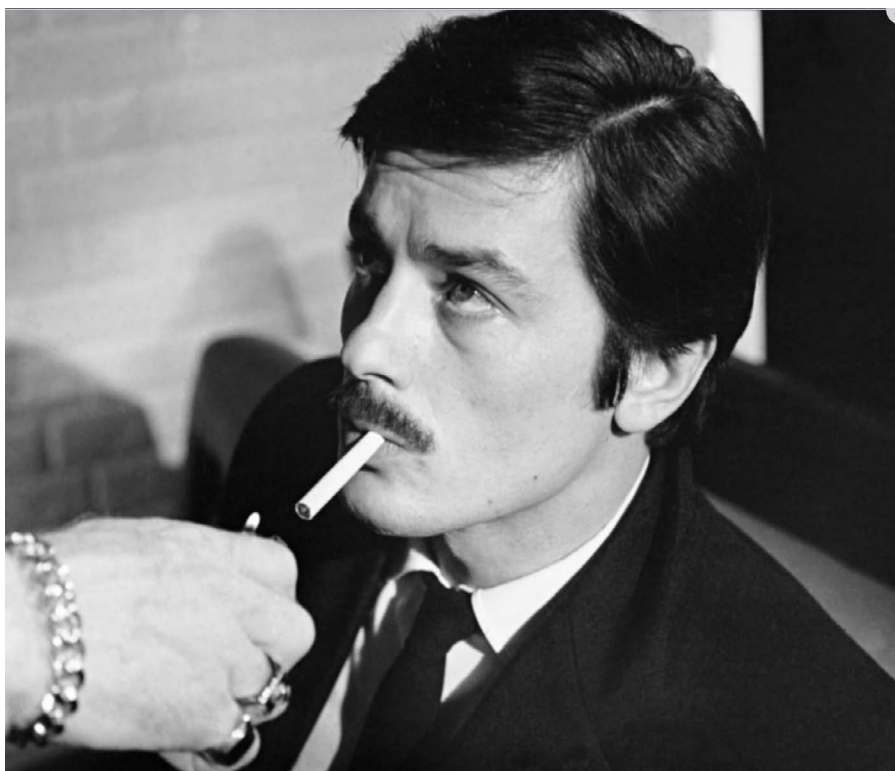
The same dynamics were true of film noir. Kurosawa made many noirs in Japan (*Stray Dog*, *The Bad Sleep Well*, *High and Low*) and lots of noirs were made in France during the classic period and after. What Sergio Leone did

with the western, Melville did with noir.

"With the Western, film noir shares the distinction of being an indigenous American form," Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward write, calling it "a wholly American film style." This was never fully true—there are lots of classic British noirs, like *Brighton Rock* or *The Third Man*, not to mention noirs from France, Mexico, Japan or Italy—yet Melville's French noirs feel less like a rebuttal than a nod of agreement. He was sometimes criticized in France for making "American" films, but this is precisely what makes his work so interesting: he takes something distinctly American and remolds it, refashions it for his own ends. Nowhere is that clear-

er than in the three films he made starring Alain Delon: *Le Samouraï* (1967), *Le Cercle Rouge* (1970), and the last film before his death at age 55, *Un Flic* (1972).

"There is no solitude greater than a samurai's," appears as on-screen text at the beginning of *Le Samouraï*, "unless perhaps it is that of a tiger in the jungle..." The quote is attributed to *The Book of Bushido*, but Melville made it up. We see what looks like an empty room. There's a cold gray light filtering through two windows, and our eyes are first drawn to the silver wire birdcage between them. It takes a few moments to register that there is a person lying on the bed. You notice the smoke curling from his cigarette before you notice



the man himself. He gets up and goes to the hatstand, putting on his fedora and adjusting the brim. He goes out into the street.

This is Jef Costello, played by Delon, who is startlingly beautiful yet inscrutable. We watch him break into a car—he systematically goes through a ring with hundreds of different keys—and drives to a garage. The mechanic changes his license plates while he waits and smokes. The mechanic gives him a gun; Costello gives him cash. Not a word is spoken.

Costello is a contract killer. The film follows him as he sets up his alibis, kills a nightclub owner, gets picked up by the cops, is double-crossed by the men who hired him, and becomes the target of a police manhunt. But the plot is largely incidental to what makes the film so special. “Like a painter or a musician, a filmmaker can suggest complete mastery with just a few strokes. Melville involves us in the spell of *Le Samourai* before a word is spoken,” Roger Ebert wrote, “He does it with light... And color... And actions that speak in place of words.” *Le Samourai* is somehow both minimalist—there are no backstories and precious little dialogue—and almost hyper-stylized. It strips American noir to its bones, but it doesn’t strip away the artifice so much as strips away a phony kind of realism. It doesn’t take place in a realistic version of France or America, but some place both and neither, a world of ritzy nightclubs with anglophonic names (Martey’s, not Chez Martey), of American cars on Paris streets. It’s shot in a palette of cold blues and grays that makes it feel like black and white even though it’s in color: Melville told *Sight and Sound* that is why he used black and white photocopies of bank notes, and black and grey labels on Evian water. While American noirs are famed for witty repartee, *Le Samourai* dwells on silence, soaks us in it, frequently eschewing score where you might expect it. And while the hats and coats of American noir

"IT'S LIKE A CULTURAL ONE-WAY MIRROR, WHERE WE CONSTANTLY OBSERVE THE U.S. AND AMERICANS NEVER LOOK BACK AT US, AREN'T EVEN AWARE WE'RE THERE."

have at least a vague realism to them—men did dress like that back then—the clothes in *Le Samourai* take on an almost mystical significance. Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin point out that the white gloves Costello wears for the murder are editor's gloves, "displacing the magic proper to cinema into the world of the fiction." Costello, like a film editor, is "playing with the linear chain of events, erasing characters from the frame, altering the arrangement of the pieces, and splicing fragments together without leaving a trace." The hats, like those in a western, are the man himself: when Jef checks his hat but leaves his check number behind, it signals that he won't be coming back for it—his death is imminent. (According to the Film Noir Foundation, Melville claimed that all his original screenplays were "without exception" transposed westerns.) You can also see the influence of Japanese cinema, not just in

the title but in its combination of graceful minimalism and excruciating attention to detail. It's a film obsessed with meticulous planning, as we watch extended scenes of Costello setting up his airtight two-part alibi, or glide in to have his license plates changed without needing to say a word. Equally, it carefully follows each step of the process by which the cops set up the cat-and-mouse chase through the metro. *Le Samourai* reaches east to samurai films and west to Hollywood noir, and channels them into something new.

FOUR YEARS BEFORE *Le Samourai*, Melville directed *Magnet of Doom*, a noir-inflected road movie which was partly filmed on location in the United States. Its loving shots of roadside motels and Frank Sinatra's birthplace throw the unreality of *Le Samourai*

into starker relief: Bertrand Tavernier called it the difference between dreaming America and filming it. The world of *Le Samourai* is, in some ways, America as non-Americans imagine it: an America defined by our relationship to the big screen. The United States is so culturally dominant across the globe that the rest of us are primed from birth to know and care about it, in a way that no other country dominates Americans' consciousness. I have lived in Ireland my whole life, but I think about America every day. I was raised on American films and television. American news, American pop music, American literature. Even though the internet should be by definition a borderless, international place, the United States is treated as the Default Country online. It's like a cultural one-way mirror, where we constantly observe the U.S. and Americans never look back

THE HATS, LIKE THOSE IN A WESTERN, ARE THE MAN HIMSELF

at us, aren't even aware we're there. If they occasionally do look, they see us as cartoon versions of ourselves.

This makes America seem like a dreamland: going there would mean climbing inside the screen. Intellectually, I know this is a form of cultural imperialism. My visual imagination has been so thoroughly colonized that I do a double-take when I see someone drive on the left side of the road on-screen. Yet I also dearly love a lot of American culture, in ways that don't at all feel inauthentic or forced: Martin Scorsese is my favorite living artist in any medium, the best seasons of television ever made are *Twin Peaks: The Return* and the second season of *Frasier*, and I would probably be dead without mid-2000s pop punk. My love of American culture and my resentment of its dominance is a constant war in my heart. But it feels best resolved by fellow European nerds obsessed with America: Leone and Melville.

Le Cercle Rouge also opens with a made-up quote: "Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, drew a circle with a piece of red chalk and said: 'When men, even unknowingly, are to meet one day, whatever may befall each, whatever the diverging paths, on the said day, they will inevitably come together in the red circle.'" The film both pushes *Le Samourai*'s stylisation further and breaks from its outlook. *Le Samourai* is a study in solitude of caged birds, and is ultimately bleakly fatalistic. Right from the fictitious epigraph, *Le Cercle Rouge* sets out different goals: this is a story of men who are destined to meet, who are tied together by the fates. It is, improbably, a story with a heart.

WE OPEN WITH Vogel (Gian Maria Volonté) boarding a train. He's a prisoner being transported from Marseille to Paris. From nightfall to dawn, he slowly and carefully prepares his escape: delicately taking a safety pin out of his pocket, push-

ing the sharp end against the wall to bend it, silently picking the lock of his handcuff, and finally, loudly, breaking the train window to jump out into the open countryside. That same morning, Corey (Delon, with a moustache that obscures his beauty and in that way, humanizes him) is being released from prison early for good behavior. Before he leaves, a guard tips him off about a jewelry store he could rob.

Vogel and Corey don't meet until 40 minutes in, but long before that the editing and camerawork, like the fates, tie these men together. Inspector Mattei is guarding Vogel on the train, and at one point, he looks up toward Vogel lying in the top bunk, but instead of cutting to Vogel the way the basic language of editing has trained you to expect, it cuts to Corey lying in his prison bed, miles away. In *Le Samourai*, Jef is alone no matter how many people he's surrounded by, but in *Le Cercle Rouge*, Corey and Vogel are together even when in total isolation.

The police have set up roadblocks throughout the area in their search for Vogel. Corey's driving through in his brand new American car, bought with money he demanded from his former criminal partner. When he pulls over to get a coffee, Vogel climbs in his trunk. At one of the roadblocks, the cops ask to check Corey's trunk, but he makes a show of none of the keys working—it's a new car, they must not have given him the right one—and the police officer lets him go. A little while later, Corey pulls over in a field, gets out, lights a cigarette, and tells Vogel to get out of the car. Vogel and the audience both realize that Corey knew he was hiding in the trunk the whole time. It is, without a shadow of the doubt, one of the greatest meet-cutes in film history.

"You weren't afraid?" Vogel asks Corey.

"What of?"

"Me, to start with," Vogel says, "And them finding me in your trunk, for instance."

Corey silently tosses him a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. They look at each other, the camera dolly in on each of them, shot



reverse shot, the score swelling. Suddenly Delon's eyes, normally so inscrutable, feel anything but.

The final member of their three-man gang is Jansen (Yves Montand), an alcoholic former policeman. When we first see him, he's lying in bed, drenched in sweat, hallucinating snakes and spiders crawling all over him: "the beasts," he calls them. While Corey and Vogel plan the jewelry store heist, holed up in Corey's apartment, they realize they'll need a marksman to disable the security system with a single shot from a rifle. Jansen is a hell of a good shot. The best on the force.

The film's centerpiece is the heist, which plays out over half an hour of screen time in total silence. There is no music, no voice-over, and no dialogue. (Later, a policeman reviewing the security camera footage hilar-

iously says, "They're not much for talk.") It's *Le Samourai's* infatuation with a meticulous process taken even further. The question of whether they'll pull it off pales in importance next to *how* they pull it off. Moments that would be the key source of tension in most films—a security guard checks out the window Corey and Vogel crouch next to, just missing them—are no more important than the way a rope ladder falls against the side of the building, the tiny sound a bag makes when it hits the floor. Jansen shows up in a tuxedo, shoes slung around his neck so he can walk soundlessly. He sets up his shot perfectly with a tripod, his custom-made bullets pointed directly at the tiny target to disable the alarm. Then he just takes the shot freehand instead. And of course he hits it. It's a moment of pure, cathartic joy for the

audience, but the men don't take the time to rejoice in it. They keep moving forward, perfectly in tune with one another. It's hypnotic.

IT'S ALSO WHAT HATERS might call "style over substance." Melville's Americanized noirs invite this critique, because they are mannered genre exercises, abstracted from society. I dislike the "style over substance" criticism in general—the distinction between form and content seems a bit too neat and tidy for me—but mostly, I worry about becoming so fixated on meaning that we lose sight of beauty. It's tempting, because even when meaning is ambiguous, it's more or less articulable: I've never quite decided if *Dirty Harry* is fascist, but I have no trouble verbalizing the argument either way. Beauty is ineffable. I mean beauty in the widest possible sense: ugliness can be a type of beauty, because it's not about adherence to any traditional mores but the totally individual yet universal experience of how aesthetics make us feel. People have tried to understand and articulate it in philosophy, criticism and art itself since time immemorial, but beauty will always exceed our capacity to express it. But it's also what art is made of: beauty and feelings. The great French director Robert Bresson said that film should have no beautiful images, only necessary ones. Yet his films are, like all films, unnecessary. And they're utterly beautiful. The heist sequence in *Le Cercle Rouge* is beautiful too. It works within established forms like a sonnet, composes visuals like a painting, moves with the elegance of a ballet. It's holding your breath, it's sitting on the edge of your seat. It's film noir. It's cinema itself. It goes off without a hitch.

It's a dark film, one where "all men are guilty" is repeated like a mantra. But that is why the sweetness shot through it is so disarming. Betrayal is one of Melville's eternal themes, which he usually positions as inevitable. But Corey, Vogel and Jansen never

betray one another. The ending, in which the cops kill our three heroes, is a definite downer, but that loyalty is a small shaft of light in the darkness. Corey goes to meet the fence; Vogel bursts in to save Corey when he realizes it's a set up; Jansen is there to help, just like he promised. Sure, the cops catch them. But they're Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. They're Bonnie and Clyde. They're legendary outlaws going out together in a hail of bullets.

UN FLIC REVERSES Alain Delon's role, casting him as the cop instead of the criminal. With neither hat nor moustache, Delon plays Edouard Coleman, the disaffected detective opposite Richard Crenna's Simon, a nightclub owner and thief who is his friend, nemesis and love rival all at once. Coleman and Simon have opposite roles in an elaborate dance, and the sides they have ended up on are almost arbitrary.

It's easy to think of Delon's playing the cop as casting against type, not unlike Henry Fonda playing the black hat villain in *Once Upon a Time in the West* after a lifetime of clean-cut heroes. But Delon doesn't play Coleman as a stark contrast to Corey and Jef so much as a variant on the same theme. The silence of his mouth and the blankness of his eyes are taken to their furthest extent, while his violence is less meticulous and more random. I don't think any human being has ever looked as beautiful as Delon does in a scene where he plays piano, a cigarette dangling from his lips, but it's a steely, cold beauty. This is what makes Coleman so unsettling: he's Corey without loyalty, or Jef without a code of honor. It's not unlike John Wayne's performance as obsessive, violent, racist Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, which Martin Scorsese wrote is so disturbing exactly because it is essentially "of a piece with Wayne's persona."

THEY SAY I'M THE BEST IN THE BIZ. I'D AGREE. THE ONLY PROBLEM? IT'S NOT EXACTLY THE LINE OF WORK I SIGNED UP FOR...



BUT I SUFFER THROUGH. A MAN'S GOT TO MAKE HIS MONEY HOWEVER HE CAN.

I STAY IN THE SHADOWS AS SHE SAUNTERS THROUGH THE GENERAL STORE.

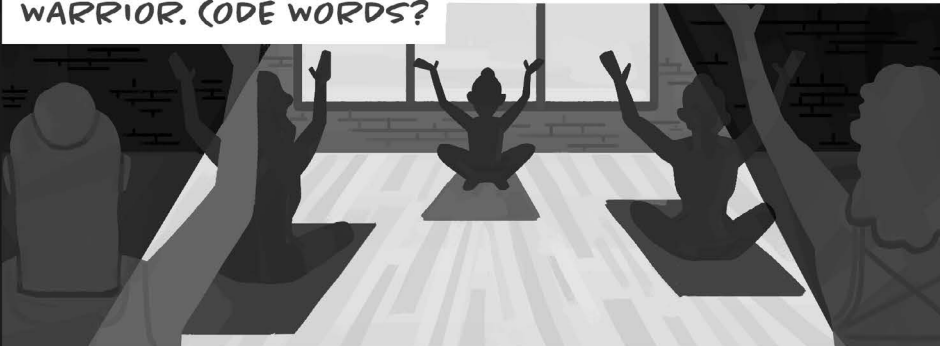


I FOLLOW THE DAME.



AVOCADO. BREAD. OJ. WHAT KIND OF BRUNCH RACKET IS THIS BROAD WRAPPED UP IN?

HER NEXT STOP. THE YOGA STUDIO. LOTUS. MOUNTAIN. WARRIOR. (CODE WORDS?)



WE'RE MOVING AGAIN. HER DESTINATION? THE BANK. LAUNDERING MONEY?

SHE HEADS HOME FOR THE NIGHT... ANOTHER HAPPY CUSTOMER?



*"I'D SEEN A FEW MAGAZINES, BUT WHEN
SHE WALKED INTO MY OFFICE I KNEW
THESE WERE NO ORDINARY AFFAIRS."*



SUBSCRIPTIONS AVAILABLE FOR SIXTY DOLLARS
CURRENT AFFAIRS

UN FLIC NEVER quite reaches the heights of *Le Samourai* or *Le Cercle Rouge*. Despite its elaborate set pieces, it's not as tightly constructed as those films, and doesn't wind up tension with the same careful precision. But it is particularly interesting when watched alongside those films, as it actively invites you to. The invitation is in Delon's casting, but in a dozen other details, too. Melville reuses locations from his previous films, like a railway bridge from *Le Doulos* or the same street as the restaurant from *Le Deuxième Souffle*. There's a fleeting shot where we see names and phone numbers scrawled onto a wall next to a telephone: among them, Robert Montagné, aka Bob from Melville's 1956 film *Bob le Flambeur*, Gustave Min-da from *Le Deuxième Souffle*, and Jef from *Le Samourai*. The iconography of Melville's films—the fedoras and trench coats, the cars and trains and nightclubs, the mock-monochrome palette of blues and grays—is all present and correct, even if our protagonist remains hatless. If Melville's earlier noirs reached west to Hollywood, *Un Flic* reaches back through his own filmography. Even though Melville planned to make more films before his death, this one still feels like an elegiac goodbye.

The film's best sequence is a 20 minute heist that plays out in real time. Simon and his gang plan to steal a suitcase of heroin that a rival gang is transporting by train. They fly over the train in a helicopter, lowering Simon down to sneak on-board. The wide shots of the helicopter and train are very obviously models—a point of frequent ridicule—but that seems, to me, to be self-conscious artifice, the

same way Melville's continued use of rear-projection driving shots is. Melville's films aren't interested in realism; they're self-conscious meta-cinema. They're a testament to how seeing the strings can be as much part of movie magic as not seeing them. But even if you're bothered by the models, the sequence that plays out from there is so perfect that it's easily forgiven.

On paper, Simon changes out of his boilersuit into pajamas in the toilet cubicle, goes to the guy's compartment and knocks him out, takes the suitcase of drugs, puts his boilersuit back on and gets raised back up to the helicopter. On screen, it's incredible. It's the meticulous attention to process from *Le Samourai* or *Le Cercle Rouge* boiled down to its essence. It's tense, thrilling filmmaking, delivering the excitement and dread that something will go wrong and the satisfaction of a job perfectly executed. It doesn't rely on music or shaky cam and quick cuts to produce that, just light and color and movement. The unseen, unmentioned ticking clock lurking in the background. No film has ever mined such tension from Richard Cranna combing his hair.

YOU CAN SEE Melville's influence on a generation of filmmakers all over the world: Quentin Tarantino, John Woo, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Heat*, the *Oceans* trilogy and *Drive*. His masterpiece is probably *Army of Shadows*, his brilliant, discomforting film based in part on his experience in the French Resistance. *Army of Shadows* is obviously capital-I Important, and his noirs seem by comparison to be frivo-

lous confections. But that would only be true if joy and cool and delight are frivolous; if beauty is frivolous.

This way of thinking about film is rooted in the separation of content from form: reducing art to a bullet point list of ideas, as if the *Star Wars* prequels having interesting themes means *Attack of the Clones* suddenly isn't the most mind-numbingly boring film ever made. This separation—focusing on meaning to the exclusion of beauty—dulls our ability to appreciate art, at least on its own terms. It cuts us off from what people even like about art, and what makes it *art* in the first place. This, in addition to being bad cultural criticism, is terrible leftism. The unequal distribution of wealth is the most urgent and material way capitalism hurts the poor and working class, but there are other ways human life can be impoverished. Socialists should of course want everyone to get the bare necessities to live. But we should want so much more than that: for everyone to have a life rich in leisure, recreation, and beauty.

Watching the heist go down in a Melville movie is pure cinema, unburdened by the responsibility to be anything “more.” It's the kind of thing that is so easy to dismiss as superficial or cosmetic style, yet it never feels like a glossy surface with a hollow center. It feels like tapping into the ineffable. They're the coolest films I've ever seen. They're so beautiful it's thrilling.

Film noir has an elusive, amorphous nature, and Melville's films reflect that: they choose to be light on dialogue and let the ineffable do the talking. It's that magic—the magic of art's ability to express for us, and to us, and with us what we cannot express through language alone—that the moralistic, meaning-focused, content-over-form turn in criticism risks losing sight of. ♣



Chapter 1: "He adored New York City, idolized it all out of proportion." Uh, no, make that, "He romanticized it, all out of proportion. To him, no matter what the season was, this was still a town that existed in black and white and pulsated to the great tunes of George Gershwin." Uhbb, start over...

"New York was his town and it always would be."

—WOODY ALLEN AS WRITER ISAAC DAVIS, OPENING MONOLOGUE, *MANHATTAN* (1979)

AT THE BEGINNING OF A DIFFERENT STORY ABOUT NEW York, a nervous young man and the woman who will soon be his wife are standing at a bus station in Montreal. They're about to start new lives in the strange foreign land of the United States, and are being seen off by the man's father. It's August, and the warm Canadian air moves slightly as the bus finally appears, the words "New York City" displayed in the sign on top. The father turns to his son and gives him these words of wisdom: "Never underestimate the other person's insecurity." Instinctively, we picture the father in faded jeans and a plaid shirt, eyes squinting into the sun.

In the years to come, that young man—heading off to study art history at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts—would become a famous and long-standing writer at the *New Yorker*, loved by some and loathed by others for his distinctive style, which is imbued with so much cloying nostalgia that it makes the teeth ache. (You can guess which set I belong to.) The writer is Adam Gopnik, and the story above, embellished only slightly by me, opens his memoir *At the Strangers' Gate*. The story is bunk. Sure, it's true in its bare details: he did, in the summer of 1980, depart for New York with Martha Parker, to whom he remains married. But while the opening vignette gives us an impression of a wide-eyed youth being sent off to the Big City by his plain-spoken, salt-of-the-earth father, the reality is that Gopnik's father, the late Irwin Gopnik, was at the time an associate professor of English at McGill University, well known for his dashing and dramatic outfits topped off by fedoras and overcoats with built-in capelets. Gopnik's mother, Myrna Lee Gopnik, is a renowned linguist and professor emerita, also at McGill, where Gopnik got his bachelor's degree. He and his five siblings grew up in Montreal's famous Model 67, a landmark experimental housing structure in the Brutalist style. It's highly likely that Gopnik, the child of two well-known, artistically-minded academics at a prestigious university, would have visited New York often throughout his life, or at least not thought of it as particularly exotic. But of course, the tale of a young shrub from some mythical heartland receiving homespun wisdom from his father before setting off into a perilous urban landscape is much more romantic to the average reader.

Most large cities have inspired fiction and non-fiction, but New York may be the city that's been written about the *most*. The sheer density of New York, and its history as a portal for immigrants entering the United States, has helped create a unique cultural and political ecosystem that has both attracted and repelled millions, inspiring a constant stream of literary output. The typical New York story drips with nostalgia. Everything was better, we are told, in the

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How To Invent A City

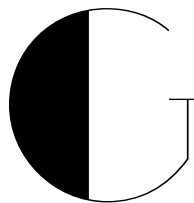
BY YASMIN NAIR



MAGIC "ILLUSION" PUZZLE
Can you find order amid the chaos of contemporary metropolitan life?

old days. The old days might be the 1900s (as hard as it is to romanticize tenement life), or the 1920s, or the 1960s or the 1970s, and so on. There are, of course, unsentimental portrayals of New York, or portrayals of it simply as a city, but these are not the most popular, or best known. In Joshua Marston's deeply underappreciated film *Complete Unknown*, characters make their way through the city in their everyday lives: the result is a more intimate, complex view of New York. But the misogyny of critics who hated the central female character (she shows no remorse for being an adventurous reinventer of herself; we can only imagine that a male character in the same position would have been declared daring and admirable) means that the subtleties of the film's relationship to the city have largely gone unnoticed. Most audiences want to hear about a New York that is charmed by, even obsessed with its own past; writers and filmmakers over decades have obliged.

Gopnik is a typical example of this latter tendency. In his hands, New York is frozen in amber, part Gershwin melody, part Sinatra paean, and mostly a fantasy that is sometimes so unreal as to be ludicrous. Consider, for instance, how he writes about his wedding to Parker in December of 1980: "When I say 'married in New York' I know that it might sound rather like top hats and morning coats and a ceremony at St. Thomas Episcopal. In fact, on a bleak December day, we would take the 5 train to City Hall..." Who in the 21st century actually pictures "top hats and morning coats" when someone says that they got married in New York? Even in a pandemic, we haven't retreated so far into imagination that we think New York is *actually* trapped in the 1920s. That's on you, dude, all on you.



OPNIK'S GENIUS, AND THE REASON HE'S THE target of both love and hate, is that he has figured out how to distill and market nostalgia, a very particular kind that evokes no sadness or sense of loss, only a warm and fuzzy feeling resolutely free of pain. This isn't even

entirely specific to his writings on New York, but apparently to his attitude toward life in general. In 2003, Gopnik was living in Paris, which had just experienced a heat wave so intense it killed tens of thousands of people. Asked for comment on this devastation, Gopnik stated dreamily: "Even in the worst heat of years past, a cool, sad breeze always swept through the city around midnight—we used to go to St. Sulpice late at night just to watch it arrive and shake the trees. But this summer it was nowhere to be found, a lost friend, and the sizzling day sank into a torpid night, just like back home." In other words: *Yeah, who knows, but look at all my pretty words.*

Gopnik is mostly known as someone whose life and experiences stand in for a particular kind of New Yorker: charming, playful, a devotee of the arts, well read, always able to see only the sunshine, never the clouds. He fulfills many writers' dreams of becoming successful and frolicking with the rich and famous. In *At the Strangers' Gate*, he spends an entire afternoon with Richard Avedon, recounting their time involving people on the streets who failed to realize they were having their portrait taken by a famous photographer. Even when he said to

them, "I'm *Avedon*," his words were greeted with blank stares. Gopnik is always creating a nostalgic New York, even milking nostalgia from the present: he is *with* Avedon, but his writing about the moment is itself meant to evoke a sense of the past; he notes, with a sense of *Oh, remind me to tell you*, Avedon would die a few days later. One imagines Gopnik's mantra for New York is always: it was, it was, it was.

My little town blues

Are melting away

I'll make a brand new start of it

In old New York

—Liza Minnelli, "New York, New York,"

by John Kander and Fred Ebb

IN 2007, A BLOG SIMPLY TITLED *JEREMIAH MOSS'* *Vanishing New York* began the work of chronicling the gentrification that was wiping out small businesses and thus, for its pseudonymous creator (Jeremiah Moss), a central part of the very character of the city he loved. His online writing continued for a decade until Moss revealed his real name—Griffin Hansbury—to, of course, the *New Yorker*.

The blog eventually became the book *Vanishing New York* and in it, Moss quotes, of course, Adam Gopnik: "New York is safer and richer but less like itself, an old lover who has gone for a face-lift and come out looking like no one in particular. The wrinkles are gone, but so is the face..." For the first time in Manhattan's history, it has no bohemian frontier." Gopnik and Moss are a few decades apart in age, and Moss' sensibility is more punk rock than classical, but he has absorbed Gopnik's vision of what New York was and should be, with a slightly grungier aesthetic.

Moss, like Gopnik, came to New York from elsewhere—Massachusetts, in his case. Unlike Gopnik, Moss at least admits to having visited the city often as a child, but he also brings with him, as an adult entering to live in it for the first time, an amberized vision of what the city should be. It can be hard to tell which comes first, the vanishing of a popular Italian bakery or the melting away of the Italian community that kept it afloat for decades, but disappear they both do. For Moss, the loss of small businesses and landmark architecture, replaced by what are to him the faceless and heartless abstractions of contemporary buildings, is a phenomenon worth raging about. And rage he does, fulsomely and constantly, earning millions of followers and spawning a larger and more public movement to keep the city's "essence," as many see it, from vanishing.

