

MATTHEW KARP: THE DEMOCRATS' CLASS PROBLEM

# HARPER'S

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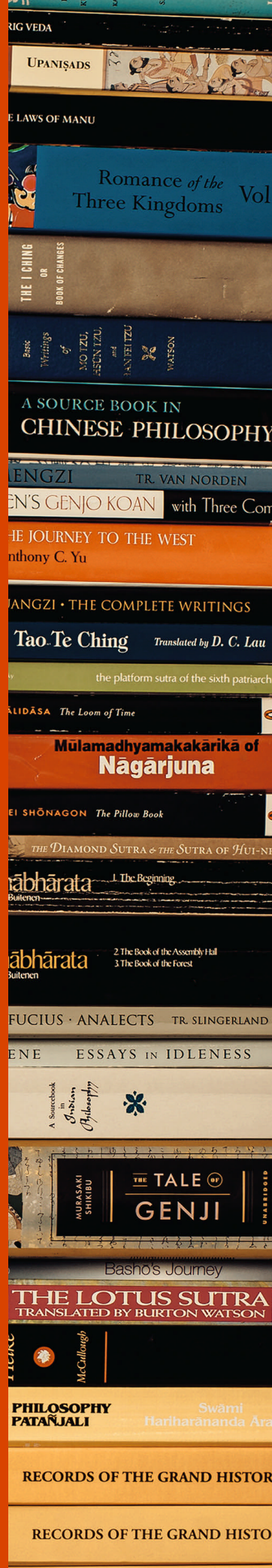
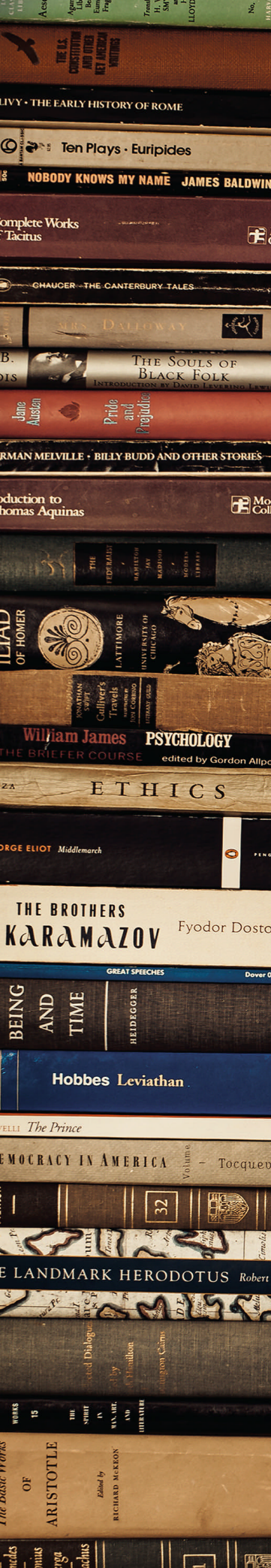
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# HARPER'S

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<b>Letters</b>	<b>2</b>
Before the Law	<i>Michelle S. Phelps, Alex S. Vitale</i>
<b>Easy Chair</b>	<b>5</b>
"As If You Was a Insect"	<i>Matthew Karp</i>
<b>Harper's Index</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Readings</b>	<b>11</b>
Dark Knights of the Soul	<i>Gail Godwin</i>
Faxing Poetic	<i>Seamus Heaney's letters from ire land</i>
Situation Vroom	<i>Joe Biden's ulterior automotive</i>
Doppelgänger	<i>Gil Cuadros</i>
A Suit with an Extra Pair of Pants	<i>Hebe Uhart</i>
Jim and Eilis	<i>Colm Tóibín</i>
And ...	<i>Preston Gannaway, Michael Ho, Sanam Khatibi, and the Epistles of Paul Schrader to the Californians</i>
<b>Report</b>	<b>25</b>
WHAT GOES UP	<i>Andrew Lipstein</i>
Does the rise of index funds spell catastrophe?	
<b>From the Archive</b>	<b>35</b>
The Gossamer Ladder	<i>L. J. Davis</i>
<b>Letter from Germany</b>	<b>36</b>
MASTERS OF WAR	<i>Thomas Meaney</i>
In search of the new world order in Munich	
<b>Miscellany</b>	<b>48</b>
THE PROPHET WHO FAILED	<i>Emily Harnett</i>
After the apocalypse that wasn't	
<b>Story</b>	<b>61</b>
THE PLEASURE OF A WORKING LIFE	<i>Michael Deagler</i>
<b>Reviews</b>	<b>71</b>
NEW BOOKS	<i>Dan Piepenbring</i>
THE SCAVENGER OF HISTORY	<i>Wyatt Mason</i>
On Eliot Weinberger	
<b>Puzzle</b>	<b>79</b> <i>Richard E. Maltby Jr.</i>
<b>Findings</b>	<b>80</b>



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# LETTERS

## Before the Law

The Harper's Forum on American policing ["Crime and Punishment," April] opened with the searing image of George Floyd's murder, inviting readers to consider how we got to that fatal encounter at 38th and Chicago, and what, if anything, has changed since May 2020. Minneapolis has rightfully become a flash point in such discussions, and it is important that we learn from the city's experiences. But Minneapolis's chief of police, Brian O'Hara, risks getting these lessons wrong.

O'Hara claims that the people of North Minneapolis, who face the highest rates of lethal violence in the city—both within their community and at the hands of law enforcement—"just want good police officers," in contrast to the "wealthier residents on the other side of town who are still screaming to get rid of us." But the results of a November 2021 vote to abolish the Minneapolis Police Department suggest something like the reverse. Driven by demands that the city move away from policing, the ballot initiative would have replaced the MPD with a new Department of Public Safety centered on a holistic public-health approach. Of the voters in the two wards that make up North Minneapolis, 38 percent said yes to abolishing the MPD, compared with only 28 percent in the city's wealthy southwestern ward. Many of the precincts that voted most strongly in favor of the initiative

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were in neighborhoods near George Floyd Square, whose residents know intimately the costs of police violence.

Furthermore, while residents of North Minneapolis have indeed called for protection from violence, the protection they ask for is not synonymous with policing. As the research in my new book, *The Minneapolis Reckoning: Race, Violence, and the Politics of Policing in America*, documents, Northsiders have long maintained that they are underprotected and overpoliced. Caught between police brutality and community violence, they have an ambivalent reliance on the police, not just a demand for more law enforcement. As one interviewee described the dilemma of calling the cops: "You're damned if you do, and damned if you don't." What North Minneapolis residents want is not simply more police officers, but a real redressing of the racism endemic to our country, past and present. As the discussants acknowledge, this includes reducing bias in policing, but also confronting the broader inequities that lead to violence in communities, such as those in housing, education, health care, and more.

Michelle S. Phelps

Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities  
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Like most centrist discourse on policing, "Crime and Punishment" largely features people whose expertise is predicated on proximity to the institution they purport to critique—whether as police advisers, research partners of police departments, or police monitors for the Department of Justice. Ever since the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, these voices have asserted that

policing is essential to public safety and that we must work hard to improve it. But after a decade of reform efforts, we have little to celebrate: as Rosa Brooks notes, U.S. police officers killed more people last year than they have in any year in the past decade. Police abuse and racial disparities in arrests remain widespread.

The Forum's participants critiqued the left's campaign to dismantle our reliance on policing. It is disappointing, then, that *Harper's Magazine* saw no need to include in the conversation any representative who might defend a left viewpoint, such as the organizers Mariame Kaba and Derecka Purnell, legal scholars Andrea Ritchie and Anna Akbar, civil-rights champions Alec Karakatsanis and Olayemi Olurin, and social scientists Beth Richie and myself. Aided by our work, cities throughout the country have begun to develop viable alternatives to policing in schools, traffic enforcement, mental-health calls, and even in dealing with community violence—from Albuquerque's civilian first responders, who now handle thousands of 9-1-1 calls per month, to Newark's Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery, funded in part by the diversion of police resources toward it. Perhaps the next Harper's Forum can focus on these optimistic developments instead of reprising the same tired points about reform.

*Alex S. Vitale*  
 Professor of Sociology, Brooklyn College  
 and CUNY Graduate Center  
 Brooklyn, N.Y.

### Code of Combat

War is a descent into hell, but not into nihilism. Military combat is governed by a unique moral code that authorizes lethal force against enemy fighters and seeks to minimize civilian harm. Andrew Cockburn's otherwise brilliant exposition of Big Tech's consistently empty promises to revolutionize warfare ["The Pentagon's Silicon Valley Problem," Letter from Washington, March] is marred by his comparison of current counterterrorism operations to World War II area bombing. Yes, death and destruction are

death and destruction. But the campaigns against German and Japanese cities were explicitly purposed to demoralize civilian populations, prompting even Winston Churchill to ask, in 1943, "Are we beasts? Are we taking this too far?"

There is a big difference—not just technologically, but ethically and legally—between attacking population centers to sap their inhabitants' will and targeting combatants who deliberately commingle military and civilian assets. Those of us in uniform often find ourselves asking, like the soldiers in the Korean War film *Pork Chop Hill*, "Where's all this push-button warfare we've been hearing about?" As Gregory Peck, playing Lieutenant Joe Clemons, replies, "We're the push buttons."

*Lieutenant Colonel Charles G. Kels*  
 Senior Attorney, Department of Homeland Security  
 JAG, U.S. Air Force Reserve  
 San Antonio

### A Shaman of the People

Frederick Kaufman's profile of Jacob Angeli-Chansley ["Jacob's Dream," Letter from Phoenix, April] does more than recount the QAnon Shaman's spectacle—it delves into the pseudo-philosophical core of his worldview and, in doing so, lays bare the quotidian nature of his conspiratorial thinking. Beneath his outlandish attire lies a familiar story: a quest for meaning in an increasingly complex world, a gnawing desire for belonging that continually evades him. It is a journey punctuated by glancing engagements with esoteric concepts and conspiracy theories, from shamanism to DMT, UFOs to Carl Jung, electromagnetic frequencies to Alex Jones and stolen-election claims. Every town in America has its own Angeli-Chansley; these figures are no longer anomalies but the inevitable products of a decades-long democratic decline, and they have coalesced into a robust domestic extremist movement.

*Jonathan Lewis*  
 Research Fellow, Program on Extremism,  
 George Washington University  
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# EASY CHAIR

“As If You Was a Insect”

By Matthew Karp

“How little the real characteristics of the working-classes are known to those who are outside them,” lamented Marian Evans in 1856. She had reason to feel she knew better. The daughter of a Midlands estate manager, Evans grew up trudging along with her father while he collected rent from other tenants, repaired buildings, and oversaw fields, forests, and mines. As a bookish girl, she enjoyed access to the library in grand Arbury Hall—but when her father entered the big house on business, she sat with the servants in the housekeeper’s room.

Now a thirty-six-year-old literary bohemian in London, Evans had traveled far from the muddy lanes and hayricks of her native Warwickshire. First she shocked her family by rejecting Orthodox Christianity; then she lost them altogether by living openly with a married man. By 1856, she was on the cusp of the most radical self-transformation of all, one that would make her the greatest novelist of the nineteenth century. Yet she hardly fled from the difficult questions about class she had encountered in the countryside. As George Eliot, she devoted the rest of her career to expanding the social world of English fiction: from the corseted dramas of Jane Austen, her moral imagination reached beyond mullioned windows to embrace the other 95 percent of the population—farmers, millers, carpenters, dairymaids, wheelwrights and wheelwrights’ wives—who were unlikely to be admitted at Pemberley except through the servants’ entrance.

Like many Victorians—from Dickens to Marx, who sometimes worked alongside her at the British Museum—Eliot thought a great deal about the

working class. Her thoughts were not simple or always sympathetic, especially when they turned to the rural world she knew best. In particular, Eliot loathed the way that artists rendered the countryside as a laughing menagerie of red-cheeked peasant girls and bright-eyed shepherds: “No one who has seen much of actual ploughmen thinks them jocular; no one who is well acquainted with the English peasantry can pronounce them merry.” The child of Warwickshire could not disguise her contempt for the notion that rural workers were natural incarnations of goodness. Over one hundred fifty years later, we can only imagine the asperity with which Eliot would have greeted the idea that a rustic “heartland” is the storehouse of national virtue, whether in Britain or America: “The selfish instincts are not subdued by the sight of buttercups. . . . To make men moral, something more is requisite than to turn them out to grass.”

These days, metropolitans run little risk of idealizing America’s rural working class. In 2020, Donald Trump won 65 percent of rural voters. In many very rural, very working-class places—such as Rusk County, Wisconsin; Mingo County, West Virginia; or Choctaw County, Oklahoma—the number approached 70, 80, or 85 percent. While some progressives imagine that Trump voters in the countryside largely own auto dealerships and pleasure boats, a glance at Rusk, Mingo, or Choctaw—where per capita incomes range roughly between \$21,000 and \$32,000 per annum—shows the poverty of this conceit. Trump’s grip on rural districts has not been made pos-

sible by “salt-of-the-earth millionaires,” as one writer termed them in *The Atlantic*, but by the single largest demographic group in the American countryside—white voters without college degrees, in households earning well below the national average.

For much of the twentieth century, Rusk, Mingo, and Choctaw—like much of the white, working-class American countryside—voted Democratic, intensely so during the New Deal era and to lesser degrees as recently as the early Aughts. But since then, these voters have joined a larger national migration of working-class Americans away from the Democratic Party. And they have been joined by great numbers of non-white voters, including perhaps half the Hispanic electorate and an unprecedented share of black Americans, according to recent polls. In Choctaw County, this group likely includes a significant portion of the working-class Native population, whose Democratic allegiance is on the wane. Still, it is rural white workers—farmers, servers, haircutters, mechanics, cashiers and cashiers’ husbands—who are usually understood as the lead characters in this historic reversal of class and party loyalty.

The result is an urban intelligentsia that regards rural, working-class voters with perplexity and pious disappointment. These Americans, Paul Krugman points out, often live in states with low employment and “high rates of homicide, suicide, and births to single mothers.” Why on earth should they vote against a Democrat, who has “been trying to bring jobs to their communities”—however ineffectually—and turn to

a Republican, who offers “little other than validation for their resentment”?

Krugman claims to be baffled by this churlishness. Others, armed with expert research, are ready to prosecute. On MSNBC, the authors of *White Rural Rage: The Threat to American Democracy* read out their heavy bill of indictment, with indubitable proof of guilt from some thirty different “polls and national studies.” It turns out, another pundit observes, that “most of the negative stereotypes liberals hold about rural Americans are actually true.” They are uniquely prone to election denialism and COVID conspiracy theories; they are a demographic less likely to support constitutional checks and balances and more likely to justify violent political action; above all, they are “the most racist, xenophobic, anti-immigrant and anti-gay demographic group in the country.” “Here, you perceive,” Eliot once wrote of a depressed Midlands village, in words that might apply with no less force to Rusk, Mingo, and Choctaw, “a terrible stronghold of Satan.”

**E**liot’s own depiction of England’s rural working class did not succumb to pastoral cliché. Her field laborers do not smile unless they have reason to: at a harvest dinner table in *Adam Bede*, “there was seldom any gradation between bovine gravity and a laugh.” And in describing rustic workers, Eliot did not shy away from the zoological; thus, for the typical English farmworker, “the slow gaze, in which no sense of beauty beams, no humor twinkles, the slow utterance, and the heavy slouching walk, remind one rather of that melancholy animal the camel.” German peasants who were susceptible to “communistic doctrines,” she wrote after the revolutions of 1848, had been “corrupted into bestiality.”

Yet even at her most severe, Eliot never stooped to simple snobbery. Victorian conservatism aside, her view of class, power, and character retained a materialist core not unworthy of her neighbor at the British Museum. “Slander,” one of her narrators notes, “may be defeated by equanimity; but courageous thoughts will not pay your baker’s bill, and fortitude is nowhere considered legal tender for beef.” As

often with Eliot, the gentle smile in the expression does not detract from the sincerity of the sentiment expressed. Her attention to such matters of legal tender, from the unpaid debts of the Reverend Amos Barton to the financial fraud of Nicholas Bulstrode in *Middlemarch*, accounts for no small portion of the richness of her novels. In all nineteenth-century literature there is no more vividly concentrated image of rural economics than Alick, the tightfisted shepherd in *Adam Bede*, “throwing very small handfuls of damaged barley to the chickens, because a large handful affected his imagination painfully with a sense of profusion.”

Of course, Eliot did not reduce all human experience to barley and pence. Her materialism went deeper, the necessary complement of a philosophical imperative “to represent the people as they are.” The sentimental view of the English countryside disgusted her, not because it idealized boorish clods, but because it drew on an insulting and pernicious theory of society: “the miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance, and want.”

Instead of issuing moral verdicts, Eliot traced material conditions. Her novels depict unique individuals making their own histories, but not as they please; not under self-selected circumstances, but within larger structures that cannot be shrugged off with a righteous cringe. “Now, it is all pretense to say that there is no such thing as Class Interest,” declares Eliot’s working-class hero, the “radical” watchmaker Felix Holt. “And this, again, has been part of the history of every great society since history began.” For Eliot, there is no escaping the blunt reality of class exploitation in the countryside. In *Adam Bede*, Squire Donnithorne pays a visit to the Poyser family, speaking in his “well-chiselled, polite way” about the possibility that they will be expelled from their farm. His manner, says Mrs. Poyser, “allays aggravated me: it was as if you was a insect, and he was going to dab his finger-nail on you.” As the critic Raymond Williams wrote, exchanges like these reveal not “simply an aspect of character but of character in a precise and dominating social relationship.”

Dickens was larger and Hardy was sadder, but Eliot remains the great Victorian novelist of precise and dominating relationships. And yet coercive power is not the only story. The Poyser and their class may be exploited and abused, but they are not mere victims. The open secret of workers’ relationship with the gentry, in Eliot, is that their labor makes its gentility possible. For Eliot as for Marx, it was obvious that the working classes were the true protagonists of history. Dorothea Brooke, the genteel protagonist of *Middlemarch*, reaches a critical decision by simply looking out the window and realizing that actual existence is everywhere except in her own parlor.

On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labor and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.

Do we believe anything like this anymore? In America today, the thought of rural workers provokes a different set of reflections from those of us ensconced in good liberal society. On MSNBC, we may look at them as if they were insects who might be advantageously dabbed out with a fingernail before November 5, 2024. Or they may inspire a doleful sort of sympathy: *Alas, these unfortunate souls, stripped of their jobs and dignity by the march of Capital, who now have nothing to give except their resentment.*

What is more difficult is to conceive of manual laborers—let alone rural, Trump-voting American workers—as a source of our own wealth and comfort. To the extent that urban liberals appreciate this logic at all, it drifts toward dim and distant thoughts about supply chains, and perhaps the dark origins of the iPhone in a Chinese factory or Congolese cobalt mine. Seldom does it lead back to Rusk, Mingo, or Choctaw Counties. If anything, the argument travels in the opposite direction: as Krugman conscientiously reminds us, “there are huge de facto



transfers of money from rich, urban states like New Jersey to poor, relatively rural states like West Virginia.”

The twenty-first century’s protagonists of history, according to white-collar common sense, do not sweat in fields or factories, much less carry bundles down country roads. The involuntary, palpitating life palpitates elsewhere now. It flashes and darts through a vortex of global finance, trade, and engineering, somehow producing AI search engines, coronavirus vaccines, and the blockchain, all without the input of a single mud-stained worker.

This may be pure ideology. But it carries a political odor, and surely has something to do with the kind of hardy perennial one so often sees in the *New York Times*: WHY DO THE DEMOCRATS KEEP LOSING THE WORKING CLASS?

It also marks a distance from the wicked old Victorian days, when, as Ray Davies of the Kinks sang, “Life was clean/Sex was bad, called obscene/And the rich were so mean.” At least the Victorians had respect. They feared the action of an empowered mass of workers, “the steam that is to work the engines,” as Felix Holt says, poised to announce its own class interest and become “the masters of the country.”

Today we have come to pity or condemn an unproductive working class, which cannot recognize its own interests. Sometime after 2016, the phrase “economic anxiety” became an unlikely punch line for liberal pundits, who saw it as a bogus euphemism for the raw bigotry that fueled Trump’s support. The joke, apparently, is that any worker who did not vote for Hillary Clinton could not possibly have had material concerns to worry about. “It seems to me,” wrote one *Vox* journalist, “that many of these people haven’t been left behind; they’ve chosen not to keep up.”

Rather than “communistic doctrine,” we now associate the masses with its ideological opposite. THE POLLS PROVE IT, announces *The New Republic*: MANY REPUBLICANS LOVE FASCISM. Hillary was right all along; the American countryside is an overstuffed basket of deplorables. A nation of liberal Dorotheas looks outside its collective window to the roads and fields beyond and simply shudders.

Eliot, unlike Marx, professed few answers to the problem of class in the nineteenth century. Yet there is something in her vision, its materialism and its idealism too, that might serve us. A chapter in *Adam Bede* served as something like a manifesto for her democratic art:

There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can’t afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities.... It is more needful that I should have a fiber of sympathy connecting me with that vulgar citizen who weighs out my sugar in a vilely assorted cravat and waistcoat, than with the handsomest rascal in red scarf and green feathers.

There is no reason to idealize today’s rural American workers any more than the shepherds and weavers of Warwickshire. Harsh social relations generate resentful social subjects; the polls prove it. But if romanticization is bad, exoticization is worse. Workers in hard-hit rural places still make the expensive products that keep society good, from weatherproof windows (Rusk County) and timber for hardwood floors (Mingo) to the pecans (Choctaw) one might find in the aisles at Whole Foods. Republican farmers, carpenters, and haircutters still move the world with their labor, no less than Democratic digital professionals do. Underneath the partisan fear and loathing, “a wide and arduous national life” still murmurs on, linking city and countryside, crossing lines of race, gender, and culture, waiting to take hold in our politics. American workers are not merely victims of that life but the literal creators of it.

“We are the 99 percent”: Remember that foolish old slogan? It never made sense as sociology; its distortion of productive relations amounted to a crime against historical materialism. Yet as a kind of democratic aspiration, it suggested a different path into political struggle. Conjuring a community defined by shared interests rather than shared values, it proposed a call to arms, not for the marginalized, the oppressed, the ethical, or the just, but for the vulgar, vile masses ourselves. We have come a long way since then. ■

## THE LAST HUMAN JOB

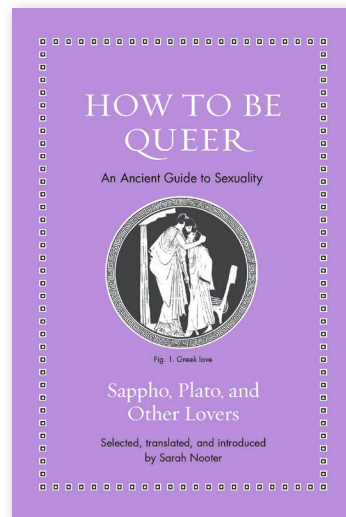
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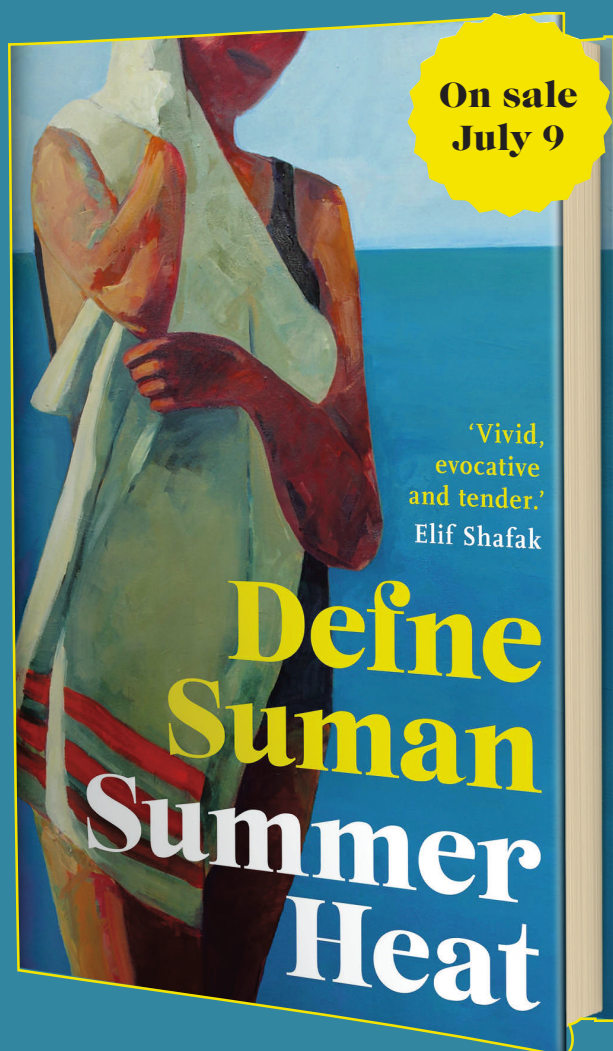
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# HARPER'S INDEX

- Percentage of white Americans who say they enjoy Juneteenth less than an average day : 29
  - Percentage of Republicans who say so : 42
- Percentage of Americans who say that people seeing racism where it isn't is a bigger problem than missing it where it is : 45
- Portion of U.S. public school teachers who say that the history of slavery does not affect black people's place in society today : 1/4
  - Portion of children expelled from U.S. public preschools who are black boys : 1/5
  - Portion of Chicago children under the age of 6 who have been exposed to lead-contaminated drinking water : 7/10
  - Percentage by which U.S. black voters are more likely than others to be concerned about climate change : 12
- Percentage decrease in the volume of climate-change coverage in corporate broadcast news between 2022 and 2023 : 25
  - Percentage of corporate broadcast news coverage that was dedicated to climate change last year : 1
- Percentage by which the *New York Times* has quoted Israeli sources more often than Palestinian sources since October 7, 2023 : 78
  - By which the *Times* was more likely to feature Palestinians as subjects of passive-voice clauses than Israelis in that period : 67
  - Percentage of U.S. adults who believe that Israel is trying to minimize harm to civilians in its attacks on Gaza : 38
- Percentage of family members of active-duty U.S. military personnel who said in 2016 they would recommend military service : 55
  - Who say so now : 32
- Portion of active-duty U.S. military personnel who are not receiving mental-health care but would like to receive it : 1/4
  - Number of U.S. insurance claims related to psychotic disorders that were filed in 2023 : 4,477,140
    - Percentage change in the quantity of these claims since 2019 : +15
    - Percentage of Americans who have not heard of long COVID : 22
  - Rank of the United States among countries in terms of happiness in 2023 : 15
    - In 2024 : 23
  - Percentage of U.S. employees in therapy who say their therapist has an effect on their mental health : 41
    - Percentage of U.S. employees who say their boss does : 69
  - Percentage of Americans over the age of 50 who say they have a friend they met at work : 44
    - Of American adults under the age of 30 who say so : 21
- Percentage of U.S. college students who say reproductive-health laws were at least somewhat important to their school choice : 71
  - Who say they were highly important : 38
- Percentage of Republican college students who would prefer to attend a school in a state with greater access to reproductive care : 63
  - Percentage of U.S. teenagers who say their parents have looked through their phones : 43
    - Percentage of U.S. parents of teenagers who say they have done so : 50
  - Number of reported unintentional shootings by children in the United States last year : 411
- Portion of U.S. adolescent overdose deaths in which a bystander who could have intervened was present : 2/3
  - Percentage by which BMW drivers have a higher rate of DUIs than the average driver : 14
    - Percentage by which Subaru drivers do : 29
- Percentage of American wine drinkers who think they could differentiate a \$10 bottle of wine from a \$100 bottle : 35
  - Number of U.S. states in which corn polls as the most popular vegetable : 32
- Percentage by which Americans are more likely to say they want to be remembered for creativity than for intelligence : 55
  - Portion of Americans who say they are worried about their memory : 2/3
- Percentage of U.S. adults who say that widespread use of computer chips implanted in the brain would be positive for society : 10
  - Percentage of those aged 18 to 29 who say they probably or definitely would consider getting such an implant this year : 13

*Figures cited are the latest available as of April 2024. Sources are listed on page 59.  
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**“Every woman must be nourished  
by an inner reservoir of secrets . . .”**



When a Turkish art historian on the eve of her 40th birthday receives an email from a mysterious man requesting a tour of Istanbul’s Byzantine churches, she has no idea that her future and the past she thought she knew are about to be upended. Flashing between 2003 and 1974, during the Turkish Army’s invasion of Cyprus, *Summer Heat* explores one woman’s place in her country’s devastating history.

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# READINGS

[Essay]

## DARK KNIGHTS OF THE SOUL

By Gail Godwin, from *Getting to Know Death*, which will be published this month by Bloomsbury.

I have been close to people who one day found themselves in the desperate place and didn't make it out.

I remember struggling to write a letter to a young man whose father had just hanged himself. The father had been the builder of our house. He was charming and talented and proud of his son. I wrote these things to the son and then came the point in the letter where I was supposed to write something hopeful for the future. All I could think of to convey was *No, you'll never get over it, but the time will come when you will be glad you can't get over it because the loved one remains alive in your heart as you continue to engage with the who and the why of him.*

Two people in my family didn't make it out of their desperate place: my father and my brother.

Though I had seen my father only twice when I was a child, I sent him an invitation to my high school graduation. Mother said not to expect him to show up, but he did. He, his new wife, and his brother drove from Smithfield, North Carolina, to Portsmouth, Virginia, for the ceremony. In the early-summer weeks that followed, we wrote letters to each other. He had elegant handwriting and prose to match. He wrote that he would like more than anything to get to know me better. Could I—would it be possible for me to spend a few weeks with them at the beach this summer? I was in my first desperate place at that time and decided to tell him about it—though not all of it. I ended up going to the beach and returning with them to Smithfield and entering Peace College in the fall, paid for by my father.

My father had been doing some personal book-keeping of his own. At the age of fifty, he had at last achieved a measure of stability. Finally, after thirty years of intemperate living, he had managed to stop drinking, had married a new widow in town with a prosperous brother-in-law, and was manager of sales at the brother-in-law's car dealership. My father confided to me during the weeks we spent at his brother-in-law's beach cottage that he regretted not having made more of himself. "You mustn't let it happen to you," he said. "Nobody is prepared for how quickly time passes, and you don't want to be one of those people who wakes up in the late afternoon with nothing to show for it." But later, in a radiant moment while we were lying on the beach working on our tans, he told me that I had come along at just the right time, and if he continued to win his battle against depression and alcohol, and if automobile sales continued like this, well, the future didn't look so hopeless after all.

As we lay side by side, congratulating ourselves for finding each other, I had no idea that old disappointments were biding their time, stealthily building like waves, which in less than three years would drown him.

One winter afternoon when I was a junior at Chapel Hill, he phoned his brother at his office. "Just felt like saying hello, old son," he said. "Son" was what the brothers called each other. After he hung up, he lay down on the floor of his bedroom in Smithfield and shot himself in the head.

Losing ground. Was that the thing that ultimately killed him? In his twenties, he began losing jobs, losing status, but always got back on his feet. A charming, handsome man, he did not need to keep a steady job as long as his mother was alive. And after her death, there would be other admirers waiting in line for whom his looks and charm were enough. By the time he met my mother, he was an alcoholic. After that came the mental disorders, given different psychiatric names as the years went by.

When they were driving back to Smithfield after my high school graduation, he came with a

raging toothache. They found a dentist along the road who pulled the tooth. But the pain continued, and when they got home, the dentist told him it had been the wrong tooth. "I should have

known," he would finish this story, laughing. "I should have known when we drove into the parking lot and his shingle read: DOCTOR PAYNE."

He still had the charm but the looks were going.

This is from a June 16, 2018, *New York Times* op-ed, "What Kept Me from Killing Myself," by the Iraq War veteran Kevin Powers. "Throughout that summer and into the fall . . . just below the surface of my semiconsciousness, was the constant thought: Maybe I won't wake up this time." Powers continues:

I doubt much needs to be said about the kind of despair that would make such an idea a source of comfort, despair that came not from accepting that things were as bad as they were going to get but, worse, that they might go on like that forever. The next step felt both logical and inevitable.

This sounds along the lines of what my twenty-eight-year-old brother might have been thinking in the hours that led up to his death.

In the last week of his life, Tommy was working on a long poem. He left behind two drafts. He titled one "Why Not Just Leave It Alone?" and the other "Why Change the World?" One line is the same in both drafts: "My pride is broken since my lover's gone." Both drafts end with the same image of the poet being laid to rest in his wooden home, "With my trooper hat on my chest bone."

It was October 2, 1983. What happened, what we know happened, as opposed to all that we can never know, was that on the Sunday afternoon after Mother's birthday, Tommy ironed a shirt at his parents' house, where he had been living with his three-year-old son. He told Mother he was going over to see J., the woman he loved, a nurse who also had a three-year-old son. They had planned to marry; they had even made out a budget. Then J. suddenly broke it off. Tommy told Mother he was going over to ask J. to reconsider. "I'm going to settle it one way or another before the afternoon is out," he said, and drove off alone.

COUPLE FOUND SHOT was the headline in the newspaper the next morning.

The day before, on Mother's birthday, I knew Tommy was unhappy. But Tommy was always unhappy. He "felt things more than most" was the family euphemism for his troubled nature. He most took to heart the family's fractures as well as the world's. Drawing you in with his shy, close-mouthed smile, he would offer his latest tale of woe. But always, always in his stories, there had been a quality of suspense, of entertainment. He starred in them as the knight-errant, complete with pratfalls and setbacks, but a knight-errant who picked himself up, dusted himself off, and set out on his next mission. Tommy was a modern Samaritan who carried a first-aid kit and a blue

[Notes]

## FAXING POETIC

*From letters written by Seamus Heaney, collected in The Letters of Seamus Heaney, which will be published in September by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.*

Dear Loving Man,

All this is spilling out like a bottle bubbling and disgorging, without much forethought.

I've actually composed it on a laptop computer, for which I have no printer.

I'm sorry not to have email.

Will fax this.

I keep thinking of the mail piling up at home and the faxes gulping and slithering into one's life and the requests for recommendations and introductions lurking . . . A feeling that sunlight and silence and free time on a Tuesday morning on a Greek island is an affront to the workers of the world.

I spend days in "correspondence," jumping to it as the cutter of the fax machine rolls out another request like a head from the guillotine.

Then this morning, after a week when I was in England, reading at Stephen Spender's centenary on Thursday and concelebrating Montague's eightieth on Tuesday, I came back to find a fax of a download from *Truthdig* (from the electronically hyper O'Driscoll).

Our own house has turned into a kind of office, a site of fax and phone, of administration and importunity.

Honest to Jesus, I seem to do little else these days than respond to the ruthless cut of the papercutter in the fax machine.

I am writing this in haste.

I feel the speed of the lines—no, not the speed—the inevitability of the fit between cadence and intelligence is not always there. I babble. But throw the hat in the air, too—in haste.

Many thanks for your letter. This is not so much an answer as a finger-fly-up-from-the-font sprinkle of the fictive water.

I'll send you my complete note at the end of the month, once I get through the mail-ramparts and fax-middens.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALLERY VACANCY, SHANGHAI

*When Day Touches Night, a painting by Michael Ho, whose work was on view last month with Gallery Vacancy at the art fair Independent New York.*

emergency beacon in his car in case he came across an accident.

