

Chasing Joan Didion

What was it that
gave her such power?

By Caitlin Flanagan

A

The Atlantic

EST. 1857



Wayne M. Hunter



STEFANOS TSITSIPAS, NITTO ATP FINALS



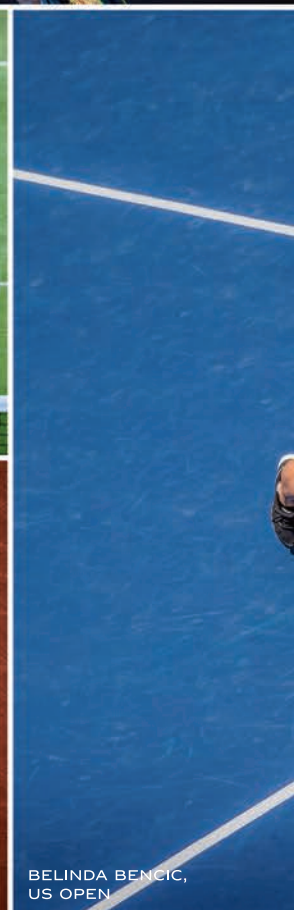
GARBIÑE MUGURUZA, AUSTRALIAN OPEN



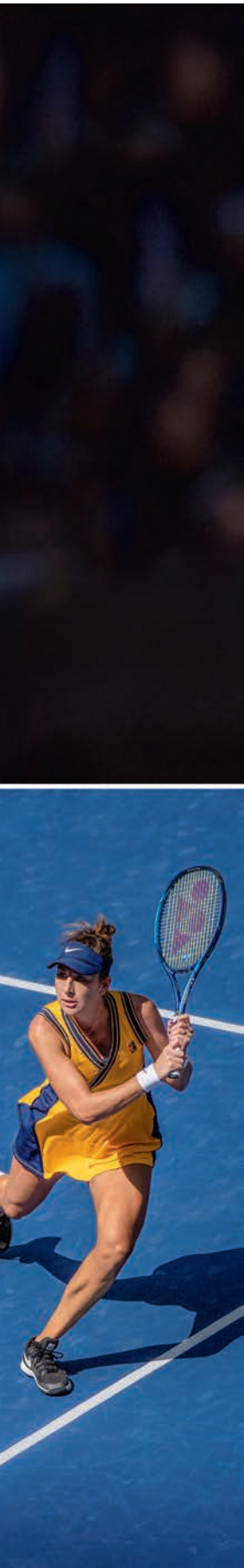
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Features

18

HOW LONG CAN THIS GO ON?

By Caitlin Dickerson

Poland has taken in millions of Ukrainian refugees since the start of the war, but patience is fraying. And some are more welcome than others.

28

How Politics Poisoned the Church

The evangelical movement spent 40 years at war with secular America. Now it's at war with itself.

By Tim Alberta

44

Can Forensic Science Be Trusted?

The story of a forensic analyst in Ohio reveals the systemic flaws in American crime labs.

By Barbara Bradley Hagerty

56

COVER STORY

Chasing Joan Didion

What was it that gave her such power?

By Caitlin Flanagan

Nikita Symik, 6, brought his stuffed cat to Poland when he and his mother crossed the border from Ukraine soon after the war began. The two have been living in Warsaw with a host family, and struggling to navigate language and bureaucratic obstacles.

Front

8
The Commons
Discussion & Debate

Dispatches

11
OPENING ARGUMENT
“They’re Not Human Beings”
Ukraine and the words that lead to mass murder
By Anne Applebaum

Culture & Critics

74
OMNIVORE
Fox News Does Late Night
Greg Gutfeld has owned the libs all the way to the top of the ratings.
By James Parker

78
BOOKS
Tracy Flick for Principal
Tom Perrotta’s ’90s antihero returns.
By Judith Shulevitz

81
Hi-Fi
A poem by Sydney Lea

82
BOOKS
Blaming Our Inner Ape
Humans love to pin retrograde gender dynamics on our primate cousins. Is that fair?
By Rebecca Giggs

86
BOOKS
The Defiant Strangeness of Werner Herzog
The director brings his signature theme—quixotic adventurers—to his debut novel.
By A. O. Scott

Back

90
ESSAY
Losing Medgar
After the civil-rights leader was assassinated, the movement was never the same—and neither was my father.
By David Dennis Jr.

100
Ode to Chewing Gum
By James Parker

On the Cover

ILLUSTRATION BY
WAYDE McINTOSH

Am I ready for a constantly changing world?

Does my strategy embrace it?
And my portfolio reflect it?



For some of life's questions, you're not alone.
Together we can find an answer.

Behind the Cover: In “Chasing Joan Didion” (p. 56), Caitlin Flanagan sets out on a journey to visit some of the places in California where the late writer lived. For the magazine’s cover, we wanted to re-create her in a vivid light. We asked the artist

Wayde McIntosh to portray her on the beach, in Malibu. McIntosh’s Didion meets our gaze before a backdrop of rich yellows, blues, and greens that evoke the Southern California hills where she once resided.

— Gabriela Pesqueira, *Associate Art Director*

THE

Absolute Power

Mohammed bin Salman is modernizing a stubbornly premodern kingdom, Graeme Wood wrote in April. He has also eliminated rivals and critics, creating a climate of fear without precedent in Saudi Arabia’s history.

the gruesome murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Saudi Arabia has an unelected, authoritarian regime that brutally suppresses dissent. The status of women there remains subordinate, and the recent “reforms” hardly even qualify as cosmetic. Saudi Arabia’s brutal war in Yemen has created one of the world’s most horrific humanitarian disasters. MBS has not condemned Vladimir Putin’s slaughter of innocent Ukrainian civilians. There is no excuse for coddling authoritarian murderers.

Gary Stewart
Laguna Beach, Calif.

I’ve never written a letter to the editor before, but felt compelled to after reading Graeme Wood’s recent article “Of Course Journalists Should Interview Autocrats,” written in response to criticism of his April cover story. Both this article and Mr. Wood’s original profile of MBS were really important pieces of journalism that informed me about a world leader and an accused assassin who has largely fallen out of the news as outrage over Jamal Khashoggi’s murder has ebbed.

That’s why I was disappointed to read that Mr. Wood’s article had caused a bit of a stir among Western journalists. He was 100 percent correct when he wrote in his follow-up article, “Any publication bragging that it is too sanctimonious to accept an invitation to interview the crown prince of Saudi Arabia is admitting it cannot cover Saudi Arabia.” Although Mr. Wood’s words may have been used by Saudi propagandists and caused controversy here in the West, I

Letters

G

Graeme Wood’s article is the best argument I’ve read in some time for why the West needs to wean itself off oil. Mohammed bin Salman is very scary, and holds

great power only because of our oil addiction. The prospect of him being in power for 40 to 50 years is truly chilling, and should be all the incentive we need to move to renewable energy now.

Thomas Cannon
Leicester, N.C.

No sooner had I read Graeme Wood’s fascinating article on absolute power in Saudi Arabia than I saw the news that 81 people had been executed in one day in the country.

Wood concludes his article with great care and skill, yet suggests that the U.S. must find a modus vivendi to work with the crown prince. Is this possible?

Frank Vogl
*Author, The Enablers
Washington, D.C.*

I have read *The Atlantic* for years. While I appreciate that your publication often presents a differing perspective from my own, I find the nature of this interview unconscionable.

I would love to know why, in your opinion, MBS agreed to cooperate for this article. Do you think he likes the attention? Do you think he knew his team could cherry-pick pieces of praise from it? Do you think he thought it could whitewash his tarnished legacy? It seems to me that it did all three.

Alex Chapman
New Orleans, La.

There are no words for what *The Atlantic* has done here. The U.S. intelligence community has concluded that MBS approved



am proud of both him and *The Atlantic* for interviewing MBS.

Eric Wells
Miami, Fla.

It was amazing to me how much character was revealed by the quotations that Graeme Wood chose to put in his frightening portrait of Saudi Arabia's leader without ever making a statement of his own opinion.

Bruce C. Miller
Alexandria, Va.

Stiff Neck

Richard Russo had run out of sympathy for COVID skeptics, he wrote in April—until he remembered his father.

Thanks for Richard Russo's thoughtful essay about loss of sympathy for anti-vaxxers. The way Russo related this global issue to his personal experience with his in-laws, and the sometimes-outdated views his late father espoused from his barstool, reaffirmed why he is one of my favorite writers. And his point about how lack of access to good health care has contributed to the anti-vax movement is something I hadn't fully considered.

However, the bigger problem remains: Those who spread COVID skepticism—or racism, like Russo's dad—don't just hurt themselves; they damage society at large. Perhaps, as Russo suggests, writing about others, and

reading about them, can give us the empathy many seem to be lacking.

Adam Idelson
New York, N.Y.

Just before reading Richard Russo's beautiful essay, I was reviewing my students' answers to various multiple-choice questions on a recent quiz. Just about everyone got most of the questions right, but for one particular question, half of the students selected the wrong answer. When that happens, either

the question was phrased in a confusing way or the instructor failed to communicate the underlying principle effectively. It would clearly be inappropriate to conclude that because they selected the wrong response, half of the students must be fools. As Russo so artfully points out, the same is true of refusals to wear a mask or receive inoculations to protect against COVID-19. If a large share of the population refuses to follow public-health recommendations, then something is wrong either with

the way important messages are delivered or with the way many people's life experiences are understood. As a society, we must learn to do better on both fronts. Along the way, Russo's comments may help restore an appropriate level of compassion for those who suffer needlessly.

Steve Weissman
Lecturer, UC Berkeley
Goldman School of Public Policy
Berkeley, Calif.

To respond to *Atlantic* articles or submit author questions to The Commons, please email letters@theatlantic.com. Include your full name, city, and state.

THE FACTS

*What we learned
fact-checking this issue*

In "Can Forensic Science Be Trusted?" (p. 44), Barbara Bradley Hagerty writes about the public's reverence for forensic science, a field that was given new prominence when the series *CSI* became a hit in the early aughts. That long-running show, as well as its many spin-offs and look-alikes, offered viewers a glossy, high-tech vision of forensics—a world where compelling evidence is almost always

available and savvy investigators produce conclusive findings.

A number of studies about the so-called *CSI* effect find that familiarity with the show does not seem to sway jurors' verdicts. Still, research suggests, watching *CSI* can influence jurors' expectations about what kind of evidence should be presented in court.

Prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judges are all alert to the potential pitfalls of such expectations—as I saw in trial transcripts I read while fact-checking Hagerty's article. During

a 2008 murder trial, an Ohio prosecutor asked prospective jurors if they could set aside their assumptions—"not feeling like Horatio [the protagonist on *CSI: Miami*] would have done this and that, and the other thing."

Such approaches are not uncommon, as the law professor Tamara F. Lawson has noted. One Florida judge routinely asks jurors before selection if they realize that some tests performed on *CSI* aren't possible in real life, and confirms that they'd be willing to convict without *CSI*-style evidence. A

Maryland judge has reminded jurors that "there is no legal requirement that the State utilize any specific investigative technique or scientific test to prove its case." Anticipating that jurors will expect fingerprint evidence, prosecutors now frequently have a fingerprint examiner testify, even in cases where no prints were found.

As a prosecutor put it in his closing argument in that 2008 murder trial: "We live in a *CSI* age. We put on the show."

—Stephanie Hayes,
Deputy Research Chief

Correction: "The Abortion Underground" (May) misstated the level of bleeding that is considered excessive after a medication abortion. The article has also been updated online to reflect a "trigger ban" passed in Wyoming in March, after the magazine went to press.

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

“THEY’RE NOT HUMAN BEINGS”

*Ukraine and the words
that lead to mass murder*

BY ANNE APPLEBAUM

In the terrible winter of 1932–33, brigades of Communist Party activists went house to house in the Ukrainian countryside, looking for food. The brigades were from Moscow, Kyiv, and Kharkiv, as well as villages down the road. They dug up gardens, broke open walls, and used long rods to poke up chimneys, searching for hidden grain. They watched for smoke coming from chimneys, because that might mean a family had hidden flour and was baking bread. They led away farm animals and confiscated tomato seedlings. After they left, Ukrainian peasants, deprived of food, ate rats, frogs, and boiled grass. They gnawed on tree bark and leather. Many resorted to cannibalism to stay alive. Some 4 million died of starvation.

At the time, the activists felt no guilt. Soviet propaganda had repeatedly told them that supposedly wealthy peasants, whom they called kulaks, were saboteurs and enemies—rich, stubborn landowners who were preventing the Soviet proletariat from achieving the utopia that its leaders had promised. The kulaks should be swept away, crushed like parasites or flies. Their food should be given to the workers in the cities, who deserved it more than they did. Years later, the Ukrainian-born Soviet defector Viktor Kravchenko wrote about what it was like to be part of one of those brigades. “To spare yourself mental agony you veil unpleasant truths from view by half-closing your eyes—and your mind,” he explained. “You make panicky excuses and shrug off knowledge with words like exaggeration and hysteria.”

He also described how political jargon and euphemisms helped camouflage the reality of what they were doing. His team spoke of the “peasant front” and the “kulak menace,” “village socialism” and “class resistance,” to avoid giving humanity to the people whose food they were stealing. Lev Kopelev, another Soviet writer who as a young man had served in an activist brigade in the countryside (later he spent years in the Gulag), had very similar reflections. He too had found that clichés and ideological language helped him hide what he was doing, even from himself:

I persuaded myself, explained to myself. I mustn't give in to debilitating pity. We were realizing historical necessity. We were performing our

revolutionary duty. We were obtaining grain for the socialist fatherland. For the five-year plan.

There was no need to feel sympathy for the peasants. They did not deserve to exist. Their rural riches would soon be the property of all.

But the kulaks were not rich; they were starving. The countryside was not wealthy; it was a wasteland. This is how Kravchenko described it in his memoirs, written many years later:

Large quantities of implements and machinery, which had once been cared for like so many jewels by their private owners, now lay scattered under the open skies, dirty, rusting and out of repair. Emaciated cows and horses, crusted with manure, wandered through the yard. Chickens, geese and ducks were digging in flocks in the unthreshed grain.

That reality, a reality he had seen with his own eyes, was strong enough to remain in his memory. But at the time he experienced it, he was able to convince himself of the opposite. Vasily Grossman, another Soviet writer, gives these words to a character in his novel *Everything Flows*:

I'm no longer under a spell, I can see now that the kulaks were human beings. But why was my heart so frozen at the time? When such terrible things were being done, when such suffering was going on all around me? And the truth is that I truly didn't think of them as human beings.

“They're not human beings, they're kulak trash”—that's what I heard again and again, that's what everyone kept repeating.

NINE DECADES HAVE passed since those events took place. The Soviet Union no longer exists. The works of Kopelev, Kravchenko, and Grossman have long been available to Russian readers who want them.

In the late 1980s, during the period of glasnost, their

ALL OF
THIS—THE
INDIFFERENCE
TO VIOLENCE,
THE AMORAL
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ABOUT MASS
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ANYONE WHO
KNOWS SOVIET
HISTORY.

books and other accounts of the Stalinist regime and the Gulag camps were best sellers in Russia. Once, we assumed that the mere telling of these stories would make it impossible for anyone to repeat them. But although the same books are theoretically still available, few people buy them. Memorial, the most important historical society in Russia, has been forced to close. Official museums and monuments to the victims remain small and obscure. Instead of declining, the Russian state's ability to disguise reality from its citizens and to dehumanize its enemies

has grown stronger and more powerful than ever.

Nowadays, less violence is required to misinform the public: There have been no mass arrests in Putin's Russia on the scale used in Stalin's Russia. Perhaps there don't need to be, because Russian state-run television, the primary source of information for most Russians, is more entertaining, more sophisticated, more stylish than programs on the crackly radios of Stalin's era. Social media is far more addictive and absorbing than the badly printed newspapers of that era, too. Professional trolls and influencers can shape online conversation in ways that are helpful to the Kremlin, and with far less effort than in the past.

The modern Russian state has also set the bar lower. Instead of offering its citizens a vision of utopia, it wants them to be cynical and passive; whether they actually believe what the state tells them is irrelevant. Although Soviet leaders lied, they tried to make their falsehoods seem real. They got angry when anyone accused them of lying, and they produced fake “evidence” or counterarguments. In Putin's Russia, politicians and television personalities play a different game, one that we in America know from the political campaigns of Donald Trump. They lie constantly, blatantly, obviously. But if you accuse them of lying, they don't bother to offer counterarguments. When Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 was shot down over Ukraine in 2014, the Russian government reacted not only with a denial, but with multiple stories, plausible and implausible: The Ukrainian army was responsible, or the CIA was, or it was a nefarious plot in which 298

dead people were placed on a plane in order to fake a crash and discredit Russia. This constant stream of falsehoods produces not outrage, but apathy. Given so many explanations, how can you know whether anything is ever true? What if nothing is ever true?

Instead of promoting a Communist paradise, modern Russian propaganda has for the past decade focused on enemies. Russians are told very little about what happens in their own towns or cities. As a result, they aren't forced, as Soviet citizens once were, to confront the gap between reality and fiction. Instead, they are told constantly about places they don't know and have mostly never seen: America, France and Britain, Sweden and Poland—places filled with degeneracy, hypocrisy, and “Russophobia.” A study of Russian television from 2014 to 2017 found that negative news about Europe appeared on the three main Russian channels, all state-controlled, an average of 18 times a day. Some of the stories were invented (*the German government is forcibly taking children away from straight families and giving them to gay couples*), but even true stories were picked to support the idea that daily life in Europe is frightening and chaotic, Europeans are weak and immoral, the European Union is aggressive and interventionist.

If anything, the portrayal of America has been worse. U.S. citizens who rarely think about Russia would be stunned to learn how much time Russian state television devotes to the American people, American politics, even American culture wars. In March, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, displayed an alarmingly intimate

acquaintance with Twitter arguments about J. K. Rowling and her views on transgender rights at a press conference. It's hard to imagine any American politician, or indeed almost any American, talking about a popular Russian political controversy with the same fluency. But that's because no American

Within the ever-changing drama of anger and fear that unfolds every night on the Russian evening news, Ukraine has long played a special role. In Russian propaganda, Ukraine is a fake country, one without history or legitimacy, a place that is, in the words of Putin himself, nothing more than

he has said, in order to defend Russia “from those who have taken Ukraine hostage and are trying to use it against our country and our people.”

In truth, Putin invaded Ukraine in order to turn it into a colony with a puppet regime himself, because he cannot conceive of it ever being anything else. His KGB-influenced imagination does not allow for the possibility of authentic politics, grassroots movements, even public opinion. In Putin's language, and in the language of most Russian television commentators, the Ukrainians have no agency. They can't make choices for themselves. They can't elect a government for themselves. They aren't even human—they are “Nazis.” And so, like the kulaks before them, they can be eliminated with no remorse.



