

SEVENTY MILES IN THE DARIÉN GAP

The impossible path to America

By Caitlin Dickerson
Photographs by Lynsey Addario

The Atlantic
EST. 1857





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Behind the Cover

For this month's cover story, "Seventy Miles in the Darién Gap," the photojournalist Lynsey Addario accompanied the *Atlantic* staff writer Caitlin Dickerson and a group of migrants as they traversed the dense jungle that spans the border of Colombia and Panama. As the migrants scaled boulders, crossed rivers, and ascended steep, muddy paths, Addario would dart forward with her camera, photographing their journey along one of the most dangerous routes to the United States. Addario has covered nearly every major global conflict over the past two decades—the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the genocide in Darfur, the civil wars in Libya and Syria, Russia's incursion into Ukraine. What she documented in the Darién Gap, she told me, rivaled "the desperation that you see in war."

For our cover image, we selected a photograph taken at dawn in the village of Bajo Chiquito, one of the Panamanian government's official reception points for those who make it out of the jungle. The photo shows a group of migrants waiting to board motorized canoes, the next step in their journey north. Their fatigue is palpable—one woman raises a hand to her brow; several migrants carry young children in their arms or on their shoulders. You can begin to understand what they've been through, Addario said, just by looking at their faces.

— Andrew Aoyama,
Deputy Managing Editor



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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

‘LORD, HELP US MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN’

*A close reading of
Trump-rally prayers*

BY MCKAY COPPINS

A week before Christmas, an evangelical minister named Paul Terry stood before thousands of Christians, their heads bowed, in Durham, New Hampshire, and pleaded with God for deliverance. The nation was in crisis, he told the Lord—racked with death and addiction, led by wicked men who “rule with imperial disdain.”

“With every passing day,” the minister said, “we slip farther and farther into George Orwell’s tyrannical dystopia.”

But because God is merciful, there was reason for hope. One man stood ready to redeem the country: Donald Trump. And he was about to come onstage. “We know what he did for us and how he strove to lead us in honorable ways during his term as our president—in ways that brought your blessings to us, rather than your reproach

and judgment,” Terry prayed. “We know the hour is late. We know that time grows shorter for us to be saved and revived.” When he finished in the name of Jesus Christ, *Amens* echoed through the hall. Soon Trump appeared to rapturous applause and Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the U.S.A.”

For all the exhaustive coverage of Trump’s campaign rallies, even before the assassination attempt at one of them in July, relatively little attention has been paid to the prayers that start each one. These invocations aren’t broadcast live on cable news, nor do they typically attract the interest of journalists, who gravitate toward the more impious utterances of the candidate himself. But the prayers offered before Trump speak illuminate this perilous moment in American politics just as well as anything he says from the podium. And they help explain how the stakes of this year’s election have come to feel so apocalyptically high.

To understand the evolving psychology and beliefs of Trump’s religious supporters, I attempted to review every prayer offered at his campaign events since he announced in November 2022 that he would run again. Working with a researcher, I compiled 58 in total, the most recent from June 2024. The resulting document—at just over 17,000 words—makes for a strange, revealing religious text: benign in some places, blasphemous in others; contradictory and poignant and frightening and sad and, perhaps most of all, begging for exegesis.

There are many ways to parse the text. You could compare the number of times Trump’s name is mentioned (87) versus Jesus Christ’s (61). You could

break down the demographics of the people leading the prayers: 45 men and 13 women; overwhelmingly evangelical, with disproportionate representation from Pentecostalism, a charismatic branch of Christianity that emphasizes supernatural faith healing and speaking in tongues. One might also be tempted to catalog the most comically incendiary lines (“Oh Lord, our Lord, we want to be awake and not woke”). But the most interesting way to look at these prayers is to examine the theological motifs that run through them.

The scripture verse that’s cited most frequently in the prayers comes from 2 Chronicles. “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

Ryan Burge, a Baptist minister and political scientist I asked to review the prayers, told me that this verse—which is quoted 10 times—is regularly cited by evangelicals to advance a popular conservative-Christian narrative: that America, like ancient Israel before it, has broken its special covenant with God and is suffering the consequences. “The Old Testament prophets they’re quoting talk about sin collectively instead of individually—the nation has fallen into wickedness and needs healing,” Burge said. “The way they use this verse presupposes that we’re spiraling down the tubes.”

Trump’s supporters attribute America’s fall from grace to a variety of national sins old and new—prayer bans in public schools, illegal immigration, pro-transgender policies,

the purported rigging of a certain recent election. Whatever the specifics, the picture of America they paint is almost universally—biblically—bleak.

In Wildwood, New Jersey, a pastor declared, “Our nation finds itself in turmoil, chaos, and dysfunction.” In Fort Dodge, Iowa, the sentiment was similar: “Lies, corruption,

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and propaganda are driving civilization to ruins.” In Conway, South Carolina, one supplicant informed God, “Our enemies are trying to steal, kill, and destroy our America, so we need you to intervene.”

The premise of all of these prayers is that America’s covenant can be reestablished, and its special place in God’s kingdom restored, if the nation repents and turns back to him. Burge told me that these ideas have long percolated on the religious right. What’s new is how many Christians now seem convinced that God

has anointed a specific leader who, like those prophets of old, is prepared to defeat the forces of evil and redeem the country. And that leader is running for president.

EARLY ON in the Trump era, it was common to hear conservative Christians compare him to Cyrus the Great, the sixth-century-B.C.E. Persian king who, though he did not worship the God of Israel himself, liberated the Israelites from Babylonian captivity and helped them build their temple in Jerusalem.

The subtext was not subtle. Here was a handy biblical precedent for the “unlikely vessel”—the man God uses to fulfill his purposes even though he lacks the faith and character of a true believer.

But this analogy seems to have outlived its usefulness to the religious right: A 2020 Pew Research Center survey found that 62 percent of Republicans viewed Trump as “morally upstanding,” and in a *Deseret News* poll commissioned last year, 64 percent said they believed he is a “person of faith.” The former president no longer needs to be described as a blunt, utilitarian tool in God’s hand. “Cyrus was a way of acknowledging, ‘I know this is an immoral person, but he could still do some good,’” Russell Moore, an evangelical theologian and the editor of *Christianity Today*, who has been critical of Trump, told me. “I haven’t heard Cyrus language in at least five years.”

The prayers at Trump’s rallies reflect this shifting perception. Cyrus isn’t mentioned, but Trump does get compared to righteous, prophetic heroes of the Bible, including Esther, Solomon, and David.

In America, more than perhaps anywhere else in the Western world, petitions to God are still a routine fixture of politics—at congressional sessions, presidential nominating conventions, inaugurations. After a gunman shot at Trump during a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, in July, both Democrats and Republicans

prayed for the former president and for the country he hopes to lead.

And many presidential campaigns are infused with religion. In July, Joe Biden attended a church service in Philadelphia where the pastor compared the president's recent political struggles to the Old Testament story of Joseph,

and a member of the congregation prayed for Biden: "Touch his mind, O God, his body; rejuvenate him and his spirit."

Bradley Onishi, a scholar and former evangelical minister who studies the intersection of politics and Christianity in America, told me that prayers at political events have traditionally fit a certain mold. God

is asked to grant the political leader inspiration and wisdom, to help him resist temptation and lead the country in a righteous direction. "It was always 'We pray for him to have the strength to do God's will, to have character, to be the man we need,'" Onishi said.

Some of the prayers at Trump's rallies run along these



MELISSA SUE GERRITS / GETTY

lines, and would be familiar to anyone who has spent time in an American church, myself included. “Give President Trump the strength to make the right decisions both in and out of the public eye,” one man prayed at a Trump event in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. “Remind him to seek your guidance as events unfold.” I have said “Amen” to a thousand prayers like this in my life, on behalf of government leaders in both parties.

But Onishi, like several of the other experts I asked to read the prayers, was struck by how many of them take Trump’s righteousness for granted. “No one prays for Trump to do right; they pray that God will do right by Trump,” Onishi told me.

Indeed, rather than asking God to make Trump an instrument of his will, most of the prayers start from the assumption that he already is. Accordingly, many of them drop any pretense of thy-will-be-done nonpartisanship, and ask explicitly for Trump’s reelection. “Lord, you have a servant in Donald J. Trump, who can lead our nation,” a woman offering a prayer in Laconia, New Hampshire, told God at a rally on the eve of the state’s Republican primary. “Help us to overcome any obstacles tomorrow so that we may deliver victory to your warrior.”

With Trump’s goodness presumed, the criminal charges against him are cast not as evidence of potential wrongdoing but as a sign of victimhood. “We ask that you put a hedge of protection around President Trump,” one woman prayed in Waukesha, Wisconsin, “and deliver him from the baseless attacks, and remove from office those who are subverting justice in our legal system.”

AT A FEBRUARY campaign event in North Charleston, South Carolina, Mark Burns, a televangelist in a three-piece suit, squeezed his eyes shut and lifted his right hand toward heaven. “Let us pray, because we’re fighting a demonic force,” he shouted. “We’re

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fighting the real enemy that comes from the gates of hell, led by one of its leaders called Joe Biden and Kamala Harris.”

Although Burns was more provocative than most, he was not alone in using the language of spiritual warfare. This is perhaps the most unnerving theme in the prayers at Trump’s rallies. One verse, from Ephesians, is quoted repeatedly: “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”

Russell Moore told me he used to hear conservative evangelicals cite this verse as a way of shifting the focus away from earthly concerns like politics and toward the larger, more important battle for our souls.

“The point would be that our opponents aren’t our enemies,” he told me. But something has changed in recent years. “That’s not the implication I see in these prayers. It’s ‘Politics is how we fight these spiritual battles.’”

Terry Amann, a conservative pastor in Iowa, told me I shouldn’t be surprised to hear such a dire framing of the election. Christians like him see abortion as a grave sin and fast-changing social mores around gender and sexuality as serious threats to the nation’s spiritual health. “Every election cycle, they say this is the most important election in your lifetime,” he told me. To him, it feels like this one really is. “Our republic is in trouble.”

But it’s easy to see the danger in internalizing the concept of politics as spiritual combat. Trump’s rallies become more than mere campaign events—they are staging grounds in a supernatural conflict that pits literal angels against literal demons for the soul of the nation. Marinate enough in these ideas, and the consequences of defeat start to feel existential. “This is not a time for politics as usual,” a Pentecostal preacher declared at a Trump rally in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, last year. “It’s not a time for religion as usual. It’s not a time for prayers as usual. This is a time for spiritual warriors to arise and to shake the heavens.”

As I was reviewing these prayers, I wondered what Trump’s most zealous religious supporters would do if they didn’t get the result they were praying for in November. With so much riding on the idea that Trump’s reelection has a divine mandate, what would happen if he lost? A destabilizing crisis of faith? Another widespread rejection of the election’s

outcome? Further spasms of political violence?

It wasn’t until I came across a prayer delivered in December in Coralville, Iowa, that a more urgent question occurred to me: What will they do if their prayers *are* answered?

Onstage, Joel Tenney, a 27-year-old evangelist with a shiny coil of blond hair and a quavering preacher’s cadence, preceded his prayer with a short sermon for the gathered crowd of Trump supporters. “We have witnessed a sitting president weaponize the entire legal system to try and steal an election and imprison his leading opponent, Donald Trump, despite committing no crime,” Tenney began. “The corruption in Washington is a natural reflection of the spiritual state of our nation.”

For the next several minutes, Tenney hit all the familiar notes: He quoted from 2 Chronicles and Ephesians, and reminded the audience of the eternal consequences of 2024. Then he issued a warning to those who would stand in the way of God’s will being done on Election Day.

“Be afraid,” Tenney said. “For rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. And when Donald Trump becomes the 47th president of the United States, there will be retribution against all those who have promoted evil in this country.”

With that, he invited the audience to remove their hats, and turned his voice to God. “Lord, help us make America great again,” he prayed. *A*

McKay Coppins is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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AMERICAN FURY

For years, experts have warned of a wave of political violence. We should prepare for things to get worse before they get better.

BY ADRIENNE LaFRANCE

C

Convulsions of political violence have a way of imprinting on the national memory. They become, in retrospect, the moments from which the rest of history seems to unspool. Yet they are forever intertwined with the possibility that things could have gone exactly the other way.

What if? becomes a haunting question. What if Franklin D. Roosevelt's would-be assassin had hit his target in Miami in 1933? What if John F. Kennedy had forgone the convertible ride in Dallas in 1963? What if Martin Luther King Jr. hadn't walked onto the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis in 1968? What if the bullet that pierced Ronald Reagan's lung in 1981 had been an inch closer to his heart? What if Donald Trump had shifted his weight just before a gunman shot at him during a rally in Pennsylvania in July? *What if?*

Maybe it is the collision of malice and luck that makes the outcome of an attempted assassination seem simultaneously fated and wholly random. But political violence is rarely random. In fact, those who study the subject most assiduously have been warning Americans for years that threats of violence are escalating.

Our experience of political violence—the shock of an assassination attempt, how the smallest details suddenly burn bright with meaning—can obscure its true nature. Violence intended to achieve political goals, whether driven by ideology, hatred, or delusions, is broadly predictable. The social conditions that exacerbate it can

simmer for years, complex but unmysterious. Again and again throughout history, and indeed today, periods of political violence coincide with ostentatious wealth disparity, faltering trust in democratic institutions, intensifying partisanship, rapid demographic change, an outpouring of dehumanizing rhetoric about one's political foes, and soaring conspiracy theorizing. Once political violence becomes endemic in society, as it has in ours, it is terribly difficult to dissolve. Difficult, but not impossible.

As I wrote in "The New Anarchy," the April 2023 cover story for this magazine, political violence is seen as more acceptable today than it was a decade ago by nearly every measure. Political conversation borrows the rhetoric of war. People build their identity not around shared values but around a hatred of their foes. A 2023 UC Davis survey found that "a small but concerning segment of the population considers violence, including lethal violence, to be usually or always justified to advance political objectives." More Americans bring weapons to protests than they did in previous years. A growing number of elected officials face harassment and death threats, which has prompted many capable leaders to drop out of politics entirely.

Officials at the highest levels of the military and in the White House told me repeatedly that they believed the United States would see an increase in violent attacks as the 2024 presidential election drew near. Other experts talked about pronounced danger in places where extremist groups had already emerged, where gun culture is thriving, and where hard-core partisans bump up against one

another, especially in politically consequential states such as Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Georgia. Clearly, they were right in their warning. They further predicted that the current wave of violence would take a generation or longer to crest.

Our informational environment threatens to accelerate outbreaks of violence. Social platforms are optimized for rhetorical warfare. Their algorithms reward emotional outbursts, wild speculation, and unchecked hostility, all of which drive engagement with websites that profit off user attention but profess no real commitment to accuracy. Some of the most powerful people on the planet—the billionaire Elon Musk, various members of Congress—stoke contempt for their political adversaries, real and perceived, and encourage legions of followers to distrust the independent sources of information that try to hold them accountable.

Periods of political violence do end. But often not without shocking retrenchments of people's freedoms or catastrophic events coming first. As I've written previously, governments have a record of responding to political violence brutally, and in ways that undermine democratic values and dismantle individual civil liberties. And political leaders are frequently complicit in perpetuating political violence, seeking to harness it for their own ends.

I first became interested in political violence around the time of the Waco, Texas, massacre in 1993 and the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995. In the years that followed, as the millennium drew to a close, the furies of

that particular era appeared to cool, which I took as a sign that something had gone right. One scholar of political violence cautioned against such optimism. "The militia movement waned very quickly in the 1990s not because of anything we did, but because of Oklahoma City," Carolyn Gallaher, who spent two years tracking a right-wing paramilitary group in Kentucky,

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told me. After the bombing, extremists went underground. But only for a time.

William Bernstein, the author of *The Delusions of Crowds*, put it in chilling terms when I asked him whether he thought January 6 would be a turning point away from violence in American politics. "The answer is—and it's not going to be a pleasant answer—the answer is that the violence ends if it boils over into a containable cataclysm," he said. What if, he went on—"I almost hesitate to say this"—but what if the rioters actually had hanged Mike Pence or Nancy Pelosi on January 6? "I think that would have ended it. I don't think it ends without some sort of cathartic

cataclysm. I think, absent that, it just boils along for a generation or two generations."

These are poisonous days in our nation. It is reasonable to worry that the attempt on Trump's life represents not the end of a cycle of violence, but an escalation in an era that has already seen a congresswoman shot in a supermarket parking lot, a congressman shot while playing baseball, and the U.S. Capitol stormed by insurrectionists. Some degree of cynicism is understandable. But too many Americans are allowing political exhaustion and despair to justify their own abstention from self-governance. Too many believe that screaming into the void, or clicking the "Like" button, amounts to political involvement.

The only way to minimize further bloodshed is to choose leaders at every level of society who reject political violence unconditionally, in word and in deed. This does not mean acquiescing to both-sidesism—you can still oppose Trump's authoritarian impulses while condemning the attempt on his life. Making it through this dark time does, however, require articulating American values worth preserving, and building consensus toward reaching them. And it requires understanding the deleterious effects of political violence. Bloodshed begets more bloodshed, and a functioning democracy can only withstand so much of it. There are no random acts of political violence in America, or anywhere else. There will be violence in our nation until Americans come together to say "Enough." *A*

Adrienne LaFrance is the executive editor of The Atlantic.

RED FLAGS

The banners of the far right

Americans love flying flags. Not just the Stars and Stripes—flags of their state, their city, their alma mater. Last year, three flags were flown outside Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito’s New Jersey vacation home: the flag of Long Beach Island, where he summers; a flag commemorating the Philadelphia Phillies’ 2022 National League championship; and the Appeal to Heaven flag, also known as the Pine Tree flag.

The last of these caught the attention of *The New York Times*. The Pine Tree flag, which

dates to the Revolutionary War, has become a symbol of the far right. The *Times* had previously reported that an upside-down American flag had flown outside Alito’s Virginia home in January 2021—a gesture of protest that had been adopted by the pro-Donald Trump “Stop the Steal” movement.

Alito explained that his wife had inverted the flag to signal displeasure with some querulous neighbors, and that she had flown the Pine Tree flag without knowing about its “Stop the Steal” association. But the incidents raised concerns that the flags revealed political views that would color Alito’s judgment in cases before the Court.

Antique American flags, obscure foreign ones, and a host of newly designed banners are now common wherever elements of the

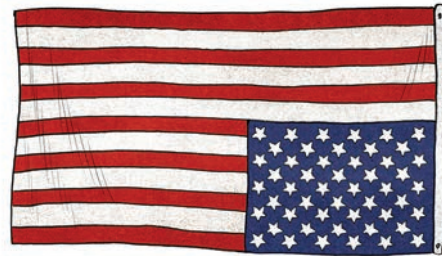
far right congregate, whether in real life or online. An array of flags dotted the crowds outside the U.S. Capitol on January 6—symbolic weapons that sometimes turned into actual ones: Several rioters used flagpoles to assault police officers or destroy property. After the attempted assassination of Trump in July, some of his supporters circulated an image of a tangled American flag, in which they saw the outline of an angel—a sign that the former president had been the beneficiary of divine protection.

Understanding what these sometimes-recondite symbols mean can shed light on how extremist ideology is evolving. Below is a guide to some of the most prominent symbols.

— Ali Breland



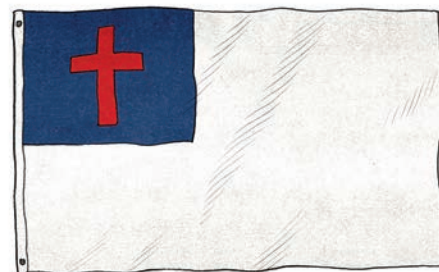
The Betsy Ross flag was created in the early years of the Revolutionary War, though likely not by Ross herself. It has been co-opted by far-right groups to invoke revolution against perceived tyranny. Some groups, such as the Three Percenters, a right-wing militia, have spun up new versions of the flag, incorporating their own symbols within the circle of 13 stars.



Historically, flying the American flag upside down was a way for sailors to indicate distress or to call for help. In the 1960s and ’70s, it was used by Vietnam War protesters. (Opponents of the war also burned U.S. flags, a practice that has been far more common on the left than the right.) Now parts of the American right are bringing back the upside-down flag, to protest the 2020 election and, more recently, Donald Trump’s felony conviction. Flying the flag upside down when not in distress is a violation of the United States flag code, though the code is not legally enforceable.



The Pine Tree flag first appeared on American naval ships in 1775. Since the 2010s, and especially after the insurrection on January 6, 2021, it has been appropriated by members of the Christian-nationalist far right, who want to transform America into a theocracy. The phrase *An appeal to heaven* was taken from the British philosopher John Locke, who wrote in his *Second Treatise* on government that men deprived of their rights are justified in revolting against their oppressors.



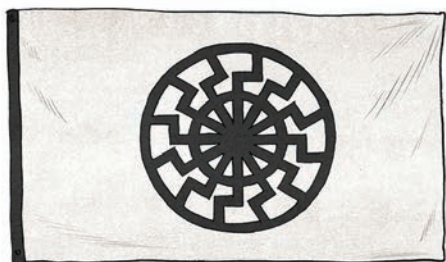
The Christian flag was designed in the 1890s by a Sunday-school superintendent on Coney Island who is said to have wanted a single flag representing the whole of Christianity. The flag is still used by Christians without explicitly political connotations, but it has been flown at right-wing rallies in support of the Christian-nationalist desire to break down the walls between Church and state.



The Celtic Cross dates back to the Middle Ages, or perhaps even Late Antiquity. Though not initially a Christian symbol, it has long been used in Christian contexts. Now it's become a fixture at rallies for neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, and other white supremacists. It is also part of the logo for a prominent neo-Nazi website, Stormfront. Norwegian fascists in the 1930s and '40s wielded a similar version of the cross as their party symbol, which has likely led to its modern usage.



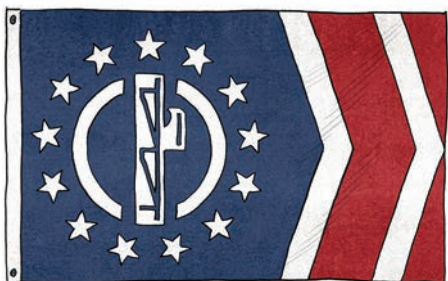
The Groyperers are a group of mostly Gen Z white supremacists led by 26-year-old Nick Fuentes. Their precise numbers and influence are hard to pin down; they have more of an online presence than a physical one. When they do show up in person, it's often with flags for "America First," the name of Fuentes's movement. The phrase was originally popularized by President Woodrow Wilson and later used by Pat Buchanan and Donald Trump to their own political ends.



The Black Sun, or Sonnenrad, symbol was used by Nazis during the Third Reich. It consists of 12 lightning-bolt runes—similar to the ones in a familiar insignia of the SS—arranged into a disk. It has appeared at neo-Nazi rallies around the world and has become a fixture of online memes. The symbol even showed up in a video shared by a Ron DeSantis campaign staffer, which depicted the then-presidential candidate's head in the center of a spinning Black Sun. (The DeSantis campaign fired the staffer.)



Anyone who flies a flag for "Kek," or the "Republic of Kekistan," probably spends a tremendous amount of time online, specifically on 4chan. *Kek* became popular as an alternative term for *LOL* among players of *World of Warcraft*, and has evolved to embody an entire ethos: trolling. The Kek flag is designed like a Nazi war flag, with a spiral of *K*'s around an *E* to replace the swastika, and a 4chan logo in the corner. Like the other right-wing symbols that have been incubated on the image board over the years, it is intended to trigger outrage.



At many of Patriot Front's marches across the country, the white-nationalist group totes its signature flag, featuring an axe surrounded by a bundle of sticks. The fasces, as it is known, was a popular Roman symbol indicating a leader's power, authority, and ability to punish his subordinates. Benito Mussolini and his allies adopted the fasces as an emblem and derived the name of their movement from it: fascism.



There isn't much to say about the Trump Rambo flag, because the flag itself says it all. It was flown on January 6 by MAGA diehards, and is perhaps the most prominent flag in a genre that reimagines Trump as imposing, physically impressive, and often armed—including Trump as the Terminator and Trump as a character from the Japanese anime series *Dragon Ball Z*.

All Together Now

Photographs by Neal Slavin

Constraints can be liberating. My father was a cartoonist, and at public events, he'd ask someone to put three big marks on a piece of paper—lines, squiggles, blotches—and then tell him what to draw: a house, a horse, a flower. Somehow, he could always do it—but the angle and approach would be unexpected.

That memory returned as I explored the forthcoming revised edition of Neal Slavin's *When Two or More Are Gathered Together*, first published almost half a century ago. Here's the constraint: The photos are all group shots. The genre has a bad reputation, picked up from too many uninspired high-school yearbooks, corporate brochures, and family-reunion albums. Slavin wanted to pursue wilder game while remaining smack in the realm of the ordinary: hot-dog vendors, bodybuilders, cheerleaders, synchronized swimmers, Elizabeth Arden masseuses, Santa's Helpers, Biltmore Hotel chambermaids, fire-department chaplains. (The new edition has some 120 images, roughly half of which were taken after the book's original 1976 publication.)

Slavin gave his subjects an overarching instruction: *You* decide how to pose yourselves. The mandate proved revolutionary. The resulting photographs possess rare animation and humor, the subjects' self-arrangement adding an extra layer of revelation. DeLorean owners wave at the camera from inside their vehicles, gullwing doors up. Uniformed cemetery



workers smile shyly, shovels in hand, beside a freshly dug hole in the ground.

Why group shots? I asked Slavin, now in his 80s. He has always considered himself something of a sociologist, he said. For many people, America calls to mind the freestanding individual—our national myth. But groups, Slavin said, are the true foundation of the country. He cited Alexis de Tocqueville, who famously observed that, in America, people

propulsively associate with one another. And when people make decisions as a group—in this case, about a photograph—you get energy, Slavin said: You “can’t press the button unless you have that energy coming at the camera.”

— Cullen Murphy

*Capital Croquet Club,
Washington, D.C., 1988*



FROM WHEN TWO OR MORE ARE GATHERED TOGETHER
(DARLANI BOOKS, 2024) . © NEAL SLAVIN .

Clockwise from top left: *Cemetery Workers and Greens Attendants Union, Local 365 SEIU AFL-CIO, Ridgewood, New York, 1972–75; the Wheelmen, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, 1972–75; DeLorean Owners Association, Washington, D.C., 1988*

SEVENTY MILES IN THE DARIÉN GAP



By Caitlin Dickerson | Photographs by Lynsey Addario

The impossible path to America



They gathered in the predawn dark. Bleary-eyed children squirmed. Adults lugging babies and backpacks stood at attention as someone working under the command of Colombia's most powerful drug cartel, the Gulf Clan, shouted instructions into a megaphone, temporarily drowning out the cacophony of the jungle's birds and insects:

Make sure everyone has enough to eat and drink, especially the children. Blue or green fabric tied to trees means keep walking. Red means you're going the wrong way and should turn around.

Next came prayers for the group's safety and survival: "Lord, take care of every step that we take." When the sun peeked above the horizon, they were off.

More than 600 people were in the crowd that plunged into the jungle that morning, beginning a roughly 70-mile journey from northern Colombia into southern

Panama. That made it a slow day by local standards. They came from Haiti, Ethiopia, India, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, and Venezuela, headed north across the only strip of land that connects South America to Central America.

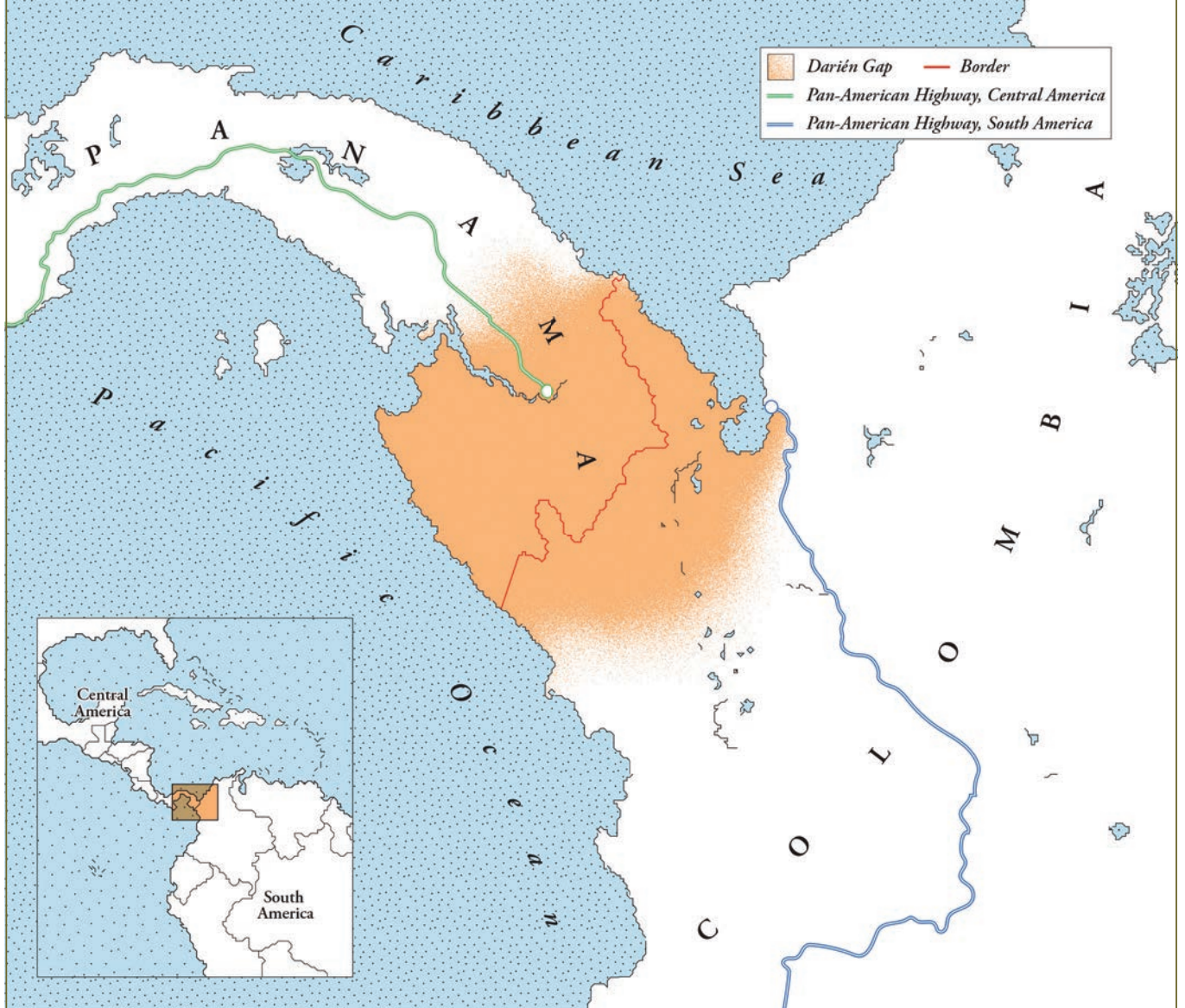
The Darién Gap was thought for centuries to be all but impassable. Explorers and would-be colonizers who entered tended to die of hunger or thirst, be attacked by animals, drown in fast-rising rivers, or simply get lost and never emerge. Those dangers remain, but in recent years the

jungle has become a superhighway for people hoping to reach the United States. According to the United Nations, more than 800,000 may cross the Darién Gap this year—a more than 50 percent increase over last year's previously unimaginable number. Children under 5 are the fastest-growing group.