Moss also came to New York on a bus, in the 1990s, in new black leather, determined to fit into what he thought would be the image of the kind of New Yorker he would become. (Along the way, he also transitioned, lending his journey both a poignancy and a meaning that's hard to miss.) According to him, he moved "unaware that the early 1990s was quite possibly the worst moment to get attached to New York." What counts as a heyday and for whom is never quite clear, but Moss' idea of what is "disappearing" in New

York is derived from what he cheerfully admits is nostalgia. “My city,” he writes, “is the city of dark moods, scrap yards, and jazz. Of poets, painters, and anarchists. Of dirty bookstores, dirty movies, and dirty streets. It’s also a working-class city peopled by men and women who love with a tough love, in thick accents and no time for bullshit. Of Gershwin’s ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ trumpeting over black-and-white *Manhattan*, and Travis Bickle’s taxi roving through the steamy rain, that grimy yellow splash. It’s the city of Edward Hopper’s melancholy rooms and Frank O’Hara’s ‘I do this, I do that.’”

But whose New York is this? What gives an outsider the right to decide that the early 1990s were the city’s “worst moment,” when he wasn’t there to live through all the decades prior? Dirty streets and grime might be Moss’ fantasy, but millions of New Yorkers have, for decades, been fighting to not have to suffer them. Constant noise and the smell of piss and shit are rarely romantic to those who have no choice but to live in those conditions full time. (Elsewhere, Moss freely admits he doesn’t care about any of the other boroughs outside Manhattan, showing great disdain for a giant swath of people and places who actually create the vibrancy of New York.) Moss is all grit and punk, writing enthusiastically about the grunge and tough life of the streets and the noise and the tumult, but with a lack of any awareness that, perhaps, many actual New Yorkers might not particularly *want* a grittier New York, just one that’s actually affordable and safe. In the hilarious Netflix series on Fran Lebowitz, *Pretend It’s A City*, Lebowitz talks to Martin Scorsese—her friend and the director of the series—about how she chose her apartments. When friends pointed out she could get a much cheaper apartment in their (much worse) neighborhoods, she would respond, “Yeah, but I don’t get raped.”

BETWEEN GOPNIK’S VISIONS OF top-hatted weddings and Moss’ rhapsodies to excrement-caked streets, whose New York counts as reality? Of all the portrayals of the city, Woody Allen’s vision of New York is perhaps most emblematic: his celebrated film *Manhattan* is self-consciously about nostalgia in its use of black and white and its iconic shot of the Queensboro Bridge. (The movie itself, mostly about a relationship between a 42-year old man and a 17-year-old high schooler does not, um, age well.) But while we might now want to deny any artistic debt to Woody Allen, his films about New York from *Annie Hall* onwards have nevertheless defined a particular kind of New York, about men and women who are intellectuals and who are intellectually driven to theorize their relationships and the world around them—a world that is also, incidentally, utterly shorn of any people of color. (Any drinking game involving “Spot the Person of Color in a Woody Allen Film” would leave one sadly nursing a full glass at the end.)

Ultimately, all representations of New York are just that: representations. And yet, it’s incorrect to think that these nostalgic fantasies never have any impact on the real life of the city. We can see, in the effect of Moss’ work, that there are actual policy decisions to be made or not made based on what people like him determine to be the ideal

New York: a city bustling with small mom and pop shops everywhere, no chains to speak of, and beautiful architecture. But is this always a good thing for people who live in New York? Who determines what architecture is “beautiful” and what isn’t? Small businesses can seem charming, but they’re generally hostile to raising wages and unionization. Additionally, whether or not you like your local mom and pop or boutique store can depend on how you’re treated there based on factors like race and gender. In Chicago, the gay area formerly known as “Boystown” (renamed “North Halsted”) remains teeming with gay “small businesses” like the notorious Beatnix that have been permitted to indulge in their blatant forms of racism and discrimination.

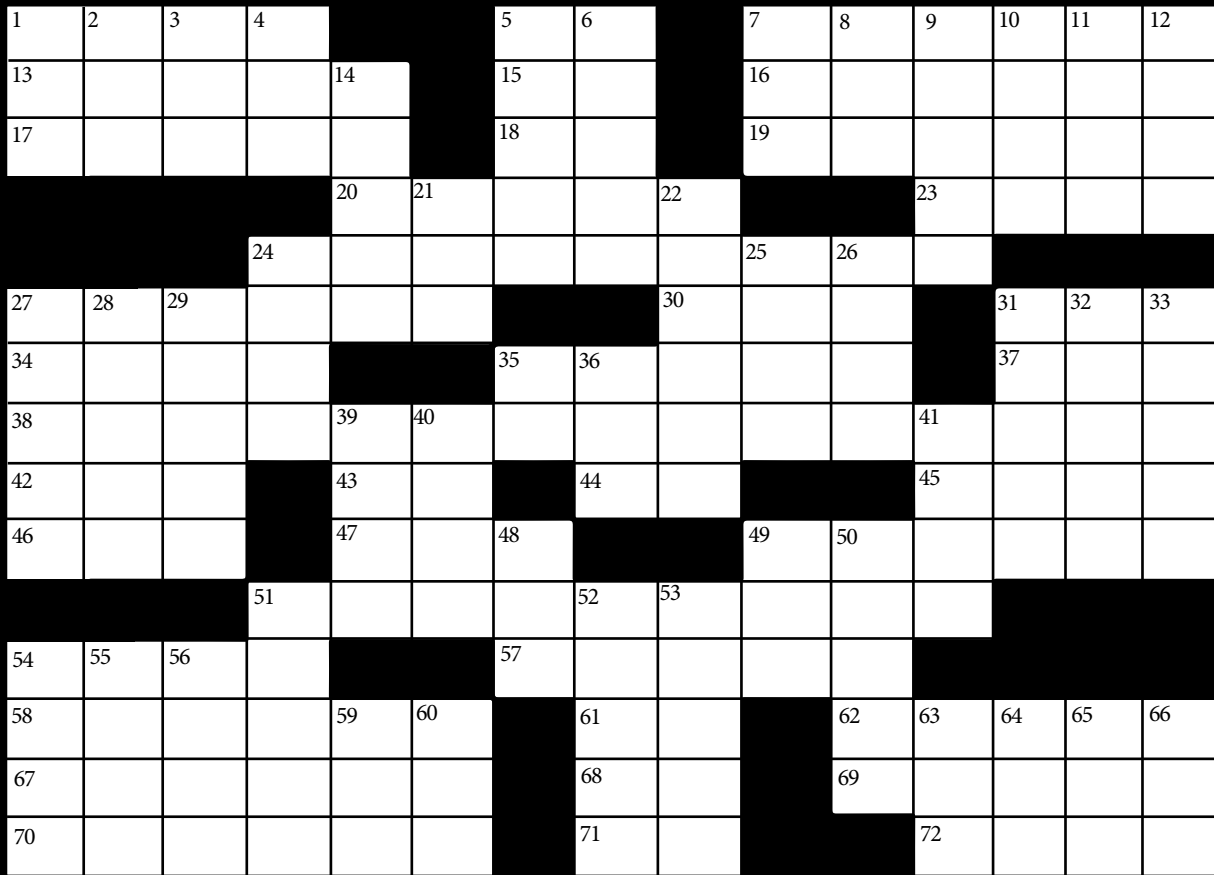
And “small business” does not always mean affordable: that overpriced coffee house or expensive store devoted to artisanal home goods might be able to afford the rent, but they’re out of reach for most who trek to the nearest Target or 99-cent store for towels. Navigating a landscape composed entirely of tiny, cute “local” businesses (probably selling goods made by tiny, cute children in remote countries) can actually be a nightmare, especially for those who are minorities in that neighborhood. It also may be a mistake to focus on the nostalgic resonance of a place over the actual function it serves in the lives of people who use and inhabit it. Aisling McCrea has written about the role of Starbucks and other “soulless” corporate stores in creating places where real people actually do congregate and create community. Corporations as emanations of capitalism are evil, yes, but as entities on the literal ground, they can become fungible, fluid places that actually give life to people. If this life-giving effect is what we’re seeking, is it right to assume that ossifying old businesses, institutions, and structures is always the best way to do it?

MOSS’ VISION OF THE CITY HE ACTUALLY lives in is bizarrely mediated through a fictional, literary, and cinematic lens that insists poverty should be the definition of authenticity. This is a strange denial of reality, both because many New Yorkers today are middle and upper class, and also because romantic and artistic visions that dominate our backward-looking conceptions of New York were often created by writers and filmmakers from those very same classes. This artistic legacy goes back literally for centuries: Edith Wharton was born into the New York high society she portrays in works like *The Age of Innocence*. Scorsese and Allen, of roughly the same generation, came from middle class families, and grew up in a time when New York more readily extended artistic, creative, and educational opportunities to people who were not already wealthy; it was these opportunities, rather than any unusually deep authenticity about their perception of New York or any connection to its “working class” heart, that allowed them to become renowned filmmakers.

Because so few can even afford to live in New York’s fashionable areas, much less make and widely distribute art there, presentations of New York have generally been limited to a narrow band of experience. The consequent visions of the city are like Russian dolls,

The New York Times

CROSSWORD PUZZLE



ACROSS

1. Painter of dogs?

5. "Raise the minimum wage? Ha ha ..."

7. Future space resorts will move in these

13. He droned on for peace?

15. When struck by your bumper, the soft sound the cyclist made

16. A "vivid face," in a Yeats poem (look how smart you are for knowing this!!)

17. The CIA __ an __ in Yemen

18. Former White ouse "woofer"

19. President who simply had no choice but to unleash nuclear hell

20. Currency used in the only country that interferes in other countries' elections

23. "Sleeves" for "crop" grown in "flyover country"

24. Pucker up for this nonagenarian

27. Cooking oil, for peasants

30. With "swain," what every boat in a regatta simply must have

31. "Scrambled" "outr  " "soup" "item"?

34. A disliker, in Cheapside?

35. Is it even wine if it isn't from __

37. Greek goddess of the dawn (are you the smartest person who has ever lived?????????)

38. One of the people in the highlighted clues is likely your ____, or theme of this week's puzzle

42. Poetic expression that you genuinely believe you're clever for knowing

43. Trippington-_-Hudson

44. The sound you made when you saw the cyclist's body

45. The "scrambled" "takedown" "notice" you issued on that "website" that calls you a "murderer"

46. Honorific you recently-fired doorman failed to use

47. __ology, or the nature of being (knowing this proves you are clearly some kind of fucking genius)

49. Private islands are over, it's all about private __

51. For a Republican president, a crime; for a Democratic mayor, a squeamish necessity

54. "Poles" "for" "billiards," "scrambled"

57. The state you were in while washing that blood off your fender

58. Famous for being heartless?

61. Headline: ""Cyclist hit __ a Porsche, allegedly""

62. What your degree proves you are

67. A genus of upright shrubs, obviously

68. The direction in which the cyclist should have looked as you came barreling down that ramp

69. The cyclist's tiny estate will be divided between his __

70. What one has in one's portfolio

71. You have a reservation later at __ Marais

72. Your lawyer settled the wrongful death case after charging \$400 an hour __

DOWN

1. Dad __

2. A leftist pipe dream where "people" receive "money" for "existing"

3. The expression on the face of one's UberEats driver

4. A medical group that simply must exist

5. Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson portrayed him in a movie enjoyed by piteous yokels

6. Garlic "mayonnaise," upscaled

7. When faced with unpleasantness, one can simply __ out

8. French commuter rail that one rides many times during one's gap year

9. With a possessive, a lexicon of biblical Greek (you are so smart I am coming)

10. The hurricane that cruelly damaged your summer home in the Caribbean

11. Previous owner of your Fab  rg   egg

12. City on the Yonne River in northeast central France, clearly

14. Taxes month, or the one where you're finally kicking out your delinquent tenant

21. Other countries steal vaccine data, this one borrows by accident

22. What one demands at the end of a Lincoln Center performance

24. Costly beef, aka the worst shortage during the pandemic

25. The berries that simply must be in your morning smoothie or your housekeeper will be fired

26. You paid a hungry young grad student to take your child's final __

27. Places to sit and look thoughtful with an unread copy of the latest well-reviewed novel

28. Game you played the last time you were happy

29. When one tips the deliveryman

31. White picket ____, or a metaphor for your segre-

gated community and school system

32. How much one tips the deliveryman, abbr.

33. You wouldn't be caught dead vacationing in __ Canarias

35. Where your great-grandfather made his money, abbr.

36. Agency you will report your gardener to if he doesn't start doing a better job on those roses

39. Sometimes you still dream of the cyclist's bloodied __ scarf

40. __ Karenina, who threw herself under a train (seriously has anyone ever been as knowledgeable as you are??)

41. __ rich (like your grandparents)

48. The channel with all your favorite films

49. "Winter of our discontent" speechgiver Richard __ (FUCK you're so FUCKING BRILLIANT)

50. One's secret __ of benzos

51. Sesame, as pretentiously as possible

52. Brutalized capital city of a region invaded by the U.S. thanks in part to this paper's cheerleading

53. One simply must visit Bruxingchatham to shoot __ (var.)

54. __ Bruins, or your shameful daughter's fallback school

55. The first half of the name you'd like to call your expensive lawyer

56. Job titles held by people who must have worked very hard

59. How the CIA gently coaxes info from vicious foes

60. With "queen," what you might say to Kamala?

63. Your employees must refer to your cat as the __ of your company

64. Untapped resource yet to be privatized

65. Where your other great-grandfather made his money, abbr.

66. This "general" is "known" for his """"chicken""""

one inside the other: Moss is nestled in Gopnick, who's nestled in Allen, and so on down the line: visions of New York that are based as much, if not more, in references to other art made about New York as they are in its day-to-day contemporary realities.

*And what costume shall the poor girl wear
To all tomorrow's parties
For Thursday's child is Sunday's clown
For whom none will go mourning*

—"All Tomorrow's Parties," The Velvet Underground and Nico

IN ONE SCENE IN *PRETEND IT'S A CITY*, THE ICONIC New Yorker Fran Lebowitz towers above a miniature version of the city in the Queens Museum. Off-camera, the director asks, "Why do you think so many young people are still coming to New York? What's here?" She responds, "New York! That's what's here!" Elsewhere, she talks about convincing the child of a friend to move back to the city. When told it's too expensive, she scoffs that, no, anyone can make it work.

In contrast to both Gopnick and Moss, Lebowitz is less invested in a nostalgic or mythic New York, and more invested in complaining about why the here and now generally sucks. She has consistently railed against every mayor of the city, with particular ire towards Michael Bloomberg. But Lebowitz came to New York in 1969, when people were often flocking to the city because it was everything their hometowns were not, where queer and other marginalized people could find affordable places to stay, and sustain cultural and political engagements of all sorts. People like her weren't chasing a dream but escaping a nightmare: New York let them in and let them be whoever they wanted to be, as corny as that sounds. Today, you can still live in New York but you might have to forego Manhattan and the trendy parts of Brooklyn (neither Gopnick nor Moss spend much time on the outer boroughs, which are bustling, vibrant, and lively—just not with the people they might want to be seen with or to be). And as developers cast their eyes on Queens and other places long considered to not be really *that* "New York" (again, according to whom?), longtime city residents face the constant threat of being priced out. Vast tracts of Manhattan are unoccupied, owned by billionaires interested in buying but not actually *living* in property. For many New Yorkers like the journalist Kevin Baker, the vitality of New York appears to be ebbing, sapped and sucked dry by those who own it but don't care about it. Baker writes, "Cities are all about loss. I get that. Intrinsically dynamic, cities have to change, or they end up like Venice, preserved in amber for the tourists." But change itself has to be dynamic, a movement towards the next iteration, driven by the daily lives of people who dwell there—while New York, for Baker and others, seems to be grinding to a halt. There's a difference between the gentrification that Moss and his ilk complain about—where old things disappear and new things appear in their place—and the more deadly sort which is really just about making things disappear without actually replacing them with anything.

The pandemic has only worsened the inequalities: *Bloomberg* reports that "more than two-thirds of New York City's arts and culture jobs are gone." (The report is oddly and particularly distressed by the fact that most of the workers in this sector are white and male.) Those with the means and resources to leave the city at the height of the pandemic will also be able to return once things ease up again, but in the meantime, a city so dependent on cheap, mobile, and mostly migrant labor (as in, migrating from other cities and countries) may feel the force of large swathes of workers having to leave permanently, as well as entire positions being cut. But it's also just as likely that there will be plenty of incoming people to replace people and jobs because, well, it's New York.

WHETHER OR NOT NEW YORK ENDURES as a vibrant cultural, economic, and political center remains to be seen. But rather than mourn the possible demise of the city—or more specifically, the demise of a nostalgic ideal—we might want to ask ourselves: how do we replicate what New York offers, even in our different cities or much smaller towns? Consider what makes a city like New York distinct: largely, it's the fact that its residents can zip around it, absorbing variant and variable parts without much trouble, because there is a (comparatively better) investment in public transportation than in most metro areas. Yet, elsewhere in the United States, most Americans remain suspicious of transportation that's not tied to cars: for the wealthy, this suspicion is largely a fear that the poor might infiltrate well-manicured suburbs or the exclusive domains of their city. In Chicago, where I live, it can take a couple of hours to make it from the poorer West or South Sides to the more affluent (and much whiter) North Side, and public transportation worsens the further you get from that area. As for New York's supposed dominance in the "creative arts": what if we invested in not just the arts, but in a public school system that cared about its students across the entire city, municipality, or county, not just in a few neighborhoods? (For all its diversity, New York has one of the most segregated public school systems in the country, a testament to its growing inequalities, and arguably also a factor in its gentrification and decay.)

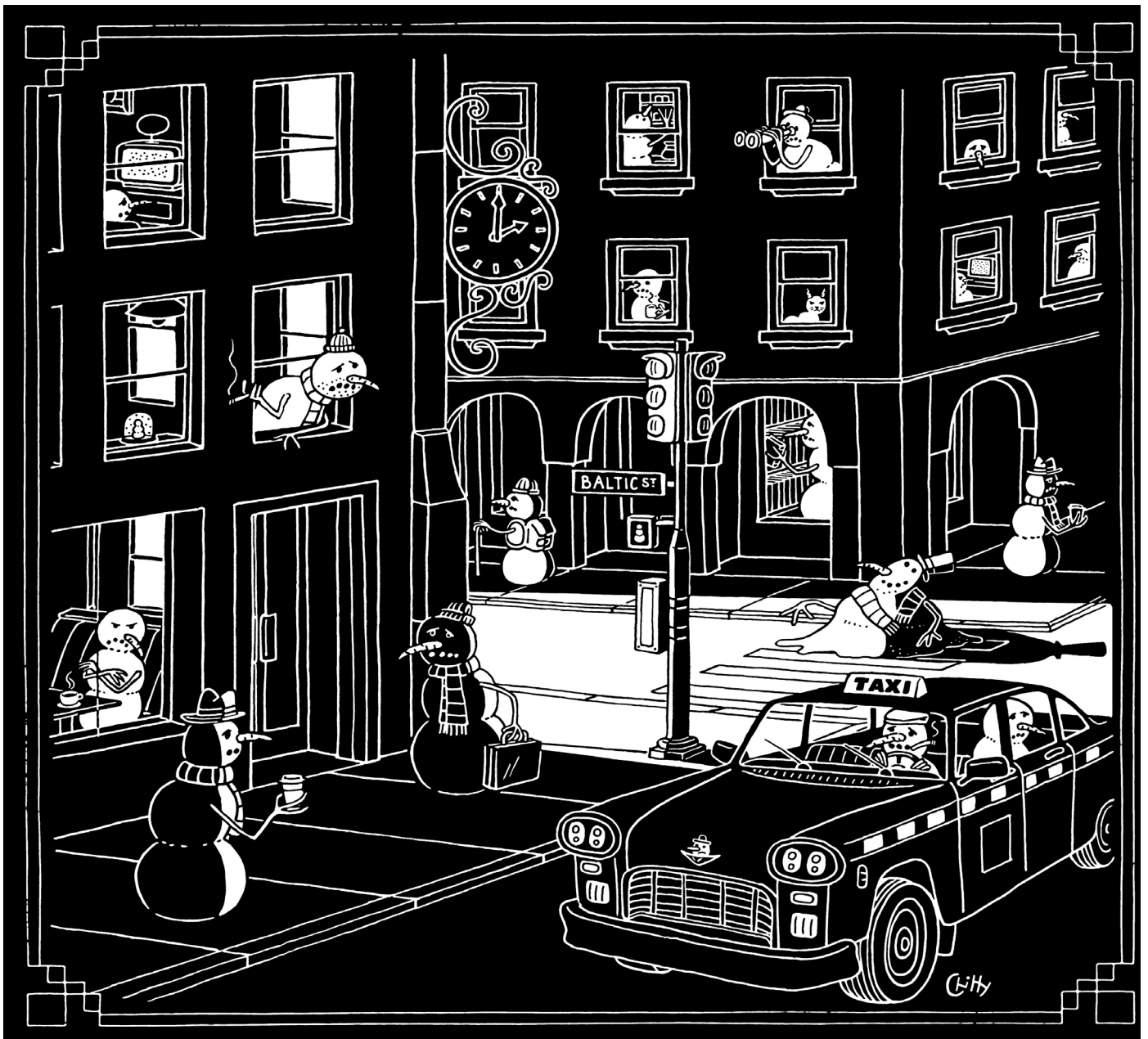
The fixation on New York as a cultural epicenter makes sense given what we know has emerged from it: the Velvet Underground and John Cale, *Annie Hall*, Keith Haring, and so much more. Much of what makes New York *New York* cannot be replicated. What makes a city truly great is the ability to get lost in it, a lostness not defined by geography or streets, but by intellectual and social boundlessness. That's not an experience easy to replicate in most cities: New York has always been a city of escape. Still, if we give opportunities to other places to nourish the uniqueness that New York has managed—through a combination of chance, brutal charm, and openness to outsiders—to wrest for itself, we might be less invested in the fantasies of New York conjured by writers like Gopnick and Moss, fantasies which ultimately only participate in a kind of Nostalgia Industrial

NEW YORK, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Complex, serving little purpose beyond selling copies of middling books. We can create art, even great art, unaided by the stench of piss and shit in the streets, in the warmth of well-heated apartments with proper doors and sanitation and an affordable coffee shop—even a chain one! down the street. Poverty and instability suppress the free exercise of creativity and talent more than they enable it: we might recall that both Karl Marx and Vincent Van Gogh would never have produced the work they did without generous benefactors.

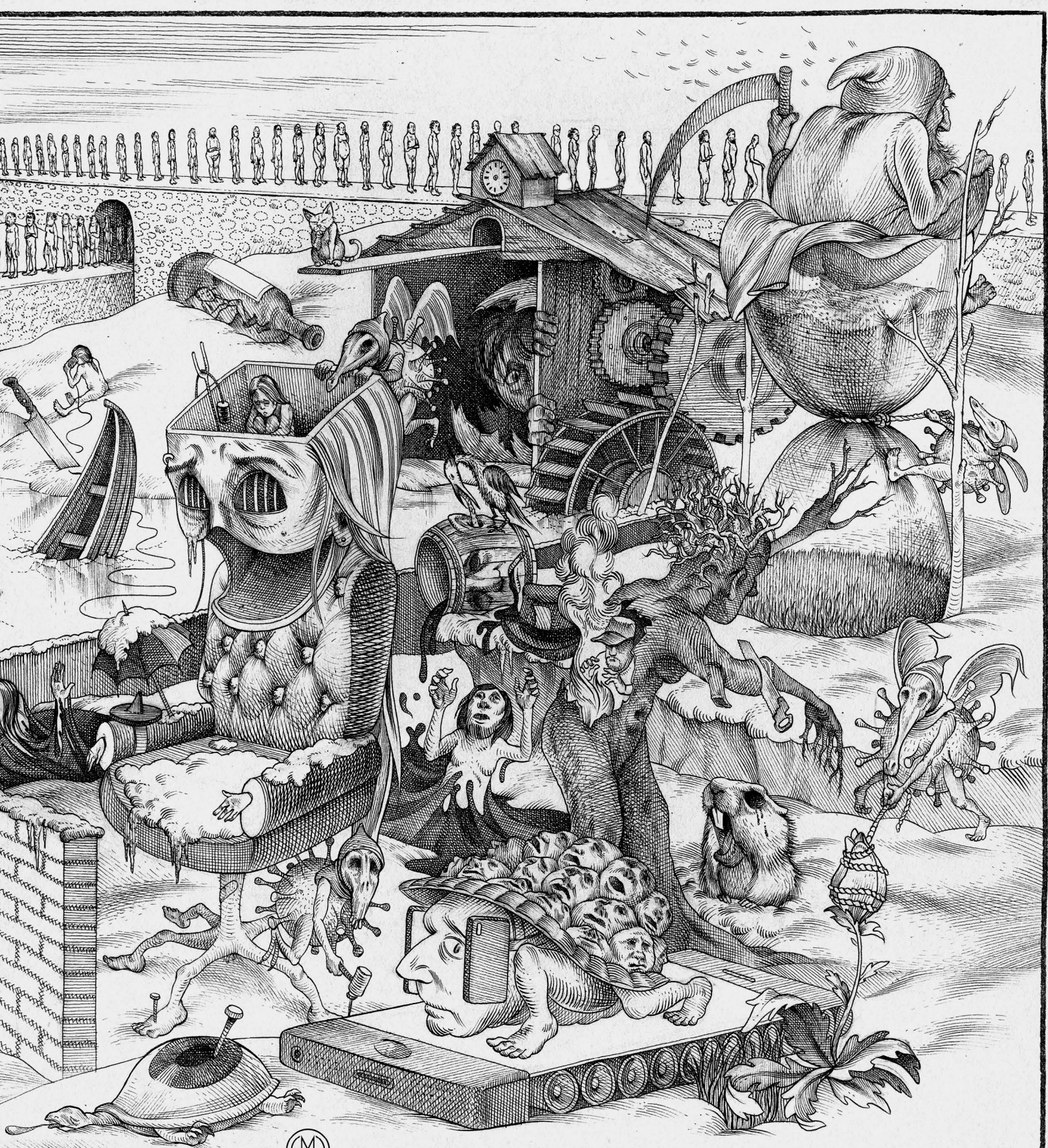
There will never be another New York, sure. But there will also never be another Kolkata, or another London or another Berlin. Every place is rooted in its people and its things, its buildings, its tools of mobility, its coffee shops and museums and bookstores and wa-

terfronts and more, but the loss of all that *stuff* is not what kills it. What kills a city is the force of nostalgia, when a place becomes an idea instead of a vital, throbbing and almost organic creature that lives and breathes with complex and complicated ecosystems that often, yes, vanish, only to be supplanted by something else. Writers write to keep alive our memories of what a city once was, what it is, and what it could be, but if we are to think seriously about how to sustain not just cities but their vibrancy too, we must focus on how to do that without depending on writerly fantasies. After all, at the end of the day, in that limitless interplay between a city that writes itself into writers and writers who write themselves into cities: who is nostalgic for whom? ♣





Far worse than the guaranteed stinging flames of a place as reliable as Hell is the existential vagueness of a place we all know :



C.M. Duffy for Current Affairs ~ 2021 ~

L · J · M · B · O



the allure of SHIP WRECKS

by NICK SLATER

THE NICEST THING YOU CAN SAY TO A SCUBA DIVER is, “You look dead down there.” It’s a testament to the ease with which they move through the water. No bursts of air bubbles, no frenzied waving of the arms or legs. The apparent lack of effort is a sign of skill, and a tranquility more often associated with Buddhist monks. A situational one, at least—a person is often quite different underwater than they are on land. Or maybe that’s a truism? Every human is a squirming, almost-bursting bag of contradictions, and it could be diving just makes this more obvious than usual. But I digress.

A corpse-like diving technique is especially useful when wreck diving. Careless kicks of your fins are an annoyance when diving on a reef—you could bonk a fellow diver on the head or, worse, destroy a delicate living tower that may have taken centuries to grow—but such clumsiness can have more serious consequences within the confines of a shipwreck. And while gulping down frantic lungfuls of air is a good way to cut any dive short, the stakes are higher when you’re trying to navigate a claustrophobic labyrinth of metal. In short, the more a shipwreck diver mimics a dead body, the less likely they are to become one.

Wreck diving is, above all, the art of being torn in two, and this was what first drew me to it. On one hand, a wreck diver is *somebody*. Somebody interesting, that is—an ordinary human who transforms into a cyborg to explore strange worlds. The ritual of dressing for a wreck dive might be the closest an average person can get to an astronaut’s preparation for space launch. There’s the pseudoerotic dance of pulling on the wetsuit, the surge of power as you click the buckles on your heavy buoyancy vest, the sense of wonder at your own body’s transformation as you stare through thick goggles at the fins on your feet and inhale a few breaths of air from the mouthpiece of the hose attached to the

“In wreck diving, a person could still go anywhere.”

giant cylinder on your back. There's a dive computer on your wrist, a knife strapped to your ankle, flashlights and reels and whistles and inflatable “safety sausages” dangling from your chest. It all makes you more than yourself. More substantial, and competent. This version of you is somebody who will go places and do things that few can imagine.