“Kolkhoznik, guard your fields against the class enemies.” A Soviet propaganda poster from the 1930s.

politician lives and breathes the ups and downs of Russian partisan arguments in the same way that the Russian president lives and breathes the battles that take place on American cable networks and on social media—battles in which his professional trolls and proxies compete and take sides, promoting whatever they think will be divisive and polarizing.

the “southwest” of Russia, an inalienable part of Russia’s “history, culture and spiritual space.” Worse, Putin says, this fake state has been weaponized by the degenerate, dying Western powers into a hostile “anti-Russia.” The Russian president has described Ukraine as “fully controlled from the outside” and as “a colony with a puppet regime.” He invaded Ukraine,

THE RELATIONSHIP between genocidal language and genocidal behavior is not automatic or even predictable. Human beings can insult one another, demean one another, and verbally abuse one another without trying to kill one another. But while not every use of genocidal hate speech leads to genocide, all genocides have been preceded by genocidal hate speech. The modern Russian propaganda state turned out to be the ideal vehicle both for carrying out mass murder and for hiding it from the public. The gray apparatchiks, FSB operatives, and well-coiffed anchorwomen who organize and conduct the national conversation had for years been preparing their compatriots to feel no pity for Ukraine.

They succeeded. From the first days of the war, it was evident that the Russian military



Women walk past people dying of starvation during the Ukrainian famine in the early 1930s.

had planned in advance for many civilians, perhaps millions, to be killed, wounded, or displaced from their homes in Ukraine. Other assaults on cities throughout history—Dresden, Coventry, Hiroshima, Nagasaki—took place only after years of terrible conflict. By contrast, systematic bombardment of civilians in Ukraine began only days into an unprovoked invasion. In the first week of the war, Russian missiles and artillery targeted apartment blocks, hospitals, and schools. As Russians occupied Ukrainian cities and towns, they kidnapped or murdered mayors, local councilors, even a museum director from Melitopol, spraying bullets and terror randomly on everyone else. When the Ukrainian army recaptured Bucha, to the north of Kyiv, it found corpses with their arms tied behind their backs, lying in the road. When

I was there in mid-April, I saw others that had been dumped into a mass grave. In the first three weeks of the war alone, Human Rights Watch documented cases of summary execution, rape, and the mass looting of civilian property.

Mariupol, a mostly Russian-speaking city the size of Miami, was subjected to almost total devastation. In a powerful interview in late March, the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, noted that in previous European conflicts, occupiers hadn't destroyed everything, because they themselves needed somewhere to cook, eat, wash; during the Nazi occupation, he said, "movie theaters were operating in France." But Mariupol was different: "Everything is burned out." Ninety percent of the buildings were destroyed within just a few weeks. A massive steelworks that many assumed the conquering army

wanted to control was totally flattened. At the height of the fighting, civilians were still trapped inside the city, with no access to food, water, power, heat, or medicine. Men, women, and children died of starvation and dehydration. Those who tried to escape were fired upon. Outsiders who tried to bring in supplies were fired upon as well. The bodies of the dead, both Ukrainian civilians and Russian soldiers, lay in the street, unburied, for many days.

Yet even as these crimes were carried out, in full view of the world, the Russian state successfully hid this tragedy from its own people. As in the past, the use of jargon helped. This was not an invasion; it was a "special military operation." This was not a mass murder of Ukrainians; it was "protection" for the inhabitants of the eastern-Ukrainian territories. This was not genocide; it was

defense against "genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime." The dehumanization of the Ukrainians was completed in early April, when *RIA Novosti*, a state-run website, published an article arguing that the "de-Nazification" of Ukraine would require the "liquidation" of the Ukrainian leadership, and even the erasure of the very name of Ukraine, because to be Ukrainian was to be a Nazi: "Ukrainianism is an artificial anti-Russian construct, which does not have any civilizational content of its own, and is a subordinate element of a foreign and alien civilization." The existential threat was made clear on the eve of the war, when Putin reprised a decade's worth of propaganda about the perfidious West, using language familiar to Russians: "They sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people



Ira Gavriluk stands among the bodies of family members who were killed outside her home in Bucha, on the outskirts of Kyiv, in April.

from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature.”

For anyone who might have accidentally seen photographs of Mariupol, explanations were provided. On March 23, Russian television did broadcast film of the city’s ruins—drone footage, possibly stolen from CNN. But rather than take responsibility, they blamed the Ukrainians. One television anchorwoman, sounding sad, described the scene as “a horrifying picture. [Ukrainian] nationalists, as they retreat, are trying to leave no stone unturned.” The Russian Defense Ministry actually accused the Azov battalion, a famously radical Ukrainian fighting force, of blowing up the Mariupol theater, where

hundreds of families with children had been sheltering. Why would über-patriotic Ukrainian forces deliberately kill Ukrainian children? That wasn’t explained—but then, nothing is ever explained. And if nothing can be known for certain, then no one can be blamed. Maybe Ukrainian “nationalists” destroyed Mariupol. Maybe not. No clear conclusions can be drawn, and no one can be held accountable.

Few feel remorse. Published recordings of telephone calls between Russian soldiers and their families—they are using ordinary SIM cards, so it’s easy to listen to them—are full of contempt for Ukrainians. “I shot the car,” one soldier tells a woman, perhaps his wife or sister, in one of the calls. “Shoot the motherfuckers,” she responds, “as long as it’s not you. Fuck them. Fucking drug addicts and Nazis.”

They talk about stealing television sets, drinking cognac, and shooting people in forests. They show no concern about casualties, not even their own. Radio communications between the Russian soldiers attacking civilians in Bucha were just as cold-blooded. Zelensky himself was horrified by the nonchalance with which the Russians proposed to send some trash bags for the Ukrainians to wrap the corpses of their soldiers: “Even when a dog or a cat dies, people don’t do this,” he told journalists.

All of this—the indifference to violence, the amoral nonchalance about mass murder, even the disdain for the lives of Russian soldiers—is familiar to anyone who knows Soviet history (or German history, for that matter). But Russian citizens and Russian soldiers either don’t know that history or don’t care about it. President Zelensky

told me in April that, like “alcoholics [who] don’t admit that they are alcoholic,” these Russians “are afraid to admit guilt.” There was no reckoning after the Ukrainian famine, or the Gulag, or the Great Terror of 1937–38, no moment when the perpetrators expressed formal, institutional regret. Now we have the result. Aside from the Kravchenkos and Kopelevs, the liberal minority, most Russians have accepted the explanations the state handed them about the past and moved on. *They’re not human beings; they’re kulak trash*, they told themselves then. *They’re not human beings; they’re Ukrainian Nazis*, they tell themselves today. *A*

Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic and the author of Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism.

FUTURE



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Photo: Jared Soares

HOW LONG CAN THIS GO ON?

Photographs
by Marcus
Glahn

Poland has taken in millions of Ukrainian refugees since the start of the war, but patience is fraying. And some are more welcome than others.

BY
CAITLIN
DICKERSON



Ukrainian refugees stand in line to register for their national identity numbers at the PGE Narodowy Stadium in Warsaw, April 2022.



On February 24, within hours of the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Karolina Lewestam and her husband, Jakub Fast, saw on social media that Ukrainians were arriving at bus and train stations in Warsaw with no idea where they would sleep.

Without even pausing to discuss it, the couple—a writer and a banker—jumped into group chats with neighbors whom they had never met and started plotting to exchange mattresses and other supplies, as they all rushed to prepare spare bedrooms and sofas. A few days later, at about 2 a.m., a van pulled up outside their historic home in an affluent neighborhood, and 10 people climbed out, including a 6-year-old boy carrying a stuffed cat. “I wanted to cry when I saw that,” Karolina recalled. “I just thought about what you choose to bring with you when you are packing in a hurry to run out of your home. That’s what he chose.”

In just a few months, Ukraine has become the epicenter of one of the largest human displacements in the world. As of April, an estimated 7 million residents have relocated within the country and another 4.5 million have crossed international borders. Most of those, at least for now, are in Poland. In a politically divided nation that is typically hostile toward refugees, hundreds of thousands of Polish people moved in astonishing unison following the Russian invasion, upending their lives in order to house, feed, and clothe traumatized Ukrainians. The display of generosity stood out from other mass-migration events I’ve covered.

But by the time I met Karolina and other Polish hosts, in late March, they were exhausted. They had missed work and lost sleep, and were stressed about the strain that caring for Ukrainians was putting on their dwindling bank accounts. (They were also wondering whether their own country would be Putin’s next target.) Many of them were ruminating over the same question—one they were gingerly trying to broach with their guests: When would they be leaving?

WHEN I ARRIVED in Poland, Nikita, the boy with the stuffed cat, and his mother, Irina Sytnik, who had worked as a taxi driver in Ukraine, were struggling. Nikita was waking up in the middle of the night calling out for his father, Ruslan, who had stayed in Ukraine to fight. Irina sobbed as she

recalled the moment the bus carrying her and Nikita pulled away from Lviv while Ruslan waved goodbye to them, unsure whether they would see each other again. “We had no words in that moment,” she told me, through a translator.

Nikita was also acting out—something he’d never done before the war—and had already been expelled from a private kindergarten for being too aggressive. Now the administrators of a second school said he was kicking and biting other children and asked that he be taken to a psychologist. “He’s frustrated because he can’t communicate with other people, because he doesn’t speak Polish,” Irina told me. “I feel the same way.”

Irina had challenges beyond just navigating the language barrier in a new country. The job she had found in Warsaw required a two-hour commute by bus and on foot that left her depleted at the end of each day. But under emergency legislation passed in the Polish Parliament after the war started, incoming Ukrainians must apply for a national identity number in order to access social services, a process that requires them to visit government offices, where hours-long queues form daily. One afternoon, while trying to complete the process, Irina and Nikita got lost, with only \$10 remaining of the \$300 they’d brought with them when they crossed the border. A police officer found them sitting on a public bench, both of them in tears, and gave them a ride back to Karolina’s house.

Ukrainians have been wedged into every corner of Warsaw—bunking not just in private homes, but in offices, sports stadiums, schools, nightclubs, and art galleries. Many of those I met had the same expression on their faces: eyebrows fixed halfway up their foreheads, as though still in disbelief about the events that had chased them from their homes and landed them here.

Marina Konpakova, a single mother of three daughters, ages 5, 11, and 14, is staying in a spare room on the second floor of an opera house that’s part of the Palace of Culture and Science, a massive Stalinist building in the center of town. The family had hoped to remain in their apartment in Zaporizhzhia, three hours from the devastated port city of Mariupol. But when an airport nearby was bombed, the apartment shook, waking Marina in the middle of the night. Then the building managers turned off the electricity, to hide the fact that people were living there. This required everyone to walk down nine flights of stairs every few hours when air-raided sirens drove them to the basement, because they couldn’t use the elevator. Eventually, she gave up and packed a bag in the dark. On their way out of Ukraine, they passed scorched fields and homes that had been blasted apart by Russian ordnance.

Cramming themselves into an airless train car heading toward the Polish border, Marina’s daughters cried hysterically. “I think they were in shock,” she told me. When I visited their makeshift apartment, the 11-year-old stood silently in the bathroom, staring at herself in the mirror with her hands on her face. The 14-year-old sat wrapped in a comforter on a mattress on the floor, seemingly oblivious to my presence.

Marina was initially scared to come to Warsaw, “but now, half of my city is here,” she said. The theater employees who



Irina Sytnik and her son, Nikita, in the Warsaw home of the Polish family that has taken them in

had set up the family's accommodations had suggested that perhaps I would be able to figure out how long they planned to stay there. When I asked, Marina replied, "They said to stay as long as I need," adding, "No one gave me a deadline."

AGNIESZKA KOSOWICZ, the president of the board of the Polish Migration Forum, an NGO that helps foreigners integrate into Polish society, is concerned about the sustainability of the Polish response to Ukrainians. "There are hundreds of thousands of people that have invited refugees to their homes, and on the one hand this is all very optimistic and sounds good," she told me, "but on the other hand I think it's like sitting on a ticking bomb because, being a human being, you know that you cannot host guests forever." Even if they had the will and the patience, some Poles simply don't have the resources to sustain their initial levels of generosity. Magda Mlotkowska, who was housing 13 Ukrainians, told me that her family's resources were thinning, with three boys of their own to care for. To help cover her bills, she was applying for a government program that provides about \$9 a day for every refugee hosted.

Kosowicz is also concerned about nonwhite immigrants to Ukraine. When the exodus began, Kosowicz's organization started receiving reports of such people being beaten or harassed as they attempted to flee the country and enter Poland. Numerous videos of these encounters have circulated on the internet. Some Polish university dorms and stadiums have rejected refugees without Ukrainian passports, as have volunteer buses transporting people to other European countries farther west. Some Polish households have declined to take in nonwhite immigrants who fled Ukraine, or asked guests to leave after discovering that they were not ethnically Ukrainian.

Even as Poland is welcoming millions of Ukrainians, Kosowicz noted, it is simultaneously blocking Syrian and Iraqi refugees, who are also fleeing violent conflicts, from entering the country through Belarus. The Polish government has justified this on the grounds that the refugees' presence in Belarus was orchestrated by that country's president, Alexander Lukashenko. A close ally of Vladimir Putin, Lukashenko is seeking to provoke Poland's right-wing government by facilitating the movement of Middle Eastern migrants across the border. Polish media had just reported on a 20-year-old paralyzed Kurdish man, who was being carried by his family to the Polish border. Some groups have been sprayed with water cannons. More than a dozen people have frozen to death in the forest that stretches across the two countries. "What happens there is totally inhuman," Kosowicz said.

Even though Kosowicz speaks English, I had brought along my Polish translator, because I had gathered from previous interviews that the disparate treatment of refugees in Poland was a sensitive subject. I thought it would be useful for my translator to learn about the issue from a fellow Pole before I pulled her into further reporting on the subject. The plan backfired.

As soon as we started discussing "third-country nationals"—immigrants to Ukraine who were living there when the war

began—the temperature in the room seemed to rise. "Most of those people, they want to go to Germany or more west," the translator said, interrupting the interview. "And Germans might come with their buses and take those people, but they don't want to." Kosowicz pointed out that Germany had sent significant aid to human-rights groups helping migrants who do manage to cross into Poland from Belarus.

Kosowicz reiterated her point about third-country nationals: "It's great, all this enthusiasm and eagerness to help. But for everybody here who is not Ukrainian—for the Afghans, for the Iraqis, for the Syrians, for the people from Yemen, where there is a war right now—for them, it's difficult." The translator interrupted again. "Maybe it's difficult," she said, "but I just think that [Ukrainians] are so culturally close to us; they are like brothers to us. Sometimes it's natural, yes?"

Kosowicz's eyebrows arched toward the ceiling.

Later that week, when I visited a hostel that was set up for third-country nationals fleeing Ukraine, I decided to go alone.

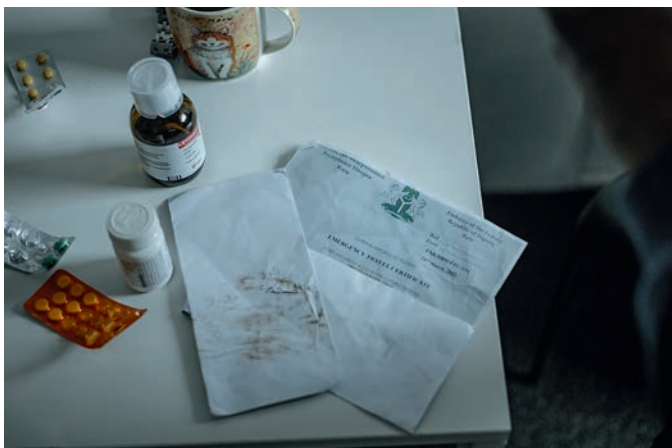
THE HOSTEL FOR third-country nationals and other vulnerable groups, such as children traveling without adult guardians, is on the industrial outskirts of Warsaw, in a building typically used as a dorm for kids' sports camps. Since the war began, the facility has hosted refugees originally from 34 different countries, packed four to a room in twin-size bunk beds. It is run by the Club of Catholic Intelligentsia, which was established during the 1950s, under Communism. In a country where the Church has in recent years lobbied for aggressive anti-abortion and anti-gay legislation, the club stands out for its progressiveness.

In the hostel, I met Yasemin, a Turkish woman whose story is a kind of cautionary tale of how forced migration can leave successive generations of a family feeling less and less rooted in any one culture or place with every additional move.

Yasemin (who asked that I not print her last name, because she worried that it could affect her future immigration prospects) said that her relatives and ancestors had landed in Turkey because of conflicts in Crimea, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, and other places. She said she was raised in a household that was out of step with the surrounding culture's social and religious expectations for women. She and her family were tired of the pressure to conform and the feeling that they didn't fit in.

When the war began, she and her 9-year-old son, Berkin, had been living in Ukraine for nine months, along with an elder daughter who was studying at a university there; they were trying to establish residency for the family based on Yasemin's partial Ukrainian ancestry. With their plans now upended, she said she would try their luck in Brussels, where, as new immigrants who don't speak the language, they would have to rebuild their lives from scratch. "We have a saying in Turkey," she said: "Geography is destiny."

I also met Nduka Edike, a 52-year-old Nigerian man who had lived in Ukraine for nearly 25 years, after immigrating to Kyiv as a university student. When his father died, he said,



Top: Nduka Edike, a Nigerian man who has lived in Ukraine for nearly 25 years, at a hostel for third-country nationals on the outskirts of Warsaw

Bottom: Nduka's travel documents are covered in boot prints and are partially ripped; he says he was assaulted by a Ukrainian officer just before he entered Poland.

he could no longer pay for his education and dropped out of school. But by then he was dating a Ukrainian woman, whom he went on to marry and have two children with, so he continued living in the country. He and his wife divorced, but they remain friends and have been in daily contact since the war began. In Ukraine, Nduka cut timber, did landscaping, and bought old shoes and refurbished them to be resold at an outdoor market. "I do any job," he told me.

Nduka said Ukrainians would frequently spit on him on the bus or yell at him, saying things like "Why did you come here?" In 2006, during a rash of violent attacks by skinhead

youth groups, he said he was stabbed several times and spent a month in the hospital, part of it in a coma. A friend was killed in the same incident, but he stayed in the country for his children, who he said would have better opportunities there than in Nigeria, parts of which are burdened by terrorism and violent crime.