The U.S. has spent years trying to discourage this migration, pressuring its Latin American neighbors to close off established routes and deny visas to foreigners trying to fly into countries close to the U.S. border. Instead of stopping migrants from coming, this approach has simply rerouted them through the jungle, and shifted the management of their passage onto criminal organizations, which have eagerly taken advantage. The Gulf Clan, which now calls itself Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, effectively controls this part of northern Colombia. It has long moved drugs and weapons through the Darién Gap; now it moves people too.

Everyone who works in the Darién Gap must be approved by the cartel and hand over a portion of their earnings. They have built stairs into hillsides and outfitted cliffs with ladders and camps with Wi-Fi. They advertise it all on TikTok and YouTube, and anyone can book a journey online. There are

Previous pages: Migrants gather at the starting point of a trail through the Darién Gap. The dense stretch of jungle typically takes three to 10 days to traverse.



many paths through. The most grueling route is the cheapest—right now, about \$300 a person to cross the jungle on foot. Taking a boat up the coast can cost more than \$1,000.

I went to the Darién Gap in December with the photographer Lynsey Addario because I wanted to see for myself what people were willing to risk to get to the United States. Before making the journey, I spoke with a handful of journalists who had done so before. They had dealt with typhoid, rashes, emergency evacuations, and mysterious illnesses that lingered for months. One was tied up in the forest and robbed at gunpoint. They said that we could take measures to make the journey safer but that ultimately, survival required luck.

Each year, Panamanian authorities remove dozens of bodies from the jungle. Far more are swallowed up by nature. These deaths are the result not only of extreme conditions, but also of the flawed logic embraced by the U.S. and other wealthy nations: that by making migration harder, we can limit the number of people who attempt it. This hasn't happened—not in the Mediterranean, or the Rio Grande, or the Darién Gap. Instead, more people come every year. What I saw in the jungle confirmed the pattern that has played out elsewhere: The harder migration is, the more cartels and other dangerous groups will profit, and the more migrants will die.

THE NIGHT BEFORE we set out, a Venezuelan father named Bergkan Rhuly Ale Vidal paced around a camp at the jungle's mouth, packing and repacking his family's bags. He and his partner, Orli-mar, had their children with them: 2-year-old Isaac

and 8-year-old Camila. Even in the dark the air was sweltering, and Bergkan's mind was spinning with worry. What if one of the children fell and hurt themselves, or came down with a fever? What if one was bitten by a snake? In trying to salvage his family's future, had he gravely miscalculated?

The first day, the path was studded with boulders and trip-wired with vines. It weaved across a river so many times that I quickly gave up on dumping out my rubber boots, because they would only fill again minutes later. Bergkan's family's tennis shoes were already ripped and disintegrating. The hills were slick with mud and so steep that we were often not so much walking as climbing on our hands and knees, holding on to mangled roots.





Top left and top right: Bergkan Rhuly Ale Vidal and his partner, Orlimar, set out to traverse the Darién Gap with their children, Isaac, 2, and Camila, 8. They traveled with Orlimar's cousin Elimar and her two children.

Bottom left: Migrants discarded clothing and gear to lighten their packs.

Bottom right: Bergkan and his children ascend a mountainous stretch of trail near the Colombian border with Panama.



LYNSEY ADDARIO FOR THE ATLANTIC WITH SUPPORT FROM NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

We passed stands selling bottles of water and Gatorade, two for \$5. Porters, known as *mochileros*, circled the family, hawking their services. “We carry backpacks, we carry children!” they chanted. They charge roughly \$100 a day, and also barter with migrants for items in their backpacks. Orlimar tried trading a pair of old headphones for new boots, but was rejected. A couple of times, she and Bergkan lost patience with the porters and yelled, “We have no money!”

Midmorning, we reached the route’s toughest hill. After half an hour of climbing, Bergkan crashed to the ground, his chest heaving. Orlimar threw down her belongings. “What do you have in that bag?” he asked her.

“Shoes—sandals,” Orlimar said in a voice so soft, she was barely audible.

Bergkan told her to dump any weight she could. She began pulling out clean clothes. “Someone else will be able to use them,” he said. But the other families nearby were also unloading supplies. The people who had the strength to keep hiking charged past us, staring straight ahead, as if exhaustion were an illness that they might catch just by looking at it.

Crossing the jungle can take three days or 10, depending on the weather, the weight of your bags, and pure chance. A minor injury can be catastrophic for even the fittest people. Smugglers often downplay how many days the journey will take—Bergkan had been told to plan for two. A few hours into the trip, he began to realize that they were nowhere near as deep into the jungle as they needed to be, which meant they might not have enough food to get them out.

Bergkan and Orlimar had planned for a different life. They’d met as teenagers and gone to college together, Orlimar studying nursing and Bergkan engineering. But Venezuela’s economy imploded in 2014, the result of corruption and mismanagement. Then an authoritarian crack-down by the leftist president, Nicolás Maduro, led to punishing American sanctions. The future they had been working toward ceased to exist. In the past decade, at least 7.7 million Venezuelans have fled.

Bergkan and Orlimar spent five years taking any job they could get, first in Venezuela and then in Peru, while they watched their friends and classmates leave, one after another, for the United States. Then Orlimar’s cousin Elimar, who was like a sister to her, came to them with an offer: Her boyfriend, who was living in Dallas, would pay for Bergkan’s family to take the cheapest route across the jungle, if Elimar and her two children—who were 6 and 8—could go with them. “No one in Venezuela can lend you money, much less that amount,” Bergkan told me. “It was our moment.” They planned to stay in the U.S. only until Venezuela’s economy recovered and they could return home.

We trudged uphill for hours. Isaac teetered on Bergkan’s shoulders. Gripping his son’s feet, Bergkan adopted a strategy of sprinting up a stretch of hill for about 30 seconds, then collapsing again. His limbs shook and his face turned an ominous shade of purple. “The weight you carry is in your mind,” he said at one point, giving himself a pep talk. Camila stopped cold a couple of times, holding up the long line of people behind her, and yelled, “Mommy, I can’t!”

Around 1 p.m., Isaac fell asleep, his limp body rocking back and forth. “It feels like his weight has tripled,” Bergkan told Orlimar. They sat down on a hillside to regroup. Elimar tried coaxing her nephew awake with lollipops, but he was unresponsive. Other parents stopped to ask if he was okay. Bergkan pulled a packet of electrolyte powder out of his bag. He mixed it with water, then shook Isaac awake and told all four children to down it. “We’re going to get you out of here,” Bergkan said, more to himself than to anyone else.

Eventually, a porter explained that we were moving too slowly to make it to Panama that day; we would have to sleep at a camp for stragglers. When we arrived, we saw wooden platforms for tents, bucket showers and toilets, and a couple of outdoor kitchens with Colombians serving plates of chicken and rice—all for a price. People around us began purchasing Wi-Fi for \$2 an hour so they could ask relatives to send them more money; transfers carried a 20 percent fee. Elimar began circulating through the camp, asking other Venezuelans for a loan to help her contact her boyfriend. Bergkan, Orlimar, and their children sat down and rubbed their aching limbs. They had no one to call.

IN THE THREE TRIPS I took to the Darién Gap over the course of five months, I saw new bridges and paved roads appear deeper in the jungle, Wi-Fi hotspots extend their reach, and landmarks that were previously known only by word of mouth appear on Google Maps. Looking down at a thrashing river, I held on to ropes that made it safer—slightly—to creep across sheer rock faces behind parents with crying babies strapped to their chests.

Guides and porters follow the migrants in the jungle with their iPhones rolling, asking, “Do you feel good?” and “Have we treated you well?” They film incessantly during the first day of walking, when people are still able to conjure a smile. (Even I ended up in one of their videos.) They post the videos on social media, selling trips across the jungle as if they were joyful nature walks. The profit motives of the cartel have become yet another factor fueling migration.

The UN has tried to counteract these messages by stationing migration officials at bus stations and other checkpoints along the way to the Darién Gap; they warn people of the dangers ahead and try to persuade them to reconsider. Those efforts have been largely ineffective. “People come with tunnel vision, like, ‘I must get to the United States,’” Cristian Camilo Moreno García, a UN migration official based in northern Colombia, told me. “Turning back is not an option.”

On the second morning of our journey, about 150 people filed out of the camp and waited for the sun to rise before they started walking. Bergkan and his family ate nothing; they needed to conserve the few cans of tuna and packages of cookies they had left. The children were still in their pajamas, some of their only remaining clean clothes. Two women stood at the end of the line collecting final payments and then handing each person a wristband, the kind you might get at a music festival, to show that they had paid. “Please take out your money so that we can move you along faster!” one yelled.

We walked along a narrow ridge with steep cliffs dropping off on either side, all of us trudging much slower than the day before. After about an hour and a half, Elimar’s son, Luciano, crumpled to the ground. The adults gathered around him. “Take off his sweater—he’s suffocating!” one yelled. Without a word, one of the porters Lynsey and I had hired hoisted the child onto his shoulders, apparently unable to watch Luciano struggle any longer. He dashed up the slope and out of sight. Elimar looked defeated but also relieved to have one

fewer child to worry about, at least until we made it to the next stopping point.

Word spread down the line that we were approaching the border with Panama. The porters, who had boisterously peddled their services for two days, started to go quiet. Profiting from migration is illegal in Panama, and can carry a sentence of more than 12 years in prison. Panama’s border patrol, known as SENAFRONT, has been enforcing those laws aggressively against people who sell migrants bottles of water, carry their backpacks, or serve as guides. The porter who had picked up Luciano revealed the scar on his chest from a bullet wound that he said he’d sustained on a previous trek, when officers had sprayed bullets into Colombia. He said that we should be prepared to run. (When I asked Jorge Gobeá, the head of the agency, if his officers ever shot across the border at Colombian guides, he told me, “If someone armed fights Panama authorities, we use force.”)

The border was marked by a Panamanian flag and piles of trash. Some people posed for pictures and celebrated half-heartedly, unsure if they were nearing the end of the journey or still at the

beginning. Orlimar made the sign of the cross, then sat down with her head between her knees. Elimar was the first to notice the Panamanian border guards approaching and warned us: “Get down! Get down!”

Lynsey and I wished the family well and, along with the Colombian porters, sprinted back down the mountain.

AFTER LEAVING BERGKAN and his family at the border, we doubled back to take the second primary land route through the Darién Gap. This one was said to be slightly easier, and cost more as a result. We had secured permission this time from the Panamanian government to follow it all the way through to the end.

After a day of hiking, we slept at another camp, where we fell in with a large group led by a Venezuelan mother of three named María

***GUIDES AND PORTERS FOLLOW
THE MIGRANTS WITH THEIR
IPHONES ROLLING, ASKING,
“HAVE WE TREATED YOU WELL?”
THEY POST THE VIDEOS ON
SOCIAL MEDIA, SELLING TRIPS
ACROSS THE JUNGLE AS IF THEY
WERE JOYFUL NATURE WALKS.***

Fernanda Vargas Ramírez, who had been living with her family in Chile. The original members had met on social media and picked up more travelers on their way to the jungle, until the group included 21 people, all but one of them Venezuelan. People crossing the Darién Gap tend to develop family-like bonds with other migrants they meet along the way. They look out for one another's kids and count off when they pause to rest, making sure no one gets lost. But this group was especially close. Its members shared food and water freely and said they planned to stay together all the way to the United States.

As we neared the Panamanian border a second time, a Colombian guide who was preparing to turn back asked a few of us to look out for a woman named Cataña, whom he'd recently led down the same path but who had never come out of the jungle. He took out his phone and showed us pictures of her sitting on a bus and in what looked like a transit station. She appeared pensive, unsure what to think about the voyage ahead. "She was very slow, so the others in the group left her behind," the guide said.

"I can't imagine this group doing something like that," I replied.

"We'll see," he said. People lose patience quickly when they're running out of food.

This route was newer and hadn't yet been trampled by hundreds of thousands of people. The foliage closed in from all sides, making the path hard to discern. We stepped over jaguar tracks and passed a Bothrops, the deadliest viper in South America, coiled around a branch near our ankles. In a ravine, we saw what looked like the scene

of a person's bad fall: a tennis shoe, a skull, and the bones of a leg with a bandage wrapped around the knee like a tourniquet.

Once we entered Panama, we faced new threats: robbery and sexual assault. Most of these attacks happen at the hands of Indigenous Panamanians. For years their villages were routinely ransacked by narco traffickers and paramilitary groups. Some Indigenous Panamanians took up arms in self-defense, or got involved in trafficking themselves. The government did little to protect them then and does little to stop them now.

The porters we had paid to continue on with us told us to stay close together because bandits were thought to be intimidated by large groups. Later, we learned that was false—they were in fact targeting large groups, perhaps because it was more efficient than robbing a handful of people at a time. Our

anxiety grew when we passed a couple of abandoned backpacks. We pushed through thicker and thicker brush until I realized there was no longer any sign of a path. One porter accused another of leading us astray. They started arguing, until a third hissed, "No yelling!" We turned around, but a bottleneck formed in front of a fallen tree trunk. One of the porters shouted for us to hurry: "Grab the kids and go!"

At midday, we reached a camp known as La Bonga, the only place in the jungle where the Panamanian government was allowing people to sell food and water to migrants. Lynsey and I met up with a dozen border-patrol officers who had been assigned to tail us, as a condition of our making the trip. We trudged through mud and rivers for another six hours before stopping for the night. It rained on and off; the adults, sharing a handful of tents, would have to sleep in shifts.

One of the women, a Venezuelan named Adrianny Parra Peña, climbed into an airless tent, her face smeared with dirt. She and her husband had been helping María Fernanda by essentially taking custody of her 9-year-old twin boys, carrying them across rivers and lifting them up steep inclines.

***IN A RAVINE, WE SAW WHAT
LOOKED LIKE THE SCENE OF A
PERSON'S BAD FALL: A TENNIS
SHOE, A SKULL, AND THE BONES
OF A LEG WITH A BANDAGE
WRAPPED AROUND THE KNEE
LIKE A TOURNIQUET.***



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Adrianny told me that she'd wanted her own children but that this was the third time in six years that she and her husband had tried resettling, first in Peru, then Chile, and now, she hoped, the United States. "We are tired of all this migrating," she told me. "This is no way to live."

THE NEXT MORNING, we faced the route's hardest obstacles, a series of rock faces. Ropes had been strung across some of them, but it was impossible to know which were secure enough to hold on to. "Oh my God, I can't watch," María Fernanda said when her 7-year-old daughter crossed the rock. She covered her eyes and shouted, "Hold on tight, my princess!"

When it was an 8-year-old girl named Katherine's turn, she slipped and fell into the rocky river about 15 feet below. Her mother, who had been right behind her, stood frozen while one of the porters jumped into the water after her. Katherine emerged crying but uninjured. We started hiking again almost immediately—no one wanted to contemplate the near miss any longer than they had to.

The next day was the group's fourth in the jungle and the 15th since leaving Chile. We came upon a fallen tree trunk covered in wet moss that we would have to cross like a balance beam above a racing river. I stopped short, certain that there was no way I would make it across without slipping. Then I noticed a little girl we'd never seen before standing alone, wide-eyed, seemingly unsure of what to do. One of the teenage boys in our group reached over, wrapped an arm around her belly, and carried her across. He placed her

down unceremoniously on the other side and kept walking. I held my breath and stepped onto the log.

We started seeing abandoned tents and wondered if they meant that we were reaching the jungle's edge, or if the people who'd left them had simply been too weak to carry even the most basic supplies. And for the first time, we saw people sitting by themselves on rocks and tree stumps, staring aimlessly into the distance, apparently deserted by their traveling companions. We crossed a river behind a family with three girls, two of whom were disabled. The eldest looked to be at least 10 but was swaddled like a baby in a sheet against her father's chest, her long limbs flopping out. Her father slipped and face-planted, dunking them underwater. When they resurfaced, the girl was coughing and screaming. The father shook himself off, tightened the sheet, and kept going. Just off the path lay a decomposing corpse, tucked under a blanket.

The dozen Panamanian officers assigned to tail us started asking us to share the last of our food—until we ran out. They were exhausted and kept wanting to take breaks. The platoon's medic chugged a bottle of saline solution. We'd given it to him, along with antivenom that required dilution, to hold on to as a precaution against snakebites. But the officer had a more urgent problem: diarrhea from drinking the river water.

Around midday, we reached a place called Tres Bocas, where three rivers combine—and where bodies tend to wash ashore toward the end of the rainy season. Many members of María Fernanda's group had fallen far behind, along with half of the border-patrol officers. One officer warned us that we were still at least 13 miles from the jungle's edge but that, because of the terrain, it would feel twice as long. We couldn't wait for the others to catch up.

For four hours, we alternated between speed-walking and running, far exceeding what I would have thought physically possible. We finally emerged from the canopy onto a rocky beach where hundreds of migrants were waiting. Many said they hadn't eaten in days.

We all climbed into motorized canoes driven by Indigenous people who charged \$25 a person.

Two hours later, as the sun set, we arrived in Bajo Chiquito, a community of about 200 people that—despite having no running water, electricity, or hospital—the Panamanian government had deemed an official reception point for people who make it out of the Darién Gap, and a key landmark amid the "controlled flow" of migration that it claims to have achieved.

THE DENSITY OF the jungle makes it difficult to contend at any one moment with the humanitarian catastrophe it contains, and the many policy failures that led people there. But all of that is on display in Bajo Chiquito, where the feeble systems for processing migrants are stretched dangerously thin.

Shaking from exhaustion, we climbed up a set of stairs that leads into the village. From sunrise to sunset, the entrance is packed with migrants waiting to be processed by government officials. Up to 4,000 people a day arrive here. Some have to be carried up the steps; others collapse when they reach the top.

Despite Panama having the highest per capita income in Latin America, its Indigenous people live in almost universally crushing poverty. Panamanian politicians are quick to decry how migration has changed the Indigenous way of life, but it has been a windfall for communities like Bajo Chiquito. While I was there, music blared as the migrants who had money bought food, Wi-Fi, toiletries, clean clothes, and tents. Residents walked around holding wads of American dollars, the de facto currency of the Darién Gap.

HAMPTONS INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL



Mary Heilmann, "Maricopa Highway", 2014, Oil on canvas, 42 x 42 x 1.5", ©Mary Heilmann, Photo credit: Marie Catalano

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Top left: Susej, 7, comforts her mother, María Fernanda Vargas Ramírez, the informal leader of a group of 21 migrants crossing the Darién Gap.

Bottom left: A migrant carries his 4-year-old son up a hill.

Top right: A blanket conceals human remains left along the trail.

Bottom right: A Colombian guide helps Susej traverse a slippery rock wall.



LYNSEY ADDARIO FOR THE ATLANTIC WITH SUPPORT FROM NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Most of the migrants I met in the processing line told me they'd been robbed by bandits at a checkpoint within a day's walk of the community. The women said they'd been groped; some said they'd been digitally penetrated under the guise of a search for hidden cash. Panamanian border officers standing nearby showed no interest in investigating. Indigenous leaders say they have asked the government for help addressing crime against migrants, but the situation seems to be getting worse. In February, Doctors Without Borders published a report on sexual violence against migrants in the Darién Gap, showing a frequency more typical of war zones. Soon after, the government kicked the organization out of the area.

On the sides of houses in Bajo Chiquito, I saw MISSING flyers displaying the photograph of a 9-year-old Vietnamese boy with plump cheeks. Panamanian authorities had told me that children who become separated from their family in the jungle are pulled aside until the adults arrive. But within minutes of interviewing people in the processing line, I met a 5-year-old Ecuadorian girl who'd arrived with a group of strangers she'd met in the jungle. When it was their turn to be questioned, no one in the group admitted that they weren't related to the girl. They had no documents for her, but the migration officers waved them through.

A long line of the sick and injured snaked around Bajo Chiquito's sole medical clinic, which was opened to respond to the influx of migrants. In the open-air waiting room—a few dozen plastic chairs on a concrete slab—people vomited, nursed rashes and bloody wounds, and carried babies who'd had diarrhea for days. Doctors handed out a couple of pills for fevers or squirts of rash cream in plastic baggies, and called for the next patient.

Two women carried in a friend who had nearly drowned; she was



LYNSEY ADDARIO FOR *THE ATLANTIC* WITH SUPPORT FROM NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY



A group of Indigenous Panamanians ventures across rough seas. Before a 2015 crackdown, many migrants traveled up the coast of Panama by boat to circumvent the Darién Gap; today, however, the cartels that control the overseas routes charge high prices for passage, driving many to opt for the cheaper—and more dangerous—paths through the jungle.

mumbling and couldn't lift her head. A nurse led them to a gurney and connected the woman to an IV while her three children watched in horror. The nurse returned a short while later and, though the woman was still incoherent, told the family that they would have to leave soon—the facility closed at 5 p.m. A couple of men who had just come out of their own appointments carried her to a tent as she moaned.

The next morning, migrants lined up again for canoes that would take them to a larger camp near the highway, from which they would depart for Costa Rica. Unaware that all of them would get a spot, they started shouting at one another in different languages about who had been first in line. “This happens every day,” an officer told me. I spotted the woman from the clinic asleep on a bench, her skin a greenish-gray color. Her youngest child, an 8-year-old boy, held her head in his lap, stroking her hair and swatting away flies. Her two older children were walking up and down the village, looking lost and debating what to do.

Suddenly, Lynsey and I heard screaming. We ran inside a pink house that was renting rooms to migrants and found a large family from China whom we had met at the clinic the day before. They'd had fevers for days and were sent away with ibuprofen. That morning the 70-year-old grandfather, Yenian Shao, had not woken up. His wife and daughter lay over his body, wailing and chanting.

Border-patrol officers called for a local investigator, who arrived an hour later. Using a translation app on his phone, Yenian's son tried asking if his

father's body could be cremated or sent back to China, but he couldn't understand the response. The authorities packed up Yenian's body and lowered it down the side of a hill into a canoe. Yenian's wife got in next, straddling her husband's body bag, followed by the rest of their family. Residents were sweeping the streets of trash. Just across the river, the first new migrants of the day were arriving.

IN APRIL, we returned to Panama to visit a sleepy fishing village near the Colombian border called Puerto Obaldía. Its once brightly colored homes have weathered over the years. There are few ways to make money here. Migration used to be one of them.

For years, migrants had arrived in Puerto Obaldía on boats from Colombia. Locals sold them food, allowed them to camp, and charged them to arrange the next leg of their journey—either on charter flights to Panama City from a tiny airstrip, or in fishing boats up the coast, to another village with a paved road that connects to a highway out of the country. This lasted until 2015, when migration through the Darién Gap reached roughly 30,000 people for the first time in history, and the U.S. leaned on Panama to crack down. The border patrol began arresting residents and charging them with smuggling.

When we went, the town was in the middle of a mayoral election, plastered with posters of smiling candidates. They were all campaigning on a platform of bringing the migrants back, though none seemed to know how to do so. The candidates I interviewed, and other residents, acknowledged that at times

the town had been overwhelmed. At one point in 2015, there were 1,500 migrants camped in this community of only about 600. But they insisted that the arrangement was better than the one that exists now—for them and for the migrants.

The boat rides never stopped; cartels simply took them over, labeling them a “VIP” option and charging upwards of \$1,000 a person. Now the boats leave just after sunset, even when the seas are dangerously rough, and sometimes they capsize. At least five people have drowned this year, including an Afghan child.

“It's the government's fault that so many have died,” Alonsita Lonchy Ibarra Parra, one of the candidates, told me. Another, Luis Alberto Mendoza Peñata, said that the community had appealed to the authorities, asking why migrants can rest and refuel in Bajo Chiquito but not in their community. “We write letters. They don't respond,” he told me. “If immigration is illegal in Panama, why is it allowed there, but not here?”

But the United States is pushing Panama and other Latin American countries to crack down more on migration, not less. Recently Panama agreed to accept \$6 million from the U.S. for deportation flights. The U.S. has also been urging Panama to construct detention centers, like those that exist along the U.S.-Mexico border. Panama's newly elected president campaigned on the promise to seal the Darién Gap completely. But an effort to do just that, announced by the U.S., Panama, and Colombia last year, had no discernible effect—more than half a million people made it through, the largest number to date. In June, the Panamanians installed a razor-wire fence across the border at the same spot where we had crossed. When I asked one of our Colombian guides what the cartel was going to do next, he replied, “Make another route.” Before the week's end, someone had cut a hole in the fence, and migrants were streaming through.

Beyond the Darién Gap, migrants and their smugglers continue to find ways around the roadblocks set before them. Recently, hundreds of thousands of migrants have flown into Nicaragua, for example, which has bucked U.S. pressure to restrict visas.

Mari Carmen Aponte, the U.S. ambassador to Panama, and other State Department officials I interviewed said the American government was trying to balance deterrence with programs to keep migrants safe. They pointed to offices that the United States is opening throughout Latin America to interview people seeking refugee status. The U.S. hopes to approve as many as 50,000 this year to fly directly into the country, far more than in the past.

Key to these screenings, the officials told me, will be distinguishing between true refugees and economic migrants. But most people migrate for overlapping reasons, rather than just one. Many of the migrants I met in the Darién Gap knew which types of cases prevail in American immigration courts and which do not. They were prepared to emphasize whichever aspect of their story would be most likely to get their children to safety.

And too often, deterrence and protection are not complementary strategies, but opposing ones. When I told Aponte about my reporting in Puerto Obaldía, where Panama's crackdown seemed only to hand migrants over to the cartel and force more of them into the jungle, she said she hadn't thought about the situation in such stark terms before. She acknowledged that she was trying to make choices "between two extremes—none of which works."

On that same trip to Puerto Obaldía, I learned that in January of this year, Panama had made what seemed like a concession to the locals, allowing them to open a small camp about a four-hour hike from the town. A group of officers agreed to accompany Lynsey and me there. On

the way, a representative from the border patrol's communications department had to stop several times to vomit from overexertion. After we arrived, the officers recovered while drinking cold Gatorade and eating a hot lunch of chicken and rice.

Nelly Ramírez, a 58-year-old woman from Venezuela, sat slumped on a bench. On her second day walking through the jungle with her daughter and four grandchildren, she had slipped on some leaves and broken her leg, and it was still oozing with pus. Other migrants had carried her to the camp while her family continued on. A woman working there had given her food and a hammock. She had no money and was panicking about what to do next. But if the camp hadn't existed, she figured she would have died in the jungle alone.

Two days later, some of the same officers returned to the camp just after sunrise. They were not on their way to investigate people robbing and assaulting migrants in the jungle, or those who captain deadly boat rides for exorbitant fees. Instead, they declared that the people running the camp had been aiding and abetting human trafficking by selling food and Wi-Fi. They burned the camp down.

MARÍA FERNANDA'S GROUP of 21 splintered before even making it out of the jungle, when some members were caught sneaking food they'd hidden after everyone said they'd run out. After passing through Central America, those who could afford it took express buses to Mexico City. The rest slept in shelters and on the streets. One of the poorest families was kidnapped in southern Mexico. They sent desperate messages to the group, begging for money. Most said they had nothing to spare.

Orlimar and her cousin Elimar are no longer speaking. They had a falling-out at a bus station in Honduras, when Elimar grew tired of waiting for Bergkan to scrounge together enough money to continue. She purchased tickets for herself and her own kids, and told Orlimar they were leaving just as they were called to board.

**WHEN I ASKED ONE
OF OUR COLOMBIAN GUIDES
HOW THE CARTEL WOULD
RESPOND TO THE CLOSING
OF THIS ROUTE, HE REPLIED,
"MAKE ANOTHER ROUTE."**



Top left: Migrants arrive in Bajo Chiquito, an official Panamanian reception point for those who make it out of the Darién Gap.

Bottom left: Soldiers from Panamanian border control visit a makeshift camp along a route through the Darién Gap, one of several improvised way stations where migrants can rest and purchase food and supplies. A few days later, officers would return to the camp and destroy it.

Top right: Panamanian soldiers transport the body of a Chinese migrant, Yenian Shao, who died after arriving in the village with a fever.

Bottom right: Migrants camp overnight in Bajo Chiquito, which has no running water or electricity.



LYNSEY ADDARIO FOR *THE ATLANTIC* WITH SUPPORT FROM NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY



Bergkan had blown up, he said, accusing Elimar of taking advantage of him. “I told her, ‘You used me like a coyote! Like a *mochilero* to help you with the kids.’”

In Mexico City, Elimar applied for an interview with American immigration officials using U.S. Customs and Border Protection’s app CBP One, which was created to streamline arrivals at the border. But she lost patience after a month and found someone to shuttle her and the kids across the border illegally. They turned themselves over to immigration authorities and were given a court date in 2029. That long a wait is not unheard-of. They now live in an apartment complex on the outskirts of Dallas, where her children are enrolled in public school. Elimar cleans offices and her boyfriend works as a cook at a chain restaurant.