In this process of exploration and discovery, wreck diving's other great appeal is revealed: the prospect of being *nobody*. You don't have to say a word when you're underwater. Can't, in fact. The extent of your social obligations is exchanging a few hand signals with your fellow divers. *Look over there. How much air do you have? Let's go down.* It's hard to even remember the basics of your life on land when you're inside a wreck. Creeping through the halls of a perilous tomb is much more immediate. Left alone in silence, your mind gets curious. The surface lies to the left, but what if you went right? What might be down that dim passageway? You're so close—why not go have a look? You could forget about the land and just go see.

“This is the thing that can get me back.”

IN THE FAR WESTERN REACHES OF THE Philippines there's a small island called Coron. It perches between the Sulu and South China Seas, just north of the much larger island of Palawan. Coron sparkles like an emerald in the crystal tropic waters, but the island itself is not particularly notable next to its neighbors. Instead, Coron's main attraction is the fleet of World War II Japanese shipwrecks beneath its bay.

The ships were sunk in 1944 by Helldiver bombers launched from a U.S. aircraft carrier. The long distance raid required a round trip of 340 miles. Since the normal combat range of the Helldiver was just 276 miles, the raid caught the Japanese by surprise. The entire fleet of 12 ships was sunk before they had a chance to flee—the fight was over in about 15 minutes. After the war, Japanese naval officials told their American interrogators, “We thought at first that Coron Bay was safe from your carrier attacks.” They were wrong, and many men died as a result.

Today, the shipwrecks of Coron are widely regarded as some of the world's finest wreck dive sites. Because the Japanese fleet was attacked while taking shelter near the coast, the wrecks lie in relatively shallow water, and because they're in the Philippines, the water is much warmer than other famous wreck sites like Scotland's Scapa Flow. Brochures of many hostels and dive shops cheerfully inform you that *Forbes Traveler* ranked Coron as one of the 10 best spots on the planet. The fact that such a magazine does not exist doesn't seem to bother anyone. In any case, the real *Forbes* has recommended Coron's “world class diving” as a top travel destination when (if?) the current pandemic ends.

I was unaware of Coron's reputation the first time I set foot on the island. Although I'd been diving for several years at that point, I had stuck strictly to coral reefs. Reefs have fascinated me for as long as I can remember. These lush undersea gardens are a far cry from the cold, murky Midwestern lakes where I learned to swim as a boy. Growing up in landlocked Minnesota, I watched thousands of hours of ocean docu-

mentaries, marveling at the divers who rolled backward into a shining blue world of crabs, turtles, and wiggling reef fishes. That was the pull diving held for me: the chance to see a kind of beauty that only existed on camera for most people.

However, a week before I landed on Coron, my sister gave me a book. It was called *Shadow Divers: The True Adventure of Two Americans Who Risked Everything to Solve One of the Last Mysteries of World War II* by Robert Kurson, and I thought it looked like shit. Pure boomer bait. It had a blurb from Clive Cussler on the cover, for Christ's sake. I stuffed the book in my bag and forgot about it. But the ferry to Coron took six hours, and the battery on my iPod only lasted one. This was one of the more fortuitous equipment failures of my life.

Shadow Divers turned out to be fascinating. In 1991, an alcoholic sea captain named Bill Nagle got a tip about a mysterious underwater object off the coast of New Jersey. Nagle, who'd once been among the best wreck divers in the world,¹ was a character straight out of Hollywood. The stubborn fearlessness that made him great in diving made him poorly suited for anything else, and when he wasn't at sea he could usually be found drowning his memories in a bar called the Horrible Inn. Frequented by "bikers, fishermen, street toughs, boat mechanics, deep-wreck divers," the atmosphere was so grimy that locals couldn't believe "anyone could do anything indecent enough to warrant expulsion from such a place." Somehow, Nagle managed to pull it off. He was just that kind of guy. But a bit of his old pride came back at the thought of discovering something special.

Years of booze and self-loathing had left Nagle unable to dive, so he enlisted the help of a legend named John Chatterton to investigate the sunken enigma. Chatterton had been a medic in the Vietnam war whose willingness to dash into enemy fire after fallen comrades led many to question his sanity. His quixotic quest for purpose eventually led him to the world of commercial diving. This was an occupation where a day's work might involve blowing up an underwater boulder or welding loose panels on a pipeline hundreds of feet deep. Chatterton was one of the few divers in the world skilled enough to pull off Nagle's plan. He also belonged to an even more select club: those willing to leave their old lives behind in search of... something.

The something turned out to be a Nazi U-boat—which was odd, because neither German nor American archives had any record of a sunken U-boat off the Jersey shore. Multiple dives turned up no trace of the sub's identity, though they did

1. Nagle was famous among divers for recovering the bell of the SS Andrea Doria, a luxuriously-decorated Italian ocean liner whose much-coveted artifacts have lured more than 20 divers to their deaths. The wreck is commonly called the "Mount Everest of diving."

cost the life of an experienced and popular diver named Steve Feldman. Wild theories were hatched about the wreck, which came to be known as the *U-Who*. Maybe it had been carrying some high-ranking fugitive; maybe even Hitler himself? Maybe the sub had been full of Nazi gold? At 230 feet below sea level, in the frigid and treacherous North Atlantic water, the *U-Who* would not surrender its secrets without a price.

I devoured the book while perched behind the bridge of the ancient ferry, a VIP area accessed by sharing cigarettes and slugs of Tanduay rum with the crewmen. By the time we reached Coron, wreck diving seemed like the only thing worth dreaming about. "A shipwreck gave a man limitless opportunity to know himself if only he cared to find out," Kurson wrote. "He could always press further, dig deeper, find places no one else had mastered." When the first thing I saw after getting off the ferry was a giant poster that said 'DIVE THE WRECKS OF CORON', I knew the old me would not be leaving the island.

*"What kind of fucking
man says something's
impossible? What kind
of man doesn't go look?"*



AS I DESCENDED THROUGH THE BRIGHT warm waters of Coron Bay, the wreck *Morazan* loomed in the distance. A mere 46 feet deep at its shallowest point, and a manageable 82 feet at its deepest, the *Morazan* was a nondescript cargo ship. Its blandness was its best attribute. On the *Morazan*, a novice wreck diver could learn the basics of the art with minimal risk of injury or death.

This was good, because wreck diving offers many ways to get fucked. Few of them involve sea life, contrary to popular belief. The odds of a wreck diver getting bitten by a shark or ensnared by a giant squid are exceedingly low (however, divers unlucky enough to brush against a camouflaged stonefish may experience such terrible pain that they try to cut off their own limbs.) Running out of air is a more common problem. The deeper you go, the more the air in your tank compresses—an amount that might last you an hour at shallow depths can be gone in minutes when you go deep. Excitement or fear can also rapidly deplete a diver's air supply. The more intense the emotional state, the heavier your breathing. This poses obvious problems when you're deep within an underwater maze.

But the *Morazan* was an airy and forgiving wreck. In this low stakes environment—a far cry from the deathtrap of the *U-Who*—I learned the ABCs of wreck diving. You kept all your equipment as tight against your body as possible. A dangling hose or loose strap could easily become snagged inside

a wreck. You kicked your legs like a frog to avoid disturbing the silt. You developed an instinct for which holes were big enough to wiggle through, and which would leave you stuck like Tom in Jerry's mousehole (remember, you've got a tank on your back that needs a few extra inches of clearance). Most of all, you learned to be at ease in unnatural places.

This became especially important when we moved on to deeper wrecks, like the seaplane tender *Akitsushima*. It was here, at a depth of around 100 feet, that I had my first brush with nitrogen narcosis. Sometimes called the martini effect, it is a peculiar phenomenon that manifests as an impairment that can take many forms. Each diver who gets “narced” has a unique reaction. Some feel pleasantly drunk, others experience intense paranoia. My first time was euphoric. The *Akitsushima* was more beautiful than any wreck I had dived in the beginning of the course. As I hovered in the giant gash left in her side by a Helldiver's bomb, I gazed out at her steel arm that had once plucked up seaplanes bobbing in the waves. The visibility was poor and I could just make out its faintest silhouette. I wanted to go explore, to see what might be lying in the sand beyond the limits of my vision (and, though it did not occur to me in my nitrogen-induced bliss, perhaps my air supply as well.) If my instructor had not tapped his tank like a drum I might've done it.

A few dives, a lot of theory-reading, and quiz-taking later, I had a card saying I was a certified wreck diver in the eyes of the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI), the world's largest dive training organization. I didn't feel like one, though. Unlike a university diploma or a liquor license, the value of a wreck diving cert is not derived from the opinion of others. If it has any value at all, it's as a token of *metis*. The Greek term refers to a mixture of skill, wisdom, and cunning. A person who possesses *metis* has a precious gift: it can't be bought or taught, only developed through great personal effort. After just over a week of wreck diving, I sure as hell didn't have *metis*.

So, after spending another semester as a teacher to replenish an empty bank account, I decided to go back to Coron. This time, I would train to be a professional wreck diver. I still wouldn't be in anywhere near the same class as Chatterton—that would take years, and much greater risks—but maybe it would be the thing that made life feel less pointless.

Since the day I'd finished *Shadow Divers*, I hadn't gone more than a day or two without thinking about it. But it wasn't Chatterton or Nagle, or even the *U-Who* itself, that had me obsessed. It was the Rouses: Chris and Chrissy, a father-son team who'd met the most tragic fate that can befall a diver.

The Rouses had been invited aboard Nagle's ship, the *Seeker*, for one of the many unsuccessful excursions to identify



the *U-Who* after its discovery. Chatterton deemed them perhaps “the most formidable diving team” in the country, and believed they might be the ones to crack this unsolvable case. This was no faint praise coming from a diver as accomplished as Chatterton. His confidence was echoed by the Rouses themselves. “I’m going to identify the wreck,” said the 22-year old Chrissy. “I’m going to be the one to do it.”

But although the Rouses’ experience and expertise had few equals—Chris, the father, had even started making his own dive equipment after his excavating company went under during the Reagan Recession—their dive was doomed for two reasons. First, the Rouses were unlucky. Second, they were broke.

At least, the Rouses were too strapped for cash to afford the breathing gas that might’ve saved their lives on the *U-Who*. At depths below 200 feet, nitrogen narcosis can get so intense a diver might “hallucinate, until lobsters start beckoning him by name or offering unsound advice.” This can be mitigated somewhat by the use of trimix: a custom diving gas that contains helium in addition to the standard oxygen and nitrogen. But trimix is expensive. Today a single tank can run between \$150-\$200, compared to \$15-\$20 for regular compressed air. Prices were no friendlier in the Rouses’ day.

So Chrissy Rouse was breathing regular air when he got trapped inside the *U-Who*. Before he died, he told medics he heard “the jungle drums” and believed a monster was trying to eat him. Chris Rouse eventually managed to free his son, but the effort exhausted their air supplies. They were forced to make an uncontrolled ascent from extreme depths. Desperate for breath, the Rouses shot upward without making the necessary stops to let the nitrogen in their blood safely dissolve.

THIS IS EVERY WRECK DIVER’S NIGHTMARE. Such an uncontrolled ascent is almost guaranteed to give a diver a severe case of decompression sickness, often called “the bends.” That is a misleadingly innocuous nickname. A diver who gets hit with the bends will be wracked by tremendous pain in every part of their body. Their blood will turn to foam as the nitrogen bubbles that accumulate in vessels and arteries while diving begin to expand. They may suffer embolisms or strokes. The reason it’s called the bends is that divers will writhe and contort themselves into grotesque shapes after taking a bad hit. Even a non-fatal hit can cause paralysis or brain damage. Many divers who’ve survived the bends have said they’d rather have drowned. Neither of the Rouses were so lucky.

For reasons I couldn’t explain, I was more interested in the

“A great diver learns to stand down his emotions. At the moment he becomes lost or blinded or tangled or trapped—that instant when millions of years of evolution demand fight or flight, and narcosis carves order from his brain—he dials down his fear and contracts into the moment, until his breathing slows, his narcosis lightens, and his reason returns. In this way he overcomes his humanness, and becomes something else. In this way, liberated from instinct, he becomes a freak of nature.”

—from SHADOW DIVERS

THE ALLURE OF SHIPWRECKS

Rouses than the mystery of the *U-Who*.² While *Shadow Divers* mentioned them only in passing, another book told their story in more detail. Written by a fellow diver named Bernie Chowdhury, *The Last Dive: A Father and Son's Fatal Descent into the Ocean Depths* showed who the Rouses were above the water, and how they dreamed of being better underneath it.

Although our lives had been different in many ways, I identified with Chris Rouse. He'd been a teenage father with

a high school education who married his sweetheart and, through a combination of grit and mixed fortune, clung to his little piece of the American Dream as the tides of neoliberalism swallowed everything around him. I identified with Chrissy, too—young and mostly lost, frustrated and hurt by his inability to move forward, finding comfort by doing things none of his friends could do beneath the waves.

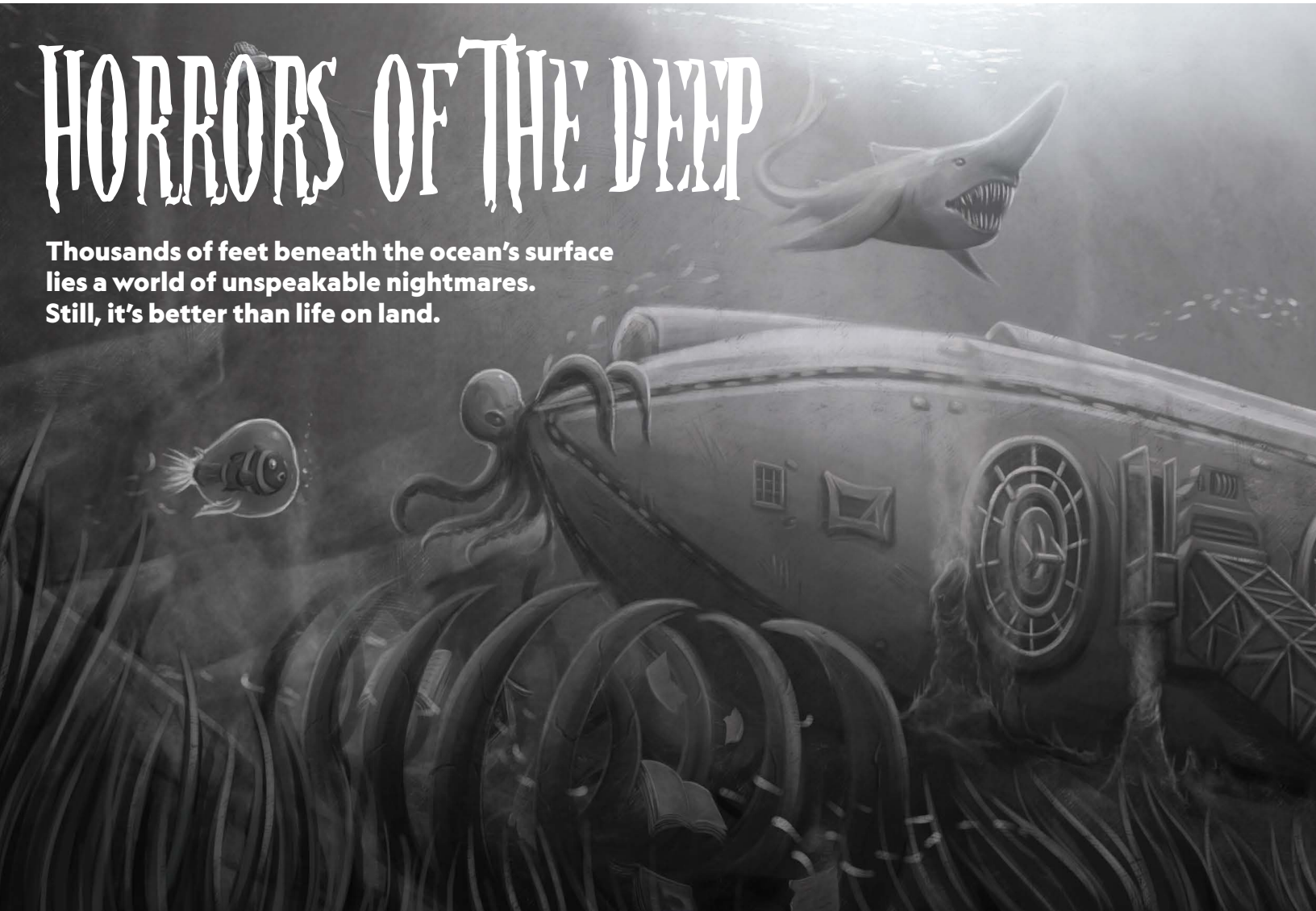
The Rouses had gotten into diving in the mid-1980s, back when the idea of a middle class family in rural Pennsylvania owning a small airplane and taking long vacations every year wasn't utterly preposterous. They first tried the sport for reasons that seem almost quaint today—life was just too predictable. There had to be more. Both father and son longed to explore the world. They wanted to discover something new, to be somebody. As Reaganomics took hold and their lives stagnated or declined, they turned to the water for a sense of purpose. Or maybe they just wanted to leave the burdens of the land behind.

My circumstances as the childless holder of a new, mostly-worthless bachelor's degree in the wake of the Great Reces-

2. The mystery of the U-Who was eventually solved, but not before Nagle drank himself to death and Chatterton's marriage collapsed under the strain of his obsession. After recovering bags full of artifacts, poring over thousands of pages of records, and even flying to Germany to meet with old U-boat crewmen, the divers finally found their answer in a top secret U.S. Navy intelligence report. The submarine was the U-869, and it had been ordered to patrol the seas around Gibraltar in early 1945. However, the U-boat's commander had missed this message and steered his ship toward New York instead. It was a suicide mission in the most literal sense: the U-869 was likely sunk by its own "circle-runner," an acoustic torpedo that mistakenly honed in on the engines of the sub that fired it. No crewmen survived the accident.

HORRORS OF THE DEEP

Thousands of feet beneath the ocean's surface lies a world of unspeakable nightmares. Still, it's better than life on land.



THE ALLURE OF SHIPWRECKS

sion bore little outward resemblance to those of the Rouses. Still, I could relate to them. We'd been born into a system that said if we wanted to matter, we had to be somebody, yet there were few opportunities to do this. Life was a fight to be special; it was exhausting. Wreck diving offered a way out. You started playing the game by their rules, but there was always a chance one day you'd discover something that set you free.

*“What I do
now is what
I am.”*

A BRISK SALTY WIND BLEW ACROSS THE harbor on the morning of our trip to the *Irako*. By now I was a divemaster, responsible for guiding groups of divers through the wrecks. My job duties also included loading dozens of heavy air tanks onto the boat, which wasn't easy with the bow lurching up and down. The captain sucked his teeth as he gauged the waves. This didn't bode well for the visibility at the dive site—the deepwater currents were likely to be strong, cloaking the wreck in clouds of silt.

Dive guides had a love-hate relationship with the *Irako*. On one hand, it was the most interesting and challenging of Coron's wrecks. Lying almost 150 feet below sea level at its deepest point, the *Irako* was nearly 500 feet long and full of fascinating objects (including a bizarrely well-preserved bicycle). I once swam through the propeller shaft with two of my colleagues, an exhilarating experience that turned to terror when my fin brushed against the bottom of the cramped tube. Instantly there arose a silt-out so dense that I pressed my



fingers against my own mask and saw nothing.

This was the devil's bargain posed by the *Irako*: down there, small mistakes could have big consequences. The wreck was so deep that any dive worth doing required decompression stops, called "deco" in divers' shorthand. Instead of swimming directly to the surface, divers had to ascend in stages to avoid the bends. Spending a certain number of minutes at shallower and shallower depths would allow the nitrogen bubbles accumulating in your blood to slowly dissipate. Head for the surface too quickly, and you risked getting bent. This kind of "deco diving" is loudly discouraged by PADI, as much out of concern for diving's brand image as anything else—hard to sell a sport where excruciating death is too likely. But in any case, it meant we only took experienced wreck divers to the *Irako*.

AS WE RODE THE BRIGHTLY-PAINTED *bangka* boat out to the site, I felt the tingle that always preceded a deep dive. My body felt more capable, more complete, with each piece of equipment I put on. I showed a sketch of the wreck to the three divers my partner and I would be guiding. They peppered me with questions, and there was trust in their eyes when I answered. It felt good to be seen that way. One diver asked me to help her adjust the settings on her underwater camera. I wasn't thrilled about that, as divers with cameras are often more intent on snapping the perfect shot than monitoring their air supply or following the guide. But her need to have proof she'd been in the *Irako* was understandable. It was a special wreck.

We splashed about half an hour later. Conditions were as bad as the captain had feared. Fierce currents made us flap like flags in the breeze as we descended the muck-encrusted anchor line down to the *Irako*. Though the sea life clinging to the rope cut like razors into my thin dive gloves, I was grateful for this lifeline. Without it we would've been swept into oblivion. Things got worse when we made it to the bottom. One diver, apparently unnerved by the descent, had already gulped down a worrying amount of air. Another seemed unable to control his buoyancy. He rose and fell in dangerous arcs, wasting gas as he struggled to stay at the same level as the group. Visibility only extended a few feet in front of us. We fought the sea as best we could—the customer must get their money's worth—but it was a losing battle. Just getting to the wreck's interior access point was a struggle. We barely made it inside before divers started bouncing off the walls.

With the group floundering, my colleague tapped his tank and signaled to abort the dive. Crawling like bugs across the deck of the *Irako*, we retreated to the anchor line. Just before

we made it there, I realized the diver with the camera was gone.

My colleague and I stared at each other. He had his hands full with the other two divers—the first was now completely out of air and breathing from my partner's "octopus," or backup mouthpiece. The second diver looked to be narced. They would not make it back to the surface on their own. A slight tilt of my colleague's head said what was needed. I tapped my mask and pointed out at nothing, then started swimming.

Recovering a lost diver under such conditions is not easy. I was hunting for bubbles—trying to make out a diver's form in such low visibility was hopeless. My dive computer began to beep. The longer I stayed down, the more deco time accumulated. Fighting the current made me breathe harder. Yet the further I swam into the abyss, the more I was overcome with joy. What I was doing felt *good*.

Oddly, it was the lost diver's panic that saved her. After several minutes of swimming, I spotted a torrent of bubbles soaring toward the sky. The diver was upside down, huffing and puffing, flailing as she tried to orient herself. I swam over and caught her arm. When I signaled for her to release some air from the bottom of her vest—which would let her balance instead of zooming to the surface—she did the opposite. I barely managed to hold onto her hand as she was yanked upward.

We dangled there together, a hundred feet beneath the waves. The absurdity of the situation was transcendent. Nothingness surrounded us. My brain floated in strange rhythms. *The void. The void!* This was close to pure disembodied consciousness as you could get without serious psychedelics. As we slowly made our ascent, foot by beeping foot, I thought about how wreck diving turned nobodies into somebodies—and, one way or another, back into nobodies. You got enchanted by the wrecks and they made a mundane world feel magical. As long as you were with the wrecks you were doing something, being somebody. But every wreck diver reaches a point where they either surrender their attachment to being The Special Diver, or they tick all the boxes on their adventure checklist and lose the magic, or they die. There was peace in recognizing this. Peace, too, in knowing that your mind and muscles were good for something regardless. You were good for something.

Less than an hour but more than a lifetime after we'd made our descent, the diver and I broke the surface. The boat was a kilometer away. She was too tired to move, so I rolled over and held her fins against my chest as I swam us back. "I got some really good shots down there," she said, fiddling with her camera. "I'll show you when we get to the boat."

The photos were bad, but I was happy for her. 📷

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THE HOLOCAUST AND CARY GRANT

by Nathan J. Robinson

Content warning: violence, abuse, ethnic slurs

FOR MANY YEARS, THE UNITED STATES HAD NO museum focused on slavery. The one major effort to create an official national slavery museum “collapsed amid a welter of debt and recriminations.” Finally, in 2014, a former plantation in Louisiana—the Whitney—was opened to the public as a museum and memorial focused on slavery. This largely occurred because a single wealthy lawyer made it his personal mission to remodel the site and present the ugly facts of slavery directly. Other plantations have buried their history; the houses are the sites of weddings and parties, and at many there is little indication that a colossal crime against humanity took place there. The slave cabins are long gone and the main house is presented only as a unique exemplar of antebellum luxury. Louisiana’s Greenwood Plantation, for instance, touts itself as a “truly magical and majestic place” that is “the perfect location for events and meetings,” promising “majestic oak trees framing your [wedding] ceremony.” Unmentioned in the promotional literature is the fact that for the first part of its life this magical home was the center of 12,000 acres of sugarcane production worked by several hundred enslaved human beings.

The Whitney Plantation’s approach makes for a very different experience. It is not magical to visit. It is traumatic and sad and painful. It also demonstrates how important historical truths have been obscured. On my visit, I was struck by the fact that the main house only looked like a sumptuous wedding cake from the front, the public-facing side visible from the Mississippi River. At the back, it looked like what it

was: a forced-labor camp. It was spartan and ugly. The house’s facade was just that, a decorative cover. When restored accurately, the house was very obviously the headquarters of a sugarcane operation farmed by the enslaved, rather than a place of peace beneath the oaks. The original “magical” Greenwood plantation, on the other hand, burned to the ground in 1960, and was reconstructed in the romantic image of what the owner thought the Old South must have been like. (Its website explains that it has since become a “favorite of Hollywood” and featured in such films as *GI Joe II* and *Jeepers Creepers III*.)

It is an easy thing to cover up a historical atrocity. After all, every new generation has to be educated anew; nobody is born with a knowledge of what came before. At the Whitney, there’s a map showing all of the sites in downtown New Orleans that once contained the offices of slave traders. There were at least a dozen along the short route I take from my home to the office. I had had no idea there were so many. And if that one lawyer hadn’t decided to spend his wealth building a slavery museum, I probably would never have known just how ubiquitous these dealers in human beings had been in my own neighborhood.

I think a lot about images and realities, how things look from one perspective versus how they really are. An actor or politician who seems affable and self-deprecating in interviews, and has a winning public persona, can be a total monster to their subordinates when the cameras are off. The look of a delicious bacon strip helps us forget that a sentient creature suffered horribly so that we could eat it. A country can appear free when you walk down the street, but have millions of people locked away in jails and prisons which are kept far out of view. Nations think other nations are mysterious, sinister Others when in reality, human

lives are extremely similar across the globe. Many people in the United States sincerely believed their country was nobly fighting to help the people of Vietnam and Iraq, while the reality was death and mayhem in the service of nothing except U.S. power.

And of course, there's Cary Grant.

"Do you know what's wrong with you?... Nothing."

— Audrey Hepburn to Cary Grant in *Charade* (1963)

THERE WAS NO SUCH PERSON AS CARY GRANT. That's not my opinion, that's Cary Grant's opinion. Grant began life as Archie Leach, born to a poor family in Britain, and in his own view, Archie Leach was what he remained. Grant said that if someone shouted "Cary" in the street, he wouldn't notice, but if they said "Archie" he looked around. Cary Grant, the definition of the debonair romantic lead during Hollywood's Golden Age, thought of "Cary Grant" only as a persona:

He's a completely made-up character and I'm playing a part. It's a part I've been playing a long time, but no way am I really Cary Grant. A friend told me once, "I always wanted to be Cary Grant." And I said, "So did I." In my mind's eye, I'm just a vaudevillian named Archie Leach... Cary Grant has done wonders for my life and I always want to give him his due.

Eventually, after therapeutically taking LSD a hundred times—an experience he found life-changing—Grant would feel that Archie and Cary had finally been united into one man, in whose skin he could feel comfortable. But that came after decades of anxiety over who he "really" was and how it related to the pictures of him on screen.

Knowing Cary Grant only through his screen appearances, it is difficult to imagine this. During his years as Hollywood's leading leading man, the typical Cary Grant character was a gentleman of style, wit, and poise. There is, as Hepburn's character said in *Charade*, nothing wrong with him. Perhaps he sometimes seems a trifle arrogant, and in *Suspicion* (1941) his wife thinks he might be trying to poison her—but it turns out to be just an unfortunate misunderstanding. Perfectly attired, perfectly charming—and yet the real Grant was an anxiety-ridden acid head who destroyed marriage after marriage (four in total). The truth is difficult to visualize because the illusion was so practiced. (The best

biography of Grant is called *A Brilliant Disguise*, and it was.)

It is so easy to be fooled into thinking things are other than they actually are, because each individual person has access to only a tiny sliver of information about the world. Everything I know about China, for instance, has been *mediated*, because it comes to me through media (I have never been there). At best, this means seeing something through a glass, darkly and with a smudge. At worst, when some interested party controls access to the informational slivers we receive, our perception can depart *entirely* from the reality. This is why public figures can very effectively trick us into thinking they're nice people when they're not: they determine which parts of themselves they show and which parts they conceal, and we can only guess what they're like by extrapolating from the parts we are shown. Harvey Weinstein was a different person to different audiences. To Hillary Clinton, he was a perfect gentleman. To women he had power over, he was hideously abusive. Plenty who knew him said they never had any idea how bad his conduct was, and it's not surprising. The worst people carefully manipulate the perceptions of others.