When Russia invaded, Nduka headed for the Polish border on a bus, but he was stuck living in a humanitarian camp nearby for six days, and at least once was blocked from crossing the border, according to American and British volunteers who tried to help him. United Nations employees



Top: A children's play area at the Ptak Warsaw Expo's refugee shelter

Bottom: The main hall at COS Torwar Arena, a sports venue now housing refugees





Top: *The Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, where Marina Konpakova and her daughters are living in a spare room on the second floor*

Bottom: *Marina with her three daughters, ages 5, 11, and 14*



eventually obtained emergency travel documents showing that he had been living in Ukraine. But while he waited, Ukrainian migrants yelled racial slurs at him constantly, he and the volunteers said. One man pointed his cellphone camera at Nduka and yelled, “Look, they taught the monkey to speak Ukrainian.”

Finally, border guards in both countries approved his documents. But just as he was about to cross into Poland, he said, he was stopped again, this time by a Ukrainian officer who took the documents and tried to destroy them. He said the officer hit him and kicked him in the knee. Volunteers observing the incident ran to alert the UN, which sent employees to help. Hours later, around midnight, Nduka finally crossed into Poland, escorted by volunteers who gave him pain medication for his injuries.

Nduka said the UN employees had warned him that he would likely not be allowed to stay in Poland. (Emergency legislation allowing Ukrainian citizens to remain in the country for 18 months affords people of other nationalities fleeing Ukraine only 15 days.) Instead, he will try his chances in Germany, which is generally considered to be more welcoming to nonwhite refugees. He is planning to learn German, to add to the Yoruba, English, Ukrainian, and Russian he already speaks.

“It won’t be that bad,” he said. “What else can I do?”

THE UNITED NATIONS High Commissioner for Refugees, which had only about 10 staff members in Poland at the start of the war, has staffed up rapidly to distribute emergency cash and other services to what has quickly become one of the largest populations of refugees in the world.

Andreas Kirchhof, a spokesperson for the agency who is based in Jordan and has previously been deployed to Burundi, South Sudan, and Lebanon, among other places, told me that the generosity of Polish people toward Ukrainian refugees does have precedent in other parts of the world. Middle Eastern and African countries have taken in millions of refugees from places like Syria, Afghanistan, and the Central African Republic. But he cautioned that such responses don’t always last. “Over time, solidarity can diminish with some parts of the population.” At one point, a Polish taxi driver vented to me that she had no time to work, because she was helping a Ukrainian mother and three children who were staying with her get settled. “I have my life too,” she said.

“We know that our destinies are intertwined,” Karolina Lewestam had told me a few days earlier, speaking of the Ukrainians she has hosted. “There is a sense of companionship between the two nations when it comes to this journey toward freedom from Russia and its influence.” Several Polish hosts told me that they felt compelled to help Ukrainian refugees precisely because their presence was a reminder that Putin could threaten Poland next—that they, too, could soon be having to pack their bags to cross international borders. But by the end of my week in Warsaw, that abstract sense of solidarity seemed to be weakening in the face of practical challenges. After nearly a month, Irina was growing

uncomfortable with the feeling that she was imposing on her host, and Karolina was weary from Nikita’s boundless energy, as well as her obligations to her own family and job.

Though Karolina’s husband had helped Irina find work cooking and cleaning in the cafeteria at the American School of Warsaw, a private English-language school that caters to the families of diplomats and international businesspeople, the position paid about \$4 an hour, not enough to rent even a tiny apartment in Warsaw. It was not clear how long she and Nikita would remain living with the family. “She’s a working-class girl, so what can I do?” Karolina said.

Historically, the way a population treats refugees has frequently come down to whether citizens of the destination country see themselves in the newcomers, in terms of race, religion, class, or some other set of common affinities. Karolina had bonded more with the other refugees she’d taken in, Ukrainian professionals who have subsequently returned home or moved on to their own apartments.

As Karolina prepared for a dinner party for two of the Ukrainian women she had hosted earlier, I asked how she was doing. “I am weird,” she replied. “Everyone wants something from me, and I have nothing left to give.”

The group chat with her neighbors was still buzzing. “Mother with two children: daughter 18, son 10, looking for a place for 2/3 weeks,” one message said. “I think so, let me check,” another neighbor replied. It was like that constantly.

If the patience of Polish citizens for their Ukrainian guests is wearing thin, refugees like Nduka and Yasemin never had access to those reserves of empathy in the first place. As someone who has covered refugee displacement in other places, I was struck by the contrast between Poland’s sudden and uncharacteristic embrace of Ukrainian refugees and the way most of the world’s displaced people—their numbers rising as a result of conflicts and climate change—are treated. Making my way around Warsaw, I frequently ran into volunteers from other countries, including the United States, who had dropped everything—some even quitting their jobs—to come and help Ukrainians. Though some presence of volunteers is typical during a migration crisis, their prevalence in Warsaw seemed far beyond the norm. This no doubt partly reflects the broader opposition to Putin’s incursions into democratic countries, as well as the fears about the conflict’s global implications, especially if it expands or escalates further. Even the casual use of the term *refugee* on the streets of Warsaw as a synonym for *Ukrainian* was noteworthy. In many places, displaced people are instead referred to as “illegal immigrants” or “economic migrants” by politicians and the media, which has been shown to affect how people think of them.

Ukrainians continue to arrive at the city’s busy train and bus stations daily, their eyes wide and teary from shock, their arms heavy with the weight of bags and pets and children, with no idea where they will sleep. But the influx of support for them from the Polish people means that most of their immediate needs are being met, at least for now. The new



After a day of work and kindergarten, Irina and Nikita commute back to the Warsaw home where they're living.

arrivals in Warsaw are typically greeted by volunteers who, within a few hours, match them with a family or hostel willing to house them. While they wait, they can visit stands that have been set up to distribute free Polish cellphone SIM cards (which are essential for people crossing borders who want to stay in touch with family), taxi vouchers, food for pets, professional counseling, and other services.

I visited a sports arena that had been retrofitted to accommodate up to 500 Ukrainian refugees. It had a day care staffed by volunteers and a cafeteria with a robust and varied buffet of hot meals, snacks, and beverages, as well as what was effectively a shopping mall full of free stuff: boxes of new socks; racks of jackets in all sizes; tall stacks of sheets, comforters, and towels; pajamas; shoes. The abundance was unlike anything I have seen while covering displaced people in the past. At camps alongside the U.S.-Mexico border, asylum seekers have at times lived for months exposed to the elements, with access only to a few reeking porta potties. Mothers have had to bathe their newborn babies with dirty water. Residents of these camps are routinely kidnapped and assaulted by gang members who control the surrounding area. Volunteer groups have organized for them to receive one or two meals a day—but at times, when funds run dry, there is no food at all. Though there is no such thing as a prototypical refugee experience, these conditions are much more common among displaced people.

According to the UNHCR, one in 97 people on the planet is currently displaced, including 35 million children. Nearly 90 percent of them live in developing countries. Ukraine is clearly one of the biggest displacement crises in the world, “but we should not forget that, still, displacement is primarily happening in the global South,” Andreas Kirchhof, the agency spokesperson, told me. “The world should definitely look at Ukraine, but should not forget Yemen, should not forget Congo, and should not forget Afghanistan and other major crises and the people who suffer from these crises.”

The war in Ukraine will help define our era, in that it represents a test of the principles of Western democracy. But it will also alter the trajectories, and immigration statuses, of millions of families for generations in ways that we can’t yet see. Being forced from one’s home causes irrevocable harm to anyone who experiences it, regardless of the kind of reception they meet in the places they land. Some find stability—and, if buffered by the right passport, family connections, or luck, can even find greater prosperity. But that is no replacement for what they have lost. Far more displaced people, though, struggle to establish themselves in a new place, or find that they are unwelcome, so they have to keep moving in search of a new home. *A*

Caitlin Dickerson is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

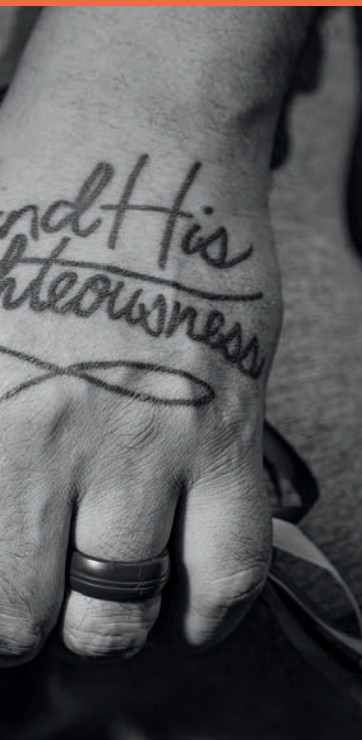
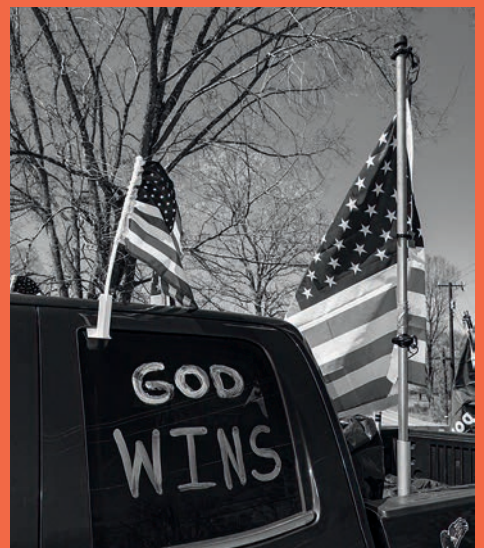
HOW POLITICS POISONED THE CHURCH

THE EVANGELICAL
MOVEMENT SPENT
40 YEARS AT WAR
WITH SECULAR
AMERICA. NOW IT'S
AT WAR WITH ITSELF.

BY TIM
ALBERTA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JONNO RATTMAN





“BEFORE I TURN
TO THE WORD,” THE
PREACHER ANNOUNCES,
“I’M GONNA
DO ANOTHER
DIATRIBE.”

“Go on!” one man yells. “Amen!” shouts a woman several pews in front of me.

Between 40 minutes of praise music and 40 minutes of preaching is the strangest ritual I’ve ever witnessed inside a house of worship. Pastor Bill Bolin calls it his “diatribe.” The congregants at FloodGate Church, in Brighton, Michigan, call it something else: “Headline News.”

Bolin, in his mid-60s, is a gregarious man with thick jowls and a thinning wave of dyed hair. His floral shirt is untucked over dark-blue jeans. “On the vaccines ...” he begins.

For the next 15 minutes, Bolin does not mention the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, or the life everlasting. Instead, he spouts misinformation and conspiratorial nonsense, much of it related to the “radically dangerous” COVID-19 vaccines. “A local nurse who attends FloodGate, who is anonymous at this time—she reported to my wife the other day that at her hospital, they have two COVID patients that are hospitalized. Two.” Bolin pauses dramatically. “They have 103 vaccine-complication patients.” The crowd gasps.

“How about this one?” Bolin says. He tells of a doctor who claims to know that “between 100 and 200 United States Congress members, plus many of their staffers and family members with COVID, were treated by a colleague of his over the past 15 months ... with ...” Bolin stops and puts a hand to his ear. A chorus of people responds: “Ivermectin.” Bolin pretends not to hear. “What was that?” he says, leaning over the lectern. This time, they shout: “Ivermectin!” Bolin nods.

This isn’t my first time at FloodGate, so none of what Bolin says shocks me. Yet I’m still struggling to make sense of the place.

Having grown up just down the road, the son of the senior pastor at another church in town, I’ve spent my life watching evangelicalism morph from a spiritual disposition into a political identity. It’s heartbreaking. So many people who love the Lord, who give their time and money to the poor and the mourning and the persecuted, have been reduced to a caricature. But I understand why. Evangelicals—including my own father—became compulsively political, allowing specific ethical arguments to snowball into full-blown partisan advocacy, often in ways that distracted from their mission of evangelizing for Christ. To his credit, even when my dad would lean hard into a political debate, he was careful to remind his church of the appropriate Christian perspective. “God doesn’t bite his fingernails over any of this,” he would say around election time. “Neither should you.”

Brighton is a small town, and I knew the local evangelical scene like it was a second reporting beat. I knew which pastors were feuding; whose congregations were mired in scandal; which church softball teams had a deacon playing shortstop, and which ones stacked their lineups with non-tithing ringers. But FloodGate? I had never heard of FloodGate. And neither had most of the people sitting around me, until recently.

For a decade, Bolin preached to a crowd of about 100 on a typical Sunday. Then came Easter 2020, when Bolin announced that he would hold indoor worship services in defiance of Michigan’s emergency shutdown orders. As word got around the conservative suburbs of Detroit, Bolin became a minor celebrity. Local politicians and activists borrowed his pulpit to promote right-wing interests. FloodGate’s attendance soared as members of other congregations defected to the small roadside church. By Easter 2021, FloodGate was hosting 1,500 people every weekend.

On this particular fall Sunday, Bolin riffs on everything from California forcing vaccines on schoolchildren to the IRS proposing more oversight of personal banking accounts. He promotes a new book that tells of “how the left has done a power grab to systematically dismantle religion and banish God from the lips, minds, and hearts of believers,” prompting the couple in front of me to make a one-click Amazon purchase. He suggests there is mounting evidence of a stolen election, concluding, “With the information that’s coming out in Arizona and Georgia and other places, I think it’s time for there to be a full audit of all 50 states to find out the level of cheating and the level of manipulation that actually took place.” The people around me cheer.

At one point, Bolin looks up from his notes.

“We had a visitor this morning who said, ‘You know, it’s really refreshing to hear a pastor talk about issues like this.’” Basking in the ovation he’s just invited, Bolin adds: “I’m okay talking about these things.”

He asks if he can keep going. The crowd answers with more applause.

Previous spread (clockwise from top left): Ken Brown leads a Sunday service at Community Bible Church in Michigan; a scene from the parking lot at Global Vision Bible Church in Tennessee; Bill Bolin gives a sermon at FloodGate Church in Michigan; a baptism at Global Vision; the tattooed hands of a FloodGate member.



LISTENING TO BOLIN that morning, I kept thinking about another pastor nearby, one who approached his job very differently: Ken Brown.

Brown leads his own ministry, Community Bible Church, in the Detroit suburb of Trenton. I got to know him during the 2020 presidential campaign, when I was writing dispatches from around the country and asking readers about the stories and trends they thought weren't receiving enough attention. Brown wrote to me explaining the combustible dynamics within the evangelical Church and describing his own efforts—as the conservative pastor of a conservative congregation—to keep his members from being radicalized by the lies of right-wing politicians and media figures.

When we finally met, in the spring of 2021, Brown told me his alarm had only grown. “The crisis for the Church is a crisis of discernment,” he said over lunch. “Discernment”—one’s basic ability to separate truth from untruth—“is a core biblical discipline. And many Christians are not practicing it.” A stocky man with steely blue eyes and a subdued, matter-of-fact tone, Brown struck me as thoroughly disheartened. The pastor said his concern was not simply for his congregation of 300, but for the millions of American evangelicals who had come to value power over integrity, the ephemeral over the eternal, moral relativism over bright lines of right and wrong.

He made a compelling case. So I began checking out his sermons, podcasts, and blog posts.

Every time I heard Bolin preach, I could also hear Brown, the pastors’ voices dueling inside my brain. Brown is polished and

Bolin in February. After he held indoor Easter services at FloodGate in 2020, in defiance of Michigan’s emergency shutdown orders, attendance at his church soared.

buttoned-down; Bolin is ostentatious and loud. Brown pastors a traditional church where people wear sweaters and sing softly; Bolin leads a charismatic church where people dress for a barbecue and speak in tongues. Brown is a pastor’s kid and lifelong conservative who’s never had a sip of alcohol; Bolin is an erstwhile “radical liberal” who once got “so high on LSD” that he jumped onstage and grabbed a guitar at a Tom Petty concert.

But in leading their predominantly white, Republican congregations, Brown and Bolin have come to agree on one important thing: Both pastors believe there is a war for the soul of the American Church—and both have decided they cannot stand on the sidelines. They aren’t alone. To many evangelicals today, the enemy is no longer secular America, but their fellow Christians, people who hold the same faith but different beliefs.

How did this happen? For generations, white evangelicals have cultivated a narrative pitting courageous, God-fearing Christians against a wicked society that wants to expunge the Almighty from public life. Having convinced so many evangelicals that the next election could trigger the nation’s demise, Christian leaders effectively turned thousands of churches into unwitting



cells in a loosely organized, hazily defined, existentially urgent movement—the types of places where paranoia and falsehoods flourish and people turn on one another.

“Hands down, the biggest challenge facing the Church right now is the misinformation and disinformation coming in from the outside,” Brown said.

Because of this, the pastor told me, he can no longer justify a passive approach from the pulpit. The Church is becoming radicalized—and pastors who don’t address this fact head-on are only contributing to the problem. He understands their reluctance. They would rather keep the peace than risk alienating anyone. The irony, Brown said, is that by pretending that a clash of Christian worldviews isn’t happening, these pastors risk losing credibility with members who can see it unfolding inside their own church.

There is one person Pastor Brown doesn’t have to convince of this: Pastor Bolin.

“The battle lines have been drawn,” Bolin told me, sitting in the back of his darkened sanctuary. “If you’re not taking a side, you’re on the wrong side.”

IF THIS IS a tale of two churches, it is also the tale of churches everywhere. It’s the story of millions of American Christians who, after a lifetime spent considering their political affiliations in the context of their faith, are now considering their faith affiliations in the context of their politics.

Brown (right) in February. When COVID arrived, he launched a podcast to combat misinformation among his congregants.

The first piece of scripture I memorized as a child—the verse that continues to guide my own imperfect walk—is from Paul’s second letter to the early Church in Corinth, Greece. As with most of his letters, the apostle was addressing dysfunction and breakage in the community of believers. “We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen,” Paul wrote. “Since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

Paul’s admonishment of the early Church contains no real ambiguity. Followers of Jesus are to orient themselves toward his enduring promise of salvation, and away from the fleeting troubles of humanity.

For much of my lifetime, however, American Christians have done the opposite. Beginning in the 1980s, white evangelicals imposed themselves to an unprecedented degree on the government and the country’s core institutions. Once left to cry jeremiads about civilizational decline—having lost fights over sex and sexuality, drugs, abortion, pornography, standards in media and education, prayer in public schools—conservative

Christians organized their churches, marshaled their resources, and leveraged their numbers, regaining the high ground, for a time, in some of these culture wars.

Short-lived victories, however, came at a long-term cost. Evangelical leaders set something in motion decades ago that pastors today can no longer control. Not only were Christians conditioned to understand their struggle as one against flesh and blood, fixated on earthly concerns, a fight for a kingdom of this world—all of which runs directly counter to the commands of scripture—they were indoctrinated with a belief that because the stakes were getting so high, any means was justified.

Which brings us to Donald Trump.