We were in the kitchen and he told me the story of J. suddenly breaking up with him. But this time something was different. I was not, as usual, deriving the usual listener's satisfaction from his story. Many years later, when remembering that kitchen scene, I realized what had spooked me about it: Not only was there not a trace of the shy, closemouthed smile, there was no knight-errant starring in my brother's story. The tone was new: one of bafflement and resignation. There was no sense of any future missions.

There was no tug of suspense. It was like a story that had already ended.

Tommy would be sixty-three now. He was born the same summer that my father drove from Smithfield to Glen Burnie, Maryland, and rescued me from my desperate place. If on that October afternoon twenty-eight years later there had not been a pistol handy in the glove compartment of J.'s car, would Tommy have remarried somebody else and raised his son and reconciled himself to a fallen world, as long as he had a first-aid kit and a job that gave him the satisfaction that he was rescuing people from injustice?



COURTESY THE ARTIST

“High School Graduation, Manchester, N.H., 2020,” a photograph by Preston Gannaway, whose work was on view last month at Chung 24 Gallery, in San Francisco. Gannaway’s monograph, *Remember Me*, was published last year by GOST Books.

But now I do hear his voice, the old Tommy voice, just as it was in life, chiding me as he defends the position of his beloved National Rifle Association with its singsong refrain: “Gail, guns don’t kill people. People do.” I continue to engage with the who and why of my father and my brother.

**D**uring my life, I have found myself in the desperate place four times. But that first time, at age eighteen, was by far the worst.

Summer 1955 in Glen Burnie, Maryland. Everybody seemed to have a future but me. I had received a letter from Mother Winters, my mentor from ninth grade. She congratulated me on being salutatorian, asked about my plans for college, and brought me news of some of my classmates. “Pat has won the four-year Angier Duke scholarship to Duke, Carolyn will be going to Radcliffe, Stuart and Lee to St. Mary’s in Raleigh ...” Here I stopped reading and felt ... what? A dry mouth, a pang in the chest, a sense of going down, of losing myself. All I knew to do was mark my position.

My position. At the time, I couldn’t hold all of it in my mind. If I had tried, I might have de-

spaired, or lashed out and hurt myself or somebody else. I had so little experience to draw from and there was no escape.

Since my early teens, I had been building my life on false premises. I was creating a persona that was more extroverted than I really was. She pretended to more confidence and security than I felt. I became a pro at embellishing and editing my history. When I entered a new school, I “went out” for things I was good at that would bring me attention. The school paper, the drama club, painting posters and scenery, entering competitions—and, of course, getting high grades. I dated lots of boys, made it a point to be cagey and hard to get until each got fed up and moved on, usually just as I had begun to appreciate him.

That was the outside of things. At home, other dramas were playing out. We were not free people. Our embattled breadwinner, who was angry much of the time, sometimes knocked one of us to the floor for challenging him. There was no money for us except what he doled out and no going anywhere he didn’t drive us. As I entered my teens, the breadwinner, who was only twelve years older than me, often spoke of how he “loved” me. His voice trem-



bled. At night I would wake to find him kneeling in the dark beside my bed, his hand taking liberties.

My mother had shed her former confident self. As a child, I knew a mother who arrived home on the 10:00 PM bus after her wartime job on the newspaper, a woman who taught college and on weekends typed up love stories that earned one hundred dollars apiece. This powerless woman seemed more like someone I was visiting in prison. Only I was in prison with her. She suffered because there was no money to send me to college. She made phone calls to a private college in Baltimore to see if I could go as a day student. The registrar said a partial scholarship might be arranged, given my academic record, but where was the rest of the money to come from? There was no “rest of the money,” my stepfather reminded us, as though we were dim-witted. He suggested I take a year off and find a job, “maybe in sales work,” and save up for college next year. He added magnanimously that I could continue to live under his roof for the time being without paying rent.

That’s the way the ground lay that June 1955 morning in Glen Burnie, when the girl sat cross-legged on her bed, the letter from her old teacher clutched in her fist. “Pat to Duke, Carolyn to Radcliffe, Stuart and Lee to St. Mary’s.”

This is my life, but I may not get to do what I want in it.

I can’t see a way out of this.

Things will not necessarily get better.

In my novel *Unfinished Desires*, about life at a girls’ school, two old nuns are being driven back to their retirement home from a doctor’s visit, and one says to the other, “There was a sentence this morning in that Prayer for Holy Women: ‘In our weakness Your power reaches perfection.’ What do you think it means, Sister Paula?” Sister Paula thinks for a minute and then replies, “I think it means you have to admit you can’t save yourself before you’re fully available to God.”

That morning in Glen Burnie, God was undergoing some very slippery changes in my psyche. He had ceased being the attentive Heavenly Father who was always aware of me. All I could be certain of that long-ago summer morning was that I could not save myself.

But something else did, something already embedded in the tissue of my particular circumstances: the earthly father who had been the absent father. In a mood of defiant resignation, I decided to send him an invitation to my graduation. Of course he wouldn’t come.

But he did come. And when we were lying beside each other on the beach, he said, “When I opened your invitation, after I got over being pleasantly surprised, I thought to myself, Well, this is one thing I did that came to fruition. And then, after we began to write letters to each other, it struck me that I might be the rescuer you needed.”

[Car Talk]

## SITUATION VROOM

*From an October 2023 interview with President Biden, conducted by the special counsel Robert Hur and the deputy special counsel Marc Krickbaum, about the storage of classified documents in Biden’s garage in Wilmington, Delaware.*

PRESIDENT BIDEN: I don’t remember when the boxes came or where they came from.

MARC KRICKBAUM: Do you remember whether it was when the Corvette was coming back after the Jay Leno show?

BIDEN: Oh, no, it was, it was in and out for a bunch of reasons.

KRICKBAUM: Okay.

BIDEN: Because it drove me crazy. I wanted to drive it.

KRICKBAUM: Got it. That makes sense—a beautiful car.

BIDEN: And the worst part was, they said I couldn’t drive it outside the driveway. It’s a long driveway. So I’d get it to the bottom of the driveway, tack it up to about four grand. [Makes car sound.] You think I’m kidding; I’m not.

KRICKBAUM: We believe you.

ROBERT HUR: I believe you. Yes.

BIDEN: Probably one of the best parts to being vice president and president, I get to drive all these, you know, electric vehicles. I have. Damn, they’re quick. You know, think about this. You had one of those big four-by-fours, the—I think it’s a Ford Bronco, whatever it is. Zero to sixty in four point six.

HUR: Yes.

KRICKBAUM: Instant torque.

HUR: That’s fast.

BIDEN: Yeah. By the way, you know how it works? [Laughs.] It’s really cool.

HUR: Sir, I’d love—I would love, love to hear much more about this, but I do have a few more questions to get through.

BIDEN: You can take thirty seconds, but you put your foot on the brake, you hit, you hit a button that’s in the—and it says “launch.”

HUR: Whoa.

BIDEN: Until it gets to about six, seven grand. Then all of a sudden, it will say “launch.” All you do is take your foot off the brake. [Makes car sound and laughs.]

HUR: It’s on my bucket list. All right. So let’s—with that, let’s launch into the next subject.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND P.P.O.W GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

*Trophy and We wait until dark, paintings by Sanam Khatibi, whose work was on view last month at P.P.O.W Gallery, in New York City.*

[Story]  
**DOPPELGÄNGER**

By Gil Cuadros, from *My Body Is Paper*, which will be published this month by *City Lights*. In 1996, Cuadros died of AIDS complications at the age of thirty-four.

I had been breathing irregularly for the past few weeks, hyperventilating, hacking up yellowish phlegm. When I had a checkup with my doctor, he found nothing and thought my lungs sounded fine and strong.

Marcus was concerned as I went through bottles of grape-flavored cough syrup, bags of lemon drops, and gallons of bitter ginger tea; he insisted one night that I go to the emergency room at the nearby hospital. By that time it was apparent; my blood pressure was off. I could barely string more than three words together before I had to gasp for breath. I was immediately put in a thinly covered hospital bed, TV remote on my right, bed control on the left. My nostrils were tubed and fine streams of moist oxygen were pumped from the wall behind the bed covered with other medical gadgetry, overhead lamps, blood-pressure sleeve and gauge, various plugs for life-support machines, IVs. For

the moment it felt good to lie within the cool sheets of the hospital bed, my feet raised slightly, my back angled gently up. The New Zealander nurse who attended to my needs brought me delicious chicken sandwiches, glasses of crushed ice with water and lemon slices. She let me watch my favorite TV program before she painlessly extracted the twelve vials of blood into various-sized tubes with colored tops, all needed to start the many tests I was to undergo.

That night I dreamed my mother was yelling down at my youngest brother, the one I feel closest to. As the red-infused dream of my mother's tirade went on, her face changed into a bloody distortion, the creases in her face and forehead looked as if carved with a hatchet. She held a knife, a long, familiar kitchen knife that was the sharpest blade she had when we were children, and she could cut whole chicken parts with it, breaking the joints, slicing easily through the flesh. Once, she cut herself badly with this knife. She did not scream or cry; she simply clenched her finger under the faucet and blood swirled in the sink with the juice of the pulled-out chicken neck and brown giblets.

As if mirrored silk, the knife slid through my brother's rib cage, revealing organs still throbbing, like holy cards of Catholic martyrs. My voice became enclosed in old black lead. I wanted to scream the harshest words I could use; my face dripped jewel-like tears while my

body thrashed. Still, my mother kept on stabbing and slashing, the knife slicing through bone, severing arteries and creating spigots of shooting blood. My heart ceased as if being crushed between two firm hands. I was afraid to approach them, my brother's skin draped across her feet. I hunched down to protect my chest, deforming myself, as I have done my whole life, when she would strike me across the mouth for saying smart things, making sure I knew who ruled my life, enforcing that I had to be perfect in everyone else's eyes except hers because she knew how worthless and pathetic I was.

My New Zealander nurse touched my arm gently. "Do you always have night sweats so badly?" The sheet that had been covering me was sopping wet and smelled strangely of my body, tin cans, and cayenne pepper.

Twelve more empty vials were placed next to me; with tender movements she began to tie off my arm with a stretched latex glove. The muscles of my upper arm winced, circulation stopped, and my hand became numb.

The doctor stood in the room, clipboard tilted so only he could see the results of the tests. He was stocky, with black curly hair and a large bulbous nose. He tapped his nose with a single finger and then spoke. He was very concerned about why I was on such heavy antidepressants and another psych-oriented drug. I told him of my lifelong history of depression, my earliest experience at six years old, how I would lock myself in dark rooms, speak to no one.

He suggested that when I got out of the hospital I should see a psychiatrist and work myself off the psych drug; the antidepressant was my choice, however.

Some of the best drug experiences I've ever had were in the hospital. When I was suffering from shingles, I screamed for Demerol shots. It was lovely. With meningitis, the same drug of choice. But with pneumonia, they decided Halcion was best for me.

I stared across at Marcus, who was making a valiant effort to be there for me as much as he could; even though our area was having the worst winter in recent times, he'd come. The rains drenched his clothes, staining his shoulders, the calves of his legs. The buses he had to take were always late and crowded and he complained of people coughing without covering their mouths. He would bring me movies, snacks, my CD player, magazines that had only pictures.

My room turned into a Salvador Dalí painting; clocks melted like processed sliced cheese. Small silver disks would appear at the edge of my vision, and when I turned, they would dart the other way. I began to sleep like children sleep, or maybe I was the newly dead.

[Crónica]

## A SUIT WITH AN EXTRA PAIR OF PANTS

By Hebe Uhart, from *A Question of Belonging*, which was published last month by Archipelago Books. Translated from the Spanish by Anna Vilner.

A long time ago, Atilio and I lived in an apartment that my mom had purchased because Atilio said the last one depressed him so much he couldn't work. He had a point: the elevator in my old building had been jammed for about seventy years. When the windowpane fell onto us, we patched it up with cardboard and resolved to start a new life in a smaller, but newer, apartment. I dreamed of decorating it to

[Poem]

## SANCTUARY

By Tyree Daye, from a little bump in the earth, which was published in April by Copper Canyon Press.

I wasn't proud of my aim  
at the bird I kept missing  
& then finally shot through the head  
even when the men around me stopped  
looking down their guns  
to glove my shoulders  
to look into my cry-ready eyes  
which is all I'd ever wanted them to do

Uncle Pac jumped from the ground  
so I thanked God  
he didn't become a bird  
I'm sure we would have shot through him too

I want this story out of my mouth  
my murdering of feathers  
No it was not an accident  
where the pellet went I went

the other birds chased their cousin's spirit  
sobbing into the wind  
I went to help them look in the wood  
I saw a see-through quill

with my bright blue shame

my taste—I must have had a little taste in me—but I didn't know how people found all those pretty things for their houses. I chose the decorations very carefully, since Atilio tended to insult them, trip over them, or break them. We did

[History]

## DOG GONE SHAME

By Dominic Pettman and Eugene Thacker, from *Sad Planets*, which will be published this month by Polity.

The first female in space was not, as is commonly thought, Valentina Tereshkova in 1963, but Laika the dog, nearly six years earlier. We tend to forget this. Space dogs in the Soviet program—of which there were dozens—were female, since there was no room in the nose cone of the rocket ships for male dogs to lift their legs up and relieve themselves. Laika herself was sourced, like all her canine cosmonaut comrades, from the streets of Moscow. Scientists poached amiable strays and brought them to the Institute of Aviation Medicine. Laika was ultimately chosen not only for her cool temperament under pressure but for her pleasing silhouette. She was selected to orbit Earth in *Sputnik 2*—a larger and more ambitious satellite than the original *Sputnik*. As a result, the Western media nicknamed Laika “Muttnik.” Under pressure to ensure this second launch was timed to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution, shortcuts appear to have been taken. *Sputnik 2* took off successfully on November 3, 1957, and official Soviet news outlets reported a healthy passenger for the first few days. Decades later, we learned that these were in fact lies. Poor Laika perished about seven hours after liftoff, having endured terrible stress and unbearable temperatures (the latter were due to an issue with the thermal insulation). As a result, this first creature to leave Earth's orbit, presumably in the history of the planet, circled the globe as a singed corpse for five long months before finally receiving an organic cremation when *Sputnik 2* disintegrated while reentering Earth's atmosphere on April 14, 1958, after circling the planet 2,570 times. English-language newspapers called Laika “the fuzziest, loneliest, unhappiest dog in the world.”

save one thing from my old apartment, a small single bed, which I viewed as a discomfort I was destined to endure. At night, he would come home from his meanderings with the same old story: he had gotten into it with a huge military guy wearing epaulets and had won.

“Go to bed,” I would tell him gently, anticipating his speech about mediocre people not knowing the meaning of a heroic gesture.

When I'd leave for work, he'd be sleeping, enveloped in a cloud of alcohol.

“Let's get you cleaned up,” I said one day, determined. We went to see a doctor who prescribed him vitamins, but even his vitamins were different from the rest of the human race's—they were brown and circular, like grainy meatballs. I also took him to a psychiatrist, whom he called Dr. Doormat. Atilio entered loudly, slurring his words.

Dr. Doormat said, “Shhh. Why don't you sit down, nice and calm now.”

Given that he was afraid of the police, the military, doctors, his girlfriends' mothers, dogs, and traveling, Atilio obeyed.

He told me that if he was going to get a job, he would need a new suit, and I wasn't going to let an opportunity like that pass us by. My mom gave me money to go to Casa Muñoz, where one peso was worth two and a suit came with an extra pair of pants.

Atilio always wore a suit with a dress shirt and tie—not once did I see him in a casual jacket or jeans. Deep down he wanted to fit in, but the odds were stacked against him. He had worked at an insurance company for a few months, where, according to some protocol I'd never heard of, he'd been promoted to company secretary. His job was to take the minutes at meetings. But it caused him so much anxiety to write everything down (he couldn't catch even half of what was said) that he threw the minute book into the Riachuelo River. Afterward he was anxious he might be punished and felt humiliated for lying, since he told his colleagues he had lost the book.

So I went to Casa Muñoz with the confidence of someone fulfilling an important role, while he waited in the bar on the corner (he always waited in the bar on the corner) for me to carry out my official duties. I didn't have any of his measurements, so I brought a spool of thread to measure the length of the pants—in such a hectic and eventful life, measurements are irrelevant details. I had just gone inside that beautiful shop with its elegant salesmen when it occurred to me that I was going about things all wrong, but I wasn't one to be easily daunted, so I put the spool on the counter.

“Oh, no. This won't do. The young man must come in person.”

“He's in the bar on the corner,” I said weakly.

“Bring him here.”

As though it were an easy feat, I went to convince Atilio to come, and he followed me to the shop, terrified. Two tall, elegantly dressed salesmen were standing by the door, an arrogant air about them. Atilio was skinny and dressed in tattered clothing—he looked at the shop and its two giants like he couldn't believe his eyes. The large and prestigious men took his measurements in a corner.

When we left, one of the giants, a security guard of sorts, said, "You need to eat more, young man, you are too skinny."

I would soon need to return to Casa Muñoz because both pairs fell into disuse. I don't know where the first pants disappeared to, and the second ones looked like they'd passed through a thousand wars. They had strange things attached to them, sticky things, and they seemed like they'd been chewed up and torn.

I'll go back and have them mended, I thought.

The salesman looked at them.

Taking care not to touch them, he spoke in a dubious and troubled voice: "Just look at them! How could he have torn them in such a way?"

"I don't know," I said, distressed by my own ignorance.

"No, there is no fixing these," he said.

What a shame, I thought, while Atilio waited for me at home under the covers, since he hadn't been able to come along without pants to wear. I had wanted the salesman to raise them toward the light, with a stick, perhaps—but sticks aren't found in shops, so he lifted the cuff with his fingernail to see what unfathomable mystery might be hiding inside those pants.

[Fiction]

## JIM AND EILIS

By Colm Tóibín, from *Long Island*, which was published last month by Scribner.

When Martin entered, the bar was empty. Jim served him a bottle of Guinness, then went into the stockroom at the back, pretending he was busy, hoping that Martin would leave when he had finished his drink. When he returned to the bar, however, Martin was still there.

"My sister Eilis is back from America," he said. "I suppose someone told you."

"I heard, all right."

"You used to do a line with her. It's a pity that didn't work out. I'd have free drink for life."

Jim did not reply.

[Auteur Theory]

## FILM COMMENT

From Facebook posts written by the director Paul Schrader since 2021.

AN OBSERVATION ABOUT FILM ECONOMICS. The post-nickelodeon decision to monetize motion pictures (squeezing large numbers of patrons into unair-conditioned rooms with—for a time—intermittent vaudeville acts) worked like a charm, for decades. Then came TV. Yet movies survived, and became exploitation pix, women's pix, prestige pix, horror pix, genre pix, realist pix. They were bigger in scope, racier in subject matter: newsreels, serious dramas, art films, European films—in air-conditioned cinemas. Now comes film's third phase: the growing desire of audiences to see in-theater entertainment become like home entertainment, and a shift from the stand-alone two-hour drama inspired by literature to ongoing episodic dramas inspired by crime serials, telenovelas, expanded documentary and biographical sagas, which strip storytelling of its ability to compose concise narratives that land like a punch in the face.

In early films, violence was pretend: dramatic staggers after being shot, shots miraculously fired from a gunslinger's hand, wounds healed after a quick wrap. In the era of televised Vietnam violence, it became gruesome: explicit squib hits, open wounds, the walking wounded. Now, in the digital era of video games, we have returned to pretend violence: digital muzzle flashes and bullet hits, heroes imperious to guns, wounds that vanish.

For cinema, there was before Godard and after him. For years he disassembled cinema and reassembled it until it became his personal Rubik's Cube. He and Dylan are the quizzical lodestars of their time. Godard was a trick master of quotes, so he'll appreciate this Marlene Dietrich line from *Touch of Evil*: "He was some kind of man. What does it matter what you say about people?"

THERE IS A NEW CINEMA LANGUAGE. Films in the international lineup make clear that multitasking, video games, and digital filmmaking have changed the language of cinema. What was once considered experimental in style and narrative has become normative. How is it possible to teach directing? You can teach time management, working with actors, lenses and lighting, but there are no longer directing rules.

"Her and the mother aren't getting on at all. They're like a pair of cats. I don't know what's gotten into the two of them. So Eilis has gone down to Cush, to my little shack, on her own, to get away."

"To Cush?"

"Yes, she's down there on her own. She must be going mad."

As soon as Martin left, Jim found himself feeling almost as sad about losing Eilis as he had felt twenty years before. The sadness that had lingered for six months or so after she left returned at odd times, often on a Saturday night when he went up the stairs after the pub had shut. It seemed so wrong to him that she was now back in town but that they would not meet, that she would not get in contact. She might depart once more without his catching even another glimpse of her, as though they were strangers.

In the silence, and with nothing to do, Jim decided that he would drive to Cush. But the idea of a firm encounter with her made him stop for a moment. How would he explain his decision to drive down to Cush and find her?

It would be simple, he thought; he would tell her the truth. He would recount to her Martin's visit to the pub. He would not stay long; he would assure her of that. It was really just to see her. Would that explanation be enough?

He could hardly have asked Martin precisely where the house was. All he knew was that it was near the cliff.

**I**n Cush, he parked the car at the top of a lane that led down to the sea. He passed a mobile home, a single-decker bus that had been cemented into the ground, and then a few modern huts. The smell was of clover and grass, and in the distance he could hear the sound of a tractor.

When he turned down the next lane, he found two houses on the left-hand side but no sign of life, no parked car or clothes hanging out to dry. If the tractor sound were not there, this could easily feel like a place abandoned.

At the end of the lane, there was a low ditch, but no set of steps leading to the strand. He stood on the ditch and looked down at the calm sea and the deserted shore. Perhaps Eilis had just driven down here and gone for a walk and was now back in her mother's house. He was almost relieved at the thought that he might not now have to meet her. The stillness, the calm waves, the thin white clouds in the eastern sky, the empty houses, emphasized how inhospitable this place was to an outsider, someone who did not even know what house he was looking for.

As he walked back to the car, a woman standing in the gateway of the second house was studying him closely.

"You look like a man who is lost," she said.

"I was looking for Martin Lacey's house."

"Martin's not there. I heard his car blasting off early this morning, and I haven't heard him coming back. He has to do something about the car."

Jim hesitated. He wanted to ask her if Eilis was in Martin's house.

"Now, you are the man that has that pub in Enniscorthy," she said. "I am Lily Devereux's mother. She used to talk about you. I remembered you because I had seen your name over the pub."

Jim still saw Lily Devereux sometimes in town. She had been on the board of the credit union with him. News would spread that he had been seen in Cush. He would have to be careful what he said.

"Well, I was looking for Martin. But I'll find him in the town."

"His sister is there now in the house, one of the neighbors told me. She has a rented car with a Dublin registration. I don't think I know her at all."

"Do you know which house is Martin's?" he asked.

"It's beyond the judge's house," she replied, "below the marl pond."

Jim made clear that he did not know what she was talking about.

"It's the other lane," she said. "I always call it the good lane, although this lane is good, too."

Jim nodded.

"And is your wife well?"

"I'm not actually ..."

"Well, there's plenty of time. And you would be a great catch. A fine-looking man with a nice business. I'd go for you myself if I was a year or two younger."

"I'll tell Lily I met you."

"Don't tell her what I just said. She'd murder me!"

"I'll say nothing."

**H**e had the keys in his hand, ready to open the door of the car, when he stopped. There was another noise in the distance, the sharp, piercing sound of a chain saw. It was coming from over the hill, cutting through the thick silence that seemed to seep up from the strand. He sighed and put the keys in his pocket. He would walk down "the good lane," as Mrs. Devereux had called it. If he saw a car with a Dublin registration, he would know Eilis was there.

The car, parked to the side of a small house that was in need of repair, stood out in the landscape, louder than any noise. A model he had never seen before, it was new in a way that nothing down here was new. He wondered if Eilis might see him from one of the small windows of the house and if she would come to the door without his having to knock. He stood and waited. Perhaps she had indeed seen him and decided to retreat into one of the back rooms.



"Perrine, Florida, 1981," a photograph by Sage Sohier, whose work was on view in April at Joseph Bellows Gallery, in La Jolla, California. Sohier's book *Passing Time* was published last year by Nazraeli Press.

He would go down to the strand, he thought, and walk by the sea. On his way back, he would stop again, and he might be in luck, she might emerge or appear at a window. He would have to let her know that he was not going to make a nuisance of himself. That would be important, but it might be hard to do were he to appear without warning at her door.

When he saw her walking toward him on the strand, he realized she would be alarmed at the sight of him no matter what. He was an intruder on her solitude. But she had seen him; he could not turn. Her hair was wet from the water. She was wearing a blue dress and had a towel under her arm. As he was trying to work out what to say, a wave came rushing in toward him and he had to dart quickly away from it.

He felt for a moment a sense of pure disbelief that this was happening. He looked down at the sand, and when he lifted his head she was there, the expression on her face not angry or fearful but puzzled, almost amused.

"How did you know I was here?"

"Martin was in the bar. He told me."

"And you drove down immediately?"

"I saw you on the street a while ago and I worried we might never get a chance—"

"How are you?"

"Good. I'm glad to see you."

"Will you walk back with me?" she asked.

If anyone were to meet them now, he thought, they might be a local couple taking a walk, but when he stole a glance at her, he saw that this could not be true: she did not look like a local woman. Her dress could not have been bought in Ireland. And the natural way her hair was cut, accentuated by the wetness, set her apart, as did the smoothness of her skin. But more than anything, it was the ease and confidence she had.

Her face was thinner; he could see some wrinkles at the corners of her mouth. But her eyes were bright and alert, and her gaze was focused as she turned to him and spoke decisively.

"I'm told that you are doing a strong line with a woman in Dublin."

"Who told you that?"

"Everyone knows it."

"Except me."

"Is that why you're blushing?"

He could think of nothing to say in reply. He wasn't sure if she had really heard such a thing or if she had made it up in order to break the silence.

"And you?" he asked.

"I'm a married woman and a mother."

"How long are you staying?"

"Four or five weeks more. My children are coming at the beginning of August."

He noticed that she did not say her husband was coming too and was glad. He would not relish seeing Eilis with her American husband in the streets of the town.

"How is your mother?"

"Well. She's well."

He wanted to ask her why she was here alone, but every question he thought of seemed wrong. It occurred to him that he really wanted to ask if she had ever regretted not staying with him.

"Do you like it down here?" he asked.

"It's so calm, so empty."

[Poem]

## EARTH FROM

By Oli Hazzard, from *Sleepers Awake*, which will be published next year by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

The murmur  
of an um  
and an

er, etc.,  
sustains the  
"apparent present"

through "stains  
in the day"—  
whatever

precedes us  
seeds how  
we guess

I guess.  
Little bits  
of anguish

showing you  
how to  
distinguish

foot from  
earth from  
star from

song to  
chew off  
and on.

When they came to the steps that led to the cliff, she found her sandals. He helped her climb the loose sand to the first step. As he took her hand, he thought this might have been what he came down here for, to touch her once, to have her smile as she leaned on him. And then to walk slowly behind her up to the edge of the cliff.

"My hair still feels wet," she said. "It takes so long for anything to dry in this air."

In the lane, he saw what she was doing. She was somehow making this encounter natural, uncomplicated. He would get no chance to ask her anything. As the early evening sunlight caught her face, her smile was a mask. But there was no strain in her voice.

"Your accent hasn't changed much," he said.

"Sometimes I try to sound more American, but the kids say I just sound even more Irish."

"Have they been to Ireland before?"

"Never."

"Nor you, since you left?"

"This is my first time since then."

Neither of them, he knew, would have any trouble remembering what "then" meant. He wished he had been with her all these years, but there was nothing that could be done about it now.

It struck him that since this was probably the last time he would see her, he should say something. But then he thought it would be best to leave it.

"You look so sad," she said.

"I feel sad seeing you."

"Don't be sad about that. It was the way it had to be."

"And do you ever...?"

"Ever?"

"I don't know. Do you ever think about me?"

As soon as he had said it, he knew how wrong it sounded. It was as if he was looking for pity or needed her to say something comforting to him. He watched her thinking; she had decided, he saw, not to respond. When he had known her, she was softer. She would have made it easier for him. Now, as they stood by her car, it was clear that she wanted him to go. She put out her hand. That was as much as she would do.

He would say nothing more to embarrass her or himself.

"I hope I didn't surprise you too much."

"Not at all," she said.

"I thought we should see each other, and it would be hard to do that in town."

When she did not answer, he reached out and shook her hand.

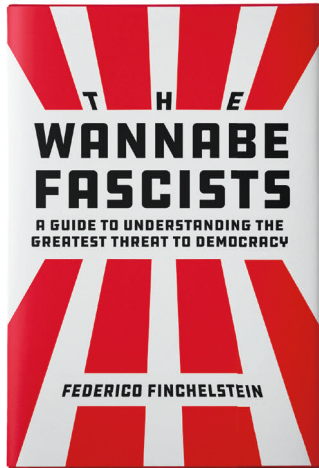
He walked up the lane to his car, noticing that the noise of the chain saw persisted, cutting through the air with the same sharpness as before. He stood and inspected the horizon before taking out his keys and opening the car and turning it so that he could go back to Enniscorthy.





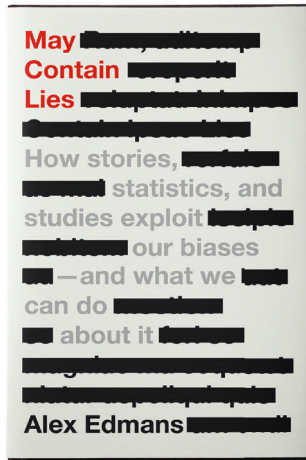
*Sprinkler*, a painting by Olivia Hill, whose work was on view in April at Bel Ami, in Los Angeles.

# NEW FROM UC PRESS



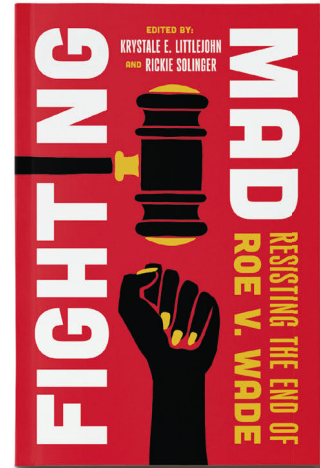
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“Essential reading for the times in which we live.”  
—*Times Literary Supplement*

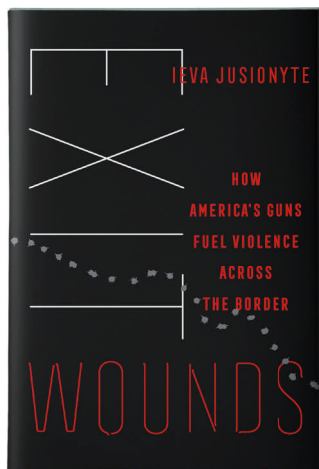


“Brilliantly researched and written and immensely practical in helping guide us through this thicket of (mis)information.”  
—Andy Haldane, former Chief Economist, Bank of England

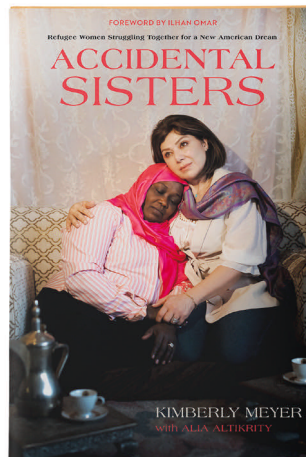
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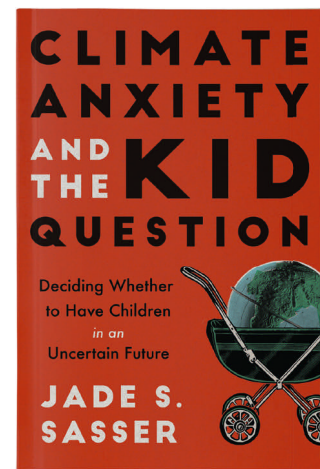
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# WHAT GOES UP

Does the rise of index funds spell catastrophe?

By Andrew Lipstein

**M**oney—where it comes from, where it goes—was on my mind as I drove from Brooklyn to Philadelphia last fall, a Friday the thirteenth. I spent most of the trip on a Zoom call with my wife and our doula, discussing what combination of night nurses, babysitters, and nannies we'd need come the birth of our twins, our second and third sons. Nary a dollar figure was uttered, seemingly out of respect, just as those attending a funeral avoid naming the actual cause of death.

Still, I wondered what exactly would balance out those items on our ledger. The writing of this article, plus a month's salary from us both? A quarter of my next book advance? All the pizza I'd delivered when I was in high school and college? The fungibility of money can feel by turns

sublime, magical, contrived. How can you pay for something and not know what real-world acts or sacrifices you're paying *with*?

As the call ended and the Philadelphia skyline lifted onto the horizon, that unspeakable sum began to seem pathetically small, trinket-like, nicked coins in the face of a vault of cash. I had made the journey to speak with Michael Green, a fund manager notable for both an immensely profitable trade he orchestrated for Peter Thiel worth nearly \$250 million, and his (occasionally combative) warnings about the boom in passive investing, which is now estimated to account for more than \$15 trillion globally. (Estimates vary widely. Experts put passive investing's share of the U.S. stock market anywhere between 15 and 38 percent.) Green isn't the only

*Andrew Lipstein is the author of the novels Last Resort and The Vegan. His new novel, Something Rotten, will be published next January by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.*

one worried: vocal skeptics include Cathie Wood, Michael Burry, Peter Lynch, Elon Musk, David Einhorn, Carl Icahn, and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. But unlike those bigwigs, Green is known for, and only known for, this issue. It is his *idée fixe*, his *raison d'être*, or—to get a little less French—his “thing.” If a niche finance podcast wants to dive into the topic, Green is the one they call. Try asking a friend who follows the market whether they think index funds are a bubble; money has it they’ll bring him up. He has become so synonymous with the subject that a Bloomberg headline referred to him solely as a HATER OF PASSIVE INVESTING.

I was a bit uneasy as I approached the door to his apartment building, a dignified brick structure on a narrow street in a historic district. (Green doesn’t have a permanent residence. He and his wife are trying out a few different places, though his choice of Philadelphia is telling, situated right between New York and Washington, the nerve centers of finance and politics, respectively.) There was a smattering of reasons for my angst.

## THERE WAS SOMETHING EXISTENTIALLY DISTURBING ABOUT MEETING A PASSIVE-INVESTING DOOMSAYER WHEN THE BULK OF MY FAMILY’S SAVINGS IS INVESTED PASSIVELY

Green is vociferous on Twitter, despite the tone set by his handle (@profplum99) and profile picture (Wallace Shawn as Vizzini from *The Princess Bride*). The morning of my visit, Green got into a squabble about inflation, questioning how “in charge of their faculties” his opponent was. (The other user, @Tim75491582, had three followers.) I couldn’t help but begin to question my own faculties, especially since my day had started at 4 AM, my alarm clock a screaming child. There was also something existentially disturbing about meeting with a passive-investing doomsayer when the bulk of my family’s savings is, more or less, invested passively. (Even that phrase, supine as it is, gives me and my wife too much credit. We each make contributions to our individual set-it-and-forget-it portfolios, have bemoaned their performance for years, and have hardly changed a thing.)