Once Bergkan’s family made it to southern Mexico, they rode in a series of vans called *combis*, which are

the cheapest way to travel on the country’s dangerous rural highways. They say they lost count of the times that narcos, police officers, and Mexican immigration officials boarded the vans and demanded bribes. They made Central Americans and Caribbeans pay more than the Venezuelans—everyone knew they were the poorest. The last group of armed men kept their request modest: “100 pesos per person,” they said, about \$6. “It’s not that much.” Sixteen days after the family left Bajo Chiquito, they arrived in Mexico City.

Bergkan is now working odd jobs; he has bound textbooks in a factory and done construction in a cemetery. The family is living in a two-bedroom basement apartment with more than a dozen other Venezuelans. They have also applied to enter the United States through CBP One and are waiting for their number to be called. They could try hopping the dangerous train known as *la bestia* to the border, where they could cross illegally. But for now, Bergkan can’t stomach a single additional risk.

WHEN SOMEONE DIES in the jungle, their remains are usually eaten by animals or swept away by a river, or they disintegrate in the hot, wet terrain. But

sometimes a body is retrieved. Panamanian authorities have offered conflicting accounts of the number of bodies recovered from the jungle—ranging from 30 to 70 a year. But these appear to be significant undercounts. In one remote community called El Real, Luis Antonio Moreno, a local doctor, told me that a mass grave dug in 2021 had quickly filled with hundreds of migrant bodies—double if not triple the reported numbers.

Moreno has operated El Real’s run-down hospital for 18 years. Its morgue is one of several in the area where bodies are taken after they are removed from the jungle. Moreno said he has processed the remains of people “from every country and every age.” Some arrive with their identification documents still protected in plastic baggies they had been carrying with them. Others are just bones. He teared up recalling two cases from last year: One was a father and son who drowned together; their bodies were still hugging when they were delivered to him. The other was a father and son who had both been shot in the head.

The morgue is next to the hospital kitchen. Moreno said the stench was often intolerable, even before the day this spring when he discovered that the air conditioner had gone out and the bodies inside were decomposing. In March 2023, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which has a program to help families track down loved ones who have gone missing while migrating, built a mausoleum in the local cemetery with space for hundreds of bodies, and it’s quickly filling.

At a recent burial ceremony, municipal workers wearing hazmat suits placed 12 white body bags into

**AT A RECENT BURIAL
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LABELED DESCONOCIDO,
OR “UNKNOWN.”**



graves. Ten of the bags were labeled *DESCONOCIDO*, or “unknown.” One bore the name of a man from Venezuela whose family had confirmed his identity. Just before the last body bag, which was also the smallest, went into the mausoleum, an ICRC worker opened it and placed a dog tag on the wrist of the 8-month-old Haitian girl inside.

AFTER LEAVING PANAMA, I sent a message to the phone number I saw on the flyer for the missing 9-year-old boy in Bajo Chiquito. The number led me to Bé Thị Lê, the mother of the boy, whose name was Khánh.

A single mother, Bé had worked in school administration in Vietnam, but lost her job at the beginning of the pandemic. She started watching videos that smugglers posted on YouTube of the trip through the Darién Gap; the journey seemed doable.

Several relatives who had already migrated to the United States sent her money to join them. Bé and Khánh traveled for nearly a month to get to the jungle, flying first to Taiwan, then France, then Brazil, and then taking buses and cars through Peru and Ecuador to reach northern Colombia.

Bé sent me photographs and videos she’d taken of her son throughout the journey, posing on boats and at transit stations. In one video, Khánh sat on a hotel-room bed, using the Duolingo app to work on his English. He was practicing the phrase *Yes, coffee with milk please*, nailing all but the final word. The app prompted him to repeat it again and again: *please, please, please*.

In the jungle, they moved slowly and quickly ran out of food. On the fifth day, they walked into a river identical to dozens they’d already crossed. Neither knew how to swim, so they linked arms with an Ecuadorian man named Juan. The rain that had been pounding all day started to come down harder, and the water suddenly changed from clear to brown, signaling a flash flood. “The water was only up to my knees, but two steps later, it was up to my neck,” Bé told me. All three were knocked off their feet. Bé grabbed onto a boulder.

Bajo Chiquito’s sole medical clinic was opened to treat an influx of sick and injured migrants.

Juan tried to do the same, but his backpack filled with water and pulled him under. Khánh slipped out of his grip. Juan and Bé scrambled to a patch of beach and looked out in the direction where the current had taken Khánh. He was gone.

Bé said she felt all the energy drain from her body as she sat on the beach, speechless and unmovable. Some of the other migrants in their group told her they had heard Khánh call out “Mommy” as he was pulled away. They offered her their condolences and kept walking. Juan eventually persuaded her to continue on so that they could report what had happened and get help trying to find Khánh. A day and a half later, they climbed up the stairs to Bajo Chiquito.



The Church of Santa Cruz y la Soledad, in Mexico City, has become a resting place for migrants on the journey north, at times housing more than 1,000 people a night.



LYNSEY ADDARIO FOR THE ATLANTIC WITH SUPPORT FROM NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Border-patrol officers used a translation app to take down Bé's account. They advised her to continue on to the larger camp near the highway to make another report. She did so, then asked her brother, who lives in Boston, to fly down and help her. Together, they returned to Bajo Chiquito and posted the signs that I later found. She said that officials there gave no indication that they planned to look for Khánh, and told her that she didn't have permission to do so herself. At her brother's urging, Bé turned herself over to American immigration authorities to request asylum, and then traveled to Boston, where she has been working in a nail salon. "My son has always been with me, since he was born until now. I have no husband, so there are times when I am not quite there," she told me. "Not so conscious, not quite there. I'm physically still here, but emotionally not, because I miss him."

Without a body to mourn, she's become obsessed with the idea that Khánh may have been pulled out of the river or washed ashore. She thinks he may have been kidnapped by someone in the jungle, or perhaps he's being taken care of but was injured or can't remember her phone number. She thinks he might still be waiting for her to come get him. After I wrote to her, she sent me pleading messages almost every day for weeks. "Please help me find my son."

When I contacted a representative at the ICRC about Khánh, the organization added him to the list of missing migrants it is trying to find. Months later, there has been no news. Bé continues to write to me. "What do you believe about my son?" she asked recently. "I'm always waiting for news of my baby." *A*

Caitlin Dickerson is a staff writer at The Atlantic. She received the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting.

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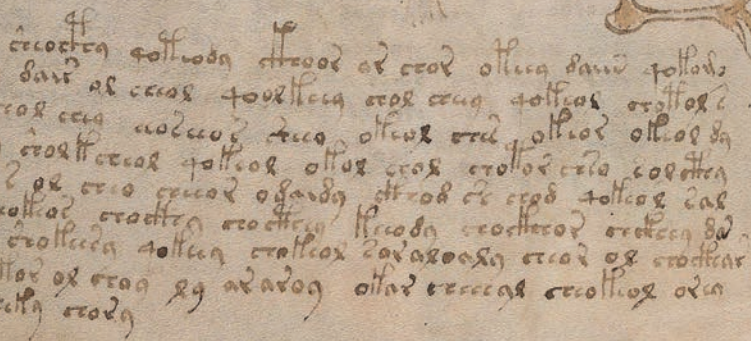
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AN INTOXICATING
500-YEAR-
OLD MYSTERY

The Voynich Manuscript has long baffled scholars—and attracted cranks and conspiracy theorists. Now a prominent medievalist is taking a new approach to unlocking its secrets.

BY ARIEL SABAR





This page and previous pages: Examples of what scholars call the “pharmaceutical” section of the Voynich Manuscript. Four apothecary jars appear to be scattered amid a selection of herbs, suggesting a possible medicinal recipe.

Lisa Fagin Davis was starting her medieval-studies Ph.D. at Yale in 1989 when she got a part-time job at the university's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Her boss was the curator of early books and manuscripts, and he stuck her with an unenviable duty: answering letters from the cranks, conspiracists, and truthers who hounded the library with questions about its most popular holding.

In the library catalog, the book—a parchment codex the size of a hardcover novel—had a simple, colorless title: “Cipher Manuscript.” But newspapers tended to call it the “Voynich Manuscript,” after the rare-books dealer Wilfrid Voynich, who acquired it from a Jesuit collection in Italy around 1912. An heir sold the manuscript to another dealer, who donated it to Yale in 1969.

Davis grew up in Oklahoma City, transfixed by the fantasy worlds of J. R. R. Tolkien and *Dungeons & Dragons*. When the Beinecke curator first showed her the Voynich Manuscript, she thought, *This is the coolest thing I've ever seen*.

Its 234 pages contained some 38,000 words, but not one of them was readable. The book's unnamed author had written it, likely with a quill pen, in symbols never before seen. Did they represent a natural language, such as Latin? A constructed language, like Esperanto? A secret code? Gibberish? Scholars had no real idea. To Davis, however, the manuscript felt alive with meaning.

Flowering through the indecipherable script were otherworldly illustrations: strange, prehistoric-looking plants with leaves in dreamy geometries; oversize pages that folded out to reveal rosettes, zodiacs, stars, the cosmos; lists of apparent medicinal formulas alongside drawings of herbs and spindly bottles. Most striking of all were the groups of naked women. They held stars on strings, like balloons, or stood in green pools fed by trickling ducts and by pipes that looked like fallopian tubes. Many of the women, arms outstretched, seemed less to be bathing than working, as plumbers in some primordial waterworks.

Although the book's parchment and pigments looked medieval, the drawings of the women had no close cultural parallel, in

any era. Even the plants—which appeared to have the stems of one species and the roots of another—resisted identification.

Davis, then 23 years old, with a rosy sense of the world's knowability, wanted to figure out what the Voynich Manuscript was, what it meant, where it came from. But people in her field saw the Voynich as a waste of time, a house-of-curiosities gewgaw unworthy of the serious scholar, especially when so many legible manuscripts begged for study.

In any case, scholars had already tried. The manuscript had reeled them in with what one cryptanalyst called a “surface appearance of simplicity”: letters that looked glancingly Latin, words that repeated with language-like regularity, handwriting that had the easy flow of a long-established script. But Renaissance-era intellectuals, Ivy League professors, and spy-agency code breakers—including William Friedman, who cracked Japan's World War II “Purple” cipher before becoming the National Security Agency's chief cryptographer—all toiled in vain to unlock the Voynich's secrets. So many headline-making “solutions” had been debunked over the years that the text had earned a reputation, in the words of a Beinecke librarian, as “the place where academic careers go to die.”

For all anyone knew, the manuscript was nothing more than the ravings of a lunatic, or a hoax to dupe some fool into paying a fortune for it. In his magisterial history of code breaking, the writer David Kahn called the Voynich “the longest, the best known, the most tantalizing, the most heavily attacked, the most resistant” of cryptographic puzzles. H. P. Kraus, the dealer who donated the manuscript to Yale, once likened it to the mythical Sphinx, “its lair strewn with the bones of those who failed to solve the riddle, and still awaiting the Oedipus who will give the right answer.”

To the aspirants who wrote to the Beinecke, Davis sent minimalist replies: prints, from microfilm, of whatever pages they requested, without comment. The Beinecke got more than enough attention from unstable-seeming “Voynich people.” Davis was careful not to encourage them, or to betray her own fascination. When she began checking out books on the

manuscript—to feed her own curiosity—she didn't tell her boss, a medievalist who would soon become her dissertation adviser. “What I wanted more than anything,” she told me, “was for him to respect me.” But the further along she got in graduate school, the less she thought about the Voynich, until she scarcely thought of it at all. If her field saw the manuscript as beneath its dignity, then perhaps she should too.

I met Davis in Boston this past March, some 35 years after her youthful infatuation with the manuscript. She had risen to one of her discipline's most visible posts: executive director of the Medieval Academy of America, the premier professional organization for North American medievalists, which she has led for more than a decade. Its offices are a 20-minute walk from her penthouse condo, where she lives with her husband, Dan Davis, a finance executive. Their balcony overlooks Boston Harbor and the meeting of the Charles and Mystic Rivers, with Old North Church in the distance.

Davis, 58, has the air of the college roommate you could spend hours staring at the stars with, casually unraveling the meaning of the universe. She has a cascade of dark corkscrew curls, and wears purple-lensed glasses—indoors and out—that “pretty much everyone,” she said, mistakes for an affectation. In fact, she has a rare disorder that causes double vision, and the tinted lenses stabilize her sight. Eventually, “I'll just start wearing an eye patch,” she said, and “go the pirate route.”

My visit came after an unexpected turn of events. The Voynich Manuscript had reentered Davis's life, forcing her to reconsider almost everything she thought she knew about it. The manuscript's notoriety—as history's hardest puzzle; as grist for unhinged conspiracies—had for many years scared scholars away. But what if you looked past its extravagant strangeness? What if you focused instead on the things—little noticed—that it shared with countless other manuscripts?

Could the ordinary illuminate the extraordinary? Davis resolved to find out.

THE YOUNGEST OF three siblings, and the only girl, Davis grew up in a home suffused with serendipitous discovery. Floor



tiles in the family room doubled as a chessboard. Posters designed by her mother, a poet, took common exclamations, such as “Good God,” and split them (“Good / God”) to inspire alternative readings.

When Davis wasn’t singing in school musicals—her star turn was as Annie Oakley in *Annie Get Your Gun*—she buried herself in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and recited poems in Tolkien’s Elvish. She loved the backstories that Tolkien created for his made-up languages. “The invention of languages is the foundation,” Tolkien once wrote. “The ‘stories’ were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse.”

Girls in Davis’s middle school didn’t tend to share these interests. When her geeky older brothers played Dungeons & Dragons, she waitressed their games, as “the beer wench.” At 13, “I was like, ‘Screw this,’” she recalled. She got her own dungeon, and led adventures for a group of fellow eighth graders, all boys.

During college, at Brown, she spent a summer singing show tunes on dinner cruises in Boston Harbor. She’d hoped to become a professional actress. But after struggling to land roles in college plays, she took classes on the history of theater, where she found herself drawn to medieval drama—which fused her childhood interests. She majored in medieval studies, and in a senior-year class, she ran her fingers across medieval parchment for the first time. *I’m touching something that somebody touched 800 years ago*, she thought. The connection felt immediate, she told me, and “magical and really powerful.”

At Yale, Davis answered letters to the library about the Voynich, but she abandoned her own research on it. She had failed to hook even her own brother. Barry Fagin, then a young computer-engineering professor at Dartmouth, had a background in cryptology but gave up on the Voynich after a few tries. “You can beat your head against these kinds of problems for years,” he told me, “and then you wake up one morning and you find you’ve wasted your life.”

Davis’s boss at the Beinecke introduced her to a 12th-century liturgical manuscript known as the Gottschalk Antiphonary, and Davis wrote her dissertation on it. The

Gottschalk was the sort of text—Latin, Christian, European—on which medievalists built respectable careers. Davis earned her Ph.D. in 1993 and became a sought-after consultant, cataloging medieval manuscripts for some of the country’s top collections and compiling, with her colleague Melissa Conway, the definitive directory of such manuscripts in North America, a project Davis chronicled on her blog, Manuscript Road Trip.

Then, in 2014, the Medieval Academy of America hired her as its executive director. She became the public face of a field

Renaissance-era
intellectuals,
Ivy League
professors, and
spy-agency
code breakers
all toiled in
vain to unlock
the Voynich’s
secrets.

that wanted little to do with the Voynich. But the Voynich wasn’t done with her.

WHEN DAVIS OPENED her email in February 2016, the message from Yale University Press surprised her. It asked if she would peer-review the essays in a forthcoming “facsimile edition” of the Voynich Manuscript, a coffee-table book that featured high-resolution, life-size images of every one of its pages.

The Beinecke’s then-director, Edwin C. Schroeder, had grown frustrated

by the constant questions his staff got about the Voynich: Its popularity, he told me, was “orders of magnitude” greater than anything else at the library. The Beinecke—a marble-paneled building somewhere between modernist cathedral and spaceship—held more than 1 million genuinely meaningful texts, among them a Shakespeare First Folio, a Gutenberg Bible, the papers of Edith Wharton, and a third-century fragment of a Pauline Epistle.

But sometimes it felt as if the only text that visitors cared about was the one nobody could read. And too often, the *way* they cared about it was to proclaim that they’d solved it. “Part of the challenge,” Schroeder told me, “was that people were regularly contacting us saying, ‘Here’s my theory, what’s my reward?’” The Beinecke didn’t offer rewards, the librarians would have to explain, and it didn’t judge theories. But with little rigorous scholarship to point people to, wild ideas bloomed.

A New Jersey doctor argued that the Voynich was a manual, in Flemish creole, of death rites for an ancient cult of Isis. A Texas chemist spied what she took to be the signature of Leonardo da Vinci. The author of a guide to the end of the world theorized that a “Semite” had written the Voynich in scrambled Hebrew, to record a message from extraterrestrials about “our future doom.” A man writing from jail believed that the manuscript was a childhood project of his from the 1980s, written in his own blood. “He kept telling us he was coming to get it,” a Yale official told me. (The library contacted the campus police.)

The manuscript’s unintelligibility had made it a blank screen, onto which people freely projected their own fantasies. When Beinecke officials permitted one self-proclaimed scholar to examine the Voynich—only to see a social-media post afterward about her conducting some sort of séance—“it was like, ‘All right,’” Schroeder recalled, “we need to change some of the conversation.”

Schroeder hoped that a high-quality reproduction, surrounded by accessible essays, would shift interest away from “Break the code!” and toward questions of history. Who might have produced such a work, and why? What do the drawings reveal about the illustrator’s understanding



Lisa Fagin Davis, photographed in June 2024

of botany, astronomy, and biology? What kinds of knowledge did earlier cultures encrypt, and how did they do it?

In its email asking Davis to vet the book before publication, the Yale press wrote, “We know that you are an expert in the subject.” That was news to Davis. True, while blogging about the Beinecke a year earlier, she had written a jokey post on the Voynich, warning readers about the “dark scary corner of the internet” where the manuscript’s obsessives lurked. But since leaving

graduate school and her Beinecke job more than two decades earlier, she had rarely given it a thought, much less studied it.

But when she read the essays, she felt her broader training as a medievalist kick in. The book treated the Voynich not as some alien vessel of dangerous secrets, but as any other historical manuscript with a physical reality and a past. The volume’s editor was the Beinecke’s new early-books-and-manuscripts curator, a historian named Raymond Clemens. Times had changed.

One essay told of how Wilfrid Voynich remade himself from a Polish revolutionary into a charming New York antiquarian. Another documented the Voynich’s suspected provenance, with evidence suggesting that the manuscript had been owned by the 16th-century Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II before passing through the hands of a court pharmacist, a Prague alchemist, a Bohemian doctor, and a German polymath on its way to the Jesuits in Italy. There were reports on recent radiocarbon tests dating the calfskin parchment to between 1404 and 1438, and on the University of Pennsylvania philosopher William Romaine Newbold, who in 1921 became the first of many Voynich theorists to succumb to grandiose delusions of having solved it. Newbold’s code-breaking key involved so many freewheeling steps that one could make the text say practically anything. Newbold was convinced that the wily 13th-century friar Roger Bacon had not only written the manuscript but illustrated it with things—the Andromeda galaxy, spermatozoa—that he’d glimpsed through a telescope or microscope hundreds of years before those instruments were thought to have been invented.

Davis’s response to Yale University Press was a rave. The existing Voynich literature contained so much “unscientific and unsupported rubbish” that people couldn’t tell fact from fiction, she wrote. A book of sound, citable research was “long-overdue.”

Titled *The Voynich Manuscript* and priced at \$50, the book would sell some 55,000 copies. (“For a rare-book library, that’s best-seller land,” Schroeder told me.) But if the Beinecke’s leaders thought it would change the conversation or slow the influx of questions, they had miscalculated. The ranks of enthusiasts—or “Voynicheros,” as they’re sometimes called—appeared only to grow. Over the next few years, new theories spread from the internet into the pages of venerable publications.

In 2017, the *Times Literary Supplement* ran a cover story titled simply “Voynich Manuscript: The Solution,” by the author of a book on how to write and sell TV screenplays. The man, who said he had a “commission from a television production company to analyse the illustrations of the Voynich manuscript,” announced that each



Above: A page from the “balneological,” or bathing, section of the Voynich Manuscript depicts groups of nude women in pools. Below: A foldout from the manuscript’s “astronomical” pages.





character represented an abbreviated Latin word. The text, he argued, was a health manual, complete with recipes, for “the more well to do women in society.”

The next year, a headline in *The Times of Israel* declared, “Scientists Claim to Crack an Elusive Centuries-Old Code—And It’s Hebrew.” The article cited a study by a pair of non-Hebrew-speaking computer scientists who claimed that the Voynich’s author used anagrams and an alphabetic-substitution cipher, even though the resulting “Hebrew” made almost no sense.

Around the same time, a Canadian civil engineer concluded that the Voynich was a Tibetan Bible, while a Russian electrical engineer glimpsed an algorithm, according to one news report, “for conducting a ritual that protected women from sexual violence by vampires.”

Committed to its no-comment policy, the Beinecke started referring Voynich theorists—and the reporters who covered them—to Davis. Again the library was sending her its Voynich headaches, much as it had some 25 years earlier, when she was a student-worker there.

This time, however, Davis had the stature, and the freedom, to tell people what she really thought.

IN MAY 2019, the University of Bristol issued an eye-catching news release: A biological scientist named Gerard Cheshire had used “lateral thinking and ingenuity” to identify the Voynich’s language (“proto-Romance,” he termed it). It had taken him, he said, just two weeks. “I experienced a series of ‘eureka’ moments whilst deciphering the code, followed by a sense of disbelief and excitement when I realised the magnitude of the achievement.” He concluded that Dominican nuns had compiled the manuscript as a medical and astrological reference for Maria of Castile, a great-aunt of King Henry VIII’s first wife.

The manuscript, Cheshire wrote, was “dominated by female issues, activities and adventures” because the men in Maria’s castle were off to battle, “leaving the women and girls sexually and emotionally frustrated, so they amused and distracted themselves whilst they waited and yearned for male attention to return.”

Cheshire had written to Davis more than a year before the news release, asking if she could help him publish his paper. “You may indeed be on to something,” Davis had replied politely. But in careful, line-by-line notes, she identified what she saw as significant errors in his logic, methods, and history.

Like so many others, she thought, he had pronounced a solution and then produced evidence for it, rather than working open-mindedly from facts to theory. At best, his ideas were a “hypothesis,” she told him; they weren’t a solution.

But Davis had found that most Voynicheros didn’t want nuanced critique; they wanted blanket affirmation—or, as Davis put it one morning as we walked to her office in downtown Boston, “Oh my God! You did it! Here’s a cookie!” When she quibbled with a man who’d argued that some of the Voynich’s letterforms represented dance choreography, he retorted, “Now I understand what Galileo must have gone through.” Cheshire grew similarly hostile after failing to convert Davis. “Try to shake off the Voynich spell,” he wrote to her. “I don’t want you to lose face when the penny eventually drops.”

When the University of Bristol announced Cheshire’s solution, it generated credulous headlines, in part because a peer-reviewed journal had published his article. Davis, stunned, slammed it in the media and on Twitter: “Sorry, folks, ‘proto-Romance language’ is not a thing. This is just more aspirational, circular, self-fulfilling nonsense.”

An attack by the head of the Medieval Academy was no small matter. The University of Bristol deleted its news release, distanced itself from Cheshire’s paper, and issued a statement saying that “following media coverage, concerns have been raised about the validity of this research.” Cheshire defended his work as ahead of its time, but the university’s about-face made international news.

Davis was imposing a reputational cost on what she saw as bad Voynich research. She tweeted about the manuscript more than 100 times in 2019. Her posts—some whimsical, others cutting—swelled her Twitter following from a few hundred to more than 10,000.

Her frustrations boiled over in an August 2019 op-ed she wrote for *The Washington Post*. “We watch ‘Game of Thrones,’ we read ‘Lord of the Rings,’ we play medieval-themed video games, and therefore we think we know something about the Middle Ages,” she wrote. The fantasies that pass for medieval history in popular culture had come for the Voynich, fueling media coverage of shoddy research and “turning an authentic and fascinating medieval manuscript into a caricature of itself.”

But after a couple of years, Davis developed second thoughts about her social-media smackdowns. It was less the hate mail she got from “Voynich bros,” as she called the men who dominated online forums—though that didn’t help. She’d just begun to feel unkind, as though she were punching down at people genuinely inspired by the manuscript’s mysteries. Hadn’t she once been one of them? Her regrets grew after a YouTube channel produced a video of failed Voynich solutions that identified her as “executive director of the Medieval Academy of America and Reigning Queen of Academic Burns.”

If she wanted to dignify the manuscript as worthy of serious scholarship, she realized, she would need to be more than just a critic.

LATE IN THE SUMMER of 2018, an announcement went out about the following year’s International Congress on Medieval Studies: Organizers were soliciting papers for a panel on ciphers, scripts, and shorthands. When Davis replied with a proposal on the Voynich, “it just wasn’t what I was expecting,” Carson Koepke, one of the panel’s organizers, told me. “If it was somebody of a lower caliber than Lisa, I think we would have been much more skeptical.” But Davis was known for painstaking scholarship, and her proposal was accepted.

Davis knew well the Voynich’s reputation as a career killer. But she’d reached a point in her own career where she felt that she could take the risk. Still, she chose to be cautious. Neither a linguist nor a cryptanalyst, she would make no attempt to decode it, she decided. She would instead confine her study to her deepest specializations.



Davis is an elected member of the Comité International de Paléographie Latine, a prestigious guild of the world's top paleographers and codicologists—experts in, by turns, ancient handwriting and the physical properties of old books. Of the Paris-based society's 67 members, Davis is one of only four to be admitted from the United States.

She had never conducted a paleographic study of an illegible manuscript, and she wasn't sure at first that she could. She couldn't use the Voynich's handwriting style to place or date it, because there was nothing in history to compare it to. Nor could she avail herself of the most basic paleographic skill: making sense of a scribe's letterforms, abbreviations, and punctuation—the skill, that is, of reading. How could you read something whose alphabet lacked any known precedent?

That left a single, slim line of attack: counting the manuscript's hands. Even if a language was unreadable, a good paleographer could spot small, stylistic tells distinguishing one scribe from the next.

Did one person create the Voynich? At first glance, it seemed so: "The handwriting is incredibly consistent throughout," a onetime Army code breaker had observed in 1946. If the language existed in a kind of vacuum, beyond history's reach, logic suggested that its creator did too: a hoaxer working furtively in a private office or some lone genius in an attic, disgorging bizarre visions onto parchment by candlelight.

But as Davis magnified the handwriting, she noticed subtle variations. In certain places, the script was more cramped or more likely to slant as it crossed the page. She tested this observation by picking a letter that didn't appear often and tracking it across the manuscript's pages. Its style, she saw, varied among groups of pages but not within those groups. This suggested that the differences—larger or smaller loops, straighter or curvier crossbars, longer or shorter feet—were the product of different scribes rather than of one scribe writing the same letter in different ways.

To reduce the possibility of selection bias, Davis examined other letters and found that their styles shifted in lockstep with the first letter. After months of

analysis, she concluded that even if the Voynich had a single guiding vision, it was the handiwork of five different scribes.

The book's physical condition filled in more of the picture. Even before anyone wrote on it, the calfskin parchment had holes where scabs, wounds, or insects had stricken the animal it had come from—one of several signs that the manuscript's makers couldn't afford, or didn't need, the finest materials. The pigments were ordinary, and luxuries, such as gold leaf, were wholly absent. Stains darkened the tops of

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the manuscript's first 100-odd pages, from an apparent water spill. Beneath Davis's fingers, the parchment felt soft, almost cloth-like, a familiar texture in books that were once heavily thumbed. "This is not a manuscript that was meant to be a precious object on a book stand for people to go, 'Ooooh,'" Davis told me. Like a manual of anatomy or an almanac of the stars, it was meant to be flipped through and used.

Davis presented her findings at the medieval-studies conference and published them in 2020 in the journal *Manuscript Studies*. She had hardly solved the Voynich,

but she'd opened it to new kinds of investigation. If five scribes had come together to write it, the manuscript was probably the work of a community, rather than of a single deranged mind or con artist. Why the community used its own language, or code, remains a mystery. Whether it was a cloister of alchemists, or mad monks, or a group like the medieval Béguines—a secluded order of Christian women—required more study. But the marks of frequent use signaled that the manuscript served some routine, perhaps daily function.

Davis's work brought like-minded scholars out of hiding. In just the past few years, a Yale linguist named Claire Bowerman had begun performing sophisticated analyses of the text, building on the efforts of earlier scholars and on methods Bowerman had used with undocumented Indigenous languages in Australia. At the University of Malta, computer scientists were figuring out how to analyze the Voynich with tools for natural-language processing. Researchers found that the manuscript's roughly 38,000 words—and 9,000-word vocabulary—had many of the statistical hallmarks of actual language. The Voynich's most common word, whatever it meant, appeared roughly twice as often as the second-most-common word and three times as often as the third-commonest, and so on—a touchstone of natural language known as Zipf's law. The mix of word lengths and the ratio of unique words to total words were similarly language-like. Certain words, moreover, seemed to follow one another in predictable order, a possible sign of grammar.