Serial killer Ted Bundy, one of the most depraved people to ever live, projected the image of a promising All-American young gentleman while secretly engaged in murder and necrophilia. True crime writer Ann Rule, in a fascinating book called *The Stranger Beside Me*, writes of her own interactions with Bundy and the difficulty she had in grasping the gap between the person she knew and the person who murdered 30 women. Before his convictions, Rule had worked next to Bundy at—of all things—a suicide hotline, and found him to be "kind, solicitous, and empathetic." It took Rule years to accept that her friendly colleague Ted was actually a monster. He had carefully selected what parts of him Rule would see, and the image seemed so real that it took a mountain of evidence to grasp that it wasn't.

I have in my office a fascinating old magazine, a copy of *Fortune* from July 1934. It's a special edition devoted to profiling Mussolini's Italy, and the editors of *Fortune* liked what they saw. Every page is full of tributes to the effectiveness of fascism at building roads and fostering a sense of national solidarity:

It is perhaps Mussolini's greatest triumph that he has made the Italians realize that if they are to get anywhere among the really Great Powers... their only chance to do so is through the sacrifice of a great disciplined effort. And not only made them realize it but made them act on it to the extent of making, more or less willingly, daily sacrifices to the State. That stern spirit is the spirit of Fascism, and it may well cause the observer to remove from the Italian people the degrading label of 'wop' and substitute instead the accolade of 'Roman.' Civis Romanus sum!

Fortune's appalling assessment of fascism was that "the wops are unworshipping themselves." It even praised Mussolini's railroad management: "Signor Mussolini *did* make the trains run on time. He is making them run faster. Much more successfully than the French, he keeps them on the rails... the unworshipping trains are now drawn by modern, efficient and most unworshipping electric locomotives." While *Fortune* insisted that as journalists they were "by definition non-Fascist," nevertheless "the good journalist must recognize in Fascism certain ancient virtues of the race."

Awkwardly, shortly after the special *Fortune* issue came out, the Italian regime began "burn[ing], slaughter[ing], dismember[ing], gass[ing], and put[ting] in concentration camps large numbers of Ethiopians as part of its occupation of that country. There is evidence that the deaths were in the millions. One-tenth of the population of Libya would die during Italy's occupation of it, and "from May 1930 to Sep-



tember 1930 more than 80,000 Libyans were forced to leave their land and live in concentration camps.”

Americans in the mid-1930s would not have any idea of the true nature of Italian fascism. The information coming to them from their press simply excluded the regime’s crimes. Even Franklin D. Roosevelt referred to Mussolini as “that admirable Italian gentleman.” My 1934 copy of *Fortune* is a giant lie, but an effective one. It’s gorgeously produced, and if it was literally all you knew of fascist Italy, it would be hard not to come away sympathetic.

IT’S UNSURPRISING THAT BUSINESSMEN WHO READ *Fortune* might be inclined toward fascism, though it’s striking to see the editors so openly warm towards it. But there’s something disturbing even about the innocent and delightful films of the Golden Age Of Hollywood. They present a grand illusion of normalcy in a way that is disturbing and perverse. The more time I have devoted to studying and trying to understand the Holocaust, the more eerie I have found the films of Cary Grant. When *The Philadelphia Story* was released in 1941, the crematoria of Auschwitz were at full capacity, and the greatest crime in modern history was unfolding on the other side of the ocean. The films of the time are part of the general climate of denial and distraction, Hollywood presenting audiences with a kind of strange alternate world for them to mentally inhabit, one where stories make sense and nothing too terrible ever happens. While Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn were bantering on screen, fascists in Europe were committing acts so vile and twisted that just to think about them for too long, or too vividly, can disturb you for days.

It’s very difficult to confront or even convey the truth about the worst things in the world. Hiroshima, atrocity, death, mayhem, brutality, carnage—these are not only words, but they are soft words. They do not touch the dark thing that is the truth, because nobody wants to go near that. An actual atrocity is so much worse to witness or experience than the words used to describe it can ever convey. And if we *did* try to convey it with words, we might turn people off—our words might be called too “graphic” or “morbid” or “gruesome” or “lurid.” Thus those of us who want to try to prevent suffering are stuck, since it is impossible to actually describe or depict the worst kinds of human suffering in ways that come close to capturing its nature without making someone so queasy that they don’t want to hear another word.

Get too close to empathizing fully with suffering, and you may find yourself in terrible agony. The closer I get to understanding the truth of what the Holocaust was for the people who lived it, or what war is for those who see it up close, the more I have to back away and run, for the good of my own peace of mind. Occasionally in reading about war, I will run across some particularly horrible crime mentioned briefly in a list—bayoneting children, for instance. And I will have to not think about what those words really mean. Because if I look at an actual child, and think about what a child is like, and what a parent feels for a child, and the pain of the child and the trauma of witnesses—if I start to penetrate the words to get to the truth—I will hurt myself. I cannot bear it. The nearer you get to seeing what dark things humanity is capable of, and understanding them as real-world happenings rather than words in a newspaper, the more you *empathize*, the closer you are getting to feeling the worst feelings that can ever be felt, feelings that may make it hard to keep living or to come back to happiness.

I once wrote an article about nuclear weapons, and it was intended to convince people of just how horrific nuclear weapons are. I tried to get people to think of what it meant for an entire city to be destroyed instantly. But I didn’t *really* try to get them to think about it. I left out the parts that would make them throw up. I took them to the very outermost edge of the darkness, and I tried to have them touch it, enough perhaps to where they would talk a bit more about nuclear arms control. But you cannot go too near the darkness, or it will swallow you whole. Even with such a toned-down article, I got an email from a distressed reader who had been having nightmares about nuclear catastrophe since reading it. I took them too near, and it induced terror and paralysis. They thought too hard. You can’t think too hard. It will destroy you. It is a black hole, and if you cross the event horizon, you will never escape.

“Think that’s about the Holocaust? That was about success, wasn’t it? The Holocaust is about 6 million people who get killed. Schindler’s List is about 600 who don’t.” — Stanley Kubrick on Schindler’s List

KUBRICK WAS NOTING MAKE A HOLLYWOOD movie “about the Holocaust,” but you cannot make one that is *actually* about the Holocaust, because in the real-world event, the kinds of stories of triumph and survival that make for compelling films were the exception rather than the rule. At the end of Roman Polanski’s *The Pianist*, nominated for seven Oscars (and winning three), the main character, Władysław Szpilman, having survived the Warsaw Ghetto and narrowly avoided extermination at Treblinka, plays Chopin’s “Grand Polonaise brillante” for an audience after the war. It’s a true story, but one with a comparatively positive ending, just as with *Schindler’s List* and *Life Is Beautiful*. To show the true events would be impossible, because it would consist of hours upon hours of people being killed pointlessly in horrible ways. You would show a life, get to know a person, and then see that life snuffed out. And all the lives around it. Over and over again millions of times. Hollywood requires moderated tragedy rather than meaningless misery and trauma.

I am telling you this because you should know that, as a writer, I am unable to completely tell you the truth about things. Whether writing about factory farming or war, I have to use the terms that convey just as much information as will hopefully stir you without giving you the full picture. I cannot take you across the event horizon, because I need you to have hope and energy to go out and do good in the world, rather than just be despondent and disturbed. But I need you to know and remember that there is much more we are not confronting. When CNN reports that several people have been killed in an airstrike, and shows a woman crying over the loss of her child, they are showing you only the information that will not disturb you. They are not showing you what a child looks like after being killed in an airstrike, and they cannot take you inside the pain of a mother who sees it. If you saw it and felt it, perhaps you would hate your government more, and be less likely to accept “bombing the Middle East” as something U.S. presidents do as a matter of course. Or perhaps to keep from being sucked into the black hole of despair, everyone would quickly become desensitized. I do not know. All I know is that there is far more, and far worse, than is seen on the surface, and that it matters. As I write, Boris Johnson is planning to significantly expand the U.K.’s nuclear

arsenal. Nuclear arsenal. Just words. But if that arsenal is ever used, the consequences... well, all I can give you are more words. Unthinkable. Indescribable. Catastrophic. These, however, do not touch the reality of how bad it would be.

I do not mean to be depressing. I really don't. Yet if we are to mobilize people to stop suffering, perhaps we must take ourselves ever so slightly closer to the edge of the black hole to remember what it is we're talking about stopping. Personally, I have found that reading first-person testimonies from the Holocaust fuels my determination to do my part to make sure nothing like it ever happens again. It's concerning to see that younger generations have a very limited knowledge of the Holocaust, struggling just to remember the basic historical facts, let alone to appreciate what it actually meant for both those who died and those who survived. We must understand what happened so that we know why it was so atrocious that the *New York Times* buried Holocaust stories in the back of the paper, and why it is so atrocious that crimes against humanity (there, another term that doesn't even begin to convey its meaning) can still occur, all the time, without anybody caring.

IT'S NOT THAT CARY GRANT SHOULDN'T HAVE MADE movies while the Holocaust was happening. Everyone needs relief during the worst times. But we must confront the way that the United States was indifferent to the suffering of a population—European Jews—whose lives simply did not mean anything to most Americans. The country's population was encouraged to dwell in a fantasy America of the mind.

We still are. If you visit the national World War II Museum in New Orleans, you'll see what I mean. The museum is big and beautiful—and has almost nothing to do with World War II. Visitors get to see original planes and tanks, and walk through a replica of a German forest, and look at the equipment soldiers carried. They get to watch a "4D" film about the war narrated by Tom Hanks—4D because props pop out of the floor. Afterwards, you can visit a replica of a 1940s ice cream parlor to have a milkshake as "In The Mood" by Glenn Miller plays. Then you can pick up souvenirs in the gift shop.

The museum doesn't take people close to the darkness that is the real-world experience of war. It doesn't want to ruin people's vacations with, you know, the actual things that happened. You leave the museum with a slight melancholy, if that. If you like, you can just look at the big planes and stuff.

The Whitney plantation did something different to me. It was purged of idiotic nostalgia. It does not try to make you feel okay. It takes you closer to the darkness than you wanted to go (but still not too far). The tour guide had us touch the sugar cane, and I realized I'd never touched sugar cane before. I couldn't believe how rough it was: it felt like the leaves were covered in tiny razors. I began to think about what it must have felt like for enslaved people to have to work with this stuff in the scorching Louisiana heat. An abstract "crime against humanity" felt ever so slightly more real. The Whitney plantation experience, and experiences like it, should be mandatory.

When I look at Cary Grant, I see the Holocaust. Not always. Sometimes I just see *His Girl Friday* and I enjoy it. But I am aware that what I am watching was created within a context of a crime. The "dream factory" of Hollywood kept people indifferent to the worst things imagin-

able. Not every film was set in an alternate universe where the war was not occurring—there are movies like *Casablanca* in which the threat of being sent to a concentration camp is quite real. But even in these films, the pure evil of Nazism was never on display in its entirety, and Humphrey Bogart was never going to be executed pointlessly in the first five minutes, as may have happened to Rick Blaine's real-world counterpart.

The world has beautiful things in it. Some things are so beautiful that you can't even believe they exist—leaves, stars, babies, etc. I am constantly amazed by humanity's positive achievements, by giant cathedrals and Skype and live recordings of Prince. It can be difficult to reconcile just how *good* the good things are with just how bad the bad things are. How can nuclear weapons coexist with flowers or sex or *North by Northwest*?

Below is one of my favorite pictures of all time:



The photo, from around 1951, depicts jazz saxophonist Big Jay McNeely in the middle of one of his legendary "honking" stage shows. McNeely's music is outrageously energetic and fun (see his song "Nervous Man Nervous" or his album *Honkin' and Jivin' at the Palomino* for examples). This is a depiction of a moment of pure human joy, of jazz in ecstasy as McNeely lies on the stage wailing. It would have been incredible to be there at the second this photo was taken.

And yet: a snapshot is a fragment of the whole, and while I love the way this photo shows the communion of musician and audience, it does not escape my attention that the audience is mostly white. McNeely would almost certainly have been returning to a segregated hotel after the concert (yes, even outside the South), and I am not oblivious to the way that the Black-white wealth gap meant that Black musicians depended financially on the patronage of white audiences. The men in the front row may have visited McNeely's concerts, but they probably went home to all-white neighborhoods and would send their children to all-white schools.

The coexistence of extreme pleasure and extreme pain is a strange thing. The way to deal with the contradiction is not to simply blot out the darkness, but neither is it to get sucked into the black hole, and be paralyzed. The illusions must be shattered, but understanding that there is quiet misery concealed beneath smiling faces does not mean accepting misery as inevitable. It means living authentically, dealing with what your country is doing and what people are really like, and acknowledging the darkness so we can end it. ♣

More Bloody TALES OF JUSTICE

by Brianna Rennix & Lyta Gold

THE STORY OF THE JUDGE

It was already 5:15, and the judge was exhausted. His wife's lasagna was waiting for him at home; his children needed help with their homework. It was inhuman to make anyone work this late. The judge dragged himself back to the hanging television screen that showed the woman in the blue jumpsuit, who was sitting in a detention center far away. "I find that you do not have a credible fear of persecution," he told her, as he'd told the ten others he'd seen today before her. "Your case will be returned to the Department of Homeland Security, and I imagine they will remove you from the United States. I wish you the best of luck in your country."

Adjourned. He heard a choked-off sob, the sound of chair legs scraping and feet stumbling away. The judge scribbled the last of his signatures and rose—but the interpreter stopped him.

"Your Honor," said the interpreter, "it looks like there's one more."

The judge looked up. On the screen, a new woman sat quietly at the table.

"Officer," called the judge, to the guard who must be standing just out of frame, "what number is this?"

Out of the silence, the woman spoke. The interpreter translated: "She says, 'Don't you remember me? I was in front of you last year. I was with my daughter, she was sixteen.'"

A repeat offender, it seemed, trying her luck at the border after she'd already been turned back once. The judge replied: "Ma'am, I heard hundreds of cases last year. You're not on my list today. Is there an officer in the room with you?"

The woman on the screen began to weep steadily as she spoke.

"Please, I need your help," said the interpreter, "I can't go back again, they killed us the first time we went back..."

"I don't understand what she wants from me," the judge



said, getting up. "Interpreter, you're off the clock."

The interpreter kept going, as if entranced. "They were waiting at the house, just like I told you they'd be... my girl, they threw her down a well. She's resting there, but I can't rest... I'm so cold, I want to rest, please let me rest—"

"Interpreter, she's not on the list. Tell her she has to wait her turn."

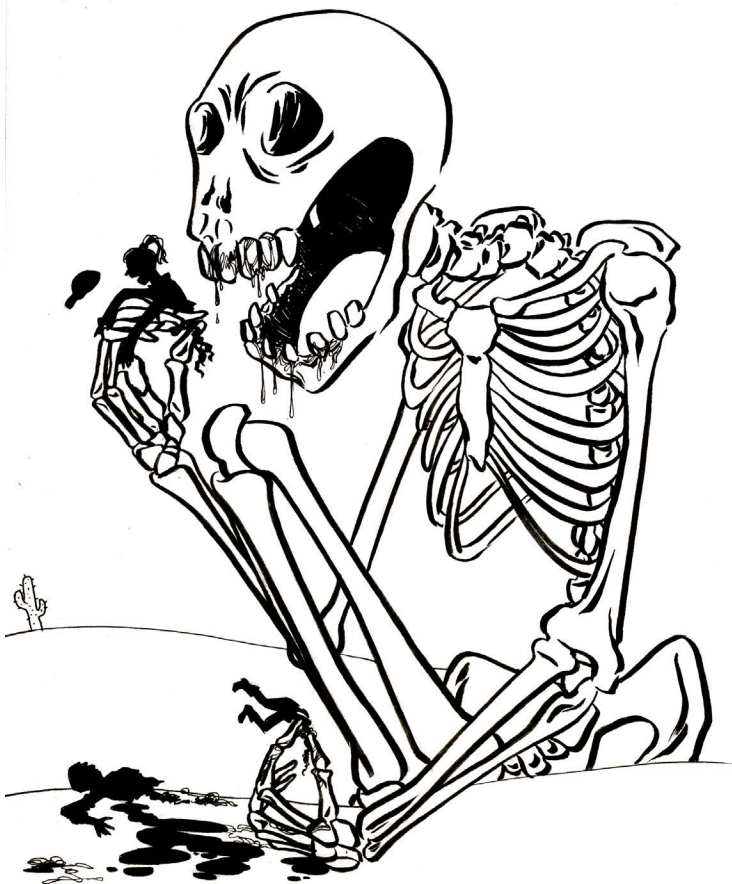
Before the interpreter could speak again, the image of the woman leapt to her feet. She looked right at the camera and spoke a harsh, emphatic sentence. The screen sparked, and popped, and hissed to black. All they could see was the ghostly reflection of their own faces.

The judge frowned. "What the hell was that?"

"I didn't quite catch it," confessed the interpreter. "Something about—*your* turn?"

The judge drove home in the dark, and didn't think of it. He didn't think of it as he parked his car: as he pushed open the front door of his house: as, in the kitchen, he found the pan of lasagna lying face-down on the floor, surrounded by a heavy spatter of sauce. On the kitchen table, a geometry workbook was opened to a half-finished exercise. A pencil rolled, clattered off the chair, bounced toward the judge's foot.

He searched all the rooms, and then he searched them again. They were gone. They had been removed. He sank slowly to his knees, thinking of other places: the shed: beneath the deck: the back of the car. He thought suddenly of the big storm drain, with its open mouth, like a well. He was afraid to look there.



THE STORY OF THE BORDER

"People die all the time crossing this desert. It's the heat, the exhaustion," said Jones. They were approaching a vehicle that had been dragged off to the side of the road, half in and out of a ditch. A multicolored bundle lay heaped up some distance away. It might have been a body—but it wasn't shaped, exactly, like a body. "Sometimes they get picked over by birds and animals," Jones added, cheerily.

Torres was new to being Jones' partner on Border Patrol but she'd never heard this tone before. Jones could be mocking, sure, even kicking the handcuffed idiots they caught crossing the border out here, but he didn't usually sound this breezy, as if he were trying to brightly convince himself. And he stayed breezy, even when they reached the ditch and saw that the abandoned vehicle was white and green. A border patrol truck. A large hole had been punched clean through the windshield.

"It could be the cartels," Jones insisted, "killing people to send a message. It happens all the time. It's normal."

The strange bundle on the road turned out to be the tattered remains of a green officer's uniform, and a jumble of—Torres wasn't entirely sure what she was looking at. Little heaps of ground meat. And that, there, was just a hand, lying palm-up as if in supplication. Just a hand.

Jones stood beside the hand, a fine tremor running through his whole body. "It's just a story, it's a joke they tell rookies, it's not real..."

"What's not real?" asked Torres. "What is this?"

Jones didn't answer. A man was walking toward them—was it a man? Torres couldn't tell how far away he was, the desert vastness rippled in a confusion of heated glass, the dark silhouette seemed all wrong beside the huge, distant rocks—it was too tall—its strides were eating up what had to be yards, miles, as it moved towards them, until it was on top of them, so huge it blotted out the sun—

Jones screamed when it grabbed him around the waist, hauled him up to grinning jaws that were lined with hundreds upon hundreds of human teeth. Naked ribs caged a rotted mass of viscera: blood seeped down from its pelvis over its huge leg-bones and piddled on the dry earth. Torres curled up on the ground and covered her head, unable to look, unable to move.

Jones' moans quickly faded away; the other noises—snapping, gurgling—ceased soon after. Then Torres could only hear the continuous buzzing of flies, and a fainter sound, as of huge joints creaking. She felt a movement in the shadow that lay over her.

When at last she looked up, she saw that the creature was crouched on its haunches, and smiling—horribly, silently—at her.

THE STORY OF THE UNION

She floated into Ghosthelpers International, and if she'd still had nails, she would have bitten them.

"Excuse me," she said to the receptionist busily typing away. "I was hoping for—um, some job help?"

She had to repeat herself a few more times, because she kept forgetting to speak out loud. Finally, on the fifth try, the receptionist heard her. "We're not a job placement agency," said the secretary,

with contempt. "It's an *international*."

"Oh," said the ghost, fidgeting with the trailing ends of her aetherical substances. "Well—I wasn't sure what to do, you know, *now*—"

"In the afterlife? Where you can do anything you want? You should do anything you want. Fill out this form."

The ghost filled out the form, using only her mind and a half-empty Bic pen, which, as you can imagine, takes some work. But under the sections headed "goals," "time commitments," and "desired committees"—she didn't know what to write.

"I'm not sure what kind of help I can really bring—"

The receptionist gestured, dryly, at the sign.

"I was hoping *for* help—I have a story," said the ghost, eagerly. "I was on checkout for months and Mark, our manager, he never wore a mask, he was so horrible, he made Sasha work even though she was coughing, and then I... surely that's enough, I've been hurt enough, to be worth helping?"

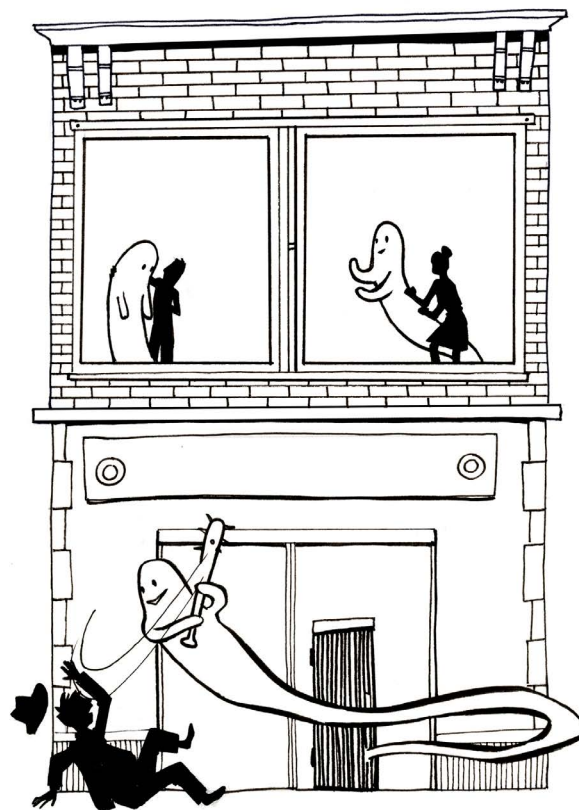
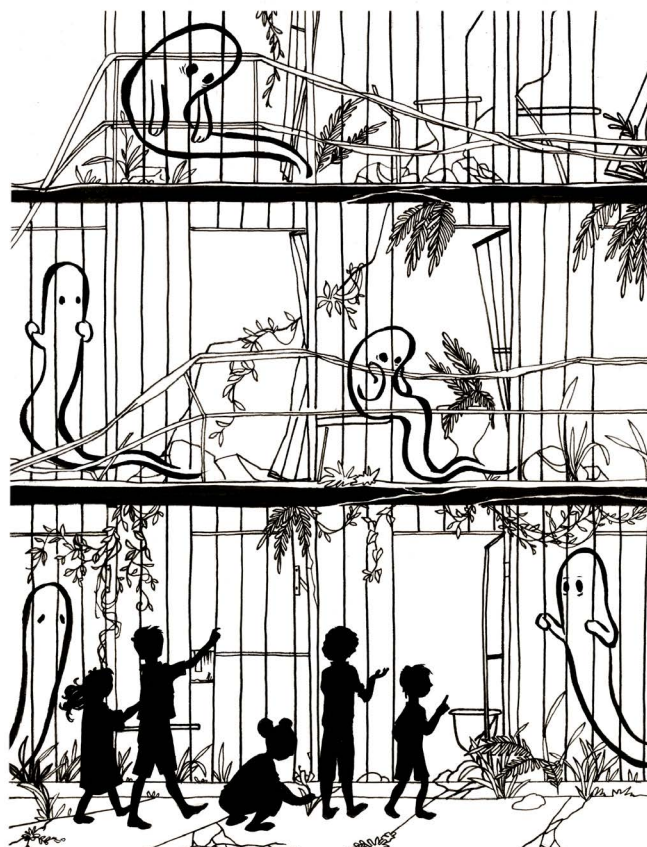
The receptionist sighed. "Come with me."

They passed a room labeled COLONIST EVICTIONS, and another named SYSTEMS DEGRADATION, and a third called VENGEANCE SERVICES. This room they entered, and it was filled with weapons stuck between two worlds: magic swords, blood-drinking spears, haunted machine guns, even a miniature enchanted tank. The receptionist handed the ghost a spiked silver club. "Here you are."

"What am I supposed to do with this?" asked the ghost.

"What," sighed the receptionist, "do you want to do with it?"

The ghost thought for a while. She thought for several days in ghost-time, while the sun rose and fell, and the wolf-moon set and climbed, and climbed out of itself only to set again. In that time, more ghosts



came in and took weapons from Vengeance Services. Some of them even told her their stories: they had all been hurt, by bosses and lovers, by lovers who acted like bosses and bosses who acted like lovers. They had been hurt, and they needed help. Sasha came through, and Sasha's mother, and others just like them. They would keep on coming through.

Finally, the ghost left Vengeance Services. She thanked the receptionist over and over, until the woman threw a stapler, which they both knew couldn't hurt her. The ghost floated over to her old haunts, the anxious corner behind the service door where they'd smoked on their too-short breaks. She waited there, with her club, until Mark came through.

THE STORY OF THE PRISON

Aurora was making it up, obviously. I told her so. "Not a chance." "It's true," she said. "They took people and they put them in these rooms, and they said, you can't ever leave."

"That's stupid," said Nadir. "How could they stop you? My mom says if you're not happy with any place you're in, you can always walk away."

"You can walk away *now*," insisted Kat. "You didn't used to."

The place didn't make any sense. It made even less sense as we passed through long hallways crazy with dust, where vines and ferns had shoved the bars apart. How could they keep people here, even when the walls and bars had been upright? How could they keep anybody still in one place, like keeping a frog in a pond and saying "sorry, frog, you've got to stay in your pond, because I said so and the other frogs too, we're all agreed on this one, and nothing can make us change our minds?"

I was thinking about frogs because I knew Jase had brought frogs. They were always in his pockets. Two floors up, a big green bullfrog skipped out of his shirt and disappeared into the ruin of these empty, rain-sick rooms. The wind walked in and out, through the holes in the walls. It sounded a lot like crying. ♣



nation of BONES

by Lyta Gold

WE ALL HAVE OUR STRATEGIES FOR staying alive. When the walls of my apartment start to feel like a sarcophagus, I go outside for long, meaningless walks. By this point in the pandemic I've memorized every inch of my Queens neighborhood: every car, every tree, every corny statue of a fairy or a gnome. I adore my neighborhood: it's full of pretty brick houses and apartment buildings with landscaped courtyards, but it's circled by cemeteries and industrial belts, some of which are crossable, some of which are not. I pace around and around the same streets and gardens, hemmed in by the dead land.

Last spring was beautiful, but eerie in the face of death. Towards the end of March 2020 I slipped out for groceries only to find that all the pear trees on the block had flowered overnight, pale and shining like something out of a fairy tale. When I got to the supermarket I realized I was the only person there without a mask. The mask mandate wasn't official yet; we had in fact been told it was morally irresponsible to wear masks when medical professionals needed them, particularly at overwhelmed local hospitals like Elmhurst, the epicenter of the pandemic in the U.S. But mask standards had apparently changed overnight, and in the produce aisle my neighbors stared at me, as if at the naked face of a murderer.

I liked the fall better. The neighbors went wild for Halloween: ghosts and witches hung from the trees by late September, and bony hands crawled out of gardens. A number of people in the wealthier, fenced-off part of the neighborhood arranged ghouls and skeletons around their Biden/Harris 2020 signs, which gave them a certain unintentional QAnon effect. In my favorite Halloween display, two skeletons lounged on patio furniture, draped in long ponchos and wigs like fabulous old New York broads having a hilarious conversation. A statue of Mickey Mouse huddled between them, and a clown mask grinned on top of an empty costume, as if the clown

had liquefied while listening. I stared at this scene for a while, until I realized I was being creepy, or at least *super* goth. But I was still goth enough to take a photo before I left: trying to capture the two skeletons, and how their bodies seemed to be *in motion*, like they'd just been frozen in the middle of a seriously good time.

THE POPULAR MEDIEVAL IMAGE OF the *danse macabre*, or Dance of Death, has varied from time to time and place to place, but it has generally depicted skeletons—or Death himself—dancing with living people. The first recorded version of this image dates back to the second wave of the Black Death, painted on a wall in the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris. “*Danse macabre* imagery began to appear not only in France,” writes the art historian Elina Gertsman, “but also in England, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland, and even in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia.” In the pan-European *danse macabre*, the living human characters usually come from all classes: peasants, noblemen, monks, popes, and emperors. The joyful skeletons flex and grin, while the living stand stiff and terrified. The Dance of Death is a story about how everyone will die, and not “eventually,” but very, very soon.