But these abstract preoccupations sunk away as one much more visceral emerged. Green came downstairs with his two dogs, asking that we walk to a café before going into the apartment, so that the hounds could get used to me. He then called one of them “insane, though very sweet,” and alluded to an incident between it and two deer, in which the dog may or may not have ended the deer’s lives. When I joked to Green about my own legs being the size of a buck’s—and thus just as easy to break—he looked down at

them, as if he could see through my pants, and said they were, in fact, bigger. As the dog brought its snout against my knee, thigh, and crotch, I pretended to be relaxed, a harmless but inquisitive journalist with the kind of sangfroid both man and canine could appreciate. It was only once the dog had deemed me an ally, or at least insufficiently appetizing, and we went on our way, that the manifold and striking ironies appeared before me.

My most recent novel, *The Vegan*, centers on a bout of interspecies empathy between a dog and a hedge-fund manager. Unbeknownst to me until I read a review of the book in the *New York Times*, the protagonist’s name, Herschel Caine, “were you to consult a naming dictionary, translates roughly to ‘deer killer.’”

Then there’s Green’s physical appearance. When I initially looked him up, I’d noticed his resemblance to Matthew Macfadyen as Tom Wambsgans in the HBO series *Succession*, jotting down that he had “the not-so-much deer-in-the-headlights look but the look of headlights as they approach the deer.”

I was still digesting all of this when, walking out of the café, a coffee in each hand, I found Green talking to a man in a black hoodie that read BAN STUPID PEOPLE, NOT DOGS. He seemed to be lecturing Green, and Green was listening avidly. The man, it turned out, was a dog psychologist who goes by Peter Jam; his business card touts DOGGY EDUCATION FOR ALL. For a few minutes, Green’s dog’s neuroses were discussed in terms so concrete they made my last therapist’s offerings seem platitudinal.

This was the nail in the coffin, the last clue I needed from the universe that I was in the wrong—as someone who doesn’t like dogs, who penny-pinches when it comes to our postpartum needs, who passively invests. It was in this state of mind that I listened, for more than four hours straight, as Green spoke with confidence, precision, and patience about the lunacy of index funds, about information flows versus financial flows, about going long cheap stocks and short momentum stocks and the Shiller PE Ratio and “the crazy guys from Cornhole Capital” and long puts and the VIX and SVXY and watching his parents give up their property owing to high taxes and “the king who thinks that he’s munificent and yet beats his jester” and, most of all, permeating every thought and aside, the immense bubble growing steadily in the market, invisible to the average investor even as—or perhaps because—it swallows more and more and more and more of our money every day. To call it a cancer on the economy would capture the urgency of Green’s warnings, but the analogy falls short once you realize that the tumor has already claimed more than a sixth of its victim—the size of a limb—and

is still deemed by mainstream opinion to be the healthiest part of the body.

Green is funny, and self-aware, and intimidating, and I soon found that I had come to believe everything he said. With this belief came a kind of relief. I felt that I'd answered the call of the cosmos. I'd listened; my eyes were opening. And yet, when I left him, fully ensconced in his point of view, the coincidences didn't stop, as if I hadn't even begun to learn my lesson, as if I had poked some beast and it would now be shining its eyes on me everywhere I went. It even followed me into the next day, rearing its head while I was on a run in the rain. I'd glanced up at a brownstone to see, floating by a tree, two stories up, a lone, iridescent soap bubble. I looked around me, expecting to see a child on the sidewalk, or an adult peering out of a window, but there was no one. By the time I lifted my phone and navigated to my camera it was gone.

**F**inancial bubbles, real and imagined, assume all shapes and sizes. They can emerge in any corner of the market, at any time in the broader economic cycle, no matter whether the policy du jour is austerity or expansionary. They might become infamous, like the Dutch tulip mania of 1637—one of the first known speculative bubbles, and now on the lips of corporate motivational speakers the world over—or quickly lost to history, like the uranium bubble of 2007. They can arise from short-term events, like the Poseidon bubble—a consequence of the increased demand for nickel during the Vietnam War—or a confluence of less-tangible factors, like the supposed higher-education bubble.

But however diverse bubbles may be, they all follow the same pattern, or so says a theory that is often misattributed solely to Hyman P. Minsky but was actually more of an intellectual baton-passing. Specifically, it states that there are five stages: displacement, boom, euphoria, profit-taking, and panic.

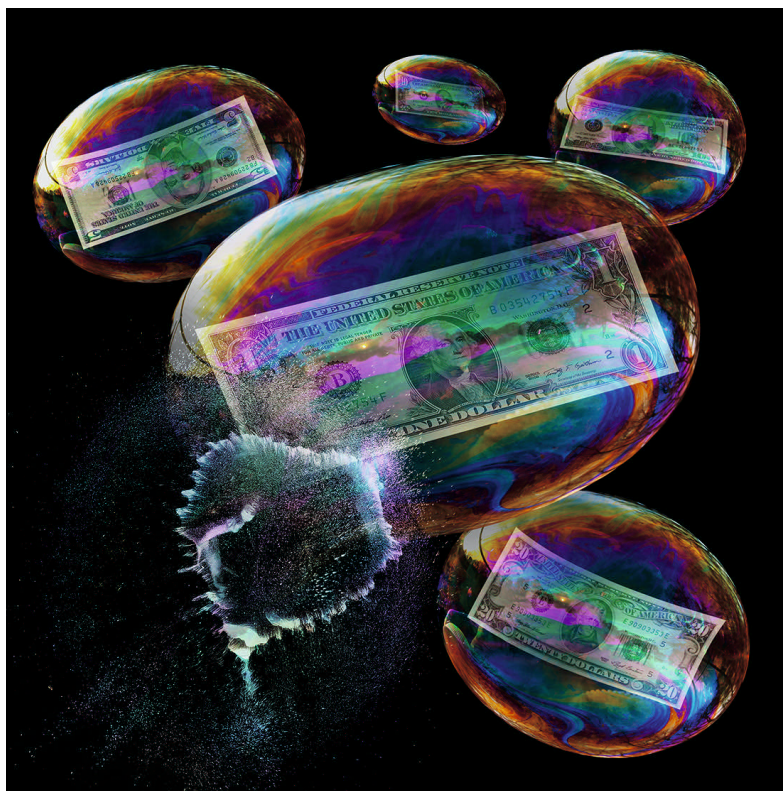
Displacement is all about a tweak in conditions, one that provides fertile ground for a new paradigm. Just as dry-wet cycles and the perfect ratio of chemicals allowed life to profit on earth, displacement is both precondition and stimulus.

Then comes the boom. In recent memory, this might have been most keenly felt during Super Bowl LVI, in 2022, also known as the Crypto Bowl. With \$39 million spent on cryptocurrency ads, featuring stars like Matt Damon, LeBron James, and Larry David—how did we ever trust so many first names in a row?—this was when the FOMO was, so to speak, real.

You know something is seriously wrong when a financial vehicle is being described like a hard drug, and euphoria is just that: a sign that the situation is about to go off the rails. In 2007, this

would have been your not particularly well-off aunt in Phoenix buying her second condo. In 2000, this would have been your college roommate dropping out to launch a (well-funded) pen-pal start-up. In 1928, this would have been, well, putting your money anywhere but under your mattress.

During the profit-taking stage, you start to see some selling, especially from “smart money”—market movers who are usually quicker to the draw and, owing to their size, impactful. This is when things get ugly—and when we really have to double down on the bubble metaphor. Once a bubble pops, it's only the air that evaporates. The



soap—slippery and made mostly of fat—is still somewhere out there, both hidden from sight and a lot more concentrated than it was before. Not that it's always advantageous to try and join in with those on the outside, betting against a (seemingly) swollen bubble; this can be just as dangerous as hopping in. As Keynes said: “The markets can remain irrational longer than you can remain solvent.”

Panic is the negative image of euphoria. Both involve the bulk of the market moving in lock-step, but with each individual investor convinced he can get in (or out) just before his neighbor. Think of panic as musical chairs, except the more frantically everyone tries to sit the quicker the chairs disappear. Today it might seem self-evident that panic begets panic—we've all seen *It's a*

*Wonderful Life*—but it wasn't until the early Eighties that we formally understood why this happens and how to prevent it, thanks to the work of Douglas Diamond, Philip H. Dybvig, and Ben Bernanke. (For their contributions, the trio was awarded the 2022 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences.)

None of these five stages alone is proof of a bubble. The 1929 panic ending the Roaring Twenties bull market (a certified bubble if ever there was one) is best captured in photographs showing throngs of men waiting outside banks to withdraw their savings. But the contemporary, funhouse incarnation of this image—lines of (still mostly) men panicking at the doors of Silicon Valley Bank during last year's regional banking crisis, their precursors' suits and fedoras traded in for jeans and down jackets—wasn't the result of a bubble, at least not by any rigorous definition. (Though it is tempting to imagine the board of your local regional bank lost in the euphoric throes of long-term Treasury bonds.)

Less clear, and more disconcerting, is a related question: Can something be a bubble if it lacks, or bypasses, one of Minsky et al.'s stages? And if so, could such an elision make it all the more cataclysmic?

**P**assive investing has an ostensibly simple definition: it's a buy-and-hold strategy using index (or similar) funds to match the overall performance of the market. Yet Green and his ilk would object starting with "buy-and-hold" and reach a fever pitch by "overall performance of the market." (In conversation, Green's tone belies his vehemence. He refers to passive investing dispassionately, using the truncated term "passive," just as millennial music fans might say "indie.")

Let's start with active investing then, which was just called "investing" before "passive" came along. In public markets, this is the buying (hopefully when low) and selling (ideally when high) of individual investments like stocks, bonds, and derivatives (such as options and futures). You might think a company is undervalued, or bound to break through in South America, or on the cusp of shedding that pesky corporate-malfeasance lawsuit, so you buy. Then, once you surmise it's overvalued, or your prediction came true (or didn't), or you need the money, you sell. Because buying a stock helps increase the price and selling helps decrease it, you're also doing your part to keep the market "efficient." In an efficient market, all prices reflect all available information. It's a quality, like freedom, we refer to in the absolute despite the fact that it can only really exist in shades. (It's also a term that makes Green bridle. When I asked him if he thinks active investing, unlike passive, makes the mar-

ket more efficient, he sighed heavily and said, "You've got to be very careful with that. It's a very loaded term in economics." He then suggested I use "mean-reversionary behavior" instead. The day after I wrote this paragraph, a week and a half after we met, he published a post on his Substack titled "For your information: 'Market Efficiency' is not the question.")

After trying your hand at the market, you might realize you're not that good at this buying low and selling high, nor do you have the know-how to diversify your portfolio enough to mitigate risk. So you give your money to someone who has told you, or at least implied—but never promised, and certainly not on paper—that over time, they can make more for you than you can make for yourself, even after taking their fees into account. This relationship can assume quite a few forms, though one of the most popular has been the mutual fund, in which the savings of many individual investors are pooled together and controlled by money managers. Though they're commonplace today (by 2022, just over half of U.S. households had shares in at least one mutual fund), they didn't get Joe and Jane Investor's attention until the Sixties—when funds began advertising to the broader public—and only really started to catch on in the Eighties, thanks to a bull market, name-brand stock pickers like Peter Lynch and Michael F. Price, and the rise of the retirement plan.

Meanwhile, another storm was brewing. Though John "Jack" Bogle would go on to lead the index-fund revolution—an ever-growing thorn in the side of active mutual-fund managers—he once sat on the other side of the aisle. In 1970, he became the chairman of the Wellington Management Company, a storied institution, having launched the world's first balanced mutual fund in 1929. ("Balanced" refers to the use of both stocks and bonds, the most common ratio being "60/40," a term that now acts as a byword for the most middle-of-the-road, meat-and-potatoes investment strategies.) Just four years later, after Bogle led a disastrous merger that he himself called "shameful and inexcusable and a reflection of immaturity and confidence beyond what the facts justified" (he also said he was "wrapped up in the excitement of the go-go era"), he was fired.

That same year, the Nobel-winning economist Paul Samuelson published a column titled "Challenge to Judgment" in *The Journal of Portfolio Management*. In rhapsodic prose, he concluded that "the best of money managers cannot be demonstrated to be able to deliver the goods of superior portfolio-selection performance." In other words, money managers weren't that great at managing money. (The trend holds true today. Over the past two decades, only 7 percent of actively managed funds beat the S&P 500.) As

the *Financial Times* journalist Robin Wigglesworth frames it in *Trillions*, his comprehensive and impressively evenhanded history of the index fund, this “landed like a call for atheism published in the Vatican’s *L’Osservatore Romano*.” Not everyone was upset. Bogle, per Wigglesworth, found Samuelson’s premise “electrifying.” (The love would turn out to be, as it were, mutual. Speaking on the index fund in 2005, Samuelson said, “I rank this Bogle invention along with the invention of the wheel, the alphabet, Gutenberg printing, and wine and cheese.”) In his piece, Samuelson called for a passive fund that would simply mirror the Standard and Poor’s 500, an index tracking five hundred of the largest U.S. stocks. But Samuelson had wanted such a fund only because he thought it would show just how mediocre active managers were in comparison. Bogle, on the other hand, needing a fresh idea to set sail on, saw a business opportunity. So what if a fund’s returns were merely on par with the rest of the market? This was, apparently, what actively managed funds were getting away with while charging hard-working Americans high fees for their middling performance. If this new index-style fund’s fees were low enough—and they could be, given such a hands-off approach—that could be Bogle’s edge.

That September, disgraced yet still yoked to Wellington, he started a new firm within his old offices. He’d even hoped to use the Wellington name and, when rebuffed, struggled to find one for himself. Then, shortly before the company was set to launch, he came across a quote by Horatio Nelson, considered to be the greatest officer in British Royal Navy history: “Nothing could withstand the squadron under my command.” It’s easy to imagine Bogle, smitten by these words, his lips tracing their syllables, his eyes widening imperceptibly as he discovered that Nelson wrote this victory speech while aboard—what else?—the HMS *Vanguard*. (It helped that Bogle’s second-in-command had heard from some ad execs that V was a strong letter.)

Vanguard’s First Index Investment Trust (known today as the Vanguard 500 Index Fund) wasn’t technically the first market-cap-weighted index fund. (This means that each stock in the fund is weighted proportionally to its total market value. Today, for example, Microsoft on its own commands around 7 percent of the Vanguard 500.) Nor was it particularly popular when it first launched. Bogle himself called it “an artistic, if not commercial, success.” This was telling. For a man deeply passionate about the theoretical foundations of finance, he had a flair for the more human side of the business: courting the press, converting employees into evangelists, turning an investment fund into a moral crusade. He also had a healthy ego. When I asked Green

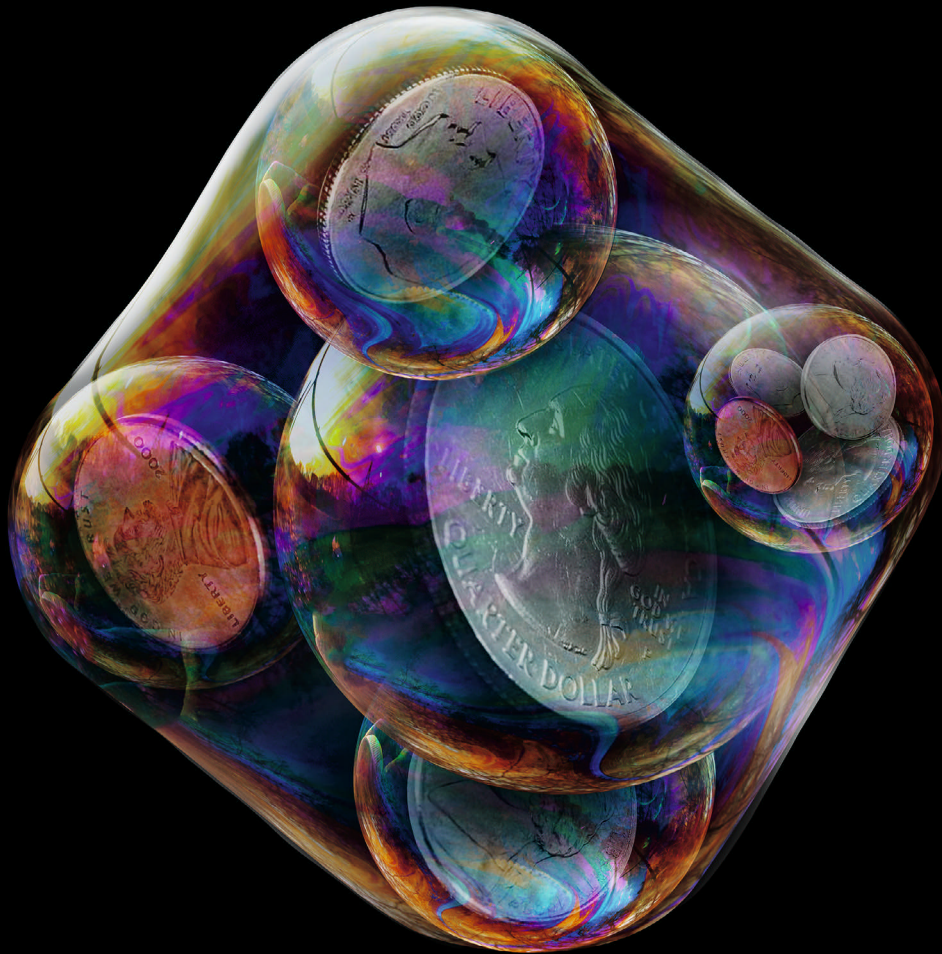
to describe Bogle in one word, he tripled his allowance: “an incredible salesman.” (Coincidentally, Green had used a factor of three earlier in our conversation, when estimating how bloated the valuation of the S&P 500 is.)

So how did we get from Bogle’s first fund, which raised just \$11.32 million—with such a paltry sum, Vanguard couldn’t even sufficiently buy all the stocks in the index—to the more than \$13 trillion passively invested in the U.S. stock market today? To the naked eye, passive’s increase in assets under management (AUM) through the years mirrors that of the supposed performance of an index fund: slow and steady, with momentum building as gains compound (and occasionally dampening in times of recession). But a closer look reveals a new paradigm at play over the past fifteen years or so—a much steeper climb, which Green and other passive-investing Cassandras blame on regulation, monetary policy, new investment vehicles, and even public narratives. Or, as Minsky might call it: displacement.

These changes may seem disparate and disconnected, yet they all speak to a continually swelling, improbably bipartisan belief: that Americans

AN EFFICIENT MARKET IS A QUALITY, LIKE FREEDOM,  
WE REFER TO IN THE ABSOLUTE DESPITE THE FACT  
THAT IT CAN ONLY REALLY EXIST IN SHADES

are best off parking their savings in long-term, highly diversified, passive investments—and those savings better grow. The first shift goes back nearly fifty years and sets the scene for the rest. The advent of the 401(k) plan, set in motion by the Revenue Act of 1978, gave workers a tax-deferred savings account linked to their employer, and helped funnel money from pension plans (in which employees continue to collect income after they retire) into retirement plans, where savings are accrued *before* retirement and invested in securities, like stocks. (It should be noted that both systems, distinct as they are, tie benefits to employment—something that has long overtaken baseball as America’s national pastime.) Over the next few years, this ruling was beefed up—in 1981, the IRS began allowing participants to deduct contributions directly from their salary—and by 1983, almost half of all large companies offered or were at least considering 401(k) plans. This, combined with the rip-roaring bull market of the Eighties, was a major boon for the likes of Vanguard, which introduced its first 401(k) program in 1983. At the start of the decade, Vanguard claimed around \$3 billion in AUM; by the end of it, this had ballooned to more than \$47 billion.



But you can now passively diversify with an even lower expense ratio, thanks to the next incarnation of indexing. Exchange-traded funds, or ETFs, are a child of the Nineties, though they didn't really get going until the Aughts. Vanguard began offering them in 2001, when there were roughly one hundred in total. There are now around eleven thousand. Unlike with a mutual fund, you need not sign some byzantine management agreement or scroll through a dull-as-death prospectus. ETFs also offer more transparency, no minimums, intraday trading (you can usually trade mutual-fund shares only once a day), and greater tax efficiency. Listed and traded like stocks, they're as easy to buy as shares of Netflix. The biggest ETF is State Street's SPDR S&P 500, ticker symbol SPY, which at the time of this writing manages more than \$500 billion, about as much as the market values of IBM, Boeing, and Disney combined. Twenty-four hours a day, five days a week, you can now put a

mere one dollar in SPY (or any of the other handful of ETFs that track the S&P 500), your dollar instantly split into five hundred pieces and invested in each of the companies, proportionate to their size, lucky enough to receive your fraction of a cent. But you can do so much more than simply buy ETFs. You can short ETFs, lend ETFs to others who want to short them, hedge with ETFs, buy ETFs on margin, and trade derivatives like options on ETFs. In this way, they can feel like the Monster to Bogle's Frankenstein, slipping from his grip, gaining a mind of their own, and, well, giving everyday investors just a bit too much discretion.

Bogle hated the more adventurous ETFs and called those who bought them "fruitcakes, nutcases, and [the] lunatic fringe." In 2019, eight months after he died, the Securities and Exchange Commission passed "the ETF Rule," making it even easier to bring ETFs to market. Suddenly, on top of ETFs for standard sectors,



commodities, currencies, and foreign assets, there were ETFs for the cannabis industry (ticker symbol: MJ), the crypto industry (CRPT), and meme stocks (the now-defunct MEME). There was even an ETF tracking the yelly CNBC host Jim Cramer's stock picks (LJIM); this ceased trading on September 11 of last year. The past few years have also seen the dizzying rise of what a Morningstar analyst likened to "walking into the casino": leveraged and inverse ETFs, like one built to do the opposite of what Jim Cramer says (SJIM); SJIM, too, has been shuttered. Green himself has the rule to thank for the fund he runs, the Simplify Macro Strategy ETF; it is, of course, actively managed. Its ticker symbol is FIG, which Green references in the name of his Substack: "Yes, I give a fig."

Given their low cost, low barrier to entry, and diversity, it's no wonder that ETFs have siphoned off more and more market share from passive mutual funds. Recently, in fact, U.S. passive ETFs have overtaken their less-junty older cousin in AUM. (At the end of 2023, U.S.-listed ETFs hit an AUM of \$8.2 trillion; the vast majority of these are passive.) But this town, it turns out, is big enough for both passive vehicles. Despite the ascent of passive ETFs, index-based mutual funds have only continued to amass assets, thanks in large part to their not-so-secret weapon: aging Americans. If you've ever wanted to ask, "Well, aren't *all* Americans aging?" you're not just an asshole; you've hit on exactly why passive mutual funds, unlike cable TV, won't go out with the baby boomers. As soon as you start a 401(k), fresh out of college—or, perhaps more realistically, in your thirties—you're likely already pouring money into passive mutual funds.

Green lays a great deal of blame for this on financial regulation. In 2001, the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act (one of the "Bush tax cuts") increased contribution limits and enabled older participants to make "catch-up" contributions. In 2006, the Pension Protection Act encouraged companies to automatically enroll their employees in 401(k) plans (studies have found that this doubles enrollment) and laid the groundwork for target-date funds to become a major recipient of those savings. (These "funds of funds" start with higher-risk investments and slowly switch to more conservative choices as you near your target date, which is often decades in the future. The constituent funds can be actively or passively managed, but most are now passive, and only trending more in that direction.) Then came the SECURE Act of 2019, a basket of provisions that incentivized employers to offer 401(k) plans, let retirees wait longer to withdraw funds, and more. Whether or not these laws are responsible, as Green says, 401(k)

plans have both exploded in size and become remarkably passive. Between 2005 and 2020, their assets skyrocketed from \$2.4 trillion to \$7 trillion. Between 2006 and 2020, the portion of those assets allocated to index funds increased from 17 percent to 41 percent, while those in target-date funds grew from 3 percent to an astonishing 28 percent. (This number is also weighed down by the fact that assets accrue over time, and target-date funds, being a newer product, are more prevalent among younger savers. Participants in their twenties now put roughly half of their plans' assets into target-date funds.) Though individual retirement account (IRA) assets aren't as likely to be in target-date or passive mutual funds, IRAs have long managed more money than 401(k) plans, have grown just as robustly, and are now responsible for more than a trillion dollars in index funds.

At the end of last year, it finally happened: total U.S. passive investments—whether in mutual funds or ETFs—controlled more of the

## GREEN BELIEVES INDEX FUNDS AREN'T MERELY MEASURING THE MARKET, THEY'RE A MAJOR FORCE OF DISTORTION—AND THEIR POWER IS ONLY ACCUMULATING

market than actively managed funds. By this point, there's no denying that a boom has taken place. But then what about the next of the five stages? If passive investing is in fact a kind of bubble, where's the euphoria? There are certainly enthusiasts (the r/Bogleheads subreddit has more than four hundred thousand members), but it's impossible to square the idea of speculative rapture with a movement designed to be its very opposite. Against a backdrop of recent financial hubris—including meme stocks, crypto, NFTs, SPACs, SPARCs, and alternative private-public investments—index funds are the safe bet, the old standby, a choice so sound your employer makes it for you. The question is whether this is proof that passive investing can't be a bubble—or only a sign we need to rethink what a bubble can be.

“It actually turns out that they're not passive at all,” Green says of index funds. “What they are is active managers with the world's simplest quantitative strategy. Did you give me cash? If so, then buy. Did you ask for cash? If so, then sell.”

This isn't just a language quibble. Green believes index funds aren't merely measuring the market, they're now a major force of distortion—and their power is only accumulating.

Some of the consequences of passive investing are well known. For example, there's the so-called index-inclusion effect, in which companies (temporarily) rise in price after they're chosen to be included in an index. The math is simple: funds tracking that index will be forced to buy that stock. On November 16, 2020, the day it was announced that Tesla would be included in the S&P 500, its shares rose 13 percent. (Though the effect has seemingly dissipated through the years, some believe this is only because traders preempt such news, evening out its impact.) But Green doesn't appear as interested in how index funds affect individual companies. In fact, he's somewhat passive (sorry) when it comes to arguably the most prominent debate around indexing: common ownership. This is when index-fund managers become major shareholders in competing firms, spawning antitrust concerns. In one of countless examples, as reported in the *Harvard Business Review*, "Vanguard and BlackRock are the largest (non-individual) owners of CVS, Walgreens Boots Alliance, and Rite Aid (with

PASSIVE INVESTING LITERALLY REDEFINES "THE MARKET," TAKING THE IDEA OF A ZERO-SUM COMPETITIVE ARENA AND TURNING IT INTO A TRADABLE ASSET

State Street not far behind in two of the three.)" Vanguard, BlackRock, and State Street—known as the Big Three—are also the three largest institutional holders of stock in General Motors, Ford, and Tesla; in JPMorgan Chase, Visa, and Citigroup; in Costco, Target, and Walmart. The trend continues across almost every industry you can think of. Together the Big Three now manage around 80 percent of all indexed money and control some 22 percent of the average S&P 500 company.

What Green is worried about is much more fundamental. It's about how the market works—or doesn't. "Buy low, sell high" has become a trope, something your corny uncle might have quipped, flipping you a nickel with a wink. But it's true enough. Investors should theoretically buy when something appears to be cheap and sell when they think it's expensive, and in this way the wisdom of crowds determines the fair market price. Indexing seems to follow the exact opposite logic. When a stock's price increases, it gets an even bigger piece of every new dollar invested in an index it's a part of (assuming that index is market-cap weighted, as most are)—which, of course, only helps to push the price up more. Green asserts that this effect has contributed to a top-heavy, overvalued market—one that even

rising interest rates haven't dampened. (Microsoft, Apple, Nvidia, and Amazon currently account for about 21 percent of the SPDR S&P 500 ETF.) But if all this is true—if the system is set up to feed only the full—what should we make of another adage, one just as dependable as "buy low, sell high": "what goes up must come down"?

It's important to note that changes in stock prices don't affect the allocation of money *already* invested in an index—though such holdings, Green believes, are just as significant. Because dormant dollars add to a stock's weight in an index but don't influence future price movements, both active traders and changes in index-fund flows can have an outsize impact, leading to unanticipated volatility. In other words, passive investing makes the market *less elastic*. To illustrate this, imagine a meeting of ten co-workers, in which nine have strong opinions and one is passive by nature. The tides of the conversation may shift, but in a fluid way. Now imagine five are passive. Now, what about eight? The two active participants will take turns seizing the room's attention, the balance of power swaying with violent force. This concept is crucial to how Green pulled off the \$250 million triumph for Peter Thiel. He theorized that a market movement of only 4 percent would result in a much larger shock wave of volatility. After finding an inverse ETF measuring the S&P 500's volatility that was "perfectly mechanical, perfectly inelastic," he made a big, bearish bet, using options for leverage. On February 5, 2018—also known as Volmageddon, after the dramatic spike in "vol" that occurred that day—the index dropped 4 percent and the ETF cratered, losing more than 90 percent of its value while filling Thiel's coffers.

But inelasticity isn't the only line you can draw from index funds to market instability. Consider, of all things, correlation. For such an anodyne word, it has the power to make money managers sweat straight through their fleece vests. Correlation, or how closely stock prices move together, tends to rise whenever volatility does, such as during the 2008 financial collapse. (It's worth noting that Michael Burry, one of the first analysts to foresee and profit from the subprime-mortgage crisis—as made famous in *The Big Short*—believes that passive investing is a bubble. He has even compared index funds to collateralized debt obligations, one of the causes of the Great Recession.) The correlation between, er, correlation and indexing is intuitive: What could cause stocks to move in lockstep more than investing in "the market" at large? Though some studies dispute this, an impressive body of evidence supports the link.

Green's ultimate doomsday scenario isn't nearly as complicated as any of these ideas. It is merely that—despite how swiftly passive investing is rising, and how many nest eggs are still left to snatch—indexing will one day reach its peak. Maybe this will be caused by a generational shift. Maybe the market will simply become saturated. Some speculate that the government will try to prevent this from happening, and Green believes they've already relied on monetary policy and regulation to “kick the can down the road”—a metaphor that meets the severity of Green's vision only if this can is full of nitroglycerin. (One example he cites is the SECURE Act of 2019, which Green thinks was passed, in part, to stave off 401(k) outflows.) Regardless, it's inevitable: at some point in the future, net flows will become negative. The passive-investing market will be, more or less, a roller coaster gliding over its crest. What then?

If index funds do in fact have “the world's simplest quantitative strategy,” their one input—investors taking out more money than they're putting in—would set in motion the beginnings of a mass selling event. Or, in other words: the profit-taking stage. Green points out that while active managers normally keep a cash buffer of around 5 percent to soften outflows (or to jump at new opportunities), passive funds don't. This could hasten the sell-off, turning profit-taking into panic—a visceral plunge that would only be exacerbated by the inherent inelasticity and correlation of a passive market. Imagine again the room full of ten co-workers, eight of them passive. Sensing that the conversation has gotten out of hand, or just that their patience has been spent, the passive co-workers might become a force of their own, a majority voice declaring that the meeting is over.

Predicting how exactly such a crisis would unfold is, at best, a test of imagination. Of the passive-investing bubble, Michael Burry has tweeted, “All theaters are overcrowded and the only way anyone can get out is by trampling each other. And still the door is only so big.” He's also said, “The longer it goes on, the worse the crash will be.” How long that is—and just how big passive will get in the meantime—is anyone's guess.

Without euphoria, without a pervasive sense of greed, without the normal warning signs that keep out cautious investors, it's possible that passive investing could grow to swallow the majority of the market. (For comparison, index-fund assets are already greater than both the mortgage-backed security market of 2008 and the entirety of the Nasdaq stock exchange at the height of the dot-com bubble.) And why not? It's the first major financial vehicle to come

with that sweetest of promises: we can all be in this together. Passive investing literally redefines “the market,” taking the idea of a zero-sum competitive arena and turning it into a tradable asset—one that anyone anywhere can invest in anytime they want. In this way, in every way, its collapse would be like that of no other bubble we've ever seen. Yes, there could be a nearly immediate evaporation of capital, including a great many households' savings; worldwide panic leading to, and then exacerbated by, bank runs; an incomprehensible cascade of bankruptcies, foreclosures, and liquidations; distrust of the banking system, the dollar, and one another; and even an earthquake in the global political order. But more than any of that—all of which we've experienced before—the failure of passive investing would strip away every last pretense that the market is a collective good. Underneath that idealistic veil, in the broad daylight of a new epoch, we'd see the base unit of investing—the trade—for exactly what it is: an exchange that two parties sit on opposite sides of, each hoping that the other got the worse end of the deal.

I took my fears straight to the source: Vanguard. I was given an hour with Rodney Comegys, the global head of Vanguard's Equity Index Group. Unlike Green, he did not invite me into his (makeshift) home. We did not even meet in person, but on Microsoft Teams, Vanguard's teleconferencing provider of choice. There were no startling coincidences. There were no beasts to keep me on my toes. It was Halloween, but neither of us mentioned it.

Comegys is an apt representation of Vanguard's brand. He is affable, patient, and optimistic. He says things like “we really are the place for the little guy,” and “I love index investing.” He was calling in from Vanguard's headquarters, in the unassuming Main Line suburb of Malvern, Pennsylvania, a far cry from the dog-eat-dog world of Wall Street. Hours after our conversation—in what I like to think of as a test of Vanguard's wholesomeness but was actually an abhorrently, impossibly idiotic mistake—I accidentally sent a draft of this article to the public-relations contact who arranged the interview. (The working title was “Stop Being So Passive!” with the current subtitle: “Does the rise of index funds spell catastrophe?”) Vanguard passed the test with flying colors. When I asked the PR rep to delete the email, he immediately confirmed that he had, then wrote me the next day to “affirm once again” that he had done so without opening the document, and even shared a story about his team being on the opposite side of such a gaffe.

Comegys came off just as magnanimous, and in a way that inspired confidence. This made me happy. I am, as I mentioned, a passive investor, and I even have a 401(k) with Vanguard. (In fact, they sent me an automated email during the middle of my interview with Green, which was like getting a text from your wife while being hit on.) It was to a receptive ear that Comegys fed bits such as “We’re not like New York–based Wall Street firms that are spending money flying people around. We’re flying coach. In the old days, you had to put a nickel in the copy machine if you made a personal copy.” (He clarified that this is no longer the case.) But as the conversation went on, I found that I was beginning to channel Green. I wanted clarity, and perhaps even assurance that Green’s ideas could be refuted.

I asked Comegys if Vanguard’s strategy was built on the assumption that the market would only go up in the long term. After some explaining, Comegys said yes. I asked if regulation has paved the road for the success of index funds. He called this “a challenging question” and then gave a fair and direct answer. He noted that regulators have in mind the best interests of investors and then conceded that regulation has likely helped to propel indexing. I asked whether index funds not only measure the market but also sway it, specifically by inflating the valuations of companies. With great care, he underscored that the majority of the market is still made up of active investors, and that they have a greater say in pricing. Citing the rapid rise of passive investing, I asked if he would ever be worried about indexing taking over too much of the market. Again he invoked the active investor. I asked if index funds make the market more or less efficient. He replied that index funds aren’t the ones making the market efficient; this was the job of “those active investors who are fighting it out every day.” Again I asked, in so many words, if he worried about indexing getting too big, given his continual emphasis on the importance of active investing. He gave a long answer basically conveying that he doesn’t see evidence that indexing is currently too big. I asked the question again. He told me that there will always be active investors, that they are going to “exist for a very long time.” This phrasing stayed with me, because it’s similar to how my mom would respond when, as a kid, I’d ask her to promise that she and my dad were going to live forever.