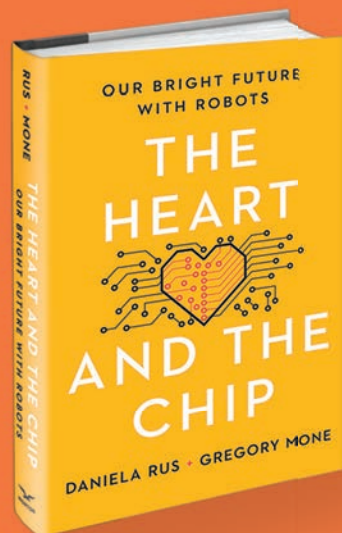
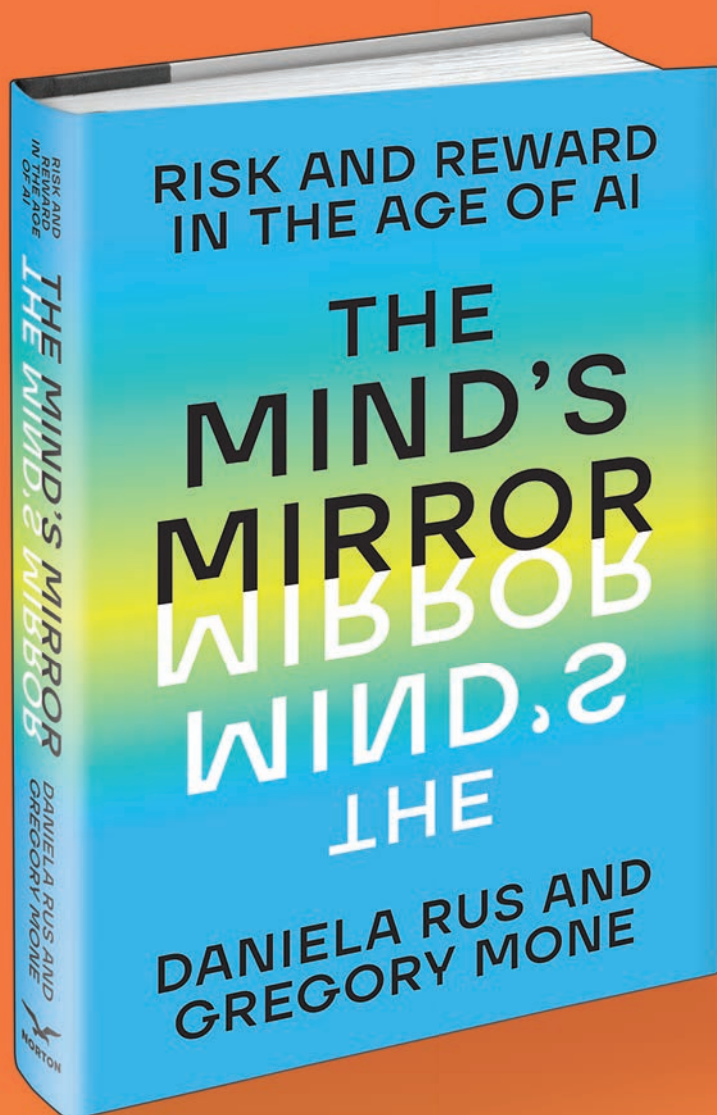
Finally, each of the text's sections—as defined by the drawings of plants, stars, bathing women, and so on—had different sets of overrepresented words, just as one would expect in a real book whose chapters focused on different subjects.

Spelling was the chief aberration. The Voynich alphabet—if that's what it was—appeared to have a conventional 20-odd letters. But compared with known languages, too many of those letters repeated in the same order, both within words and across neighboring words, like a children's rhyme. In some places, the spellings of adjacent words so converged that a single word repeated two or three times

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in a row. A rough English equivalent might be something akin to “She sells sea shells by the sea shore.” Another possibility, Bownern told me, was something like pig Latin, or the Yiddishism—known as “shm-reduplication”—that begets phrases such as *fancy shmancy* and *rules shmules*.

No known cipher—certainly none from the early 1400s—could produce the Voynich’s overly repetitive letter sequences *and* its language-like word and letter frequencies. To pull off something similar in English, Bownern and a graduate student found, you’d have to do strange things, like replace all the vowels in a word with a single, catchall character; or anagram the letters of each word into alphabetical order; or lard the text, in some yet-to-be-determined fashion, with nonsense characters, or “nulls.”

But if Voynichese was some reclusive group’s invention, why would its scribes take the extra step of scrambling its letters? Why riddle a puzzle? And yet that’s what the Voynich did, over and over again. The moment you felt you were getting somewhere, it coiled in on itself, retreating from your grasp, into another disguise.

This shape-shifting—this inability to see it from any one angle—persuaded the Malta computer scientists, led by Colin Layfield, to assemble a multidisciplinary team. So little was known about the underlying language—if it was a language—that even artificial intelligence, in its current state, lacked the models to decode it. Good AI requires “massive amounts of data to learn from,” Layfield told me. “We simply don’t have that luxury with the text in the Voynich.” In 2021, Layfield recruited Davis, Bownern, and other specialists, and they began meeting online to develop ideas for collaboration. In late 2022, the Voynich Research Group, as it became known, held its first conference, with 16 peer-reviewed papers, touching on history, literature, paleography, linguistics, cryptography, and—because of some of the drawings—medieval gynecology. Davis was invited to give the closing keynote.

Scholars inside and outside the group are now pressing in a variety of directions. Some are using mathematical tools to hunt for “cribs”: words whose meanings can be

inferred because they consistently appear, like labels, beside certain illustrated objects.

Others are reevaluating the alphabets that earlier scholars created to convert the Voynichese letterforms into machine-readable ASCII text—the raw data for computational studies of the language. AI might be unable to decrypt the Voynich, but it could contribute in other ways, once enough of the world’s hundreds of thousands of medieval manuscripts are digitally imaged and accessible. Models trained on those images may eventually develop the power to spot visual similarities to the Voynich—the curvature of a particular pen stroke, the shades of certain pigments—that have eluded the human eye. Those similarities could help scholars identify writing communities with possible ties to the Voynich.

Still conspicuously missing from the research are professional art historians. Scholars of medieval art could bring a whole new field to bear on the Voynich’s illustrated world, but like other medievalists, they have been reluctant to engage.

In a 2020 article in the journal *Cryptologia*, a pair of European scientists argued that someone could have used a simple formula to give strings of meaningless symbols the structure of language. The Voynich, in their view, is little more than artfully constructed nonsense. But Davis has come to believe that the manuscript has meaning, and that scholars will one day find it. She thinks that an individual is less likely to hit on the solution than a cross-disciplinary team, whose members will turn small, hard-won discoveries into a coherent picture. “A lot of people try to make the argument that surely it would have been read by now if it could be read,” she told me. “But that’s just not enough of a reason to give up hope.” Egypt’s hieroglyphs and the Mycenaean script known as Linear B were also notoriously indecipherable—until the Rosetta Stone and a British genius produced working keys.

But what if the Voynich remains unsolvable? What if the manuscript is in some sense smarter than us all, its anonymous author, or authors, laughing from the grave at the hubris of reason? When I posed these questions to one of Bownern’s

graduate students, she recited a Robert Frost poem about all human quests for understanding: “We dance round in a ring and suppose, / But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.”

ON A SUNNY DAY this past April, I walked into the Beinecke with Davis and Bownern and descended the steps to a basement classroom, where a librarian had set the Voynich on a pillow that keeps stresses off the book’s old body. It was open to a page where a block of inscrutable text is pierced by a plant with leaves that resemble origami frogs.

Bownern teaches an undergraduate Yale linguistics class on the Voynich, and today was her students’ one chance to see it in the flesh. Hands clasped behind their back, many of them leaned gingerly toward its open pages, as if in the presence of something sublime.

At times Davis, too, still feels the tug of the manuscript’s ineffable magic. But today she had come from Boston to ground Bownern’s students in its hard, physical facts: the parchment thumbed to the softness of felt. The blotches where some ancient reader may have spilled her water jug. The ellipsis of pinpricks where someone with needle and thread had tried, long ago, and without success, to mend one of the parchment’s many holes.

A year earlier, while lecturing at a different college, Davis had fielded a question about what made the Voynich “so sensational.” Was it that some band of medieval women might have come together to preserve their secrets? Was it the text’s spirituality, or the possibility that it said something about the Holy Grail or the Living Water?

Davis gently steered her questioner away from speculation. The Voynich is “not imaginary,” Davis said. “It’s an actual object, it exists in space and time, it has a history, it has physical characteristics, and because of that, it has a true story. We just don’t know what that true story is yet.” *A*

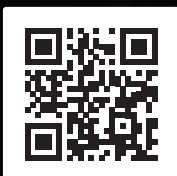
Ariel Sabar is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the author of Veritas: A Harvard Professor, a Con Man and the Gospel of Jesus’s Wife.

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HOW
M. NIGHT
SHYAMALAN
CAME BACK
FROM THE
DEAD

The filmmaker
weathered
some of the
wildest hype
and harshest
backlash that
Hollywood has
to offer. Then
he found a
different path.

BY
DAVID
SIMS

Photograph
by Justin
French

John du Pont, heir to the eponymous chemical fortune, lived on an 800-acre estate west of Philadelphia known as Foxcatcher Farm. Du Pont was an eccentric: He collected stuffed birds and mollusk shells and patrolled his property in an armored tank. His great passion was amateur wrestling, and though he was largely cut off from society, he would invite wrestlers to live in guesthouses on the Foxcatcher grounds and pay for their training. One such guest was Dave Schultz, who won a gold medal at the 1984 Olympics. On a January afternoon in 1996, du Pont pulled up to Schultz's guesthouse in a silver Lincoln Town Car, rolled down his window, and fired a .44-caliber

Magnum revolver into Schultz's chest. Schultz collapsed, bleeding, into the snow. A motive for the murder was never established.

In 2002, the filmmaker M. Night Shyamalan bought a farm down the road from Foxcatcher. Shyamalan and his wife, Bhavna, were living with their two young daughters in the Philadelphia suburbs. The new farm was only 30 minutes away, but its rolling hills and wide pastures made it feel like a different world. Shyamalan began going there regularly to write.

On his way, he'd drive past du Pont's former home, its iron fence now rusted and covered in ivy. When Shyamalan learned of the grisly local history, he became fascinated by it. Foxcatcher seemed to him, he told me recently, like "a mythical land." He started working on a new script.

A more conventional filmmaker might have written a psychological thriller about du Pont, the cosseted scion of enormous wealth who descends into madness and ultimately murder; later, the 2014 movie *Foxcatcher* would be just that. Shyamalan, characteristically, took the story in a stranger direction. He set his film in a rural 19th-century community that has shut itself off from outsiders, for fear of

the monsters that roam the surrounding woods. The twist arrives reliably in the third act: The movie is set not in the 19th century, but in the present day—town elders had founded the community as an escape from the modern world. Parents perpetuate the ruse by donning monster costumes and haunting the woods to keep their kids "safe." The movie, which came out in 2004, was called *The Village*.

Shyamalan was in the midst of a head-spinning run of success. Five years earlier, he had directed *The Sixth Sense*, a thriller about a boy who sees ghosts and befriends a child psychologist—who turns out to be a ghost himself. The movie had been a sensation, financially and critically, and was nominated for six Academy Awards. It had also established an expectation, perhaps an impossible one to satisfy, that each new Shyamalan movie would build to a shocking revelation.

In two follow-ups, the superhero fable *Unbreakable* (2000) and the alien-invasion thriller *Signs* (2002), Shyamalan had managed to deliver something like that jolt. But this time, the response to the big reveal was withering. "The entire solemn, portentous edifice that is *The Village* collapses of its own fake weight," declared *Newsweek*, a magazine that just two years earlier had described Shyamalan as "the next Spielberg." The critical consensus was clear: In straining to surprise, Shyamalan had become painfully predictable. "It's so witless," Roger Ebert wrote, "that when we do discover the secret, we want to rewind the film so we don't know the secret anymore."

The Village was not a total flop—it had its defenders, and made money for Disney—but it severely damaged Shyamalan's reputation among critics and audiences alike. Although he was only 34 at the time, his career entered a period of steep decline, one from which it wasn't clear he would recover. Shyamalan later described feeling, at his lowest point, like "a cautionary tale," someone who'd "revealed himself to be a sham."

I was just starting my own career as a film critic in the years after *The Village* came out, and I still remember the snickers that would spread through the theater whenever a trailer for "an M. Night

Shyamalan film" appeared on-screen. In a remarkably short span, a wunderkind had become a punch line. But that's not the end of the story.

Shyamalan eventually sold the farm where he wrote *The Village*, but he now lives nearby, in a Georgian Revival manor in Chester County. The drive to Ravenwood, as the 125-acre estate is known, is lush and horse-studded. Shyamalan's compound, which also houses his production company's offices, feels more like a bucolic college campus than a laboratory for cinematic horror.

When I visited, Shyamalan was in his basement movie theater helping his 24-year-old daughter, Ishana, mix her horror debut, *The Watchers*, which she directed and Shyamalan produced. He was taking a break from editing his newest thriller, *Trap*. Shyamalan's movie theater is the one part of his house that feels like it sprang directly from his brain: The atmosphere is cheerful faux Gothic, like Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* meets Disney's *Haunted Mansion*.

Shyamalan raised his three daughters—his youngest, Shivani, 19, is in college studying fashion design, and his oldest, Saleka, 27, is a singer—to share his obsession with movies. His office is decorated with posters for what Shyamalan calls the "holy trinity": *Jaws*, *The Exorcist*, and *The Godfather*. When the girls were young, he required them to watch all movies—even, say, *The Little Mermaid*—in rapturous silence in a dark theater. They weren't allowed to see his own movies until they were about 10, at which point he began to show them one a year.

Shyamalan hadn't received anything like this kind of education from his own parents. His mother and father, who emigrated from India, were doctors, an ob-gyn and a cardiologist. Being a doctor was the





Top: *Shyamalan as a toddler in 1971.*
Bottom left: *Shyamalan filming Praying With Anger in 1991.* Bottom right: *Shyamalan at NYU in 1990.*



“family way,” Shyamalan told me, and he was expected to attend medical school. His parents sent him to a Catholic elementary school, attracted by its rigor and discipline. Shyamalan was the only Hindu student—in his mind, a perennial outsider. He recalls his teachers explaining that anyone who wasn’t baptized was going to hell.

When he was 7 years old, he went with his family to see *Star Wars*. It was the first time he experienced something like religious awe: sitting in the dark, watching Luke gaze up at Tatooine’s twin suns. He remembers getting into the family station wagon after the movie, still reeling: “My sister was talking away, and I was like, ‘Don’t talk. Don’t you understand? We’ve just seen something extraordinary.’”

As a teenager, he started shooting his own movies. He also began to develop a

finding the divine in nature. Shyamalan’s given name is Manoj, but one day, while reading about the Lakota, he happened upon a name that translated into English as “Night” and decided to claim it.

He chose to go to NYU to study film. (For his high-school yearbook photo, he submitted a fake *Time* cover with a grinning self-portrait and the headline “NYU GRAD TAKES HOLLYWOOD BY STORM.”) His parents were confounded by his decision. But if he was rebelling against their expectations, he wasn’t yet entirely out of their shadow. His first film was a low-budget indie called *Praying With Anger*, in which he starred as an Indian American student returning to his ancestral country after his father’s death, in an effort to reconnect with his roots. Supernatural forces are present in the movie, if peripherally: His character encounters a

ghost while wrestling with his Hindu faith. Shyamalan found that the narrative conventions of a ghost story made it easier for him to address the deepest human anxieties: mortality, grief, the search for meaning in life. “Genre has always helped me talk about more emotional stuff,” he told me.

A few years after graduation, Shyamalan sold a script called *Wide Awake*. It told the story of a young boy growing up at a private Catholic school and seeking a higher power as he deals with the loss of his grandfather. Shyamalan fought bitterly with the producer Harvey Weinstein about the movie’s direction.

deeper interest in spirituality and the supernatural. He became fascinated with Native American history, compelled by the idea of

“I was, how can I say it, blessed to have to meet the challenge of working with Mr. Weinstein at 22 years old,” Shyamalan said. “You’re facing demons right away.” By all accounts, Shyamalan was overwhelmed by Weinstein’s aggressive, bullying style of doing business. When Miramax released the film in 1998, it went largely unnoticed.

For his next script, Shyamalan wrote something completely different. His interest in the supernatural took on a darker aspect—and moved from the margins to the center of his storytelling.

The script had begun as a serial-killer drama, but Shyamalan worried that everything he wrote felt like a rehash of *The Silence of the Lambs*. Over time, the script morphed into a story about a boy and his psychologist. *The Sixth Sense*’s famous twist came to Shyamalan late in the writing process, he told me. He had been frustrated—“I was like, ‘Why is this feeling straight and flat, and why aren’t we discovering something?’” Then one day he had a revelation: The therapist is just another ghost.



Shyamalan and Bruce Willis during the making of *The Sixth Sense* (1999)



Adrien Brody and Judy Greer in *The Village* (2004)

Shyamalan's script sparked a bidding war. In the '90s, original dramas still had major sway in Hollywood. The producer Michael De Luca, at the time New Line Cinema's head of production and now co-CEO of Warner Bros. Motion Picture Group, remembers the excitement of first reading *The Sixth Sense*. "I thought, *Oh my God, he's dead. He's a ghost. I can't believe it. I didn't see it coming.*" he told me.

Disney beat him out, spending \$3 million and guaranteeing that Shyamalan could direct. Then Bruce Willis signed on, agreeing to make a movie by an unproven director to help satisfy a three-picture deal with Disney. Alongside Willis, Shyamalan cast a child actor named Haley Joel Osment, whose chilling delivery of the line "I see dead people" impressed him during auditions.

When *The Sixth Sense* was released, in August 1999, it outperformed all expectations—it was a word-of-mouth sensation, topping the box office for five weekends in a row. It ultimately made more than \$670 million worldwide. Suddenly, at 29, Shyamalan was an Oscar nominee who had made the year's biggest hit that wasn't *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*.

He told *Philadelphia* magazine in 2000 that he'd been enjoying the adulation, but that it also made him nervous. "I know inevitably it could be bad," he said. "What if I make a bad movie?"

Shyamalan followed *The Sixth Sense* with two movies that successfully delivered on its promise, while demonstrating the young filmmaker's range. *Unbreakable* is a brooding superhero movie also starring Willis and featuring Samuel L. Jackson as his ostensible mentor. The film couldn't match the success of its predecessor, but it was artful and entertaining, and it supplied another twist ending (Jackson's character is more malevolent than he initially seems) to bolster Shyamalan's reputation as a master practitioner of Hitchcockian final blows. His next movie, *Signs*, centers on a farmhouse that comes under siege by a mass of invading aliens. The tone is bouncier, looser, fun. It, too, was a hit at the box office.

The Village, then, could have been a temporary setback for a director with so much goodwill among audiences and so much capital in Hollywood. For his next project, Shyamalan might have reached for something safer. Instead, he doubled down on his dark visions. The result was *Lady in the Water*, which was based on a bedtime tale he'd invented for his daughters. The movie starred Bryce Dallas Howard as a mythical sea-nymph-esque creature named Story who emerges into a housing complex through its swimming pool, pursued by a gruesome monster called, regrettably, a scrunt.

When Disney executives saw the script, they didn't know what to make of it. "It was the first time that we'd ever reached

a threshold issue of 'I don't get it,'" Nina Jacobson, a former Disney executive who worked with Shyamalan, told me. "I didn't get it, and my bosses didn't get it." She found it too weird, too complicated, too scary. In Michael Bamberger's book *The Man Who Heard Voices*, a tell-all about *Lady in the Water*'s production process, Shyamalan recalls having previously cited *Bambi* as evidence that Disney's audience could handle bleakness: "Bambi's mother dies ... Shot dead. One of the greatest children's movies ever."

Jacobson and a few other executives flew to Philadelphia to meet Shyamalan for dinner and explain their misgivings. They were still willing to make the movie, but Shyamalan was hurt by their lack of faith in the idea and his ability to execute it. "It was kind of like a painful breakup," Jacobson told me. "It was hard." After they left, Bamberger writes in his book, Shyamalan cried.

"I think I have a thing where I want everyone to like me and I want to please everybody," Shyamalan told me. "There's that side of me, which maybe isn't a great side of me. And then the other side of me, which is: I'll burn down the house for an idea, no problem, without blinking. Those two sides are always a little bit at war within me."

He took the script to Warner Bros., which had been eager to work with him since it had been among the studios that lost out to Disney on *The Sixth Sense*. It



Bryce Dallas Howard and Paul Giamatti in *Lady in the Water* (2006)



Olivia DeJonge (left) and Kathryn Hahn in *The Visit* (2015)

gave him such a large budget that he was able to build an entire apartment complex as a set. But when the movie came out in 2006, it was a financial and critical disaster.

Like the Disney executives, I was baffled by *Lady in the Water*. The idea of a contemporary fairy tale was appealing in theory, but the movie's tone was thudding and oppressive. Late in the story, a preening film critic played by Bob Balaban gets violently shredded by a scrunt. People in my profession couldn't help but interpret the scene as unsubtle score-settling. But Shyamalan hadn't just lost the critics. A filmmaker who'd once had audiences wrapped around his finger seemed to have lost his grasp on what viewers wanted to see.

Hollywood tends to view anyone who refuses to move to Los Angeles with suspicion, if not disdain. Shyamalan has made nearly all of his movies in the Philadelphia area. He spends most of his time at Ravenwood, where he can be surrounded by family and close collaborators. Perhaps inevitably, he's earned a reputation in some quarters as a recluse, walled off in his own kind of fortress.

In person, however, Shyamalan is engaged and attentive, swinging between intensity and playful lightness. He makes unrelenting eye contact and projects a boyish enthusiasm, whether discussing the coaching career of Doc

Rivers (Shyamalan is an avid *Sixers* fan) or considering the plate of tacos in front of him (which he consumes with audible delight). The actor Cherry Jones, who worked with him on *Signs* and *The Village*, once said that Shyamalan struck her as being like a "brilliant 11-year-old."

Shyamalan is at his most animated when discussing the craft of filmmaking—camera angles, aspect ratios, the Soviet director Mikhail Kalatozov's knack for framing a shot. About his own movies, Shyamalan is passionate to the point of defensiveness. When I asked him how he feels now about his most critically derided films, he was emphatic. If he could make *The Village* over again, he told me, he'd do nearly everything the same. He still loves *Lady in the Water*. What many viewers saw as chaos, he sees as a kind of "jazz." If his critics don't appreciate the music, he told me, perhaps it's because he is defying expectations. "I am an immigrant, at the end of the day, and I'm telling stories not about immigrants," he said. "Sometimes it feels like it would be easier to swallow if I was making movies about Indian mathematicians or something like that. Then I would get the benefit of the doubt."

Yet even Shyamalan does not defend the period of his career that followed the box-office failure of *Lady in the Water*. In the late 2000s, the studios had a growing appetite for franchise-building and

recognizable intellectual property. Trying to make himself useful, Shyamalan directed an adaptation of a Nickelodeon animated series and a sci-fi action thriller based on a story concept from Will Smith, the movie's star. *After Earth* was a CGI bonanza of asteroid showers and crash-landing spaceships; the plot was flat and, unusually for Shyamalan, devoid of surprise. He had moved into what he calls his "hired gun" phase, working on other people's ideas instead of his own. "I'm so bad at that," he told me. "I'm so bad at it, and I felt so empty."

After the Will Smith vehicle, Shyamalan decided that he wanted out of the studio system. He took out a loan against his house to fund a documentary-style horror movie called *The Visit* (2015), about two teenagers who go to stay with their estranged grandparents and discover them acting oddly at night. *Lady in the Water* had cost \$70 million to make. He shot *The Visit* for \$5 million. Narratively, the movie is classic Shyamalan—an early atmosphere of unease (why are the grandparents behaving like this?) leads to a typically flashy twist (the grandparents are not actually the grandparents).

But *The Visit* is also different from much of his previous work in a key way: It's more aware of its own absurdity. The movie is genuinely frightening, full of breathless chase sequences and jump



Shyamalan directing Josh Hartnett in *Trap* (2024)

scares, but it leans into its outrageousness, at times even verging on slapstick. In a scene toward the end, the “grandfather” essentially pies one of the teenagers in the face with a soiled diaper. This tonal mash-up was intentional: Shyamalan told me that he was pleased to see early audiences laughing even at the movie’s scary parts.

The Visit was rejected by studio after studio as Shyamalan searched for a potential distributor, until Universal—in partnership with the horror studio Blumhouse—finally came on board. The movie ended up making nearly \$100 million worldwide, 20 times its budget.

The success of *The Visit* set in motion a new budgeting approach for Shyamalan. He would fund every project himself, using his estate as collateral, and try to make his movies as efficiently as he could. His follow-up to *The Visit* was *Split* (2016), in which James McAvoy plays a kidnapper

with multiple personalities. It grossed \$278 million worldwide, against a budget of \$9 million. “The theory is, make it as small as humanly possible,” Shyamalan said. The process, he told me, has been “both freeing and scary.”

In this shoestring mode, Shyamalan developed a new economy in his storytelling. Compared with the sprawling, elaborately staged movies of his studio days, his thrillers began to incorporate fewer characters and simpler sets, and many of them benefited from these limitations. *The Visit* and *Split* were both basically set in one place—a farmhouse and a basement, respectively—which helped give them a powerful atmosphere of escalating claustrophobia. Both movies earned some of the most glowing reviews Shyamalan had received in years.

Throughout the mid-2010s, as big studios focused on superhero sagas with

the broadest possible appeal, Shyamalan moved into a space that Hollywood had largely abandoned: mid-budget thrillers aimed at adults. The decision proved prescient. After years of box-office dominance, the comic-book movie generally—and Disney’s Marvel division in particular—is now in decline, as audiences have grown fatigued by endless sequels, spin-offs, and reboots.

Shyamalan, by contrast, makes original movies, even as his name on the marquee promises something reliable: horror that is self-consciously over-the-top, even campy—plus an explosive finale. Moviegoers, once irked by his predictability, now seem to appreciate him for it.

Twenty-five years after Michael De Luca got outbid on *The Sixth Sense*, he signed Shyamalan to a deal at Warner Bros. to distribute his new movie, *Trap*. “Look,” De Luca told me, “nothing will quite equal

how you felt when you read *Sixth Sense* ... That was unbelievable.” But when Shyamalan pitched *Trap*, De Luca was sold. “I feel like he is closer to what the average audience member might leave the house and go see as a theatrical movie than certainly a lot of us that are based in Hollywood.”

In *Trap*, a young father named Cooper (Josh Hartnett) takes his daughter to see a pop star named Lady Raven, played by Shyamalan’s daughter Saleka. In an arena full of screaming teens, father and daughter snap selfies and dance in their seats. Cooper makes charmingly awkward attempts to bond with his kid, Riley (Ariel Donoghue); Riley razzes him for trying to use Gen Z slang. When Cooper notices a heavy police presence at the show, he asks a staffer what’s going on. The concert, he learns, is a sting operation: The authorities are there to catch “The Butcher,” a notorious serial killer who is supposedly in the audience. The pitch for the movie, Shyamalan has said, was essentially: “What if *The Silence of the Lambs* happened at a Taylor Swift concert?”

What follows is a spoiler only if you’re the kind of person who likes to know *nothing* about a movie before you see it: The Butcher is Cooper himself, a twist that’s revealed in the movie’s official trailer. It’s another classic Shyamalan setup: deceptively wholesome scene-setting followed by a development that casts everything that came before it—Cooper’s visible nerves, the meticulous way he mops up ketchup with a napkin—in a sinister new light. Now, stuck in the arena, the Butcher has to find a way out.

Yet *Trap* also delivers more complicated thrills. It tricks us into empathizing with Cooper, a doting if hapless dad who also happens to systematically murder people in his basement. While making *Trap*, Shyamalan found a kindred spirit in Hartnett, who was plunged into superstardom in the early 2000s by roles in blockbusters such as *The Virgin Suicides* and *Pearl Harbor*, then made a conscious decision to step away from Hollywood soon afterward. “He chose to leave and live a life,” Shyamalan said of Hartnett, who lives in England with his wife and four children. “He found meaning in his

family and meaning as a human being. And now he’s like, ‘Now I can come to the industry and be able to give.’”

Shyamalan and Hartnett created a character tormented by both his own monstrosity and the more mundane challenges of raising a kid. Shyamalan was interested in what it would look like to merge psychopathy and paternal love in one role, Hartnett told me.

Trap is not a universal parenting tale—“If you relate to this movie, you should seek help,” Hartnett said—but Shyamalan found himself identifying with Cooper in certain ways nonetheless. He sometimes thinks about what it’s been like for his daughters to grow up in his orbit, dealing with all the attention that comes with having him as a dad. “When I go to a game or a recital, it’s, like, a thing,” he told me. “It isn’t just about the kid.” Cooper wants to give his daughter the Lady Raven concert experience she’s dreamed of, but now his job—serial killer—is threatening to ruin their special day. “You just want to be at the concert sometimes, you know?” Shyamalan said.

Shyamalan has often drawn on his anxieties about fatherhood in his writing. “That something could happen to the family unit is the primary fear,” he told me at Ravenwood. “It’s the thing that’s most sacred.” Many of his films take this primary fear and use it as fodder for psychological horror. *Old* (2021) follows several families trapped on a beach where they all start aging rapidly; parents watch aghast as their children transform before their eyes.

The Village, too, is a parable about family—about parents going to absurd lengths to do what all parents want to do: protect their kids from the world. When I first saw the movie, in 2004, I reacted the way most critics did at the time. I was hung up on the obviousness of the twist, and the preposterousness of the idea that people could build a life around what looked like history’s worst community-theater production.

Years later, I watched the movie again, after becoming a father myself. One of Shyamalan’s skills is his ability to take a comforting notion—making a better society for your children—and find the nightmare in it. And the nightmare at the core

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of *The Village*, for better or worse, has aged well. What parent doesn’t despair at the mess we’ve made for our children to clean up? Who wouldn’t spare them that work if they could help it?

The implausibility of Shyamalan’s story no longer bothers me: So what if the monsters look like bipedal porcupines? So what if the village turns out to be a short distance from a major road (yet somehow its residents never seem to hear the cars)? The sloppiness of the world building feels almost intentional, as does the ridiculousness of the twist itself. Of course these desperate, half-mad parents didn’t manage to create a credible utopia for their kids. That is Shyamalan’s point: You can’t escape the world’s awful uncertainty. You just have to live with the fear. *A*

David Sims is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



My Mother the Revolutionary

By Xochitl
Gonzalez

She cared about saving the world more
than she cared about me.