When Trump was elected thanks to a historic showing among white evangelicals—81 percent voted for him over Hillary Clinton—the victory was rightly viewed as the apex of the movement’s power. But this was, in many ways, also the beginning of its unraveling. The “battle lines” Bolin described as having emerged over the past five years—cultural reckonings over racism and sexual misconduct; a lethal pandemic and fierce disputes over vaccines and government mandates; allegations of election theft that led to a siege of the U.S. Capitol; and, underlying all of this, the presidency, prosecution, and martyring of Trump himself—have carved up every institution of American society. The evangelical Church is no exception.

The nation’s largest denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, is bleeding members because of ferocious infighting over race relations, women serving in leadership, accountability for sexual misconduct, and other issues. The United Methodist Church, America’s second-largest denomination, is headed toward imminent divorce over irreconcilable social and ideological divisions. Smaller denominations are losing affiliate churches as pastors and congregations break from their leadership over many of the same cultural flash points, choosing independence over associating with those who do not hold their views.

Perhaps it shouldn’t be surprising that Christians, like Americans from every walk of life, are self-selecting into cliques of shared habits and thinking. But what’s notable about the realignment inside the white evangelical Church is its asymmetry. Pastors report losing an occasional liberal member because of their refusal to speak on Sunday mornings about bigotry or poverty or social injustice. But these same pastors report having lost—in the past few years alone—a significant portion of their congregation because of complaints that they and their staff did not advance right-wing political doctrines. Hard data are difficult to come by; churches are not required to disclose attendance figures. But a year’s worth of conversations with pastors, denominational leaders, evangelical scholars, and everyday Christians tells a clear story: Substantial numbers of evangelicals are fleeing their churches, and most of them are moving to ones further to the right.

Christianity has traditionally been seen as a stabilizing, even moderating, influence on American life. In 1975, more than two-thirds of Americans expressed “a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the church,” according to Gallup, and as of 1985, “organized religion was the most revered institution” in American life. Today, Gallup reports, just 37 percent of Americans have confidence in the Church. This downward spiral owes principally to two phenomena: the constant stench of scandal, with megachurches and prominent leaders imploding on what seems like a weekly basis; and the growing perception that Christians

SUBSTANTIAL NUMBERS OF EVANGELICALS ARE FLEEING THEIR CHURCHES, AND MOST OF THEM ARE MOVING TO ONES FURTHER TO THE RIGHT.



are embracing extremist views. One rarely needs to read to the bottom of a poll to learn that the religious group most opposed to vaccines, most convinced that the 2020 presidential election was stolen, most inclined to subscribe to QAnon conspiracy theories is white evangelicals.

Many right-wing pastors have formed alliances—with campaign consultants, education activists, grassroots groups, even MAGA-in-miniature road shows promoting claims of an assault on American sovereignty—that bring a steady flow of fresh faces into their buildings. From there, the fusion of new Republican orthodoxy with old conservative theology is seamless. This explains why, even during a period of slumping church attendance, the number of white evangelicals has grown: The Pew Research Center reports that more and more white Trump supporters began self-identifying as evangelicals during his presidency, whether or not they attended church.

Meanwhile, other pastors feel trapped. One stray remark could split their congregation, or even cost them their job. Yet a strictly apolitical approach can be counterproductive; their unwillingness to engage only invites more scrutiny. The whisper campaigns brand conservative pastors as moderate, and moderate pastors as Marxists. In this environment, a church leader’s stance on biblical inerrancy is less important than whether he is considered “woke.” His command of scripture is less relevant than suspicions about how he voted in the last election.

“A pastor asked me the other day, ‘What percentage of churches would you say are grappling with these issues?’ And I said, ‘One hundred percent. All of them,’” Russell Moore, the public theologian at *Christianity Today*, told me. “I don’t know of a single church that’s not affected by this.”

Once the president of the Southern Baptist policy arm, Moore quit the denomination in 2021 after enduring years of “psycho-

of the religious right, but to the precepts of political conservatism. For many years—while getting married, starting a career in technology, having children—he remained rooted in both.

When Brown felt called to join the clergy, he enrolled at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. It was there that he began to question the union of his politics and his faith. The more he studied scripture, the less confident he felt in the people he’d listened

to for so long. Some of the Christian right’s leading voices—people like Paul Weyrich, of the Heritage Foundation, and James Dobson, of Focus on the Family—promoted visions of “postmillennialism,” a controversial interpretation of scripture that encourages amassing political power as a means of building a kingdom in this life parallel to that in heaven.

“I started to realize that a lot of these religious-right guys weren’t actually trained theologians. A lot of them didn’t know what they were talking about, biblically,” Brown said. “I worried that could come back to haunt us.”

Just when Brown’s passion for politics was beginning to abate, Bill Clinton was elected president. “The apocalypse,” Brown recalled, laughing. Like so many evangelicals, the pastor viewed Clinton as

the manifestation of America’s moral decline. He obsessed over the president’s every scandal and deception.

But Brown was growing equally disillusioned with Christian conservatives and their tactics. Some of the same people who tormented Clinton and lectured on morality were just as ethically compromised as he was—but because they played for what was ostensibly God’s chosen political team, they faced little scrutiny. “Back when I believed there was an honorable alliance between Republicans and evangelicals, it was because I believed that our values would ultimately prevail, come what may on this Earth, whether we win or lose some election,” Brown said. “But over time, there was a shift. Losing was no longer an option. It became all about winning.”

Late in Clinton’s tenure, Brown, who was serving as an associate pastor in Flat Rock, Michigan, was commissioned to plant a new church down the road in Trenton. He would have his own flock to look after. He didn’t have time to worry about politics. Aside from preaching against abortion—an issue Brown sees as inherently biblical—he kept politics out of his sermons. George W. Bush, whom evangelicals claimed as one of their own, was popular with Brown’s congregants. It was a period of harmony inside the church.

“And then,” Brown said, “came Barack Obama.”

It felt silly at first—jokes about Obama’s birth certificate, comments about his faith. But over time, the discourse inside the church became more worrisome. One day, a longtime member told Brown something that at the time sounded shocking: The president wore a secret Islamic ring. Brown demanded to know the woman’s source. “And she sent me this fake, Photoshopped thing. It didn’t take long

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logical warfare” for his opposition to Trumpism and advocacy for racial reconciliation. In the time since, as he’s traveled the country and counseled pastors on the intensifying divisions within their congregations, Moore has become convinced that the problem of political fanaticism inside the Church poses real threats outside it.

“Honestly, I’m more concerned than I was a year ago—and that’s saying something,” Moore said. “It may sound like Chicken Little. But I’m telling you, there is a serious effort to turn this ‘two countries’ talk into something real. There are Christians taking all the populist passions and adding a transcendent authority to it.”

Moore is not exaggerating. More than a few times, I’ve heard casual talk of civil war inside places that purport to worship the Prince of Peace. And, far from feeling misplaced, these conversations draw legitimacy from a sense of divine justice.

The Church is not a victim of America’s civic strife. Instead, it is one of the principal catalysts.

“I WAS A card-carrying member—literally, a card-carrying member—of the Moral Majority,” Brown told me.

It was 1981. Brown was an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, and for the first time, the Christian kid who’d graduated from a Christian high school was outside his bubble. He felt threatened by what he saw all around him: moral relativism, shameless sexuality, far-left professors who openly disparaged his faith. Brown found an identity in the nascent evangelical movement that aimed to restore the religious values of America’s founding. He read the books, watched the videos, listened to the radio programs. Brown committed himself not just to the dogma

to debunk,” Brown told me. “So I wrote her back and said, ‘Hey, here’s the deal: If you have forwarded this to anyone, you have an obligation to go back to them and correct it. Because Christians cannot foment falsehood. We are people of truth.’”

The woman never replied. She still attends Community Bible; the two have not spoken about the incident since. But it was a watershed moment for Brown. “That was the beginning of a new ministry for me,” he said.

Brown wasn’t faced with just Obama-centric conspiracy theories. People were beginning to confront him with questions and concerns he couldn’t comprehend. Once, when he visited Washington, D.C., for a pastors’ conference, he returned home to learn that people in the church had been entertaining a rumor started by one of its members. Having read blog posts about a FEMA program that recruited clergy to help calm communities after natural disasters, this man believed that Brown had gone to D.C. for covert training—and that he and other pastors were preparing to help the government enforce martial law.

“Good people were taken in by this stuff,” Brown said. “They really wondered whether I was a part of this secret government plot.”

Even as Brown became more vocal, he knew he was being drowned out. Fear, the pastor says, was taking root inside Community Bible. Some of it was explainable: The cultural climate was getting chilly for evangelicals; the Great Recession was squeezing his blue-collar congregation. But much of the anxiety felt amorphous, cryptic—and manufactured. However effective Brown might be at soothing his congregants for 45 minutes on a Sunday morning, “Rush [Limbaugh] had them for three hours a day, five days a week, and Fox News had them every single night.” Brown kept reminding his people that scripture’s most cited command is “Fear not.” But he couldn’t break through. Looking back, he understands why.

“Biblically, fear is primarily reverence and awe. We revere God; we hold him in awe,” Brown told me. “You can also have reverence and awe for other things—really, anything you put great value on. I think, in conservative-Christian circles, we place a lot of value on the life we’ve known. The earthly life we have known. The *American* life we’ve known . . . If we see threats to something we value, we fear—that is, we revere, we hold in inappropriate awe—those who can take it away. That’s Barack Obama. That’s the left.”

An urgency—bordering on panic—could be felt inside the Church. For white evangelicals, the only thing more galvanizing than perceptions of their idealized nation slipping away was the conviction that their favored political party was unwilling to fight for the country’s survival.

“There was this sense that America is under siege, that the barbarians were at the gates,” Brown said. “Then along comes Donald Trump, who says he can make America great again. And for evangelicals, it was time to play for keeps.”

WHEN I FIRST walked into the sanctuary at FloodGate, I didn’t see a cross. But I did see American flags—lots of them. There were flags on the screens behind the stage, flags on the literature being handed out. There was even a flag on the face mask of the single person I spotted wearing one. It was May 2021, and the

church was hosting an event for Stand Up Michigan, a group that had formed to protest pandemic shutdowns, masking, and, most recently, vaccine mandates. This was the launch of the group’s Livingston County chapter.

While covering presidential campaigns, I had attended political rallies at churches across Iowa, South Carolina, Texas, and elsewhere. But I’d never seen anything quite like this. The parking lot swarmed with vehicles covered in partisan slogans. The narthex was jammed with people scribbling on clipboards. (I thought they were doing preemptive COVID contact tracing; they were actually enlisting volunteers for political activities.) Inside the sanctuary, attendees wore MAGA caps and Second Amendment–related shirts. I didn’t see a single person carrying a Bible.

For the next three hours, the church became a coliseum. The executive director of Stand Up Michigan decried the “evil” Democrats in charge of the state; said there was “probably some truth” to QAnon, which holds that satanic liberal elites are cannibalizing children for sustenance; and warned that Christians are too “nice.” The chair of the county board of commissioners railed against diversity training and critical race theory. A state senator tried to play to the base—joking that she’d asked God why he’d allowed Gretchen Whitmer to become governor—but then cowered when the base turned on her, with people standing to demand that she answer the question of whether Trump had won Michigan in 2020. Visibly shaken, she refused to answer.

The table had been set by Bill Bolin himself. Introduced at the beginning of the program as the “rock star” who disobeyed the government, Bolin took the stage and wasted no time before showing his visitors just how uncouth one could be in the pulpit. He began by suggesting that COVID-19 was “possibly being manipulated with the funding and blessing of Dr. Anthony Fauci, the man who put us in masks.” When he heard scattered boos, Bolin said: “That’s right, go ahead!” The sanctuary filled with jeers. A minute later, the pastor was boasting about how far he’d taken his insults of Whitmer. “Probably the most egregious thing I ever did,” Bolin said, chuckling, “was I did do a Nazi salute and called her ‘Whitler.’”

In my ensuing visits to FloodGate, and in long conversations with Bolin, it became clear that this type of extreme political expression is central to his church’s identity, and to his own.

Bolin told me that after a troubled childhood in Southern California—he said he began drinking and doing drugs at age 9—he discovered an interest in political activism. He became infatuated with Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., committing himself to the art of protesting: marches, sit-ins, hunger strikes. He was a “proud hippie” more interested in the occult than in any organized religion.

Then, when he was 20 years old, he was packing for a cross-country hitchhiking trip and discovered a Bible that had been given to him years earlier. “I lifted it up—and remember, I’m a supernaturalist—and felt like my arm was on fire,” Bolin told me. “And I heard a voice: ‘Return to me, or you will die.’”

Bolin got a ride to Reno, Nevada, where he had a Christian cousin. They went to church together. “There was an altar call, and I went down and got baptized that same afternoon,” Bolin said. “I’ve never been the same. It changed who I am.”

That change included his politics. Setting out on his Christian journey—working as a substance-abuse counselor, attending Bible college, pastoring in churches from California to Pennsylvania—Bolin found that many of his old stances were incompatible with his new faith. In particular, his views of abortion and religious freedom were turned upside down. One thing didn't change. "I have always been prone to protesting," Bolin told me. "Then and now."

Much like Pastor Brown, Bolin married conservative theology to conservative ideology. But whereas Brown became disillusioned by the religious right's hypocrisy and political ruthlessness, Bolin believes that evangelicals didn't go far enough. "Christians have languished with their participation in politics," he said, "which is one of the reasons we're in this dire position as a nation."

When Bolin arrived at FloodGate in 2010, the church—founded in 1972 and formerly called the Father's House—was mostly apolitical. Bolin changed that. "Pastors used to be the primary influencers in their communities in determining who we elected," Bolin said. He aimed to restore that tradition in his own ministry.

Some people left the church; others joined. All the while, his congregation hovered right around 100 people. He leaned into plenty of political controversies—including Trump's candidacy—but his membership stayed flat. Looking back, it's fair to wonder whether that's because he was on the wrong side of that particular issue. "Donald Trump was the last person I wanted elected president," Bolin said, letting go of a belly laugh. He thought Trump was a charlatan, a lifelong Democrat who was defrauding conservative voters.

"He proved me wrong," Bolin said. "He turned out to be the most pro-life president we've ever had. His influence on the courts will change the country for the next 50 years." Bolin sounded ashamed of having ever doubted Trump. He rattled off the former president's accomplishments. He rolled his eyes at the "condescending" Christians who criticized Trump's ethics. He defended the January 6 insurrection, which "was not a big deal." In fact, Bolin himself nearly traveled to Washington that day "because a lot of people from our church were going, and because I love Donald Trump."

The Trump conversion experience—having once been certain of his darkness, suddenly awakening to see his light—is not to be underestimated, especially when it touches people whose lives revolve around notions of transformation. And yet, it reflects a phenomenon greater than Trump himself. Modern evangelicalism is defined by a certain fatalism about the nation's character. The result is not merely a willingness to act with desperation and embrace what is wrong; it can be a belief, bordering on a certainty, that what is wrong is actually right.

IN THE FALL OF 2016, Ken Brown informed his congregants that he planned to vote for Trump. His choice came down to abortion, he explained, and the Supreme Court appointments in the balance. Still, the pastor emphasized Trump's personal failings and warned against political idolatry. He reminded his people that Christians aspire to a higher standard than "the lesser of two evils." Brown felt confident they understood him.

His confidence was misplaced. Over the next four years, the pastor watched as many of his people became MAGA disciples. They were glued to Fox News. Some posted ugly, combative messages on social media. A few were devotees of Alex Jones, the internet-radio host famous for his hateful conspiracy theories.

When COVID arrived—bringing with it "a new flood of misinformation"—Brown and his leadership team wrote a letter to the congregation laying out their reasons for closing the church and specifying the sources they were relying on. Brown also launched a blog and a podcast, vying for his members' attention at a moment when so many were suddenly stuck at home and swimming in hearsay and innuendo.

Jen Furkas, who began attending Community Bible in 2003, wondered if Brown's efforts were coming too late.

"There are people at the church, people who I'd consider friends, who would have said very hurtful, very unbiblical things," Furkas, the assistant principal of a local public school, told me. "And it didn't just start during COVID."

Furkas describes herself as a moderate Democrat—which, she joked, "makes me the most liberal person at our church." When Trump became the Republican nominee and Pastor Brown shared his intention to vote for him, Furkas was so disappointed that she left the church.

She spent a year shopping around. But none of the other congregations felt right. One Sunday, Furkas came back to Community Bible and noticed something different about the place. "It was Ken," she said. "He had changed. This wasn't the same guy who was sold out to this mindset of *Well, it all comes back to abortion and the courts*. It was clear that he'd seen how this fanaticism had infected the church."

Furkas recalled how, a few years ago, Brown delivered a sermon reminding everyone whom Jesus had come to save. Clicking through a PowerPoint on the sanctuary's projector screens, Brown showed pictures of well-known faces. It was good for some laughs and lighthearted commentary. Then he put up a photograph of Ilhan Omar, the Democratic representative from Minnesota and a Muslim, wearing her hijab. "What about her?" Brown asked. "Did Jesus come for her?" The room was silent.

"I love the evolution from Ken," Furkas said. "But I know it's come at a cost."

Every person I spoke with from Community Bible brought up the fact that some longtime members had quit the church. Brown acknowledged that his tactics had pushed some people away, but he shrugged off the number, saying "four or five families" and "a few individuals" had left. "Sometimes, when someone leaves," he said, "that means you've been successful in protecting the rest of your flock."

But not everyone who's dissatisfied with a church leaves—at least, not right away. At a place like Community Bible, with a core of members who have been together for years, the concern isn't necessarily a mass exodus. It's a mass estrangement, in which people stop listening to the pastor or stop trusting one another—or both—and the church slowly loses its cohesiveness.

"What I worry about is people tuning Ken out—people who don't like his politics, and because of that, they stop letting him

be their pastor,” Bob Fite, a high-school history teacher who has attended Community Bible for more than a decade, told me. “And honestly, he’s making me nervous. I have tried to tell him, ‘Stay in your lane.’”

Fite said that Brown is “losing people” with his political agenda. One of those people is B.J. Fite—Bob’s son. B.J. was raised evangelical, graduated from Bob Jones University, and believes it’s his responsibility to be active in the Church. He’s just not sure anymore that Community Bible is a good fit for someone like him—deeply conservative, a Trump voter, a consumer of right-wing media.

When I met B.J. it was apparent that he was wrestling with whether to leave Community Bible. In fact, he said he’d been engaged in a weeks-long text exchange with Pastor Brown. B.J. was upset that Brown had released multiple podcast episodes vilifying the people responsible for the January 6 insurrection. He also resented the fact that Brown had written blog posts endorsing COVID vaccines and, B.J. felt, had minimized the concerns of people—like himself—who worried they would lose their jobs for refusing the shot.