**P**assive investing seems like the sensible choice for the average American. Active investors are crucial to keeping the market efficient. Index funds are quickly ascending and show no signs of slowing down. I now be-

lieve all of these things. What I don’t know is whether they can all continue to be true together. Green would say no. Comegys would waver. In an effort to widen my aperture, I sought out two even more disparate perspectives.

Lasse Heje Pedersen is a prestigious Danish economist. Green says he’s “indebted” to Pedersen’s work on redefining passive investing. He also named Pedersen when I asked him to list three people who would agree with him most. As soon as I started talking to Pedersen, I realized this wouldn’t be the case. He is incredibly measured, pensive, and realistic. When I boiled down the two sides to (a) active investors will always be able to correct distortions caused by index funds and (b) indexing will get so big it will create its own gravity, undermining the effect of active investing, Pedersen replied that the first statement is more valid. He also said that everyone can make money together, and professed great faith in the market generally.

I had a much more casual conversation with Peter Jam (surname Jambazian), the dog psychologist Green ran into outside the café. I’d taken a picture of his business card, and when I called him out of the blue, he acted as though me peppering him with questions was the most natural thing. We discussed dog aggression and fear, the “movable territory” of Chihuahuas, and why dogs do not need meditation (“they are always living in the here and now”). When Jam told me that he doesn’t really know anything about the market, this only made me crave his neutral, detached opinion even more. But every time I tried bringing the conversation back to investing, he started talking about guitars—buying them, fixing them, selling them. For more than ten minutes, I struggled to understand what should have been obvious: the guitar market was the most trustworthy market he knew. He sensed my hesitation. “Those are investments for me,” he said. “You know, like, it can be so weird for you.” He laughed. “But it’s kind of like investments for me. I know their worth.”

If this seemed to be the soundest investment advice I’d heard in weeks, I also wondered how, exactly, you can possibly know the worth of anything. Was Peter falling into the same trap as passive investors? Wasn’t his confidence in the price of guitars based solely on past performance? I considered taking this idea back to Green, and was about to email him when I remembered something striking he’d said early on in our time together: “I constantly try to remind people—it’s like, you know, just remember, we’re a species who for three thousand years believed that a sun god transited across the sky, dragged by golden horses, right? We will believe almost anything.” ■

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# THE GOSSAMER LADDER

By *L. J. Davis*

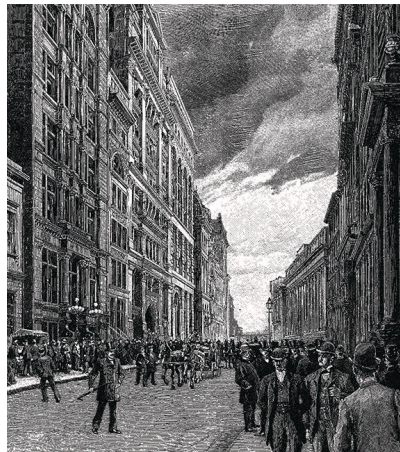
Early this year, I began to notice a peculiar thing in the Brooklyn neighborhood where I live: gatherings, in small nervous knots, of my stockbroker and investment-banker neighbors. These were successful people in their forties and fifties who were making large sums of money. So were their firms. So were their clients. With the market swinging wildly but generally and dramatically up, profits were falling to my neighbors in a golden rain. Yet they whispered among themselves as if they were being followed by the police. They were in the middle of the biggest bull market in American history, and they were afraid.

Indeed, in the mid-Eighties, as the bull market took on a certain sinister aspect, these traders seemed to lose control of events. One didn't have to look hard in the first months of 1987 to see that the roaring market was out of touch with economic reality; it was a market being artificially manipulated, and based increasingly on the exchange of meaningless pieces of paper. No market that behaved like that could sustain itself for very long, although its capacity for inflicting damage was immense. There were, after all, ample precedents, and my neighbors at least knew this: that under no circumstances must the events that led to the stock market crash of October 1929 be repeated.

A bull market is usually marked by the arrival of lay investors—members of the general public eager to cut themselves in on the action, although they traditionally play no great role in the occasional catastrophe except to serve as its principal victim. The great bull market of the Eighties,

however, was marked from the very beginning by their presence, via profit-sharing plans, insurance companies, huge mutual and pension funds: the so-called institutional investors to whom the citizenry had entrusted much of its hard-won savings.

One might think that the presence of these institutions would act as a stabilizing force. After all, managers of funds, holding other people's money, might be expected to let cooler heads



prevail. Not so. The manager of a fund has a fiduciary obligation to obtain the highest possible return on the money entrusted to his keeping, so in an overheated market such as the one that began to build up in the mid-Eighties, the fiduciary obligations of the fund managers all but compelled them to speculate—and to speculate massively.

In turn, they devoted large sums to the purchase of junk bonds. And while a junk bond is sometimes likened to a share of common stock, it is nothing of the sort; when the line forms at bankruptcy's soup kitchen,

the holder of a junk bond will be served last, if at all. Junk bonds represent a major degradation in the quality of the nation's credit, and such a degradation, my neighbors knew, was a sign of impending disaster.

There were other portents. News commentators were fervent on the subject of insider trading; editorials in the *Times* were thunderous; the SEC ordered one arbitrageur to disgorge \$50 million in fines, and another pleaded guilty to felony charges. A measure of excitement always attended the spectacle of traders heading to the federal sneezer, where they would inevitably go on to perfect their tennis games in a few months' light confinement. Meanwhile, more thoughtful students of catastrophe worried about the perilous link between wild speculation and debt. A stock market on the brink of a crash gives ample warning of its condition and probable fate. The great bull market of 1929 crashed not once but several times: crashed and recovered, crashed and recovered, crashed and did not recover. It was doubtful, in the fall of 1986, whether the country could absorb such a blow.

Or perhaps there would be no disaster. Perhaps the stock market would start making sense. Perhaps everything else would somehow fix itself, and perhaps a mandrake root would be got with child. But in the late winter of 1987, none of these things seemed likely to happen, and to my nervous neighbors, huddled under the curbside plane trees, it seemed impossible that the present situation could sustain itself much longer. A panic, among other things, is a discovery process. And in a panic, real money is the only money that counts. ■

From "The Next Panic," which appeared in the May 1987 issue of Harper's Magazine. The complete article—along with the magazine's entire 174-year archive—is available online at [harpers.org/archive](http://harpers.org/archive).

# MASTERS OF WAR

In search of the new world order in Munich

By Thomas Meaney

I.

*Naturally, I too will be staying at the Bayerischer Hof.*

—Franz Kafka

**T**he Hotel Bayerischer Hof in Munich is an indestructible fortress of Mitteleuropean culture where tour guides like to pause. Richard Wagner repaired to the Hof for tea after his opera performances in Munich; Sigmund Freud fell out with Carl Jung in the Hof over the status of the libido; Kafka stayed at the Hof when he gave his second, and final, public reading to a hostile audience. A decade later, Hitler learned to crack crabs at the Hof under the supervision of a society hostess, and Joseph Goebbels counted on its rooms for a good night's rest. The Hof weathered the revolutions of 1848; it withstood the revolution of 1918–19, in which the socialist leader Kurt Eisner was assassinated in front of the hotel and Bavaria briefly became a workers' council republic; it rebuffed the Nazis' attempts to buy it in the Thirties; and, after it was nearly destroyed by an Allied bombing raid in 1944, it was reconstructed with beaverlike industry. Today its wide façade of three

hundred and thirty-seven rooms imposes itself over the small Promenadeplatz like a slice of meringue cake too large for its plate. Every February, hundreds of diplomats, politicians, academics, and arms dealers convene here for the Munich Security Conference.

I came to Munich to get a closer look at Europe's "security culture" at its "transatlantic family meeting," the largest backdoor diplomatic gathering in the world. There was a threefold crisis in global politics—Ukraine, Gaza, Taiwan, each of which threatened to become a wider conflagration and fan flames toward the others. On the day before the conference began, the doors of dozens of Mercedes and BMWs slammed shut in front of the Hof as security teams surveyed the grounds. More than five thousand police officers were on duty in central Munich, five for each conference participant, which transformed the Old Town into a museum under martial law. There were police checkpoints on all the streets leading to the hotel, officers stationed on the tops of buildings, a helicopter overhead, and small groups of ordinary people at the cordons. The onlookers I talked to were waiting for the Klitschko brothers: Vitali, the mayor of Kyiv, and Wladimir, both of whom were former world heavyweight box-

ing champions. In the early Aughts, the Klitschkos appeared together in commercials for the Kinder Milk-Slice, and they remain celebrities for Germans of a certain age.

In front of the Hof, there was a small, makeshift memorial of laminated photos and candles around the base of a statue. As I approached, I expected to see images of the Israeli hostages in Gaza or perhaps the prisoners of Mariupol. Instead it was a shrine to Michael Jackson, vigilantly maintained by a society in Munich, to commemorate his stays at the Hof in the Nineties. During one visit, Jackson's entourage tossed down to the crowds in the plaza below a great amount of the hotel's fine linens on which they had scrawled I LOVE YOU.

The Munich Security Conference aspires to a different tone. It is the bodily expression of the raft of values that fall under the euphemism "Atlanticism." The Atlanticist is a special species of Western liberal who sees the world order as an American-led, European-assisted project that requires hard-nosed dealing with the rest of the globe, which must, whether through entreaties or force, hegemony or domination, be kept in its place. For Atlanticists, "credibility" is a word to conjure with. It means staying the course in whatever quagmire they have made—from Vietnam to Afghanistan—the

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idea being that rival powers will take this as a sign of steadfastness rather than the hubris of an elite that diagnoses its own citizenry's aversion to wars abroad as a form of populist disease. Though Atlanticism began its life as Anglo-Saxonism—and the U.S.-U.K. relationship remains its kernel—its most pungent variants, and the fervor of the converted, are found in Central and Eastern Europe. The arteries of Atlanticism run across the Continent in the form of NATO academies, John F. Kennedy Avenues, and the Amerikahäuser in German cities, where you can check out a biography of Davy Crockett or *The Great Depression for Dummies* and gaze on the walls at posters of national parks. The Munich Conference itself is only one among a galaxy of Atlanticist institutions—the German Marshall Fund, the Federal Academy for Security Policy, the Atlantic Council, the Atlantic Initiative, the Deutsche Atlantische Gesellschaft, the Atlantic Brücke—all of which tug hard to forestall the expiry date of a worldview that has seen better days.

One could be forgiven for thinking that the golden age of the Atlanticists

was the Nineties, when American power still seemed supreme, when China was just becoming an oil importer, Indian internet connections were patchy, and Russian children drank vodka on Nevsky Prospekt in the chaos of post-Communism. But the real golden age was the early Sixties, when American power was not merely maintained but in ascendance, when wide domestic opposition to wars of choice abroad had only just made itself felt. When there was an enemy to be faced down across the Iron Curtain that organized moral life. When the old Nazi-built Tempelhof Airport in Berlin included a U.S. air base with a bowling alley and a basketball court. For Atlanticists, most of them aging men but with no shortage of youthful pretenders among them, Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine has been the equivalent of a blood transfusion.

The world order was changing; no one denied that. Some, like Hamas, didn't want to get left behind by the new arrangements; others, like Russia, wanted to get in some last-minute edits; and China was becoming fonder of an increasingly open-access international

order, all the more since the United States seemed determined to recapture its rogue-state status of the Bush years. Germany, meanwhile, the great reviser and loser of the past two major reshufflings, is addicted to the crumbling status quo. In fact, Germany and Israel share opposite bunks in the same privileged berth: Germany, a nation whose intellectuals believe more than any other in post-nationalism; Israel, a nation that adheres to the prerogatives of a nineteenth-century European ethno-nationalist state born in the wrong region, too late. Israel heavily insures its security, with a first-rate military, an effective lobby in Washington, nuclear weapons, and extra territory seized in the Six-Day War; Germany is grievously underinsured, with a weak army, no national lobby in Washington, the country itself a storage unit for nuclear weapons whose ignition codes are commanded by the U.S. president, and the extension of its territory is unspeakable even among the German far right. The two countries are additionally locked in an embrace it would take a Bismarck to break, and which far exceeds a malignant outgrowth of memory

politics, with Germany providing Israel with discounted submarines, which are capable of firing nuclear weapons, while Israel's largest defense deal to date is to supply Germany with long-range Arrow 3 missiles for the European Sky Shield Initiative that the German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, spearheaded in 2022 in the wake of Russia's attack on Ukraine. Israel and Germany occupy these extreme positions at the favor of Washington, which is fighting a proxy war hotter than any conflict with Russia during the Cold War years, gearing up for a showdown with China in Asia, and being pinpricked by the Houthis of Yemen, which the Biden Administration bombed relentlessly throughout the weekend.

This was the deep-shit Munich Security Conference. The mood the year before had been buoyant about the chances of Ukraine delivering a major defeat to Russia. Now the Russians had routed the Ukrainians in Avdiivka, were targeting medical facilities, were securing a land bridge to Crimea, and were ramping up armaments production in a roaring war economy. Putin had given a long interview to Tucker Carlson in which he dangled the prospect of a peace deal. There were at least thirty thousand Ukrainian soldiers dead in a country with a manpower shortage, and as much as ten times as many Russian troops killed or wounded, though their numbers were much easier to replenish. Last year, Israel seemed to be riding into the sunset with a number of Arab states as they agreed to share spyware and migrant labor from Asia and get richer together. Now Israel was engaged in a *Vernichtungskrieg* in Gaza. It was a massacre with all the trimmings—the detonations of universities; missiles fired into maternity wards; the deliberate starvation of Gazans with assistance from Israeli civil society—all while the U.S. Air Force prepared to drop energy bars on the survivors. Where to put the Palestinians? Could the Australians offer Christmas Island? Might the British Tories be persuaded to include them in their plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda? Could they staff the resorts Jared Kushner seemed to envision for the Gaza waterfront? Did anybody have a PDF of the Madagascar Plan?

Africa itself was not looking good. Across the Sahel a series of coups and insurgencies left only the government of Mauritania unscathed; the French were washing their hands, yet again, of their last imperial playground. In the Central African Republic, Russian Wagner Group mercenaries were running a brewery and controlled the country's largest gold mine, though the government was flirting with an American security firm to help run the state. In Eurasia, by the start of the year, a strikingly successful cleansing of a local population—the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh—had been completed by Azerbaijan with Israeli drones. In Europe, meanwhile, Switzerland had cast off centuries of neutrality (by participating in the economic war against Russia) and Leo Varadkar, the taoiseach of Ireland, a neutral

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## THE CONFERENCE'S THEME WAS "LOSE-LOSE," WHICH SOUNDED ABOUT RIGHT WHEN IT CAME TO THE GLOBAL ORDER

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country outside NATO, was attending Munich for the first time. As for the major European powers, Germany and France both faced hard-right insurgencies of different vintages, and their leaders felt themselves entering a tight spot between Wicked Putin to the east and Wicked Trump to the west. *Der Spiegel*, the national weekly, asked on its cover whether—despite the clause barring it from doing so in the reunification treaty—Germany might need to acquire nuclear weapons. The men and women at Munich were existentially juiced, but they were also panicked.

### II.

*We smile at astrological hopes  
And leave the sky to expert men*

—Adrienne Rich

As the first day of the conference got under way at the Hof, reports came that Alexei Navalny had died in the Arctic penal colony where, in old tsarist style, the Kremlin had sentenced him to nine-

teen years. The conference-goers peered into their phones and interpreted the news as a message from Putin: I may not be in Munich in person this year, but I am there in spirit. "Do you think they actually killed him today or that they just saved the news until now?" a young German journalist giddily asked an English counterpart working for a Swedish-owned website. Within minutes of learning of Navalny's demise, Christoph Heusgen—the head of the conference, Angela Merkel's onetime foreign-policy guru, and the former German ambassador to the United Nations—took the stage. The audience settled in for an impromptu eulogy of Navalny. "Henry Kissinger died," Heusgen declared, "whose death we mourn today." He was sticking to his speech cards, but then, in the pantheon of Atlanticism,

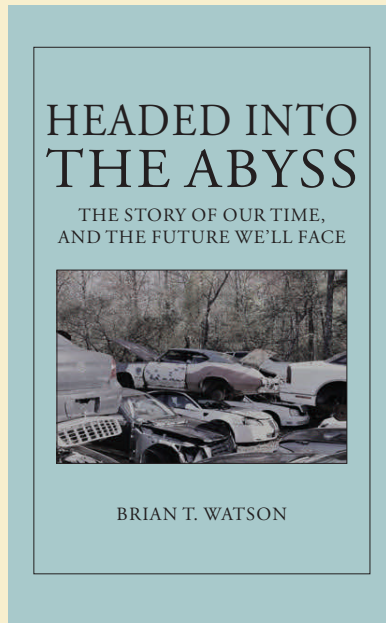
Kissinger did come before Navalny. Heusgen followed with the report of Navalny's death—and of the fact that Navalny's wife happened to be in Munich. In measured tones, Heusgen announced that this conference's theme was "Lose-Lose," which sounded about right when it came to the global order, until Heusgen added, with a twinkle of mischief, "But we have put a question mark." He reminded the audience that the motto of the conference was "peace through dialogue"—though Russians and Iranians were not invited—and that nobody should submit to "doom and gloom." "We have asked all moderators to look in their discussions for a silver lining," Heusgen said, with the particular satisfaction Germans and diplomats, and especially German diplomats, derive from alighting upon an English cliché.

A long convoy of black Chevy Suburbans coiled around the Promenadeplatz. Kamala Harris was in the Hof. Ever since Joe Biden, a true Atlanticist junkie, made it a thing, American vice presidents were expected to make appearances at Munich. Harris walked into the ballroom with at least two disadvantages. The first was the anticipation that Navalny's widow, Yulia Navalnaya, would soon address the conference. That would overshadow anything Harris said. The second was that Harris was in a place where Europeans judge Americans according to



how far they deviate from John McCain. Beset with these deficits, Harris had to get the message across that, no, Washington would not abandon the Europeans now that the Russian bear was at the door. She needed to reassure the room that Trump was a lunatic to say that the Russians could do “whatever the hell they want” to European countries that didn’t meet their NATO defense budgets. Harris did all these things, but in a check-the-box fashion. “Not since the end of the Cold War has this forum convened under such dire circumstances,” she said. Nods all around. “Our sacred commitment to NATO remains ironclad.” Pray go on, heavenly muse. Harris regretted that “some in the United States” wanted to “isolate ourselves from the world.” But that wasn’t going to happen. It was in America’s strategic interest, Harris declared, to be the global leader, and it redounded to the great benefit of everyday Americans. Now it was time to win against Russia! There was a halftime urgency in Harris’s tone, but it wasn’t connecting with the conference-goers. You sensed they wanted a grizzled call to arms from someone in epaulets instead of a pep talk from a field-hockey coach. But it was a campaign year, and Harris was lobbing talking points to CNN, to MSNBC, to C-SPAN. Before a room where Nigerian military brass mingled with Latvian diplomats, Harris delivered a State of the Union warm-up to Democrats in Ohio. “We have made a once-in-a-generation investment to rebuild our roads and bridges and ports and highways with more than forty thousand infrastructure projects across all of our fifty states,” she declared. “We’re bringing semiconductor manufacturing back to America, which will secure our supply chains and enable the future of technology.” It was like so much that poured out of the Biden Administration: a nationalist and even Trumpian policy, paired with carefully subdued zeal to signal we-got-this competence and aren’t-we-better-than-the-alternative civility.

In one of the side events, Israel Katz, the Israeli foreign affairs minister, was interviewed by one of Germany’s tawdriest newshounds, Paul Ronzheimer, a journalist for the tabloid *Bild* who



**HEADED INTO  
THE ABYSS**  
THE STORY OF OUR TIME,  
AND THE FUTURE  
WE’LL FACE

**Brian T. Watson**

Brian T. Watson is an architect and cultural critic. For twenty-three years, he has been a columnist with the *Salem News* in Salem, Massachusetts, focused primarily on current affairs and the forces that were and are shaping societies both here and abroad.

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Independent of the pandemic and war, we are beset by a range of unprecedented developments that together, in this century, threaten the very existence of civilization. The current states of just ten forces — capitalism, technology, the internet, politics, media, education, human nature, the environment, population, and transportation — are driving society in predominantly negative ways.

These forces are powerful and interconnected and their combined dynamics will carry us into any number of disasters well before 2100. We have the knowledge and solutions to address our difficulties, but for many reasons we will not employ them.

There is urgency to this story. We face many threats, but one of them — the internet and its hegemony and imperatives — is rapidly changing nearly everything about our world, including our very capacity to recognize how profound and dangerous the changes are.

*Headed Into the Abyss* is unique in a number of ways. It is unusually comprehensive, presenting a satisfyingly round story of our time. It crosses disciplines, connects dots, and analyzes how each force — in synergies with other forces — is shaping society. Individually, we tend to see and address things in parts, but the forces shaping our lives exist now in ecologies that defy piecemeal solutions.

Also uniquely, Watson brings human nature and trauma into his assessment of the future. People have limitations, and these are playing a large role even now. Taking real people and their emotions into account, and the adjustments and the rate of change that real people can make, *Headed Into the Abyss* is honest and frank about our present predicaments and our likely future.

What it all adds up to — the big picture — is a sobering conclusion.

made his name during the Greek debt crisis, when he distributed drachmas in Omonoia Square and encouraged the Greeks to stop grifting hardworking Germans and leave the euro zone. It was surprising to see Ronzheimer there, since *Bild*—the American equivalent would be *People* magazine run out of a back office of the Reagan Administration—had repeatedly hammered Christoph Heussen and the Munich Security Conference for their insufficient loyalty to Israel. Heussen once referred offhand to the attack of October 7 as an “action,” which he’d been trying to live down ever since. Ronzheimer led the charge in *Bild*. “You have to imagine it,” he wrote:

One of Germany’s most important diplomats, the head of the world’s most important security conference, agrees with all the “yes, but” Israel campaigners, while the charred and mutilated bodies of innocent people are still being found here in Israel.

Yet Ronzheimer was a natural choice to interview the Israeli foreign affairs minister. It was Israel Katz’s first time in Germany, and this, along with the fact that his parents had survived the Judeocide, made Ronzheimer assume a reverential posture toward his guest. Thuggishly, the diplomat told Ronzheimer that “it would not be a good idea” for António Guterres, the secretary-general of the United Nations, to run into him in the hallways in Munich. If Israel was not allowed to finish off the job in Gaza, Katz said, there would be “Gaza Strips in London, Gaza Strips in Paris, Gaza Strips in Berlin.” Nobody understood what this meant. Was Katz suggesting that there was a future in which parts of the capital cities of Britain and Europe—Tower Hamlets and Newham, Belleville and Clichy, certainly Neukölln—would require counterinsurgency operations and, just to be safe, aerial bombing? And if so, would eradicating Hamas somehow avert that prospect? As their talk came to a close, Ronzheimer thanked Katz for making the trip, while people carrying posters of the Israeli hostages surrounded Katz for selfies.

I later heard a rumor that Yulia Navalnaya broke down in tears after her midday speech on the main stage in Munich. But as she spoke, her defi-

ance captured conference-goers’ imaginations. “I would like to call upon all the international community, all the people in the world. We should come together, and we should fight against this evil. We should fight this horrific regime in Russia,” she declared to a standing ovation. We were present for what was effectively Navalny’s canonization. It helped that he had shed his Russian chauvinism (for a long time it seemed unlikely that Navalny would have stomachached Russia losing Crimea any more than Gorbachev would have). Navalny himself had been educated by his own dissidence; he had transformed, and reached the point where he more accurately inhabited the old Western dream for Russia, dating back to 1917, when the reformist Alexander Kerensky ruled the country for three months before being ejected by the Bolsheviks. Navalny’s death produced a powerful spectacle (powerful enough for Trump to register the discursive quake and claim a few days later that he too was a dissident). As Yulia Navalnaya left the stage, Nancy Pelosi expertly positioned herself to receive her in her arms.

On the curb outside the Hof, I found scattered debris of the Obama Administration. Ben Rhodes, Obama’s foreign-policy speechwriter, the coiner of “the Blob,” was reminiscing with one of Vice President Harris’s advance staffers. “You remember that motorcade in Delhi near the Red Fort?” Harris’s staffer said. “Oh yeah,” Rhodes said. “There are those times when you know it’s just faster to get out and walk.” Rhodes didn’t seem to hold the conference in high regard. “Obama never came to Munich,” he told me. “It’s more of a senators’ thing. Biden used to love it. McCain *really* used to love it.” On the American participation in the Gaza war, Rhodes was withering. It was a reminder of how much American foreign policy was generational, with Rhodes more sensitive than his elders, including his old boss, to how the country was viewed at home and abroad. As we were speaking, we received news that Senator Lindsey Graham would not be attending the conference this year. “Graham is going down to the southern border, so he can avoid conversations with his old German friends,”

Rhodes said. The leading Republican star attending the conference would be the junior senator from Ohio, J. D. Vance. “Of course Vance is coming,” Rhodes said. “Vance is just coming to troll.”

### III.

*The U.S.A. is indispensable, but Russia is immovable.*

—Egon Bahr

The Munich Security Conference was founded in 1963 by a curious throwback figure in German history, Ewald-Heinrich von Kleist. Kleist sprung from a Prussian aristocratic family of ardent monarchists. His father—who shared his first name—was determined to thwart the democratic advances of the age. The elder Kleist not only welcomed the demise of the Weimar Republic, but faulted the Nazis for being too incompetent a band of hooligans to dismantle it. He accused Hitler of “chickening out” during the failed 1923 Munich putsch and worried the Nazi Party was too infected with ideas of social equality. The elder Kleist tried to persuade his conservative peers to prevent Hitler’s chancellorship—to make him postal minister instead—and published a pamphlet, *National Socialism: A Danger*, the year before Hitler came to power. The elder Kleist spent many of the following years in hiding. He narrowly escaped the Night of the Long Knives, and tried to drum up anti-Nazi resistance in England, where he met with Winston Churchill. Meanwhile, his son, twenty-one years old, was tapped by Claus von Stauffenberg to be the suicide bomber in the July 1944 plot to kill Hitler. In a scene the younger Kleist would recount for decades afterward, he traveled to his family’s West Pomerania estate to ask his father’s blessing. “You have to do it,” the elder Kleist told his son while looking out the window. “A person who fails at a moment like this will never be happy again in his life.” The plan was for the younger Kleist to ignite explosives in a briefcase while standing next to Hitler during a review of new Wehrmacht uniforms. Hitler canceled the reviews, and Kleist never got his chance. A few months

later, Stauffenberg placed a bomb under a table where Hitler was meeting. When the bomb exploded, four attendees died, but Hitler survived, and after the plot failed, most of the conspirators, including the elder Kleist, were rounded up and executed. The younger Kleist miraculously survived. He was interrogated dozens of times and spent several months at the Ravensbrück concentration camp, before eventually being released a free man, possibly with the expectation he would lead authorities to other traitors. He was advised by a sympathetic Gestapo officer to blend back in to the Wehrmacht, which he did by joining Army Group Caesar in northern Italy, where he spent the rest of the war.

In 1945, it took U.S. Army intelligence less than twenty-four hours to pick out Kleist as a precious asset among the sea of POWs in a soccer stadium in Genoa. The Americans plied him with Chianti and cigarettes, and offered him three years of paid study in America if he would propagandize on behalf of the U.S. occupation. Kleist, still a German conservative of the old mold, refused. "We have many ways of making you cooperate," his American captors told him. "I don't think so," Kleist replied. "I was just held by the Gestapo, and they're better at this than you."

Many high-level Nazis were rehabilitated by Washington in preparation for the Cold War with the Soviet Union, but Kleist was something special: a hard-right-wing anticommunist with sterling anti-Nazi credentials. The real political innovation of West Germany, as far as the Americans were concerned, was to produce a new breed of Western-oriented, pro-market German conservatives, a category that had historically defined itself against Western liberalism. The threat the U.S. occupying forces were worried about came from the growing German peace movement. War-weary and disoriented, the German population was reluctant to rearm when a war had just led to their society's destruction. West German Social Democrats also believed that the integration of West Germany into NATO and the U.S. security sphere would close the door on the eventual unification of the country. In 1951, nearly six million people

in West Germany signed a petition against rearmament. In response to such developments, the Central Intelligence Agency devoted itself to building up an anticommunist, pro-armament constituency in West Germany via propaganda, youth indoctrination, and the recovery of the Wehrmacht's own capacities, the history of which the CIA began thoroughly airbrushing. In 1952, among a phalanx of other initiatives, the CIA set up the Gesellschaft für Wehrkunde, the Society of Military Studies, with figures such as Felix Steiner, a former SS general responsible for legions of atrocities, including the execution of at least six hundred Jews in Ukraine, at the heart of the organization. Georg-Hans Reinhardt, the star panzer general, joined the group in 1954, while Kleist's anti-Nazi exploits made him the perfect ornament to top the outfit. He no longer saw any point in resisting the West, and took up the post.

The U.S. project of making West Germans into Cold Warriors was successful. By the late Fifties, much of the official resistance to an American-led order was diminished. The Soviets had made one world-historical blunder after another. Caught off guard by the Allies' most formidable weapon, the deutsche mark pegged to the dollar, the Soviets had blockaded Berlin and set themselves up for a multidimensional demonstration of Western supremacy, the Berlin airlift. West Germany hosted hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers and a major air base, Ramstein. The Nazi-linked armaments behemoths—Thyssen, Krupp, and Heckler & Koch (founded by veterans of Mauser)—became integrated with the U.S. military and police, helping to supply submarines, artillery components, and handguns to the hegemon. If German leaders wanted more independence to maneuver, it would not come via the military but rather through the disciplining of their economy, to make themselves into highly competitive exporters that could in turn discipline countries in their sphere. But German public opinion still did not always please its American patrons. In 1963, Egon Bahr, who in a few years would become the foreign-policy architect to the new Social Democratic chancellor Willy Brandt, outlined the policy of



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Ostpolitik, in which West Germany would seek rapprochement with the Eastern bloc and start trying to issue its own peace dividend. That same year, Kleist founded the Munich Security Conference in an effort to strengthen Atlanticist backbone.

For the next thirty years, the conference was where NATO functionaries could, without too much media glare, fine-tune European and U.S. relations, adjusting the degree of European autonomy as suited the moment. By the late Nineties, when the Cold Warrior chancellor Helmut Kohl was finally out of power, his chief foreign-policy strategist, Horst Teltschik, oversaw the conference's transformation into a see-and-be-seen jamboree. The Russian threat evaporated, and old sparring partners like Egon Bahr and Henry Kissinger could pretend that détente and Ostpolitik had been the same thing.

Many of the most notable Munich moments came in the Aughts. In 2002, the Social Democratic chancellor Gerhard Schröder refused to sign off on George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq. (The refusal arguably enhanced American hegemony—making it seem as though genuine dissent within the order was possible—while Germany still supported the war effort by nonmilitary means.) In the following years, the interventionist strain of U.S. policymakers browbeat Europe, and Germany in particular, into submission. The year after Vladimir Putin made a visit to the 2007 Munich Conference and told the guests that any move toward NATO by Ukraine would be a fatal mistake—the videotape of the performance shows Angela Merkel in the audience wryly smiling at his familiar Russian bluntness—the Bush Administration duly forced the leaders of France and Germany, against their protests at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, to declare that Ukraine would one day join NATO, at a time when most of the Ukrainian population did not support such a prospect.

In 2008, in the full storm of the financial crisis, the diplomat Wolfgang Ischinger became the head of the conference. He was by far the most effective publicist in its history, though much of this took the form of Davosification. It was Ischinger who brought

in the CEOs, and who welcomed participants to the first financial-crisis-era meeting by announcing that they would discuss “banks, not tanks.” It was Ischinger who entered the breach of Twitter to fence with graduate students of international relations. By 2014, the Munich Conference was where U.S. neoconservatives went to pummel their European counterparts for acting independently. In a private session on the sidelines of the 2015 conference, Victoria Nuland, assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, criticized the peace framework Germany was working out with Russia in the Minsk agreements, reportedly decrying “Merkel's Moscow stuff”—i.e., Berlin's search for a diplomatic compromise with the Kremlin. Nuland would also make clear the United States' vigorous opposition to new sources of German autonomy, such as the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

Ischinger became embroiled in a number of scandals—most notably by denying he profited from the Munich Conference, before *Der Spiegel* revealed that he owned a 30 percent stake in a company that sold appointments and contacts at the conference—and Christoph Heusgen succeeded him. A sixty-nine-year-old, cool-mannered Düsseldorfer, Heusgen had served for twelve years as Merkel's chief foreign-policy adviser. He has fond memories of being billeted in the Bush daughters' bedroom during a diplomatic visit to George W. Bush's Prairie Chapel Ranch. Heusgen followed Merkel in thinking that the prosperity of German industry relied on cheap Russian natural gas, no matter what the American opposition. But since the Ukraine war, Heusgen has carefully readjusted his view of Merkel's record. In a recent book, he distanced himself from the Minsk agreements that he had helped negotiate with Merkel. Yet he has since hinted that something like the Minsk agreements will still be necessary to reduce the violence in Ukraine. A man with delicate antennae, he has finely tracked the elite consensus of the country, which, once the war in Ukraine began, seemed to cast off the last vestiges of Merkel's outlook and submit to U.S. demands to increase its military spending and buy U.S.-supplied energy. In his February interview with Tucker

Carlson, Vladimir Putin evinced his nostalgia for Germans—from Willy Brandt to Merkel—who made even the faintest murmur outside the Atlanticist script. Putin mentioned Egon Bahr's proposal in the Nineties for the replacement of NATO with a new European security architecture that would include Russia. “He was a wise old man,” Putin said of Bahr, “but no one listened to him.”

#### IV.

*It is not possible in every war for the victor to overthrow his enemy completely.*

—Carl von Clausewitz

The second day of the conference was opened by the German chancellor. In his youth, Olaf Scholz had been a left-leaning Social Democrat with long, curly hair who seemed ready to follow the way of Willy Brandt. He made his name as the mayor of Hamburg, Germany's worldliest city, and had been the finance minister in Merkel's coalition government. Last year he was criticized across the Anglo and German press for prevaricating about the Ukraine war in its early months. In particular, he was faulted for holding back shipments of artillery and tanks, a hesitation in keeping with the majority of the German population's own doubts. He has since come to heel. “I'm probably not telling you anything new when I say that Germany will invest two percent of its GDP in defense this year,” Scholz began, “and also in the coming years—in the 2020s, 2030s, and beyond.” Scholz has the unfortunate habit, even when he is saying something important, of sounding like a notary reading aloud the terms of a contract. But at Munich he would demonstrate Germany's loyalty to the Western alliance, its promise to make good on payments going forward, and the conjoining of Ukraine and Israel as the common cause of humanity. Then came highly sanded-down pieces of NATO mantra. “Without security,” he muttered, “all else is nothing.” And then the fealty. “Since the start of the war, the United States has provided Ukraine with something over twenty billion dollars a year in military assistance—with a gross domestic



product of twenty-eight trillion dollars,” Scholz said. “A similar effort must surely be the least that can be expected from every European country.” After his speech, Hadley Gamble, a former CNBC anchor from Knoxville, Tennessee, gamely interviewed Scholz on the main stage. One was suddenly witnessing either elaborate German innocence or practiced German obtuseness. Scholz insisted that he received regular updates from Tel Aviv confirming that international law was being followed. “What evidence do you have that the Israelis are abiding by international law?” asked Gamble. “We are asking that they do so,” Scholz replied. Gamble, seeing there was no way to get anywhere with the chancellor playing the simpleton, opened the floor to softball questions.