When I was in grade school,

my prized possession was a button. It went on my quilted coat in the winter, and my jean jacket in the spring, and when it got too hot, I'd reluctantly pin it to my book bag. This was the '80s, and buttons featuring Smurfette or Jem were sartorial staples. Still, my button stood out. VOTE SOCIALIST WORKERS it said, and below that: GONZÁLEZ FOR VICE-PRESIDENT. It had a photograph of a woman's face in profile: black hair, big glasses, ribbed turtleneck, determined look. My mother.

The button was a souvenir from her 1984 campaign for vice president of the United States—my mother, Andrea González, was the first Puerto Rican woman to run for national office. The day it came in the mail, I was 7 years old and hadn't lived with her for nearly four years. Her running mate was a former Black Panther named Mel Mason. Obviously, they lost. But that didn't make me less devoted to the thing. If asked—and I always hoped people would ask—I could rattle off the talking points of their platform.

Lots of kids don't have mothers. The teachers at my Brooklyn public schools made sure we motherless children knew that we weren't alone, that there were others whose permission slips and parent-teacher conferences were tended to by an aunt or a sister or a grandparent. We were the ones the other families whispered about: whose mother had died, whose mother had left with a no-good man, whose mother was lost to the streets or prison or drinking or drugs.

I remember feeling terribly sorry for the kids whose mothers had abandoned them, and terribly afraid I'd be mistaken for one. Because my mother hadn't ditched me; she was working to save the world from the ravages of capitalism. There was a reason she wasn't with me. A good reason. The button was my proof. And for years, it was enough.

WHEN I WAS 3, my mother sent me to Brooklyn to live with her parents. According to family lore, shortly after I arrived, my grandfather, Pop, took me to ride the city bus. We joined a crowd of commuters shuffling their feet at the corner stop. Confused, I asked one of the adults where their signs were. Until then, I'd never seen a gathering of grown-ups who weren't protesting something.

I'd spent the first years of my life being shuttled from meeting to rally to picket line. Hugo Blanco, who had led an Indigenous-peasant uprising in Peru, was one of my babysitters; so was Fred Halstead, the 6-foot-6-inch anti-war activist. At rallies, especially pro-choice ones, I was a useful prop. *See? We don't hate babies!* There I was, on my mother's hip, a cigarette in her mouth and a stack of flyers in her hand, as she spread the word of the revolution.

In Brooklyn, it was Pop who kept my mother present for me, in addition to overseeing potty training and taking me to dance class. My grandmother was less involved; after working all day in a school cafeteria and fastidiously cleaning our home, she often took to her bed. In those early days, my mother was writing for the Socialist Workers Party's newspaper, *The Militant*, and making a lot of trips to Latin America, giving speeches to the proletariat. I knew this because the party videotaped these speeches and my grandfather mail-ordered all of the videos. Although he had voted for Richard Nixon, Pop supported whatever his children pursued. On rainy Saturdays, he would screen my mother's speeches while I sat cross-legged on the floor, transfixed. In this way, my mother and I had a perfectly lovely relationship as virtual strangers.

Each week, he scanned his copy of *The Militant* for articles she'd written or references to her. He read to me about how she was advocating for women's rights in Puerto Rico; next she was in Washington, D.C., speaking about the transit workers' union negotiations; then she was running for mayor of New York in 1985 on a platform of preserving the city for "working people." When she wasn't giving speeches, she was embedded in factories—an auto plant, a bra maker—galvanizing the unions while working the assembly lines. My grandfather would clip out the articles, and I would underline the words and phrases I didn't know and look them up in our big dictionary: *colonialism*, *collective bargaining*, *fascism*. Concepts that seeped into my consciousness before I had any context for understanding them. These were my mother's things. These were the reasons she'd left me. And therefore they must be very important.

Once a year, my mother would come to visit for a week around Christmas. Normally my grandparents and I spent our Sundays having dinner with 20 or 30 cousins and great-aunts and -uncles. But when my mother came to town, our family shrank to the four of us. If a cousin or an aunt stopped by for cake and coffee, a tense silence would fall. No one knew what casual bit of conversation my mother might take as a political provocation. There was no wrong time, she seemed to feel, to fight for justice.

She always brought me a doll from the countries where she'd gone to battle the bourgeoisie. The dolls came in shades of brown and black and were made of fabric, with native dresses and elaborate hairdos. They were better than any Barbie or Cabbage Patch Kid, my mom would say, because they were made by hand, not by a corporation; they sprang from tradition, not a marketing department. She told me about the women who made the dolls—how they faced many oppressions but would someday rise up.

During the day, my mother would head into Manhattan and meet up with friends from the party, and I'd play with my new doll at home. At night, she'd chain-smoke and watch TV with my grandparents. But sometimes, during these visits, I'd catch my mother staring at me. "You're pretty," she'd say. I'd reply that we looked alike—people were always commenting on how we looked and talked and even moved alike. But inevitably she would say, "No, you're prettier." As I got older, this made me uncomfortable. I could plainly see that my mother wasn't vain. If she was giving me a compliment about something of such little consequence to her, it must be the only thing she could think to say.

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my mother's hip,
a cigarette in her
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After a few days of this, she would leave—go back to a factory or the campaign trail. In my room, my grandfather had built a shelf for the dolls, each under a clear protective dome. When my mother was gone, he'd ascend the stepladder and add the new doll to the others, the task becoming a ceremony that marked her departure. Over the years he expanded the shelf until eventually it wrapped around my bedroom, and the totems of Black and brown women from across the world looked down on me while I slept.

NOT LONG AGO, a young author whose work I enjoy invited me to dinner. It was a pleasant enough meal until, over oysters and charred octopus, the author began throwing out socialist jargon—*class struggle*, *oppressors*, *imperialism*—and talking about us, two white-collar writers dining in a lovely restaurant, as “exploited laborers.”

The idea of me—paid a comfortable wage to sit around all day, think thoughts, and type them out—being an “exploited laborer” felt insulting. It was an insult to people like my grandparents, who worked blue-collar jobs all their life. It was an insult to my mother. “What are we risking,” I asked my young companion, “carpal tunnel?”

I had spoken with my mother maybe four times in the past 15 years. But I found myself wondering what she'd make of the conversation. What would she—who'd devoted so much of her life to her ideology—make of the soft lives and hard absolutism of so much of today's far left?

My mother's parents grew up in the same tenement building in Red Hook, Brooklyn, during the Great Depression, in the kind of poverty that might have been depicted by a Puerto Rican Charles Dickens. My grandmother and her siblings were orphans—10 of them in a railroad apartment, the eldest still a teenager. Pop's family lived a floor above and was a little better off—his parents weren't dead, and he was one of only seven. At 18, he fought in World War II. A year after he came home from Europe, he married my grandmother, and he eventually got a job fixing trains for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

By the spring of 1969, their family was doing well. Their oldest daughter, Linda, a bottle blonde with a German Irish husband, was working as a receptionist at General Electric; my mother, the bookish, black-haired sister, was in her first year at Brooklyn College; and Alberta, the youngest, was 11 and enrolled in Catholic school. Then one day at the train yard, Pop was lying underneath a subway car, repairing a break, when a motorman turned the engine on and began to drive the train forward, dragging Pop along with it.

He was lucky to survive, but one of his legs had been shattered. He was in a cast up to his thigh, trapped in the apartment for months, unable to work. His union and workmen's comp were the only things that ensured our family's survival. Just a few months later, while Pop was still laid up in bed, Alberta went to a Mets game and came home complaining of a headache. A week later, she was dead. My grandmother, already prone to depression, was leveled. My mother was radicalized.

Alberta died from encephalitis, an inflammation of the brain linked at the time to mosquito-borne viruses. My mother learned that such illnesses were sometimes traced to poor sanitation in low-income neighborhoods. This opened her eyes to many other unfair things in the world. She was reading Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon, and one day on campus she encountered some people selling copies of *The Militant*. They, too, saw the injustice of the world. Moreover, they had a theory for how to change it—a vision for a new world order. They were from the Socialist Workers Party.

My mother joined their movement, first as part of the Young Socialist Alliance, and later as a full member. The revolution required devotion. Membership involved many meetings: educational forums on the “Cuban situation,” organizational meetings on anti-Vietnam War efforts, lectures by comrades visiting from abroad, branch meetings, executive meetings, youth meetings, committee meetings. Members were responsible for selling *Militant* newspapers each week. For a time, *The Militant* ran a scoreboard that tallied which branches were performing best. Many comrades spent Saturdays hawking books with titles such as *Sandinistas Speak* and *The Housing Question* from the group's publishing imprint, Pathfinder Press. They handed out flyers at factories and joined striking workers to show their solidarity. All of this added up easily to 10 or more commitments a week. Failure to participate could result in expulsion.

The revolution was also nomadic. The party's ranks were growing—the anti-war movement had brought many young people to the party. New branches needed to be opened, others

revitalized. Members were deployed and redeployed by party leadership. A steelworker in a union in Detroit might be sent to live in the South, where a labor grievance was brewing. A year later, he might be ordered to Pittsburgh. The blow of a cross-country move was softened by the fact that you'd always have a place to stay: Party members were expected to open their homes to newcomers. They were glad to do it—and why wouldn't they be? They weren't hosting a stranger; they were hosting a comrade they simply hadn't met yet.

Each August, members from all over the United States, and sometimes from overseas, would descend on the campus of Oberlin College, in Ohio, for the party's convention. There would be educational sessions on the Russian Revolution and rallies to raise spirits and funds. Comrades would spread out on the

lush, green lawns, debating the minutiae of the party's position on Cuba or Grenada. They shared wine, cigarettes, and often each other's beds.

That's where my parents met, in 1975. My mother was working on desegregation in Boston, and would soon move to L.A. to run a new branch office there. My father was handsome and three years her junior. Soon, they were married. And in 1977, I was born.

HERE IS AN INCOMPLETE LIST of the many people who raised me in my mother's absence: my grandparents. Their brothers and sisters and children. Mister Rogers. The librarians at the Brooklyn Public Library. Maria from *Sesame Street*. Judy Blume. L. M. Montgomery. Lisa Lisa & Cult Jam. The entire cast of *A Different World*. *Seventeen* magazine. Mariah Carey. The women on the Planned Parenthood hotline. My English teacher. My drama teacher. My friends' moms. Zora Neale Hurston. Kurt Cobain. John Hughes. Every shopgirl at Patricia Field and Ricky's. All of my high-school boy-friends. F. Scott Fitzgerald. Sandra Cisneros. Lil' Kim. The streets. The club.

My friends. All of my beautiful friends.

There were others as well, people I was too young to remember but who felt they'd played some role in my upbringing. After my first novel came out, many of these people sent me messages because they had held me on their knee once or had babysat me, and ever since then had wondered, as one woman wrote to me, "what had happened to that bright-eyed little girl." That woman said she'd thought of me often over the years, but, "for a long time, I was reluctant to ask either of your parents what happened to you, because I thought it might be a sad story." Old Socialists I'd never heard of sent baby pictures of me; told me that I'd lived with them for weeks or months; had stories about taking care of me, facts I'd never known about my own life. A few described reading to me, claiming some credit for my literary career. And maybe they were right.

My novel *Olga Dies Dreaming* was not about my mother, but it did borrow the basic premise of our lives. It follows two siblings who were abandoned as children by Blanca, their mother. Blanca is a member of the Young Lords, a Latino civil-rights organization, and she left to pursue the liberation of Puerto Rico. Hurricane Maria, which devastated the island,

CLIPPING COURTESY OF THE MILITANT; PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVE PAPARELLO



brings Blanca suddenly back into her children's lives. And in an indirect way, it brought my mother back into mine.

I wanted Blanca to be historically accurate. Researching the radical movements of the era, I stumbled upon an article in *The Militant*, from 1984, about my mother. There she was campaigning in Puerto Rico, denouncing the repression of unions and cheering on the independence movement. It was funny—I was over 40, and I'd had access to the internet for half my life, but I had never thought before to use it to piece together my mother's life.

I found an op-ed she wrote about the need for bilingual education reform: "Memories of my own school days in New York City include teachers telling us 'to go back to San Juan' (Puerto Rico) if we didn't speak English and washing our mouths out with soap for speaking Spanish in class. The message they sent was clear: you, and your language were inferior." Here was a memory that I could relate to, just not one that I'd ever heard before.

The New York Times featured my mom in an article about the female candidates running for vice president in 1984. Angela Davis, the Communist candidate, thought that the slate of women was fantastic and that everyone should do whatever they could to stop Ronald Reagan. My mother was, to my amusement, less impressed. The *Times* quoted one of her articles for *The Militant*: "The Ferraro candidacy is another attempt to convince women and other victims of capitalist society that progress can indeed be won through the two-party system." The article then mentions that my mother was from Brooklyn, Geraldine Ferraro from Queens, to which my mother was sure to add that the differences between them were "more than just boroughs."

I looked further back in time, and read about a press conference she gave denouncing President Gerald Ford's proposal to make Puerto Rico a state: "Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States. This move is just an attempt to cover up the colonial status and to continue to make profits." She popped up year after year, like the Forrest Gump of socialism. The date at the top of the article was the only proof that she was, at that moment, newly pregnant with me.

By the time I wrote *Olga Dies Dreaming*, I'd achieved quite a bit of healthy peace around our estranged relationship. Still, when I found a small mention in the *Times*, from 1984, about her vice-presidential run that said she was living in New Jersey, I was shocked. The whole year I was 6, she'd been right across the river, and all I could remember clearly was her Christmas visit.

Worse was a story about her candidacy for mayor of New York, when she ran against Ed Koch. That placed her even closer—in New York City, when I was 7 and 8. I had somehow never thought about this before: Of course one needs to reside in a city in order to run for mayor of it. All that time I was wearing her campaign button, she was only a subway ride away.

WHEN I WAS ABOUT 13, my mother didn't come back to Brooklyn for her Christmas visit. She'd been playing Norma Rae

on an automobile assembly line in St. Louis when she met a Vietnam vet who had two small children—a girl and a boy, then 3 and 4. That year, my grandmother informed me, my mother was going to stay in Missouri and have Christmas with him.

In the summer, it was suggested that I go out to visit her—something I'd rarely done—and meet her boyfriend. They were living with his children and planning to get married. In all the talk about her new life, I noticed that we no longer discussed her work with the party—no one mentioned any speeches, or campaigns, or trips abroad. She had retired, apparently, given it all up, and no one said a thing about it. All I knew was that where there had once been sparse furnishings and perpetual calls to offer new addresses, she now had a new family and a big home with a "great room." They raised dogs, including one that was allegedly 86 percent wolf. At the wedding, there was country line dancing. After, a Costco membership. Her days of activism were over.

My grandfather was shocked, my grandmother bemused. I quietly seethed. Socialism had been my mother's religion, and my mother had been mine. Now none of it mattered. I declared myself too old for dolls and packed my watchwomen into a box.

After my mother settled down in the Midwest, our relationship got both more intimate and more estranged in unpredictable turns. It was my mother, for instance, who taught me to use a tampon during a summer visit to St. Louis, when her husband—a totally lovely man—insisted on taking us camping. We were going to swim in the river, and when I complained that I had my period, my mother handed me a Tampax. "Grandma said virgins can't use these," I remember saying. "Grandma also thinks men have less ribs than women and that's not true either," my mother said, as she gently shoved me into a campground stall. (My grandmother, for what it's worth, did believe this—because of Adam and Eve—and could not be convinced otherwise.)

I remember eating dinner with them outside as a storm came over the plains. "That's what weather looks like," her husband said. It was big and wild and interesting. And I saw how it must feel that way to my mother too—so different from the cramped skyline back home.

But then I would see her with his children and it would fill me with rage. Or she would take the mother act too far and try to weigh in on my studies or whom I was dating. We would spend a week together, erupt into an argument, and not speak again for months.

Once, before their wedding, when I was about 15, I was sent for a visit and we went on another camping trip. The little kids wouldn't come, my mother promised me. Instead it was just me and her and her fiancé and a young relative of his. I guess it never occurred to the adults that us sharing a tent might be a bad idea. That night, the boy's aggressions sent me silently running from the tent. I hid in the campground bathroom, empty save for a stray dog and a scapular, a Catholic devotional necklace made of fabric, hanging from the mirror. I woke in the morning with the dog curled beside me and the scapular in my hand, and I walked back to our campsite. Save for two postcards I sent to friends back home, I have never said anything about that night until now.

Andrea González in a 1985 clipping from *The Militant* (foreground); the author and her mother around 1979 (background)

The few memories my mother shared about me as a child were almost always anecdotes from her political life, tales more about my absence than my presence.

In my mother's absence, I looked for meaning in all the things that were not hers. As a high schooler, I tried on Republicanism, but then Republicans gave us Clarence Thomas and Rush Limbaugh, and even as a teenager, I couldn't get down with that. Instead, I embraced stories of meritocracy and individualism—of people who made a life for themselves without following in anyone's footsteps. I worshipped Jim Morrison and obsessed over *The Fountainhead's* Howard Roark. Oprah was my idol. Bill Clinton was my role model. My mother was appalled, but I saw that he was like me: someone with no one around to help him except the good teachers who saw just how special and smart he was.

When I got into Brown, my mother was no more approving. She thought that an Ivy League education was a waste of money, the schools just a breeding ground for snobbery. But I was learning things. Money, until then, had existed in degrees of scarcity. *Rich* was a relative term, one bestowed in regard to the number of Jordans someone owned or whether their parents could afford to buy them a car. At Brown, I discovered that real wealth was something else. It was access: to culture, to experiences, to power. I believed that with enough hard work, those things would all come my way.

My memory of my college graduation is marred by a fight my mother picked with her older sister at dinner. My aunt Linda, an English teacher, had been the one to drive me around on

college tours and proofread my papers. I'd sent her my senior thesis to read, and it had won a departmental prize that was awarded during the ceremony. But the topic—colonialism and Postimpressionistic painting—irritated my mother. She hadn't read the paper, but I remember her railing against it anyway. Something about artists making decorations for the moneyed class. Aunt Linda defended my paper. My mother proclaimed her an out-of-touch member of the petite bourgeoisie. I recall a glass of wine being thrown. Or maybe it was just spilled and I have watched too many telenovelas. Either way, my mother stormed out of the restaurant, and my grandparents ran after her.

In my 20s, my mother and I were distant acquaintances. Unconsciously or not, I ended up in a career that I knew she would despise: planning weddings for the very rich. When Pop died, in 2009, my mother swept in. She gave the eulogy, and in it she memorialized all the things her father had done for her: taught her to read, to write, to be independent, to fix a car. All the things he'd done for her, that is, with one exception—raising me. And that omission was the one thing I could never forgive.

THIS SPRING, my mother and I had our first real conversation in years. Outside of family funerals, we'd rarely talked; I didn't even have her phone number. We spoke on Zoom, which she hadn't used before, and when she finally got the camera working, I could see a wood-framed landscape painting hanging over her head, the kind you might find at HomeGoods. Her lifestyle had changed, but her politics had not. When I asked about her position today, she told me, without hesitation, "I still do believe totally in the power and the capacity of the working class on a world scale to bring about a just world."

After she left the party, she continued working in the Missouri factory she'd been deployed to. For two decades, until the plant closed, she installed fenders on minivans. She enjoyed the work; she says the auto industry attracts freethinkers. Despite those years in the Midwest, her Brooklyn accent is still so thick that the transcription service I used could barely understand her. At one point, she paused in order to gather her thoughts without using "words that have come to mean nothing." I could see what so many comrades had admired about her. She is pragmatic on one hand and uncompromising on the other. (She described the left's beloved Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as "a very smart young woman" who "does not really advance the self-confidence, self-consciousness, or the organization of working people. Because she is a Democrat.")

But when I tried to talk about personal matters, the conversation foundered. Only through politics could we seem to access each other as humans. The few memories my mother shared about me as a child were almost always anecdotes from her political life, tales more about my absence than my presence.

I showed up in a story about a labor rally in D.C., where my mother was passing out flyers in support of making Martin

A 1985 clipping from *The Militant* (*foreground*); the author and her grandparents in 1979 (*background*)

Luther King Jr.'s birthday a federal holiday. Some white men took offense, started to rough her up a bit, and grabbed her bag. She yelled at them: "My kid's pictures are in there!" They gave the bag back, and she showed them the photos. It helped them realize, she said, that "you may have ideas different from them, but you're still a human being with kids." And then, without skipping a beat, "So yeah, we were really trying to convince working people that the way we live now is not the beginning and end of the way we could live."

We discussed her run for mayor. She said she used to joke that our family was so big, she could come in second with their support alone. That campaign, she said, "was more fun because I was home." I should have said, "You were home—why didn't you come see your daughter?" But I didn't. Perhaps I didn't want to hear the answer.

When I did finally ask if she regretted not raising me, she answered my question with a story. Two comrades were having a baby and considering giving it up. Someone said that they should talk to her. "I said, 'Are you outta your mind? Don't do what I did. That was terrible. That was a stupid thing ... Don't do anything that I did. Don't do that.'"

She told me she had missed the "pleasure of watching you grow and change." At that moment, I felt sad for her. I felt the need to comfort her. I told her how proud I was of her. I told her about the button. My mother changed the subject.

THERE'S A KIND OF powerful woman who can make every member of a crowd feel like the only person in the room, but meet her one-on-one, and you barely register. I'd always seen this as a flaw until I sat down to write the Blanca character in my novel,



and recognized it as something else. In a letter about the father of her children, Blanca writes, “I could spend my time soothing his loneliness and hurt, trying to motivate him back into purpose, or I could spend my time working towards the liberation of oppressed people around the world. Both, you must understand, are expressions of love.”

To my surprise, my mother told me she liked the book, and when I asked if she saw herself in Blanca, she said, “Oh, very clearly.” Then she said that the novel had made her consider, for the first time, how her absence had made me feel: “I know how I looked at things, and the book made me think, ‘Well, this is how you saw things.’” She thought at the time that she was doing the right thing: “Okay, this is the best situation I can create given my situation.” Now she realized that to me, “it had to have felt the other way, like I was dumping you.” She wasn’t apologizing or trying to win me over; her tone was completely matter-of-fact.

The conversation knocked the air out of me. I’d spent a lifetime trying to understand my mother’s experiences, and she had never bothered doing anything of the kind for me.

In her telling, my father was a good person, but he drank and was no help. One day, when I was a few months old, she said she came home from work to find the door bolted from the inside. She could hear me crying, but no one would answer. Eventually she broke in and found my father passed out in a chair and me lying on the floor, covered in urine. “You were soaked to the gills,” she said. The next morning, she told him he had three months to pull it together. (My father, now long sober, denied this account. He always believed she’d left him for another man. My mother said, “I left him because I wanted to be sane.”)

She was a single mother on a working wage, effectively doing three jobs: She had a gig at a factory, she spent her breaks trying to recruit her colleagues to the cause, and she devoted her evenings to party or union work. The party—while empathetic to workers at large—was often insensitive to the individual needs of female comrades. (When the “problem” of women breastfeeding during meetings arose, for example, leadership decided that it was a nonissue: Babies were not full members of the party and therefore should not be at meetings in the first place.)

But also, my mother had been a star. The man she dated after my dad, a fellow comrade named Dave Paparello, told me that she “was a fucking natural.” She wasn’t pretentious or faux folksy, and she had a knack for getting people to listen to her. She could also be, he said, very intimidating. Mel Mason, the former Black Panther who was her presidential running mate, told me that meeting her was “one of the high points of being in the Socialist Workers Party.” She was “a real revolutionary.” But motherhood changed the way people saw her.

I could feel the anger in her voice, all these years later, as she recounted traveling with me from Houston to Dallas to attend a class led by a visiting senior party member, an older man. During his talk, she told me, “you were making a little noise, but you were not crying. You were very well-behaved.” In front of the entire room, the man said, “You have to shut her up or leave.” And so she left.

It wasn’t the last time she would be thrown out of a meeting for bringing her baby. It bruised her ego, but it also bruised her perception of the party’s leadership. She was out there trying to recruit working women from the factory lines, and the party seemed clueless about what life was really like for them.

I asked my mother if she had felt overwhelmed by motherhood, and she admitted that she had. Changing the world, for some of us, feels easier than raising a child. They are both, I suppose, expressions of love.

I’LL PROBABLY NEVER fully understand why my mother left the party—it was the one subject related to her career that she was reluctant to discuss. But by the time she resigned, many others had done the same thing. The late ’80s and ’90s were a period of decline. The exodus was a response, in part, to the exhaustion from civil-rights battles fought and won, and to the end of the Vietnam War. But for many members, the problem was not a loss of faith in the cause, but frustration with the autocratic nature of party leadership. Just as members felt they were making progress in a posting, they might be told to leave. Anyone who questioned their assignment was assured that someone else would be sent to take their place, as if they were all interchangeable.

Dave Paparello had been a member of the party since he was a teenager, but he quit around the same time as my mother. He said the intellectual openness that had drawn him to the party started to “degenerate” and leadership became more “corporate.” Meetings became less about strikes and actions and more about internal party affairs. “Trials,” once rare disciplinary events, became more frequent. The threat of expulsion loomed.

Diana Cantú, a former comrade who briefly dated my father, has kept in touch with me over the years. She majored in medieval studies and worked as a publicist for the Gilbert & Sullivan Repertory Company before she joined the party, learned to solder, and took a job at an electronics plant—mortifying her bourgeois family. She told me that her last days in the party felt like being on one of those centrifugal-force rides at an amusement park, or on a spinning wheel at a playground. Everything went round and round, faster and faster, until people couldn’t hold on anymore. “You see them fly off. And I remember that sensation ... You just fly off.”

All of this made sense to me. But none of it explained St. Louis, the Costco membership, and the stepkids. None of it explained how, after decades of radical independence, my mother had seemingly changed her whole life for the love of a man. Talking about my mom, Dave said he just couldn’t “make the puzzle pieces fit.” And that’s true for me too.

I felt betrayed when she left the party, but even more aggrieved that she had raised these two other kids. “I wouldn’t blame you for that,” she told me, during another call. But she insisted that she’d married her husband, “not the kids.” Living with two small children ... “I didn’t really care much for doing that, to be totally honest. I thought I wasn’t really good at it.” Sometimes, she said, the kids would give her a hard time, telling her, “You’re not my mother.” And she would say that was right: “That’s why I don’t love you unconditionally. I don’t love you no matter what you do. Sometimes, I don’t love you.”

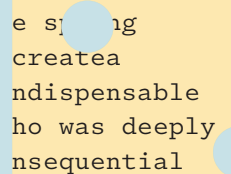
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I've seen too much
of movements to
trust them.

Protests give me
claustrophobia.

Rallies cause heart
palpitations.

Collective power
moves me;
collective thought
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In theory—as a matter of policy—my mother did love children. I recently came across a decades-old article about her running for a school-board seat in D.C. that seemed to sum her up. *The Washington Post* reported that she had been “involved in a program to increase parent involvement in the New York City school system before coming to Washington,” and was pushing for the D.C. board to “more actively involve parents in policy-making decisions.” This was in 1981. Back in Brooklyn, I would have been starting kindergarten.

IN THE PAST FEW YEARS, support for labor movements has been ticking up. Some people compared this spring's college encampments demanding divestment from Israel to the protest movements of the 1960s. Online, people throw around the word *socialism*, though many have only the vaguest grasp of what the ideology entails. Much of the far left's energy seems more focused on rhetoric than on real work. It's hard to imagine those college students, for example, packing up their tents and pulling a swing shift at a bra factory.

But one thing feels similar, and that's the absolutism required to be “down for the cause.” The righteousness of the collective pursuit serves as justification for all kinds of callousness. Dissent, or even nuance, is unwelcome. And nothing is too precious to sacrifice to the cause.

I grew out of my rebellious politics a long time ago. On most issues, my mother and I are aligned. I'm a member of two unions, including the Writers Guild of America, and I supported our strike last year. But life imbued me with a journalist's skepticism of all brands of certainty. I've seen too much of movements to trust them. Protests give me claustrophobia. Rallies cause heart palpitations. Honestly, even stadium concerts make me uncomfortable. Collective power moves me; collective thought freaks me out.

The Socialist Workers Party still exists, but its ranks have dwindled, though my father is still a supporter. Some of its positions—for example, its staunch support of Israel (the party argues that Iran, not Israel, is the main aggressor in the Middle East)—have left it out of step with many on the left. The most influential socialist party in the U.S. now is probably the Party for Socialism and Liberation. It's running two Latina candidates for president and vice president this year, Claudia De la Cruz and Karina Garcia. They agreed to an interview with me. They are passionate and eloquent and—not that it matters—beautiful. I thought I detected some mild disdain from one of the women over having to engage with such a centrist mainstream-media hack as myself. (My politics are far more Elizabeth Warren than Trotsky.) I was not offended; I was relieved. This woman knew that my struggle was not the home attendant's struggle or the minimum-wage worker's struggle. When I asked what their goals were, they said: Burn it all down. Start from scratch.

I agreed with many things that they said: Our democracy was structured to protect capitalism and disenfranchise labor. The two-party system is broken, and we are absolutely living under the whims of a billionaire class. But when they talked—with radiant clarity—about the need to sublimate the individual to the collective in order to create true change, I bristled.

When my mother told me she hadn't ever considered how I felt about growing up without her, my first reaction was that her wiring was off. But speaking with those two Socialist candidates, I came to view it differently. All around my mother, people were being told to give up one life here and start another there. And they did, no questions asked. She must have seen me as just another comrade being relocated for the movement. She had not considered my feelings because, I suspect, she had not considered her own.

The happiest my mother sounded during our calls was when she was talking about the successful organized-labor actions that took place last year—strikes by health-care workers, United Auto Workers, the Screen Actors Guild. “I love that guy!” my mother said about Chris Smalls, the Amazon Labor Union leader from Staten Island. “I love him, right, where he wore his leather jacket and his cap. I thought: *This is what union organizing should look like. Everyday people.*”

She sounded like a proud parent. *A*

Xochitl Gonzalez is a staff writer at The Atlantic. She was a finalist for the 2023 Pulitzer Prize in Commentary.