Bolin praying with FloodGate congregants in February. The pastor initially opposed Donald Trump’s candidacy, but he says he came to “love” the former president.

“There are different truths in politics—Trump’s truth, Biden’s truth, whatever,” B.J. told me. “But in church, there’s supposed to be one truth. Why aren’t we just sticking to that truth?”

Bob Fite said he addressed these concerns in a letter to Pastor Brown and the leadership team. But nothing changed. Bob can’t imagine leaving the place he loves, the place where he and his wife, Valerie, teach Sunday school. But he also can’t imagine standing by while Brown pushes B.J. out the door.

“I’ve been going to church with a lot of apprehension,” Bob said. “I told Valerie, ‘One day, if Ken says the wrong thing, I might have to stand up and leave.’”

BILL BOLIN KNOWS SOMETHING about people leaving. About 90 percent of his Sunday crowd at FloodGate has migrated from other congregations over the past two years. Almost all of them, he says, came bearing grievances against their former pastors. Yet most had never considered looking elsewhere. It took a pandemic, and the temporary closing of their churches, for them to sever ties.

As of the spring of 2020, Jeff and Deidre Myers belonged to Oak Pointe Milford, a suburban-Detroit church. Though they were frustrated that the preaching wasn’t more overtly political, they were highly engaged: leading a marriage ministry, active with other homeschoolers. They were even friends with the pastor, Paul Jenkinson, and his wife.

And then COVID hit. When the church closed, rumors flew about the board of elders holding contentious late-night meetings



to debate pandemic protocols. The longer the church remained locked, the more people speculated on who was casting the deciding votes. Around that time, George Floyd was murdered. Oak Pointe Novi, the parent church, introduced a video series called “Conversations,” which featured interviews with Black pastors and social-justice activists.

“I thought I was going to vomit,” Deidre told me, recalling her reaction to one episode. Jeff added: “It was the pastor’s son”—who, he claimed, is said to be a member of antifa in Canada—“lecturing on white privilege and critical race theory.” (I could not confirm that the pastor’s son is, in fact, a member of antifa in Canada; several people who know the family laughed when I asked the question.)

After an outcry, the pastor apologized for “the ruptures that have occurred,” while the elders issued a separate statement denouncing critical race theory. According to Jeff and Deidre, they were just two members in a stampede out of Oak Pointe.

Deidre saw friends from other congregations, also displaced by shutdowns, posting on Facebook about FloodGate. The first service she attended—in which Pastor Bolin unapologetically advocated for people, like Jeff and Deidre, who felt cheated by their old churches—brought her to tears. Jeff was equally moved. They had found a new home.

When Jeff and Deidre met with Jenkinson to inform him that they were leaving the Milford church, tensions ran high. Their worst fears had already been confirmed: A friend on the elder board had told them that Jenkinson—their pastor, their friend—had argued to keep the church closed. Jeff and Deidre pressed Jenkinson on the church’s refusal to engage with politics. When they asked the pastor why, despite being personally pro-life, he had never preached on abortion, they got the response they’d dreaded. “He said, ‘I’d lose half my congregation,’” Jeff recalled.

Jenkinson remembers the conversation somewhat differently. Jeff and Deidre, he tells me, weren’t just pushing him on abortion; they were challenging the pastor’s policy of political neutrality from the pulpit, and accusing him of taking the easy way out of the debates fracturing his church.

“And I remember telling them, ‘The harder thing to do is what I’m doing,’” the pastor says. “This is how you lose people. How you gain people is, you pick a tribe, raise the flag, and be really loud about it. That’s how you gain a bunch of numbers. That is so easy to do. And it cheapens the Gospel.”

Whatever the specifics of their exchange, to Jeff and Deidre, Jenkinson’s stance amounted to cowardice. “I realize these are hard conversations, but the reason we left Milford is they were never willing to have the conversation,” Jeff said. “They were just trying to keep everybody happy. Paul is a conservative, but his conservatism has no teeth.”

Tony DeFelice is another new arrival at FloodGate—and another Christian who got tired of his pastor lacking teeth. At his previous church, in the Democratic-leaning Detroit suburb of Plymouth, “they did not speak a single word about politics. Not on a single issue,” he told me. “When we got to FloodGate, it confirmed for us what we’d been missing.”

DeFelice, a building inspector, had been attending the Plymouth church for 14 years when the pandemic began. He and his

wife, Linda, had friends and family there; one of their daughters still works on the church staff. Tony and Linda had their share of complaints—the church was too moderate and “too seeker-friendly,” catering more to newcomers than longtime Christians—but they had no plans to leave.

And then, in March 2020, everything fell apart.

“We didn’t leave the church. The church left us,” Tony told me. “COVID, the whole thing, is the biggest lie perpetrated on humanity that we’re ever going to see in our lifetime. And they fell for it.”

Tony and Linda say FloodGate’s style—and Bolin’s fiery messages on topics like vaccines and voter fraud—has changed the way they view their responsibilities as Christians. “This is about good against evil. That’s the world we live in. It’s a spiritual battle, and we are right at the precipice of it,” Tony said.

With the country on the brink of defeat at the hands of secularists and liberals, Tony no longer distinguishes between the political and the spiritual. An attack on Donald Trump is an attack on Christians. He believes the 2020 election was stolen as part of a “demonic” plot against Christian America. And he’s confident that righteousness will prevail: States are going to begin decertifying the results of the last election, he says, and Trump will be returned to office.

“The truth is coming out,” Tony told me.

When I pressed him on these beliefs—offering evidence that Joe Biden won legitimately, and probing for the source of his conviction—Tony did not budge. He is just as convinced that Trump won the 2020 election, he said, as he is that Jesus rose from the dead 2,000 years ago.

NESTLED IN A wooded stretch of exurban Wilson County, Tennessee, the campus of Greg Locke’s Global Vision Bible Church feels more like a compound. Heaps of felled oak trees border the property, evidence of hurried expansion. A rutted gravel parking lot climbs high away from the main road. At the summit stands an enormous white tent. A sign reads THIS IS A MASK FREE CHURCH CAMPUS.

Inside, men wearing earpieces and camouflage pants guard the entrance. Behind them, many hundreds of people jump up and down on a floor of cedar chips. Locke salutes them as “soldiers rising up in God’s army.” Some hear this more literally than others: I spot a few folks carrying guns.

Most evangelicals don’t think of themselves as Locke’s target demographic. The pastor has suggested that autistic children are oppressed by demons. He organized a book-burning event to destroy occult-promoting *Harry Potter* novels and other books and games. He has called President Biden a “sex-trafficking, demon-possessed mongrel.”

If this all sounds a bit strange—ominous, or even “dangerous,” as one local pastor warned me the night before I visited—well, sure. But strange compared to what? Having spent my entire life in and around the evangelical Church, I had in recent years become desensitized to all the rhetoric of militarism and imminent Armageddon. The churches that host election-fraud profiteers and weeknight speakers denouncing the pseudo-satanic agenda of Black Lives Matter—churches that consider themselves



Worshippers at Global Vision Bible Church, in Tennessee, in April. The old Global Vision building (above) held about 250 people. Now the congregation gathers in a tent that fits 3,000 (below).



mainstream—were starting to feel like old hat. It was time to visit the furthest fringes. It was time to go see Greg Locke.

Not long ago, Locke was a small-time Tennessee preacher. Then, in 2016, he went viral with a selfie video, shot outside his local Target, skewering the company's policies on bathrooms and gender identity. The video has collected 18 million views, and it launched Locke as a distinct evangelical brand. He cast himself on social media as a lone voice of courage within Christendom. He aligned himself with figures like Dinesh D'Souza and Charlie Kirk to gain clout as one of the Christian right's staunchest Trump supporters. All the while, his congregation swelled—moving from their old church building, which seated 250, into a large outdoor tent, then into an even bigger tent, and eventually into the current colossus. The tent holds 3,000 people and would be the envy of Barnum & Bailey.

Which is fitting—because what's happening at Global Vision can feel less like a revival than a circus.

One Sunday morning in November, Locke, prowling the stage in a bright-orange tie, asks how many people have traveled to his tent from outside Tennessee. Scores of people stand up. "And this is every weekend!" Locke cries in his hickory drawl. Eager to put on a show for the visitors, Locke announces that his special guest—he tries to book one every Sunday—is the actor John Schneider, who played Bo Duke on *The Dukes of Hazzard*. The crowd erupts and everyone hoists their phone in the air, heralding Schneider's arrival like Catholics awaiting the pope.

Schneider has come to speak and sing. There's such energy that even some very serious-looking men—dressed in paramilitary gear, firearms strapped to their sides—bounce on their toes and clap along. Between songs, Schneider offers a different catalog of greatest hits. He talks about the flu shot making someone sick. He decries the Christian elites who look down on people like him. He hints at a potential violent uprising.

"We are born for such a time as this. God is calling you to do something," Schneider says. "We have a country to get back. And if that fails, we have a country—yes, I'll say it—to *take* back."

Locke's sermon is about the Philistines of the Old Testament stealing the Ark of the Covenant from the Israelites, because they sensed that the only way to defeat God's chosen people was to separate them from God. The same thing is happening in America today, Locke warns. Liberals have devised a plot to separate Christians from God. And all too many Christians—under the guise of a "plandemic"—are allowing it to happen.

"Let me tell you something," Locke says, his voice rising. "I ain't never had a prostitute mad at me for keeping this church open! I ain't never had a wino or a drunkard [come] in here and say, 'I can't believe you!' I ain't never had a crackhead mad for keeping this church open! But I get letters from preachers all the time: 'Oh, Brother Locke, you just need to take a chill pill. We feel like you've shamed us.'"

Locke starts nodding. "I have! Every last one of them cowards, I've shamed all of them!" The audience leaps to its feet again. "Shame, shame, shame!" he shouts, wagging a finger.

Listening to Locke that morning, I felt a peculiar sort of disappointment. There was nothing *sui generis* about the man or

this Sunday service. Locke said nothing I hadn't heard from other pastors. Atmospherics aside—it's not every day you worship inside a tent next to an armed man wearing an Alex Jones shirt—the substance was familiar and predictable to the point of tedium.

Let's be clear: Locke belongs to a category of his own. He recently accused multiple women at his church of being witches (his source: a demon he encountered during an exorcism). That makes it easy for evangelicals to dismiss Global Vision as an outlier, the same way they did Westboro Baptist. It's much harder to scrutinize the extremism that has infiltrated their own church and ponder its logical end point. Ten years ago, Global Vision would have been dismissed as a blip on Christianity's radar. These days, Locke preaches to 2.2 million Facebook followers and has posed for photos with Franklin Graham at the White House.

Walking out of Global Vision, I asked myself: How many pastors at smaller right-wing churches—pastors like Bolin—would have felt uneasy sitting inside this tent? The answer, I suspect, is very few. Global Vision and FloodGate may be different in degree, but they are not different in kind.

THIS MISSION CREEP inside evangelicalism is why some churches have taken an absolutist approach: no preaching on elections, no sermons about current events.

"The second you get into any of the political stuff, you start losing focus," Michael Bingham, the lead pastor at Aldersgate United Methodist Church, in Greenville, South Carolina, told me during a visit last fall. "Some people say, 'Well, you have to preach on abortion.' Okay. But then something else happens in the culture—and if you preached on abortion, well, you better preach on voting rights. Or gun rights. Or immigrants. I've just decided I'm not touching any of it."

Bingham has been a pastor in the UMC for nearly 25 years. Over that time, he says, he's watched as political disputes have traveled from the periphery of church life to the heart of it. Despite being personally conservative on most issues—and estimating that two-thirds of the church agrees with him—Bingham has maintained a posture of unflinching neutrality from the pulpit.

He has two reasons. First, Bingham simply does not believe that pastors should contaminate the Gospel with political talk. Second, and of more immediate relevance when we spoke, the United Methodist Church was finalizing plans for a denominational divorce over core social divisions, including whether to ordain gay ministers. Under the tentative plans, individual churches will vote on whether to break away and join the new conservative denomination or side with the liberals and remain under the existing UMC umbrella.

With rumors of this imminent split roiling Aldersgate, Bingham told me, the last thing he wanted was to exacerbate tensions within his church. Plenty of people there know that he's a conservative. They also know that his deputy, Johannah Myers, is a committed progressive. But the pair were working diligently to keep any trace of those political disagreements out of church life. "We are doing everything we can to hold this place together," Myers told me.

But what is left to hold together? When I visited, the church—an elegant structure with room for 500 in the sanctuary—was

hosting maybe 150 people total across two Sunday services. Bingham is proud to say that he hasn't driven anyone away with his political views. Still, membership has been in decline for years, in part because so many Christians today gravitate toward the places that are outspokenly aligned with their extra-biblical beliefs.

For all their talk of keeping Aldersgate unified, Bingham and Myers acknowledged that in a few years' time, they would belong to different churches. The same went for their members. When I met with some of the longest-tenured laypeople of the church, almost everyone indicated that when the UMC divorce was finalized, they would follow the church that reflected their political views. It didn't matter that doing so meant, in some cases, walking away from the church they'd attended for decades.

"What's coming is going to be brutal. There's no way around that," Bingham told me. "Churches are breaking apart everywhere. My only hope is that, when the time comes, our people can separate without shattering."

KEN BROWN KNOWS plenty of pastors like Bingham, who refuse to talk about the very things tearing their churches apart. He knows they have their reasons. Some don't know what to say. Others fear that speaking up would only make matters worse. Almost everyone is concerned about job security. Pastors are not immune from anxiety over their mortgage or kids' college tuitions; many younger clergy members, in particular, worry that they haven't amassed enough goodwill to get argumentative with their congregation.

Brown is grateful that, after 20 years leading Community Bible, he gets lots of latitude from his congregation. He hears the grouching that his political commentary takes the focus off Jesus, but his entire rationale rests on the belief that Jesus long ago became a secondary focus for some in the church. "I need to do better explaining why I'm dropping these comments in such a volatile cultural environment. Some people feel like I'm just dropping random anti-Trump bombs," Brown said. "But if I didn't see Trump—and Trumpism—as a danger to our mission, they would never hear me say anything about Trump."

Brown has informed the church that he's headed toward retirement. He's searching for a successor and hopes in a few years to transition into a support role. He says the new lead pastor doesn't necessarily need to share his approach to the crises of discernment and disinformation. But this only adds to the urgency of fortifying Community Bible.

The pastor is pushing harder than ever, and he feels, for the first time, that momentum is on his side. Many of his members, Brown said, have told him over the past year that they swore off cable news or deleted their social-media accounts; not coincidentally, some of

them seem more engaged with scripture than ever before. There are still holdouts, Brown said, people who'd prefer the church to go in another direction. But that only validates his approach: Without this intervention, how much worse off might Community Bible be? "I can't prove what would have happened," Brown said, "but my guess is that our church would have descended into the sort of war zone that other churches have become."

There are days when Brown envies his colleagues from other churches who haven't waded into this fight. It would be simpler to spend his final years as a lead pastor sticking to scripture. But whenever he considers that temptation, Brown says he is reminded of a favorite passage. In the Book of John, Chapter 10,

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Jesus warns of the "hired hand" who puts his own safety ahead of the flock's: "So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away."

Brown believes he's been called to be a shepherd. The hired hand, he says, is no better than the wolf.

SITTING INSIDE a cramped office at the back of FloodGate, Bill Bolin is second-guessing himself.

We've talked at length about extremism in his church—the people who were certain that Trump would never leave office, the people who swear by QAnon—and Bolin seems, at some level, to genuinely be reckoning with his role in it. He says he's worried about Christians getting their priorities mixed up. He tells me he doesn't want his rants about Biden or the 2020 election—which are "nonessentials"—to be taken with the seriousness of his statements about Jesus, which are the "essentials" people should come to church for.

"I do make a separation between our religious perspective and our political perspective," Bolin tells me. "I don't view political statements as being infallible."

That's putting it generously. In the time I spent listening to Bolin preach, sitting with him for interviews, and following his Facebook page, I recorded dozens of political statements that were either recklessly misleading or flat-out wrong. When I would challenge him, asking for a source, Bolin would either cite "multiple articles" he had read or send me a link to a website like Headline USA or Conservative Fighters. Then he would concede that

part of politics, for as long as we've been a nation. And there is a long history of both sides exaggerating—like in a post like that."

Still, Bolin seems rattled. He begins telling me about a couple of Democrats who attend FloodGate and have rebuked him for his political rhetoric—but who reassure him, Bolin says, "When it comes to the Word, you're rock-solid." Then he tells me something surprising: He's thinking of scaling back "Headline News" on Sunday mornings. Maybe he'll just read news clips verbatim, he says, without adding commentary. Or maybe he'll cut the political headlines in half, adding some "feel good" news

to balance the mood. The more he thinks about it, Bolin says, he might just cut the segment altogether, posting those political musings on Facebook but keeping them out of worship.

"We're now going from pandemic to endemic. Our culture will change. There will no longer be this massive division over COVID," Bolin says. "The fervency is going to die down."

Except there will always be something new. Literally moments before he talked about the fervency dying down, Bolin previewed a shtick he was going to deliver on Sunday morning about Apple adding a "pregnant-man emoji" to the iPhone.

Bolin had diagnosed in some detail "the sorting" within evangelicalism—the scramble of Christians switching congregations, churches rising and falling, pastors

adapting or heading for the exits. It occurs to me, while he discusses these potential changes, that no church is guaranteed anything. The moment Bolin stops lighting fires from the pulpit at FloodGate, how many of its members—who are now accustomed to that sort of inferno, who came to FloodGate precisely because they wanted the heat—will go looking for them elsewhere?

That's not a risk he seems willing to take. Bolin tells me the church has sold the building we're sitting in—where the congregation has met since the 1970s—and purchased a sprawling complex down the road. The pastor says FloodGate's revenue has multiplied sixfold since 2020. It is charging ahead into an era of expansion, with ambitions of becoming southeast Michigan's next megachurch.

Bolin says FloodGate and churches like it have grown in direct proportion to how many Christians "felt betrayed by their pastors." That trend looks to be holding steady. More people will leave churches that refuse to identify with a tribe and will find pastors who confirm their own partisan views. The erosion of confidence in the institution of American Christianity will accelerate. The caricature of evangelicals will get uglier. And the actual work of evangelizing will get much, much harder.

God isn't biting his fingernails. But I sure am. *A*

IN A SENSE, CHRISTIANS HAVE ALWAYS LIVED A DIFFERENT EPISTEMOLOGICAL EXISTENCE THAN NONBELIEVERS. BUT THIS IS SOMETHING NEW.



the claims were in dispute, and insist that he didn't necessarily believe everything he said or posted.