Referencing the Black Death during the time of coronavirus is a fraught matter; the comparison seems overwrought, and more than a little goth. The Black Death was obviously a much worse disease. (*Vox* has helpfully ranked historic plagues in terms of severity, in case you wanted to know how upset you should feel.) The Black Death also differs from the coronavirus in another sense, too: during the Black Death, every kind of person really did die, whether peasants, noblemen, monks, popes, or emperors. Drinking powdered emeralds wouldn't save you; neither would an “injection” of snakeskin, Armenian clay, precious metals, and “bone from



PHOTOGRAPH BY LYTA GOLD

the heart of a stag”(?). Contemporary COVID-19, however, can be staved off by cold hard cash. Money and fame can buy the special experimental treatments given to patients like Trump and Chris Christie, the private islands that are perfect for waiting out this plague in style, or the vaccines that the wealthy have been able to score through “hefty donations” and “cozy relationships with CEOs” as per a report from *Business Insider*. Over two million people have died of the coronavirus so far, but the rich (and white) have had a tendency to survive, while the poor (and Black and brown) have died. In Poe’s classic story “The Masque of the Red Death,” the rich and well-connected flee into the countryside ahead of a terrible plague that has devastated the poor, only to be caught, in the end, by the specter of the Red Death himself. But the Red Death would struggle to make it into the private party of a contemporary prince. He’d probably be turned away at the door by armed and vaccinated guards.

However, the *danse macabre* image—with its emphasis on the fact that everyone, rich and poor alike, will die—recently became very popular once again. Several commenters have pointed out that the “dancing Ghanaian pallbearers” meme, in which handsome-

ly-dressed, professional pallbearers dance as they carry a coffin on their shoulders, can be seen as a kind of modern *danse macabre*. The pallbearers themselves have embraced the imagery, particularly after COVID struck. In May 2020, they released a video where, clad all in skeletal white, they warned: “stay home or dance with us.” When Boris Johnson and Donald Trump came down with the coronavirus, usage of the dancing pallbearers meme skyrocketed; Twitter became, on those miraculous days, a truly joyous place to be. It felt like the Red Death had finally caught up to the party: these emperors had succumbed to the plague that they had so mismanaged and ignored, and finally, *finally*, two rich men who deserved it would die.

Of course, both Trump and Johnson lived. Sometimes it seems as if terrible people have a way of surviving, just like roaches, while wonderful people are gone too soon. In a heartbreaking essay for the *Georgia Review*, writer Gerald Majer describes the illness and slow death of his partner Ka, whose cancer had spread to her bones. He also considers the meaning and interpretation of skeletons in general, riffing for a while on the 1929 animated Disney short: “A Silly Symphony: the Skeleton Dance.” This short

is another version of the *danse macabre*, but this time without any living people in it—only the skeletons are featured. The video is publicly available on YouTube; I highly recommend watching it, though as Majer points out, it's not "silly" at all. "[The skeletons] are too empty," he writes, "they are too much frame and rack to be comical, though it's a hard bone of irony they're chewing on or being chewed up by. They are seriously dead, dead serious." Majer's phrasing here is reminiscent of the moment in the "The Masque of the Red Death" where the wealthy party-goers turn, shocked and angry, to see someone "dressed up" (they think) as the embodiment of the plague. "Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made." The rich, who otherwise laugh at everything, who think they've escaped the reach of death and his skeletal hand, do *not* think a Red Death costume is funny.

"The Skeleton Dance," with its ghoulish lack of humor—or, alternatively, its darkly brutal humor—doesn't seem remotely Disney-like at all, at least not Disney as we have come to know it. We do not associate Disney with death and the *danse macabre*. The animator of "The Skeleton Dance," Ub Iwerks, left his partnership with Walt Disney just one year later, citing Walt's bullying and proprietary behavior. Walt Disney would later claim that Mickey Mouse—the foundation of his cheerful empire—had simply magically popped into his head one day, although the two men had actually developed the concept together. Eventually, a broke and desperate Iwerks crawled back to work for Disney, but he never again created anything quite as wonderfully weird as the dancing skeletons.

Beyond isolated examples like the old "Skeleton Dance" on Youtube, the Ghanaian pallbearers, and the rituals of Halloween, images of dancing skeletons and the *danse macabre* are mostly missing from contemporary life. So too is any meaningful, popular grappling with the scope and horror of the coronavirus. A few ongoing TV shows have put together Zoom-based episodes—the coronavirus episode of *Mythic Quest: Raven's Banquet* is particularly good, addressing both the misery of isolation and the ingenuity of creative people even in the middle of a terrible situation. I haven't watched the romantic comedy *Love in the Time of Corona*, or the pandemic-set *Coastal Elites*. I don't want to see attractive people winsomely struggling with the gosh-darn-it annoyance of Zoom. Mere depiction of events isn't what I'm after: I want metaphor, scale, catharsis, grief.

However, in America, mass popular response to tragic events doesn't really come out in art—it comes out in advertising. Most of what I've seen has been focused on the idea that the tragic event is in the sentimentalized past and tomorrow is already here. *We've worked hard; let's thank our essential workers; and hey, haven't we all earned ourselves a snack?* The Super Bowl's expensive showpiece ads mostly treated the coronavirus like it was already over, or as a pleasant hardship we're in the process of overcoming through hustle and determination. In one of the most disturbing ads, *Sesame Street* partnered with DoorDash, the gig economy delivery service. Both the muppet and the human residents of Sesame Street sing about "all from the people in your neighborhood" and how to "get more from your neighborhood." While all this cute neighborly singing goes on, contracted workers at DoorDash earn less than a

living wage making deliveries during a pandemic while their CEO just became a billionaire.

I watch these ads and I feel dead. I sit on my couch, motionless, less animate than the skeletons.

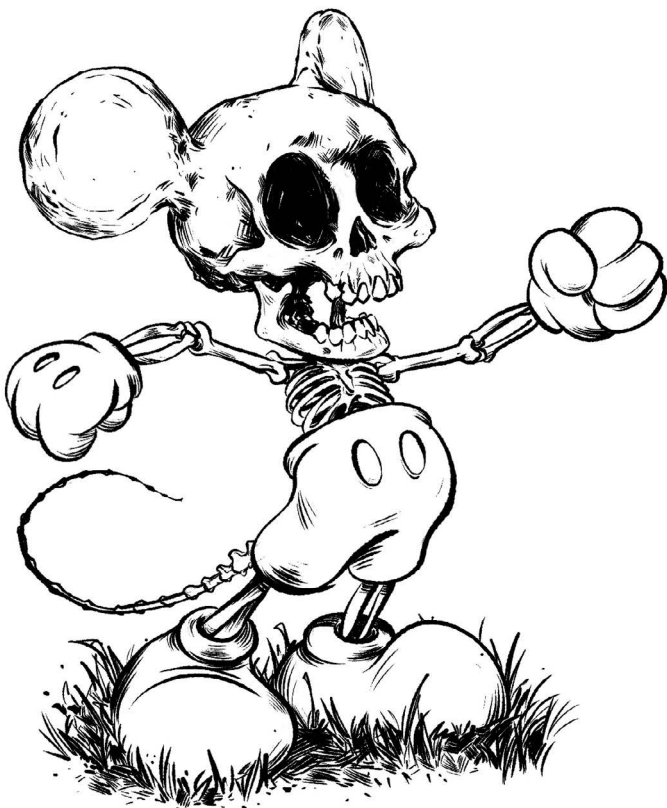
WHY ARE SKELETONS SO creepy? The editor-in-chief of this magazine once wrote, "How often do you think about the fact that underneath your skin, you are a skeleton? When you see other people, do you think about the fact that they, too, are skeletons?" I told him I wanted to write an article about skeletons; he said, "ok, I will close my eyes." We don't really want to talk about skeletons, and the fact that we are all skeletons, and will all someday be reduced to skeletons. I once waited two hours in line to see the Catacombs of Paris—it wasn't worth it, largely because it's overpriced but also because all those long tunnels lined with millions of skulls don't seem *real* at all. It doesn't seem like so many people could have lived, and now have died, and I could be standing in a tourist trap gawking at what's left of them.

Maybe it's for the best that people don't want to think about skeletons, now or ever; maybe it's better to focus on bright, cheerful things. Disney superfans in California, for example, have endured the COVID-19 closure of Disneyland by "finding creative ways to keep the magic alive: consulting Disney-inspired cooking blogs, participating in Disneybound costume challenges on TikTok and Instagram, watching Disney+, hosting outdoor movie nights and stay-at-home Disney Days." Disney *World*, however, reopened in July, even as Florida experienced one of the worst outbreaks in the world, with higher caseloads than most countries altogether. The company was losing a great deal of money at the time, even having to trim executive pay; and, as a Disney shareholder put it, Disney World is "the heart of the brand," one of their most beloved and reliable money-making assets. Disney World has stayed open ever since; a few months ago, many "cast members" who put their lives on the line in "the happiest place on Earth" were fired, even as executive salaries were restored.

I keep looking at that photo I took of the Halloween display, trying to find the creepiest element. The skulls and the clown mask seem the most obvious, but I think it's the Mickey. The other faces are grinning and laughing, having a fabulous time. Mickey's smile is forced, and fixed.

WALTER BENJAMIN ONCE WROTE that "Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being...[Mickey Mouse] films disavow experience more radically than ever before. In such a world, it is not worthwhile to have experiences." The curious thing is that Disney's parks are *supposed* to be about experiences: specifically, the experience of magic. The travel site Undercover Tourist promises that if you go to Disney World right now, you will "still see pixie dust around

*The unheimlich
is the creepy that
underlies the
familiar, the
glimpse of the
skeleton that hides
beneath the face.*



every turn...The magic," they promise, "is still there!" I went to Disney World as a kid, and liked it fine; later, as an adult working for a Disney subsidiary, I gave away my complimentary parks tickets and never went myself. I didn't feel the magic as a child and I don't feel it as an adult. I especially don't feel it *now*: even to imagine the seething crowds in a Disney park is to picture something deathly, frightening, uncanny.

How can one person visit a place and experience something magical and comforting while another is only disturbed? This question is addressed in Freud's essay about the uncanny, which he partly explains through the German word *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich*, as Freud explains it, is "the opposite of *heimlich*, heimisch, meaning 'familiar,' 'native,' 'belonging to the home'...we are tempted to conclude that what is 'Uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar." But it's not quite that simple, as Freud illustrates with the following passage by the writer Karl Gutzkow:

"The Zecks [a family name] are all 'heimlich.' " "Heimlich'? What do you understand by 'heimlich'?" "Well, . . . they are like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it without always having the feeling that water might come up there again." "Oh, we call it 'unheimlich'; you call it 'heimlich.' Well, what makes you think that there is something secret and untrustworthy about this family?"

The *unheimlich* is the creepy that underlies the familiar, the glimpse of the skeleton that hides beneath the face. The words end up meaning the same thing because the *heimlich* obscures the *unheimlich*; the very wholesomeness of *heimlich* necessitates the existence of the unwholesome *unheimlich* beneath. As Freud puts it, "what is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*." The smiling family that never says what they mean, that covers up their secrets and the bones of the dead: nothing could be quite as uncanny, or really quite as German.

For a deeper look at the interplay between the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich* in Germany, I recommend *A Demon-Haunted Land*, historian Monica Black's appraisal of miracle doctors and witch trials in postwar Germany. That's post-1945 Germany: the supposed modern age, free of such unwholesome magic. Narratives about postwar West Germany are usually tales of triumph: the industrious Germans worked hard and, with American help, they performed an economic miracle. But Black's book complicates the story: the economic miracle came at the expense of real reconciliation and acknowledgment of crimes. The denazification process was never really complete; far too many people had been involved. "Like the neatly swept streets of Munich," Black writes, "the surface of things was being smoothed over." Under that surface, darkness bubbled: it came out in a belief in magical cures, in signs and portents, and the conviction that random neighbors were actually witches, malignant forces bent on destruction.

People weren't supposed to talk about the darkness: what they had done during the war, and to their Jewish neighbors, or what might have been done to them in turn during the Allied invasion. "Instead," Black explains, in the process of describing a contemporary study called *The Inability to Mourn*, "[Germans] fled into a kind of perennial busyness: constant work, constant rebuilding, constant improvement and tinkering." That busyness has formed the basis of the popular narrative of Germany's postwar journey: hard work and success through an embrace of liberal capitalism. It's a much easier story to tell, for Germans and for everyone else. Black



**KNOW
YOUR
TROLL**

THE ALMIGHTY 4 CHAN
**SHIT
POSTING
HEAVEN**

DIS
LIKE

MEAN THINGS I WOULDN'T
SAY IN REAL LIFE

A Brief
Introduction
to Y.A.
Twitter.

**IS YOUR
FAMILY SAFE
FROM THE
INTERNET
MONSTER?**

NATION OF BONES



concludes, “For what does it mean, for all of us, if a nation can turn so quickly from building Auschwitz to constructing an affluent and neon-lit world?”

People do not like to talk about death and grief and horror; it’s much easier to work hard, to be cheerful and industrious, to visit brightly-lit Disney World while all the darkness bubbles out underneath. Incidentally, Walt Disney was allegedly anti-Semitic himself, and his original design for Disney World was distinctly fascist in character. However, if you google this today, the first page of results will tell you, triumphantly, that Disney wasn’t an anti-Semite; a flattering 2015 documentary supposedly proves it. *Insider.com* declares Disney’s alleged anti-Semitism “a myth,” even though he founded a famously anti-Semitic industry lobbying group, and invited Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl to visit his studio shortly after Kristallnacht. The author of the biography *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, claims that in his research he “saw no evidence” that Disney was anti-Semitic. With a little triumphant imagination, you can cover up just about anything.

AFTER THE WAVES OF THE Black Death subsided, many of the images of the *danse macabre* disappeared too. “Plastered over,” according to Gertsman, “in order to be covered by a newer, more fashionable subject in a newer, more fashionable style, or else destroyed along with the edifices on which they were painted...the *danse macabre* images suffered an exceptional streak of bad luck...only a few survive...” The plague was over and other, often cheerier subjects became popular in its place. The original mural in the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents was lost long ago. Nobody wants to think about the fact that they are skeletons.

“The skeleton,” writes Gerald Majer, “might be an emblem of the Western political subject in its modern phase, a creature dia-

grammed out to productivity and efficiency, averages and norms. Stripped and racked, with the motley variables of human movement and gesture reduced to motion sequences and statistical frequencies.” I feel like a skeleton sometimes, working; I feel my skeleton itself, or more specifically the soft tissues around it, which seem to have liquefied with lack of movement. I go out for my long walks; I use the elliptical machine I bought online and assembled while watching 10 episodes of a murder mystery show. My feet hurt, all the time—not from dancing, but from thoughtlessly pressing down on my heels, hard, as I work.

We’ve been told during the pandemic to work—if we’re so lucky to be employed—and to perform self-care. There’s not much else to do. Still, “it’s okay to not be okay,” insist a hundred articles. Another hundred articles warn against the dangers of the toxically positive, that is, those who insist everyone should be happy and upbeat. The anti-toxic positivity screeds flooded the internet mostly between July and December 2020. Viewed together, they have a weird identical quality: each essay begins with a recounting of personal trauma, frustration with a toxically positive person or group of people, quotes from experts on why “it’s okay to not be okay,” and concluding with some variation on how “you will be more emotionally healthy if you let yourself be sad.” Toxic positivity is ironically built into the framework: you let yourself be sad so that later you will be happy; you strip yourself down to a skeleton so that later you can put your skin back on, and then your loungewear, and get back to work with a smile. Show us those teeth that you’ve been grinding down to stumps.

Nothing is okay right now, not even the affirmation that it’s okay to not be okay, that eventually there will be something positive to pull out of this experience, that everything has meaning and will make sense. We are skeletons, working, constantly moving, except when we are caring for the connective tissue of our skeletons, so that they will continue to keep moving, forever. In the meantime, Disney World—that cathedral of toxic positivity, of fake miracle magic—will reopen, has already reopened, over the bones of the dead.

It’s really not surprising that so many of the Super Bowl ads treated the pandemic as something that could already be forgot-

ten, paved over. It's not just a generalized capitalist or American tendency; the NFL has, specifically, chosen to treat coronavirus as a sort of embarrassing inconvenience, much like the chronic traumatic encephalopathy that afflicts so many of its players. When too many players on a team caught coronavirus during the 2020 season the games were simply canceled, and disappeared. But the season's over; Tom Brady won again, and in the ad space Dolly Parton sang a new version of her classic "9 to 5," updated into—as Tom Sexton calls it in the *Baffler*—"an anthem for the rise-and-grind, side-hustle set." Parton didn't write the lyrics on her own: her corporate partner, Squarespace, collaborated with her in the process. "At one more ominous point in the song," writes Sexton, "she just repeats the word *working* several times in a row." It's indeed ominous, unsettling, *heimlich/unheimlich*: a cheerful, attractive young woman dances through her side hustle, and Parton sings "*working, working, working*" over her like a broken record, like someone performing the same repetitive movement, over and over and over again.

TO SAY ALL THIS IS TO BE a buzzkill; to think about the grinding work and skeletons and endless repetitive misery below the surface of this country as the spring turns around again and the vaccines are distributed, haphazardly, and to the wealthy first—it's not positive, or funny. At best, it's *totally* goth. I keep thinking of the movie *Midsummer*, and its protagonist who is unable to grieve the death of her family because everyone around her finds her grief *uncomfortable*. Eventually, she falls in with a cult who lets her feel it, precisely because they are the only ones who *will* let her feel it.

"How does one mourn in isolation?" Dodai Stewart asks in the *New York Times*. "How does one process grief for an entire city?" Her essay-diary covers five months of life in New York, from March to July 2020. It concludes soon after Governor Cuomo's triumphant declaration that "we did it": aka the state had lowered infection rates, largely due to conscientious mask-wearing and the weather. In her final entry, Stewart describes a video she saw on Twitter, with symbolism she liked and "took...as a sign" even though it was "cheesy." "During a thunderstorm," she says, "lightning struck the Statue of Liberty, the bolt slicing through an immense and menacing cloud. The statue stood steadfast and unmovable. She didn't budge an inch."

The *New York Times* has talked about the virus quite a lot since July, as caseloads throughout the country surged again and ambulance sirens screamed through my neighborhood on their way to Elmhurst hospital. The *Times* coverage through the winter spoke of delays and coverups and disappointments, promises from the Biden administration of a definitive end, plus a shocking story about how Trump was closer to death in October than anyone realized—but, as we know, still didn't die. The vaccine will eventually be distributed, and by Halloween 2021 things may be more or less "back to normal." Skeletons will hang from the trees. There are theories that the holiday of Halloween evolved out of the *danse macabre*, that we dress up as ghosts and witches to perform a kind of yearly Dance of Death, haha, we will all die, but not now, not all of us, not yet.

In a surprising twist, one of the better TV shows to debut during the pandemic—a show which also happens to feature ghosts and witches—was made under the aegis of Disney. The Marvel show *Wandavision*, written before the coronavirus hit, is set in the ensorcelled town of Westview, New Jersey, where a grieving witch forces everyone to act out a treacly, celluloid version of suburban American family life. It's very *heimlich* of course, and *unheimlich* too. But it's also a story about the inability, or refusal, to grieve. The Scarlet Witch is unable to accept the death of her robot boyfriend, whom she has recreated within the ensorcelled town as a kind of living ghost. She's opposed/aided by Monica Rambeau, a Black woman whose mother died in a hospital while Monica was unable to be at her side. The resonances are surely coincidental, and the show is limited by the synergistic needs of the Marvel universe and its sunny Disney overlords. But it's at least a story about how hard it is to talk about death, and grief; how hard it is to admit that we are skeletons, and the even more unimaginable truth that the ones we love are also, *will also* be skeletons (or in the case of the robot boyfriend, a bunch of metal parts.) In any case there will be nothing we can do but remember them, and let them go; they will live and be animated only in our minds, in what may be a kind of actual magic.

There's an honesty about skeletons: that's why they're laughing at us. They're what will remain after we're gone; they will continue to exist whether we choose to acknowledge them or not. Gerald Majer, writing about his dead partner (Ka was an artist, and she sounds lovely) says that for a while she wanted to put a human skeleton in her studio. "She wouldn't do anything with it," he writes, "just hang it in her studio and look at it, maybe talk to it. I guessed her feeling wasn't only that everything vain and false would be stripped away and the naked truth of the human frame would stand clear; in some way the skeleton would be a living thing to her. She would draw power from it. A hard, glowing nakedness, in some fashion more alive than any fleshly, living body." 🦴

ANSWERS TO CROSSWORD *from page 43*

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THEM DOGHEAD BOYS

by Alex Jennings

THINGS GOT BAD BAD ONCE THE Ravels were gone. Five-Oh swooped down and arrested damnear eighty of them and after that wasn't nobody on the corners slingin but things wasn't no safer. Up at the corner of Brainard and Josephine there was a murder at five or six in the evening. I say "murder" cause what else you'd call it? Wasn't even boys from the neighborhood. Ole Ronny was just riding his bike like he do and three boys started grittin on him and woofin at him, saying they was gone take his wheels. He said leave him alone, but they didn't and he called down a piece of the night and it wrapped around two of them, caught em up and then dropped them down from real high, hit the third boy and he just lay in the street with his spine broke and ruined bodies piled on top of him and he didn't die til later in the hospital. Wasn't no shit like that when the Ravels was still around. Monster shit.

Vampires ain't so bad. They're predictable, mostly. Yeah, they need blood, but they only out at night and somebody got to give them permission. In the movies they need permission to come inside but in real life they need permission to get you at all. Anybody can give permission, though.

At least they got rules. Dogheads don't need permission for nothing.

ME AND LONZO WENT TO GEORGE Price High over on O. C. Haley. Lonzo was tall with big hands and feet, but he gangled and couldn't coordinate. He could play a little ball, but he wasn't real good. Didn't make the team. I didn't either, but I didn't try.

I'm wrong, though. It wasn't that Lonzo couldn't coordinate—he was fine. He just didn't have a competitive spirit. If you blocked his shot, if you scored on his goal, he didn't care. He couldn't really pretend that a game was more than a game. He couldn't *chase*.

We lived over on Simon Bolivar—more like brothers than neighbors. He lived next door to me and Aunt Sharon on the far side of a cream-colored double with faded red trim. It had a nice porch, and the old folks would sit out there and drink or play dominos and talk trash. The thing about Lonzo is he had a hard time. Something bout him that just got on some niggas' nerves, so they would devil him

at school. I looked out for him when I could. I was never king of my class or nothing. People respected me, especially once I started cutting hair, but wasn't nobody afraid of me or nothing. I wasn't hard and I didn't pretend to be.

Nobody made it their business to be on Lonzo all the time but sometimes Rel Howard or somebody would smack his books out his hands or throw his book sack in the dirty shower water after Gym. That kind of shit. You know how sometimes somebody mess with you and then you mess back a little maybe, or you let him know you too much trouble to keep fuckin with and he back down and you forget about it because it wasn't really nothing? Well, Lonzo couldn't do that. Grown folks would tell him *roll it off ya back*, but every time wasn't just its own little happening, it was—each little incident was connected, I guess, with the one before and the one after so they was sort of all stitched together contiguous like one of my Aunt Sharon's quilts she makes. He couldn't just let shit go.

But that sounds like he held onto shit on purpose, which ain't the case. He wasn't bitter, you know? He just *remembered*. You could see it in his eyes and the way his throat worked when he bent to pick up his things. Rel was harmless though I thought and just liked to have somebody to threaten when he felt small. It must be hard feelin like you ain't got no control over nothing.

SO THE RAVELS GOT GOT, AND AT first things was quiet. That year, there wasn't even no fireworks at New Year's. The quiet was all tense at first, but then the longer it went on, it was like it relaxed—or it didn't relax but you thought maybe you was wrong, and just nothin was happening and things was fine. . . Even after that shit with Ronny. Every now and then you'd see somebody went missing years ago just standing on the corner staring, you know? Like me and Lonzo seen Ms. Pearline from over on Saint Andrew just standing outside the community center one night while we was riding our bikes back from Coliseum Park. She was wearing one of her old lady nightgowns and staring real hard down Camp Street. It was like she was looking out on some other world.

That wasn't a big deal, though. We just didn't ride around so much after that. Later I heard Ms. Pearline was back living in her

house. Them white folks bought the place was gone and she was just back in there. It was just something happened.

Then the cops killed Aubrey Lincoln. Aubrey was a crackhead, but not like on TV. He didn't steal and he wasn't hassling nobody for money. He might ask you for a cigarette even if you didn't smoke, but he wasn't doing nothing to nobody. He lived with his cousin on St. Andrew and Daneel and he was gay so maybe tricked a little sometimes but that's whatever.

Folks saw three cop cars in the parking lot behind the old Myrtle Banks building—the one the white folks is opening back up as a fancy grocery—and the lights was all going, and I heard they had Aubrey cuffed on the ground but they shot him eleven times. You woulda never seen some shit like that in the Ravel days. I'm not saying they was good folks—they was killin niggas and running bitches and poisoning folks with rock and whatnot, but they was *orderly*, you feel me? They had a chain of command, and the cops didn't fuck with them

After that, police was around more. Cop cars cruising up and down Baronne, on Bolivar. Three four nights a week, cops would park they cars in the lot outside the old Barbershop at Josephine and Haley and they'd just sit and talk at each other out their win-

dows and you could feel them even when you wasn't looking at them like on a real sunny day when you shut your eyes and see a red glow from the light but like it's shining from inside your own head. I think that's when the cold began, but I didn't notice it til later.

ME AND LONZO AND BILLY D WAS hooping over at A. L. Davis, and time got away. All of the sudden, it was full dark and we had to go. Wasn't nothing had happened for a few weeks, what with the police all over. Didn't even see no dead folks or nothing. So we got on our bikes and we was riding home—

And there was three of them outside the Chicken Mart.

One had on a old letter jacket from De La Salle even though it was nice out. He was short but *broad* broad across his chest. He was just standing but he looked coiled up like a spring. His head was a mix of dogs. There mighta been some boxer in there, some shar pei, because he had jowls and wrinkles, and he had this splash of white on his forehead with these pretty light-brown spots, you know? And his eyes was big and tired, and you could tell he was smart.

The one on his right was a Doberman. He wore some ripped jeans and a diagonal-striped polo. The third was like a Rottweiler. None of them said nothing when we rode past, and I thought maybe I should speak but everything seemed slow and I knew I would be past before I could make up my mind. You gotta speak to folks out here, it will save your life, but they wasn't people.

And then I heard Lonzo's voice from far off, saying, "How y'all is?"

"Beautiful, beautiful," one of them said.

"Killer breeze," another one said.

And I said, "Yeahyouright," and I nodded sharp with my chin like we understood each other.

But we didn't. I didn't.

THEY FOUND THE FIRST COP THAT week. Officer Schreiber. He pulled up out front the barbershop and before anybody could join him he got yanked out his Bronco and worked on and then stuffed dead back in the passenger seat

just left there to find. I heard he was one of the cops killed Aubrey, but I also heard he wasn't even there.

We was over at Aunt Sharon's for Sunday dinner. It was me and Lonzo and Uncle Trev and Keely and this cop knocked on the door asking questions. I watched Aunt Sharon fix her face on the way to the door. She dulled herself, made herself smaller and like she didn't have nothing to say about nothing. So the cop knew before he asked her she didn't know. She sucked her teeth and said, "What a waste. What a waste," and hummed high in her throat like when she on the phone.

The cop said, "Take my card. Get in touch if you hear anything." And as soon as she shut the door, the light came back into her face and she grunted that grunt that says, *well now I've heard everything*, and dropped the card in the kitchen trash.

"You think somebody put a vampire on him?" Lonzo said. His eyes all glossy and shining.

"Naw," Aunt Sharon said. "Too much blood."

OFFICER HARBAUGH WAS NEXT. NOW I know he wasn't there the night Aubrey got killed, but he done some other shit. I heard him say to Ronny at the block party, "You know if I shot you right now, wouldn't nothing happen to me." His voice was up, and light, like there wasn't nothing to it, but you know cops. They think they wear they police-ness in their uniform and when they take it off, it ain't with them, but they also know that's not true, ya feel me? And Ronny said, "I been knowing that." And they just watched each other.

I mean to say I ain't heard nothing else about him. Not like some other officers I could mention. But they found him all torn up outside the Jazz Market. Well, most of him. Some of him was across the street, and some more of him was about a block down. Like he was drawn and quartered like in them cowboy movies but it wasn't neat. And that cold that only I could feel. Not cold like the seasons turning. Like I had this feeling of the sun going down even though it was the middle of the day. Like the lights never came all the way on anymore, and everything was get-

ting thinner and more washed-out, but it was all scoured by the dark instead of the light.

IMISSED A COUPLE DAYS OF SCHOOL after Mardi Gras break, but I didn't miss them. I got extension cords and I posted up on the porch and I cut niggas' hair for \$10. I made \$900 in three days. People was coming from other neighborhoods. I didn't ignore Lonzo, though. We still hung out to watch old VHS tapes his cousin had with *Yo MTV Raps* on 'em and clowned all them old niggas with Africa medallions and geometric hair.

But I didn't see him at school for a few days, and I didn't see him back at the house neither, and Nicole and Gigi said Lonzo was hiding out because Rel and his crew was gone jump him next chance they got. I said jump him why, and they didn't know. So I asked Aunt Sharon and she said Lonzo was staying by his cousin on the Wank. I didn't like that.