For the past two years, it has been customary for Volodymyr Zelensky to seize the occasion at international gatherings. At Munich, the effect was achieved in part by the sense that here was a man beleaguered by war, whom the Kremlin really wanted dead. An added element of Zelensky’s dignity apparatus was unwittingly supplied by the

conference-goers themselves. Everyone knew that Zelensky was in the difficult position of having to seem grateful for all the help the Europeans had given him while at the same time forcefully pressing his case that they were actually leaving him bare-handed, bereft of munitions. He had to put on a smile for a group of people who were privately weighing his chances of success—who were looking down at their phones at the news from Avdiivka (Putin boasted of staying up all night watching the Russian advance)—while beaming with admiration for his performances and clapping wildly. Any kind of peace settlement with Russia was still unspeakable in most Western capitals. The difficulty of Zelensky’s position, the restraint one felt he had to master, only contributed to the conference-goers’ sense of his aura as a savior dealing with penny-pinching cowards.

“Do not ask Ukraine when the war will end. Ask yourself: Why is Putin still able to continue it?” Zelensky told the room. The question he wanted to ask was meant to incite introspection of the “by golly, we should do something” kind. But it seemed possible to

hazard an answer. Why was Russia able to continue the war? Because Western sanctions not only didn’t work but backfired, as was likely to be the fate of the extra, post-Navalny round of penalties. It turned out that Russia had built up a war economy that was now churning out nearly three times as many artillery shells as the United States and Europe combined. It turned out that the rest of the world still wanted to buy Russian gas and oil. It turned out that the commodity traders of Switzerland were willing to move en masse to Dubai to handle the Russian volume. Why was Russia able to continue the war? Because only Ukraine was willing to fight and die for Ukraine, however much Emmanuel Macron might fantasize about sending NATO infantry detachments. Why was Russia able to continue the war? Because each Ukrainian drone strike inside Russia’s borders was a gift to the Russian war party, and even the Biden Administration worried that strikes on Russian refineries threatened to drive up global oil prices, which could play to Trump’s favor in November (the Ukrainians’ inadvertently contributing to Trump’s

victory with higher energy prices was an irony no one wanted to savor). Why was Russia able to continue the war? Because Russia still had nuclear weapons, more of them than any other power on the planet. One of the more common seesaw conversations I heard among Western strategists in the lead-up to the Munich Conference was the simultaneous urge to imagine Putin in The Hague—should we execute him by firing squad after his guilty verdict or by hanging?—and the grudging acknowledgment that Russia’s nuclear arsenal was a phenomenon with real physical properties.

“Don’t be South Vietnam!” the historian Niall Ferguson mock-shouted to me over a drink after Zelensky’s talk. We were at Hugo’s, the louche, purple-lit lounge across from the Hof where hangers-on and groupies of the conference congregated. Strippers seemed imminent (the venue was not Ferguson’s choice). “That’s what I told Zelensky and his adviser when I met them,” Ferguson said. “I told them, ‘You want to be North Vietnam.’ And they asked, ‘What do you mean we should be North Vietnam?’ and I told them, ‘You want to fight while talking and talk while fighting.’” Ferguson thought the war could still be won, but even if Ukraine couldn’t get all its territory back, it needed to fight toward a more optimal negotiating position. I imagined Ukraine as one of those spots on the map with diagonal lines through it indicating contested territory. Won’t the settlement be something like Korea or Kashmir? I asked. “No, it certainly doesn’t have to be Kashmir, it can be like Finland was a few years ago, a non-NATO but de facto NATO ally.” What was keeping that from happening? I asked. “The Germans need to ramp up their production,” he replied. The German arms manufacturer Rheinmetall was opening a plant in Ukraine, but that kind of thing was hardly enough. “Germany is going to be wiped out in its industrial production by the Chinese,” Ferguson told me. “Their cars are going to be wiped out. It’s in their own interest to build up armaments if they want to preserve any future of German industry.” Outside the lounge were fleets of BMWs and Mercedes poised to vanish. It seemed like a bit of steel-helmet fantasia to think that Germany

could replace any iota of its auto profits by becoming an international supplier of heavy weapons. “They should go read Meinecke again,” Ferguson said, laughing. “*Die Deutsche Katastrophe!*”

## V.

*Since 1945 we have lived between latent and open civil wars whose terribleness can still be outdone by a nuclear war, as if the civil wars that rage around the world are, reversing the traditional interpretation, our ultimate savior from total destruction.*

—Reinhard Koselleck

Ever since taking over the conference in 2022, Christoph Heusgen has wanted to make it less of a cigar-and-cognac affair for old NATO hands. As Germany’s ambassador to the United Nations, Heusgen regularly met with people from Africa, from Asia, from Latin America. He has succeeded in making the Munich Security Conference more about the Global South, more about food security, less about nuclear missiles. At Munich there were over one hundred participants from these states. The organizers were particularly pleased that the president of Colombia came at the last minute. When I spoke to the Mauritanian delegation, an assistant to the defense minister, Hanana Ould Sidi, told me, “We have come to teach the art of peace—we have peace within our borders—not to learn it.” The problem was that Israel’s war in Gaza had made this Southern contingent inconvenient, even annoying. It was hard for anyone to get through an interview with the press, or a panel on the stage, without being posed the Gaza question. “There’s a Global South person on every panel,” a journalist said to me outside one of the press rooms, with the suggestion that this made it impossible to do Munich properly. The same frustration was in evidence among many of the conference-goers. They were like people seated in first class expecting *côte de boeuf*, only to be served a Hindu vegan meal.

The disjuncture took more dramatic shape when I took a walk through the Old Town. In the Marienplatz, where huge Israeli and E.U. banners fluttered from the neo-Gothic New Town Hall, there was a pro-Palestinian protest,

tightly fenced in, with police officers looking down from the surrounding buildings. Inside the cordons, a mixture of elderly German peace activists outfitted in antinuclear T-shirts had lived long enough to have the experience of being joined by a much younger group of protesters in keffiyehs carrying placards and Palestinian flags. I passed a young Jewish couple holding each other and a small sign that read **JEWS AGAINST GENOCIDE**. As I reached the corner of the square, a rich Irish brogue roiled the plaza through a microphone. “We know that they are all here: the rogues’ gallery of war criminals! Clinton, Blinken, Stoltenberg, already drenched in the blood of the people of Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya . . . and now Gaza!” Why, if it wasn’t Clare Daly, a member of the European Parliament from Ireland, addressing the crowd, with Yanis Varoufakis’s distinctive head bobbing near the front row. As I walked away from the plaza down Theatinerstraße, there was a smaller but no less animated protest for Ukraine ahead of me. Far fewer police officers. On a stage, a Ukrainian man pointed to a blow-up doll of Putin in prison pajamas behind bars, while children held signs that read **FREE THE TAURUS MISSILES!** to shame Germany into sending more advanced weaponry to Kyiv. At the center of the gathering and drumbeats, there was a group of young women wearing traditional Ukrainian costumes with baskets on their heads, while a man shouted through a loudspeaker, “Putin is a murderer! Putin is a murderer!”

## VI.

*I was talking to a mother at my state fair. She said, “Senator, I don’t want my eighteen-year-old fighting in Europe.” I said, “That’s why we’re giving Ukraine weapons. So that doesn’t happen, because if Ukraine loses, and Putin invades one of our NATO allies, then your eighteen-year-old will be fighting in Europe.”*

—Senator Pete Ricketts, Republican of Nebraska

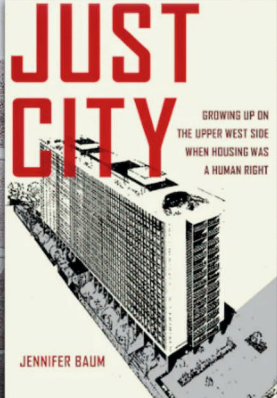
The Republicans were relaxed in Munich. They seemed like they just wanted to get to Trader Vic’s, the tiki-style bar in the basement of the Hof. For the Europeans, it

was as if they didn't grasp the gravity of the situation, but they understood it perfectly well: America was getting good value out of the war. After softening the ground with the protectionist measures of the Inflation Reduction Act, a policy that excludes Europe from the profits of the U.S. renewables boom, the United States had significantly increased the amount of natural gas it provided Europe; the Russian army was tied down; NATO was rejuvenated; the resubordination of Europe was being lubricated with Ukrainian blood. As I'd heard earlier, Lindsey Graham, more than capable of bullshitting his way through a panel or two, had backed out of attending the conference. In his place was Pete Ricketts, the junior senator from my home state, Nebraska, whose billionaire family owns the Chicago Cubs. In a moment of European concern that Trump, if elected, would leave them to Putin's mercy, Ricketts was a specimen of interest for the Europeans. Not only did he appear to be devoid of urgency, but he acted like he belonged in Munich and sidled himself onto a panel with NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg and the prime minister of one of the most hawkish states, Kaja Kallas of Estonia. They pressed Ricketts on why the Republicans were threatening to block aid to Ukraine at this crucial hour. Was he prepared to see a world where Putin won? Where America yielded its global leadership? "In the United States right now we have a pressing national-security issue at our southern border," Ricketts declared. "Over the course of the past three years, eight and a half million people have either entered our country illegally or attempted to enter our country illegally. Putting that in perspective, that's more than four times the population of my state, and that's the number one consideration for people in my state—and frankly across the United States." Kallas looked at Ricketts as if he were disemboweling a cow. A few moments later, a member of the Ukrainian parliament jumped up and told Ricketts, "We are ready to help you with the border. But do you really think that if Ukraine would fail, that will help American border?" It was a surreal image: Ukrainian combat veterans descending in choppers to take

out Guatemalan families. I had seen the Ukrainian MP all throughout the conference. His name was Oleksii Goncharenko. He was one of the new young men coughed up by the war. He had protested the German ambassador's comments on holding elections in the Donbass by spray-painting NEIN! on the commemorative portion of the Berlin Wall in Kyiv. Goncharenko was a hot-blooded Ukrainian nationalist who broke with the pro-Russian party of his father, the former mayor of Odesa, who is now wanted by the Ukrainian state.

Outside the entryway of the Hof, I met Goncharenko. "It's gloomy this year," he said. I asked him if he wanted NATO to formally enter the war. "That will never happen," he replied. I asked what he thought the West should do if it proved impossible to recover the eastern regions occupied by Russia. And then Goncharenko said something interesting: "I would say that if all of Ukraine cannot come into NATO, then just take a part of us in for now—take in the part we control." This seemed to mark a shift at the conference. Whereas inside the Hof NATO commanders and U.S. senators still spoke of taking all of Ukraine back as a necessity, a pure embodiment of Ukrainian nationalism was standing outside speaking in the language of a deal, even if still suffused with the unreality of NATO membership.

"You probably know the average age of Ukrainian soldiers. I was privileged to command soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, typically of age eighteen to twenty-three or so. In Ukraine, it's over forty!" It was General David Petraeus on the phone. He was in the Four Seasons, near the Hof. I had been trying to reach him all day to get his view on how both the Ukraine war and the Gaza war were going. Petraeus had been coming to Munich for decades, first as a speechwriter for the Supreme Allied Commander Europe. He, too, believed Russia could be defeated. The U.S. decisions to send more weapons would unlock German decisions to send more weapons, and soon there would be a steady flow to Ukraine. "The lesson here is to stop temporizing. Let's get on with it." But

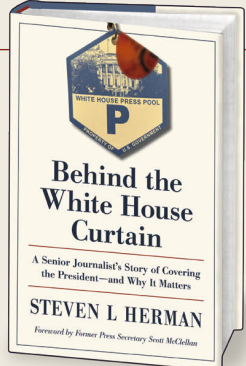


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Ukraine, according to Petraeus, also had to meet its side of the deal. There needed to be more Ukrainian teenagers on the front line.

I asked the general who had presided over two U.S. defeats in the Middle East how he thought the Israel Defense Forces were faring. “I think the answer lies in a clear hold-and-build approach.” Petraeus meant that the IDF, which he believed didn’t have much experience with the type of operation they were conducting, were not properly holding the north of Gaza. Instead of building from conquered territory, they kept moving on from it. I thanked the general for his time, as I saw J. D. Vance walk by the front of the Hof.

If Ricketts was a standard-issue Republican who, despite some genuflections to Trump, was still at heart a Cold Warrior, Vance was Trump’s man in Munich. He strutted out to the Michael Jackson shrine and offered himself as a target to Scandinavian and Arab journalists who, for different reasons, sized him up like the Antichrist. I kept a bit of distance from Vance in case a sniper from any one of a number of nations decided to take him out. “The reason I’m in Munich is because my political view is not well represented here, but it’s the will of the American people,” Vance told the gathering press. “Look, it’s not even about political will anymore when it comes to Ukraine,” Vance said. “It’s a question of production: we can’t even make enough armaments for Ukraine, and there’s a whole Asian element that we also have to arm for.” I asked Vance what he thought about Ukraine’s reaching a peace with Moscow. “This thing is going to end in a negotiated settlement,” he told me. “The problem is that our sanctions have only resulted in the hypermilitarized Russian state.” Vance was treating Munich as another fairground for his audition to be Trump’s vice president, or at the very least as the Republican Party’s foreign-policy chieftain. As far as that went, it was going well. For the conference, he had prepared a line intended to bring Europeans to their senses. “If this war is so existential,” he asked, “then why aren’t you treating it as

existential and building up your armies as if it were Armageddon?” It was one of the shortcomings of the conference that the answer to that sort of question was nowhere to be heard. Vance, who styled himself as the teller of hard truths, was really just giving the predicament another coat of MADE IN USA varnish.

For more than a decade, Washington pushed for European governments to spend more on defense, but insisted that this money primarily be spent buying from U.S. suppliers, not E.U. ones. In 2018, when the Europeans put forward one of several plans to coordinate their spending on domestic manufacturers, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, Kay Bailey Hutchinson, warned against it becoming “a protectionist vehicle for the E.U.” “We’re going to watch carefully, because if that becomes the case,” Hutchinson threatened, “then it could splinter the strong security alliance that we have.” The result had been an extortion racket in all but name, one that European diplomats for twenty years had decided to honor little by little while knowing full well that if they were to invest too heavily in European-made weapons and armaments, in European interoperable systems, they would be breaking NATO’s unwritten code.

Vance shirked the specifics. If the Americans really wanted to grasp why they were unable to produce enough munitions—American China hawks claimed U.S. long-range precision weapon stocks would not last a week in a confrontation with China over Taiwan—they needed to confront how unattractive making lethal military hardware had become in a highly financialized economy. The Pentagon had not spent decades planning for a protracted land war on the steppes of the Donbass, and defense contractors are run by the same McKinseyfied executive class as the rest of corporate America. Shareholder pressure and the sheer opportunity cost of maintaining the capacity of plants, workers, and supply chains to ramp up production of millions of rounds of shells were immense. To even be able to compete for big government contracts, companies already had to be a “pro-

gram of record,” which effectively barred new entrants. The major defense contractors, in fact, prefer to have large backlogs—it looks better for financial metrics. So hard-up America had to decide which of its wards was most deserving of its limited matériel: Taiwan, Israel, or Ukraine. There was not enough to go around.

There was not as much talk at Munich as I expected about the world’s other major power, China. The Chinese successfully lurked through the conference amid the distractions of Ukraine and Gaza. It was as if they were determined to pass unnoticed. They spoke on behalf of the international order they now believed was jeopardized by the very powers that had built it. Wang Yi, China’s old, experienced foreign minister, who had been called back into service after one of Xi’s purges, gave a speech so flat that hardly anyone remarked on it. He had a brief chat with Heusgen, as well as Indian external affairs minister S. Jaishankar, afterward and left. Later, I spied him moving quickly through the outdoor tent corridors, followed by a small retinue. They whisked themselves down the street in front of the Hof. I thought Wang would get into one of the long black Mercedes or BMWs, but he and his staff made toward the central train station. “But isn’t that...?” “Yes, that’s Wang Yi, Chinese foreign minister, member of the politburo of the world’s rising power, walking unguarded in downtown Munich,” the English journalist who worked for the Swedish-owned website mused.

We decided to follow him. Up Salvatorplatz, across Brienner Straße. Was Wang taking the subway? We crossed a main intersection. It was hard to keep up with him. Did the People’s Republic have no security detail? The German cars that China would soon be blotting out of existence jostled for position at the stoplights as we ran across the street. It was two more blocks until we huffed it and caught up to him. “Mr. Wang, I wonder if I could ask you a question,” I said. Wang turned and looked unperturbed, while one member of his entourage intercepted me: “Please, no.” As the rest of the group hurried by, I asked the last staffer,



who was smoking, what he made of the conference. He took a smiling drag and said: “Wir sprechen kein Englisch!” “You wasted your breath,” the editor of *Foreign Affairs* later told me over a drink at Odeonsplatz. “You’ll soon likely be dealing with Liu Jianchao instead, who’s much more approachable. He was at the embassy in London and speaks excellent English. You’ll have better luck with him.”

The final hours of the conference were a desultory exchange of business cards and exhortation to keep up one’s chin. Lost on the managers and technicians at Munich was that security is not the same thing as peace. Attempts even to refer to the history of grand peace settlements on the Continent were thin on the ground. Heusgen seemed to sense it, but could hardly declare that the “Lose-Lose” endgame he called on conference-goers to prevent was no longer amenable to Atlanticist solutions. China was not as convenient an adversary as the Soviet Union. It turned its back on full-scale foreign interventions not long after Ben Rhodes was born; if it had an ideology left to export, it was an updated version of the modernization theory the United States practiced in the Sixties, when it tried to transform the Mekong Delta into the Tennessee Valley Authority. Now China was facing an insurgency at its Belt and Road hub in Pakistan; it was helping the junta of Myanmar negotiate with the armies of ethnic minorities; it was channeling resources out of Africa at a stupendous clip, all while developing its industries and universities, and looking to dump its excess production on foreign ports. Far from being a victim of planning, as the Soviet Union had been, it had reinvigorated the idea of industrial planning in the West.

Ukraine, Gaza, Taiwan: the crises were interconnected. At the time of last year’s conference, the United States had directed Israel to send its American military matériel to Ukraine, while this year the war in Gaza threatened to so remove Ukraine from the minds of Congress that Biden was forced to tie \$60 billion in aid to Ukraine to an Israeli package if it were to have any chance of passing. Remember, too, that Japan announced last year that it would send interceptor

missiles—a valuable deterrent against any Chinese move on Taiwan—to the United States, presumably for the country to pass on to Ukraine. The tripartite crisis left each of the major players, except Europe, with benefits to show for their position: The United States increased its power over Europe. Russia had wrecked Ukraine, the NATO outpost on its border, while the Kremlin had shorn itself of elite domestic critics, many of whom had left the country en masse. China’s geopolitical position has been improved as the only credible restraint on the Russian attack dog, while it continues to trade for Israeli technology even as it makes old Maoist noises that Palestinians have the right to

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### LOST ON THE MANAGERS AND TECHNICIANS AT MUNICH WAS THAT SECURITY IS NOT THE SAME THING AS PEACE

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achieve self-determination through armed struggle.

But there is another scenario in which the U.S. position could badly erode. If German manufacturing really does lose competitiveness in part owing to structurally higher energy costs, and if European governments do boost defense spending but still can’t take on Russia alone and alienate European electorates by forcing austerity in social spending, American grand strategy in Europe could crack apart. It may be that Washington’s plans for Europe worked only in a world in which Russia decisively lost the Ukraine war, or hung on in a stalemate but suffered the kind of economic collapse that the sanctioners believed they were inflicting. But a Russia that’s a nuclear-armed Chinese resource colony capable of churning out millions of rounds of 152mm shells—and that has reshaped the European security order significantly in its favor, however much it may be facing a long-term counterinsurgency on its western border—is likely to put paid to American illusions about a war that was initially greeted as a welcome chance to deliver a body blow

to what IR theorists like to call “a non-peer competitor.”

Any way you cut the cake, Europe is the loser. Not only must it funnel the weakened gains of its national economies to U.S. arms contractors and energy companies as its price for the war on Russia, but it cannot accept Chinese investment to compensate either. The European states are bracing themselves for the American terms of their thread-cutting from the Chinese economy. There is little doubt that Biden’s executive order restricting investment in Chinese technology applies as much to the E.U. as it does at home. The German city of Duisburg, the last point of a rail network connecting Chinese goods to Europe, has curtailed investment, with

Chinese freight rail volume dropping 80 percent since 2020. Meanwhile, the Italian leader, Giorgia Meloni, yesterday’s fascist threat to the Continent, is rumored in the Italian press to be set to receive the Global Citizen Award from the Atlantic Council, which praised her for having withdrawn Italy from Beijing’s infrastructure development program, the Belt and Road Initiative.

As the conference came to a close, I saw Armin Papperger, the CEO of Rheinmetall, head toward the Literaturhaus, while Anne Applebaum of *The Atlantic* walked down the Promenadeplatz, scowling into her phone. At Munich she had met the German Green politician, Anton Hofreiter, who told her that he worried Europe could soon face three autocracies: Russia, China, and the United States. “When he said that, it was my turn to shake my head,” she wrote in *The Atlantic*, “not because I didn’t believe him, but because it was so hard to hear.” There were more security conferences coming up, little siblings of Munich: the International Security Expo in London, the Black Sea Security Conference, and the “offensive security” Hexacon in Paris. Goncharenko wanted to host his own security conference in Odesa. Outside the Hof, as the line of Mercedes and BMWs stretched into the far distance, and beyond them drivers waited for a price surge, there was a barrage of auf Wiedersehens, au revoirs, goodbyes, back pats, and hastily composed group photos. “Next year in Munich!” ■



# THE PROPHET WHO FAILED

After the apocalypse that wasn't

By *Emily Harnett*

Like many, I had assumed that her name, Elizabeth Clare Prophet, was an alias or affectation. Given what I knew of her—of the strange books she wrote, of the strange church she led—it seemed a little on the nose. But in fact it was her actual married name: her second husband, Mark, came from a long line of Prophets, and Elizabeth—his soul-mate, his twin flame—remained one long after his death. In a way, her first name belonged to him, too. As a child, she went by Betty Clare; Mark preferred Elizabeth, so Elizabeth she became. But Betty was how she was known to her parents and, later, to her enemies.

As for the people who knew her, who loved her, who still believed in her—they called her Mother. This is what Pamela calls her when I meet her for the first time, on Ridge Avenue in Philadelphia. The room is purple, and Pamela herself wears purple: purple pants, purple sweater, purple T-shirt

*Emily Harnett is a writer and teacher living in Philadelphia. This article is part of a series supported by the John Templeton Foundation.*

beneath it. The carpet is purple, too. It is a small room, made smaller by the cloying intensity of the color and by the windows, which, while large, are mostly covered up, letting in very little light. Outside, it is a June morning, golden and warm. The effect, inside, is of being trapped in an Easter egg.

Pamela clarifies that she had two moms: the one who gave birth to her, who raised her in Pennsylvania, whom she loves so much that the thought of her makes her cry; and Elizabeth Clare Prophet, who could read minds, who summoned angels, and to whose teachings, Pamela says, she's devoted her life. Pamela is a member and former leader of the Philadelphia chapter of the Summit Lighthouse, better known to some as the Church Universal and Triumphant, the New Age religious group that achieved notoriety under Elizabeth's direction in the Eighties and Nineties.

In the early Nineties, the church retained an estimated membership of between thirty thousand and fifty thousand people. Church officials are cagey about numbers (this is for

“spiritual reasons,” they say), but their ranks today are clearly much diminished. The church relies on donations from its members—the most serious of whom were once required to sign over their assets to the church community—as well as from the sale of books by Elizabeth like the 1984 title *The Lost Years of Jesus*, which, according to the church, has sold more than 250,000 copies. In its more prosperous years, the Philadelphia chapter operated out of a mansion in one of the city's ritziest suburbs; today, its financial circumstances can be surmised from the size of its storefront church on Ridge Avenue.

After I found Pamela on Facebook—she used a photo of Elizabeth as her profile picture—she invited me to attend Sunday services in early June last year. There, I met a handful of members of the Philadelphia chapter: Carol, Blanca, and the two Roberts. One Robert, a black man with piercing blue eyes, wore a bolo tie and cowboy boots. The other, Pamela's husband, is white and wore a gray mustache and



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gray sweatpants, which he tucked into the tops of his white tube socks like pantaloons. Together, we sit and stare at the altar. Framed portraits of the Prophets stare back. Mark, pictured in black and white, has a lantern jaw and a faint resemblance to Fred Flintstone. Elizabeth, in color, looks into the camera with a knowing, close-lipped smile. Their frames are flanked by amethyst geodes. The room is so small, so brightly painted, that I feel giant and profane, an interloper in a sacred dollhouse. The lights dim; the service starts. We sit, we stand, we recite, we sing. We proceed through a dream version of a Catholic mass. In place of a homily, we have a booklet of “ashram rituals”; there are “decrees”; and rather than a priest, there’s Elizabeth Prophet, speaking to us from beyond the grave.

Twenty minutes into the service, Pamela approaches the altar and removes a cloth from a small monitor. Elizabeth appears onscreen, standing before an altar much like the one before us. Although church doctrine maintains that she has died many times—her “previous embodiments” include Guinevere, Marie Antoinette, and Martha from the Bible—Elizabeth passed away most recently in 2009. According to the church, she lives on in the “etheric realm,” as well as in some fifteen thousand hours of recordings that have for many years been stored in a concrete bunker in Montana. That footage of her channeling, chanting, lecturing, singing, and prophesying composed the bulk of her ministry. In the Eighties and Nineties, some of her followers would hand-deliver these videos to public-access TV stations. You can see the attentive faces of her devotees when the camera pans from Elizabeth to the audience in the packed ballroom. They look nothing like the dregs of the counterculture, as they were often characterized. They’re wearing slacks and enormous glasses. They look like salespeople for IBM.

Elizabeth’s voice surrounds us. She addresses us not as the Messenger—the mouthpiece for Jesus, the Buddha, and her dead hus-

band, each of whom inhabits her mind to transmit eternal truths—but as herself, as Elizabeth. She speaks about the growing epidemic of gun violence. She reflects on the biochemical and spiritual causes of depression. She doesn’t sound like Guinevere or a high priestess of Atlantis, as she claimed to be. She sounds like a PTA president. She looks like one too—like every bake-sale organizer, every field-trip chaperone, every dutiful mom I had ever seen outside girls’ dressing rooms at JCPenney on Sunday afternoons. Her makeup is neutral, tasteful, and perfect; her hair is short, brown, and permed. The trained eye can date her recordings by each iteration of that perm, reading the diameter of her curls like the rings of a tree trunk. By this method, and by an onscreen chyron, I determine that Elizabeth is speaking to us from the late Nineties. She sympathizes with our despair, but warns that it interferes with our ability to “hold the light.” We must be impervious to despair, she tells us.

“Are you impervious to despair?” she asks.

It was an interesting question to field from someone who spent at least \$12 million preparing for Armageddon and, according to her daughter, considerable spiritual energy praying for it. In 1989 and 1990, under Elizabeth’s direction, the church constructed near the hills of Montana’s Paradise Valley and the gates of Yellowstone National Park what was at the time described as the largest private bomb shelter in the nation. There, on March 15, 1990, hundreds of followers waited for the nuclear strike that Elizabeth had prophesied in a series of increasingly impassioned public addresses over the course of several years. Over three days, they hunkered underground, surrounded by gold coins and assault rifles, only to emerge into the sunlight of a bitterly ordinary day.

I became fascinated with the church’s story, a Cold War reprise of the Great Disappointment of the nineteenth century, in which thousands of Millerites waited in vain for Jesus’ return on a Tuesday in Octo-

ber 1844. I researched the Church Universal on and off for years under the assumption that they were a historical footnote to a bygone era, only to discover that they were an active religious group that met on a weekly basis around the corner from my nail salon. (Though the church is headquartered in Montana, it maintains chapters, or “teaching centers,” all over the world.)

The longer I thought about it, this coincidence began to make a cruel kind of sense: church members had given everything to their belief that a surge of dark karma would swallow the world, but in fact the world had swallowed them whole and spit them out—in, for instance, Philadelphia, a karmic event if there ever was one. If anyone needed to remain impervious to despair, it was Eagles fans. And perhaps because I was a Philadelphian—bound in tribal solidarity with losers of all stripes—I felt sympathetic to the group: I couldn’t help but pity them for their great disappointment. Many of them had been coping with it for longer than I’d been alive.

I was born more than a year after members of the church went down into the shelters, and I turned thirty-two the day before I attended their services for the first time. Afterward, I had plans to eat birthday cake with my mom—like Pamela, I had grown up in the Philly suburbs. But I surprised myself by lingering for a few minutes and chatting. They sat around me on the plush purple carpet, listening to the facts I shared about my life with the warm curiosity I tended to associate with talk therapists and kindergarten teachers. When I finally told them I had to go—to celebrate my birthday, I explained—they burst into song. But the song was not what I expected. *You are a child of the light*, they warbled,

*You were created in the image divine,  
You are a child of infinity,  
You dwell in the veils of time,  
You are a daughter of the Most High!*

I looked to Pamela, who looked back at me with perfect tenderness as she sang. Their voices were thin, wavering, sincere. Someone’s cracked a little on a high note. I couldn’t remember the last time strangers had

sung to me for my birthday. Maybe once, against my will, at a Chili’s or something. I felt like I was five years old; I felt like the most important person on earth.

Elizabeth established the Church Universal in 1975, at a time when the nation was spawning new religious movements at a dizzying rate. While it would be fair to describe the church’s doctrine as New Age—Elizabeth herself used the term—it was also self-consciously rooted in nineteenth-century American esotericism: the church was only the most recent exponent of a set of teachings espoused by the Russian spiritualist Helena Blavatsky, who advanced the idea that all the world’s faiths amounted to a single body of knowledge authored

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ON MARCH 15, 1990, HUNDREDS  
OF FOLLOWERS WAITED FOR  
THE NUCLEAR STRIKE THAT  
ELIZABETH HAD PROPHESED

---

by a pantheon of immortal beings. Guy and Edna Ballard, a husband and wife from Chicago, developed these beliefs in the Thirties in a series of books titled the “I AM” Discourses, and declared themselves Messengers for the Masters on earth. When Elizabeth met Mark in 1961, he was leading a Ballard offshoot group in the D.C. area and had proclaimed himself Messenger; Elizabeth was a twenty-two-year-old secretary at the *Christian Science Monitor*, unhappily married to a Christian Scientist and eager to find solace in a community of fellow Ballard devotees. Shortly after their meeting, Mark informed her that the Masters had disclosed to him their desire for her to be his “spiritual partner.” Elizabeth accepted his proposal, leaving her husband and assuming the office of Messenger by his side.

After his death by stroke in 1973, Mark became known as Ascended Master Lanello—a portmanteau of Lancelot and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, each of whom he had claimed as previous embodiments. Elizabeth remained the sole Messen-

ger on earth until her death from Alzheimer’s in 2009. The church has yet to name a successor. The thousands of hours of recordings that the church maintains—stacked alongside nonperishable food in its bomb shelters—has allowed her to attain a practical immortality even with her most recent embodiment in the grave. Besides, it’s hard to know who would replace her.

In 2021, General Michael Flynn, the Christian nationalist and former national security adviser to Donald Trump, gave an address at a non-denominational church in Nebraska that internet sleuths suspected had been plagiarized from one of Elizabeth’s “dictations,” as her dispatches from the Masters were known. One helpful YouTuber spliced together footage of the two for comparison.

Both propose a religious call to arms and entreat the “freeborn” to resist becoming “enslaved by any foe,” while making confusing allusions to “sevenfold rays” and “legions.” But Flynn recited this prophetic word salad with the delivery of one’s least-favorite uncle plodding through an ill-prepared wedding toast. Elizabeth—with her precise elocution, her terrifying and obvious sincerity—sounded like a woman on the brink of a great cosmic battle.

QAnon conspiracy theorists, who quickly noted that some of Flynn’s language wasn’t exactly biblical in origin, believed the “occult prayer” exposed Flynn as a satanist. But if the incident reveals anything besides the mutinous humor of Flynn’s ghostwriter, it’s the degree to which millenarian rhetoric has saturated American public life. In 1960, the sociologist Daniel Bell predicted “an end to chiliastic hopes, to millenarianism, to apocalyptic thinking—and to ideology.” But as the historian Paul Boyer has noted, after the great revolutionary movements of the Sixties waned in America, much the opposite came to pass. Prophetic belief—whose adherents, in Boyer’s description, “take very seriously the Bible’s apocalyptic sections and derive from them a detailed agenda of coming events”—exploded in popularity during the Seventies and Eighties. Such beliefs have shaped

not only American religiosity but our understanding of the human psyche itself.

In the Fifties, the psychologist Leon Festinger coined the Psych 101 term *cognitive dissonance*, based in part on research he'd done for the book *When Prophecy Fails*, which described the mental state of a Fifties UFO cult after its leader's apocalyptic predictions went unrealized. There have been so many of these groups, flourishing and flaming out in endless cycles, trading places in a Beckettian limbo wherein divine reckoning approaches but never arrives. They have furnished streaming services with an endless supply of podcasts and documentaries rehearsing the history of America's ill-fated apocalyptic sects and outsider religions. But whenever I try to place Elizabeth in this tradition, I come up short. She would be easier to categorize had she been more like Jim Jones, to whom she was often compared, or Charles Manson, whose Family had allegedly sent her death threats. But while her church was armed to the hilt, they never killed anyone; although Elizabeth could be mercurial and vindictive, she was a beloved mother of five. Were it not for her prophecies of nuclear Armageddon, it's possible that the church would have remained one of the many fledgling religions eking out its existence far from the center of American life. Perhaps the one thing Elizabeth had in common with the believers of those other faiths was that she, like so many Americans before her, could imagine no greater spiritual fulfillment for herself or the nation than an extinction event.

I wanted to go to Montana, where Elizabeth's prophecies drove her followers underground. There, I thought, I might understand the persistence of prophetic belief in American life, which seemed to proliferate even as rates of mainstream religious affiliation waned. At the very least, I wanted to better comprehend how the church had lasted so long. Many left soon after the shelter episode, but a perplexing number remained. The failure of Elizabeth's prophecies

was itself a disaster of apocalyptic scale—a shattering irony that threatened to transform the remainder of their lives into mere epilogue. And yet their fate was in some ways enviable. I first read about Elizabeth in the winter of 2020–21, a time when, for obvious reasons, it was easier to sympathize with a people who had engineered their downfall by overpreparing for catastrophe. At the time, it was comforting to imagine the believers on the worst day of their lives, emerging from their concrete bunker only to discover that the world they left behind was still there, indifferent and untroubled. Their great disappointment seemed to me a kind of miracle: what a relief to imagine a future in which the worst thing that could happen was that the world *didn't* end. While I wondered if I would drink in a dive bar or dance at a concert or hug my mother ever again, it was soothing to imagine that I too would one day leave my isolation and find the world exactly as I'd left it.