It seemed a dangerous practice for anyone, let alone someone trusted as a teacher of truth. Many of the backwater websites and podcasts Bolin relies on for political information were the same ones cited to me by people from his church. In a sense, Christians have always lived a different epistemological existence than nonbelievers. But this is something new—and something decidedly nonessential.

At one point, I show Bolin a Facebook post he wrote months earlier: "I'm still wondering how 154,000,000 votes were counted in a country where there are only 133,000,000 registered voters." This was written, I tell him, well after the Census Bureau had published data showing that more than 168 million Americans were registered to vote in 2020. A quick Google search would have given Bolin the accurate numbers.

"Yeah, that's one I regret," he tells me, explaining that he subsequently learned that the numbers he'd posted were incorrect. (The post was still active. Bolin texted me the following day saying he'd deleted it.)

Doesn't he worry that if people see him getting the easy things wrong, they might suspect he's also getting the hard things wrong? Things like sanctity and salvation?

"I really don't. No. Not too much. I don't," Bolin says, shaking his head. "Firebrand statements have been part of the pulpit, and

Tim Alberta is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



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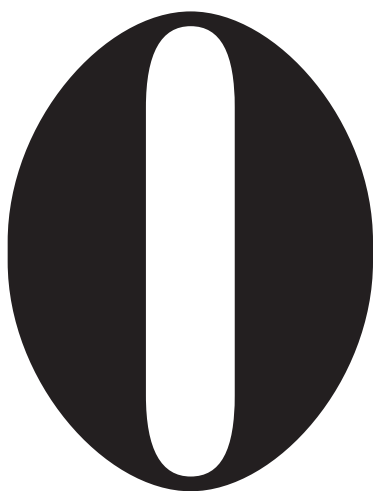
Illustrations by Isabel Seliger



The story of a forensic analyst in Ohio, whose findings in multiple cases have been called into question, reveals the systemic flaws in American crime labs.

BY
BARBARA BRADLEY HAGERTY





On February 12, 1981, 16-year-old Sherry Parsons returned home from high school in the small town of Norwalk, Ohio, and found a strangely quiet house. She called out for her mother, Barbara; hearing no response, she climbed the stairs and walked into her parents' bedroom. "Then my eyes focused on the blood on the bed," she recalled when I spoke with her recently. "I saw my mother on the floor, bludgeoned to death. I dropped my schoolbooks and started screaming."

Blood soaked her mother's nightgown and the bedsheets, and covered the walls and the ceiling. The police in Norwalk interviewed James Parsons, Barbara's husband and Sherry's father. There had been marital problems, but Parsons had a strong alibi: He had picked up breakfast at a coffee shop on the way to work at his auto-repair shop, where he saw customers throughout the morning. Police did not seriously investigate any other suspects.

The case was cold for about a decade, until Sergeant Mike White, in Norwalk, began looking into the murder. White wondered if he could connect the bedsheets to what he believed might have been the murder weapon: a Craftsman breaker bar—a heavy tool with a long handle, used to unscrew tight bolts—that had been found in a car that James Parsons had once owned. White approached the Cuyahoga County coroner's office, in Cleveland. The technicians there examined the bedsheets and the tool, which had no traces of blood on it, and said they could not conclusively rule out the

breaker bar as the murder weapon or connect it to the crime.

White then brought the matter to the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation, where the case was assigned to a forensic scientist named G. Michele Yezzo, a bloodstain specialist. Yezzo proved to be more helpful. She believed she could make out a letter *N*, consistent with the appearance of the same letter in the word *Craftsman* on the breaker bar, imprinted on a bedsheet. She also believed that some stains on the victim's nightgown—which are not easy to decipher—appeared to be similar in shape to the head area of the bar. She sprayed a chemical on the bedsheet and the nightgown to enhance the stains and raise any other impressions. As she watched, more detail emerged. She later testified that she was able to see "individualizing characteristics"—marks seemingly unique to that breaker bar—on the nightgown. She also testified that the letter *S* rose to the surface of the bedsheet—likewise consistent with the appearance of that letter in the word *Craftsman*. But Yezzo failed to photograph the newly visible image, and it faded. Moreover, the chemical process used to bring out the bloodstain markings—all of them, on both the bedsheet and the nightgown—made replication by the defense impossible. When asked, years later, why she had failed to photograph what she said she'd seen on the enhanced bedsheet, Yezzo replied, "This is one time that I didn't manage to get it soon enough." She added: "Operator error."

In 1993, 12 years after the crime, James Parsons was indicted for the murder of his wife. The largely circumstantial case rested in no small part on G. Michele Yezzo—that is, on her credibility as an expert, including her unverifiable memory of what she may have seen when she conducted her experiment. Yezzo's testimony provided a crucial physical link between Parsons and the crime. At trial, Yezzo acknowledged that other Craftsman tools—of which there are millions—were imprinted with the same logo. "I want to see more to be able to say it's that bar, absolutely, to the exclusion of all others," she said. But, she testified, "my opinion is that there is nothing that makes it inconsistent with this bar."

If you are a semanticist, parsing carefully, those words mean little. In court, they can come across as definitive: Nothing rules out the possibility. The words were deployed as definitive by prosecutors—"the evidence is uncontroverted by the scientist, totally uncontroverted"—and understood that way by the jury. Parsons was found guilty and given a prison term of 15 years to life. Michael Donnelly, now a justice on the Ohio Supreme Court, did not preside over this case, but he has had ample exposure to the use of forensic evidence. "As a trial judge," he told me, "I sat there for 14 years. And when forensics experts testified, the jury hung on their every word."

Two decades later, in 2013, the Ohio Innocence Project decided to look into the case. Parsons was still in prison. Because his conviction rested substantially on Yezzo's testimony, the Innocence Project requested her personnel file from the Bureau of Criminal Investigation. "It was really just a Hail Mary," Donald Caster, a professor at the University of Cincinnati College of Law and a staff attorney at the Ohio Innocence Project, told me recently. The legal team, he said, had noticed "squirrely things" in a couple of other Yezzo cases. In early 2015, the Innocence Project received the bureau's personnel file—all 449 pages of it. "People just don't have personnel files that are hundreds of pages long," Caster noted. "It's not really a thing."

The allegations in the personnel file detailed a long, acrimonious history. Among them: Yezzo had threatened to kill her co-workers, had threatened to kill herself, had threatened to bring a gun to work, had hurled a property-room key attached to a six-inch metal plate at a colleague, and had used a racial slur to describe a Black co-worker. With respect to her scientific analysis: "Her findings and conclusions regarding evidence may be suspect," Daniel Chilton, the assistant superintendent of the Bureau of Criminal Investigation, had written in a memo to his boss in May 1989. "She will stretch the truth to satisfy a department." Another note, written a few days before she was to testify in the Parsons trial, stated that Yezzo had a "reputation of giving dept.



in 2016, Yezzo denied using a racial slur. She acknowledged problems with her behavior, citing personal pressures and overwork, but stated that her performance on the job had been unaffected.

The Bureau of Criminal Investigation documents revealed a suspicious timeline. Because of the allegations about her workplace behavior, Yezzo had been put on administrative leave two months before the Parsons trial. But her testimony was going to be needed. Yezzo was reinstated shortly before the trial. Parsons's attorney was never told about the administrative leave or the bureau's concern that her analyses might tilt in a single direction: toward law enforcement. "She should have never even testified," Sherry Parsons told me. "But they got her to come back the day of the trial."

In April 2016, after being presented with the new findings, an Ohio judge vacated Parsons's conviction—not on the grounds that Yezzo's analysis had been explicitly discredited but because the state had not revealed what it knew about possible bias. "This evidence could have been very useful to the defense in its cross-examination of Ms. Yezzo," Judge Thomas Pokorny observed in an opinion from the bench. "Ultimately, these failures undermined his right to a fair trial." He declared the guilty verdict "unworthy of confidence." Parsons was released 23 years after his conviction, a fragile man suffering from heart disease, cancer, and dementia. He died 10 months later, at age 79. Sherry Parsons and her sister have now brought a civil suit against Yezzo, alleging that she violated James Parsons's civil rights by fabricating evidence and withholding information about her administrative leave. (In a court filing in March, Yezzo denied these allegations. The case is ongoing.)

Forensic science, which drives the plots of movies and television shows, is accorded great respect by the public. And in the proper hands, it can provide persuasive insight. But in the wrong hands, it can trap innocent people in a vise of seeming inerrancy—and it has done so far too often. What's more, although some forensic disciplines, such as DNA analysis, are reliable, others have been shown to have serious limitations.

James Parsons was found guilty of murdering his wife based in part on bloodstain evidence that prosecutors said connected the crime to a Craftsman tool.

answer [it] wants if [you] stroke her." In the same documents, analysts reworking some of Yezzo's cases questioned her conclusions on a blood analysis and a partial-footprint analysis.

In an article about the personnel file that appeared in *The Columbus Dispatch*

A NUMBER OF CASES involving G. Michele Yezzo's work in Ohio offer an entry point into the subject. I have read thousands of pages of court and other documents related to Yezzo's career. Her alleged professional and personal shortcomings are a matter of record. That said, it is important to be clear about what she does and does not represent.

Yezzo is not like Annie Dookhan, a chemist in a Massachusetts crime laboratory who boosted her productivity by falsifying reports and by "dry labbing"—that is, reporting results without actually conducting any tests. At one trial, Dookhan testified that the substance a man had been caught with was crack cocaine when it in fact was a piece of peanut. The man served 15 months. Massachusetts has dismissed convictions in more than 20,000 cases Dookhan was involved in.

Nor is Yezzo like Michael West, a forensic odontologist who claimed that he could identify bite marks on a victim and then match those marks to a specific person. In their book, *The Cadaver King and the Country Dentist*, Radley Balko and Tucker Carrington recount how, in a videotaped autopsy of a 23-month-old girl, West was seen pressing a dental mold that he had made of a suspect into the toddler's cheek, elbow, and arm. (West has called allegations that he was tampering with evidence "a damn lie.")

The deeper issue with forensic science lies not in malfeasance or corruption—or utter incompetence—but in the gray area where Yezzo can be found. Her alleged personal problems are unusual: Only because of them did the details of her long career come to light. And yet the career itself is not as unusual as one might wish. It highlights how tenuous many forensic findings can be; how easy it is for prosecutors to make them appear solid to a jury; how closely some analysts work with law-enforcement colleagues, to the point of alignment; how rarely an analyst's skills are called into question in court; and how seldom the performance of crime labs is subjected to any true oversight. All of this combines to create a dangerous prosecutorial weapon.

Brandon Garrett, a professor at Duke University's law school and the author of

Autopsy of a Crime Lab, told me recently that when he examined the forensic testimony in hundreds of wrongful convictions, he found "a blizzard of error." To take a single metric: More than half of those exonerated by post-conviction DNA testing had been wrongly convicted based on flawed forensic evidence.

When asked to explain why forensics goes wrong, critics cite three factors. First, some commonly used forensic methods have not been rigorously evaluated; their validity has not been

THE QUALITY OF THE WORK DONE IN CRIME LABS IS ALMOST NEVER AUDITED.

established. Second, the overwhelming majority of crime labs are not independent but tucked into police departments or state law-enforcement agencies. They depend on law enforcement for funding and operate under ever-present financial and psychological pressure to collaborate in securing convictions. Third, no one from the outside is rigorously checking the work done by forensic analysts, who may or may not have adequate scientific training. Many labs participate in voluntary accreditation programs, but, Garrett noted, accreditation largely focuses on having the right procedures spelled out on paper; proficiency tests given to lab analysts are extremely easy. Only in a few states are the regulations and controls that govern clinical labs and hospitals extended to crime labs as well. The quality of the work done in crime labs is almost never audited.

Even the best forensic scientists can fall prey to unintentional bias. A case widely cited by criminal-justice experts involved

the FBI. In 2004, a series of explosions tore apart four trains in Madrid, killing nearly 200 people. The bombing was the work, it was believed, of Islamist terrorists. The Spanish National Police recovered a partial, smudged fingerprint on a bag of detonators and asked the FBI to analyze it. "Partials" are not ironclad and leave considerable room for interpretation. The FBI's fingerprint database offered up 20 possible matches. An FBI examiner found minutiae in the fingerprint that led him to identify a U.S. citizen named Brandon

Mayfield as the man who had touched the detonator bag. After reviewing the comparison, two other examiners agreed with this analysis. The FBI launched an investigation into Mayfield and learned that he was a lawyer in Oregon who had converted to Islam and once represented a Muslim man (in a child-custody case) who was later convicted of terrorism. Mayfield was soon in custody. The Spanish police never agreed with the FBI analysis, but their arguments initially went nowhere; ultimately the Spanish identified the print as belonging to an Algerian national. Two weeks after bringing Mayfield in, the FBI admitted its error and released him; the federal government later paid Mayfield \$2 million in a settlement. A 2006 Inspector General report acknowledged that Mayfield's background likely contributed to the FBI's failure to reconsider its position after "legitimate questions" were raised.

Study after study has demonstrated the power of cognitive bias. Itiel Dror,

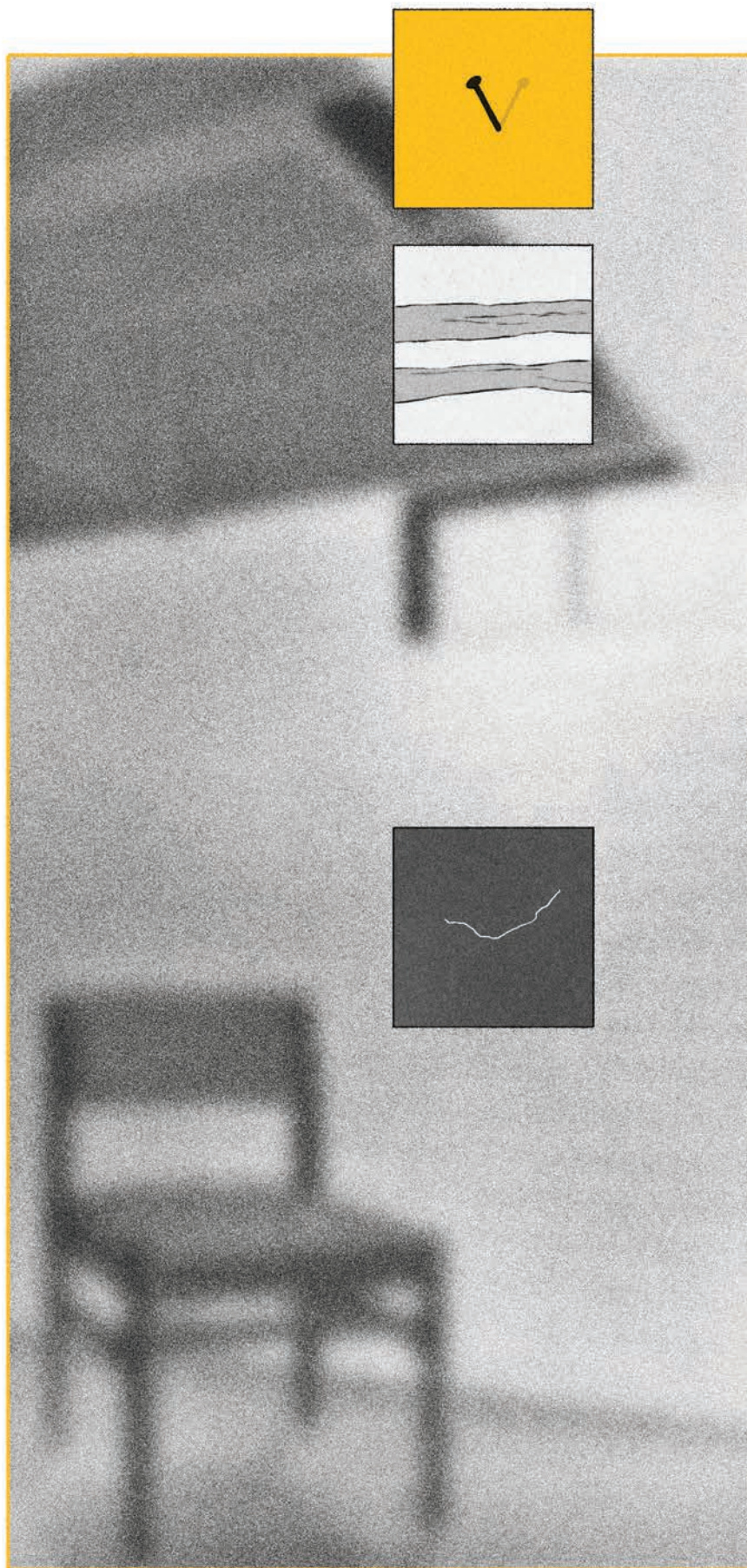
a cognitive neuroscientist at University College London, found that forensic examiners analyzing a DNA mixture in a gang-rape case were far more likely to discern a possible link to a specific individual if they had already been told that the individual was a suspect. In a recent study, forensic anthropologists were also far more likely to wrongly conclude that a femur came from a female when they were shown staged images of a recovery scene containing a bra.

Cognitive bias can of course affect anyone, in any circumstance—but it is particularly dangerous in a criminal-justice system where forensic scientists have wide latitude as well as some incentive to support the views of prosecutors and the police.

TIMOTHY HOWARD'S ACCOUNT of what happened on the morning of April 1, 2006, seemed straightforward. He had found his wife, Delilah, hanging from the belt of her pink terry-cloth bathrobe in the basement of their home in Franklin County, Ohio. Howard, a 44-year-old house painter, said that he'd cut Delilah down. He'd called 911. He'd performed CPR. But she was gone. After the police arrived, he'd gathered his three children—two daughters, 18 and 22, and a son, 11—and they'd settled in a bedroom. "One of the kids was looking on the dresser and found there was four notes, one to me and one to each of the three kids," Howard told me recently at the public defender's office in Columbus. "And they explained that she was sorry, but she can't—couldn't—go on."

The marriage was strained, but Howard had no record of violence—indeed, no police record of any kind—and his wife had a history of depression. She had tried to commit suicide twice before. Nevertheless, Howard was charged with murder. Prosecutors alleged that Howard had strangled his wife with her bathrobe belt

.....
Timothy Howard said he found his wife, Delilah, hanging from the belt of her bathrobe in their basement. He was later convicted of murder in a case that involved fiber evidence.
.....



and staged the death as a suicide, advancing a bizarre theory that he had planted notes that Delilah had written in a previous suicide attempt.

Howard's trial, in 2008, quickly turned into a battle of the experts. The state's witness from the coroner's office—not yet board-certified—concluded that Delilah had died from ligature strangulation. She ruled the death a homicide. Howard's lawyers presented their own pathologist, who testified that the angle of the marks on her neck pointed to a classic hanging injury. The state presented an expert who insisted that Delilah weighed too much for a nail to hold. A defense expert disagreed.