Future Shock

Grappling With the Generative AI Revolution

In the new special issue, we initiate *Harvard Data Science Review*'s arduous but imperative journey to explore the broad spectrum of questions raised by recent advancements in foundation models and generative AI tools like ChatGPT. To what degree, and how, is the accelerating pace of the generative AI revolution putting novel, and potentially unsustainable, pressures both on accepted norms and practices of scientific research, teaching, scholarship, and academic publication and on broader social, cultural, economic, political, and legal structures, dynamics, and institutions? Does the rapid proliferation of generative AI applications represent an inflection point in the evolution of data science and AI and in the scope and scale of their societal impacts or is this sense of 'revolution' itself merely a by-product of the hype created by tech evangelists and their critics? Has the commercial race to bring generative AI tools to market (as evidenced by the recent actions of OpenAI, Microsoft, Meta, and Google, among others) exposed a perilous gap between the accelerating pace of present-day technological expansion and the development of novel sociotechnical, ethical, legal, and regulatory vocabularies, which are sufficient to provide adequate responses to the basic practical questions that this expansion raises for the society of tomorrow?

Many of our current contemplations may turn out to be wrong, or even shockingly wide of the mark. Uncertainty is a feature, not a bug. And yet, the process of undertaking these wide-ranging contemplations will also undoubtedly augment human intelligence, individually and collectively. Confronting uncertainty (and the unknown) is an unchosen, if inevitable, human burden, but it is equaled by our unique power to collaboratively reflect on past learning and present experience to shape informed visions for our collective futures. Such an intergenerational capacity to share learning and experience in the

ends of collaborative future-making is the very hallmark of human intelligence. It endows us with the unique aptitude for collective *artifice*—the faculty for social creativity and historical self-transformation that sets us apart from the generative '*artificial* intelligence' systems and LLMs we build and deploy.

When all is said and done, these systems are computational creations rather than contemplating creators. Rather than warm-blooded agents of history compelled to deftly walk the tightrope of uncertainty, they are inert mapping functions. The patterns they reproduce (in mathematically transforming inputs to outputs) are the products of the statistical distribution of the history of language use and of the untold labors of the innumerable speaking, interacting, and co-creating humans whose linguistic and symbol-mongering activities have been captured in the digital archive. These systems are, as a consequence, entirely disconnected from the actual trials and triumphs of history. They are thus, unlike us humans, characteristically not subject to the shocks of future shock.

This volume of *Harvard Data Science Review* aims to interrogate future shock as originating in the all-too-human choices that developers and technologists have made in designing, producing, deploying, and commercializing GenAI technologies. In just this sense, we hope to put humans—as makers of technology and as originators of the beliefs and values that steer the pursuit of AI innovation and the formulation of technology policy and governance regimes—in the driver's seat. We invite all our human readers to join us in this driver's seat to embark on a contemplative journey of collaborative reflection and future-making, informed by visionary explorations and careful research.

This is an excerpt by David Leslie and Xiao-Li Meng. You can learn more and read the full open access special issue online at hdrs.mitpress.mit.edu.



Culture & Critics

OMNIVORE

How Greed Got Good Again

In HBO's Industry, Gen Z reveals itself to be just as money-obsessed as the corporate raiders of Wall Street.

By Spencer Kornhaber

The question before the room was how much blood the banker should bleed. Mickey Down and Konrad Kay sat in an editing bay in Cardiff, Wales, scrutinizing footage from the third season of *Industry*, their HBO drama about the drug-addled, over-sexed employees of a multinational financial firm. They'd paused on one particular shot of a character realizing that his nose had sprung a leak



after much snorting of powders. The blood had been added digitally, and it fired down straight and steady from the character's nostril, like a burgundy laser beam.

The 35-year-old Down, wearing a Nike zip-up vest and thick tortoiseshell glasses, stroked his chin. The blood was looking a little too gruesome. "We just want it to be noticeable; it's a geyser at the moment," he said. A producer noted his feedback, and another unpaused the footage. The next shot revealed that the banker had been cradling a newborn baby in his arms—and that the blood had splattered onto the infant's cheek.

The image, and the writers' matter-of-factness in discussing it, caused me to gasp. Down gave an apologetic chuckle. "We're sort of numb to it, aren't we?" he said. The 36-year-old Kay—the quieter and wryer of the two men—murmured, "It doesn't register."

It referred to the depravity of *Industry*, a study of lethal greed and ambition transmitted from one generation to the next. When the series debuted in 2020, it followed a class of new hires at the London offices of Pierpoint, a fictional competitor to the likes of J. P. Morgan and Goldman Sachs. Young and diverse in race, sexuality, and class, the protagonists entered a century-old institution at which "culture change"—an attempt to build a kinder, more ethical workplace—was supposedly afoot. Rather than upending the system, however, the new hires proved quick studies at old-fashioned self-dealing and backstabbing.

Industry has been praised for turning the jargon and technical intricacies of high finance into gripping entertainment. The show is also unmistakably a product of its time: Its pacing is as frenetic as a TikTok binge, and its plotlines touch on Brexit, meme stocks, and—in the upcoming season—green investing. Because of the show's sharp-witted, slickly produced treatment of money, privilege, and existential emptiness, some critics have anointed it the heir to HBO's *Succession*. But where *Succession* is fundamentally a family saga about the jaded rich, *Industry* focuses on fresh converts to the savagery and excesses of the business world. In that, it feels spiritually more akin to grandiose send-ups of 1980s corporate boom times: *Wall Street*, *American Psycho*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*. And like those predecessors, *Industry* can't help but glamorize the very milieu it's trying to skewer.

Today's young adults—so often stereotyped as quiet-quitters and socialist revolutionaries, driven by idealism and fixated on self-care—may seem a far cry from the suspenders-wearing yuppies of the Reagan era. *Industry*, though, argues that the *Wall Street* mantra "Greed is good" is very much alive and well. In Down's view, the typical Gen Zer is "a mini Margaret

Thatcher." He added, "I don't even think they consider it, like, 'capitalism.' It's just 'securing the bag.'"

THE INSPIRATION for *Industry* came more than a decade ago, when a 21-year-old Merrill Lynch intern who'd reportedly worked for 72 hours without rest died of an epileptic seizure. ("It is possible that fatigue brought about his fatal seizure, but it is also possible that it is something that just happens," the coroner said.) The then-BBC executive Jane Tranter read a news article about the incident and was horrified. This was a few years after Bear Stearns collapsed, and the ensuing crisis had thrown a harsh light on the win-at-all-costs ethos of high finance. Tranter told me that she had wondered, after the disaster of the 2008 financial crash, "why the fuck would anyone choose to go and intern in one of those banks?"

Then she found two aspiring TV writers who'd done just that. Down and Kay had met as undergrads at Oxford, where they bonded over similarities in their backgrounds. Both men were raised poshly, but their immigrant mothers—Kay's from Poland and Down's from Ghana—preached the importance of proving one's worth with a paycheck. As Down put it, "The immigrant mentality is almost sort of a euphemism for *capitalist*." When recruiters from the big banks came to campus, the two friends applied for jobs because it felt like what was expected of them. Down remembers thinking, "What the fuck else am I gonna do?"

Down landed in mergers and acquisitions at Rothschild & Co., Kay in equity sales at Morgan Stanley. They turned out to have little aptitude for the work—both of them left within three years, with dreams of making it in the entertainment world—but they did feel, for a while, seduced by the identity their roles provided. "I was really proud of my Morgan Stanley bag," Kay remembered. "I'd take it into a bar. I'd be like, 'Look at me; I'm such a big, swinging dick.'"

Big, swinging dick had been a prized title for high earners on Wall Street at least since its appearance in the 1989 book *Liar's Poker*, in which the journalist Michael Lewis described the fraternity-like antics he'd witnessed at Salomon Brothers. When Kay and Down joined the workforce in the early 2010s, they quickly found that, despite the recent financial collapse, the BSD ethos was still going strong. "You came into contact with people who had been there literally since 1982," Down said. "They were stuck in their ways. They were not going to change at all." And just as the old modes of doing business remained intact, plenty of retrograde views did too. "The moment a woman turned her back, everything was about sex: what she looked like, what she was wearing, who's fucked her,

Industry can't help but glamorize the very milieu it's trying to skewer.

would you fuck her—all that sort of stuff,” Kay said. “And weirdly, a lot of the misogyny was from very senior women.”

When Down and Kay set about making a series inspired by their time in finance, they quickly realized that they wanted to dramatize the experience of fresh-faced newcomers adapting to an institution that refuses to evolve. The denizens of Pierpoint know that times are supposed to be changing: In one scene, the foulmouthed trader Rishi announces, in a tone of mock triumph, “Bullying has been eradicated from the culture!” Nevertheless, during the first season, the recent college grad Yasmin is targeted by her boss in a sexist tirade at a work dinner. That boss ends up taking a leave of absence and apologizing. Yet as Yasmin rises in the ranks, she pays forward her abuse to colleagues in subtle, but still horrifying, ways.

That Yasmin doesn’t look like her tormentor is the point. Previous portrayals of high finance emphasized it as a patrilineage: In *Wall Street*, the rookie trader Bud Fox idolizes the diabolical Gordon Gekko as the sort of man he can aspire to become. But *Industry* revels in the complexities of mentor and mentee relationships in a workplace shaped by overlapping social and demographic waves. In the first season, Harper Stern—a Black American trainee at the bank—finds her allegiances torn between two bosses: Daria Greenock, a white Millennial fluent in the rhetoric of corporate feminism, and Eric Tao, an Asian American Gen Xer feared for his ruthlessness. Both try to woo Harper with identity-based overtures. “People like us, born at the bottom ... we intimidate people here,” Eric says, positing himself and Harper as fellow outsiders.

Ultimately, though, Harper doesn’t seem to feel sentimental affinity toward any of her elders. All she shares with them is a thirst for winning—and so she strategizes based on who has more clout in the corporate hierarchy. Myha’la Herrold, the actor who plays Harper, told me how she thinks about her character’s dynamic with Eric: “He’s like, *Oh, I’m seeing myself in you*. And she’s like, *I would like to see myself where you’re sitting*.”

SOME VIEWERS may be tempted to wonder whether Down and Kay have gone overboard on the cynicism. But just this year, a 35-year-old Bank of America associate who’d reportedly complained about 100-hour workweeks died of a sudden heart problem—recalling the sort of tragedy that inspired *Industry* years ago, and that was dramatized in the show’s premiere. (No definitive link between the employee’s workload and death was determined.) Surveys of generational attitudes about money and work suggest that growing up amid



Top: Harper (Myha’la Herrold) with her colleagues Robert (Harry Lawtey) and Yasmin (Marisa Abela) in *Industry*. Bottom: Kit Harington as the start-up CEO Henry Muck.

the chaos of inflation, crypto, and a pandemic—not to mention the constant, conspicuous salesmanship of online influencers—has encouraged, not challenged, aspirations toward wealth among young people. A recent *New York Times* article reported that college students are angling for so-called sellout jobs with a zeal that surprises longtime faculty. At Harvard, the share of grads going into finance and consulting is reaching heights not seen since before the 2008 financial crisis.

And despite *Industry*’s disturbing take on the high-finance lifestyle, many in its audience have been the opposite of repelled. The creators told me that they regularly hear from new bankers who say that the show inspired their choice of career. One friend of Down’s reported that multiple people in his M.B.A. program had enrolled because they were hard-core fans of *Industry*. Recently, in a West London pub, two young guys approached Kay to express their admiration for the series. They seemed like exaggerated versions of the showrunners’ earlier selves—“two actual

drunken, coked-up—for want of a better word—morons,” Kay said.

François Truffaut once said that no movie about war could ever truly be anti-war; history has shown the finance world to be virtually shame-proof. Young bankers have treated *Liar’s Poker*, an exposé, as “an instruction manual,” Lewis has said. Gordon Gekko lives on as a dorm-poster symbol of alpha-maledom. Even the sadistic, chain-saw-wielding Patrick Bateman of *American Psycho* has, in recent years, been memed as a mascot for the “rise and grind” ethos that some young men fetishize: wake up, work out, make money, repeat. (So what if a few body parts are stashed in the fridge?)

Down and Kay understand why finance types love their show. For all its darkness, *Industry* is a pageant of beautiful and superhumanly competent people entangled in slinky romances and high-stakes dealmaking. Entertainment about hyper-capitalism “has to have both the seductive element to it and the warning,” Down told me, and the seductive elements include fine cars, expensive clothes, and the freedom to do and say whatever you want so long as you’re closing deals. In Wall Street movies, “the first act is usually ‘Look how amazing this all is,’” Down said, and “every finance bro seems to just forget about the third act.”

But the show’s deeper appeal lies less in its depiction of the spoils of success than in its dramatization of the actual work. *Industry*’s seductions and warnings seesaw relentlessly; each trading-floor triumph or delirious night at the club tends to crash into a comeuppance and a monstrous hangover. Even the older, more experienced characters are perpetually grinding—not because they have to, but because they want to. As one billionaire hedge-fund manager explains in the show, “It’s all just a cycle of victory and defeat.” The people of Pierpoint are addicted to the cycle itself.

SEASON 3, which premiered August 11, intensifies that chase to sometimes-nauseating extremes. “Every time we come back to *Industry*, it’s the same, but bigger and more ... gross,” Herrold told me. The show is more lurid in its tone, more shocking in its twists, and it delivers, as Kay put it, even more “weird sexual stuff” than before. “We just want to throw everything at the wall,” Down added. “The sweet spot for this show is when people”—audience and characters alike—“are about to have a heart attack.”

The escalating grossness is also making a broader point about the stakes of the game that *Industry*’s characters are playing. This season focuses on the rise of ESG investments—short for “environmental, social, and governance.” Looking to tout itself as the

greenest mega-firm in the business, Pierpoint funds a sustainable-energy company headed by Henry Muck, a handsomely vapid child of privilege played by *Game of Thrones*’ Kit Harington. In the real world, ESG has been evangelized as a market-driven solution to the climate crisis, appealing to the idealism of younger investors and consumers. It has also been exposed, in various instances, as a front for fraud, speculation, and the rebranding of the planet’s worst polluters.

Unsurprisingly, *Industry*’s angle on all of this proves, in Kay’s words, to be “the most cynical view you could possibly have.” The show makes quite clear that its characters and the institutions they work for are glorified gamblers—and that they’ve rigged the global casino so that their debts get paid by other people. Meanwhile, the lifestyles of the rich and amoral glitter more than ever; the new episodes’ settings include a yacht, a private jet, and a sprawling old-money estate. Although *Industry*’s characters have never been virtuous, the “stripping away of humanity,” Kay said, is all but total this season.

Part of that is simply a function of time passing on the show: The longer these characters remain enmeshed in their work, the more corrupted they become. Eric—separated from his wife and in the throes of a midlife crisis—wins a promotion and gets caught up in toxic C-suite machinations. He realizes that there is always another moral line he’ll have to cross to succeed at his job. “We really did experiment with, like, ‘What happens if this guy really sells his soul for money?’” Kay said. “‘What happens if he really keeps making decisions which get rid of his personhood and make him an embodiment of the institution?’ And it takes him to a pretty fucking dark place.”

At its core, the show remains a portrait of inter-generational continuity, of avarice bridging gaps of age and sensibility. In Cardiff, I watched Kay and Down edit a scene in which a veteran money manager lectures Harper about the usefulness of insider trading (he’s nearly quoting Gordon Gekko’s dictate to only “bet on sure things”). The elder character, wearing a necktie while fly-fishing, refers to the younger one, who is clad in a leather trench coat and has a nose ring, as “terribly modern.” The line lands as a joke: Though they hail from different historical eras, these two characters are, in some ways, interchangeable. If *Industry* has a “thesis,” Kay said, it’s that, although social mores change, one generation of “animals with an economic incentive” is exactly the same as the next. *A*

Spencer Kornhaber is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



BOOKS

Does the World Need a Great American Biracial Novel?

The hero of Danzy Senna's new satire is trying, and failing, to write one.

By Tyler Austin Harper

Early on in Danzy Senna's new novel, *Colored Television*, her biracial writer-professor protagonist, Jane, takes a meeting with Hampton Ford, a Black producer who is pivoting from network to prestige TV. Jane's situation is less enviable. Up against a tenure deadline, she has a neurodivergent son, a daughter shunted from school to school, and a tuned-out abstract-painter husband at home—as well as a recently completed, 450-page second novel that has been unceremoniously rejected by her agent and her publisher. What's more, home for the four of them is the latest in a succession of house-sitting gigs in unaffordable L.A. The family's hopes for upward mobility have been pinned on Jane's promotion to associate professor. No wonder, then, that she has resolved to seek her fortunes in the shadow of the nearby Hollywood sign.

Her husband, Lenny, calls her opus a “mulatto *War and Peace*,” and she has

come to Hampton's office desperate to somehow salvage the decade of work she's put into it. She pitches him a biracial comedy that will defy the trope of the "tragic mulatto," the stereotypical mixed-race character, common in 19th- and 20th-century literature, torn between white and Black worlds, unable to live happily in either. She goes on to explain to Hampton that mulattos, historically depicted as either "dangerously sexual" or "sad and mokey," have in every case "been treated like a walking, talking predicament rather than an actual character." Jane wants to create a show that makes audiences laugh, and in which biraciality is more than a woeful burden to overcome or bear with stoic resignation. "The Jackie Robinson of biracial comedies," Hampton jokes after she describes her vision.

Colored Television tracks Jane's attempts to collaborate with Hampton on a comedy about the Bunches, a fictional mulatto family that is a hotter, hipper, richer version of her real one. The novel oscillates between long passages of largely unproductive brainstorming in Hampton's high-gloss office and scenes from Jane's ever more shambolic personal life: Her son has an obsession with Godzilla, her daughter refuses to play with a Black American Girl doll, and she and Lenny have drunk their way through a stratospherically priced wine collection in the too-nice house they're currently occupying, courtesy of a friend who is sojourning in Australia. They promise themselves they'll replace the bottles, well aware that they can't possibly, and that this transgression is a boozy diversion from their sputtering marriage and the receding prospect of a middle-class life.

And then, of course, there's Jane's novel, a swollen, spectacular thing. She describes it as "multitextual," a chaotic collage of history and sociology, incorporating hundreds of years' worth of mulatto experience, real and imagined. She has included a disquisition on Thomas Jefferson's mathematical theory of race, and an extended treatment of the Melungeons of Appalachia, "who were believed to be the first tribe of triracial Americans to self-isolate and procreate, creating generations of future Benetton models." She weathers moments of panic. "She had the feeling that the book was her last word on something and she had to get it right. There would be no second chances." When she'd sent off the ill-fated manuscript to her unsuspecting agent, she'd allowed herself a moment of uncharacteristic bravado: She'd believed, if only fleetingly, that she had created "a manspreading major American novel. She was going to become the voice of her people."

The contrast between Jane's novel (bloated, grandiose) and Senna's (well-oiled, precisely choreographed) could not be more apparent, yet these differences mask a shared preoccupation: Both novelists, fictional and real, have a Great American Biracial Novel in mind,

one that will rescue the mulatto experience from lazy stereotyping. And both fall short not necessarily because they are unequal to the task, but because the task, as *Colored Television* sets out to demonstrate, is basically impossible, and anyway, beside the point.

Where, after all, is the obvious biracial archetype to either deepen or deconstruct? The tragic-mulatto figure is by now an outdated cliché from the pre-civil-rights era. Meanwhile, what might have been its replacement, the dream of a postracial hybrid hero that found its apotheosis in Barack Obama, has proved evanescent. The old racial incentive structures—the benefits and liabilities that accompany being of color—have twisted and collapsed under the weight of polarization, identity politics, and, yes, progress. Today, the world is our oyster (I am one of these mulattos) and we can rather freely identify as Black, biracial, raceless, or—for the lightest-skinned—white (though not "half white," a category that does not exist within America's convoluted racial calculus). Instead of attempting to untangle this web of racial alternatives, Senna has embarked on a satire of the identitarian cause itself.

The old racial incentive structures—the benefits and liabilities that accompany being of color—have twisted and collapsed under the weight of polarization, identity politics, and, yes, progress.

SHE COULD HARDLY be better positioned for such a project. Senna's career—this is her third novel since her much celebrated 1998 debut, *Caucasia*—has been singularly focused on the shifting social and psychological dynamics facing mulatto Americans whose skin, like hers, is light enough to pass for white. I'll insist on this word, *mulatto* (Google it and you'll see a warning sign accompanied by the words *offensive* and *dated*), because Senna insists on it, not just in *Colored Television* but throughout her writing. A 1998 essay published in *Salon* was titled "Mulatto Millennium" and opened with the line "Strange to wake up and realize you're in style." Senna wryly diagnosed that America had been beset by "mulatto fever," a worship of multiracial celebrities and stars, such as Lenny Kravitz, who basked in "half-caste glory." She spun out a parodic vision of a mulatto pride march (buttons proclaiming MAKE MULATTOS, NOT WAR; a T-shirt announcing JUST HUMAN), rambling down an unspecified Main Street. "I trailed behind the parade for some miles," Senna wrote, "not quite sure I wanted to join or stay at the heels of this group."

This vignette has proved an apt metaphor for Senna's trajectory. Born in 1970 to a white mother and a Black Mexican father, both of them caught up in the Black Power movement in racially polarized Boston, she was raised Black—"No checking 'Other.' No halvies. No in-between"—though often mistaken for Jewish (her mother was, in fact, of Boston blue-blood descent). She grew into a skeptical ambivalence about performative "mixedness." Riffing in the *Salon* essay,

Senna described being a spy among white people and a participant-observer in “Mulatto Nation (just M.N. for those in the know),” and feeling alternately curious and nauseated in both roles. Often repelled by her discoveries, she honed a mostly keen and acerbic—rather than sad and mokey—take on biracialism.

Her fiction asks where this mulatto parade is going, and why people like her should join it, or choose not to, in post-civil-rights-movement America. In *Caucasia*, drawing on her youthful experience in the turbulent mid-’70s, Senna presents a protagonist, Birdie, who molds her identity to the dictates of a moment in which racial categorization was more firmly binary, more Black and white. *New People*, published in 2017, jumps forward two decades, giving us biracial Brooklyn in 1996, imagined through the lens of an untethered “quadroon” (also offensive and dated, per Google) named Maria who can’t decide whether to marry her “beige” and benevolent fiancé or to seek out someone more melanated.

Both books play out within the guardrails of the tragic-mulatto stereotype even as they press persistently against its limits. Those biracial dramas turn, as they have always turned, on the Decision. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argued that people who suffer from hysteria, that outmoded diagnosis with a fraught history, are unconsciously plagued by the question “Am I a man or a woman?” In this sense, the tragic mulatto is akin to a hysteric, except stymied by the interminable puzzle “Am I Black or white?” The fact that a decision is demanded by a society organized around, and deeply neurotic about, racial categorization shapes their fate.

Caucasia and *New People* are both saturated, deliberately and deftly, with this racial hysteria. The adolescent Birdie must pick the comparative ease of feigned whiteness or the shared heritage of Blackness. Maria must decide whether to become one of the glittering “new people” of the novel’s title, an in-style mulatto, or embrace old-fashioned Blackness, with all its weight and earned pride.

Colored Television, set roughly in the present, appears lightly autobiographical, focusing on a mixed-race novelist dedicated to chronicling mulatto life, and hitched to a Black artist who refuses to make legibly Black art. (Senna is married to the iconoclastic Black novelist and painter Percival Everett.) Yet as this new novel clicks neatly into place, completing her oeuvre’s historical arc, Senna faces a new challenge. She slips in a different metaphor clearly meant as a commentary on the current state of the mulatto project. “Race is like this smoothie here,” Hampton says to Jane, holding up a cup of green sludge he’s drinking as they bat around ideas. “This has probably got five different fruits and vegetables in it, six different

supplements. But I couldn’t tell you what. Because the more ingredients you add to it, the more it tastes like nothing.” He puts the straw to his mouth, then remarks, “I hate smoothies.” A constructive collaboration on what seems destined to be indecipherable racial pulp is evidently not in store.

“I can make it more biracial,” a nervous Jane promises the irascible Hampton as their meetings proceed and her frantic revisions fail to pass muster. Jane’s problem, which is ultimately Senna’s problem—and America’s problem, if it is a problem—is that she doesn’t know what “more biracial” would even mean, what mulatto essence our racially vampiric entertainment industry is trying to extract from her. Hampton implores Jane to produce a “biracial juggernaut,” reminding her that his boss hired him “to diversify the fucking content.” The higher-ups are trying to corner the mixed-race market—a fast-growing demographic in America—but neither he nor Jane has the faintest idea how to do this. She’s kept her platonic rendezvous with Hampton a secret from her high-art husband, and the reader is left suspecting that Jane hides the show from Lenny not just because he views television writing as a philistine perversion, but because she would have to explain what her biracial comedy is actually trying to say.

Her inability to distill a message from her show is a testament not so much to Jane’s insufficient writerly chops as to the challenge of wringing out a univocal meaning from biracial America. In a brief but telling moment, Jane sketches out a potential episode for the series during a late-night session with Hampton and his assistants, all of them hopped up on Adderall. She proposes that the married mulatto leads take DNA tests, and, this being a comedy, the results surprise. The wife, Sally, discovers that she is “more American Indian than Black,” and the husband, Kyle, learns that “both his Black sides were half Irish.” Soon enough, the characters are playing into new stereotypes—Sally starts gambling at casinos, while Kyle develops a drinking problem. Hampton savages the idea, but the aborted episode contains an apt lesson: If these two take DNA tests and promptly turn into Native and Irish caricatures, isn’t that a signal that their preexisting biraciality was never really an identity at all?

SENNA HAS A FLAIR for sketching her characters with a kind of thick minimalism: Snippets of backstory and an array of ticks and quips deliver an unexpectedly fully realized person. Jane comes to life on the page, careening among flights of artistic insecurity, California-chic fantasies, and the warm banalities of motherhood. She is far more rounded than the “walking, talking predicament” that she herself has

COLORED
TELEVISION

Danzy Senna

RIVERHEAD

derided. Still, *Colored Television* can feel like an exercise in shadowboxing. The pacing is brisk, and Senna throws sharp jabs and hooks. But the objects of ridicule are so numerous that they tend to blur.

Senna can't resist letting her eyes wander from her tightly drawn critique of identity politics to a series of other, equally fashionable sources of ire. Here she skewers Hollywood, with its sellouts and bottomless appetite for lowest-common-denominator racial profiteering. There she takes aim at the American literary canon, which has too often reduced the mulatto to a tortured soul or sacrificial lamb. She doesn't spare academia, with its system of feudal labor that ruthlessly separates anointed tenured professors from serflike contingent labor. Or the progressive public, with its identitarian fetishes, its class-agnostic multiculturalism that is all gums and no teeth. Yet the result of Senna's broad reach is that she risks a certain flatness: Her project often seems animated by the reflexes of the moment, pummeling familiar targets that were beaten and bruised before she ever laid hands on them. Deft though many scenes are, the novel never quite builds to truly cutting satire.

Colored Television is here to tell us that deciding on some tidy new biracial identity to replace the stereotypical tragic mulatto is a farcical, futile exercise. You won't find any definitive statement about the mulatto condition post–Civil Rights Act, post–Obama, post–Trump, post–George Floyd in Senna's pages. "The mulatto people ... were a riddle that could never be solved," pronounces a scholar near the end of the novel, having thrown up his hands after a career of trying—earning Jane's enmity at first, and then her empathy. That sentiment is one that some readers might consider a cop-out, but it also delivers a welcome dose of comic humility. Jane never triumphs with her mulatto *War and Peace*. Still, a tragic end is out of the question. In a quick, coda-like closing, Senna grants Jane and Lenny an enviable rescue—which includes scoring a fixer-upper "on expensive dirt." *A*

Tyler Austin Harper is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and an assistant professor of environmental studies at Bates College.

Making a Monument Valley

By Kinsale Drake

You rock with the rose quartz, the sweetgrass, the cedar. In the summer, our city smells almost like dusk on the rez: The reservoirs are shallow enough to be the old ocean, the one that covered the Four Corners. The Citibank building. Hook a right down Bunker Hill, the one with the city Indians. Their ghosts shadow the eucalyptus trees. Let them haunt you. I like it

That way: Up the 101, thick scarlet vein. I let you go bumper-to-bumper, reclaim the land between each car. Fuck it, you honk, Let's be sovereign! We riot in the fumes. Smoke lavender, tobacco, weeds. Logically, the land's been dead a long time. The smog says otherwise,

The way it rises out of the Valley every other week. A long breath let go. The Santa Anas carry all the scents back to us that they tried to get rid of. Inhale. A long line of cars breaks the jagged edges. Saddleback. We stop the car, hot, off Crenshaw. When you hop out, you swear the ground kicks
Just a little bit beneath your feet.

Kinsale Drake is a Diné poet and the author of The Sky Was Once a Dark Blanket, a winner of the 2023 National Poetry Series. She is also the recipient of the Joy Harjo Poetry Award, the Academy of American Poets College Prize, and the Adroit Prize for Poetry, among other honors.



BOOKS

The Wild Adventures of Fanny Stevenson

Her surprising marriage to Robert Louis Stevenson changed literary history.

By Phyllis Rose

When Fanny met Louis in 1876, he was not yet Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *A Child's Garden of Verses*. He was a scrawny, sickly, rotten-toothed, chain-smoking, 25-year-old literary wannabe who had published a few essays and reviews and was financially dependent on his parents, constantly squabbling with them over how—as they saw it—he was wasting his life, denying God, and generally going to hell in a handbasket. His parents were righteous Scots. He was a flaky bohemian. The men in his family were lighthouse engineers, and his father wanted Louis to continue the tradition. Louis hated engineering. He wanted to write. They compromised on law. His father dangled the equivalent of \$145,000 if he passed the bar exam, which he did, but he never practiced, choosing instead to hang out with friends, mostly writers and artists far from the parental home in Edinburgh.

Fanny Vandegrift Osbourne was 36, 11 years older than Louis, an American, a wife, and a mother.

JOHN SINGER SARGENT, *ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON AND HIS WIFE*, 1885, OIL ON CANVAS, 20 1/2 X 24 1/2 IN. CRYSTAL BRIDGES MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, BENTONVILLE, ARKANSAS, 2005.3. PHOTOGRAPHY BY DWIGHT PRIMANO.