Although I envied Elizabeth's followers for the paradise they regained, I also pitied them for the same reasons I pitied myself. While a droll acknowledgment that the world was ending had become obligatory among my peer group—white, millennial, middle class—there was little about our behavior to suggest that we actually believed it. We said it was pointless to save for retirement, but we saved for retirement. We said we couldn't imagine bringing children into this world, and then we brought children into the world. Perhaps we were indifferent; perhaps we were in denial. But I also wondered if we were soothed into passivity by a vestigial belief deep in the collective psyche that someone was coming to save us. I suspected that this was true for me, and that my tenderness for them sprung from this truth. The debunking of their beliefs confirmed their existential loneliness, which was also mine. I couldn't muster any smug satisfaction at the failure of their prophecies, not so long as I suspected the reason for their terrible prayers going unanswered was that there was no one there to

listen—not to them, not to me, not to anyone.

The ranch, as the church's headquarters are known, is located in Corwin Springs, Montana, an unincorporated community about eight miles from the northern entrance to Yellowstone National Park. You can see the church as you approach from Gardiner, the tourist town where I stayed. I did not notice a sign announcing its presence to passersby, and save for the small white crosses marking traffic fatalities, there's hardly anything to interrupt the majesty of the road as it curves through the red mountains of the Gallatin Range. This land, according to church doctrine, is among the most sacred places on earth, but to the nonbeliever, it looks just like any other string of dusty ranches and sporadic campgrounds—beautiful, lonely, and largely unchanged since the closing of the Western frontier. Bison mosey on either side of the road, swinging their dainty tails. Elk curl up on the ground like big cats. But when the sun is strong, you can glimpse something glinting in the hills: the top of the church's gold-toned steeple catching the light like a capped tooth. Following that flash, I turned left onto a narrow metal bridge and crossed a looping turquoise stretch of the Yellowstone River. On the other side, beside a dirt road, a small wooden sign pointed the way to the Royal Teton Ranch.

The church purchased the property, then 12,500 acres, from the Forbes family in 1981. After Mark's death, Elizabeth informed her followers that the move to Montana had been among his final instructions. Legal trouble had already cast a pall over their previous home, in southern California, where the group had lived in a sprawling gilded mansion they called Camelot. Elizabeth insisted that California was polluted by bad karma; the ranch, by contrast, was free of karmic and other pollutants, a mountain paradise appropriately located on the edge of Montana's Paradise Valley. The organization later parted with much of its property, the ranch having contracted to some 7,500 acres that included



sites like the church, called King Arthur's Court, and a remote mountain valley they called the Heart of the Inner Retreat, accessible by a long, unpaved road that climbs a thousand feet in elevation. The Heart, considered the most beautiful place on the property, is where Elizabeth brought students from the spiritual classes she called Summit University. Photographs show her standing in the long grass framed by a backdrop of green hills, her followers seated in a circle at her feet. It is also where they built their bomb shelter.

I had come to the ranch for the largest of its quarterly conferences, this one marking the Fourth of July, a holiday with special importance in their doctrine. The conference involved several days of services for veteran members, as well as a sort of spiritual onboarding program called Essentials, in which I had enrolled, scheduled to take place in King Arthur's Court. Despite its title, the Court was a beige, bland, modern construction with all the Arthurian grandeur of a McMansion.

Inside, I followed signs for the Essentials track to a small, windowless chapel with an altar and a giant framed portrait of the turbaned and bearded El Morya, the Ascended Master that Elizabeth claimed as her spiritual guide. The artist, in the typical Summit Lighthouse style, rendered him with the oversize, wet-looking eyes of a Disney princess. I took my seat along with twenty or so other "newbies," as one woman referred to herself. We were sequestered from the majority of the in-person attendees in the main chapel, where the more advanced work, I later learned, took place.

Guiding the newbies were two beatific white-haired women, Paula and Carla, who greeted us and the hundreds of people attending via Zoom. After the briefest of overviews of the church's history—most conference attendees weren't exactly neophytes—we watched an opening invocation by Elizabeth, in which she called on the divine to protect America's youth from "malevolent and discarnate spirits." Then we watched what

I can only describe as a confusingly erotic biblical cartoon: a two-and-a-half-minute video in which John the Apostle—long-haired, shirtless, needlessly ripped—zips through space and time, summoning a New Jerusalem out of the mountain landscape of the American West. A booming voice-over quotes the Book of Revelation while a faint choir harmonizes ecstatically in the background. The Essentials program, Carla explained, would "take us from where we are right now in consciousness into a new heaven and a new earth." No one had mentioned the bomb shelter yet.

"A New Heaven and a New Earth" was the theme of this year's conference, which marked the thirty-third anniversary of the so-called shelter cycle, when Elizabeth's prophecies culminated in the three nights underground. The

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OVER AND OVER,  
WE REPEATED: "I AM A BEING  
OF VIOLET FIRE, I AM  
THE PURITY GOD DESIRES!"

---

catalyst for her doomsayer turn is unclear, but her daughter Erin speculates that the prophecies were incited by troubles that she had endured in the Eighties; some believe this was the actual reason for the church's move to Montana. In 1981, the church sued Gregory Mull, a former member, over a \$32,000 loan he had failed to pay back; Mull filed a \$253 million countersuit, claiming that the money had been a gift and that he had been a victim of "coercive persuasion" at the hands of Elizabeth and her church.

Central to the Mull controversy—and to the church's teachings—was something called a "decree," a form of rapid, accelerating prayer performed at the pitch and speed of an auctioneer's prattle. You can hear it on *The Sounds of American Doomsday Cults Vol. 14*, an obscure album that circulated for years in avant-garde music circles. As far as anyone knows, the other thirteen volumes don't exist. The label that released it, Faithways International, has is-

sued only one other recording: a collection of songs by the leader of the Japanese terrorist cult Aum Shinrikyo. *Vol. 14* consists of a continuous recording of one of Elizabeth's services, likely from the Eighties, in which she rails against the "misuse of the four-four time" and prays for those subverted "by the syncopated rhythm of the fallen ones." Highlights of the recording are a roll call of some seventy names of presumed fallen ones—everyone from Michael Jackson to Def Leppard—and the eerie, unsettling sound of the decrees. The church's critics described it as "Satan's hum." Mull and his lawyers described it as hypnosis. To me, it sounded like spoken-word poetry as performed by a hive of bees.

That night, Patricia, a handsome black woman in a sparkling purple sweater, guided us through our first decree session. Each of us, she explained, was a "spirit spark" who had become "trapped in a physical body." By doing our decrees, we could begin a process of reunification with the divine. "We're gonna make it a singsongy voice, and then do it *faster*," Paula said delightedly, directing us as though we were actors in a school play. Over and over, we repeated: "I am a being of violet fire, I am the purity God desires!" The newbies beside me did their decrees with cheery, practiced ease; as we gained speed, I stumbled over the words, my tongue twisted. By the final repetition, the decree had morphed into something spooky and Seussian, something in between incantation and nursery rhyme.

It was on July 4, 1988, that Elizabeth stood before an enormous American flag and delivered one of the prophecies that would drive her followers underground. Wearing a white coat, she spoke for six hours while the Montana sky darkened from day to night above her. In a nearby RV, her pregnant daughter, Erin, watched the address on a video monitor and thought: "Something seemed seriously wrong with Mother's sense of time."

In truth, something had been wrong with Elizabeth's sense of time



since childhood. Born in 1939 in Red Bank, New Jersey, Elizabeth was the only child of a German immigrant, Hans Wulf, and his Swiss wife, Fridy. In a school photo, Elizabeth looks like an aspiring Donna Reed, with poodle-curl hair and dainty white gloves. At home, her life was sometimes chaotic and unpredictable. When she was not yet three, her father was detained on suspicion of espionage, an experience that darkened her youth. Within a few years, she had grown accustomed to strange lapses in her head: sudden, fleeting moments of mental absence that frightened and confused her. These “blackouts,” she suspected—later diagnosed as petit mal seizures—were her means of escaping her father’s drunken rages. In grade school, a teacher had roused her from an episode by grabbing her shoulders, screaming in her face, and promising to “shake the devil out of” her. Though she wasn’t raised in any formal religion, she noticed the convictions of the religious people around her.

Fridy, in her own way, helped to shape the evolution of her daughter’s beliefs. Shortly before her death, she confessed that she had tried to give herself an abortion while Elizabeth was in the womb. She had never forgiven herself for it, nor did her daughter. The latter remained convinced that the drug her mother had ingested to abort her still lingered in her brain and body, a belief that shaped her vehement pro-life politics as well as her diet, which included frequent health cleanses in the hope of purging the poison from her system. In addresses, she inveighed against sugar, alcohol, and junk food. Notoriously, the church discouraged expectant mothers from consuming chocolate. Her followers were encouraged to be vegetarians and eat most of their meals in the ranch’s cafeteria, away from the evils of added sugar.

So I am not being glib when I say it is difficult to imagine these people drinking Kool-Aid under any circumstances. In between sessions in El Morya’s chapel, I walked down to the dining hall in one of the handful of prefab buildings that housed some

of the attendees who had traveled to the conference. The church depended on paid staff for most of its daily operations, but participants would receive a free lunch in exchange for volunteering for something like meal prep. Or so I had been told by Jennifer, a thirtysomething newbie who took furious notes during the Essentials sessions and responded to my salvos of small talk with the muted interest of someone who had not traveled to Montana to make friends. In the cafeteria, I spotted her wearing an apron and manning a food station along with Carol from the Philadelphia chapter, who wrapped me in a hug and greeted me with peals of delight as though we had known each other for years.

As Carol drifted away, summoned by cheerful cries of recognition, I considered my food options. Most of them were viscous. There was a carrot stew, a trough of gooey black beans. Beverage choices included “reverse-osmosis water.” I cringed, but then felt a stab of contrition. My meals, for the past several days, had consisted of twenty-dollar burgers from a place called the Corral and freezer-burned pizza from a casino bar where I spent my evenings feeding dollar bills into slot machines and drinking complimentary beer. It would not kill me, I told myself, to eat something healthy.

I bought dinner from the cafeteria and sat down at a long square table, picking at the edges of my meal. The room gradually filled. I was joined by Anna, Elizabeth, and Kirsten, a fifty-something brunette with dramatic eye shadow and little strands of iridescent tinsel threaded throughout her hair, as well as Kirsten’s husband, Marcus, who works in IT. Anna, freckled and British, peered at Kirsten and then back at me, her eyes darting theatrically. “The two of you have the same eyes!” she exclaimed. Kirsten shot me the briefest of glances over her meal. “You must be from the same soul group,” someone said mildly.

The table got to talking. I asked the women how they came to the church. Kirsten explained that her mother had introduced her when she was seventeen, then informed

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me that three generations of her family—her mother, her children, and she and Marcus—were in attendance at the conference. Anna said something confusing about angels and an ex-boyfriend, her prim British voice barely audible over the clamor of the cafeteria. Elizabeth, an older lady with white hair and fuchsia cat-eye glasses, explained that she had always been a “searcher” and heard about the Prophets from a woman she met at work. She saw the truth of their teachings at the first service she attended, when an angel sat beside her.

“How did you know he was there?” I asked.

“I saw him!” she said. “With my third eye,” she clarified. “He was *big!*”

Soon, the women paired off into their own conversations. Marcus, who had endured our chitchat with the polite boredom of husbands at social functions everywhere, rose with palpable relief to go talk to someone he knew. Alone at the table with Kirsten, I regarded her more clearly; aside from the tinsel in her hair, she appeared less ethereal than I’d first thought. She was buxom and forthright, with something subtly appraising in her manner, and though she had finished eating, she lingered at the table, evidently in the mood to talk. “So what do you believe?” she asked me. “Past lives, anything like that?”

“I wish,” I said. After my father died, I explained, I tried to imagine that he had returned in various forms—a colorful bird, an interesting cloud—but the efforts always felt strained and intrusive, like I was goading a dead guy into playing charades. Kirsten frowned in sympathy. Before she could respond, two lanky blond teenagers, a boy and a girl, galloped up to our table and asked her permission to go to the hot springs next door. They were beautiful kids, sunburned and giddy. There were altogether more children and young people at the conference than I had envisioned. Elizabeth Prophet’s own, now mostly middle-aged, were conspicuously absent. Elizabeth had expected her two eldest, Sean and Erin, to be her most faithful *chelas*,

a term derived from Sanskrit that could mean either “disciple” or “slave” depending on whom you asked. The rest of the *chelas* were of varied backgrounds and vocations: they were engineers and psychiatrists, architects and lawyers, and in one case, a vice president of Chase Bank. They even once included, as Erin writes in her memoir, *Prophet’s Daughter*, “a real live rock star”: Ron Strykert, of the Eighties band Men at Work. Overwhelmingly, they were college-educated. Many of them had been raised Catholic. Kirsten told me that, though her husband voted Democratic, most of the church’s members were “constitutional conservatives.” (This wasn’t exactly news to me. Every altar had an American flag on it; Elizabeth habitually inveighed against the evils of Communism in her dictations and lectures. At the back of the main chapel stood an enormous, framed copy of the Constitution.)

Here I was, in the West, eating my vegetables in a church cafeteria with staunch anticommunists in the middle of a mountain range, a tableau that could have scarcely seemed more patriotic if a bald eagle had alighted on my shoulder. It was the Fourth of July, after all, and I was dining with people who had come together to celebrate their love of God, country, and their moms. My own mother was a schoolteacher who lived in Pennsylvania and collected ceramic cups with horses on them; theirs was a woman who had stridden about her Montana ranch in the company of armed men whom she called her Cosmic Honor Guard. Through her prophecies, Elizabeth imbued her lifelong otherness with a higher purpose, carving out a place for herself in the nation’s destiny. As a Prophet, she ceased to be Betty Wulf, daughter of a suspected German traitor, and became, unquestionably, a true American. Her church is a tribute to that transformation.

The winter of 1989–90, Daniel Kehoe recalled, “had to be one of the coldest, snowiest winters we ever had.” Folksy and earnest, he spoke of his time preparing

for the apocalypse with a mix of pride and chagrin, like someone remembering a particularly foolhardy kitchen renovation. Along with Paula, Carla, and a man named Steven, Daniel was addressing the newbies in person and via Zoom for a “roundtable discussion.” It was the first time that I had heard any of them acknowledge the shelter episode explicitly—what they call the shelter cycle, or the shelter drills—and I was surprised by how merrily they spoke of it. “We went through tests day and night,” Daniel said wryly. Such is how the believers interpret the events of that year, in which they moved their entire lives belowground: as a test.

That year, under Elizabeth’s direction, the church’s men and women began around-the-clock work on an excavation site larger than six football fields. Daniel, who had professional experience overseeing large construction projects, supported the efforts to build a parallel complex of shelters in nearby Glastonbury. The ranch’s complex was intended to house around 750 people, many of whom had been living at the church. Made of steel and concrete, the structure consisted of multiple underground passages arranged in the shape of an H and divided with submarine-style doors. The largest of its shelters was big enough to fit a semitruck. Each was equipped with decontamination chambers at its entrance—shower stalls, landlines within reach—to wash off radioactive fallout. The church built bunk beds with purple seat belts on them. There were infirmaries and laundry facilities. Radiation suits and Geiger counters and body bags. Huge armored trucks designed for transporting military combat crews. They had enough food to last them seven years—floor-to-ceiling grain supplies, nonperishables. According to Erin, they had a tractor trailer’s worth of Isuzu pickup trucks. Beneath the bunker, in a chamber, they had more than five million dollars’ worth of gold and silver bullion, as well as twenty-five thousand dollars in pennies. (Paper currency, they suspected, would have little use in the postapocalyptic world.) And

they had guns: fifty AR-15s and thousands upon thousands of rounds of ammunition, for defense against roving bands of marauders.

All told, the church spent around \$12 million on the project. Members quit their jobs, emptied their bank accounts, sold their furniture, their cars, their houses. Those who couldn't afford the move to Montana or fees for the smaller, privately built shelters nearby took out pleading ads in the paper: "Urgent mother with three small children needs loan for shelter space," read one. Others advertised space in their own DIY shelters, made from buried oil drums or prefab bunkers, for as much as \$4,000.

On March 14, 1990, Elizabeth's followers went underground, where they were prepared to remain for a period of possibly seven years. They brought their suitcases, their children, their handguns. In her memoir, Erin recalls a certain ambient giddiness at the nearness of the golden age, at the sure vindication of their beliefs. The church's guards patrolled the ranch's perimeter. Elizabeth, her neck layered in jewels, her fingers covered in rings, decreed deep into the night. There were rumors that agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives watched from the hills.

"Well, we built them and nothing happened!" some people were thinking," Carla recalled of the morning that followed. Noah faced the same difficulties when he built the ark. People laughed at him, too. But something *did* happen that day, according to Steven: they saved the world. Back then, he explained, the jolliness in his tone giving way to a thundering self-seriousness, "we were in—thirty-three years ago—the middle of what we now know as the *Cold War*." And by making "the effort to survive and preserve the teachings," they kept the Cold War from becoming a hot war. Their preparations called forth a "divine intervention" that stopped the missiles from falling.

Crazy, perhaps, but not much crazier than America's own approach to nuclear preparedness: What is "deterrence," after all, if not the belief that

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I	R	G	R	A	P	P	A	M	P	H	A
Z	E	R	O	K	B	U	G	B	E	A	R
O	A	E	X	A	G	G	E	R	A	T	E
F	L	U	E	N	T	N	D	D	N	S	A
F	D	L	S	A	W	S	C	R	U	B	S
T	R	O	M	B	O	N	I	S	T	E	T
R	A	G	W	E	E	D	C	E	E	L	Y
A	G	Y	I	L	Y	C	E	U	M	F	A
C	O	F	F	E	E	V	E	S	T	R	Y
K	N	E	E	O	D	Y	S	S	E	Y	S

- [I]Abel; 2. Dega[s], rev.; 3. b-elfry\*; 4. bug-bear; 5. cough-ee, pun; 6. drag-on; 7. Dr. Seus\*-\*;
- [touchy-f]leely; 9. E.U.-logy; 10. e(X)agger(rev.)-at-[not]e; 11. fluent\*; 12. gra[m](p)a; 13. hi-hats\*;
- Icees, pun; 15. impugns\*; 16. jamb, homophone; 17. john, two mngs.; 18. knee, hidden;
- lyceum\*; 20. Me[ll]anie; 21. Near East\*; 22. odysseys, first letters, rev.; 23. O(ff-trac\*)K;
- O-sak[e]-a; 25. PE-anut(rev.); 26. qui-xotic\*; 27. quiz, second letters, rev.; 28. ragweed\*;
- scrubs, two mngs.; 30. trombone\*; 31. two-eyed, first letters; 32. [s]unless; 33. unreal\*;
- ve(st)ry; 35. Wi-F[i]-e; 36. sex-o[r]-rex, rev.; 37. Y-a-Y-s[koal]; 38. zero, two mngs.

preparing for disaster is tantamount to preventing it? The believers' commitment to surviving a civilization-destroying cataclysm struck me as grim (who would actually want to inherit such a devastated world?), but it was one they shared with defense intellectuals shaping America's nuclear policy for much of the Cold War. In 1992, two years after the church completed construction of its shelter, the *Washington Post* revealed the existence of Project Greek Island, the code name for the secret congressional bunker that the government had been maintaining under the Greenbrier resort in West Virginia since 1957. The bunker, meant to ensure the continuity of government in the event of a nuclear strike, made no accommodations for the rest of the nation, who would be left to duck and cover.

But preparation for disaster often suggest a sublimated desire for it. And what no one on the Essentials panel acknowledged, as they summoned the events of 1990, was how furiously some prayed for the nuclear holocaust the group now credits itself with preventing. As Erin writes in her memoir, by the second night underground, the mood among the group had changed from jubilation to tense, muted desperation. Elizabeth gathered her closest followers and told them it was time to call down judgment upon America. Together, they swung their ceremonial swords and called on Jesus Christ to punish "the evils continuing in the earth." Elizabeth, wielding her own sword engraved with the name ARCHANGEL MICHAEL, called on its namesake to "let the bombs descend." Erin, along with many of the others, would mark that day as the beginning of the end of their involvement with the church.

If the bombs had fallen, they would have confirmed Elizabeth's clairvoyance; they would have smitten her enemies; they would have installed her at the helm of a golden age. But prophetic beliefs can be easily rigged to elude disconfirmation. The person who predicts an 80 percent chance of rain can point to a cloudless sky and remind critics

that he had also allowed for a 20 percent chance of sunshine. The sect that hangs its hopes on a specific Day of Judgment can always claim after the fact that it prevented the very apocalypse it had predicted. Either way, faith is affirmed. Through such rationalizations, the believer ensures that no matter what happens—no matter what she *wants* to happen—she'll find herself on the right side of prophecy.

This modification of belief, I thought, was perhaps how Elizabeth's followers remained, as she had once put it, "impervious to despair." But as I drove back to my Airbnb, I recalled the desperation that had resulted in my own journey to Montana: the months I had spent in the depths of the pandemic rewatching the Lord of the Rings movies, researching Elizabeth, and rereading Kierkegaard, the most anguished of the Christian philosophers. When the pandemic subsided, I stopped reading books with titles like *Fear and Trembling* and started doing other things, like taking showers. But now I pulled up a PDF of *The Sickness unto Death* on my phone for old times' sake. The "despair at not willing to be oneself," Kierkegaard writes, is an unconscious despair, a disease of the spirit. Fleeing the demands of selfhood, one spends his life with his "face inverted," refusing to confront the despair that is "going on behind him," trailing him like a shadow. I was struck by this image; it reminded me of Elizabeth, who sometimes began her dictations with her ringed hands raised and her back turned, waiting for the Masters to speak through her, to transform her into someone other than herself.

**Y**ellowstone Hot Springs, its website boasted, is "a soaking experience unique in the world." The lobby, when I arrived, was plain and touristy, with wood-paneled walls and displays selling T-shirts, mugs, and national park memorabilia. Though the church once had grand ambitions for these waters—Elizabeth had dreamed of channeling them into the ranch to heat its greenhouses—the only evidence of the church's involve-

ment was a small shelf of Elizabeth's books by the entrance, which I inspected as I paid for my ticket. The woman at the register was mild-mannered and blue-eyed—a member of my soul group, perhaps.

"Are you affiliated with the church?" I asked.

"Yes," she said proudly. "Are you a Keeper?"

I nodded, recognizing her reference to the Keepers of the Flame, a fraternity within the movement.

"I charged you too much, then," she said reflexively, and handed me a one-day pass.

It was the golden hour. The pools were full of park visitors, tanned and tired and happy, crusty with the outdoors. I waited for a spot to open up in the hottest pool and clambered in, settling into the water with an amphibious calm. As I watched my legs turn pink, I felt a rosy glow of fellow feeling for everyone stewing beside me. The other attendees had prodded me all weekend to visit the hot springs, but if they were here among us, I couldn't tell. I spotted a mother and daughter with parts down the center of their hair and long-sleeved bathing suits: possibly Keepers, possibly Mormons, possibly just modest. I turned to a guy with a nose ring and the sweet, sun-chapped face of a young Robin Williams, and asked him if he had heard about the church next door.

"I have not," he said tersely. I realized that I sounded like a proselytizer.

"Just wondering," I said, embarrassed. "I hear that they're a cult or something."

Perhaps Elizabeth's delusions were a symptom of her illness; perhaps they were a tragic consequence of hubris. But that hubris was hardly unique to her, given how secular modes of prophecy have come to predominate in everyday life. In *Seeing into the Future*, the historian Martin van Creveld chronicles the history of forecasting, tracing the way that speculation evolved, over the course of centuries, from an occult religious practice to Cold War statecraft and a critical part of the world economy. Once the province of mystics and mages, prophecy has now become the purview of think tanks, meteorologists, and market

analysts. But people today, van Creveld points out, are hardly better at predicting the future than their superstitious predecessors. Elizabeth's life is a reminder of the awful irony that in the nuclear era, technical knowledge has given human beings the power to destroy their future without allowing them to reliably predict it.

Today, church members seem to have given up on prophecy, if not their prophet; they have turned away from the uncertain future toward the certainties of their past, when their Mother was still lucid, still alive, still looped on video. Though they have never acknowledged her death—they speak exclusively of her “ascension”—they have been mourning her unceasingly since the day she died: October 15, 2009. Maybe this is what it meant to be a child of infinity: you grieve your parents infinitely. To do so is, perhaps, a practice akin to faith. The love of a parent was the closest I had come to knowing the love of God. If I could believe in one, it seemed possible that one day I could believe in the other. I was moved by Kierkegaard's notion, as I understood it, that you could live your life within arm's reach of grace but with your face averted—that you could be both estranged from God and close to him.

**O**n the Fourth of July, I headed to King Arthur's Court for the climax of the conference. Characteristically, the church was not celebrating the Fourth with beer or barbecue but with a waltz. After the services, I lingered to watch the Court transform into a dance floor. (According to the believers, the Ascended Master St. Germain inspired Strauss's waltzes, whose 3/4 rhythm mimics the beating of our hearts.) Women of all ages gathered in flowing dresses of teal or pink or lavender, and hung garlands of flowers. Others laid out plates of cheese and rows of seltzer. Mostly, they spun, singly or in pairs, waiting for the music to begin. I studied two young women giggling and fussing with each other's hair: both beautiful, both blond, both pregnant. A crisply tanned woman with chunky highlights twirled with

her teenage son, who then passed her off to his father, a man I recognized from the Essentials crew by his gold chain and overpowering cologne. One middle-aged woman in a dusty-rose dress stood away from the crowd, spinning round and round in solemn concentration as though performing some private spell.

As I watched, I thought of Elizabeth, who had also loved to dance and who, several years after the shelter cycle, according to Erin, apologized to her children. She had abused her power in her ministry of the church, she said. But by then it was too late. A few years later, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. She would never be quite so lucid again. Erin remembers that admission with a pained optimism for what might have been. She sees in that moment of brief, belated moral clarity the possibility of a different outcome—of a fuller reckoning with the harm Elizabeth did, of the mistakes she made—had she remained healthy. Perhaps nothing is an expression of greater faith in her mother than this rejection of the fatalism that defined her. As “The Blue Danube” was piped in over the speakers, I held my fingers to my wrist and tried to count the tempo of my heart: not quite a waltz, not quite a march, but something both more and less than music—the steady measure of ordinary time. ■

### June Index Sources

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# THE PLEASURE OF A WORKING LIFE

By Michael Deagler

At the time of the adman's death, Gary Minihan had been with the Postal Service for thirty-five years. He spent the first thirty as a letter carrier in Abington, Pennsylvania, where his pragmatic father, who also carried mail, had persuaded him to take what was meant to be a temporary job at the age of twenty-two, after Gary had quit junior college for the second time. That was 1980. A first-class stamp cost fifteen cents. They gave him a walking route that included Paperbark Avenue, where he had lived as a teenager and where his parents still resided. He hoofed the blocks, kept the mail dry, and sweated in all weather—Gary had always been a large man. He did not like the work. He intended, always, to quit, at the end of this year or the next one. He imagined becoming

*Michael Deagler's story "New Poets" appeared in the November 2020 issue of Harper's Magazine. His first novel, Early Sobrieties, was published last month.*



a writer of some sort, of speeches or magazine articles. He brought his customers bills, catalogues, and greeting cards. At Christmas, they gave him Scotch and shortbread. He ate lunch at his parents' house and sometimes showered there when he got off work, even after he married and moved to Bucks County. As the years passed, the homes on his route were bought and sold, families moved in and out, children grew up and new children replaced them. The older people died, his parents included. In time he

stopped thinking of the house on Paperbark as theirs, since the mail he dropped in the letter box no longer bore their names. He ate his lunch in his truck. By 2010, Gary was still a young man—too young, at least, to retire—but he was diabetic and his hips were shot. A friend with more political sense who had worked his way up at the Philadelphia district building found Gary a spot managing the small storefront post office in Kiltown, tucked away in a strip mall off Bethlehem Pike, between the Firstrust Bank and a hair salon. Such things were not usually done, Gary liked to point out. At the United States Postal Service, there were outdoor people and indoor people, and it was rare for an outdoor person to be invited inside.

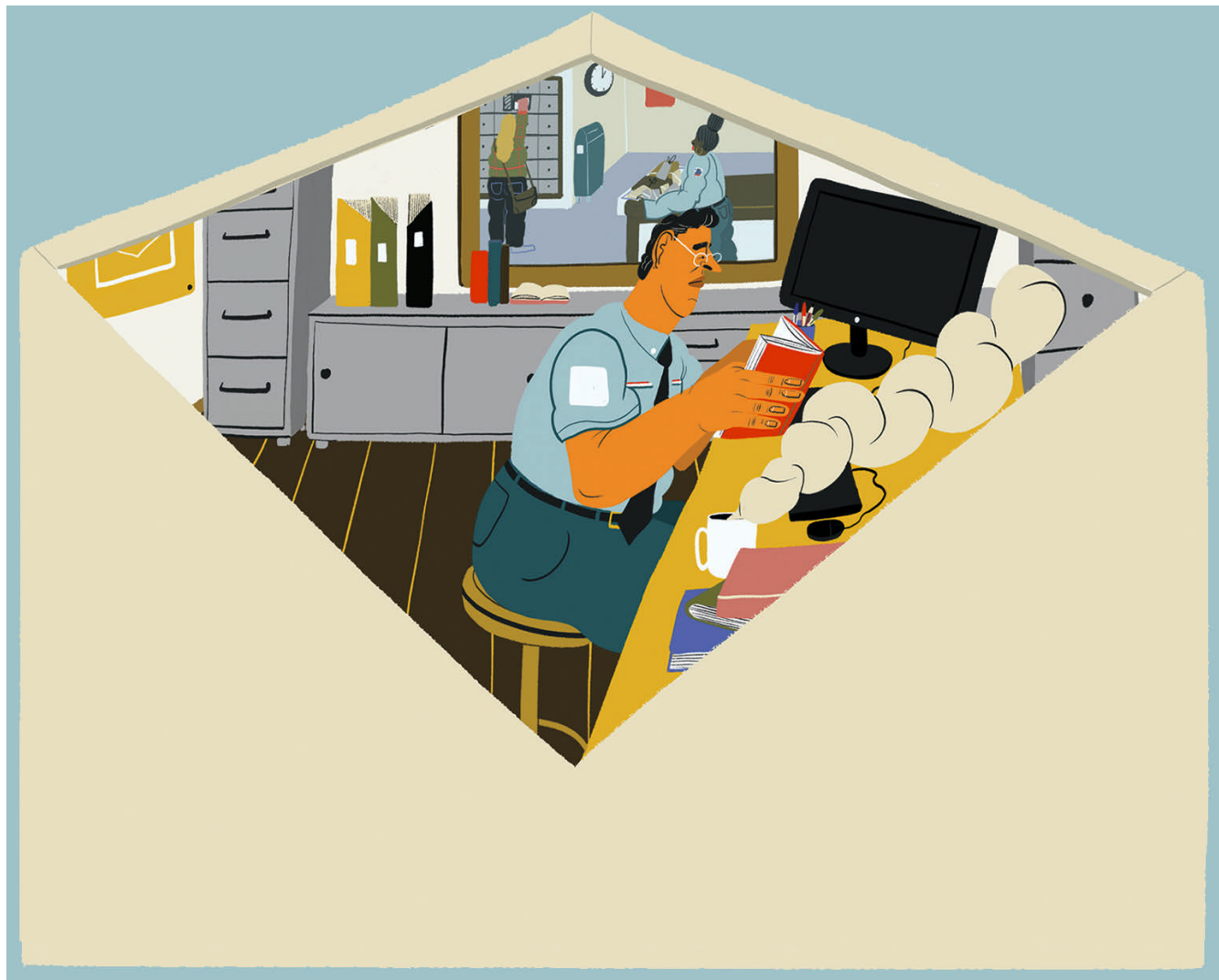
Gary's new title was postmaster. Technically, he was the interim postmaster, which did not pay as well as a proper postmaster, but the job was his until he maxed out his pension. Kiltown did not offer mail delivery, only

three hundred and ten P.O. boxes. These were rented primarily by small-business owners and a few wealthy people from Chestnut Hill who felt their post office was not well run. Gary had two clerks to assist him. Marla Towey was in her late thirties, with two children and an ex-husband who worked for SEPTA. She could not stay

The P.O. boxes were in the outer lobby, which was accessible to the public twenty-four hours a day. Members of the local homeless population could sometimes be found sleeping there in cold weather. The business window was in the inner lobby, which was locked up every night, and behind it lay the work floor where the

was in, he sat in the back, where, besides placing the presorted mail in the boxes after it was delivered in the morning and gathering it to be picked up in the evening, there was never very much to do.

The downtime proved an adjustment. All of Gary's working life, for ten hours a day, there had been



past two-thirty in the afternoon because she needed to be home when her kids got off the school bus, and she lived all the way in Drexel Hill. Alondra Robles was ten years younger than Marla. She had three children, the smallest of whom was the daughter of a man she sometimes called her boyfriend but more often spoke of as though he were a chronic medical condition. Alondra also suffered from lupus. Marla had a herniated disc.

employees spent their days. Things were busiest around eleven o'clock, when a line of ten or so customers would assemble before the window to buy stamps or mail packages. Monday was the most hectic, Tuesday the calmest. Often an hour would go by in which only one or two people came through the door. Gary manned the window on days when both Marla and Alondra were off or out sick. When one of them

something to march toward—this house and then that house, the next block and the one after. Now he spent most of the day sitting in the closet-size office at the back of the work floor, and hours passed in which he could not say that he accomplished anything at all.

"You're looking at this all wrong," said Chuck Feeney, his friend at the Philadelphia district building, when Gary called him at the end of his



first week. "It's a low-traffic store. Basically runs itself."

"That's the thing," said Gary. "What do I do while it runs itself?"

"Got a library card?" asked Chuck. "Got a Kindle?"

The next day, Gary brought to work the first volume of Robert Caro's Lyndon Johnson biography, which he had bought not long after he was hired as a letter carrier but had never gotten around to reading. In his first attempt at junior college, Gary had been a political-science major. In his second attempt, he had tried business administration, though it had never been a subject that excited him. His daughter, Caitlin, had graduated from Cabrini College with a degree in communications. Gary had always imagined she would go to a more prestigious school, but Cabrini had given her a field-hockey scholarship, and he could not complain about that. He sat down to read the biography after loading the mailboxes and making sure Alondra was all right at the window. The volume was nine hundred and sixty pages long. Gary read four of them before he felt his attention waver.

He could hear Alondra at the window, agitated with someone. She hung up her phone as Gary stepped out of the office.

"How's Jeff?" he asked her. Jeff was Alondra's sometime boyfriend.

"Gary, you know I don't want to hear that name ever again." Alondra was on her feet, leaning forward against the counter. Her lupus caused her joints to cramp if she sat in a chair for too long. "That was my mother. Lucas is throwing up everywhere."

Gary couldn't remember if Lucas was the oldest child or the middle one. The youngest, he knew, was a girl named Jada. "Poor guy. Lucky he's got his grandma. I used to drop my kids off with my mom when they were sick. Grandmas make the best doctors."

"You know, Lucas is in first grade next year," said Alondra. "Am I gonna be able to leave at two-thirty like Marla does?"

"I don't think we can have both clerks leave early every day," said Gary. "We need to keep the window open till four-thirty."

"Why does Marla get to leave early?"

Gary did not have a satisfying answer. Marla's special dispensation was a holdover from the previous postmaster. Gary had not wanted to do anything to upset the order of things. Neither he nor his wife, Claire, who worked as a bookkeeper for a screw and bolt manufacturer, had ever been there when the children got home from school. Their kids had gone to a neighbor's house until they were old enough to watch themselves. But maybe Marla didn't have any neighbors who could watch her kids for two hours.