So I got Aunt Sharon to take me over there, and when I walked into his cousin's and saw Lonzo sitting on the couch with his left eye swole shut I felt hot hot. It wasn't like the other times. I guess cause they hit him in the face? Shoving him a little or knocking him down was one thing, but there was something about banging up his eye like that that bothered me. Like they really wanted to hurt him. And I could tell from the way he talked that his ribs was cracked, and he smelled different.

Real calm, I said, "What happened?"

And Lonzo said, "I don't know. I was crossing the parking lot at Church's after I got off the bus, and somebody hit me in the back of the head. They grabbed me and then Rel hit me in the face and kicked me."

I couldn't feel the look on my face, but Lonzo flinched. "Don't do nothing though," he said.

I decided I'd just find out Rel's side and maybe take it into account. I knew what I *wanted* to do, but I knew it was wrong, too. There's rules in life and if you gone operate outside them best have good reason.

I said before nobody afraid of me, and they ain't, but they don't know. Sometimes my mouth full of razors. If you fuck with me, I will say some shit to you that will fuck your shit up. Like when we was in elementary

school and the other kids was learning how to cuss and Semaj Bunton called me a bitch and I said, *Nigga, your eyes too far apart. Your mama drank when she was having you and that's why you can't do math.*

We wasn't friends after that, but he didn't fuck with me.

A COUPLE MORE POLICE. ONE OF THE Ravels that didn't get got in the sweep. Mean old motherfucker named Zell who dressed like it was still 1993 in baggy black jeans and them white white T-shirts you can't wear more than once. The week before he and his old lady got into it outside the social worker's office. He hit her so hard her eye socket broke. They found him in three garbage bins, side by side.

More dead folks. Old Patrice would show up at the basketball court if you stayed out there too late, asking for cigarettes. He was harmless, but he got burnt to death and worse than they way he looked was the *smell*. He smelled like a fuckin cook-out, and just thinking about it makes my mouth water. Shame the way that nigga died, smoking in bed.

It was coming up on spring, but that ghost-cold was getting worse. Lonzo came back across the river, but somebody stole his bike, so we was on foot for the time being. We walked in a big square down to Washington and then up to Magazine and over to the park, then back down Felicity, just going slow and talking shit. Shit was still spooky, but not so bad—I think I saw a little boy staring at us from the top floor of that burnt-out apartment complex on Washington just before Saint Charles, but Lonzo didn't look. Anyway, as we turned back down toward Central City, Lonzo said, "I think I need your help with something."

"What you thinkin bout?" I'd been thinking so hard on what to do about Rel I guess I forgot Lonzo was thinking bout it too. Rel didn't do nothing after Lonzo came home, but we didn't have forever to let the issue ride.

"You remember Antoine Dupre?"

Twonn was a sweet skinny soft-headed boy used to help out at the Chicken Mart for a couple extra dollars from time to time. Mostly nobody bothered him. Mostly. He didn't come back to school when the new

year started, he wasn't on my mind, but I hadn't seen him since the police started dying.

"What about him?"

"He a doghead now."

I stopped walking. "Excuse... the fuck... *me...*?" Dogheads standing around on corners is one thing, but if they was turning folks now, that spelled *real* trouble for the neighborhood.

"That's what I heard, though," and Lonzo's voice was high. I could tell my reaction unsettled him.

I covered. "That don't sound crazy to you?"

"I mean, he was gone. I reckoned he was like the other folks been turning up."

I made myself sound thoughtful. "You know what, though? Could be."

AUNT SHARON WAS WORKING ON A new quilt. She sat in the living room with the TV on too loud, her mouth full of pins as she ran the squares through her sewing machine. Wheel of Fortune came and went, and then Jeopardy and I was just sitting there thinkin and I waited

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until I felt her notice me, and I said, "Lonzo says Antoine Dupre a doghead."

She swept the pins into her left hand and sucked her teeth. "Well."

"Lonzo said he heard that."

"Heard nothing," Aunt Sharon said. "I seen that boy at the Chicken Mart just last night."

"Why you didn't say?"

"Didn't think it was important," she said. "You think he the one killin up all them police?"

I didn't say nothing. On the TV a white couple was digging in a suspicious mushroom patch thinking it was part of some treasure hunt they was on. Oops! Turns out they dug up a skull.

I laughed, but I could feel Aunt Sharon's eyes on me.

"Didn't seem important," she said again. She sighed. "We do what we do and they do what they do."

I DIDN'T TELL AUNT SHARON I WAS going out that night. I just made extra noise in the hall closet looking for my shoes and then I hid them back out of sight. Aunt Sharon said she seen him, but I had to see Twonn for myself.

I headed down to the corner where Simon Bolivar meets Jackson and from there I could see the dogheads laughing and talking out front of the store. I crossed the street, but not all the way. I stood in the shadow under the oak on the neutral ground, right by the transformer, and just watched.

The Chicken Mart had shut for the night. The lights were off now, the parking lot empty, and the dogheads just stood out there in their bare not-paws-not-feet swaying sometimes like seaweed in a underwater current. There was four of them this time. The Boxer/Shar Pei wore a pair of bleach-spotted jeans, and I couldn't tell whether they was supposed to be like that or somebody fucked them up in the wash.

The one that hadn't been there the first time Lonzo and I seen them was smaller than the rest. He looked a little like a boxer, and his fur was dark, but there was something about the shape of his head. About the way his shoulders seemed pulled up in a kind of

constant shrug. Not a boxer. A mastiff, but mixed with something. He looked younger than the others and sure enough when he pulled out a cigarette he had to shift his head to smoke it, and that was Twonn all right.

He took a drag, then another. He looked this way and that, and he hunched, like he was smoking in the rain.

I started barking. Made myself sound real big and mean. The dogheads all tensed and stretched their necks and smelled the air. I didn't see Antoine drop his cigarette, but now his hands were empty and his head was a doghead again. The way he moved, his body language, looked just like everybody else's. Like he'd always been one of them. He growled. I couldn't hear it but I could see the noise vibrate his body.

I stilled my voice mid-bark and let the sound ring in the empty intersection and the parking lot.

They started pacing. Each one prowling like a comedian on a stage. Twonn still looked like one of them. Like he was born for it.

EVENTUALLY, TWONN BROKE OFF from the group and jogged across Jackson toward that old warehouse type thing without walls where they be selling fruit on the weekends. He didn't look in my direction. Instead, he turned up toward Saint Charles and shifted human again. He swung his legs out some when he ran. We used to make fun of him for that when he first started at school with us in third grade. I followed him, like I was just walking.

He went all the way up to Carondelet then cut over to Saint Andrew, then came back down across Baronne, then Haley. I let him walk on the right side of the street while I took the left.

I knew Ronny was there before I seen him. I didn't expect him to say nothing. He stepped hard onto the sidewalk with his fists balled. His face was all thrust out in front of him like he was a doghead too, but he was just a man.

He looked at me out the corner of his right eye then turned his head, still leading with his face. "Love me this springtime, baby," he said. "Love."

"Can't beat the weather," I said.

"Can't beat it," he said. But he wasn't agreeing. "Can't be beat."

I waited.

"Wa'ant right what happened to Zell," he said. "All in them trash cans one two three."

I shook my head. "Wasn't nothing nice."

"He was kin to me."

I forgot about Twonn. "He was what?"

"He was kin."

"Oh word?" I said. My voice was bright. "You was cousins, you and him?"

He watched me, then looked away. He looked like a stone carving or a angry little doll. Something that got more respect than it deserved. "On my mama side," he said. "Distant."

"You look out for yaself outcheat, Ronny, ya heard? Never know who all out here...."

By then, Twonn was long gone, but it be that way sometimes.

THE NEXT DAY AT SCHOOL, I STUCK with Lonzo close as I could but our schedules wasn't always the same. He was in precalculus, but I was in trig, and we didn't have the same lunch. I skipped Government and went to his lunch anyhow. The cafeteria and the gym was combined, so the baskets were drawn up out of the way and the tables was lined up like soldiers waiting for inspection. The ghost-cold was still bothering me, but we weren't allowed to wear jackets over our uniforms, and anyway that wouldna helped. The whole room smelled like orange oil with an unusual touch of bleach from three weeks ago when Ri-Ri threw up.

Lonzo sat by himself at the end of a table in the far corner. A group of freshman sat at the other end playing keep-away with Coke bottles and checking out a group of sophomore girls at the next table.

Lonzo looked surprised when I sat my tray down next to his and peeled the skin back from my beefaroni pack. "You with me today?"

"Just tryna find out what you need help with."

"Help?" Lonzo's American Literature textbook sat on the table by his tray, so I knew he was intending to read all through

the period. I had this feeling then like why was he studying at lunch? Was it because he didn't get time to study last night?

"About Rel and them?" I said.

"Oh," he said, too surprised. "Yeah, well, I think that trouble gone resolve itself, ya heard?"

"Oh?" I said. On God I wished I hadn't acted the way I did when he told me about Twonn. I had to be *cool* cool now because not only did I want to hide my frustration with him, I didn't want him seeing my irritatedness with my own self.

"Yeah, you good."

My chest felt tight. I needed the words to say what I was trying to say, but it wasn't easy like it shoulda been. "Listen, bruh," I said. "You my dog, bruh. You my abc."

"Yeah," he said. And there was no struggle, no scariness on his face. He was just—he looked young. No, he looked *new*, like if time was a cooking fire he was still raw, and he hadn't seen what he would see and the world hadn't printed itself on him the way we shaped our sculptures in art class.

"I mean there ain't nothing wrong with me lookin out for you. I'm your *dog*, dog."

He looked me in the eye and reached for his chocolate milk. He tried to open it with his left hand without looking, but he couldn't quite, so he looked away to the carton and I wanted him to stop messing with it, to keep looking at me and it bothered me how bad I wanted him to see me. For real for real.

He said, "Yeah, but you know."

"What?"

He looked back up at me then and he looked even younger, even rawer than before,

and he said, "You a year ahead of me. What I'm gone do when you graduate and I'm by myself? What I'm gone do at college?"

I watched him a little then I opened my Sprite. I said, "You act like I ain't thinking bout that shit too."

"But that's what I mean," he said. "That's *my* shit."

"Listen, I ain't trying to run your life, I'm just tellin you: stay away from them doghead boys. They don't—You don't know what they... They's monsters, feel me?"

"Ravels was monsters. If I'm a doghead, at least—!"

I brought my palms down hard on the tabletop. "*Nigga, not like that!*"

That was the moment. That instant right there. It was—I think it was my tone. Sometimes I think I was the only one who never made him feel small, who never made him feel weak. But I slipped. He didn't see much, but he saw too much.

His chocolate milk had spilled when I hit the table. He set the carton right again, in its pale brown pool, and the way his wrist curled said, *You were with me, but now you're not. You're outside of me and you don't understand.*

WEDNESDAY WAS OUR HALF-DAY and Lonzo was supposed to stay and help plan the Spring Festival. I was going to set up a booth and cut hair in the parking lot across the street. It was official/unofficial. Still, I knew as soon as I touched my locker, even before I opened it, that Lonzo was gone. That tightness was still in my chest, and it combined with that cold feeling to make my skin crawl. I had to work to keep my shoulders from drifting up to my ears. Anyone was paying attention woulda seen too much, so I blew off the meeting and just headed out.

IT SHOULD'VE BEEN EASY TO TRAIL HIM—and it was, at first. He'd gone back up to Haley and then down a couple blocks before going to Bolivar. It was the afternoon and it was bright out. The birds was singing, and the sun was bright, and it was a little too hot out. Finally. I smelled cut grass and the kitchen and cleaning from Café Reconcile.

I smelt the liquor and perfume over at the Jazz Market.

And then it was like all them smells and all the other signals from my senses sort of turned up and blended on me. You know when you on the street and somebody drives your way with their brights on, and the light washes everything out and you can't see? It was like that, except it was sounds and smells and the breeze and that cold cold cold.

It wasn't that I couldn't take nothing in and that I couldn't find him, but it was, too. I went around in circles. I went places Lonzo hadn't been in days and days, and every time felt like *now*, just *now*. And that ain't right.

I think that's how it happened. I went around in circles, for blocks and blocks, winding in a sort of cornered spiral. Whenever someone spoke to me, I said, "You seen Lonzo?" and if they said no, I just kept walking like I ain't have no manners.

When the dark started to come on, I could parse his smell again. The scent of the cologne his uncle gave him for Christmas and his blood underneath, bright and a little sweaty from where the sun touched his bare arms and legs and the hollows of his neck. That's how I found him. I went back up Saint Ann even though I'd already gone up there past that place we call the zombie house because it looked all abandoned like a house in a zombie movie but also it was a home that would not just lay down and die.

I went in the back and I found him on the dirty floor. My eyes almost wouldn't have recognized him, and his smell was all wrong, too, but that cologne was still there, and a sort of echo of him. He looked—it's *bad* when somebody gets stuck Between. I saw it before, once. One of my Cousin Leti's quadruplets was born sick, and it didn't come out stuck, but it got that way later in the night, and wasn't nothing could be done to help.

That was the worst thing: its eyes were calm like it knew what it was happening. Like it understood. If the eyes had been lost or crazy with pain or anything else, maybe, it wouldn't have been so bad. When Lonzo's swollen eyes struggled open, they were big and brown and deep, flecked with gold, and they were still his.



His mouth was all wet and ruined and red from where his new teeth half-split his gums. I was all shaky, but sometimes when there's trouble you ain't got time to just stand around feeling shit, so I didn't. He was lying on the dirty floor in a pool of his own blood and shit and piss and whatnot and the bite on his arm stank like disease. I said, *Why you wouldn't listen to me? I tried to tell you and why you didn't just fuckin listen?*

I almost lost it. I almost came apart then, but I didn't. I killed him quick so he wouldn't suffer, but I didn't go crazy. I didn't go crazy until after.

MAYBE I WOULDN'T HAVE DONE WHAT I did if one of them had stayed with him. Maybe if one of them had stayed in that stinking fuckin room full of mold and debris and nasty blankets, if one of them had kept trying to help him through I would have—mercy ain't really the word, but I wouldn't have been as mad.

I wasn't thinking when I found them at the Chicken Mart. I know folks found Ronny out front of his house all pulled-apart, and I don't remember that, but you ask me he had it coming. Them kids he killed didn't deserve what they got. And when the last boy was lying there in the street with his back broke, Ronny shoulda done right and ended him.

If they was still at the Chicken Mart that meant they thought it was a normal night. That meant wasn't more than one or two of them tried to turn Lonzo, and maybe they didn't deserve to die but yes they did.

If I'd been thinking, I wouldna thrown Doberman-head through the mart's doors. I woulda just pulled his arms and legs off and left him there, but I could smell that he was the one. He was the one that made the bite, so I decided to do him last. I tossed him away to do Twonn and the other one. He was still alive, so he tried to climb into the store through the hole his body made in the glass. I caught him by his legs and dragged him out shrieking.

I saw me in the glass. My blood is royal, so it's not just my top that changes. It's not canine hair that grows on my limbs. We are not dogs and we are not wolves, we is-

sue from the beast-god who mated with the black earth, from the god of Hunt and Carnage, and when I show myself, mortals cower.

SOMEONE CALLED A VAMPIRE ON ME. Someone must have seen what I did and called out. Ronny couldna called nothing or nobody with his bottom jaw and his tongue tore out. The one that came out the branches of the oak as I stalked toward home was shocked to see me. It wasn't pure either, just some white-faced goth motherfucker moved down after the Storm and sacrificed himself to an Elder.

I didn't speak to it or make a sound. Didn't even stop walking. I just extended a claw and pointed at it. It froze for a second, then darted back up and away.

Thou shalt not dilute the blood.

That is the law.

The Ravels didn't know that, they just had a vested interest in keeping monsters from multiplying in Central City. If they was still around, Lonzo coulda just gone to them for help instead of--! Instead of how things wound up.

Nowdays, these motherfuckers *stay* coming here. They see in the movies or they read in their shitty little books that there's ghosts and spirits and other shit down here in New Orleans and they come to join the romance. Usually, if they look hard enough for long enough, they find someone to share the blood like a disease, turn them into something weak and diminished. A goth bitch in a funeral dress. A hood nigga with the head of a dog. Scum lacking any understanding or respect for our ways.

I knew Aunt Sharon wouldn't want me tracking blood on her carpet, so I shifted back and went to the backyard to rinse off with the hose. When I turned to the door, she was standing there on the concrete patio shaking her head at me.

"They won't remember," I said. "They'll barely notice."

"Nigga, that's a *good* thing," she said. "You don't know because you young."

"Some things shouldn't be forgot."

"And some things must be," she said. "*Must.*"

"They steal our power and then they use it to turn our home into the Wild fuckin West. You ask me, they ain't really forgot, and if they did, they need reminding."

"Didn't nobody ask you," she said. "Didn't nobody call your fuckin name. You shoulda bit that boy yourself and been done with it if you loved him so much. Instead you was busy hunting police."

"Naw. No. *No!*" I knew the whole time I was standing there naked, but now I felt it. I felt *seen* in a way I'd been taught never to allow. "You wrong for that, Aunt Sharon. You wrong! *I ain't never hurt nobody ain't had it coming!*"

"Until tonight. You think all them dog-heads turned your boy?" She didn't wait for me to answer. "I don't care who your daddy is in Darkest Africa. You want to stay living in my house you live by my rules. No more gangsters and *you leave them fuckin police alone!*"

I covered my face with my hands and sobbed. Now I felt old old. Ancient and heavy as one of them heads on Easter Island. When I looked back up at her, she didn't seem angry anymore, but she ain't no easier to read than I am.

"You really think I shoulda turnt him myself?"

"Of course not, baby," she said. "It woulda been wrong." But I knew, then. I *knew* the rest, that she wasn't saying: *It woulda been wrong, but if you had, he'd still be alive.*

And she's right. Killing Rel and his crew wouldn't have solved Lonzo's problem. He was right. What *would* he do at school by himself? At college? Afterwards? I couldn't be with him all the time, unless we . . .

. . . I couldn't be with him all the time.

I know where Aunt Sharon is: she's out stalking the neighborhood, making sure nobody knows the mess I made for what it is. Me, I'm lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling in the dark of my bedroom.

Killing Rel won't bring Lonzo back, and I know it's the wrong thing to do but I will lie here until Aunt Sharon comes home, and even after that, until sleep changes her scent, and then I will pay each of Rel's boys a little visit. I will save Rel Howard for last, and best believe, I will show him *all of me*. ♣

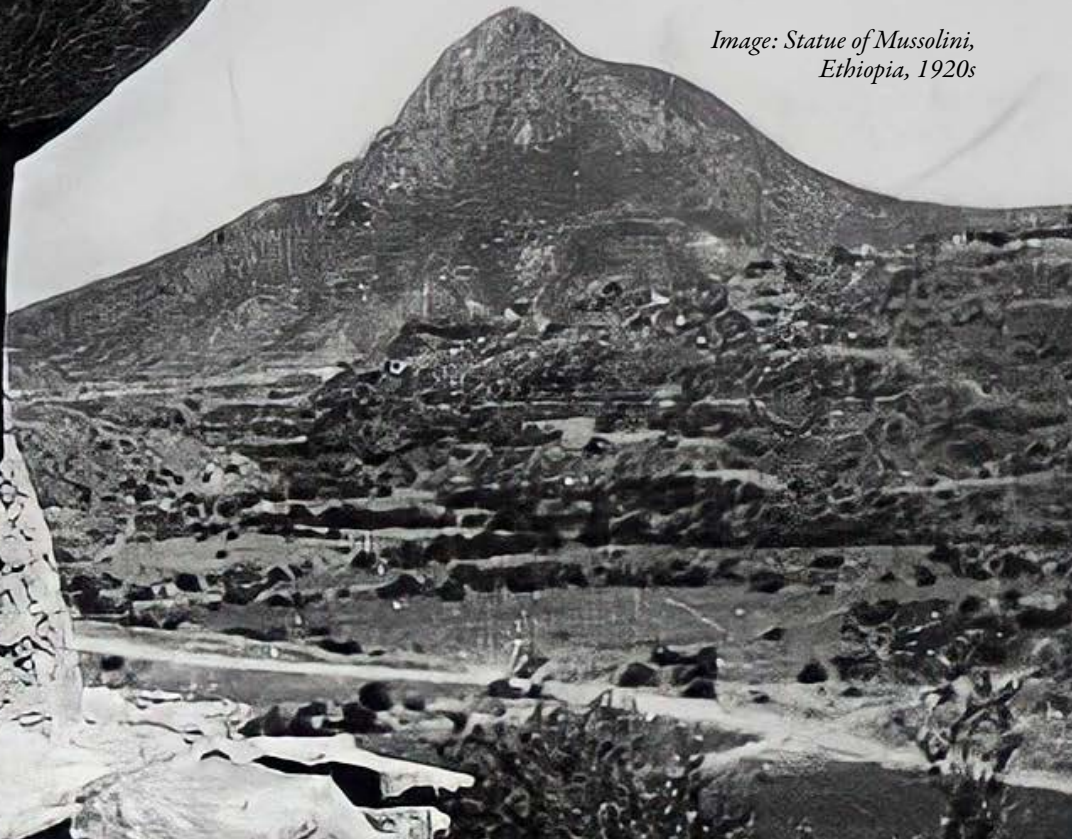


WHAT IS FASCISM?

by *Abel G. Sterling*

ON JANUARY 6, 2021, THE WORLD GAPED AT their smartphones and television screens as Donald Trump's bizarrely dressed and dangerously radicalized mob of marketing executives, real estate brokers, portfolio managers, live-streamers, veterans, bartenders, and others bulldozed through state security forces and stormed the United States Capitol, some of them on a mission to lynch Mike Pence, Nancy Pelosi, and any members of "the Squad" they could find. As the Capitol Police appeared to melt away, routed as decisively as France's Third Republic when German panzers poured through the Ardennes, many wondered: was this the beginning of a fascist coup? Were America's democratic institutions, deliberately flawed and limited as they are, crumbling before our eyes? Or, as some outspoken parties continue to argue, was this Internet-poisoned rabble largely harmless? Should we be much more concerned by tech moguls' unchecked, unaccountable power to censor and control public discourse, or by the expansion of the surveillance state under the guise of anti-terror security? Should the left try to ally with the sort of person who attended the "Rally to Save America"—not the actual *Nazis* of course, but the masses imagined to be disillusioned by decades of corruption, endless warfare, neoliberal austerity, and a smugly condescending liberal coastal elite? None

Image: Statue of Mussolini, Ethiopia, 1920s



of these questions have anything close to simple answers (though, if you're looking for a cheat sheet, I'm inclined to say no, and fuck no).

At the heart of these debates are conflicting explanations of what the actual fuck is going on with America and what we can do about it. On the one hand, if we choose to identify Trump and his supporters as "fascists," we instinctively understand from history that this is a *very bad thing*. We are all presumably well aware of how within living memory, fascists launched the bloodiest and most destructive war in the history of the world, resulting in more than 80 million deaths. The Nazis are deeply ingrained in the popular imagination as evil incarnate, the armies of darkness that threatened to march across the face of the earth. If Trump and his supporters are determined to be "fascists," those monsters from history, then even if he has been temporarily defeated, we should still be very alarmed. But if they aren't fascists, or at least if they aren't dangerous ones, then we can focus on a more familiar and, in some respects, more comfortable enemy: the 21st century neoliberal establishment in all of its austerity-enforcing, privacy-violating, phone-tapping, and murderous drone-bombing horror.

Some on the left might argue that this distinction doesn't really matter. There is a long tradition in left-leaning discourse to identify fascism with liberal or neoliberal imperialism. Leftists recognize that the United States *already is* a brutal capitalist tyranny with a long history of aggressive warfare, racial authoritarianism, and genocide. So, the debate over fascism can also become a debate over the nature of the United States: how should we understand capitalism's endless injustices and inequalities, the governing ideology of liberal democracy, and American imperialism? And if we dig even further, it becomes a dispute over the ideology of liberalism itself, and liberalism's relationship to fascism. When you scratch a liberal, does a fascist really bleed?

I think that these labels and terms do matter, not only because fascism and liberal imperialism are in fact different things, but because fighting fascism requires different tools, arguments, and strategies than the ones used to combat liberal capitalism and its imperial project. "Fascism" has descriptive power beyond a pejorative term or an epithet, and it's back, baby, posing a greater threat than at any point since the Second World War. Understanding fascism is crucial not only because accuracy in words and labels matter, but because it's enormously important to recognize and understand fascism in order to effectively mobilize against it and destroy it.

Liberal imperialism and fascist imperialism are both murderous criminal enterprises which have and, in the former case, continue to wreak death and destruction on untold millions. It is of cold comfort for an Iraqi orphan to be told that their parents' killers weren't "fascists." Nevertheless, we need to recognize that liberal imperialism and its fascist counterpart operate differently and are vulnerable in different ways. While both Bush and Obama unquestionably committed atrocities while they stood at the helm of the most powerful capitalist state the world has yet seen, they were not fascists. George W. Bush would be better condemned as a liberal imperialist, one whose speeches were inundated with now-clichéd liberal shibboleths like "liberty" and "freedom." Admittedly, calling Bush a "liberal imperialist" rather than a fascist lacks a certain punch. But labeling Bush and Obama as fascists doesn't work because fascism is not only explicitly and emphatically anti-communist, but *anti-liberal* as well.

In the 20th century, fascism only became a powerful force when liberalism failed. The First World War threw Europe into social and political chaos, slaughtering millions, shattering ancient empires, and profoundly disrupting social and economic life. Free market liberal-

ism did not have the answers. In Russia, liberals failed to address the twin crises of war and economic collapse, and were swept aside by the Bolsheviks. In Italy, the liberals mismanaged the war, signing a peace treaty that was a national humiliation. Soldiers returned home to face mass unemployment, uncontrolled inflation, and widespread unrest. The Italian king and governing establishment—including the discredited liberals—ended up inviting Benito Mussolini's fascists to form a government to restore order in 1922. Elsewhere in Europe, liberal democratic politics stabilized after the immediate post-war revolutions and upheavals. In Germany, the Nazis remained relatively marginal until the Great Depression finally destroyed the inter-war liberal order. Not only did the Depression result in massive unemployment and immiseration worldwide, but the economic crisis was unsolvable, even theoretically, by traditional liberal means. The *laissez-faire* approach that had led to the collapse offered no solutions when it came to climbing back out of it. With Germany threatening to unravel, and the communists waiting in the wings, the Nazis had answers that maintained a form of capitalism while directly rebuking liberalism: replacing liberal notions of pluralistic democracy, individual autonomy, and free market economics with the radical centrality of the nation.

FASCISM, IN BRIEF

REJECTING BOTH LIBERALISM AND SOCIALISM, FASCISM is a set of radical, revolutionary ideologies and political movements of the extreme right that place the nation, however defined, above all other possibilities of human experience and social organization. For fascists, the nation is the central analytic prism through which all of world history, all knowledge, and all human social relationships are to be understood. If a Marxist sees dialectical class struggle as the motor of human history, while a liberal sees the enlightened march of progress and a conservative sees the decline from a harmonious past, the fascist sees the nation. If we want a general framework for what fascists actually believed, or believe, historian Roger Griffin's 1991 definition, now almost a cliché, is genuinely helpful. In his book *A Fascist Century*, Griffin identifies fascism as a political ideology "whose mythic core... is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism." The unusual term "palingenetic" refers to central narratives of national "rebirth." In another useful formulation, Griffin writes that fascism might be defined as "as a revolutionary form of nationalism driven by the myth of the nation's imminent rebirth from decadence." Emerging from illiberal, anti-democratic, and (mostly) counter-Enlightenment 19th century intellectual traditions, fascism opposed liberalism's universalist emphasis on reason, the rule of law, individual autonomy, and pluralistic representative democracy¹; as well as socialism's materialistic, revolutionary, class-focused, and internationalist egalitarianism, supplanting both with the spiritual, emotional, particularist, and fundamentally irrational totalization of the nation-state.

Historical fascists pursued a revolutionary project, though not in the Marxian or socialist socio-economic sense: under a fascist regime, workers remained workers and capitalists remained capitalists. What

1. *As liberalism unfolded historically, of course, these lofty ideals rarely, if ever, came close to being meaningfully fulfilled. Nonetheless, liberalism's rank hypocrisy made (and makes) the ideology no less capable of motivating or shaping political, economic, and cultural activity in particular directions. We'll return to this.*

fascists undertook was an ideological and political transformation of the nation, the state, and politics, culminating in the construction of a radical and all-encompassing authoritarianism that, in principle if not in practice, fused the nation, state, and the leader. This realized nation-state expressed its will not through liberal democratic parliamentary squabbling, but through the fascist movement and its leadership cult, and in the person of the leader: il Duce or der Führer. In Germany, where fascism historically reached its most extreme expression, a particular propaganda poster expressed this concept well: the image of Adolf Hitler above the words “Ein Volk, ein Reich! ein Führer!”: one people, one realm, one leader.