Originally from Indiana, she had married at 17, quickly had a baby, and followed Sam Osbourne, her good-looking and good-natured but feckless husband, to mining camps in the West, where he tried unsuccessfully to strike it rich. Her father gave her a pocket pistol when she left home. She kept it in her bag and learned to shoot a rifle as well. She was one of 60 “respectable” women in a city with 6,000 men. Building furniture, sewing curtains, chopping wood, hauling water, stoking fires, making soap, shooting rattlesnakes, and, of course, cooking, she made a home of their rough quarters.

Camille Peri’s engrossing *A Wilder Shore: The Romantic Odyssey of Fanny and Robert Louis Stevenson* recounts in some detail the very unromantic odyssey that led Fanny to her meeting with Louis. The book is weighted toward her, partly because Fanny is, in fact, the more colorful of the two Stevensons and partly because of Peri’s underlying feminist project: to do justice to an often-vilified woman. Stevenson biographies tend to be anti-Fanny, downplaying her role in his writing and blaming her for exaggerating his illness and working him to death. Peri’s is pro-Fanny. Her richly researched and vivid double portrait makes a convincing case that Fanny pulled off a rare feat, enabling Louis’s genius to mature while releasing his boyish energies.

Fanny’s first go at marriage revealed little inclination to martyrdom on anyone’s part. Sam Osbourne regularly visited brothels around the camp and left her for months on quixotic quests for wealth. Finally, fed up with camp life and believing Sam to be dead, Fanny took their daughter, Belle, to San Francisco, where she eked out a living as a seamstress. Sam turned up eventually and got her pregnant again, but soon after their son Lloyd was born, in 1868, she bolted for the second time, going by ship down the California coast and through the Panama Canal (no transcontinental railroad yet) to New York, then back overland to her parents’ home in Indiana, where she stayed for a year. Some trip for a woman alone with two children.

Not long after, Sam, now working as a court stenographer in San Francisco and making decent money, prevailed on Fanny to return to him. While Fanny was pregnant with their second son, Hervey, Sam bought the family a little house in Oakland—and began spending most of his time across the bay in San Francisco. Fanny, Peri suggests, was not unhappy in her husband’s absence. Polymorphously creative, she painted, built a wet-plate-collodion darkroom, practiced marksmanship, and gardened seriously, for both food and beauty, pickling cantaloupes and grafting roses. She and Belle began to study art in San Francisco, commuting across the bay by side-wheel steamer while a helper cared for the boys. But Sam carried his faithlessness a step too far, when he tried to bring his current girlfriend into the Oakland household.

Fanny and Louis fell in love almost at first glance, though it is hard to say who was the less impressive catch.

Again Fanny gathered the children and left him, this time for Europe, ostensibly to study art, with Sam promising to support them but again not always fulfilling his promises. In Paris in 1875, mother and daughter enrolled at the Académie Julian, an art school that, unusually, offered classes for women. But little Hervey’s health suddenly worsened, and doctors diagnosed tuberculosis. He died at the age of 5 in April. Fanny was devastated, Peri writes, her own robust emotional and physical health broken. Trying to recover, she went with her surviving children, Belle, now 17 years old, and Lloyd, who was 8, to an artists’ colony in Grez, near the Forest of Fontainebleau. She and Belle would spend the summer painting *en plein air*, escaping the city heat, and enjoying the company of like-minded artists.

Louis and his cousin and best friend, Bob Stevenson, had the same plan, and when they heard that two women would be among the artists at Grez, they were initially horrified. It was a guys-only thing, a kind of summer camp for artsy men. Bob went to Grez early to try to persuade Fanny and Belle to leave. But after he met them, he sent word back to Louis that it would be okay. They were “the right sort.”

FANNY AND LOUIS fell in love almost at first glance, though between the two of them, it is hard to say who was the less impressive catch, the abandoned and abandoning wife or the sickly post-adolescent. Each responded to the other’s core vitality. His charisma was legendary. You can search the biographical record in vain for someone resistant to his wit and charm. Accounts of him mention his remarkably expressive eyes, conduits to his quicksilver soul. And she, though not an obvious beauty, too dark-skinned for the tastes of the time, also had no trouble gathering admirers. She was fun, this wild and tiny woman who could do anything, who smoked and sometimes went barefoot, who painted outdoors and from nude models, like a man.

For Louis, an overprotected man who resented his upbringing and expected all women to be delicate tyrants like his mother, Fanny’s glamour was immense. He had never encountered an American woman outside of books, and she was an unusually unconventional specimen (as Henry James, that connoisseur of rule-bending womanhood, later testified). They lived together in Paris and also saw each other in London, but Fanny did not imagine a future for them as a couple. Louis’s closest friends did not welcome her; they considered her uncouth and damaging to his growing reputation as a belletristic essayist and critic. His family was unhappy. Her family and Sam’s were fiercely opposed to a divorce: The scandal would affect their social standing along with hers. Finally, Fanny returned to Oakland and to Sam in 1878.

It took at least a week and usually more to cross the Atlantic by steamer, then another week to cross the United States by rail. A lovelorn year later, Louis came after her, and in doing so made a kind of existential leap, proving to himself as much as Fanny, by the epic nature of the journey, that he was not an effete young man of letters who had to negotiate his desires with his parents. He seems to have been one of those men for whom marrying an unsuitable woman is a defining act, a rejection of the life that others expect him to live.

He wanted to travel steerage to get the full emigrant experience, but had to upgrade to get a cabin in which he could write. He knew he would use the voyage as material for a book, eventually “From the Clyde to Sandy Hook,” the first half of his ambitious travelogue *The Amateur Emigrant*. The second half, “Across the Plains,” followed his journey from New Jersey to California on a cut-rate train utterly lacking in comfort. He had to rent a board with straw cushions to sleep on and chipped in with two other men for a bowl, a towel, and soap to wash with. By the time they could change to a better train for the last leg, the air in the crowded carriages was fetid.

The three-week odyssey from Glasgow to San Francisco was eye-opening, every bit as worth writing about as Louis had anticipated. Recording the despair and false hopes that brought so many emigrants from Europe to America was harder-hitting work, less geared to the picturesque and pleasing, than the travel writing he had previously done, such as *Travels With a Donkey in the Cévennes*. As Peri suggests, Fanny was already nudging him toward greatness as a writer by forcing him to live a bigger life than he had known before he met her.

By the time they were reunited in California, Louis was quite ill. When his coughing began to bring up blood, he and Fanny assumed he had tuberculosis, the only disease people then knew about that was associated with the symptom. Peri cites bronchiectasis, which affects the airways, as another possible diagnosis. Fanny threw respectability to the wind and moved him into her house to nurse him. She had already lost a child and was not going to lose her man.

Without Fanny’s care, Louis might have died before they could be married in San Francisco, in May 1880, four years after they met and five months after she and Sam divorced. Fanny was 40, Louis almost 30, and from then on, it is fair to say that she kept him alive. She trained herself to be his personal physician; subscribed to the British medical journal *The Lancet*; promoted bed rest and clean air, the two principal treatments for TB; and stocked palliative drugs for all contingencies. These included laudanum, that Victorian cure-all, to dull his pain; hashish or chloral hydrate (knockout drops) to make him sleep;

*I admire
the way they
lived, genuine
bohemians
who seem to
have cared
only about
staying alive
and living
intensely,
always
resourceful,
unfussy, and
open to new
experiences.*

and, to try to stop his hemorrhaging, the hallucinogenic ergotin (derived, as LSD was later, from the ergot fungus, which helped constrict blood vessels). An early believer in germ theory, Fanny would rigorously protect her husband later in life from visitors with colds, irritating both him and would-be callers. Their life became not so much a search for health as a notably adventurous campaign to hold off death.

They honeymooned, eccentrically, in an abandoned silver mine in the hills in Napa Valley, with Fanny’s son Lloyd and Chuchu, their dog. The fresh air and mineral springs near St. Helena were reputed to be healthy for consumptives, and staying rent-free in a ghost town appealed to Louis’s imagination. It was their first collaboration: Louis envisioned something, and Fanny made it happen. She turned a shack, overgrown with poison oak, into a livable space. She hammered furniture from crates, set up a kitchen, and managed to keep the family fed and healthy. Fanny created the experience. Louis created the account of it, *The Silverado Squatters*. This joint effort in the service of his health, his creative output, and their mutual pleasure set a pattern for their life together.

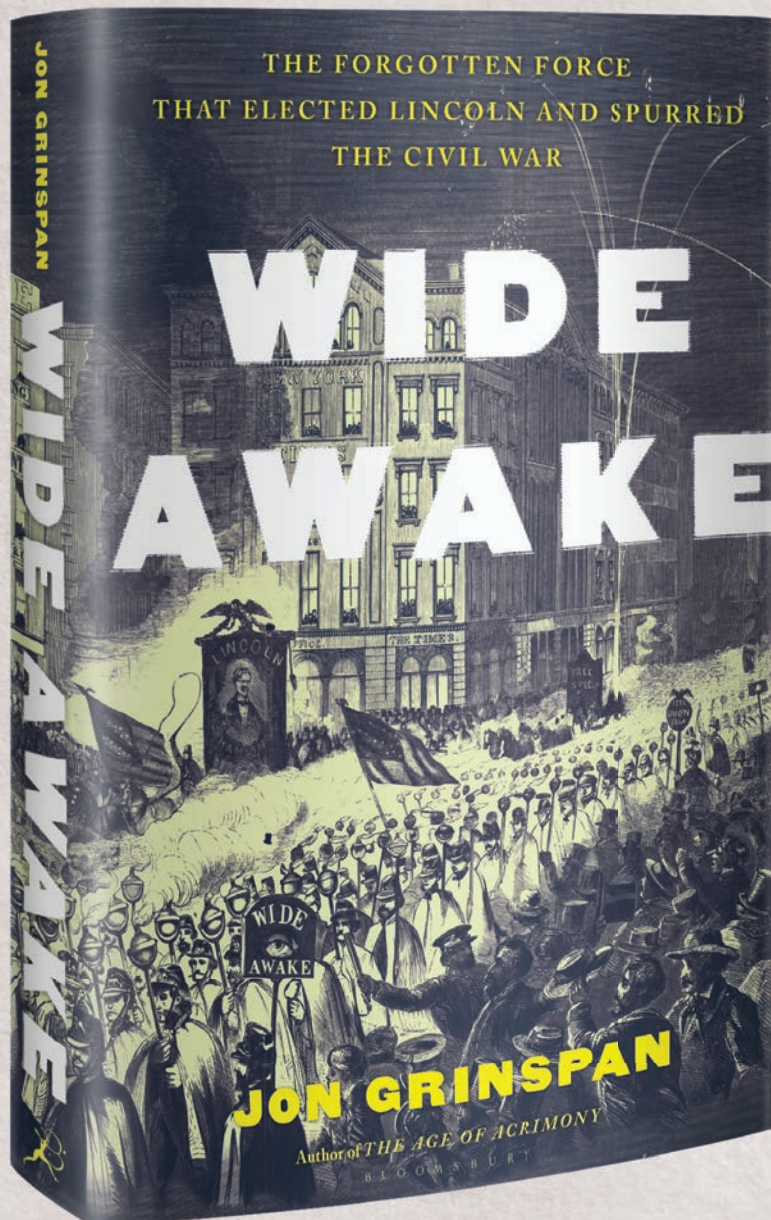
I AM FULLY CONVINCED by *A Wilder Shore* that without Fanny, the great body of work created by Robert Louis Stevenson in his truncated life of 44 years would not exist. He seems to have been born a stylist, a writer whose sentences delight with their originality, grace, freedom, and bull’s-eye accuracy. However, the knowledge of human character that underlies his wild adventure tales, the kind of knowledge that Dickens acquired from childhood misery and his work as a reporter, Louis got from life with Fanny. Unlike his parents, Fanny wanted Louis to write, and unlike his London chums, who feared that his critical gift would wither in the cultural wastelands beyond London, she encouraged him to write fiction.

In addition to her dozens of other creative modes, Fanny had written and published short stories, including some fantasy tales for children, turning to this as she had to needlework as a way of making money. Now she collaborated with Louis on some stories, and became his first reader and an editor whose enthusiasm for his work was steady but whose criticism was fearlessly expressed.

Their life together led them back to Europe, to Switzerland, Scotland, the south of France, and England, before, famously, Samoa in the final years, always in search of relief from Louis’s physical ordeals, almost always short of money—with writing always in mind. Housebound in the Scottish Highlands because of incessant rain, Louis spent time playing with 13-year-old Lloyd, making up stories to go with Lloyd’s watercolor paintings, as he had sometimes

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B L O O M S B U R Y



made up stories inspired by flame-shapes in the fireplace. Louis annotated one painting, a map, with names such as Spyglass Hill, and it became the basis of a tale about a boy like Lloyd, who finds himself on a ship full of pirates. In 15 amazing days, Louis wrote the first 15 chapters of *Treasure Island*, reading them aloud in the evening to his little family and guests. His London friends predictably regretted his wasting himself on a children's book, but the tap had been opened. Within three years, he published *Treasure Island* (Fanny told him bluntly—to no avail—that it sagged in the middle), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (she convinced him that those characters should be two sides, good and evil, of the same person), *Kidnapped*, and *A Child's Garden of Verses*.

Peri does not often venture into extended discussion of Louis's literary work, but when she does, it can be fascinating; she ties, for example, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to the couple's rampant use of psychedelics. When Louis hemorrhaged, the drugs Fanny gave him sometimes rendered him close to insane. Louis often thought of himself as living with another person inside him, a creature he called Bloody Jack, who preyed on his weaknesses. Bloody Jack erupted unpredictably, like a volcano, spewing blood and racking coughs, fits that could go on for hours or days, draining his vitality. But the feverish thoughts that came with Bloody Jack could be strangely invigorating.

The struggle to keep working was constant. Louis sometimes spent days in bed, speaking only in whispers and writing prone, for fear of bringing on more hemorrhaging, and sometimes he could not read, write, or even see. He would urge Fanny to go out into the world and come back with a tale to tell. She cleaned up his blood and carried him to the toilet. He allowed no one else to do it. If his hemorrhaging was worse than usual, she had to figure out why and how to stop it. "The feeling that my husband's life depends upon my dexterity of hand and quickness of thought keeps me in a continual terror," she wrote to Thomas Hardy's wife, Emma. Louis's friends thought Fanny a hysteric on the subject, always crying wolf.

One would like to imagine their final years in the South Seas as a beachside vacation, a reward for their difficulties, but sadly this was no stay at Club Med. Much of their time was spent sailing about the Pacific, because Louis found sea air good for his lungs. Fanny never minded, although she was given to seasickness. As so often in her life, she was anomalous but useful, mending clothes, doctoring, and helping the all-male crew repair equipment. Settled eventually in Samoa, the Stevensons built a house and raised their own food. Between his hours of writing, Louis farmed alongside Fanny. Lloyd, as well as Belle and her husband and son, joined them. So did Louis's

now-widowed mother. Fanny continued her culinary experiments. Were the local ferns edible? Louis refused to try them without knowing. Fanny sampled them and was sick for a day. And so she learned.

It is probably clear that I love this couple. I love both of them. I love their incongruity, the tiny round woman who came up to the bony man's chest. His gift. Her gifts. Their devotion to each other. I admire the way they lived, genuine bohemians who seem to have cared only about staying alive and living intensely, always resourceful, unfussy, and open to new experiences. I like them so much that I hate reading of the times they disagreed, acted badly toward each other, even fought, but that is what married people do. I am grateful to Peri for telling the story of their marriage, in all its complexity, with sympathy and spirit. If only it were possible to tell a gender-bending story like this one without having to point out how gender-bending it is. If only, when Fanny rides a horse astride rather than sidesaddle, one did not have to add that she is "renegotiating concepts of womanhood and equality."

Few writers have been painted with their wives. Only the portrait of Thomas and Jane Carlyle by Robert Tait, *A Chelsea Interior*, comes to mind. Jane Carlyle recorded how much they disliked sitting for the painting but little about what they thought of the finished piece, except that their dog looked too much like a sheep. But in 1885, John Singer Sargent, who had been a student of Carolus-Duran in Paris with Louis's cousin Bob and so came to know the couple, painted them in the dining room of their house in Bournemouth. The portrait is suitably eccentric. Louis is painted in profile, full length, mid-stride, slightly hunched over, but turning to the viewer as though interrupted, stroking his mustache. This was typical behavior, apparently; caught up in conversation, he would walk, talk, and finger his mustache. At the extreme right, almost off the canvas, is a mass of highlights and glitter, which turns out, upon further study, to be Fanny, her face barely visible, sitting in a heavy old chair, barefoot and dressed in a sari with gold trim, an apparition in glitz. Louis liked the painting, in which he saw Sargent's wit. Fanny described it to an artist friend as a "very insane, most charming picture." To note that Fanny is marginalized would be tediously obvious. What makes the portrait so special is how Louis's nervous energy is solidified and monumentalized, while Fanny's solidity is dissolved into brushstrokes of dazzle. As Sargent understood and Peri proves, this couple requires an eye for dynamic disequilibrium. *A*

Phyllis Rose is the author of Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages, among other books.

A WILDER
SHORE: THE
ROMANTIC
ODYSSEY OF
FANNY AND
ROBERT LOUIS
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BOOKS

Pity the Bad Man

A bold new novel invites the reader to consider the plight of the bullies and the boors.

By Hillary Kelly

The story goes that John Milton—who went blind in his early 40s—composed 20 lines of *Paradise Lost* in his mind each evening, and then repeated them aloud the next day to an assortment of amanuenses, among them his three daughters. Their work has been especially romanticized. In portraits that hang in great museums, Milton gazes skyward, as if receiving his dictation from heaven, and the young women—Anne, Mary, and Deborah—lean toward him, eagerly awaiting his next divine word.

What the paintings don't show is that these three women are generally believed to have loathed their father, who forced them to read aloud in languages they did not speak and to spend countless hours attending to his genius. When a family servant relayed the news of Milton's marriage to their second and final stepmother (he hadn't told them himself), Mary is said to have drolly noted that if she "could hear of his death that was something." One way to portray Milton is as a writer who entrusted his daughters with 11,000 intricate lines of his epic poem about Adam and Eve's temptation in the Garden of Eden and the triumph of wily Satan. But if the lore about his disaffected daughters is true, they would perhaps have seen it differently: In accordance with his depiction of Eve as Adam's simple helpmeet, their father assumed that they would be delighted to serve his mind, and he took little interest in their own endeavors. Then again, we don't know their precise feelings—they didn't have the opportunity to write them down.

In *The Hypocrite*, the young British writer Jo Hamya's second novel, a 21st-century daughter is asked to play amanuensis for her father in much the same way. Sophia, 17 and freshly released from the bonds of secondary school, spends a month in Sicily with her well-known novelist father. There, the two of them sit at the kitchen table for hours each day as he dictates to her. "Your job is to take it all down so that I can talk freely ... New paragraph open quote

Everyone in these pages is thrown off-balance, all of them just scarred little people, fumbling in the dark.

start italics." He is demanding and unfatherly, a boss instructing a peon. Ironically, his novel is about "teen-agers fancying each other on holiday," something that Sophia—simultaneously eager to please her dear old dad and to assert her independence—hints she might know a bit more about than he does. But her father skips over the salacious parts with her. "Some of it is too grown up for you, cherub."

Unlike Milton's daughters, Sophia ultimately gets her say, publicly. A decade after the Italian trip, Sophia is a few weeks into staging a critically lauded play in London's West End. The novel is set over the course of the afternoon, early in the play's run, when her father first watches it, with flashbacks to that summer in Sicily. Sophia hasn't shared the script with him and he has avoided reviews, so he is unaware that the play is about him, that it will open with a 10-minute sex scene featuring a look-alike of a woman he actually bedded—and that he'll soon consider his cherub a fallen angel. By the novel's end, he'll have sweated through his shirt, locked himself in a café bathroom, broken down in sobs and humiliated himself in front of a few hundred people, and relived his life as a parent, an artist, and a cultural figure through the gimlet eye of his only child.

Should we—would you—pity this man?

What if I told you that he'd recently been depressed, isolated during the early days of England's COVID-19 lockdown? That he'd stopped doing dishes and laundry, that he would stare into space and mutter to himself? That a man whom *The Telegraph* had once ranked "one of a hundred most important people in twentieth-century British culture" hadn't produced a new novel in 10 years? That his ex-wife had moved back into his home just to buttress his disintegrating emotional state?

Sophia's father—a man without a name, a person known only in relation to his child—is an object to be held up to the light and wondered at. Is this, *this*, the stuff that men are made of? Are these the fearsome creatures who have ruled the planet for all of written history?

But wait. Parental coldness is not his only blunder. "He's aware," Hamya writes, "of having been a divisive figure in the past; had leant into it when it meant good money." He's a man who defended a Louis C.K.-like figure and "kept referring to the fact that the comedian had asked each of these women whether masturbating in front of them was okay." He's publicly said that he loves multiracialism because he has "Polish and Hungarian ex-girlfriends," and that "white men are experiencing racism within the publishing industry." According to a critic, he offends people for a living. According to his family, he's an entitled exploiter: He took on none of the rearing of his daughter and then set her to work on his manuscript like an unpaid intern. As Sophia's mother puts it to her, "I kept you with me for almost eighteen years without him interfering and he

still managed to ruin it at the very end.” The grown-up Sophia is most distressed by his fiction: “When I read his books, they’re like prolonged rape scenes in films.”

Now how do you feel about him?

I’VE ASKED YOU to assess Sophia’s father before considering Sophia—the crumbling man before the rising woman—because Hamya does so too, though slyly. Depending on how you read it, this is Sophia’s novel: She gets a name; she gets a play; she gets the agency to move figures around on a stage and have them act out her whims. But right away, he gets the power of a point of view, which is unusual for a man in a novel like this one. I’ve given him narrative supremacy here because that’s precisely what *The Hypocrite* pushes us to contemplate—whether we can understand women’s stories about powerlessness and oppression without men’s voices.

The Hypocrite falls into the category of #MeToo novels, a label that presumes a perspective that Hamya plays with adroitly. Novels focusing on the imbalance of power between men and women didn’t arrive with the hashtag, and they’ll outlive it too. But a cavalcade of new fiction in recent years has addressed the issue of what happens when an oppressed, assaulted, and fearful gender tries to claim new authority. Idra Novey’s *Those Who Knew* (2018) played out a revenge fantasy, and Miriam Toews’s *Women Talking* (2018) took up the question of whether retribution or forgiveness is the more appropriate response to sexual violence. Sigrid Nunez’s *The Friend* (2018) and Lisa Halliday’s *Asymmetry* (2018) asked whether a woman can assent to her subjugation. In *Trust Exercise* (2019), Susan Choi constructed a sexual-assault story in which each new layer of information upends what came before. When truth is so debated, she asked, can coherent narratives really convey anything useful? Julia May Jonas’s *Vladimir* (2022), perhaps the most incendiary of the bunch, presents a wife who tacitly approves of her husband’s dalliances—as long as her own kinky appetites aren’t suppressed.

The Hypocrite trades off between two primary narratives: One keeps close third-person company with Sophia’s father as he sits through the play, the other with Sophia as she lunches with her mother at the same time. He is confused at first about why the set is a perfect replica of the kitchen in their Sicilian lodgings, and then, as the opening scene of loud, thrusty screwing begins, wonders “what Sophia means by setting up a sex scene in the only place she’s ever, as far as he knows, engaged with his writing.”

His recognition is slow and painful: The man onstage is him—the character even talks to each of his lovers about the themes and plot points of Sophia’s father’s last novel. And then he registers the kick in the

ass to his ego: “He had assumed Sophia did not tell him about this play for a long time out of embarrassment; to eliminate the possibility that he might tell her it was bad ... Now the realisation—perhaps her omission was to spare his feelings, not hers.” The play is, unfortunately for him, very, very good. Better, he thinks, than anything he’s ever done.

In the theater’s rooftop restaurant, Sophia does not have the posture of a victor: “The thought of him now as unhappy and bowed settles in her stomach like flu.” She and her mother argue about the fairness of making her father represent all men, and whether Sophia’s work has evened the playing field between them or exacerbated the tension. Although her father has let her mother down more than he has any other woman, the conversation between mother and daughter is strangled.



They talk at cross-purposes about whether his sexual presumption makes him a low-grade villain. “But really, tell me this,” her mother asks. “Outside of the make-believe he makes his money on, have you ever come across a direct quote that says he hates women?” Sophia, like her father later, cries in the bathroom. She’s wrested control of his novel, but along the way, she’s sacrificed him on the altar of her art, which has only continued their ouroboros of humiliation and creative abuse. Both are furious at how they’ve been co-opted, and are determined to prove that they’re the enlightened party. Hamya, unlike most of her #MeToo counterparts, doesn’t take sides. Moral clarity isn’t on offer.

The Hypocrite is a brilliant litmus test of a novel, which doesn’t mean it’s indecisive or wavering. Hamya, an elder member of Gen Z, proposes that multiple theories can all be true at once—that Boomers can feel indignant about changing social mores while their children encourage necessary change, that men and women can intellectually attack each other with equally wounding vigor, that the question of how to handle womanizers (to purposely use a dated term) is not easily answered by shaming them. How you interpret *The Hypocrite* says more about you than it does about the novel: Hamya knows that your pity is just as valuable—and misleading—as her characters’.

THE PROBLEM WITH PITY is that it’s so often interpreted as a soft emotion, a synonym for empathy or compassion. Asking women to pity men is like asking the subjugated worker to pity his greedy boss. But pity, crucially, is also a weapon: It makes its object smaller and weaker, while casting the pitier as solicitous and tender. In Mary Wollstonecraft’s founding text of feminism, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pity is a yoke she wants to throw off. “Those beings who are only the objects of pity,” she writes, “will soon become objects of contempt.” After almost two and a half centuries, turning the tables and whittling a man down to a pitiful creature is still a revolutionary act. It remakes him in the stereotyped image of the woman—subject to the whims of his emotions, cowed by larger forces. So the question *Should we pity men?* does not elevate them to any shining status of victimhood.

By the play’s intermission, after Sophia’s father has come to the discomfiting conclusion that it’s “like the novel Sophia helped him write, but better,” he encounters another audience member outside having a smoke. The young woman, referred to as Round Glasses, opens the conversation: “I think I know who you are ... Can’t say I’m a fan.” And this is when his collapse begins in earnest and Hamya’s talent for meaningful laceration crescendos.

THE
HYPOCRITE

Jo Hamya

PANTHEON

Round Glasses eviscerates Sophia’s father, reading off a list of people and groups he’s offended: “Jews. Muslims. Catholics. Christians. Americans. Anyone who died or lost a loved one in 9/11. Gays. Women. Trans women.” She savages the play too: “Your daughter’s done nothing brave. Her whole conceit makes me cringe. It’s actually very common, very BBC. All these white female characters making a show of reclaiming an anglophone novel from a privileged white man. Like that’s changing the narrative.” Sophia’s father skewers Round Glasses, a white woman “wearing Carhartt overalls and pristine Birkenstocks,” poking at the way she “feast[s] on the degradation of others,” and how all of her opinions are “rephrased junk from strangers who pour their heart out via globalised American media conglomerates on the internet.” These two strangers lob invectives at each other, but victory isn’t intellectual. It comes only when he snipes that she has “no compassion,” at which Round Glasses smiles. “I hadn’t thought of you as someone whose feelings were so easily hurt.” The conversation ends. Checkmate, pity takes king.

From there, the story converges on a meeting between father and daughter, a moment to confront each other about their generational and gender gaps. Verdicts collide. Sophia’s play is hilarious and transcendent; a woman seated near her father has tears on her cheeks from laughter. At the same time, the play turns Sophia into an object of contempt to her mother. Everyone in these pages is thrown off-balance, all of them just scarred little people, fumbling in the dark.

What Hamya brings to this modern debacle, besides a precision of language and an aptitude for structure that ought to make her contemporaries quake, is a tenderness you don’t see coming. That’s partly why *The Hypocrite* doesn’t rest easily among #MeToo novels, despite its subject matter. Pity is a natural feeling between generations, each of which thinks the other is surely misunderstanding something important about life—and yet, bonds are strong: Ceasing to recognize your parent’s or child’s humanity is nearly impossible.

Hamya successfully makes a muddle with *The Hypocrite*, and I mean that as high praise. Contemporary fiction too often seeks the relief of some imagined perfect morality, perhaps because so many readers now conflate the beliefs of characters and their creator. It’s a pleasure to read a 27-year-old writer who embraces the novel’s power to fog up certainties about “bad men”—and prods readers to join in. *A*

Hillary Kelly is a literary critic and an essayist.