"Why don't you run home and check on him, if you're worried," suggested Gary. Alondra lived twenty minutes away, in Olney. "But you gotta come back after lunch if he's not too bad. All right?"

With Alondra gone, Gary took her place at the window, the Johnson biography spread open on the counter before him. Through the wide glass storefront, he had an unobstructed view of a construction crew digging up the thin strip of lawn next to the McDonald's across the parking lot. There must have been a pipe that needed fixing. The hole was deep enough that the man standing in it was visible only from the waist up. The other men lingered around the rim, paunchy in their sweat-stained T-shirts. For thirty years, people had said to Gary, "At least you're getting exercise," even as he stood before them in all his heaviness, growing wider by the season. It was a hot day for early May, with the sort of heat that a person walking in and out of buildings might mistake for beautiful weather. Anyone who had to dig a ditch would never mistake a hot day for anything other than what it was.

Alondra did not return that afternoon, nor did she call. Back when Gary told Claire he would have two clerks working under him, his wife laughed. "I'm sorry, Gar," she said, seeing the expression he must have made. "I just can't picture you managing people."

Gary had been at Kilntown for more than four years when the adman stopped in for the first time. He had read all four volumes of Caro's Johnson biography—he

finished the final volume the same week it was released—as well as books about John Adams, Ulysses S. Grant, and Harry S. Truman. So far that summer, he had read about the Brooklyn Bridge, the Chicago World's Fair, and the Lewis and Clark expedition. He was halfway through a history of the Panama Canal when Marla told him there was a man at the window who wanted to buy ten thousand dollars' worth of stamps.

The Kilntown post office sold plenty of stamps, but most customers bought only a book or two at a time. A few local businesses purchased them by the roll. Sometimes the nuns from the Sisters of St. Joseph came to stock the mail room at the senior-living facility they operated on Wissahickon Avenue. It was always a pair of them, Sister Mary Elizabeth and Sister Agnes Marie, neither younger than eighty. They would arrive with a check for some arbitrary figure—ninety-six dollars and eleven cents, say—and the value of the stamps Gary sold them had to equal that amount, not one penny more or less. He would invite the nuns to sit with him at the table in his office as he counted out one- and two- and additional-ounce stamps, three- and five- and ten-cent stamps, fumbling with the math on an old RadioShack calculator. He felt like he was back in elementary school, with the nuns staring at him through the glare of their spectacles, embarrassed that he could not do the sums in his head, but he was responsible for every dollar exchanged in the building, and he did not trust himself to get the numbers right on his own.

"Now, this check isn't going to bounce, is it, ladies?" Gary would tease. "The Sisters of Mercy were in here the other week and warned me about you St. Joe's girls." Sister Mary Elizabeth would protest playfully whenever he said things like that, but Sister Agnes Marie never cracked a smile.

Gary stepped out of the office to see who it was who wanted ten thousand dollars' worth of stamps. A man stood across the counter from Marla in a loud blue suit with no tie. His face was flushed from the summer heat. It was July. The lobby was decked in patriotic bunting.

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In the years since he had been at the Kilntown Post Office, Gary had come to think of himself as its proprietor, and he did what he could to make the store a more inviting space. He tried to keep the walls and counters neat, and he decorated for holidays, even the minor ones. All year long, he played music—Bill Evans, Stan Getz, things like that—using the iHome Caitlin had bought him several birthdays ago. Alondra said the jazz made her sleepy and asked if she could pick what was played on alternating days. Gary told her that, unfortunately, only the postmaster was authorized to select the music. The jazz made the post office feel like a café, he thought, even if no one hung out there except himself and the clerks. He had looked into putting a Keurig machine in the lobby, but he was told by his supervisor downtown that it was a potential safety hazard to have customers making coffee. Instead, he bought one for the employees to use in the back. He discovered after ordering it that Marla did not consume caffeine and Alondra drank only Diet Coke.

Gary invited the adman to sit in his office, at the table where he hosted the nuns. The office was not as orderly as the lobby—books and papers cluttered every surface—but Gary thought it was charming in its own way, like the study of a disorganized but respected professor. Only the table was kept clear, because it was needed to get the money together at the end of the day.

“I like that music you’ve got playing out there,” said the man. He reminded Gary of someone, though Gary could not say who.

“I think that’s McCoy Tyner,” said Gary. The man asked what the song was called, but Gary didn’t know. “I’ve just got them all on a playlist.”

The adman’s name was Jeremy Kruskoski. He needed two hundred rolls of first-class stamps.

“We don’t keep nearly that amount of stock in the store,” explained Gary. “I can order it for you, but we don’t keep that much lying around. That’s a hell of a lot of stamps.”

Jeremy worked in print advertising. He had business with Bausch + Lomb, the contact-lens people. Targeted mailings, postcards with discount deals, that sort of thing. Jeremy had

asked an optometrist for his client list, only to learn that it was illegal for doctors to share such information. Patient confidentiality and what have you. Jeremy had the idea, then, of sending optometrists packs of the postcards pre-stamped, with the address line left blank. He took one out of his pocket and showed it to Gary. “The optometrist just has to fill them out with his patient’s information and drop them in the mail. Bausch and Lomb makes money, the optometrist makes money, the customer gets cheaper lenses, and I look like I know what the hell I’m doing. Everybody gets theirs.”

Gary inspected the card. Fifteen percent off a year’s supply of contact lenses. Claire wore contact lenses, but Gary didn’t need them. His eyes were about the only parts of him that worked as well as they ever had.

“Everybody gets theirs,” Gary repeated. As he said, he could certainly order the stamps for Jeremy. The turnaround would be about a week.

“I knew you could help me. Soon as you came out there, I thought, Here’s the guy I should be talking to.” Jeremy took in the stacks of books around the office. “You writing a dissertation or something?”

“Just like to read,” said Gary. “This place basically runs itself.”

“Sounds like a dream. With me it’s go, go, go, all the time. Nights, weekends. My doctor told me I should meditate. I said to him, ‘Where the hell am I gonna meditate? On the Schuylkill Expressway?’”

“You’re young,” said Gary. “Things settle down. They did for me at least.”

“Hell, they’d better,” said Jeremy. “I got little kids, so that’s part of it.”

“That’s part of it,” agreed Gary. “It’s a busy time of life. I have two, grown up now. It’s like they were never in the house in the first place.”

“That’s what I’m waiting for,” said Jeremy. “A busy time of life. I like that. I feel that, you know? So which of these should I read first, once my kids go off to college?”

Gary eased the Truman book out from under three others balanced on top of it. “Here’s a regular guy who ended up becoming president. Sold men’s clothing, originally.”

“No shit?” Jeremy stared at the cover for a moment. It seemed as though he

was going to ask a question about it, but instead he said, "We'll be doing a lot of business. It's Gary, right? Lot of business, Gary. You get a bonus for moving stamps?"

Gary did not.

"Well, you're gonna move a lot of stamps regardless. Enough that we should probably talk about discounts."

After the adman left, Gary sat thinking of his son, Colin. Colin worked in computers—medical software, something like that. He lived in Madison, Wisconsin, with a woman who did the same thing. Gary had asked him if he figured they would get married, but Colin said he didn't think so. Gary and Colin spoke every couple of weeks, whenever something needed to be said. Gary would usually tell him about the book he was reading, how Truman had done this or that. Colin listened, but Gary could tell he wasn't very interested. "You know, Truman was almost assassinated by Puerto Rican nationalists," Gary would say, and Colin would respond with, "That's great. Listen, Dad, I got this thing I gotta get to . . ."

When the window shuttered at four-thirty, Marla sat in Gary's office as he closed out her drawer. Gary saw more of Marla in the summer, when her kids were out of school. That summer, her favorite conversation topic was her cousin, who flipped houses in the city. "You should see these places. Real shitholes. You would never think to live there. But he cleans them up and sells them for twice, three times what he paid."

Gary wished she would stop chatting as he added up the money. He counted it once, twice, three times and still came up short. "Marla, you're missing a hundred dollars," he said, doing his best not to sound accusatory.

Marla stared at him as though he hadn't said anything.

"You sold a hundred-dollar money order," he said, looking over the receipts. "Where's the hundred?"

"It's in there," said Marla. "It isn't in there?"

Gary counted a fourth time. He had never had a drawer short one hundred dollars before. The money went out with the mail on the evening truck. If it was short even one dollar, he would get a phone call in

the morning. They looked for things like that, the people downtown.

"A hundred is a lot, Marla," said Gary. "That's a lot of money to lose."

"I didn't take it," said Marla.

"I didn't say you took it. Maybe go look around the counter and see if you misplaced it?"

Marla returned empty-handed, her face crumpled like she might start to cry. In his first few years with the post office, when Gary had made less money, he took a second job delivering pizzas at night. They had just bought the house in Bucks County and Claire was pregnant with Caitlin. A week into the pizza job, he misplaced a twenty—dropped it on the street, probably, trying to stuff it in his pocket—and the manager, a real bloodless son of a bitch five years his junior, deducted it from his pay. The guy acted as though Gary had taken it, as if he was not just a thief but a stupid one who hadn't realized it would be missed. Gary worked the rest of his shift and then made a big show of quitting. He told the manager he'd be waiting for him in the parking lot. He hadn't actually waited—he had just wanted to scare the kid. Gary had had more of a temper when he was a young man.

"It's all right," he told Marla. He went to the store's safe. Alondra often turned in her drawer with more money than it should have had. Four or five dollars over, never too much. Gary reminded her each time that she needed to be better about giving people the correct change, and then he placed the extra money in an envelope. On the night Marla's drawer was short, there were one hundred and eight dollars in the envelope. He counted out a hundred and slipped them into the bank wallet. "You gotta be more careful, Marla. Technically, they can dock your pay for the difference."

"I don't know what could have happened," said Marla. The threat of tears had passed. "I must have accidentally given it to somebody. Really what I'm most upset about is that somebody got an extra hundred bucks and didn't say anything about it. Just decided it was theirs to keep. You can't trust nobody these days, I swear to God."

"Yeah, you're welcome," said Alondra when Gary told her about it the

next morning. "I'm the only one making this place any money."

Gary moved a lot of stamps. Over the next five months, Kilntown became the third-most profitable store in the Philadelphia suburbs, behind only Chester and Lansdale—much larger operations—owing solely to Jeremy and his bulk stamp purchases. The higher-ups in the district building allowed Gary to keep three hundred thousand dollars' worth of stock on hand, a previously unfathomable volume for a tiny walk-in post office. It didn't mean any extra money for Gary, but even so.

"The district manager knows your name, Gary," said Chuck Feeney on the other end of the line.

"If we're so important, maybe they can get me one of those ergonomic saddle chairs so I don't have to deal with this broke-ass stool," said Alondra when Gary told her about it. He had tried not to sound too self-important as he did.

"We have a store budget," said Gary. "It has to be spent on improvements for the store."

"A new chair isn't an improvement for the store, but a coffee machine is! Nobody even uses that thing but you, Gary."

Jeremy used the coffee machine. He drank the breakfast blend with three packets of Splenda. He came in every Friday for his stamps, usually dropping thirty-five thousand dollars each time. Gary had been unable to secure him a discount—the Postal Service did not offer discounts on stamps—but the increased stock saved Jeremy from having to place an order and wait a week for it to come through. He acted as though Gary had pulled off a masterstroke of arbitration. "It pays to know a man on the inside," said Jeremy between sips from his paper cup. "My grandfather taught me that. Worked at traffic court. One of the greatest ticket fixers of the twentieth century."

On such days, Gary would sit nervously with Jeremy's check until he sent it off on the evening truck. He was plagued by an irrational anxiety, considering that it was simply a piece of paper, easily canceled and replaced

if lost. Really, it was Jeremy who should be nervous, driving off with thirty-five thousand dollars' worth of stamps in his car. But Jeremy never seemed nervous about anything.

On the evening of Marla's accident, Gary left work early for a wake. Mrs. Brown, who had lived on his route for a decade, had passed away from emphysema. She had always been kind to Gary, offering him a drink every time he stepped onto her porch. When he greeted her son at the funeral parlor, Gary told him, "I delivered your mother's mail for ten years." He had not expected much of a reaction to this statement, but the son seemed oddly moved by it. He ushered Gary around to his relatives, saying, with a gravity Gary found slightly embarrassing, "This is Gary Minihan. He delivered Ma's mail for ten years."

Gary was on his way home when he received a call—the first since he had left work—from a man who identified himself as Marla's ex-husband, Steve. "There's been an accident on the jobsite," he said.

Gary turned his Hyundai around and headed back to Kilntown. When he got there, a second sedan was idling next to Marla's in the rear parking lot. A man dressed like a train conductor leaned against the hood smoking a cigarette. Marla lay in the cabin, reclined on the passenger seat. She rolled the window down as Gary walked up to the car.

"You all right, Marla? What the hell happened?"

"I told you I need a key to the back door, Gary," she said without looking at him. Gary noticed that she was holding her neck rigid. "I've been saying it for years."

Marla had closed up the store, handing off the day's mail and earnings to the evening driver at five. She then locked the door between the inner and outer lobby, realizing a moment too late that she had left her car keys in Gary's office.

"I must have set them down when I was getting the mail together for the driver. Like you *told* me to do, Gary." This shouldn't have been a problem—Marla merely needed to unlock the door she had just locked—but when she inserted her office key and gave it

a twist, the blade snapped off. "It's in there now. Go on and look at it. The door's stuck in the locked position. So I was locked outside without my car keys. And I don't have a key for the back door, and I had to get home to my kids, and I didn't want to call you, Gary, because you told me you were going to a wake and I didn't want to be disrespectful." So Marla did the only reasonable thing, which was to climb through the package window that connected the outer lobby to the work floor.

"You went through the package window?" asked Gary. Not in a million years would it have occurred to him to try to crawl through the package window. Not that he could have fit, of course. It was a narrow aperture, about four feet off the ground, where people dropped off packages that already had postage. Just hoisting himself up to it would have been a challenge.

"It was the only way in, Gary!" cried Marla, her jaw jerking above her stiff neck. She had tumbled through the window headfirst and landed upside down. Still she had not called Gary, out of respect for the dead. She called Steve. The smoking conductor confirmed the story with a nod.

"Jesus Christ," said Gary. "How did Steve get you out?"

"I had to crawl, Gary," said Marla. "I crawled all the way to the back door, like an invalid. I may be an invalid now."

"Well, go to the hospital," said Gary. "What are you doing in this car? Call an ambulance."

"We have a doctor we like," said Steve. He seemed unconcerned by the whole affair. "I'll take her in the morning."

"I won't be in tomorrow, Gary, if that isn't obvious," said Marla. "You need to call a damn locksmith."

"How's Marla gonna act so stupid when she's got a herniated disc?" wondered Alondra the next morning. "Even the homeless people who sleep in the lobby never try to crawl through the package window."

Gary paused as he was loading his coffee pod into the Keurig. The possibility had never occurred to him. If

Marla could squeeze through the window, surely a homeless person could. People might be crawling in and out of the window every night, and he would never know. He should probably have a talk with Chuck Feeney. Maybe the union rep too. He didn't think he was liable for what happened to Marla, but who knew with things like that?

"The juiciest aspect of the whole thing is that she called Steve," continued Alondra. "I bet they're back at it hard. No way I would call Jeff in that situation. He'd just fuck it all up worse. Plus his license got suspended."

Around two o'clock, Jeremy appeared in the doorway of Gary's office, sweaty despite the December air. His suit was olive green. Gary was surprised to see him, as it was not a Friday. "We fucked up, Gary," he panted. "There's been a misprint emergency."

Gary set aside his John D. Rockefeller biography and gestured for Jeremy to sit.

"This guy," said the adman. "Dr. Vincent Wu—he's the biggest optometrist in Phoenix. He's got a fucking empire out there. I spent fifteen grand just on postcards for his clients."

"So?"

"So, I misspelled his name. I wrote Vincent *Woo*, with two *os*. The cards are useless. I'm out fifteen grand on a fucking spelling mistake."

"We can figure something out," said Gary. "Some kind of buyback, maybe. These things must happen."

Jeremy's agitation seemed disproportionate to the severity of the loss. Sure, Gary would be in a panic over fifteen thousand dollars, but he would have guessed it was little more than a rounding error for Jeremy.

"Things have been tense at home," Jeremy admitted, rubbing his temples. "Between you and me, my marriage ain't in the best shape. Some other ventures haven't panned out like I thought they would." He picked up the Rockefeller book and flicked the cover open and shut. "You always keep a calm head, Gary. It makes me calm. You know, I'm thinking that after I get things straight I might expand a little. Maybe I'll put you on my war council. That'd be something, huh?"

Gary agreed that that would be something.

Gary had trouble returning to his book after Jeremy left. He kept thinking about the job offer—if that was what Jeremy had meant by war council—wondering whether it was serious. Gary had never intended to spend his entire career with the post office, confident that something else would come along. Most of the carriers he had known were not lifers. They had migrated from other occupations—construction, manufacturing, the Army—or from jobs that didn't exist anymore. Telephone operators, electrotypers. A couple guys used to build ships at the shuttered Navy Yard. The post office was a decent place to land—job security, pension—but Gary had landed there so early. He remembered the day he realized that, since his raises were based on nothing but his length of service, he could calculate how much he would make every year for the rest of his life. It was a bit like learning the exact height of the sky.

**M**arla went on disability leave. The post office offered fifty-two weeks, and Gary was sure she would take all of them.

“So are we getting a new clerk?” asked Alondra. “Tell them to send someone who can count a drawer.”

Gary cleared a buyback of Jeremy's misprinted stock for ninety cents on the dollar. It was standard practice, but Jeremy wanted to celebrate. He had Gary meet him for drinks at the pub just across Bethlehem Pike.

Jeremy looked sweatier than at their previous meeting. His tan suit appeared yellow in the dim light of the bar. He told Gary he was drinking Red Bull and vodka, but after the first round—a putrid combination that made his heart race—Gary switched to beer. Gary had never been a big drinker, and was even less of one since the diabetes. He had never been inside this pub, which was more upscale than he had imagined. Suit jackets and cocktails and huge potted ferns. He felt like he was at a wedding reception.

Jeremy had put back a few before Gary got there. “The wife's leaving,” he said by way of explanation. “What

can I say? I still like to party. But it's not a good time for a divorce, money-wise. Really fucking terrible time, right now specifically.”

Jeremy ordered another round and sat staring at the sports highlights playing on the television suspended in the corner. “How is there enough time?” he asked. “I look at my kids and I barely recognize them. When I was a kid—well, my dad wasn't around, but my friends had dads. I saw those dads around. Dads used to be around more, didn't they? Where did they find the time?”

Gary didn't know. He thought there was a lot of time, almost too much of it. That was how he had read all those books in his office. But it hadn't always been like that, he supposed. He had lived most of his life in a different time, one that had ended only when he'd stopped carrying mail.

“You're easy to talk to, Gary, you know that?” Jeremy placed a wet palm on Gary's shoulder. “You remind me of a priest.”

Gary chuckled. “A priest for the war council?”

“What's that?”

“The war council,” repeated Gary. “Your next venture. You said you'd hire me for the war council.”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah,” said Jeremy. It was clear from his expression that he hadn't thought about it since he had said it. “If I could give you a job, Gary, I would. Maybe for the next thing. This Bausch and Lomb thing was a bust. Didn't go at all like I expected. But when I figure out the next thing, you'll be the first hire I make.”

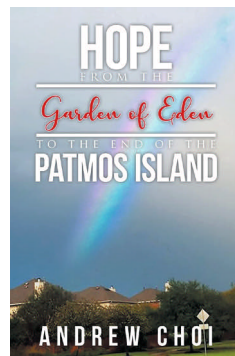
“To the next thing,” said Gary, tipping his beer. He felt like a rube. What was he doing in that bar? he wondered. He needed to go home.

“Orthodontists, maybe,” muttered Jeremy. “Invisalign.”

**G**ary called Jeremy later in the week about returning the stamps. The misprinted postcards needed to be destroyed under postal supervision before a refund could be issued. The call went to voicemail, which was not unusual. Jeremy did not call back that day, which was.

He received a call three days later from a man who identified himself as

## Hope From the Garden of Eden to The End of the Patmos Island by Andrew Choi



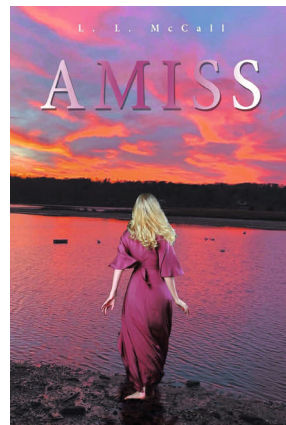
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Jeremy's brother-in-law. Jeremy had been found in the hotel where he was staying, dead of cardiac arrest. The man implied that drugs might have been involved.

"We heard your message about the refund." The man sounded irritated, as though this was not a job he thought should fall to him. "That's some good news, finally. Jeremy left a lot of debts outstanding. I can put you in touch with the lawyer who's straightening it all out. How anyone ever trusted that guy with money, I'll never understand."

Gary had planned to go to the wake. He brought a blazer to wear over his work clothes. It hung in the back of his car all day. But when the time came to turn west onto the turnpike, he found himself driving east toward home.

"What happened to the wake?" Claire asked when he walked into the house, his blazer undisturbed on its coat hanger. She was sitting on the couch watching something on her iPad. She wore one of those headsets with a microphone attached, like an air-traffic controller.

"I didn't feel like it," said Gary.

"I thought this was a friend of yours."

"Just a customer. Nobody there would even know who I was."

Claire frowned. "So?"

"So? What am I supposed to do, go up to his widow and say, 'Hi, I sold your husband stamps?'"

"I'm sure she'd appreciate the gesture."

"She was divorcing him. She could give a shit about who sold him stamps."

Claire turned back to her tablet. "Supposed to snow tonight," she said, after a moment.

There was a foot on the ground by 5 AM, when Gary's supervisor called to say he needed to go in early and shovel the store's walkway. It fell to the postmaster to ensure that the building was accessible, a responsibility that seemed to Gary, on that particular morning, a profound injustice. Claire warned him not to have a heart attack and fell back asleep. Gary grumbled as he dressed, filled a thermos with coffee, and pulled away from his own unshoveled driveway to risk his life on the roads.

The rear lot was a sheet of white. He didn't bother to locate a space, stopping the Hyundai somewhere near the center and grabbing his shovel from the trunk. He trudged around to the entrance. A plow had cut a path through the main lot, kicking up an extra three-foot hump of snow in front of the post office that Gary would have to get through. The wind had blown a drift two feet up the glass door. Across the parking lot, barely visible in the pre-dawn light, a teenager labored to clear the McDonald's sidewalk. With that sympathetic scrape echoing off the concrete, Gary lowered his shovel and went to work.

The snow was heavy, the six inches closest to the ground dense as wet sand. Once it was on his shovel, Gary had nowhere to put it. If he threw it to the left or the right, it would only become the problem of whoever showed up to dig out the bank or the hair salon. If he tossed it in the parking lot, it would impede traffic. The only spot available was the strip of lawn beside the McDonald's, where he had seen the men digging a trench that first week in Kilntown. He figured McDonald's wouldn't mind a bit of extra snow on their lawn. He would work it out with the teen if it came to that.

He went at it slowly, shuffling across the cleared lane and dropping snow on the McDonald's lawn one shovelful at a time. After the third trip, Gary was sweating beneath his coat. His hips were killing him; his arms and palms were immediately sore. He was too fat, too broken-down. He was fifty-six, but his body felt much older. Too old to be shoveling snow. He didn't even shovel snow at home—the Zieglers next door had a blower. There was no sound anywhere in the blind morning other than his scraping, the teen's, and his own gulping breath.

He had been a fool to think there would be an early departure, a special dispensation that would excuse him from his work, his real work, before they had gotten everything they needed from his body. He was only—had only ever been—a set of arms and feet, a back to lift and haul. A shoveler.

A carrier like his father. A smarter man would have played his hand better. Cut corners, made a fuss, found a scam. He'd lacked the imagination for that.

As the sky lightened, the hump grew smaller. His shoulders burned, and the sidewalk gradually cleared. He turned finally to the entrance itself, just as the first SUV pulled up to the McDonald's drive-through. Gary felt his shovel scrape against the threshold. The drift that had formed against the glass crumbled into a pile of fluffy clods.

Then, like some religious visitation, the door opened from within. Gary stood there staring, his shovel laden with snow, as a figure sidled out of the lobby—his lobby, the lobby he had spent the past forty minutes making accessible. It was a woman swaddled in several old coats, her hair greasy beneath a stained knit hat, a hiking backpack slung over her shoulder. She shuffled past Gary without a look or a word, beelining for the road. His grip loosened and the shovel spun, spilling its contents back onto the pavement. Gary watched the woman float silently away down Bethlehem Pike and melt into the wintery day beyond.

After catching his breath, he scraped up the last of the snow and went inside to open the store.

In March, Gary learned that Marla had been fired.

"Faking it," said Chuck Feeney from the district building. "Faked the whole thing."

"The injury?" asked Gary. He sat in his office with the phone to his ear.

"The ex-husband, too, at SEPTA. Said he fell off a platform or something like that. He was out for a year, then applied for permanent disability. Social Security sent an agent to check him out, and not only is he full of shit, but Marla's full of shit, too. They're renovating a house together on Baltimore Avenue. The guy saw them hanging Sheet-rock. Lifting, carrying, climbing, the whole thing."

"You know, I had my suspicions," said Gary. "Her story sounded off to me."

"Well Jesus, Gar, don't say that. There's gonna be eyes on your shop

after this, especially with all that money you've been bringing in."

"That's all over now. The guy died. In fact, we still owe his widow a refund for some misprinted stock. It's getting shredded tomorrow."

"Probably for the best," said Chuck. "Too much excitement for a guy like you, Gary, just waiting out the clock. How much longer you got?"

"Five years," said Gary.

"I always knew she was a liar," said Alondra when she heard about Marla. "She'd lie about nothing. Miss 'I don't use caffeine,' then I come in after she's opened up and like two of my Diet Cokes are missing from the fridge. So, like, who took them, Gary? The Diet Coke fairy?"

The next day, Gary drove to the printer in Fort Washington to oversee the destruction of Jeremy's stamps. A rented shredding truck was set up at the far end of a small industrial park, the useless postcards stacked on a pallet. No snow covered the ground, but it was one of those wet, colorless days in March when it seemed as though the year had already exhausted itself. Two Postal Service representatives—Gary and a woman from the district building downtown—were required to witness the destruction and sign off on the refund.

"Who is Dr. Vincent Woo?" asked the woman, examining one of the postcards. She was younger than Gary and wore an expensive-looking scarf atop her suit. He would not have pegged her for a postal worker.

"Biggest optometrist in Phoenix," said Gary. "He oversees a vast empire."

The cheerful man who ran the shredder—he seemed, from the way he spoke and moved, to love his job—let them each throw a few handfuls into the maw of the truck. The cards vanished in a faint purr of dust.

"What's the strangest thing you've ever shredded?" Gary asked him.

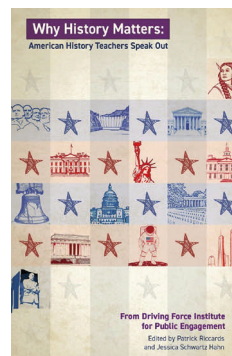
"Five thousand origami cranes," said the cheerful man.

They left it to the man to carry on the destruction while they sat in folding chairs on the near side of the lot. It felt a bit like a tailgate. The

woman, Gail, had brought coffee and breakfast sandwiches. They were there for most of the morning, chatting and comparing notes—Gail was a font of gossip about the district building, about Washington, about where things were headed. She took frequent smoke breaks down at the roadside, talking loudly to someone or various someones on her phone. Gary sat by himself and observed the pulverization, thinking, for some reason, of his father.

Years before, an elderly woman had come up to Gary at his father's wake with a letter folded neatly in her hand. She told Gary that, on the very last day that Francis Minihan ever carried mail, he had dropped a copy of the letter into each of the boxes on his route, and she had saved hers because it struck her as such a thoughtful and unexpected gesture. Gary stuck the letter in his suit jacket and read it in his kitchen late that night, thoroughly tired and slightly drunk. In the letter, his father reflected on how much he had enjoyed serving his customers and watching them grow over the years. How the job was hard, but how the people on his mail route were a source of fulfillment. How, when he had started with the post office, a first-class stamp cost only three cents. The last line above his signature read, "It was the pleasure of my working life to be among you." Francis had never been a talkative man, and Gary was astounded by how well he articulated his thoughts on the page. He was sure it was one of the best things he had ever read in his life. He decided then that when his own final day of carrying the mail arrived, he would do the same thing, for he felt, in that instant, those same things his father had. He would write his own letter and make a copy for every customer and set it in their mailboxes without a word, to let them know that he had been there among them and that it had meant something. Years later, when he was offered the job in Kiltown, the farewell letter was not on his mind. He only remembered it two weeks after he was situated as interim postmaster, and by then the moment had passed. ■

## Why History Matters: American History Educators Speak Out by Patrick Riccards

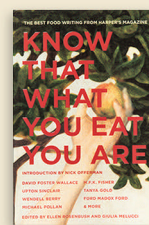


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## NEW BOOKS

By Dan Piepenbring

No one can torch the English language like a Beltway insider. A few years ago, phrases like “a feature, not a bug” and “saying the quiet part out loud” burned so fiercely through the Washington commentariat that they enjoyed hardly a moment between the flame of novelty and the ash of cliché. “Flood the zone”—used recently by the South Carolina congressman Jim Clyburn and the Clinton crony Philippe Reines, plus reporters at *Politico*, the *Washington Post*, and *Axios*—came into fashion in 2018, after Steve Bannon said, “The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit.” What zone? Whose shit? Not important. The expression, which comes from football, has such an intimidating, postmodern vagueness that pundits adopted it even after Bannon used it at their expense.

Phil Elwood is a professional zone flooder. He admits as much in the first chapter of **ALL THE WORST HUMANS: HOW I MADE NEWS FOR DICTATORS, TYCOONS, AND POLITICIANS** (Henry Holt, \$28.99), a memoir of his years as a flack: “My strategy has been to flood the zone.” And yet, a few pages later, describing the first time he created “a false narrative,” he muddles the metaphor. He was twelve, and his father, a minister, was presiding over an open grave when it began to fill with a worrisome brown liquid, setting the casket afloat. Watching “shit-colored water swirl,” Elwood had his dad distract the congregation while he leaped into the earth to hold the coffin down. Ever since, he’s thought of himself as a casket sinker, though he could just as easily be the ugly tide.

And his tide has brought some bodies in. His client list is a veritable rogues’ gallery: the Qaddafis, Russia Today, the flashy file-uploading tech entrepreneur Kim Dotcom, the Nigerian government, a consortium of private-jet owners. Others, such as the U.S. Tuna Foundation, appear innocuous until you learn that, on the foundation’s behalf, he tried to persuade pregnant women to eat more canned fish, mercury poisoning be damned. His MO is to defend the indefensible and to get the media’s standard-bearers to do the same. This requires a proprietary blend of Rolodex flipping, “What if I were to tell you . . .” phone calls, and spoon-feeding leads to reporters at happy hours, where he does his best work. “The public reads their stories and believes them because they are coming from a trusted news source and not a corporate bagman,” he writes.

Elwood possesses a genius for the inane. Like Tony Curtis’s sweating, fretting, sinning press agent in *Sweet Smell of Success*, he’s “a man of forty faces . . . all deceptive.” To help Qatar secure World Cup hosting rights over the United States, Elwood says he leveraged America’s childhood-obesity epidemic. His angle:

The United States’ failure to fully fund K-through-twelve physical-education programs while instead lobbying to host

international sports events is harmful to the welfare of our nation’s children.

He paid a lobbyist ten grand to have his “resolution” slipped to a congresswoman from Detroit, who dutifully circulated it on the Hill; he then leaked the story to *Politico*, and before long, his cockamamie idea was news. It would be a stretch to say that this won the hosting privileges for Qatar—their cash bribes to FIFA officials probably had more to do with that—but it’s a stout piece of business all the same. Elwood’s boss Peter Brown dubbed him an “operative,” a term Elwood wants engraved on his tombstone. “We can’t just do a good job,” Brown once told Elwood. “We have to *appear* to do a good job.”

That’s a tall order when your job is to babysit Mutassim Qaddafi—the dictator’s fourth son, who insisted Elwood call him “The Doctor”—on a lost weekend in Vegas. “You’re definitely not supposed to spend Ramadan banging your infidel girlfriend and then heading to the pool for a noon cocktail,” Elwood writes, but that’s what The Doctor





ordered. His suite reeked of “mall cologne and chain-smoked Marlboros.” He wanted to ship a Harley to Libya and buy jorts at the Gap. He saw Cirque du Soleil and Cher and was unmoved by both. His chief pleasure came from berating casino employees. The whole episode scarred Elwood. Something about the Qaddafi retinue’s lust for guns, coke, and motorcades made him question his life choices. Brown fired him (“The Arab Spring has been bad for our business model”), but even with a therapist and a Xanax scrip, he couldn’t resist the allure of the abhorrent. He later signed on with Psy-Group, an Israeli intelligence firm whose promotional materials argued that reality “is a matter of perception.” The agency asked him to keep a laptop running in a locked drawer at all times and to move money through his personal bank account for them—job responsibilities that brought the FBI to his door.

His book is suspended precariously between apology and celebration. It’s terrific fun, but there’s something unresolved in the dishy mea culpa tone. Elwood positions himself as an adrenaline junkie who chased a few too many thrills by, say, kowtowing to “people who blew up Pan Am Flight 103 and murdered their own citizens with sarin gas.” He grew so disgusted with his various complicities that he attempted suicide. By the final page, though, he’s returned to the PR industry, relishing his role as “resident arsonist.” This time, he swears his fiery perfidy will help “the good guys.” We’ll have to take his word for it, as he doesn’t tell us who

his new client is, only that “each face” on their video calls “earns a salary north of a million dollars.”

Because Elwood says little about his political philosophy—what role, for him, would a PR firm serve in the best of all possible worlds?—his sense of good and evil is oddly superficial; he’s one of those grown men who’s really into *Star Wars*, where the baddies tend to be in uniform. I, too, would yearn to escape to a galaxy far, far away if I made my home in Washington, but for him it’s the only place: a town of tacky steak houses, patio bars, and seer-sucker sport coats by Jos. A. Bank. He wishes the rest of us would go easy on it. “After twenty years in this city, I have met so many people who want to make the world a better place,” he writes. He doesn’t introduce us to any of them, though he could still call the book *All the Worst Humans* if he did.

**I**n 1911, the National Poultry, Butter, and Egg Association launched a public-relations long shot of Elwoodian proportions: they got more than four hundred people to ingest refrigerated food in public. Convened at the banquet hall of a tony Chicago hotel, these intrepid souls sat “in a flutter of expectation at the prospect of eating, for the first time in their lives, a dinner where every item on the bill of fare had been in cold storage,” a reporter wrote. The chicken they ate had been slaughtered around Valentine’s Day; it was now nearly Halloween. But everyone survived, and not a single intestine was heard to cry foul.