When G. Michele Yezzo, from the Bureau of Criminal Investigation, was called to the stand, she focused tightly on the fiber evidence. Yezzo explained that she had examined the “tape lifts” that had picked up debris on three nails near the spot where Howard said he'd found Delilah hanging. The tape lifts “failed to reveal any fiber samples that were consistent with the belt” from the robe. The prosecutor went over the point again, more bluntly this time, asking Yezzo to confirm that she had not found “any fibers.” She answered, “That is correct.” Howard's defense relied in part on connecting the belt with a nail. Yezzo's assessment was therefore crucial. “It's easy to see how that testimony could have essentially been the tiebreaker,” Joanna Sanchez, the director of the Ohio public defender's Wrongful Conviction Project, told me, “and pushed the jury to think, *Okay, the physical evidence isn't matching up with what he said.*” Howard was convicted and given a prison term of 23 years to life.

In 2011, Sanchez began looking into Howard's conviction. After agreeing to handle his case, she filed numerous public-records requests. Among the documents she received were Yezzo's handwritten notes about her investigation. The notes indicated the presence of “no fine pink fibers”—as she had testified—but there were a few additional words: “some red noted but microscopically different in color.” Whatever the source and nature of the fibers, the fact of their existence had been omitted from Yezzo's official report. She did not mention it in courtroom

testimony when asked by the prosecutor about the presence of “any fibers,” thinking, she later explained, that the question was about the fibers she considered “consistent with” the belt. Sanchez believes that information about the presence of fibers would have been used to devastating effect by Howard's defense team.

In 2012, a far more experienced coroner in Franklin County took a second look at the forensic findings, along with the health-care records that described Delilah's previous suicide attempts. The coroner changed the manner of death from “homicide” to “undetermined.” With that, the state's case was significantly undermined. Prosecutors fought for another five years, but in 2017, at age 56, Howard was released. While awaiting a hearing to be granted a new trial, he accepted what is known as an Alford plea: He was given his freedom in return for a guilty plea that included an assertion of his innocence.

IN 2015, after James Parsons's lawyers had requested Yezzo's personnel files, Mike DeWine, at the time Ohio's attorney general and now its governor, appointed a special prosecutor to investigate the forensic analyst's performance. The audit largely focused on six years during which formal complaints had been made about Yezzo's behavior, but even this limited review raised questions about her 32-year tenure. Of the 126 “death related” cases that involved Yezzo during this period, auditors flagged 18 for further review. In these instances, the audit took issue with Yezzo's documentation—in some cases, for instance, because her notes were “minimal”; in some other cases because her findings did not support her final conclusions. Although Yezzo usually passed proficiency tests, in the 2000s, she failed tests involving hair and glass, and was reprimanded for a quality issue in a paint analysis; supervisors ordered dozens of her cases to be reexamined by other forensic scientists.

Yezzo had difficulty getting along with colleagues, but law-enforcement officers and prosecutors showered her with praise. “If you were here right now, I would give you a heartfelt hug and kiss for Valentine's Day,” one prosecutor wrote. “There

were several turning points in the trial. Your testimony was one of those critical times for us.” Another prosecutor called her “an important member of our law enforcement team.” A third referred to a successful prosecution as “a real collaborative venture.” This kind of reinforcement is not atypical. “Forensic experts get to know the prosecutors and they get to know the police,” Justice Donnelly, of the Ohio Supreme Court, observed during a recent conversation. “The lines can be blurred, and it begins to take on the semblance of a team effort. You're all part of ‘Team Ohio.’”

Yezzo maintains that she was never pro-prosecution; the audit put in motion by DeWine found “no indication of foul play or intentional deception” on Yezzo's part and recommended that no further action be taken. But by that time Yezzo was long gone. She had been reprimanded by her superintendent in 2009 for “interpretational and observational errors” that “could lead to a substantial miscarriage of justice.” Yezzo resigned “in anticipation of retirement” a month later.

Prosecutors have noted that Yezzo's testimony may not always have been pivotal. Ryan Stubenrauch, an attorney and former adviser to DeWine, told me that, with the exception of DNA evidence, “in your average case, it is not one piece of forensic evidence that makes or breaks” a prosecution. Witness testimony, motive, circumstantial evidence, other physical evidence—these combine to build to a conviction. Yet, as criminal law recognizes, one can't simply remove a piece of load-bearing evidence after the fact and insist that the edifice would have remained standing anyway. Prosecutions are like a game of Jenga, Donald Caster, the Ohio Innocence Project attorney, observed. The government presents layers of evidence to create a tower of culpability. “If you pull the wrong piece out, the whole thing comes tumbling down,” he said. “And that's what happens once you take Yezzo's testimony out of a lot of these cases.”

PERHAPS NO SINGLE CASE demonstrates the outsize role that questionable forensic science can play in a defendant's fate than the murder trial of Kevin Keith,

a case that also illustrates the difficulty of true legal redress.

On February 13, 1994, at about 8:45 p.m., a man came to the door of an apartment in the small city of Bucyrus, Ohio, about an hour north of Columbus. The man spoke briefly with a woman named Linda Chatman, who had just arrived; the apartment belonged to Marichell Chatman, Linda's niece. Whoever the man was, he was known to Linda and Marichell. He walked inside, asked who was winning the basketball game on television, then pulled a 9-mm handgun and ordered all six people there—three adults, three children—to lie on the

survive. Glancing out her front door, a resident of the complex saw a husky Black man careening out of the parking lot in a cream-colored automobile. It skidded into a snowbank and eventually sped off after the driver got out of the car and rocked it free.

Police immediately suspected a man named Kevin Keith. Keith was a small-time drug dealer who had recently been charged with drug trafficking, thanks to evidence supplied by Marichell's brother Rudel Chatman. Police arrested Keith two days after the crime as he sat on his couch watching TV. When I visited him last year at the medium-security prison in Marion,

perpetrator, witnesses contradicted one another and themselves, and even disagreed about whether or not he had been masked. No physical or biological evidence—blood, hair, fibers, fingerprints—connected Keith to the crime scene. Could Keith at least be connected to the snowbank? The getaway car had left tire-tread impressions and a partial license-plate impression—the numbers 043.

When Keith's girlfriend came to visit him in jail, the police took notice of the license plate on the car she was driving: MVR043. However, the car was not cream-colored—it was green. And it was not Keith's car or even his girlfriend's car—it was her grandfather's car. Moreover, the tires on the car did not match the tread marks in the snow. The only possibly good news for the prosecution was that the tracks in the snow seemed to resemble those from a type of tire, Triumph 2000s, that the grandfather had once owned—the police had found a receipt. The state's theory seemed to be that Keith had replaced the Triumph 2000s with some other kind of tire after the crime. Or maybe that he had put them on to commit the crime and then changed them back. "Why would somebody change the tires on a car and not the license plate?" Rachel Troutman, an attorney at the Ohio public defender's office, asked when I spoke with her recently.

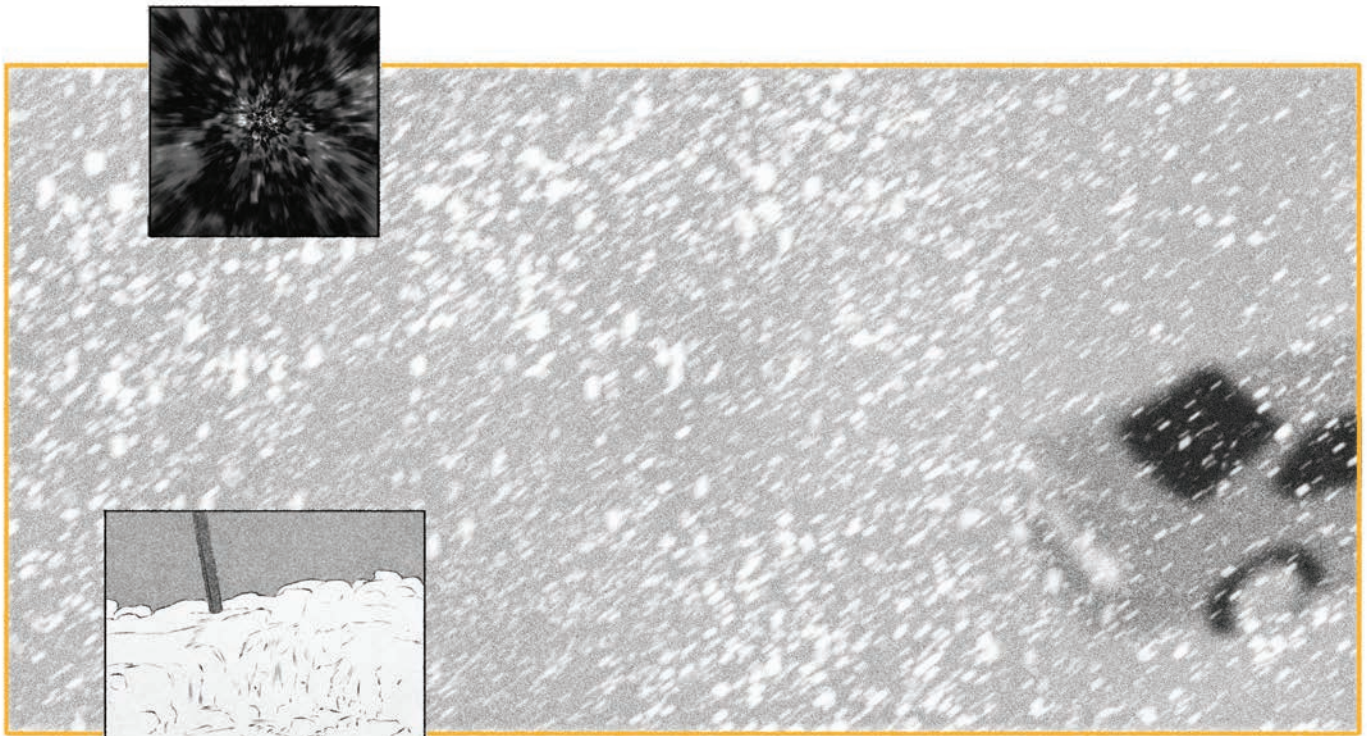
To fortify its case, the prosecution relied on Yezzo, who testified by deposition. She had herself conducted some of the analyses that found no physical link between Keith and the murder, but a Bucyrus police captain had sent her a brochure advertising Triumph 2000 tires along with a copy of the grandfather's receipt, and had scrawled a note: "Hope this will do the trick for us." Yezzo never looked at the actual tires that the state alleged had made the impression in the snowbank—the ones that the grandfather had once bought but that were not on the car when the police examined it. Rather, she simply compared photographs and a plaster cast of the tire-tread impressions with images from the brochure. She testified that the tracks in the snow were similar to the tread design on the type of tire that had once been on the

YEZZO WAS REPRIMANDED BY HER SUPERINTENDENT FOR "INTERPRETATIONAL AND OBSERVATIONAL ERRORS" THAT "COULD LEAD TO A SUBSTANTIAL MISCARRIAGE OF JUSTICE."

ground. "What are you doing?" Marichell asked, according to later trial testimony. "You ain't going to hurt us while the children are here. I don't want anything to happen to those children." "You should have thought about this before your brother started ratting on people," the man replied, and shot Marichell in the head. Then he trained his gun on the others. When he was done, Linda, Marichell, and Marichell's young daughter lay dead. Marichell's boyfriend and two young cousins were badly wounded but would

Ohio, he told me he'd thought they were picking him up for selling "a little weed." He went on: "The next thing I know, I'm being read murder charges."

At Keith's trial, in 1994, the prosecutor promised a case supported by numerous eyewitness accounts and compelling forensic evidence. Jurors got something else. One of the young cousins who survived the attack, a 6-year-old girl, had told police explicitly that Keith was not the culprit. "It looks like him but that's not him," she said. When it came to identifying the



and a total of 130 in Crawford County and nearby Richland County, that had the sequence 043 at the far right of their license plate.

Looking back at Yezzo's testimony, Justin Herdman, a former U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Ohio, told me: "Comparing photographs is about the worst possible way you could ever think of to make a scientific determination about commonalities or draw connections. That's not science. That's somebody on the back of a cocktail napkin drawing conclusions." Nonetheless, Keith was convicted and sentenced to death.

When Rachel Troutman first met Keith, in 2007, she was skeptical of his claim of innocence. She would soon change her mind. She discovered radio logs and police reports that called into question the veracity of witnesses and police officers. She found that the Bucyrus police had received two subpoenas for phone logs and other records that could have been exculpatory; someone had scrawled "Ignore" across the subpoenas. As outlined in a motion for a new trial, she also found that police had suppressed information from an informant about a man who allegedly told a friend he'd been paid to "cripple" Rudel Chatman, Marichell's brother, because he was a snitch. This man, who had served time

for murder when he was a minor, owned a light-colored car and had a license plate containing the sequence 043, though the numbers did not occur at the end, where Yezzo had said they ought to be.

Every time Troutman discovered new exculpatory evidence, the court declined to consider it. As Keith's execution date drew near, in 2010, the parole board unanimously rejected a bid for clemency. Troutman finally appealed to Governor Ted Strickland. Thirteen days before Keith was to be executed, Strickland commuted his sentence to life without parole, noting that he was troubled by "important questions" about the forensic evidence and the failure to fully investigate "other credible suspects."

Prominent members of the Ohio bar have moved into Kevin Keith's camp. Justin Herdman is now a member of his legal team. Lee Fisher, Ohio's attorney general when Keith was tried, filed an affidavit in court on Keith's behalf: "I am deeply concerned that Ms. Yezzo's conclusions and testimony led to a miscarriage of justice in Mr. Keith's case," he wrote. In another affidavit, Strickland stated, "I have become convinced that Kevin Keith is very likely an innocent man."

G. MICHELE YEZZO agreed to speak with me last year. We met at a deli, in a strip mall in Columbus. She is in her late

In the murder trial of Kevin Keith, the state alleged that partial tire and license-plate impressions in the snow tied the defendant to the crime scene.

grandfather's car: "Its similarity is it would have originated from the Triumph 2000," she stated. (Yezzo has taken issue with the court transcript, believing that she would have said "could have.") As for the number sequence on the license plate, Yezzo reported that the impression in the snowbank had "spacing and orientation similar to the license plate 'MVR043,'" meaning that, in her judgment, the numbers came at the far right of the license plate—a conclusion unfriendly to Keith and one that effectively ruled out anyone whose license plate had 043 on the far left. Even so, there were 17 other cars in tiny Bucyrus,

60s, with brown hair and bangs cut straight across her forehead. She wore a rainbow-colored T-shirt in support of efforts to combat autism. Although Yezzo would not talk about any of the allegations that appear in her personnel file, she insisted that she had never skewed her findings. She also said that she had sometimes testified for the defense. If a prosecutor uses her words a certain way, Yezzo maintained, she should not be held responsible. “I do the analysis to the best of my ability, and if anything, I’m conservative.”

Yezzo is already being sued for her role in the Parsons conviction, and other lawsuits may be in the offing. The Ohio attorney general’s office declined to

When I spoke with Yezzo, she sought to diminish her influence over any particular outcome. “I am not the one to say, ‘That person did it,’” she explained. “I can say: ‘This is what I have from the physical evidence.’ That being the case, I’m not judge and jury, and never will be, and never have been.” None of this changes the fact that Yezzo’s judgments *were* given an imprimatur of expertise and certainty by prosecutors, or that juries *did* convict in part because of them.

Questions of forensic judgment aside, jurors and the public do not appreciate the fact that the “science” of forensics may not warrant the label. In 2009, in a comprehensive report called “Strengthening

body with “virtual certainty,” despite the fact that skin is elastic and bite marks change over time. Some studies have found that forensic dentists match bite marks to the wrong person about 15 percent of the time. (Dental experts sometimes can’t agree whether a mark came from a human being.) Bloodstain analysts, who look at patterns of blood to re-create the backstory of physical violence—an assault by, say, a six-foot-tall, right-handed man with a hammer, standing over the victim—have fared little better than the dentists. In a recent study, forensic experts were shown photographs of a bloody scene for which the study’s authors knew the “ground truth”—that is, how the patterns had been created. The experts got it wrong about 11 percent of the time. Perhaps the most alarming finding involves comparative hair analysis using microscopes. This technique has now been largely superseded by DNA analysis, but it helped put untold numbers of people in prison and dozens on death row. By 2015, the FBI had reviewed hundreds of criminal cases in which FBI examiners had testified that hair found at a crime scene incriminated a suspect. The FBI concluded that its experts had provided scientifically invalid testimony in 96 percent of the cases—including 33 of the 35 death-penalty cases. “It’s hard to be *that* wrong,” Mark Godsey, the head of the Ohio Innocence Project, told me.

That doesn’t mean that “all forensic science is worthless,” Sandra Guerra Thompson, the author of *Cops in Lab Coats*, explained when I spoke with her. “Many disciplines are solid, but we just don’t have enough proof yet to fully support others.” She pointed out that serology, toxicology, chemical analysis, and of course DNA analysis rest on secure foundations. The larger problem, experts say, involves pattern-matching disciplines, which still overwhelmingly lack established methods or standards. They also require judgment calls—essentially, comparing two pieces of evidence and determining whether, for instance, a smudged, partial tread mark at a crime scene might have been made by a suspect’s shoe, or whether a fiber found in a suspect’s car could reasonably have come from a victim’s sweater. These comparisons may be more prone to bias or error.

JURORS AND THE PUBLIC DO NOT APPRECIATE THE FACT THAT THE “SCIENCE” OF FORENSICS MAY NOT WARRANT THE LABEL.

comment about Yezzo, citing the ongoing litigation, and added that since Yezzo’s retirement, the Bureau of Criminal Investigation has developed “several quality controls.” When I mentioned her name to John Lenhart, who ran the bureau back in the early ’90s, he groaned. Lenhart had put Yezzo on administrative leave in 1993, shortly before the Parsons trial; she was reinstated without his knowledge, and kept her job for another 16 years, giving testimony in hundreds of criminal cases. Lenhart left the bureau in 1994 and returned to state government years later, as Ohio’s director of law enforcement. He was surprised to be told that Yezzo was still there. “I’m going, ‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’” he recalled.

Forensic Science in the United States,” the National Academy of Sciences delivered a withering assessment. Under the academy’s auspices, experts of all kinds had been brought together to examine disciplines including the analysis of fingerprints, firearms, bite marks, and bloodstains. They drilled down on the question *How good is forensic science at connecting a piece of evidence to a specific individual or source?* The answer: Only DNA could reliably do this. Other disciplines had not yet been backed up by robust research.