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FICTION



Beauty

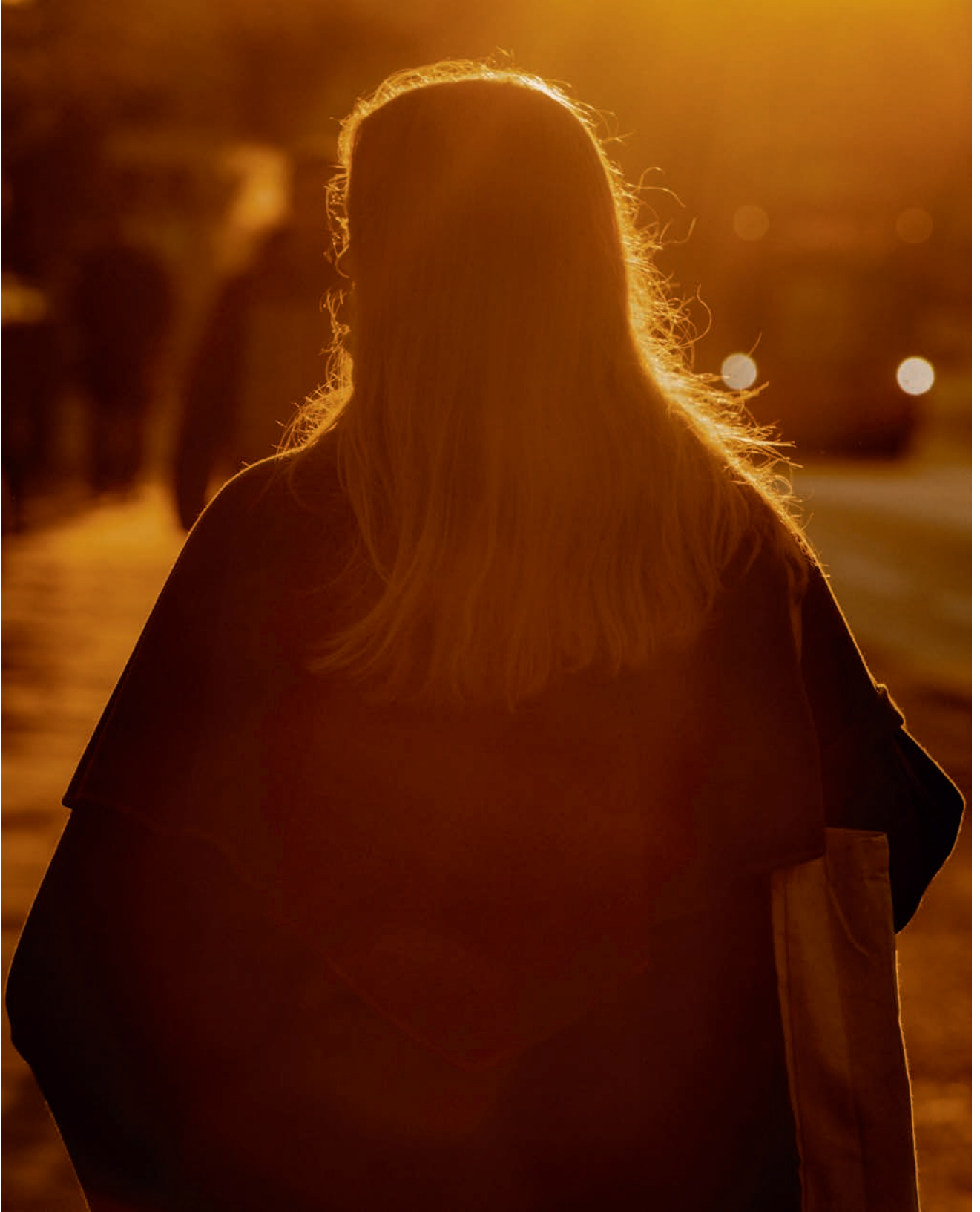
By
Graham
Swift

“Mr. Phillips?”

“Yes. Speaking.”

It was 7:30 on a Sunday morning. He was in his dressing gown. But he’d recognized the voice of his son-in-law, Paul, and appreciated the mock formality.

“Mr. Phillips” was what Paul had studiously called him when they were first introduced by Helen. Another Sunday, not so many years before. “Mr. Phillips ... Mrs. Phillips ...”



all very proper and respectful, and he'd liked it. He and Ruth had been wondering when—if—they might meet "the boy," as they'd both begun to designate him. Now here he was, on the doorstep beside Helen, with the obligatory bunch of flowers for Ruth and his scrupulous "Mr. Phillips."

He'd liked it, and thought he'd let it run for a while. Wasn't that how potential fathers-in-law were supposed to treat potential sons-in-law? A leg of lamb was roasting in the oven. Let the boy sweat a bit too.

But the boy had turned into Paul. And Helen would turn into Mrs. Heywood. And he, Mr. Phillips, had turned, quickly enough, into Tom. "Call me Tom." He'd seen Helen's face relax. And the boy, so it seemed, was also shortly to turn into a barrister.

If he'd put him through it, just a little, then in truth he'd been somewhat daunted himself.

Jesus Christ, Helen's going to marry a whiz-kid lawyer.

"MR. PHILLIPS?"

"Yes. Speaking ..." A calculated pause. He could join in the game. Birds were singing outside. "Yes—Paul—it's me."

"You have a granddaughter."

ON A GRAY February day almost 20 years later, as his train sped through several English counties, he'd remembered that moment. It seemed like recalling a dream. The phone, his dressing gown, the birds. He'd left Ruth upstairs, still half asleep, or perhaps only pretending to be. For almost 24 hours, they'd been expecting a call. He'd leaped up. "I'll go. I'll take it downstairs."

After speaking to Paul, he'd returned, light-footed, to Ruth, who by then was fully awake, eyes wide, and sitting up as if to receive an audience.

A Sunday morning in May. They were both not yet 50, mere youngsters themselves.

He'd reemployed the formula of their son-in-law.

"We have a granddaughter."

Then he'd said, "And she has a name already. Clare."

NOW HE no longer had Ruth and he no longer had a granddaughter. It was unbearable.

And from the moment of his getting up this morning, he'd been haunted by that long-ago figure: himself, disheveled but overjoyed, in his dressing gown. As he'd shaved, he'd been wearing the same dark-blue dressing gown. How many dressing gowns did you need in a life?

His train had carried him captively onward, but this was all his choice. Winter scenery had glided by.

And how long a life can seem. Yet how quickly 20, 30—50—years can pass. How quickly one scene can overtake another.

NOW HE WAS walking with a woman young and old enough to be his daughter along a covered pathway on a university campus near a provincial city. He'd never been to either the city or the university, though he'd once been, 50 years ago, at a similar university when parts of the campus were still under confident construction.

He wondered whether to mention it to this woman—she was called Gibbs, Sarah Gibbs—in order to remedy scant conversation, in order to hide his apprehension and confusion.

It was a difficult walk. Words were failing both of them.

HERE HE WAS, when it was too late. Everything was too late. Ruth had died six months before. Of "natural causes." Cancer was a natural cause, though "natural" was an easy word. And six months was nothing, it was still yesterday.

And he'd thought that *that* was cruel?

Could you die of unnatural, inexplicable causes? Yes, now he knew you could.

It had been a consolation—another easy word—that Ruth, at least, had never had to know the loss of their granddaughter. The double cruelty was his alone. Though Clare had known the loss of her grandmother.

Had that even been a *reason*?

THEY HAD BEEN CLOSE, Ruth and Clare. What's more, it was often noted, from the first moments of Clare's being "shown" by her parents—he'd thought

of that day when Paul had been "shown" by Helen—that Clare had Ruth's looks. Their closeness was prefigured by resemblance. Clare had her grandmother's eyes, her mouth, her way of tilting her chin; you couldn't deny it. It was all rather wonderful. He had been seeing his wife as a baby.

Might he say something of all this to this woman? "Clare was very close, you know, to her grandmother. That is, to my wife ..."

Was that a good tack? Or was it better—or more crass—to say, "I was at a university myself, you know, just like this one. I studied modern history ...?"

And feebly joke, "Now I'm part of it."

Why hadn't this woman—Mrs. Gibbs? Dr. Gibbs?—put on a coat? It was February. She'd said, "It's no distance." It was already feeling like half a mile.

THE RESEMBLANCE had been unmissable. He might put it differently and say that Clare had been as beautiful as her grandmother. They shared their beauty.

He wished he'd said it when they were both alive. Might he say it now to this woman?

But Clare's grandmother had died. Just when Clare was leaving school, when she'd gained a place at university and was turning 18, just when she was deserving of blessings and congratulations—not least from her grandmother—her grandmother had stolen her thunder and died.

A reason? A trigger? If only her grandmother hadn't died.

Well, yes. He said it constantly to himself. If only Ruth, his wife, Ruth, Clare's grandmother, hadn't died.

And sometimes he even said—unreasonably and harshly: If only Clare hadn't stolen his grief.

COLD GUSTS blew around the pathway. The canopy above them rattled and tinkled. He was in the coat he'd arrived in. This woman must be suffering, in just her white blouse and black cardigan. She must have thought, back in her office, that it would be somehow unseemly, under the solemn circumstances, to go through the petty business of fetching her coat and putting it on.

He had said—it was common decency—“It’s chilly out there. Aren’t you going to put on a coat?” He hadn’t thought this visit would involve such niceties.

But no. It was “no distance.” Or perhaps she’d thought that she should appear penitent. Though was it her fault? He hadn’t said it was anyone’s fault. He hadn’t come here to blame.

Though he hadn’t come here, either, to console. Poor woman, she must have been going through it.

A black cardigan, a black skirt. To offer a token touch of the funereal? A black skirt that hugged her hips. Was it for him to notice?

“MRS. GIBBS?”

Another phone call.

“Yes. This is—Mrs. Gibbs speaking.”

He hadn’t known whether to call her “Mrs. Gibbs” or “Dr. Gibbs” or even, possibly, “Dean Gibbs.” She was, apparently, a dean.

“This is Mr. Phillips.” He might have said “Tom Phillips,” but didn’t. “I’m Clare Heywood’s grandfather. I mean, I was her grandfather.”

“Ah.”

He’d heard the tremor of exasperation.

Yes, he could well imagine the tough time of it this woman has been having. Not only imagine; he knew it, from Helen and Paul. Sarah Gibbs was their “liaison” with the university. Perhaps she’d thought that after three weeks she’d almost weathered it. Now here was an agitated grandfather.

He’d heard the exhaustion in her voice. But three weeks was nothing. How long did you—could you—give such a thing? He’d been told, many times, well-meaningly, that he’d “get used” to Ruth’s death, or, more subtly, that he’d “get used to not getting used to it.” Well, six months had passed and he hadn’t gotten used to anything. Six months was nothing.

And how did you ever get used to *this*?

“Mr. Phillips—please, would you accept my deepest condolences.”

A fair start. It had even been said with a sort of gentleness.

Then he said, “There’s something I’d like to discuss.” And he thought he’d heard an intake of breath.

Yes, she might have had enough “discussion.” Enough fielding, in its various forms, the relentless question “Why?” He’d had to steel himself to make this call—to get put through. Now he sensed

*She was
beautiful.
He hadn’t
expected it.
He hadn’t
expected to
be confronted
with beauty.
Yet he’d at
once thought:
Jesus Christ,
she’s beautiful.*

a steeliness on her part. Perhaps she was really some horn-rimmed harridan.

“No, I don’t mean ‘discuss.’ There’s something I’d like to *do*.”

LESS THAN A WEEK LATER, on this gray day, he’d found himself in her

office. His “request” had been granted. Could it be refused? A date had been agreed on. He’d taken a train. A taxi from the station. He’d been directed to the appropriate administrative block. He was still steeled, still prepared for some harridan. But—

She was beautiful. He hadn’t expected it. He hadn’t expected to be confronted with beauty. Yet he’d at once thought: Jesus Christ, she’s beautiful. Some inner voice that he thought he’d lost years ago had said it, even in such brazen language.

And he was at once bewildered. Doubly bewildered. He was bewildered anyway. It seemed that he’d entered long ago a permanent state of bewilderment. Life had become bewilderment.

She’d stood up, behind her desk.

“Mr. Phillips, I’m Sarah Gibbs.”

Forty-four? Forty-five? The same age as Helen, a little older. Might that have helped Helen in their “discussions”? Could anything have helped Helen? Or Paul?

Forty-five? Forty-six? And, probably, a mother too, perhaps with a daughter of her own, around Clare’s age. Why had he immediately thought: daughter? But, in any case, young and old enough to be his own daughter. And beautiful.

She came forward, extending a hand. A black cardigan over a white blouse. A black skirt. What did she make of his own choice: a suit and tie, visible beneath the unbuttoned coat that he seemed uneager to remove? A stern let’s-get-on-with-it look about him. And yet—could she see it?—he’d been stopped in his tracks.

“Please call me Sarah.”

Had he said, “I’m Tom”?

Bewilderment. The words *Mrs. Gibbs* or *Dr. Gibbs*, let alone *Dean Gibbs*, didn’t go with the word *beautiful*. If *beautiful*, in this context, was even a legitimate word. He hadn’t found any other woman beautiful since Ruth died. He hadn’t thought it possible, permissible. Now it was happening, now of all times.

“Please, Mr. Phillips, won’t you sit down?”

He hadn’t wanted to sit down. Sitting down led to “discussion,” to not getting on with it. But he sat, without taking off his coat. A compromise. She hadn’t said, after all, “Won’t you take off your coat?”



When she sat too, at her desk again, he noticed, inside the collar of her blouse, a single string of pearls. He felt a stab, an unwarranted but undeniable stab. She might have seen his eyes glisten. A present from a husband, for some special occasion. She belonged still to that world in which husbands gave presents to their wives, a world of pearl necklaces. The world he no longer inhabited.

NOW SHE walked beside him, her hand sometimes seeking her throat, as if to coax from it unobtainable words, or to tell herself that, instead of a pearl necklace, she might at least have worn a scarf.

HE'D DECLINED, perhaps too briskly, the inevitable offer of a coffee or tea, but seen the flicker of relief in her face. No sitting around for five minutes, clinking cups. She, too, perhaps, wished to get on with it. Or get it over with.

The face had, yes, its signs of strain, but this didn't stop it having its principal effect. He was actually afraid that if they lingered for any length of time, looking at each other across her desk, she must see in his own face the awkward fact that he was attracted to her.

Attractive. A better—safer—word than *beautiful*? It was almost neutral. But it wasn't the first word that had come into his head. And what did this—business—between them have to do with safety? It was too late for safety. Though she was apparently a dean, charged not with the academic needs of students but with their general welfare. Their safety. Hadn't she failed, catastrophically?

But he hadn't come here to blame. Though perhaps she thought he had—sitting there, in his coat, like some impatient inspector.

Did she find him frightening? While he found her beautiful.

The pearls had trembled as she spoke.

"You must realize, Mr. Phillips, that Clare's room has now been cleared."

It was good that she called it "Clare's room," but there was the little collision of "Clare" and "clear." They were the same word. Had she noticed and regretted it?

And cleared was itself a strange expression. But, yes, he'd "realized." He'd known

from Helen and Paul. It was, anyway, a reasonable assumption. He hadn't been expecting, after more than three weeks, a room that would be "just as she left it." A room full of things. Full of Clare. That would have been unbearable.

"Everything that belonged to her has been—taken by her parents. It's just, I'm afraid, a bare room. We are keeping it empty and locked as a—mark of respect."

He'd thought, but not said: For how long? Long enough for this visit of his? How long would be appropriate? He'd thought: Poor students who had the rooms on either side, who shared the corridor. Poor student who, one day, whenever the period of respect was over, might get allocated the same room.

He said, "I understand. But even so."

Meaning: Even so, I'd still like to go there.

Had she been thinking that at the last minute he'd reconsider? Was she worried that she might not get through this little exercise herself? Might he have to hold her hand?

Was she frightened of him?

"Well, then." She got to her feet again, but paused, her fingertips pressing her desk. "If you're sure."

"Quite sure. It's why I'm here." He tried to smile.

She took from among the things on her desk a set of keys. But, for whatever self-punishing reason, disdained a coat.

AND NOW they were walking along a covered but exposed pathway and she must be frozen, but he couldn't bring himself to offer her his own coat. Part of him, in fact, longed to offer it, to be in circumstances where he might not only offer it, but take the opportunity to nestle it around her. But these were not those circumstances. He was shivering too, even in his coat. These were circumstances that, in any weather, might have caused shivers.

"No distance"? Hadn't she learned the dimensions of her own university? They walked along pathways, between buildings and wintry lawns, across paved spaces that seemed to have been recently equipped with brightly colored, screwed-down metal benches and tables, though the paving itself, he noticed, was

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blackened and puddled. The buildings, too, which must once have been modern and “contemporary,” had streaks and stains on their brickwork.

And as they walked together, he was aware of their togetherness in a way that, though he’d imagined that there might be such a walk, he’d not foreseen he would peculiarly appreciate.

Attracted, attractive. The safer words? He was having feelings about her, and it was shocking, shaming, bewildering that he was having such feelings when engaged in such a purpose.

And when, anyway, for God’s sake, he was *old*.

HE’D RECOGNIZED IT, accepted it. He was 68. He’d not recognized it when Ruth died. He’d been 67, Ruth 66. He’d felt then, even with gushes of anger: I’m too young for this, too young. Ruth had certainly been too young. But, after this other terrible thing, he’d become old.

Sixty-eight? That’s not old, they might say, not these days; it’s nothing. But he recognized it. There are things that age you.

He was an old man, even a ridiculous and grotesque old man, walking beside this woman young enough to be his daughter, and having feelings about her. He was in his suit and tie and coat, but he might as well have still been wearing the dressing gown he’d worn this morning. A permanent, flapping old man’s dressing gown, the February wind now and then revealing his bare, blue old man’s knees.

And around him were young people. Of course there were. It was a university. They flitted around like so many ghosts, using the paths, going in and out of buildings, crossing the paved spaces with the playground furniture. Some of them nodded, even smiled at Mrs. Gibbs, a little sheepishly, he thought. And what on earth did they make of him?

He was an old man among ghostly young people, and must look like a ghost to them. Or perhaps like a man who had seen a ghost. Or was going to see one.

THEY HARDLY SPOKE. It was a silencing walk. He felt the onus was on him to gallantly dispel the silence, but he lacked

the means. What topic was appropriate? And there was no question of their batting between them the word that yet surely hung over them and that had hung over everything for more than three weeks: Why?

*He thought
that she might
have been
prepared for
him to have
some kind of
convulsion,
to weep.
Prepared,
even, to
put an arm
around him.*

No one had the answer. Clare herself had left no explanation. No note. There was nothing she’d said to any friend—or family member—to be recalled, even with hindsight, as ominous.

Why? It started and at once stopped conversations. But it was the only word

that mattered. He’d not pushed it forward in his dreadful conversations—if *conversations* was even the right word—with Helen and Paul. He wasn’t going to thrust at them a word for which, though they must have ceaselessly struggled to find it, they clearly had no answer.

Paul was now an experienced legal counsel, no doubt used to sharply getting to a point, but he was as beyond words as Helen. And as for “counsel.”

THEY WALKED. His heart was thumping at what lay ahead. At the same time his blood was tingling, outrageously, at something else. It was being warmed by this woman—who must be freezing—at his side.

Was it all a monstrous conflation? It was Clare who’d been beautiful, Clare who’d taken after Ruth and been beautiful and young and had so many other things going for her. But who’d deliberately and meticulously over a sufficient period of time stored up some pills and then killed herself in the room that he was about to be shown.

THEY TURNED, at last, into one of the residential blocks. This must be the one. They went up two flights of stairs. A corridor. The doors to rooms, perhaps seven or eight on either side. He had the dream-like illusion that Mrs. Gibbs, with her set of keys, was taking him to *his* room, to where it would be his lot to be staying, some strange, uncategorizable guest. After she’d unlocked the door and shown him the room, she would hand him the key.

And now they were outside it. “Clare’s room.” It was just a door. There was no special sign, least of all an indelible CLARE HEYWOOD. Just a number: 16. Between 15 and 17. She unlocked the door and stepped back, to let him enter first.

A bare rectangular room, quite small. A few fittings. A folding flap of a desk. A window with a view, a pleasant-enough view of trees—now all bare too—and sloping lawns. Paths. Another of those paved spaces with the colorful apparatus. Her last view.

But it had happened, of course, at night.

A bed, also bare, just a mattress. A single bed. But he knew from his own direct,

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if ancient, experience, which he had no wish to invoke in detail, how these single rooms and single beds might become intimately shared.

He stood in the room. It was all impossibly cruel. It was like some neat, comfortable, yet punitive cell. Surely not a condemned one.

Why?

Mrs. Gibbs said, behind him, “Would you like, perhaps—some time to yourself? Would you like me to wait along the corridor?”

“No. It’s all right.”

He was glad of her hovering presence. And, even now, of the tingle. Did she feel it? Was it, conceivably, a mutual thing? He felt in any case that she, too, preferred not to be left alone—standing at the end of the corridor, clasping her arms around herself and wondering how long he might need.

While she stood at his shoulder, he scanned the room. Was there, in a corner, some clue, an overlooked clue, some hint that only a grandfather might discern? But it didn’t take long to take in everything—and nothing.

It was all he could do, all he could have done. It didn’t even look like “her,” or anyone’s, room. He’d never come here when she and all her things had been in it. He’d never visited, proudly, when she was a new university student, 18 years old, with her life before her. She’d been born—that Sunday-morning call had come—in the momentous year 2000. What did they think, those flitting ghosts, about their future? He, her grandfather, had been born in the not unresonant year 1950. And had outlived his granddaughter.

Would it have made any difference if he’d visited? Surely it would have been the last thing she’d have wanted, a *grandfather* turning up to embarrass her before her newfound friends. And in any case, her *bereaved* grandfather, with his smell of age and grief.

But he was here now, with his even stronger smell, the bare trees outside peering in at him like so many assembled witnesses.

AFTER A WHILE he turned and said, “Okay, that’s enough.”

Mrs. Gibbs was standing closer than he’d thought.

He said, “I’m glad I came.” A clumsy statement. But, truly, he was. Even if *glad* was a preposterous word.

She let him out, then relocked the door. It was as though he’d said, “No, I won’t take it, I won’t take this room.”

He thought that she might have been prepared for him to have some kind of convulsion, to weep. Prepared, even, to put an arm around him. But no, it hadn’t been needed. At least he’d spared her that, and sacrificed, for himself, the chance to receive from her some faltering, pitying—soft, womanly—embrace.

If Clare had been a ghost, haunting her room, what would she have thought to behold such a thing?

AROUND THEM AGAIN, as they walked back, flitted all those other ghosts. And as they walked back, they walked, once more, mostly in silence. But this time he said it. It seemed it would have been heartless not to. “It’s really freezing. Won’t you have my coat?” And—for whatever reason—she declined, with a little determined shake of her head. “It’s all right.” Though she’d clearly been trembling.

He thought, then, that she might burst into tears. That she might be the one, in her role of dean, of guardian, of faintly maternal protectress, to suddenly break down. And require comforting.

And again, as they walked, what small talk was there? Oh yes, I was at university myself once. It was where I met my wife ...

IN HER OFFICE, as he made his final departure and they shook hands, he said once more, “I’m glad I came. Thank you, Mrs. Gibbs. Thank you very much for

your trouble.” But he didn’t, even at this point, call her “Sarah” or give her hand some extra affectionate squeeze.

And the strange thing was that, even as she’d relocked that door, even as he’d offered her his coat, his extraordinary rush of feeling for her—his attraction, his perplexity before her beauty—began to fade. It seemed itself like some departing ghost.

Was she beautiful? Or had he in some unaccountable way gifted beauty upon her?

When he said goodbye, he said something else. He said that his daughter and son-in-law, Helen and Paul, Clare’s parents, didn’t know about this visit of his; he’d not mentioned it to them. And he asked Mrs. Gibbs if—were she to have any further dealings with Helen and Paul—she might not mention it either. He asked if they might keep this visit of his “between themselves.”

And that’s just what it had been—more than he’d supposed. Between themselves.

She had blinked a bit. Out of surprise, or out of a sense of complicity. Or she’d just blinked. And yes, when she’d blinked he’d thought that her dark-brown eyes were beautiful.

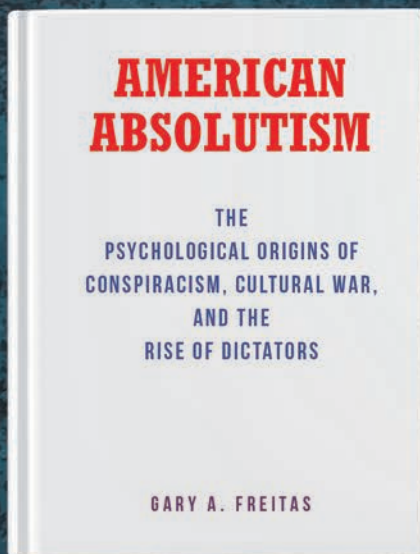
She said, “I won’t say anything.” But she didn’t ask why. She just said, “I understand.”

“I understand.” The words, too, were like a ghost. Nobody understood anything.

On his train back, he wondered if Mrs. Gibbs would remember him: the man, the grandfather—Mr. Phillips—who came to look at just an empty room. Or was she already forgetting him, putting him away, with relief perhaps, in some file for unclassifiable items?

Outside his window, the February sky darkened. The scudding fields and trees became obscure, until he could see nothing of them beyond his own reflection seemingly keeping him company in the dark. *A*

Graham Swift is the author, most recently, of Here We Are.



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1 Opposite of bottom
4 “Burnable” music tech
that came between tapes
and streaming
7 Shakespeare’s *Much* ____
About Nothing
8 Uncooked
9 Adjective at the beginning of
four American-state names
10 “Revolutionary Love”
singer DiFranco
11 Tales that take a while to tell
13 Illusions in the desert
15 Being broadcast
16 Get up to speed
18 Sowing machine
20 More than just mist up
22 *Femme*-to-be
23 Step-counting wearable
24 She replaced Fallon on
“Weekend Update”
25 Magic city, briefly
26 Craft in many conspiracies,
briefly
27 Perched-on projections
29 Auditory reflection
30 Haul in a sack, perhaps?
32 Toponymic Dutch wheels
34 Statistic for good passers
36 Flight phase before touchdown
37 Stereotypical bedroom-door
slammer
38 Norwegian flatbread
traditionally eaten
on Christmas

- 1 Hue you might become
by lying in the sun
- 2 Poem of praise
- 3 Neckwear for an alpha
- 4 Daniel who played James
Bond after Pierce
- 5 Do the cha-cha or the
Cha-Cha Slide
- 6 Like some holey cheese
and classic watches
- 12 With 28-Down, like this
answer, if it were a road
- 13 Unruly groups
- 14 Phrase before the subject
of a memo, maybe
- 17 Experience sadness
- 19 Depictions made by
carving into a surface
- 21 Fossil-fuel prefix
- 22 Indoor sports arena
- 23 Take back a title, in a way
- 24 Tool for skiing or fishing
- 28 See 12-Down
- 31 Image that's elegantly
unadorned?
- 32 Alligator ____ (fish that can
weigh more than 300 pounds)
- 33 Becomes a pressure
cooker, perhaps?
- 35 Last word of the year, to many
- 38 "Now, what could the answer
to this clue be ..."
- 39 Power-train component
- 40 Sony acquisition of
2008, briefly
- 41 Fenty nickname



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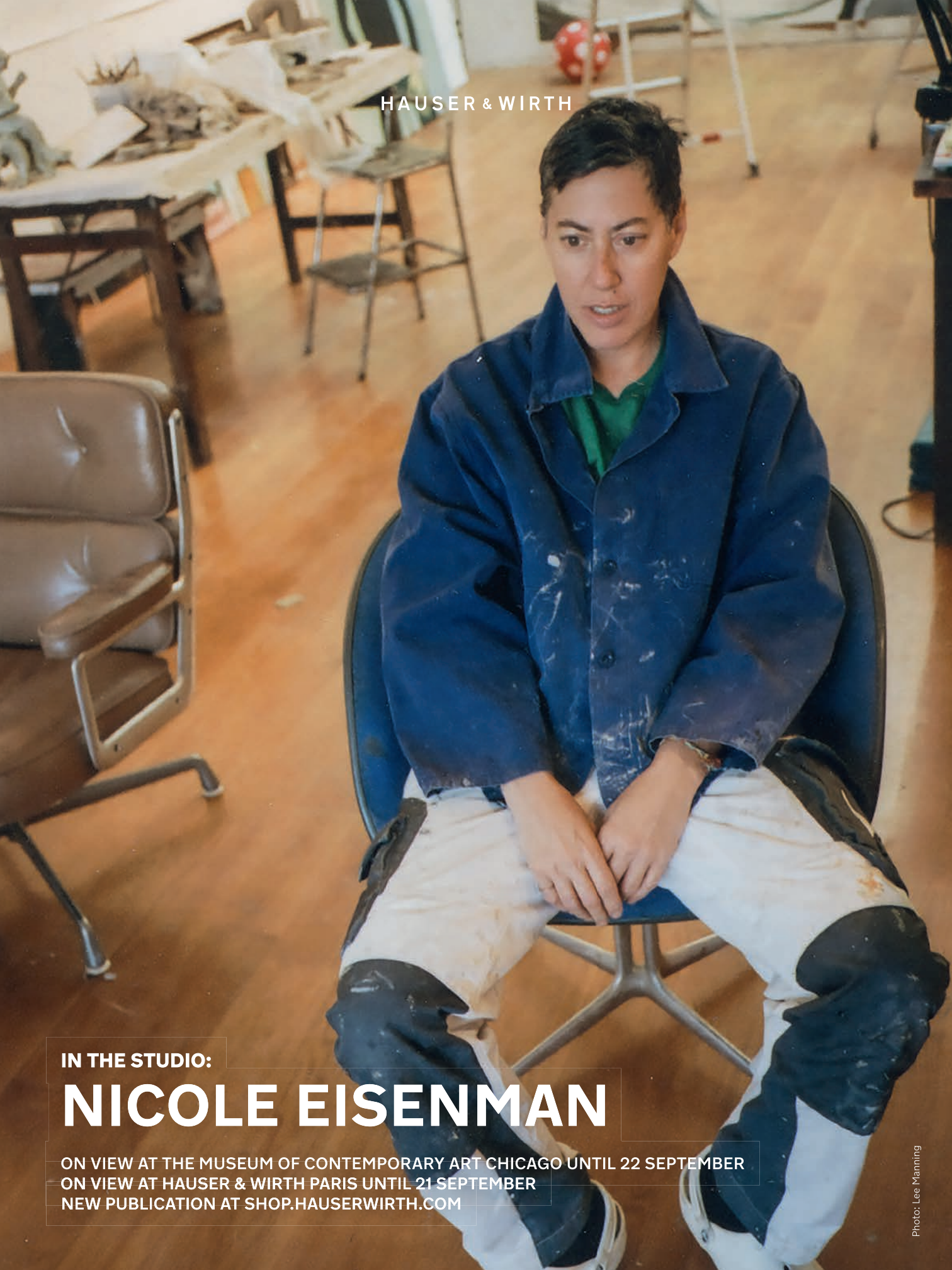
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A photograph of Nicole Eisenman sitting in a black office chair in her studio. She is wearing a dark blue, paint-splattered button-down jacket over a green shirt, and white pants with large black patches on the knees. Her hands are clasped in her lap. The studio has a wooden floor, a brown leather chair to the left, and various art supplies and sculptures in the background.

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