Beyond this ideological core of authoritarian ultranationalism or revolutionary nationalism, theorists of fascism can disagree significantly, and fascist variants themselves differ rather dramatically. That said, there are key components for understanding fascism, at least as it existed when it came to power in the 20th century. Some of these strike us as more familiar when we look around the contemporary world than others. I will touch on four: 1) the fascist division of the world into binaries of Us and Them, 2) the cult of the leader, 3) the corporatist vision for the national state, and 4) the fascist mass movement.

The fascist understanding of the nation and its place in the world relies on fundamental, Manichean binaries: the distinction of Us and Them, with the boundaries of the nation (Us) enforced through violence. Fascism’s Us consists of the true members of the nation, standing together to oppose Them, the sinister Other who threatens Us, destabilizing the nation’s unity and internal harmony. This demonic enemy, whose identity and nature varies between different fascist formulations, poses a profound and existential danger to the nation, poisoning it from within and from without. The enemy is pernicious and insidious, justifying any and all measures against them, but they are also vulnerable to the nation’s power: simultaneously strong and weak, in Umberto Eco’s classic formulation. Exploiting emotions of pride, humiliation, and rage, the fascists’ “enemy” is a reversal of the real: transforming victim into perpetrator and turning fascist perpetrator into victim. The nation’s vulnerability, its sense that it is under threat, justifies and celebrates acts of what historian Robert Paxton calls “redemptive violence” to defend the nation and purge it of its enemies. Fascist rhetoric can be deceptively “anticapitalist,” with tirades against parasitic “elites” or plutocratic, internationalist, cosmopolitan bankers (by which they nearly always mean Jews). There is a real danger here for socialists to be suckered in by fascist populism: actual wealthy capitalist “elites” are of course, a familiar enemy of socialism. But because fascism is *national* in focus, its apparent anticapitalism is just an illusion and a misdirection. Fascists aren’t interested in replacing capitalism at all—and certainly not with a new system that’s better for everyone. They want the system, whatever it is, to defend and enforce *their* dominance: the dominance of one race over others, of one gender over others, and to crush all real or perceived threats to that dominance from within or without.

In Italy and Germany, the fascist leadership cult coalesced around Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler as the voice and will of the nation mobilized into one unitary being. As the linchpin at the heart of fascism’s fusion of nation and state, the leader personally took on sacred dimensions, becoming the definitive source of truth and the legal authority superseding any precedent. Expressed in diatribe, film, and highly controlled civic discourse, Hitler—as the personification of the nation’s will and spiritual essence—was the defining fountain of transcendent truth that defied any empirical validation, becoming, as historian Federico Finchelstein observed, the very incarnation of truth itself. Unverifiable, unfalsifiable, the leader’s vision of reality

formed the alternate world of mythic fascist “truth.” This leadership concept was further expressed by the Nazis’ *Führerprinzip*, the philosophy that the will of the leader, embodying the national will, superseded all written law. Hitler’s autocratic decrees repudiated liberal German constitutional jurisprudence, as the regime violated liberal notions of property rights and the private sphere in directing state power to foster and protect the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the racially defined national community.

Some pieces of this may indeed sound familiar to anyone who has lived through the last four years: Trump governed as a self-described nationalist who claimed to place America first, America über alles, and wanted to “make America great again,” for it to be reborn (palingenesis) and made anew following a period of decline. Trump’s new post-presidency think tank is named “The Center for American Restoration.” His rhetoric has operated through binaries of Us and Them, celebrating and encouraging violence against the insidious Other, in the form of Mexicans, Muslims, journalists, liberals, or Antifa. His political opponents are illegitimate as a matter of course because they are his opponents. Trump’s QAnon adherents take Trump’s logic a step further, envisioning redemptive and cleansing violence to purge the nation of its internal enemies in what they call “the Storm.” Trump preferred ruling by arbitrary decree, rejecting any source of truth outside his own perspective, and built a fanatical following around frequently ridiculous, self-serving myths and lies.

BUT HERE IS WHERE IT GETS COMPLICATED. 20th century fascism was largely dependent on its mobilized paramilitary organizations, which were backed by significant segments of the population. In *Fascists*, sociologist Michael Mann observes that these paramilitaries aimed to be seen as “popular,” posing as true expressions of the nation’s will, a national vanguard at the forefront of a mass movement. Their ranks were often first filled by traumatized and hardened First World War veterans who shared wartime bonds built around camaraderie, the military hierarchy, and the practice of violence. The groups celebrated and practiced brutality on a large and public scale, deliberately provoking altercations with their political rivals—such as communists and socialists—and then swooping in, presenting themselves as the guardians of law and order. Prior to seizing power, the paramilitaries were the core “muscle” behind fascist politics, waging street warfare and threatening the authority of the existing state. The fascist paramilitaries in Italy and Germany were enormous organizations, forming their own “state within a state” of newspapers, clubs, social welfare measures. Fortunately, at present, while American fascist groups like the Boogaloo Boys do exist and do pursue provoking strategies, these clubs are generally smaller and more disorganized groups than the successful interwar fascist movements. And despite clear sympathies, the Republican Party has yet to fully merge with them; they haven’t literally united into a single organization.

When fascists succeeded in taking power in Italy and Germany, they worked toward a peculiar vision of the state, often termed “the corporate state.” While Trump’s plutocratic collusion with big business for brazen self-enrichment sort of falls under the umbrella of this idea, the 20th century corporate state was envisioned as something much more radical. “Corporate” in this sense means “corporate” like the human body, with all groups and interests and classes that make up the nation “harmonized” for the good of the totality. Crass commercial relations between capitalists and workers are, in theory

at least, of secondary concern, with economic class divisions to be transcended and subsumed by the unifying power of the nation-state as the fundamental basis for reality. Benito Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile directly argued that in its ideal and largely unrealized form, fascism is “spiritual” rather than materialistic, and communal rather than individual. Rejecting liberal democracy’s factious parliaments and its atomizing individualism along with socialism’s concern with equality and property redistribution, the corporate state aimed to resolve the tensions of modernity once and for all with the power of the nation-state.

Historically, no corporate state ever really resembled this ideal. Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were absolute *clusterfucks* of competing interests, corruption, and structural incoherence. Nevertheless, fascism proved to be a terrifying and enormously powerful authoritarian configuration, reaching its most radical form in Nazi Germany, where the state expanded to involve itself in every arena of human life, aiming to mobilize and reshape society while also re-arming for military aggression.

In one of the most beautiful sections of *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx writes that the productive and destructive unfolding of capitalism meant the destruction of old social relations, conditions, and beliefs: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” For the fascist, this “real condition” is the transcendent truth of the nation-state. In a world of nations pitted against one another in Darwinian struggle and zero-sum competition, the only choice is to discard all other illusions: gather together to greet the storm. Be strong, not weak.

ECONOMIC ANXIETY AND ITS LIMITS

THE MARXIAN ANALYSIS OF FASCISM REMINDS US THAT no matter how radical fascism was in its political theory or its populist, anti-plutocratic rhetoric, it remained a firmly capitalist system. When in power, it never really threatened capitalism’s socio-economic structure, or the power of the capital-owning classes overall. This was why traditional Marxian analyses of the movement paid less attention to fascism’s ideological contents in favor of explanations grounded in economics: fascism was

a product of socio-economic class and the class struggle that underlies politics. World history is, above all, the history of class struggle, and inter-war Marxists argued that fascism represented a particular political formation in the global struggle between the capitalist bourgeoisie and the awakening proletarian masses uniting in the struggle for socialism. In July 1924, as Stalin consolidated his power, the Comintern declared that fascism “is one of the classic forms of the counter-revolution in the epoch of capitalist decay.” The declaration argued that fascism “is the instrument of the big bourgeoisie for fighting the proletariat, when the legal means available to the state have proved insufficient to subdue them. It is the extra-legal arm of the big bourgeoisie for establishing and consolidating its dictatorship.” In this view, the coercive powers held by the liberal bourgeois state—which had always been nothing more than a façade for bourgeois dictatorship—had proved inadequate, and, essentially, fascism was the maintenance of capitalism through new means. It was nothing profoundly *different*.

In exile, Leon Trotsky developed a more nuanced analysis of fascism. He acknowledged fascism as a mass movement, something new and distinct, with its own dynamics and unique dangers. Trotsky wrote that the supporters of fascist movements, largely the “petty-bourgeois mass,” formed the “genuine base” for fascism: businessmen, bureaucrats, shopkeepers, educated professionals, managers, land-owning small farmers, and other middle-class people with limited capital but defensive of their socio-economic position. They were joined by some members of the working class whose revolutionary aspirations had been crushed. In the form of fascism, capitalism unleashed “the masses of the crazed petty bourgeoisie and the bands of declassed and demoralized lumpenproletariat—all the countless human beings whom finance capital itself has brought to desperation and frenzy.” The petty bourgeoisie, in Trotsky’s view, was trapped in a vise: manipulated and exploited from above and threatened by the working classes from below. Downwardly mobile, impoverished by the very logic of capitalism, crushed by economic crises, humiliated, miserable, and heavily indebted, the petty bourgeoisie as “doomed classes” tended to turn their energies and hatreds downward at the workers in the “party of counter-revolutionary despair.”

If we look at the people who stormed the Capitol, it may seem that we have uncovered fascism’s apparent social base of radicalized, struggling, petty bourgeois reactionaries. There’s the Texas real estate broker who flew to Washington D.C. in a private plane, the Chicago-area marketing CEO, and the Georgia investment manager who showed up to overthrow the outcome of a liberal democratic election. Nevertheless, this line of class analysis has its limits. Outside the Marxian tradition, generations of scholars have, in large part, struggled to prove a clean correlation between socio-economic class and support for fascist movements. It’s not entirely clear that fascism really appeals the most to those suffering from “economic anxiety”: aka, a downwardly mobile petty bourgeoisie. Nobody struggling economically can really afford to fly to Washington D.C. with thousands of dollars worth of tactical gear for a Wednesday insurrection. A University of Chicago study found that those arrested at the Capitol were 94 percent white and 86 percent male. 66 percent of them were older than 34, with an average age of 40. Just 9 percent of them were unemployed, while 13 percent were business owners, and 27 percent were white collar workers.

Michael Mann has argued that historically, most fascists were not particularly economically disadvantaged, nor were they especially drawn from the middle class. There is some variance here: in Ger-



many after 1930, the Nazis were supported by voters from all classes, and in some countries, like Hungary and Romania, fascist supporters actually tended to be more working class than not. Mann argues that, in general, the social base for fascism came not from the “marginal” or the “rootless” or even the struggling petty bourgeoisie, but from individuals in relatively secure social positions. They were people who “tended to come from sectors that were not in the front line of organized struggle between capital and labor.” Instead, fascists were often people “viewing class struggle from the ‘outside,’ declaring ‘a plague on both your houses.’” They were people who “viewed class struggle with distaste, favoring a movement claiming to transcend class struggle.” Unsurprisingly, fascists tended to be soldiers and veterans; somewhat surprisingly from our perspectives, they also disproportionately came from people closely involved with and invested in the state: “civil servants, teachers, and public sector manual workers.” (Other than veterans, who may have represented between 14 and 20 percent of those arrested in the Capitol, groups like teachers and civil servants would not appear to be the base for Trumpism.)

Historical materialism doesn’t quite explain why people are drawn to fascism, and it also doesn’t explain how Nazis and other fascists behaved once they were in power. True, they immediately crushed labor unions, murdering communists and socialist activists with glee, and forced workers into fascist labor unions subordinate to state authority. But the Nazis’ ultimate goals were, by most standards, irrational and fantastical: the transformation of Germany into a world power through a total race war fought in all directions, and against the majority of the world’s wealth and industrial power. The result was 80 million dead, the Holocaust, hundreds of millions of destroyed lives, and unimaginable devastation.

To make any real sense of Nazi behavior, we have to look at their ideas. Emerging from various right-wing Völkisch intellectual currents, strands of German romantic nationalism, various reactionary and anti-liberal ideologies melded with racial social Darwinism, the Nazis envisioned a New Order fundamentally organized around racial hierarchy. At the peak was to be the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the racially defined national community of the master race. Below them fell the subordinated peoples of Western Europe, and the enslaved, displaced, or exterminated peoples of Eastern Europe. Jews occupied the role of the absolute racial enemy, the Other secretly orchestrating both plutocratic international capitalism and Soviet socialism. Under Nazi rule, no coexistence with Jews was possible. Once in power, the Nazi regime mobilized the nation-state on a massive scale: first to protect and grow the national community, then to purify it spiritually and physically. This entailed reasonably generous welfare provisions (particularly pro-natalist ones) in the interests of promoting “a healthy racial community,” and at best, neglect or expulsion for those outside of it. This is one of the clear points of total contradiction between fascist and socialistic visions for a welfare state. Fascists demand benefits that are exclusively for them and people like them—because they and only they are deserving of anything, and because the fascist welfare state enshrines and enforces social, political, and economic power. Depending on the fascist configuration, this could mean the power of German over non-German, of white people over Black people, of men over women, or of Christians over Muslims and Jews. In Nazi Germany, these exclusivist welfare policies meant sterilization and death for “the unfit” and the nation’s enemies.

At the same time, the Nazis pursued economically unsustainable rearmament and military expansion that could only be paid for by future plunder and conquest. For Hitler and his allies, all of this na-

tional “socialism” was capitalism mobilized and directed to a long-term geopolitical purpose: the revision of the global order and transformation of Germany into a world power. Hitler’s genocidal war for *Lebensraum*, living space for the German nation in the east, would obliterate the “Judeo-Bolshevik Soviet Union,” to be depopulated and transformed by German colonization. The eastern conquests, they believed, would provide sufficient exploitable resources to reconstruct Germany as a continental empire capable of competition over the next few centuries with the ultimate geopolitical enemy and, clearly, the emerging superpower: the supposedly Jewish-dominated United States.

When analyzing fascism, it’s important that we don’t assign an underlying *true*, material logic to their madness based on what we think *should* motivate them, waving away what they actually say, believe, and want. The fact is that Nazis had particular beliefs which can’t be neatly boiled down to class warfare and material needs. The members of Trump’s anti-democratic mob, in many cases quite economically secure people, were mobilized to defend white supremacy: to revolt against perceived cultural and political (and possibly but not necessarily economic) erosion with violence. We need to pay close attention to fascist ideas, fascist ideology, and fascist plans. We need to take them seriously, because this shit is terrifying.

FASCISM, LIBERALISM, AND EMPIRE

FASCIST ITALY AND NAZI GERMANY ALSO MAKE little sense unless we understand them as imperial projects, emerging and collapsing in the context of centuries of global European imperialism. 20th century fascism arose from a world dominated by empires. At Versailles in 1919, soon-to-be fascist Italy was tossed colonial scraps in payment for its million dead; a humiliated Germany was stripped of its overseas possessions. Surrounded by colonial empires of enormous power and prestige, fascists saw empire as an inescapable necessity for national survival. The Second World War was ultimately Germany’s suicidal war for empire: an attempt to dominate foreign states and seize land, with dispossession and death for the “natives” in their way. War for empire was itself nothing unusual: the First World War had been, after all, a war for empire. The United States fought genocidal wars of expansion to conquer and settle the North American continent with white Europeans, and it continued to plot imperial interventions across Latin America and Asia. The British Empire was, to put it mildly, not a peaceful endeavor. What then, if anything, distinguished fascist imperialism from what Europeans had been doing for centuries?

This was the line of thinking pursued by postcolonial intellectuals in the tradition of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, who understood fascism through the murderous horrors of European capitalist imperialism. Césaire argued that not only did fascism represent, essentially, the *normal* work of capitalist exploitation, it amounted to mostly the same barbarities that Europeans had been inflicting on non-Europeans for hundreds of years. What differentiated the tens of millions of dead from Nazi imperial aggression within Europe from those who died and even now continue to die during the centuries of global empire? In the aftermath of the Second World War, Césaire wrote that “before they [Europeans] were its victims, they were its accomplices... they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them... they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had

been applied only to non-European peoples." Hitler was the "demon" inherent in European imperialism, now brought home. He was unacceptable because his imperialism treated *Europeans* like natives:

...what [the European] cannot forgive Hitler for is not crime in itself, the crime against man, it is not the humiliation of man as such, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa.

With the arguable exception of the Holocaust, nearly every horrific Nazi measure had a precedent in the liberal democratic world, particularly in the United States and the British Empire: concentration camps, Jim Crow in the American South, slavery, the color bar in South Africa, genocidal settler colonialism, illegal and unprovoked warfare, the appropriation of land and territory from indigenous peoples, racial segregation and racial caste systems, and murderous antisemitism. Social Darwinism emerged in the context of 19th century European imperialism, justifying racial supremacy and colonial domination on a pseudoscientific, biological basis. Eugenics was a popular and mainstream scientific project in the 20th century until it was discredited by Nazi excesses. Many liberals greeted these scientific developments in the oppression of "primitive" peoples as the march of progress.

Hitler, in fact, looked to the United States and British Empire as models for a continental empire. Many Nazis were admirers of American racial laws, particularly those in the American South. In *Hitler's American Model*, James Whitman details extensive parallels between the Nazis' Nuremberg Laws and the Jim Crow laws that enforced segregation in the American South, the United States' own legally enshrined and violently enforced racial caste system. According to historian Mark Mazower's books *Dark Continent* and *Hitler's Empire*, the United States' conquest and settlement of the North American continent served as an important blueprint for Hitler's empire to be built in the ashes of the Soviet Union. In October 1941, Hitler remarked that Germany intended to treat Eastern Europeans like "Red Indians... In this matter I am cold as ice." Their welfare was

absolutely no concern; Hitler observed that "[w]e eat Canadian corn and don't think of the Indians." One SS pamphlet compared Ukraine to a future German California: a vast and fertile territory, mismanaged by the Soviets, but suitable for feeding new generations of the Aryan race. Hitler was an open admirer of the British Empire as well, writing favorably in 1928 of the English people's "overall governing qualities as well as... [their] political clear-headedness," and their racial suitability for managing a global empire. He was particularly impressed by the British ability to rule over vast territories with only small numbers of white people. At times, he imagined Ukraine not as a California but a "new Indian Empire," ruled by a small number of officers, perhaps serving as Germany's "North-West Frontier." Many Germans understood their territorial conquests in the East and their relationship with its inhabitants in decidedly colonial terms. For instance, one German in the Ukraine in 1942 described his situation as being "here in the midst of negroes." On occasion, Hans Frank, the *Gauleiter* of occupied and dismembered Poland, thought of his territory "a protectorate-state, a kind of Tunis."

So what, really was the difference between liberal imperialism and fascist empire? During the Second World War, the United States deported its Japanese population to concentration camps. Allied air bombardments killed millions of civilians. Millions of Indians died under British control in the Bengal famine of 1943. Even after the war, the British didn't hesitate to construct a monstrous concentration camp system in Kenya in the 1950s to fight anti-colonial rebels. In the 1960s and 1970s, the American involvement in the Vietnam War killed millions. Since 2003, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died in the invasion George W. Bush justified with a web of lies. Why should we care if some murderers were "fascists" and some weren't?

It's true that in practice, liberal imperialism amounts to little more than brutal exploitation and domination. But that is not how it sees itself, not how it justifies itself both at home and abroad. The liberal imperial imagination envisions the peoples of the world in a hierarchy best captured by the metaphor of a ladder: the ladder of progress. At the top of the ladder are the most enlightened, civilized, rational, and progressive: white Western liberals themselves. Perpetually below them are the Others: the developmentally delayed denizens of the backward reaches of the world in dire need of some form of intervention or uplift, often couched in terms of "economic development," "progress," "free trade," or maybe "women's rights." Think of George W. Bush's rhetoric of bringing "freedom" and "democracy" to Iraq, or liberating Afghan women from Islamist domination.

In its contemporary form, however, liberalism recognizes its Others as *people*—that is, fellow human beings not absolutely and irreconcilably different from the liberals themselves. Its stated ambition is to provide the best for everybody. If you'll only just shut up, calm down, and listen to the experts at the World Bank or the *Economist*, regulated capitalism and representative democracy will eventually bring peace and prosperity to even the remotest and most backwards of nations (though with some groups deservedly reaping more benefit than others). The ideology of progress, the messianic march to the future at the heart of liberalism, means that the expansion of capitalism, reason, and democratic governance will ultimately bring peace and prosperity to everyone—just keep waiting, and believing.

While hypocritical, racist, and fatally flawed, these concessions—of supposedly universal goals and a common humanity—have allowed space for oppressed groups to confront and resist liberalism on its own terms. Across the colonial world in the 20th century, indigenous elites educated to be the administrators and colonial in-



"Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow."

termediaries that would undergird colonial domination for another century hurled the contradictions of liberal empire back into astonished white faces. In the United States, liberal feminist and civil rights activists confronted the American imagination with the country's failure to live up to its own image in terms that it absolutely could not ignore. The space for speech, opposition, and resistance that liberalism allows—while inadequate, bigoted, and often marginal—has been an important part of peaceful struggles for social justice.

No such possibilities exist within fascism. Fascism recognizes only the nation, power, blood, and domination. If liberals envision the world as a metaphorical ladder of civilization, enlightenment, and progress, the fascist imagines only the contented and well-fed faces of national compatriots, with slavery or the mass grave for everyone else. The fascist world is divided between two incommensurate types of people: winners and losers, superior and inferior, Us and Them, groups sharing fundamentally nothing other than, perhaps, a grudgingly acknowledged humanish shape. Nazi imperialism eliminated every justification for empire but naked force: might and might alone makes right. The all-encompassing centrality of the nation, this radical particularism, entails a total rejection of any possible or even theoretical universalism proposed by socialism or 21st century liberalism. It's the boot smashing on a human face forever: perpetual slavery and murder for countless millions.

WHAT WE'RE DEALING WITH

FASCISM ALLOWS NO ROOM FOR OPPOSITION. It sneers at even limited notions of a common humanity. Nuanced essays on hypocrisy, cruelty, and injustice will fall entirely flat with fascists, because to them, the people who are suffering aren't really human beings in any meaningful sense. Fascists bond over exclusion, dominance, and sadism. In the words of Adam Serwer, "the cruelty is the point." Fascism can't be debated, negotiated, or worked with, because fascists reject the entire premise of discourse, of multiple perspectives, and of negotiable interests. Any "alliance" between left-wing and right-wing "populists" over opposition to "elites" is a suicidal fantasy. There is no good faith engagement with a fascist qua fascist because fascism rejects pluralism in principle.

Fascists tell lies as a matter of course. They have a history of participating in democratic institutions only to take them over and destroy them. They do at times employ anti-capitalist rhetoric, but only in the service of nationalism and dominance. They may break and ignore laws, not out of any sense of injustice, but because they disavow any authority but their own. Obsessed with strength, fascists are therefore vulnerable when they appear weak and pathetic, aka like the *losers* they are obsessed with. This was an approach taken by the antifascists in the German town of Wunsiedel in 2014, who transformed a neo-Nazi rally into a humiliating fundraising opportunity for the anti-Nazi organization EXIT-Germany. Mockery and humor can undermine fascists' appeal, turning their "struggle" into a farce, damaging their pride, and striking at the core of the hypermasculine persona of strength that they love to project.

At the same, we must never forget that even when fascists appear defeated, ridiculous, and mockable, they are still dangerous. In the wake of Trump's electoral loss and the failed coup attempt, American fascists may indeed look harmless, but so did the Nazis in the aftermath of the absurd "Beer Hall Putsch" of 1923. Following Hitler and his allies' failed attempt to seize power in Bavaria, many observers, the

New York Times included, were quick to write their political epitaph. Hitler was given a light prison sentence; he used the opportunity to dictate *Mein Kampf*, and emerged from prison to national stardom. When the economic collapse of the Great Depression turned the Weimar Republic's crippled and polarized political gridlock into an urgent crisis, the mockable Hitler and his once-dismissed Nazis were prepared to step in with radical solutions. It would be a huge mistake to believe the threat of Trump has passed. The political, cultural, and economic forces that created Trump and Trumpism aren't going anywhere.

The Nazis' path to power was prepared by opponents who underestimated, dismissed, and belittled them, preferring to focus on older adversaries and more familiar grudges. The refusal of the communist KPD and the social-democratic SPD—Germany's largest left-wing and largely working class political parties—to approach any reasonable accommodation with one another famously cleared a path for the Nazi seizure of power. Rejecting an increasingly alarmed Trotsky's public calls for the communists to ally with social democrats as "fascist and counter revolutionary," in September 1932, the KPD's leader Ernst Thälmann argued that Trotsky's proposal was "the worst theory, the most dangerous theory and the most criminal that Trotsky has constructed in the last years of his counter revolutionary propaganda." Despite the urgent and growing threat of Nazism, the KPD—under the direction of the Soviet Comintern—directed the bulk of its efforts against the SPD, confronting SPD unions with slogans such as "Drive the social fascists from their jobs in the factories and the trade unions!" and "Chase them away from the factories, labour exchanges and professional schools." The KPD even notoriously allied with the Nazi Party in an unsuccessful August 1931 referendum to remove the Social Democratic government in Prussia, the SPD's most important political stronghold. The SPD returned the hostility, equating Nazis with "Kozis" (communists). When Hitler became chancellor, the KPD called for a general strike. The SPD declined to participate.

Following the Reichstag fire of 1933, the Nazis didn't hesitate to crush both left parties. Otto Wels, the last pre-war SPD chairman, fled before he could be arrested, but most prominent members left in the country were sent to concentration camps. Ernst Thälmann was imprisoned in March of 1933 and spent the rest of his life in Nazi captivity. On August 18, 1944, Adolf Hitler had Thälmann killed.

After the Nazi seizure of power in Germany, Stalin revised his Comintern strategy and encouraged European communist parties to once again join anti-fascist coalitions. He still, however, underestimated the immediacy of the Nazi threat. The 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact briefly made the Soviet Union Hitler's partner in revising the liberal international order established at Versailles. Stalin greedily seized a third of Poland, all of the Baltic states, and launched a bloody and futile invasion of Finland. His reward was Operation Barbarossa: the Nazi invasion that resulted in over 20 million dead and the near total destruction of the Soviet Union.