In **FROSTBITE: HOW REFRIGERATION CHANGED OUR FOOD, OUR PLANET, AND OURSELVES** (Penguin Press, \$30), Nicola Twilley writes of the technology’s turbulent ascent from ungodly curiosity to ubiquitous necessity. What the French called *frigoriphobie* was a natural response to the “zombie foods” that now emerged from an artificial winter in “a disquieting suspension of organic matter’s inevitable destiny.” Food was supposed to rot. Freshness, like life, meant nothing if it was prolonged indefinitely. In a London municipal meeting, it was said to be “against public morals to do anything which would prevent the getting rid of perishable meat as quickly as possible.”

A Buffalo newspaper put the finest point on it: **THERE IS NO DEATH, ONLY COLD STORAGE.**

In fact, early cold storage offered plenty of death. Food poisoning was endemic, but sometimes the fridges also just blew up. At the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, a warehouse able to cool thousands of pounds of food that had been dubbed the “Greatest Refrigerator on Earth” burst into flames, killing more than a dozen people. Even when the fridge wasn’t lethal, it carried a flavor of the end, as in the case of a “young Irish fellow” who, upon trying ice cream for the first time, shouted, “Jasus! I am kilt. The coald shivers is on to me.”

On top of the shivers, fires, and plagues, fridge innovators had to contend with the basic headache of moving cold stuff in a hot world. One purveyor of frozen meat outlined the problem: “Where the food is, the people are not; and where the people are, the food is not.” In 1805, Frederic Tudor, later known as Boston’s Ice King, seized on the notion of harvesting winter itself, developing a system of ice-houses around New England’s lakes and eventually shipping large ice blocks by boat. The business drove him into debt and to the brink of insanity. “The idea was considered so utterly absurd by the sober-minded merchants as to be the vagary of a disordered brain,” his



brother-in-law recalled, while Tudor, in his journal, entreated himself to “sell out in the best way you can and become a regular man.”

But the King died rich, because people wanted ice. The cold chain

represents man's ungainly triumph over space and season. Twilley dismantles it link by link: refrigerated trucks, railcars, planes; the development of fridge-friendly fruits, lettuces, cheeses; the rise of orange-juice speculators and businessmen who say things like "you take Mother Nature and standardize it." There's the Anthropocene in a nutshell. I kept expecting to get bored, but I didn't, even though Twilley spends a lot of time in frigid, depopulated, windowless rooms; repurposed mines and caves; and automated storehouses tucked off the interstate—all that precedes the comforting glow of the freezer aisle. Her writing shimmers on the far side of the consumer moon, among chasms of yogurt and "vast, anonymous cuboids filled with millions of apples hibernating in the dark." In an Americold warehouse, she watches as "the aseasional fulfillment of American desires continued unabated":

Frozen guava juice in barrels, destined for a Dr. Smoothie bottling plant; cans of refrigerated peanut butter paste, imported from Argentina to fill M&M's and Clif Bars; pallets stacked with rolls of X-ray film for local hospitals; and thousands and thousands of freshly baked King's Hawaiian buns, trucked in hot from Torrance.... I couldn't help but feel like a cog of cold-stiffened flesh in a perpetual protein-shuffling machine. Box after box of Asian white shrimp and imitation crab meat was stacked forty feet high to the ceiling. One pallet held gallons of beef blood in milk cartons; the label on another set of boxes said that they contained bull pizzles, hearts, and livers. "We call that 'misc.," said Cesar.

The cold chain now binds nearly every corner of the earth, but Twilley, born in Britain, is right to see it as an American fixation. We love our misc., and we want it served chilled. An Englishwoman visiting New York in the 1840s found herself pleasantly overwhelmed by frosty beverages and cool cobbler. "Whenever you hear America abused," her hostess told her, "remember the ice."

**G**iambattista della Porta, the Renaissance natural philosopher, found that salting ice lowered its melting point, a discovery

through which he bequeathed to us gelato and wine slushies. For different reasons, his work looms in the background of **SPYCRAFT: TRICKS AND TOOLS OF THE DANGEROUS TRADE FROM ELIZABETH I TO THE RESTORATION** (Yale University Press, \$30), a diverting history and how-to manual from Nadine Akkerman and Pete Langman, who write of the indelible mark della Porta left on the practice of espionage. He developed a suite of cryptographic techniques that proliferated in English epistolary life during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when important people desperately wanted to send letters without recourse to invisible ink or an impenetrable code. As Ben Jonson, supposedly himself a spy, wrote in an early seventeenth-century epigram,

They all get Porta for the sundry ways  
To write in cipher, and the  
several keys  
To ope the character. They've found  
the sleight  
With juice of lemons, onions, piss,  
to write  
To break up seals and close 'em.

English spies were as contemptible at the time as PR professionals are today, and not nearly as inventive—they stole most of their tradecraft from the Continent, where Spaniards and Italians like della Porta had far outpaced them. England's isolation, geographically and religiously, meant that it was "a hotbed of conspiracy," Akkerman and Langman write, "riddled with Jesuits." Catholics aspired "to return this upstart island to the one true faith." In short, treason and deceit were thick on the ground, despite their severe consequences. Counterfeiters could be punished by having their ears cut off and their nostrils slit; even those who retained their services referred to them as pygmies and toads. All this meddling changed the face of correspondence. One might have to spend all night beside a stinking tallow candle decrypting sentences that read like Gmail passwords: "I have had newes from K. 50. 6nfnz. 4kmyhq4. 4lmp. 5mnw last 4dkwzhu."

Unfortunately, to crack such messages, a spy needed only to get a

copy of the cipher wheel, and that was as easy to intercept as anything else in the mail. With cleverness or desperation, people hid notes in pig bladders, bullets, eggs, open wounds, fancy hairdos, wooden legs, and live dogs ("when he is killed, the letters may be found in his belly"). Oxford anti-royalists exchanged missives in a certain postbox made inconspicuous by the fact that men often stopped to pee near it. Those skilled in handiwork turned to letter locking—folding, threading, and weaving the



paper such that it couldn't be opened without betraying the tampering.

As always seems to be the case with intelligence work, no one quite knew what they were doing, and many innocents died along the way. The English had a fondness for poison, but, Akkerman and Langman write, their understanding of it was "caught in the twilight zone between magic, tradition and what we now call science." We're still mired there, in Bannon's zone, vast and sodden. Reading *Spycraft's* many accounts of meddling and manipulation, I thought back to the epigraph for Elwood's book: "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." He credits these words to George Bernard Shaw, and they've circulated for years among business-school types with this attribution, but Shaw seems never to have said such a thing. It was William H. Whyte Jr., the sociologist who coined the term *groupthink*. ■

# THE SCAVENGER OF HISTORY

On Eliot Weinberger

By Wyatt Mason

Discussed in this essay:

*The Life of Tu Fu*, by Eliot Weinberger. New Directions. 64 pages. \$13.95.

Translation is an irresistible subject that better writers would do better to resist. It's too easy to rhapsodize over, theorize onto, sentimentalize at (pick your preposition). There are very few excellent books on the practice that meaningfully address its rich complexity. My favorite heftier entry is *The Craft and Context of Translation*, edited by William Arrowsmith and Roger Shattuck, published in 1961 by the University of Texas Press. The anthology grew out of a symposium on translation held in Austin in 1959, and it features essays by Arrowsmith, Shattuck, Richard Howard, Kenneth Rexroth, and D. S. Carne-Ross.

In his essay, Carne-Ross, who has no Wikipedia page but warrants a bronze statue in the cultural commons, kicks things off by planting a flag, offering up the term *transposition* as another conception of what translators might do. In his view, transposition is an activity that walks midway between the literal crib—which would seek for every word its exact-ish equivalent in another language, syntax and style in the destination language be damned, subsumed beneath the so-called allegiance to accuracy—and a practice that attends less to the particulars of definition than to the quiddity of the original. Transposition, for Carne-Ross,

occurs when the language of the matter to be translated stands close enough to the language of the translator—in age, idiom, cultural habits and so on—for him to be able to follow the letter with a fair hope of keeping faith with the spirit.

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Carne-Ross's metaphorical phrase "stands close enough" offers an essential, physical conception of the translator's work: it's an act of reportage.

Carne-Ross means it as close to literally as one can. He offers the following object lesson when discussing the difficulties of the "brilliant artistic convention" of the messenger's speech in Greek drama. It "turns up in almost every Greek tragedy, the big formal narration, lasting anything up to a hundred lines, describing the disaster which has just overtaken the hero," one that "defeats the translator and leaves the actor . . . with a long and embarrassing piece of versification on his hands." Searching for a solution, Carne-Ross reaches not into his lexicon but into lived experience:

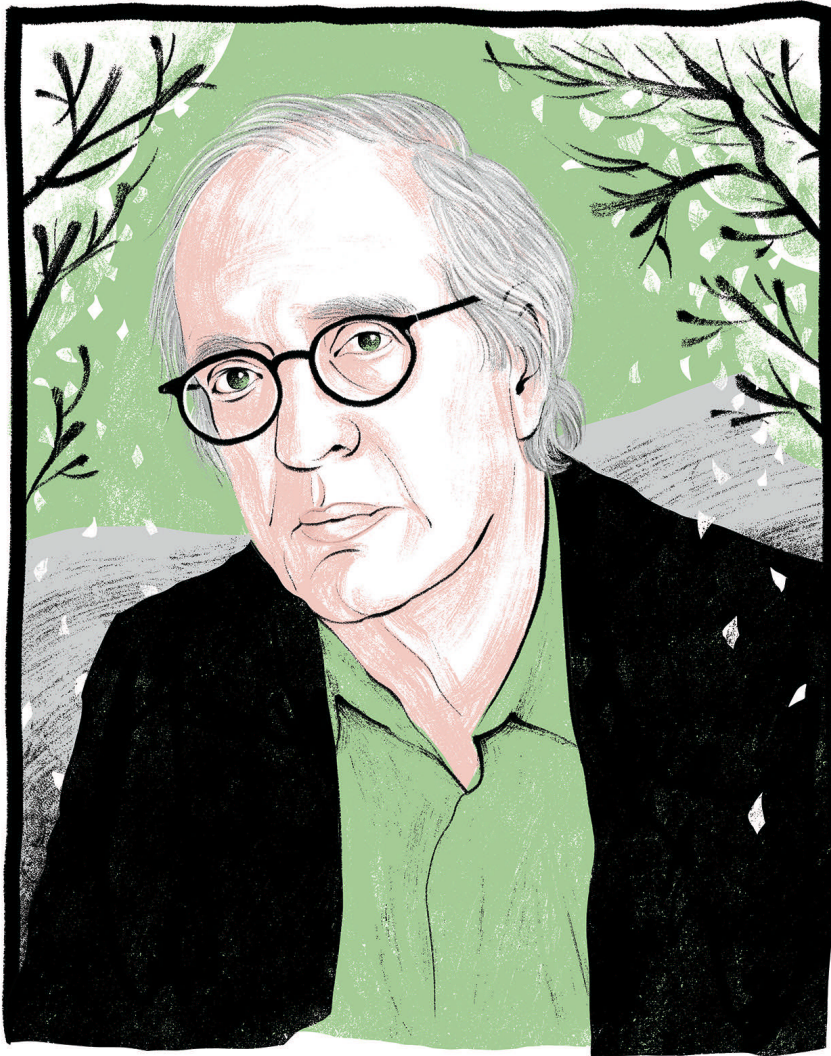
During the war I heard an Italian woman give a long, circumstantial and very dramatic account of an air-raid which had taken place a few days before, and it struck me at the time that this was the raw material out of which the ancient dramatists fashioned the convention of the messenger's speech. The Anglo-Saxon, in similar circumstances, doesn't make a speech; he simply swears and tries to put the fire out.

In Carne-Ross's view, translation is not a cloistered but a cosmopolitan activity: one must have lived in the world, not merely in the book, in order not to mismanage it. It is an act of reportage, a documenting of the events of the lived world, one that demands of the reporter that they listen to a text as they would to the voice of another person, the breath behind it, its quaverings. I like to think of transposition as a marriage of lived

experience and the innocence of pure creation. To succeed, the practice approaches an elemental purity akin to Wittgenstein's statement: What is is mystical. The isness is the thing, but it is a floating thing.

Where *The Craft and Context of Translation* is perhaps the best longer book on the subject, the best brief book on translation, *hors catégorie*, is Eliot Weinberger's *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*. In a body of work produced over the past half century, Weinberger has ventriloquized an English voice for the corpus of the Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, made essential versions of Borges's lectures and essays, and imported a range of contemporary writing from Spanish and Chinese. I am willing to guess that Weinberger would concede (or brag) that he wouldn't have become the essayist he is—unique, I think, in the American iteration of the form—without his girding as a translator. Through eight major collections, all of which have delicious titles—*Works on Paper* (1986), *An Elemental Thing* (2007), *The Ghosts of Birds* (2016)—Weinberger has been exploding the form, finding new, expressive constructions for the pursuit of idea and place. Collage is his essential mode, in the way that Weinberger's late peer Guy Davenport defined the practice: "retrospective in content, modern in its design."

It is meaningful that Weinberger's first serious work as an essayist was *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* (1987, revised in 2016). What distinguishes Weinberger's *Nineteen Ways* is, in part, its frankness (it runs eighty-eight terse pages, even in its expanded version), which is like that of someone diagnosed with six months to live who won't mince words. It's ultimately a sutra on English usage—from the Sanskrit *sutram*, for "thread," "rule," and *siviyati*, for "sew"—an *Elements of Style*, but unlike the Strunk and White, one not at risk of aging out of idiomatic relevance. Weinberger considers, serially, seventeen (now over thirty, in the most recent edition) translations of the same four-line, Tang-dynasty poem by Wang Wei (c. 700–761). At first it does not seem



like an essay at all; rather, a set of translations with commentary. Weinberger's examples are less comparisons of words—there is no *it doesn't mean that, it means this* pedantry—than they are focused on what Carne-Ross calls “spirit” but which we'd more commonly call “form”: how the translator's manipulations do or do not manage the work of placement; of, in a variant etymology for *transposition*, “getting beyond.”

Weinberger is a student of Chinese, but he does not advance himself as an authority:

In classical Chinese, each character (ideogram) represents a word of a single syllable. Few of the characters are, as is commonly thought, entirely representational. But some of the basic vocabulary is indeed pictographic, and with those few hundred characters one can play the game of pretending to read Chinese.

Play is—as a poem is—a form of knowing the world, and is, as an activity, what Aristotle goes on about in *Poetics*: imitation, the means by which we learn everything. Weinberger distills the rules:

Chinese has the least number of sounds of any major language. In modern Chinese a monosyllable is pronounced in one of four tones, but any given sound in any given tone has scores of possible meanings. Thus a Chinese monosyllabic word (and often the written character) is comprehensible only in the context of the phrase.... For poetry, this means that rhyme is inevitable, and Western “meter” impossible.... A single character may be noun, verb, and adjective. It may even have contradictory readings: character 2 of line 3 is either *jing* (brightness) or *ying* (shadow). Again, context is all. Of particular difficulty to the Western translator is the absence of tense in Chinese verbs: in the poem, what is happening has hap-

pened and will happen. Similarly, nouns have no number: rose is a rose is all roses. Contrary to the evidence of most translations, the first-person singular rarely appears in Chinese poetry. By eliminating the controlling individual mind of the poet, the experience becomes both universal and immediate to the reader.

One after another, he takes up a translation of a poem:

There seems to be no one on the empty mountain . . .  
And yet I think I hear a voice,  
Where sunlight, entering a grove,  
Shines back to me from the green moss.

And contemplates it:

Where Wang is specific, Bynner's Wang seems to be watching the world through a haze of opium reflected in a hundred thimbles of wine. It is a world where no statement can be made without a pregnant, sensitive, world-weary ellipsis.

Cites it:

An empty hill, and no one in sight  
But I hear the echo of voices.  
The slanting sun at evening penetrates  
the deep woods  
And shines reflected on the blue  
lichens.

And smites it:

Dull, but fairly direct.... Chinese poetry was based on the precise observation of the physical world. Jenyns and other translators come from a tradition where the notion of verifying a poetic image would be silly, where the word “poetic” itself is synonymous with “dreamy.”

Gives it:

Through the deep wood, the slanting  
sunlight  
Casts motley patters on the jade-green  
mosses.  
No glimpse of man in this lonely  
mountain,  
Yet faint voices drift on the air.

And tosses it:

In this poem, the couplets are reversed for no reason. The voices are *faint* and *drift on the air*. The mountain is *lonely* (a Western conceit, inimical to Wang's Buddhism, that empty = lonely) but it's a decorator's delight: the moss is as green as jade and the sunlight casts *motley patterns*.

And, eventually, he exalts a rendering or two. For the odd and marvelous thing that emerges out of these attentive readings is the strange experience of arriving at a picture in which, without Weinberger's finger in the frame, the reader, once an ignoramus, now sees a form has been found, not forged:

Empty hills, no one in sight,  
only the sound of someone talking;  
late sunlight enters the deep wood,  
shining over the green moss again.

This feels fully like Wang Wei, the reader with no Chinese thinks. But Watson's detection is only the eighth of the versions Weinberger considers, just a stop along the way through subsequent translations. "We have invented nothing!" Picasso exclaimed at Altamira, in all likelihood apocryphally. Weinberger shows how much, and how little, we learn, as a species, from our species. So these translators march on through time, insisting on their own varieties of stupidity and clarity. "In its way a spiritual exercise," Weinberger writes,

translation is dependent on the dissolution of the translator's ego: an absolute humility towards the text. A bad translation is the insistent voice of the translator—that is, when one sees no poet and hears only the translator speaking.

Weinberger is an agile scavenger of history, hunting for resonances. He is the author of the most revealing and meticulous history of racism that I've read, an essay called "The Falls" in the collection *Karmic Traces* (2000). In the essay, Weinberger pursues the idea of slavery through thousands of years of its manifestations, beginning with Palestine of the second millennium BC and the conquest of Canaanites by the Hebrews; traces the anti-Semitism and Jew hatred that permeates European intellectual history; and rounds on colonial classificatory schemes that had as one of their many eventualities the slaughter of the Tutsi by the Hutu.

*An Elemental Thing*, an ongoing project, is, in its current form, thirty-four short essays that document a solitary wandering through the vastness of the world: the physical, the historical, the conceptual. What for a lesser writer

might be a gathering of research on a topic into a file from which an essay could be written becomes, in Weinberger's collagist mode, prismatic. Its essays are animated by childlike questions. ("Wind: what is it?" "The stars: what are they?") What does it mean when men share the same name, a question Weinberger playfully addresses in an essay called "Changs," a collage of micro-biographies of thirty different historical Changs from the past two millennia: another kind of sutra, on identity. In *An Elemental Thing*, wrens are everywhere, as are tigers; sounds, too. A certain set is heard by the Kaluli people, who live in Papua New Guinea: fragments of the human story, there to be collected and composed. He exhibits a naturalist's attention to form and function, alert to how the print of the hoof of a camel in the sand takes the shape of a lotus. But he's also, like Joseph Cornell, a juxtaposer extraordinaire. One essay, "In Lux Perpetua," begins on a bench where a child cries over a sandwich stolen by her dog, her face haunting Weinberger. This scene prompts a reminiscence on his daughter dyeing Easter eggs the day before, which in turn then triggers his telling of the story of two saints, two mothers thrown to the bulls, who survive the mauling and embrace in ecstasy (before being run through by the swords of gladiators as they do).

"The Rhinoceros" is exemplary. The essay traces textual appearances of the animal through time. Its five parts approach the rhino from five directions. One found text, a Hawaiian newspaper clipping in Hawaiian and translated, describes the creature, its features. Part Two traces the discrete histories of eight of the animals that each had the misfortune to be crated, alone, to Europe, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries (number six lived at Versailles, during the Revolution and the Terror, allegedly unperturbed). But from there the essay gets weirder, with a section of exchanges of letters from 1924 in the *Journal of the Royal African Society*, about British officials' role in butchering the animals, with a reply from a reader who laments: "no large animal in my opinion is less harmful, less dangerous, and more easily shot than is this comparatively defenceless

walking gargoyle of the bush." Whereupon we're on to the perhaps predictable section four, on recent extinction statistics (he cites the few dozen or so Northern white rhinos of the Nineties, which have since been reduced to two). But Weinberger then wrong-foots the reader with a final, fifth section, one detailing the contents of a box at the British Library, the fragmentary remains, on a birchbark scroll, of the oldest extant Buddhist text, unearthed near the Khyber Pass. The sutra, a literal one that scholars have cobbled together, concerns the rhinoceros, each part of the text ending with the phrase "wander alone like a rhinoceros." We are, by the essay's end, the creature, or we would do better to be.

In his political essays, Weinberger turns his quality of attention to the infamies of the Bush Administration, the meretriciousness of its conquest of Iraq. Drawing on American foreign policy circa 9/11 and the Iraq War, these pieces were huge collages of perfidies that Weinberger fashioned into a narrative of governmental misdeeds. "What I Heard About Iraq" is an editorial as if by Braque, and Weinberger argues the linear into the realm of the solid:

I heard the Red Cross say that casualties in Baghdad were so high that the hospitals had stopped counting.

I heard an old man say, after 11 members of his family—children and grandchildren—were killed when a tank blew up their minivan: "Our home is an empty place. We who are left are like wild animals. All we can do is cry out."

As the riots and looting broke out, I heard a man in the Baghdad market say: "Saddam Hussein's greatest crime is that he brought the American army to Iraq."

As the riots and looting broke out, I heard Donald Rumsfeld say: "It's untidy, and freedom's untidy."

And when the National Museum was emptied and the National Library burned down, I heard him say: "The images you are seeing on television you are seeing over, and over, and over, and it's the same picture of some person walking out of some building with a vase, and you see it twenty times, and you think: 'My goodness, were there that many vases? Is it possible that

there were that many vases in the whole country?"

I heard that 10,000 Iraqi civilians were dead.

This essay, from 2005, runs ten thousand words (there is a second one, amounting to eleven thousand, which appeared a year later). It is composed of reported speech, reported reporting, arranged. The effect is not the numbing of a litany but of an incantatory drone, a colony of bees.

The essay was Weinberger's blockbuster, one that depended on his unique understanding of form. "Every force evolves a form," was Davenport's Shaker-sourced version of "make it new"; one looks at Weinberger's work and finds a mind actively feeling for the form that, in each case, suits the case at hand. One of my favorites of his books is *Angels and Saints* (2020), a sort of lives of the saints that is as much a lives of the angels, a kind of etymology of the two ideas, told as a history based on the stories and retellings of stories, by which the words have acquired meaning. It is an analogue of Weinberger's Iraq essays in that it draws from the sound of history, though Weinberger shapes it differently. A tryptic in form (fit for the Christian altar or for a Commedia), it generates many retellings. Here is a moment from his portrait of the life of Thecla, a saint of first-century Turkey and a follower of Paul's—Paul who refused to baptize her, Thecla who was condemned to death for fighting a nobleman who wanted to buy her into sexual slavery—thrown as punishment into a pit, to be eaten by wild animals:

A lioness ran up to her but lay at her feet. A bear tried to attack her, but was killed by the lioness. A lion charged, and both lion and lioness died in the struggle. There was a large pool of hungry seals, and she threw herself into it, declaring that, if no man would do it, she would baptize herself. Lightning struck and killed the seals. The women in the arena threw nard and cassia and cardamom into the ring and all the remaining animals fell asleep.

Animals; words; vulnerable flesh; saints. Another way of thinking of Weinberger in this mode is as a translator of a religious text that has been lost. Repetition

is one of his reflexes. His reports on the various St. Teresas—from Korea, Italy, China, Chile, and the United States—all begin, "A pious virgin. . .," which goes without saying but, being said, says much without going on about it.

The repetitions in history no less than those in nature and their minute variations are there for the attentive creature to note. Weinberger's new little volume, *The Life of Tu Fu*, charts that world of noticing. It's not a translation but rather an invention in the Tu Fucan mood. A characteristic page:

Watching the horses being washed,  
Listening to the cicadas in the trees.

I write about what is happening:  
I record the dawns and sunsets.

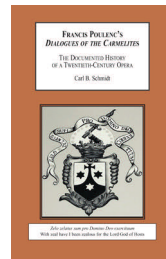
I wonder why cherries are all the same  
size.

If it is not painted perfectly, a tiger will  
look like a dog.

Tu Fu: Tang-dynasty poet, as essential in Chinese as Milton or Dickinson in English. Weinberger's *Life* is not a translation of his poetry; rather, it is a fictional autobiography in fifty-eight poems. The poems are Weinberger's, not Tu Fu's. He has distilled the mass of them into a thumbnail sketch. Weinberger recounts the changing (or perhaps unvarying) perceptions of Tu Fu as he moves through time—one of civil war in China when random violence spread from region to region, forcing his family to repeatedly move to safety. This makes the book sound like the adventure story it is not. Those movements are barely in the background; the foreground is Tu Fu's sensibility, hard to seize in translation, and so Weinberger is coming at it from the flank.

I have read the book three times straight through (a half hour when read aloud), and then dipped in here and there for the past several weeks, before reading it a fourth time. I confess to perplexity, if not over the nature of the enterprise, then over the form. It feels, as so little of Weinberger does, precious. I couldn't accuse it of chinoiserie, as Weinberger does of a few of the translations of Wang Wei, but it does at times bring with it a whiff of Deep Thoughts.

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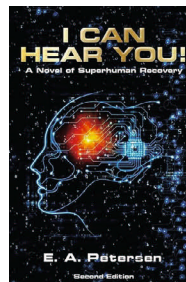
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The couplet that starts the forty-ninth poem, quoted above, roots the reader nicely in sight and sound and therefore place. Watching; listening. The second couplet is a statement of method, both of Tu Fu and of Weinberger. *Ça va*. But then I stare at that line left in the spotlight of what we'll call stanza three, a single line that says, formally, invariably, look at me: "I wonder why cherries are all the same size." My three initial reactions have been the same: first, because they are cherries and cherries are that size, cherry-size; second, all cherries are not the same size, as anyone who has ever picked a cherry can tell you; third, different varieties of cherry are all different, in size, on average, from other varieties; etc.

Throughout the book, some lines, like this one, have about them an apparent precision that—owing to the sparseness of the pages, not to say of the lines themselves—invites more intense focus. One is being asked to read these lines with attention. One is being asked to pause. One pauses, and then one is, in one's pause, repeatedly derailed. I cannot say whether this is Weinberger offering a rendition of one of Tu Fu's habits of mind that he felt it only right for him to preserve, especially given, at this point in the autobiography, Tu Fu is in his late life.

Habit, certainly, is deliberate in the text. There are many entries that begin: *I wonder; I thought of; They say*. These sound properly like Weinberger, and they could animate any of his essays. The weaker poems in *Tu Fu*, oddly for Weinberger, feature such an organizing principle. Whereas those that don't

adopt that mode are the more successful and feel fully like earned forms:

In the street a woman is weeping.  
A boy walks by whistling.  
An officer changes his horse.  
The clouds are brown and unmoving.  
The wind picks up.

All things do what they do:  
Birds swoop to catch an insect.  
Moonlight breaks through the  
forest leaves.  
Soldiers guard the border.  
I am trapped in this body.

There is no Chinese original, so I cannot help seeing in these two stanzas two hands of five fingers, reaching for and seizing at a form—a way of coming to grips with the vastness of the world. Landscape and interior, the poet as unfree as all other things seem to be free. From sense to sense—the sound of weeping and whistling; the sight of clouds and moonlight; the scent of a horse; the feel of wind and feel of wings on wind—Weinberger moves us through these perfect sentences from which a word could not be removed or added without injury to the lines. The softness of perception throughout, a delicacy, is then hit, hard, at the end by the body that will not let the poet go into the landscape, where he wishes, through eight lines, to be the soldier at the border bringing the poet up short. It is a shuttle from the freedom of the senses and the instrument or faculty that allows us to record them, to write them, into the jail of the body that holds each of us until its door finally yawns wide. One is trapped, and one is not. ■

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# PUZZLE

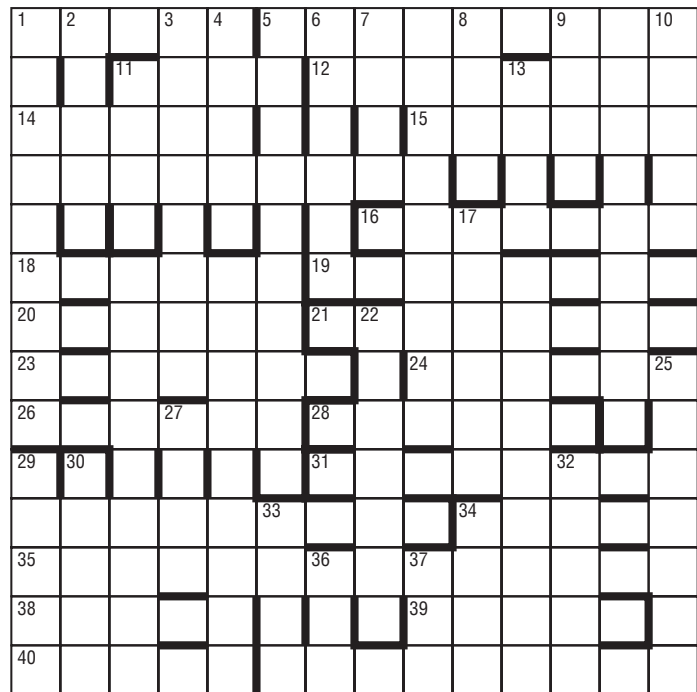
## MATCHED SETS

By Richard E. Maltby Jr.

The ten unclued entries are five related pairs. Solvers must discover their relationship and the pairings.

Clued answers include eight proper nouns and one foreign word. The entries at 12A and 17D are uncommon.

As always, mental repunctuation of a clue is the key to its solution. The solution to last month's puzzle appears on page 57.



### ACROSS

1. Confirms the age of Kings or Queens (5)
11. Olympians' mom, one from another planet—look around (4)
12. Developed in my care: U.N.'s affinity for mathematics (8)
14. Love that's not sexual? Jaw-dropping! (5)
15. Halt processes over returning private land (6)
16. Catches oversized homes wasting energy (7)
18. No human retires with a thin sheet (6)
19. Mutual—an organization in its *Anatomy of a Fall* (8)
20. Schnitzler hero covers three quarters of Asia Minor (6)
21. Judo wrestling with bit I found in the country (8)
23. Line set loosely is capable of being drawn out (7)
24. See representative's sister joining old union (6)
26. English coin's side when flipped? Really? (4, 2)
28. Disturbing slogan for whites in a community (6)
31. Most of *Squid Games*' initiation ends with broken leg—it's an unreadable script (8)
34. River to be avoided in industrial test (5)
35. United in invention, fairy tale includes one with no markings (14)
38. It's not expected, but to start with, we're buying! (5)
39. Copy cats? Prime requirements for any daily making editors nervous (5)
40. Meat producer's article: "Bad Gnus" (5)

### DOWN

2. Rangy, uncomfortably hot (5)
3. Un-asserts? There's money or dirt in different banks! (8)
4. Season opener: a baseball team turns up in trunks (5)
5. Rubbish, trash allows development of COPD in the environment (10)
6. What's in a name? I unmasked weakness (6)
7. Touch-up coming from a low blow! (4)
8. One small housing unit that's almost a string (4)
9. I get a turn to be a Disney parrot (4)
10. Lies, writing, "Golly, this is missing one" (5)
11. Take \$1,000 from an African city to get to another country (4)
13. Puzzle constructor's introduction is very sweet (4)
17. Small canals awfully built up in the middle (6)
22. Resonances of Donne (old writer) bloom in the spring (7)
25. Mark of excellence in seedy motel's breakfast food (7)
27. Endless ardor—it could be the way! (4)
29. Southern island—it's inspirational! (5)
30. A round of music goes around later (5)
32. Cheap shots? Corresponds by voicemail (5)
33. A year in law school elevated a talk-show host once (3-1)
34. Polish uprising—it can go two ways (4)
36. In Limoges you work endlessly (3)
37. Buff? Cool! (3)

**Contest Rules:** Send completed diagram with name and address to "Matched Sets," *Harper's Magazine*, 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. If you already subscribe to *Harper's*, please include a copy of your latest mailing label. Entries must be received by June 11. The sender of the first correct solution opened at random will receive a one-year subscription to *Harper's Magazine* (limit one winner per household per year). The winner's name will be printed in the August issue. The winner of the April puzzle, "April Foolishness," is Madeline Cook, Milledgeville, Ga.



## FINDINGS

**M**icroplastics were found in sixty-two of sixty-two human placentas from a biobank in Texas; in half the arterial plaques of Campanian carotid endarterectomy patients; in the gastrointestinal tracts of three bottlenose dolphins and a harbor porpoise in the Black Sea; in shrimp in South Africa's Crocodile River; in two-thousand-year-old archaeological remains buried seven meters underground; and in the gonads of adult oysters in the Mangrove Coast of the estuarine Brazilian Amazon. Microplastics were determined to increase nitrogen retention in Fujianese mangrove sediments and to either increase or decrease CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from Hainanese mangrove sediments, depending on the precise concentration. Abyssal microplastics appear to sink from the surface of the open ocean, and polystyrene particles increase the bioaccumulation of SSRIs in brine shrimp. Blue is the dominant color of microplastic found inside Guiana dolphins on the coast of Espírito Santo, and polypropylene is the dominant synthetic polymer found on *Ulva rigida* seaweed. Artificial plants with fenestrated leaves retain the most surface microplastics, whereas natural plants with smooth leaves retain the least. Microplastics in the human male reproductive system are associated with urban living, home-cooked meals, and the use of body and facial scrubs. The tail of a crayfish contains less ionic lithium than its gastrointestinal tract, gills, and hepatopancreas.

**H**umans are losing their ability to digest cellulose. Animal models exhibit an association between a wide range of neuropsychiatric and neurodegenerative disorders and an altered brain pH. An analysis of 1,156,703 selfies found that Chinese women experience their lowest lifetime acne levels between the ages of forty and forty-

four. Chinese scientists reconstructed the face of Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou, teeth from a graveyard near the royal palace at Westminster were found to belong to imported jousting horses, and a researcher attempted to improve the dating of elite tombs of the Goguryeo kingdom on the basis of painted depictions of the Northern and Southern Dippers. A prehistoric fen folk village built above a river was found to contain beads from Persia and a skull worn smooth by touch.

**T**he mating call of the male Albert's lyrebird was differentiated into loud gronking and rhythmic gronking, and it was posited that the males' shaking of stick piles or vine tangles may trick females into thinking predators are nearby. Japanese tits use an "after you" wing gesture to defer nest entry to their mates. Namibian spotted hyenas were found to catch and eat red-billed queleas at a rate of one every three minutes. Dwarf rock-wallabies were found to have unusually large teeth. "If I were a vegetable," said a skull-shape researcher, "I would not mess with a pygmy rock-wallaby." Mice who received fecal transplants from mice who had received double oophorectomies gained weight. Some heritable eye diseases may be caused by gut bacteria. Bone-marrow transplants can give mice Alzheimer's. Daytime events are more likely to be consolidated into long-term memories during sleep if they are followed immediately by five to twenty sharp wave-ripples generated in hippocampal neurons. Object words appear to activate mental representations in dogs, and children who touch their faces more often recognize their reflections earlier. Toxicity has remained a consistent feature of online interactions since 1989. Researchers concluded that, when generating a page of text, AI can emit up to thousands of times less CO<sub>2</sub> than human writers do. ■

"Yellow Towels #2, 1979" and "Amy, Phil, and Brian, 1980," photographs by Tina Barney, from her book Tina Barney: The Beginning, which was published last year by Radius Books © The artist. Courtesy Radius Books

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