Once entrenched in power, the only option remaining against fascism is force. Fascism cannot be compromised with: it does not leave space for healthy dissent. To defeat fascism, leftists the world over have to unite and form a broad, multiracial, working class coalition. At times, it may be necessary to unite with liberals over values we share: pluralism, democracy, autonomy, and freedom. But what leftists can never do is unite with fascists against liberals or against anyone: their anti-liberalism and anti-elitism are not ours. We are not welcome in their nation. ♣

Choose your own



1. SITUATION

(first letter of first name)

- A. crowded train and everyone is Alex Jones
- B. in Kiev and everyone is mad at you
- C. discovered your body has a zipper
- D. no one is wearing a mask (pandemic)
- E. no one is wearing a mask (surgery)
- F. you must retake chemistry NOW
- G. your closet is infinite but none of the fits are right
- H. you are so very, very late (school)
- I. you are so very, very late (period)
- J. NAKED IN PUBLIC BUT NO ONE HAS NOTICED YET???
- K. naked in public and everyone has noticed
- L. due to a misunderstanding, every member of Fleet Foxes is convinced you're a jerk
- M. infinite airport terminals between you and your connection
- N. left your cat at the grocery store
- O. you did the dance wrong and now the river is pee
- P. back at the worst job you've ever had and this time there's no quitting
- Q. you can fly but everyone can see your asshole
- R. WAFFLE HOUSE STAFF: PRISON WORK-RELEASE DIVISION
- S. you laughed out a spark and now California is burning
- T. you're still alive but no one will believe you
- U. it's WWI and you forgot the bullets
- V. paper due tomorrow in a language that has never existed
- W. teeth falling out of your head
- X. teeth falling into your head
- Y. everything is teeth
- Z. it's your ex! YOUR FUCKING EX

2. AND THEN...

(first letter of last name)

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| A. you are being chased by— | F. at your favorite writer's book signing and you spill— | P. your neighborhood is invaded by— |
| B. your phone starts telling everyone about your fetish for— | G. you will be killed if you don't successfully cook— | Q. you're in the passenger seat and the driver is— |
| C. playing basketball but the ball is— | H. Rachel Maddow announces you're in league with— | R. you find yourself about to marry— |
| D. your worst family member has cornered you to tell you about— | I. you drop the stolen masterpiece, which is— | S. you have to give a speech but instead of notes you have— |
| E. crawling out of the toilet, it's— | J. you're pulling a bucket up from the well and it's full of— | T. the Magic Eye painting of your deepest fears resolves into— |
| | K. at a barbecue and your neighbor is serving— | U. all your socks are filled with— |
| | L. you're having weird, uncomfortable sex with— | V. you open the crashed spaceship only to discover— |
| | M. you're doubled over and vomiting out— | W. your face is covered in blisters that pop to reveal— |
| | N. you're carrying an egg that's hatching out— | X. it's prom and your outfit is made of— |
| | O. you learn your liver is riddled with— | Y. the customers are angry and they all want— |
| | | Z. you cut your birthday cake, revealing— |

NIGHTMARE



3. THE WORST PART

(first letter of the name of your street)

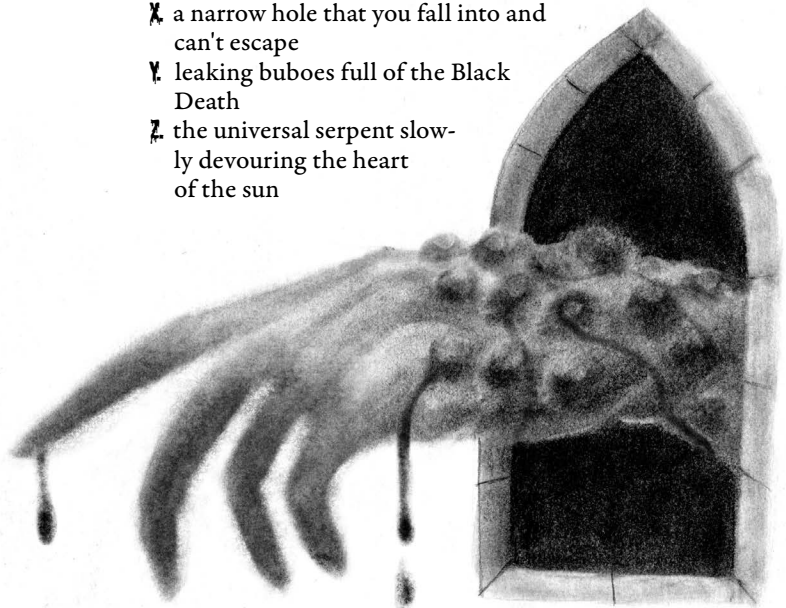


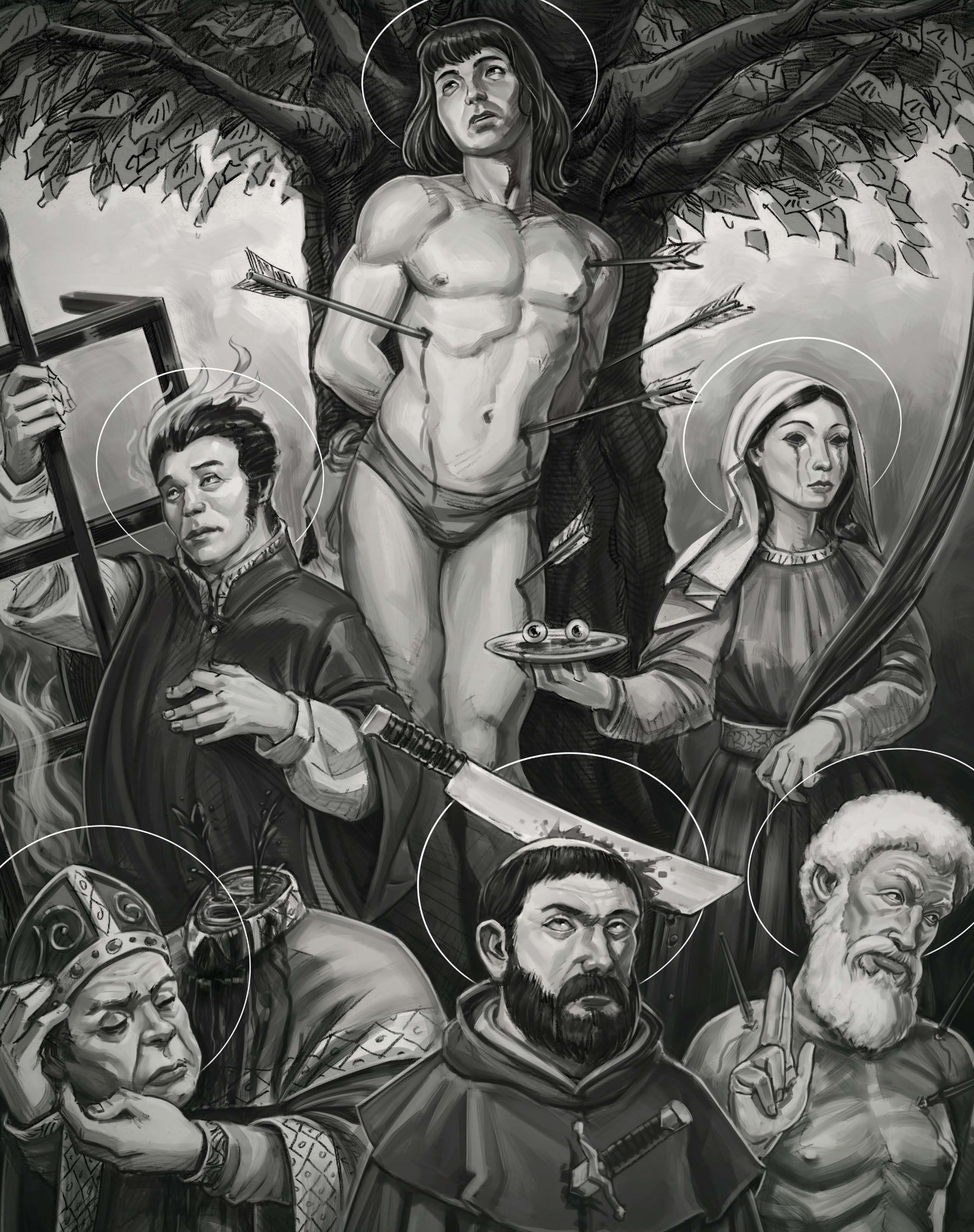
- A. snakes
- B. spiders
- C. sharks
- D. SKELETONS
- E. darkness
- F. a bloody showerhead that blames you for everyone it's killed
- G. your dead aunt who always saw through your bullshit
- H. Bear, the great Destroyer of legend
- I. Mitch McConnell
- J. that ABYSS again
- K. a stone golem in terrible pain
- L. that part of the wall you know is haunted
- M. Skyeleigh McEaighneigh, the new White House press secretary
- N. 1000+ unread emails
- O. the mysterious filthy object in the stockroom
- P. bees
- Q. murder hornets
- R. blood! what a mess
- S. brains!! just kidding, it's actually spaghetti—psych it really is brains
- T. an undead coyote covered in flies
- U. a new song from Hamilton
- V. a perfect spiral of sentient mold
- W. a secret DM in which your friends make fun of you
- X. a narrow hole that you fall into and can't escape
- Y. leaking buboes full of the Black Death
- Z. the universal serpent slowly devouring the heart of the sun

4. PLUS...

(zodiac sign)

- AQUARIUS Mardi Gras beads that can feel pain
- PISCES rats that are not afraid of you
- ARIES the haunting scent of a perfume that, waking, you will always desire but never find again
- TAURUS that paperwork you never filled out
- GEMINI the disappointed ghost of Mr. Rogers
- CANCER a city-sized pustule
- LEO the mafioso's glass eye
- VIRGO the wind of Divine Justice
- LIBRA you, humiliating yourself, in front of everyone you know
- SCORPIO the ominous whistle of a bomb
- SAGITTARIUS John Waters! he thinks you're boring
- CAPRICORN YOUR EX!!! YOUR FUCKING EX!!! AHHH





The Solidarity of MARTYRS

A millennium before *Ocean's Eleven*, if you wanted to hear a story of a daring heist, the best person to ask—if you were in western Europe, anyway—was probably your local abbot or bishop. In the 9th century, for example, you might have wandered up to the basilica in Seligenstadt and inquired how the mortal remains of the martyrs Peter and Marcellinus, who were killed and buried in Rome during the 9th century, wound up inside an altar many hundreds of miles to the north.

One surviving version of this story comes to us from the writings of a courtier called Einhard, and it goes like this:

Einhard was awarded a little bit of land by the Carolingian emperor and wanted to build a church on it. However, he needed a holy martyr to be the church's patron. So Einhard called up a smooth-talking cleric named Deusdona, who was known for making himself useful in these kinds of situations, plied him with some wine, and began lamenting about how there were *so many* neglected martyrs' tombs languishing down in Rome, bereft of the veneration they were due—just heaps upon heaps of ashes and bones from the days of the persecution, lying around with nobody paying any attention to them. Einhard indicated to Deusdona, delicately, that he was ready and willing to provide a *very* loving home for any stray martyrs Deusdona might happen to know of.

Deusdona told Einhard that he had a bunch of saints' bones at his house in Rome, all up to date on their shots and ready to be adopted, and that all Deusdona needed was a loan of a mule and a little cash. So Einhard dispatched Deusdona to Rome, along with Einhard's notary, Ratleig. On their way, the pair made a pit stop at a monastery in Soissons, where they acquired a third priest-accomplice, Lehun, who was also seeking some martyrs' remains on behalf of his abbot. However, when the group arrived in Rome, Deusdona told Ratleig and Lehun that unfortunately, *all* his martyr-bones were actually with his brother right now, who had taken them on a business trip to Beneventum, and Deusdona had no idea when he would get back. Thankfully, Deusdona knew of somewhere else they could get martyr-bones pretty quick: *a church dedicated to some martyrs*.

With this in mind, our heroes paid a nighttime visit to the church of the martyr St. Tiburtius, and—in a very reverent and respectful manner—tested the durability of the lid on St. Tiburtius'

By Brianna Rennix

sepulcher. Unfortunately, the lid was *very* heavy; fortunately, down in the crypt they located another tomb, this one for two martyrs named Peter and Marcellinus. (We don't know very much about Peter and Marcellinus beyond the fact they were a priest-exorcist duo, and therefore, I assume, were also vampire-hunters.) With a little prayer and elbow-grease, the team was able to break open the tomb, extract the dusty remnants of Peter and Marcellinus' bodies, and then replace the tombstone so that none of the locals would suspect anyone had been there and mistakenly interfere with this very holy and totally above-board relic acquisition mission.

I wish I had space to summarize at length the second and third acts of this heist, which has many more twists and turns. Deusdona briefly commandeers and re-gifts the body of St. Peter to another church, forcing Ratleig to break into *that* church to steal it a second time, because St. Marcellinus sends Ratleig powerful ghost-vibes that he's lonely in the grave without his friend. Our heroes must then evade the Pope's emissaries, whom they nearly cross paths with near the Alps. *Then* they have to deal with Peter and Marcellinus' extreme pickiness about their final resting-place: the martyrs don't like the first church Einhard has built in Michelstadt, and so they make their casket messily ooze blood all over the altar-linens until Einhard builds them their very own special church in Seligenstadt. Later, it's dramatically revealed that one of the relic-snatchers, Lehun, skimmed off the top by stealing an ENTIRE PINT AND A HALF of Marcellinus' ashes when no one was looking, requiring extensive delicate negotiations between Einhard and the abbot in Soissons. In the end, Peter and Marcellinus are happily installed to-

gether in the church of their choosing, and demonstrate their favor by healing numerous visitors of various kinds of illness, paralysis, and demonic possession.

Stories like this one were an entire sub-genre of hagiographic literature in the earlier Middle Ages, explaining how various thieves—sometimes priests or monks, sometimes merchants—brought bits of saints' bodies to new locations, with the tacit approval or even the active miraculous intervention of the saints themselves, who were imagined to be one and the same with their corporeal remains. Of course, it's impossible to say which parts of these narratives had any foundation in actual events, or even to reconstruct the likely motives of the chroniclers who wrote them. Scholars have noted that this heist literature—whose open celebration of brazen theft defies a lot of our instinctive assumptions about Christian ethics—is a tangled mess to unpack: some of these stories were perhaps after-the-fact religious rationalizations for real-life lootings, and all of them were certainly intended to provide a miraculous pedigree (and chain of custody) for saintly relics that up-and-coming religious establishments hoped would bring in divine favor, political patronage, and tourism dollars from pilgrims.

What these stories certainly show is that the dead bodies of saints and martyrs were once hot commodities. The veneration of martyrs originally came about during the infamous feeding-Christians-to-lions period in Rome, during which the graves of martyrs became popular sites for meeting and prayer by Christian communities. Over time, the idea eventually caught on throughout Europe that these centers of spiritual power could be conveniently relocated through the simple expedient of digging up the saint's corpse and moving it somewhere else. This led to a period of several centuries during which saints' cults, largely through the medium of their supposed corporeal relics—ashes, bones, teeth, hair, hearts, skin, clothing—were so prevalent that they overshadowed many other elements of Christian liturgy. For a long time, you couldn't even legally consecrate an altar that didn't have a bit of a dead saint in it.

The veneration of religious martyrs—at least in the Catholic tradition—has a very strong focus on the body. In this way I think it differs from that of most political martyrs, for whom public remembrance tends to focus on things like speeches, with a little less focus on the physicality of their demise—especially in this modern era where slaughtered political figures are most likely to have been assassinated by gunfire, or executed by the state through methods we've been conditioned to view as non-sadistic. By contrast, devotion to Christian martyrs is all about physical suffering: I can't quote you an inspirational saying from most martyrs, or tell you what exact point of morality or doctrine they went to bat for, but I can for sure tell you in what peculiar and gruesome manner they were popularly believed to have been murdered.

This interest in the corporeality of martyrs can be seen not just in the medieval fad for bodily relics, but also in very long traditions of visual art. One style of religious art shows the martyr just chilling serenely while holding their own murder weapon, while another displays them in the actual act of being tortured or killed. Some of this, obviously, is supposed to be titillating: for example, there's a whole genre of "virgin martyrs" who consecrate their chastity to God and are then killed for refusing someone's sexual advances—these divinity-fortified virgins

are quite physically tenacious, and it usually takes a few scourgings, attempted suffocations, and botched decapitations to finish them off. For those whose interests lie elsewhere, there's St. Sebastian, whose martyrdom involves his handsome, barely-clad body being trussed to a tree and punctured with arrows, lovingly rendered by centuries-worth of painters. On the other end of the spectrum, there are what I like to call the slapstick martyrs—like St. Denis, always depicted carrying his own severed head which is sometimes spurting huge quantities of blood, or St. Peter of Verona, usually shown walking around with a hatchet buried in his skull. Another poor bastard named St. Cassian—whom I only recently discovered through the advanced research technique of googling the phrase "weirdest martyrs ever"—was apparently stabbed to death by a bunch of pen-wielding pagan schoolchildren. (Perhaps a good patron for modern-day grad students and adjunct faculty who rely on student evaluations.)

Not all saints are martyrs, of course—you can become a saint by just giving alms to the poor, like a loser—but there's long been a consensus that martyrs are the *coolest* kind of saint. Martyrdom was sufficiently revered that other, less violent modes of sainthood were sometimes conceptualized as forms of *metaphorical* martyrdom. In medieval Ireland, for example, it was frustratingly hard to get yourself killed for the faith: and so the Irish, like persecution-seeking conservative Christians in the modern United States, were eager to find some way to be spiritually murdered. One sermon explained that there were in fact three types of martyrdom: in addition to the traditional "red martyrdom," involving torture and death, there was "green martyrdom" and "white martyrdom," forms of spiritual death through self-imposed exile abroad, solitary confinement in a cell or atop a sea-rock, or various ascetic practices. Throughout Christian history, various saints have willingly practiced strange forms of self-punishment, and interpreted the appearance of miraculous wounds on their bodies as signs of God's favor.

This whole tradition is *odd*, to be sure, but perhaps not much odder than a thousand other things we accept as normal: from the deeply-rooted fascination with the detritus of vanished human bodies that underlies everything from our interest in archaeology to true crime to ghost-hunting, to our constant demand that human beings who need to trade on their suffering for public favor— asylum-seekers looking for sanctuary, sick people looking for internet benefactors to cover their medical bills—somehow contrive to make their personal histories both gory and digestible.

IMAGES AND NARRATIVES OF MARTYRS ARE intended to inspire meditation on suffering, which—prurient dimensions aside—is not something human beings normally enjoy doing. This is especially true because most of us stand in many attitudes toward suffering at once: we all have been or will be on the torture-rack: we are all standing by while somebody else is racked; most of us, in some sense great or small, have driven in a few thumbscrews ourselves. So the martyrs are, simultaneously, our exemplars, our supplicants, and our judges.

It's hard to say if any human society has ever had a *healthy* atti-

tude toward suffering, or even what such a thing would look like. When I say “suffering,” just to be clear, I’m referring to extremities of human agony that can make existence seem unbearable: physical and sexual abuse, serious illness, hunger, incarceration, social isolation, deep depression, grief, the toxic anxiety of poverty and day-to-day precarity. As leftists, we think that some of these forms of suffering are “preventable”: that is, we imagine that there’s a logistically feasible coordination of resources, ingenuity, and compassion that could eliminate them. Most of us also believe that there is some subset of suffering that’s *not* preventable, because of the hard limits of human agency—accidents that can’t be foreseen, diseases that can’t be cured, the simple fact of mortality—and the squishier limits, perhaps, of human beings’ capacity to care about one another, which may be malleable but certainly are not boundless. And so we exist in a world, now, where suffering is real and happening every minute and can’t be averted: and we imagine a future where, if many things go right, some percentage of that suffering might go away, but not all of it. Thus, even if our primary attitude toward suffering is that it’s a problem to be solved—which, especially in terms of suffering caused by material deprivation, does seem to be the most helpful way to think about it—we have to leave some mental space to think about suffering as something that *will not* be solved, not for the people who are alive now, and not for those who will come after us.

One way that people have tried to reconcile the existence of suffering is by thinking of it as having some kind of pedagogic function. U.S. society generally likes to silo off suffering in unseen places and pretend it doesn’t exist, but to the extent that we have any folk beliefs about suffering, this seems to be the main one: suffering is a teacher, suffering builds character. Some religious people I know believe that God allows suffering as a necessary precondition of free will, or because these trials further our spiritual growth, the same way a parent instructs a child through rules and punishment. I’ve always hated this idea, because it purports to have explanatory power within the conventional limits of human understanding, but ultimately makes no sense at all. Granting the possibility that maybe full-grown adults can sometimes derive spiritual insight from pain, under some circumstances, what about little children in warzones or stricken with terminal illnesses, who are destined to die very small? What valuable lessons are they supposed to be learning from brief, horrible experiences for which they have no context?

An alternative explanation is to imagine that suffering can be instructive *to others* who witness it, and that this is a source of power for the sufferer. This element is often present in martyr narratives, as martyrdoms usually result in the conversion of onlookers and sometimes of the executioners themselves. These martyrdoms exemplify the weird tension between the idea of submission to suffering as an abnegation of power, and endurance of suffering as an assertion of power. One of the punchiest martyr narratives is that of St. Lawrence: in the time of the Roman persecution, so the story goes, he was a deacon tasked with distributing alms to the community. When the Romans demanded that Lawrence surrender the treasures of the church, Lawrence made a big show of needing three days to gather all the riches together; at the end of that time, he presented the Romans with a crowd of poor and sick people who

he declared to be the treasures of the church. The Romans were not amused by this teachable moment, and sentenced Lawrence to death. Lawrence was executed by being burned alive on a gridiron, and quipped to his executioners mid-roasting, “I’m done on this side—turn me over and eat.” Even Jesus’ well-known exhortation to “turn the other cheek” has a kind of passive-aggressive energy to it: we usually think of it as a call to forgiveness, or kindness, but if you imagine an actual person who’s just been punched in the jaw turning and coolly presenting the other side of their face, the effect is the exact opposite of meekness. It’s the psychological force of this willing submission to suffering that underlies the whole theory of non-violence as a source of *power*: it relies on unsettling the expectations of the person inflicting violence, and of the third person witnessing it. But I am not sure how well this theory of suffering-as-power actually *works*, outside of very limited moments of serendipity or carefully-orchestrated public spectacle. Most often, it seems that subjects of violence become accustomed to receiving violence, inflicters of violence become inured to distributing it, and those of us who happen to be nearby pretend we saw nothing, and, in the future, avoid the near occasion of seeing any such thing again. And many forms of suffering are inflicted by no person in particular, and are endured by the sufferer in solitude, seen by no one.

The Christian veneration of martyrs offers yet another possible way to think about suffering: that although suffering seems bad, it is in fact good, not necessarily because it’s educational (although it



might sometimes be that too) but because the act of suffering, itself, at the moment of experience, brings a person close to God. To non-religious people or people from very different religious traditions, I expect this attitude often seems morbid and demented. I myself have never been entirely sure how to feel about it. The idea certainly creates some perverse incentives toward self-harm: a lot of martyrs, for example, do a pretty questionable job toeing the line between “seeking” martyrdom (which you’re not supposed to do) and “accepting” martyrdom (which is highly virtuous), and some forms of religious self-denial—whether through actual mortification of the flesh, or the rejection of basic forms of human fellowship—are very hard for me to conceptualize as “good.” I think all of us have met people in life who seem hell-bent on making themselves suffer, and perhaps have experienced that same dark instinct in ourselves. Giving self-hating impulses a gloss of mysticism seems quite dangerous, potentially.

On the other hand—given that suffering is inescapable, and that suffering dominates the lives of some human beings in ways that seem absolutely beyond endurance—it’s hard not to cling to the hope that suffering *is* actually holy, in some way, and profess the faith that hard and unlucky lives are nevertheless not ruined ones. The veneration of suffering is ultimately a wish that those who suffer the most won’t be forgotten, or disregarded as aberrational outliers, but will be cosmically *victorious*: that the world will, one day, beg mercy and intercession from *them*. But it’s hard to say if this hope is anything more than a fantasy. Ultimately, it’s probably morally safer to focus most of our energy on the attempted redress and palliation of suffering, wherever we can, even if it doesn’t feel like we’re doing very much. Christianity, and most religious traditions, share with leftism the belief that we must feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, ransom the imprisoned, and bury the dead. Leftism is perhaps more optimistic than most religions that a couple of these duties could one day be automated or rendered obsolete through better advance planning. But leftists also realize that most of our fondest dreams about humanity’s potential, if they are achievable at all, aren’t achievable in our lifetime: and so in the end, the best any of us can do is try to die hopeful.

THERE IS CERTAINLY SOMETHING VERY *MAGICAL* about martyrs, with their physical courage, their dramatic demises, and the supernatural feats that they work from beyond the grave. When I was small, my family mostly attended Mass at multi-purpose chapels on U.S. military bases; the chaplains didn’t spend much time on saint-lore, and so my first introduction to martyrs came at age eleven, when I ended up at a Catholic school run by Dominican nuns. My fifth-grade teacher was a tall, beautiful nun with a strong sense of pageantry and drama. She loved the stories of the saints, especially the martyrs. She encouraged us to collect and swap saints’ cards, Pokemon-style, and learn all about their various miracles and grisly tribulations. Before I got to Catholic school, I had developed a big taste for fantasy novels, and loved all kinds of myths and legends and pantheons, and so I was delighted to absorb this new set

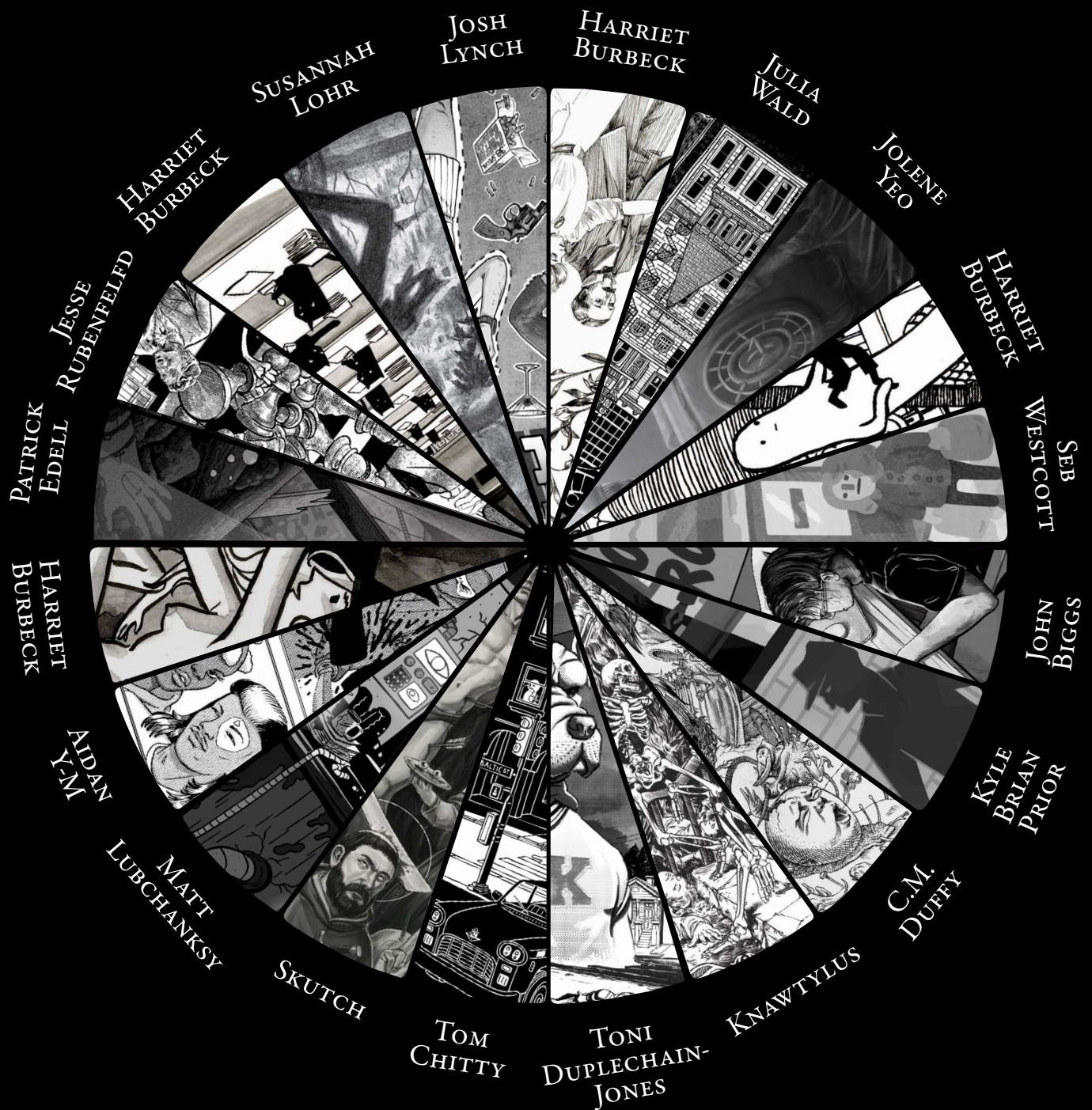
of stories: all the more so because I was assured by my teacher that *these* stories were actually *true*, that *this* magic was not merely on paper, but in the real world. I felt intense curiosity about a kind of “religion” that included heroics and world history, with the possibility of miracles constantly hovering on the horizon—as opposed to just sitting on a hard chair in uncomfortable clothes, which had been my main impression of religion up until that point. The nun mistook this interest for deep natural piety on my part. I liked to please her, and so for a couple years I did try very hard to be pious.

She was a very odd person, that nun, and I still think about her often. She was boisterous and funny: she could do lots of tricks, like tucking her hands flat against her wrists inside her sleeves so that it looked like she had stumps for hands. If there was ever a game of soccer or kickball on the playground, she would hitch her habit around her knees and wade in. She told the class that she’d always wanted to be a truck driver, but had instead become a nun because she didn’t trust her ability to resist various temptations without discipline. She also told me once that she wore a knotted cord somewhere on her body, to punish herself, which she’d had on for so long she didn’t know if it was physically possible to take it off. I remember she once showed us a long video about St. Maria Goretti, an 11-year-old martyr who was stabbed to death for resisting her rapist, and who then appeared to him miraculously in his prison cell and gave him lilies that burned in his hands. She and I argued a great deal, and I often made her cry; but apparently the memory of my jokes also made her burst out laughing when she was supposed to be observing silence in the convent. She liked to talk to me, and give me little gifts, and show me her drawings (she was a very good artist.) Once, she sat down next to me on the playground and told me that lots of people would want to be my friends throughout my life, but that it was wrong to indulge too much in mutual affection. Instead, it was right to seek people out who had no one to love them, because their need was greater.

It’s very strange to look back at the things adults told you when you were a child which were almost certainly cries for help, or attempted exertions of power, but which at the time you absorbed as disinterested truths, and sank so far into your selfhood that they can’t easily be dug out. The particular order this nun belonged to required its members to move frequently, and discouraged them from forming personal attachments of any kind. I’ve since found that I have the most mental energy to help strangers when I feel close to my friends and comrades: and so I’ve come to the conclusion that solidarity is, at least for me, morally preferable to solitude. Solidarity is, at its best, about marshalling shared energy to ease what suffering we can, because it’s terrible to suffer alone, and also terrible to feel that you alone are responsible for aiding those who suffer. The reality is that it’s very hard to be a saint: solidarity recognizes that we are not usually, as individuals, at our best on any given day: that it’s a little easier to be good if you know it will make your friends proud: that it’s a little harder to punish yourself ceaselessly if you know it will make your friends sad. Even the ghosts of Peter and Marcellinus, who had already endured the tortures of martyrdom, felt lonely without each other: they pestered their kidnappers and made their caskets drip with blood until they were comfortably interred together. ♣



The Illustrators



Cover illustration by Stephen Barnwell, from his book:
*Willoughby's World of Wonder:
A Field Guide to Strange Beasts & Curious Creatures.*