Consider bite marks. For years, the American Board of Forensic Odontology claimed that it was possible to match a suspect’s teeth to the bite marks on a victim’s

The 2009 National Academy of Sciences report was a bombshell, at least among forensic professionals. But it had little impact, and proposed reforms, such as removing crime laboratories from state and local law-enforcement agencies and making them independent, rarely gained traction. When a presidential advisory council reported in 2016 that many forensic disciplines did not yet pass scientific muster, the Justice Department essentially rejected the report. The National Commission on Forensic Science, created in 2013 to raise the standards of the science used in courts, was disbanded during the Trump administration.

THE STORY OF G. Michele Yezzo reveals not that Ohio's crime lab is uniquely bad—it is highly regarded, in fact—but that it is not unique at all. “There are so many different ways that forensics can go wrong,” Duke University's Brandon Garrett told me. It's not just about unreliable forensic methods and it's not just about biased experts: “It's about the whole forensics enterprise and how poorly we regulate it.” Garrett keeps a running tab of scandals at crime laboratories. Hardly a month goes by, he said, when he doesn't find another lab to add to the list, whether for specific cities (Cleveland, New York, San Francisco, Detroit) or for entire states (West Virginia, Montana). Some crime labs have been closed; others, including in Washington, D.C., have lost their accreditation and have had to outsource their work.

When properly conducted and modestly characterized, forensic science has a clear role in the criminal-justice system. And a few labs have made changes that might preserve its utility while mitigating its problems. One bright spot is Houston. In 2003, after it became clear that faulty forensic work by Houston's police crime lab would lead to an exoneration, *The New York Times* described the lab as “the worst” in the country. Auditors discovered that technicians were poorly trained, kept shoddy records, misinterpreted data, and submitted reports based on evidence that they hadn't bothered to test—this in a state that puts more people to death than any other. “Houston was

ONLY SEVEN STATES HAVE LAWS THAT EXPLICITLY ALLOW A PRISONER TO CHALLENGE A CONVICTION ON GROUNDS OF DISCREDITED FORENSIC SCIENCE.

a hot, stinking mess,” Peter Stout, who took over as president of the laboratory in 2017, told me. “It got bad enough that everybody said, ‘Okay, we've got to do something different.’”

The old crime lab was scrapped. Taking its place was the Houston Forensic Science Center. No longer part of the police department, the center is a “local government corporation,” Stout told me, with a board of directors that includes defense attorneys and even one exoneree. The Forensic Science Center analyzes evidence for both the defense and the prosecution. It steers clear of dubious techniques, such as hair analysis, bite-mark comparisons, and bloodstain analysis. Crucially, it employs blind testing: Periodically, the lab's managers slip a sample into the stream of evidence for which they know the ground truth in advance—*this sample is cocaine; the owner of this latent print is in the database; this DNA mixture involves these three people*. With such exercises, Houston can determine whether analysts are arriving at the correct answers. These kinds of procedures will not prevent every mistake. But they do introduce an element of forensic neutrality—and, over time, will perhaps lead jurors to a more realistic view of what weight to place on forensic analysis.

Meanwhile, only seven states have laws that explicitly allow a prisoner to challenge a conviction on grounds of discredited forensic science. Ohio is not one of them, and the path to a new trial in states without such laws can be difficult. As for attempting to bring a case in federal court, that too is often a dead end. In 1996, at the urging of President Bill Clinton, Congress passed a law that makes it nearly impossible for federal courts to overturn state convictions. For Kevin Keith, this means that even though his lawyers have discovered new information, he almost certainly cannot get relief. In 2021, after considering Yezzo's testimony, the wealth of new evidence, and the applicable law, U.S. District Court Judge Solomon Oliver Jr. denied Keith a new day in court. He had no jurisdiction. “This case, more than most, demonstrates the tragic result” of the 1996 law, Oliver wrote. But his hands were tied. He had to apply the law as it is, “not as the court wishes it to be.” Kevin Keith remains in prison. *A*

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"Five years ago, I would have never imagined my life would be like this."

— Uma Sinjali Magar



GIVE A FUTURE THEY COULD NEVER IMAGINE

With just one goat and no income source, life used to be a struggle for Uma Sinjali Magar and her family. Although smart and capable, she didn't have enough money to meet her family's needs.

That all changed when Heifer International came into her life. With her hard work and Heifer's support, she transformed her future. Uma joined a Heifer cooperative that encouraged her to build her business, start saving money and confidently express herself. She grew her goat herd, and the bargaining power of her cooperative allows her to make more money from the sale of each animal. With an increased income, her whole family benefits.



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Chasing Joan Didion

*I visited the writer's California
homes, from Berkeley to Malibu.
What was I looking for?*

By Caitlin Flanagan

*Didion on the deck of her
Malibu home in 1976*



*“Think of this as
a travel piece,”*

she might have written. “Imagine it in *Sunset* magazine: ‘Five Great California Stops Along the Joan Didion Trail.’”

Or think of this as what it really is: a road trip of magical thinking.

I had known that Didion’s Parkinson’s was advancing; seven or eight months earlier, someone had told me that she was vanishing; someone else had told me that for the past two years, she hadn’t been able to speak.

I didn’t want her to die. My sense of myself is in many ways wrapped up in the 40 essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album*. I don’t know how many times I’ve read *Democracy*.

“Call me the author,” she writes in that novel. “Let the reader be introduced to Joan Didion.”

There are people who admire Joan Didion, and people who enjoy reading Joan Didion, and people who think Joan Didion is overrated. But then there are the rest of us. People who can’t really explain how those first two collections hit us, or why we can never let them go.

I picked up *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* in 1975, the year I was 14. I had met Didion that spring, although she wasn’t famous yet, outside of certain small but powerful circles. She’d been a visiting professor in the Berkeley English department, and

my father was the department chair. But I didn’t read her until that summer. I was in Ireland, as I always was in the summer, and I was bored out of my mind, as I always was in the summer, and I happened to see a copy of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* in a Dublin living room. I read that book and something changed inside me, and it has stayed that way for the rest of my life.

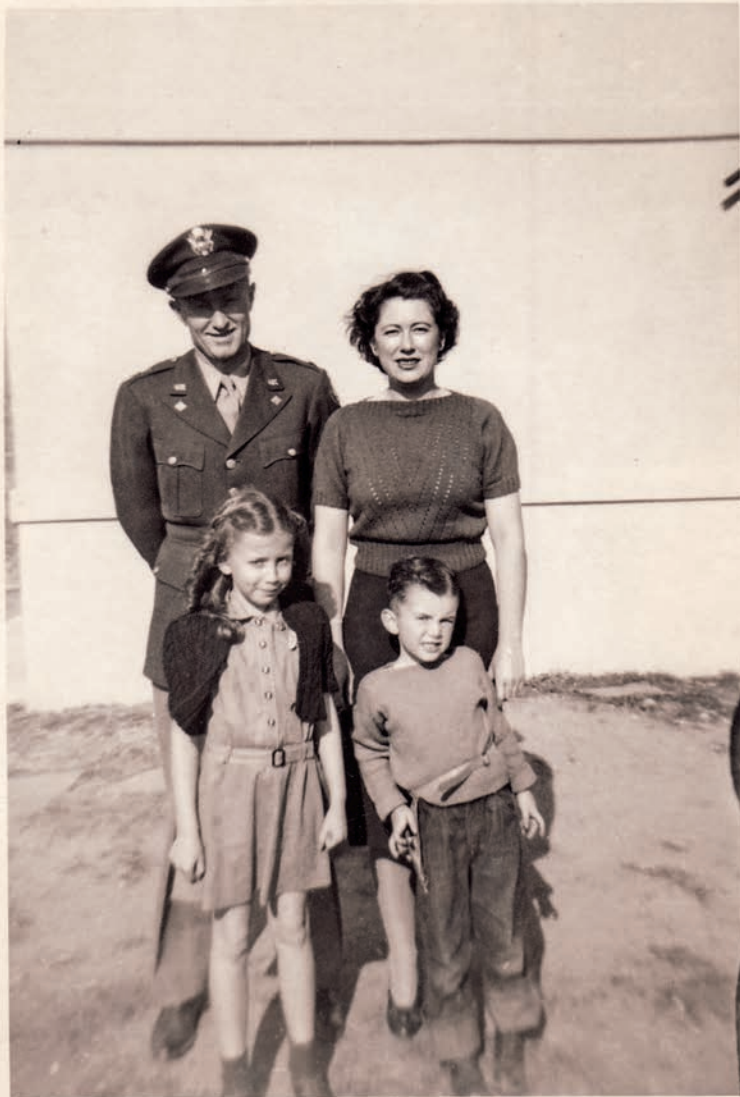
Over the previous two years people kept contacting me with reports of her decline. I didn’t want to hear reports of her decline. I wanted to hear about the high-ceilinged rooms of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, and about all the people who came to parties at her house on Franklin Avenue. I wanted to go with her to pick out a dress for Linda Kasabian, the Manson girl who drove the getaway car the night of the murders. I wanted to spend my days in the house out in Malibu, where the fever broke.

In 1969, Didion wanted to go to Vietnam, but her editor told her that “the guys are going out,” and she didn’t get to go. When her husband had been at *Time* and asked to go, he was sent at once, and he later wrote about spending five weeks in the whorehouses of Saigon.

Being denied the trip to Vietnam is the only instance I know of that her work was limited by her gender. She fought against the strictures of the time—and the ridiculous fact of being from California, which in the 1950s was like being from Mars, but with surfboards.

She fought all of that not by changing herself, or by developing some ball-breaking personality. She did it by staying exactly as she was—unsentimental, strong, deeply feminine, and a bit of a seductress—and writing sentence after sentence that cut the great men of New Journalism off at the knees. Those sentences, those first two collections—who could ever compete with them?

Slouching Towards Bethlehem and *The White Album* created a new vocabulary of essay writing, one whose influence is on display every day of the week in the tide of personal essays published online by young writers. Those collections changed the way many people thought about non-fiction, and even the way they thought about themselves.



*Joan Didion in 1943 with her parents
and younger brother, James*

A thousand critics have addressed the worthy task of locating the errors of logic in those essays and calling out the various engines that turn the wheels: narcissism, whiteness, wealth. Frustrated by the entire cult of Didion, they've tried to crash it down by making a reasonable case against its foundational texts. God knows, none of that is heavy lifting. Joan Didion: guilty as charged.

But what no one has ever located is what makes so many people feel possessive not just of the stories, but also of their connection to the writer. What is it about these essays that takes so many people hostage?

At a certain point in her decline, I was gingerly asked if I would write an obituary. No, I would not. I was not on that particular train. I was on the train of trying to keep her alive.

I wanted to feel close to her—not to the mega-celebrity, very rich, New York Joan Didion. I wanted to feel close to the girl who came from Nowhere, California (have you ever been to Sacramento?), and blasted herself into the center of everything. I wanted to feel close to the young woman who'd gone to Berkeley, and studied with professors I knew, and relied on them—as I had once relied on them—to show her a path.

The thing to do was get in the car and drive. I would go and find her in the places where she'd lived.

Sacramento

The trip began in my own house in Los Angeles, with me doing something that had never occurred to me before: I Googled the phrase *Joan Didion's house Sacramento*. Even as I did, I felt that it was a mistake, that something as solid and irrefutable as a particular house on a particular street might put a rent in what she would have called "the enchantment under which I've lived my life." What if it was the wrong kind of house? Too late: A color photograph was already blooming on the screen.

2000 22nd Street is a 5,000-square-foot home in a prosperous neighborhood with a wraparound porch and two staircases. The Didions had moved there when Joan was

in 11th grade. It was a beautiful house. But it was the wrong kind of house.

The Joan Didion of my imagination didn't come from a wealthy family. How did I miss the fact that what her family loved to talk about most was property—specifically, “land, price per acre and C-2 zoning and assessments and freeway access”? Why didn't I understand the implications of her coming across an aerial photograph of some land her father had once thought of turning into a shopping mall, or of the remark “Later I drive with my father to a ranch he has in the foothills” to talk with “the man who runs his cattle”?

Perhaps because they came after this beautiful line:

When we talk about sale-leasebacks and right-of-way condemnations we are talking in code about things we like best, the yellow fields and the cottonwoods and the rivers rising and falling and the mountain roads closing when the heavy snow comes in.

On my first morning in Sacramento, there was a cold, spitting rain, and my husband drove me to the grand house on 22nd Street, where people are always dropping by asking to look at “Joan Didion's home.” It was the largest house on the block, and it was on a corner lot. (“No magical thinking required,” the headline on Realtor.com had said when it was listed for sale in 2018.)

I stood in the rain looking up at the house, and I realized that something was wrong. She had described going home to her parents' house to finish each of her first four novels, working in her old bedroom, which was painted carnation pink and where vines covered the window. But it was hard to imagine vines growing over the upstairs windows of this house; they would have had to climb up two very tall stories and occlude the light in the downstairs rooms as well.

Later, I spoke with one of Didion's relatives, who explained that the family left the house on 22nd Street not long after Joan graduated from high school. The house where she finished her novels, and where she brought her daughter for her first birthday, was in the similarly

expensive area of Arden Oaks, but it has been so thoroughly renovated as to be almost unrecognizable to the family members who knew it. In fact, the Didions had owned a series of Sacramento houses. But myths take hold in a powerful and permanent way, and the big house on 22nd Street is the one readers want to see.

The neighborhood was very pretty, and the gardens were well tended. But Joan Didion wasn't there.

IN SOME WAYS, Sacramento seemed to me like a Joan Didion theme park. In less time than it takes to walk from Mr. Toad's Wild Ride to the Pirates of the Caribbean, you could get from the Didions' house on



Didion's family moved to the house on 22nd Street in Sacramento when she was in 11th grade.

22nd Street to a house they had lived in earlier, on U Street.

We drove around looking at places that I had read about almost all my life. Nothing seemed real, and there was almost no sign that Joan Didion had grown up there. If I lived in Sacramento, I would rename the capitol building for her. I would turn a park into the Joan Didion Garden, with wide pathways covered in pea gravel, as in the Tuileries.

I never imagined that I would see the two governor's mansions she describes in "Many Mansions." The essay contrasts the old governor's mansion—a "large white Victorian gothic"—with the new, 12,000-square-foot one that was to be the Reagans' home, but that was left unfinished

after his second term. During this period she loathed the Reagans, but not for political reasons. She hated their taste.

The size of the house was an affront to Didion, as was the fact that it had "no clear view of the river." But above all, she hated the features built into the mansion, things representative of the new, easy "California living" she abhorred. The house had a wet bar in the formal living room, a "refreshment center" in the "recreation room," only enough bookcases "for a set of the World Book and some Books of the Month," and one of those kitchens that seems designed exclusively for micro-waving and trash compacting.

She didn't just hate the house; she feared it: "I have seldom seen a house so

evocative of the unspeakable," she wrote. (This is why some people hate Joan Didion, and I get it. I get it.)

Then there's the old mansion, which she used to visit "once in a while" during the term of Governor Earl Warren, because she was friends with his daughter Nina. "The old Governor's Mansion was at that time my favorite house in the world," she wrote, "and probably still is."

In the essay, she describes taking a public tour of the old mansion, which was filled with the ghosts of her own past and also the crude realities of the present. The tourists complained about "all those stairs" and "all that wasted space," and apparently they could not imagine why a bathroom might be big enough to have a chair ("to read a story to a child in the bathtub," of course) or why the kitchen would have a table with a marble top (to roll out pastry).

It is one of those essays where Didion instructs you on the right kind of taste to have, and I desperately wanted to agree. But in my teenage heart of hearts, I had to admit that I wanted the house with the rec room. I kept this thought to myself.

When my husband and I arrived at the old governor's mansion, I started laughing. Nobody would want to live there, and certainly nobody in the boundless Googie, car-culture future of 1960s California. (It looked like the *Psycho* house, but with a fresh coat of paint.) That said, we drove over to the house that was originally built for the Reagans and that the state had since sold, and it was a grim site: It looked like the world's largest Taco Bell.

The funny thing about all of this is that at the time Didion wrote that essay, Jerry Brown was the governor of California, and he had no intention of living in any kind of mansion. Instead he rented an apartment and slept on a mattress on the floor, sometimes with his girlfriend, Linda Ronstadt. And—like every California woman with a pulse—Didion adored him.

This is Joan Didion's magic trick: She gets us on the side of "the past" and then reveals that she's fully a creature of the present. The Reagans' trash compactor is unspeakable, but Jerry Brown's mattress is irresistible.



BEFORE WE LEFT Sacramento we made a final stop, at C. K. McClatchy Senior High School, Didion's alma mater. There was one thing I wanted to see: a bronze plaque set into cement at the top of a flight of stairs. I couldn't believe that it hadn't been jackhammered out, but there it was.

THIS BUILDING IS DEDICATED
TO TRUTH LIBERTY TOLERANCE
BY THE NATIVE SONS OF THE
GOLDEN WEST.

SEPTEMBER 19, 1937

These plaques were once all over the state at different civic institutions, and especially in schools. The Native Sons of the Golden West is a still-extant fraternal organization founded to honor the pioneers and prospectors who arrived in California in the middle of the 19th century. The group's president proclaimed in 1920 that "California was given by God to a white people." The organization has since modernized, but you cannot look at the pioneers' achievements without taking into account the genocide of California's actual Native peoples. "Clearing the land" was always a settler's first mission, and it didn't refer to cutting down trees.

People from the East often say that Joan Didion explained California to them. Essays have described her as the state's prophet, its bard, its chronicler. But Didion was a chronicler of *white* California. Her essays are preoccupied with the social distinctions among three waves of white immigration: the pioneers who arrived in the second half of the 19th century; the Okies, who came in the 1930s; and the engineers and businessmen of the post-war aerospace years, who blighted the state with their fast food and their tract housing and their cultural blank slate.

In *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, there's an essay called "Notes From a Native Daughter"—which is how Joan Didion saw herself. It's generally assumed that she began to grapple with her simplistic view of California history only much later in life, in *Where I Was From*. But in this first collection, she's beginning to wonder how much of her sense of California is shaped by history or legend—by stories,

not necessarily accurate, that are passed down through the generations.

"I remember running a boxer dog of my brother's over the same flat fields that our great-great-grandfather had found virgin and had planted," she writes. And she describes swimming in the same rivers her family had swum in for generations: "The Sacramento, so rich with silt that we could barely see our hands a few inches beneath the surface; the American, running clean and fast with melted Sierra snow until July, when it would slow down."

She's writing about a feeling of deep rootedness not just to the land but to the generations of her own family who lived on it. But she already knows that it won't last. "All that is constant about the California of my childhood is the rate at which it disappears," she writes.

When my husband and I had arrived in town, we'd stopped for a cup of coffee at the McDonald's at Old Auburn Road and Sunrise Boulevard. You could see how flat the terrain was and how obviously it had once been ranchland. Who had sold that beautiful land to the McDonald's Corporation? The Didions. Then we went to a clutch of small, unlovely tract houses, and found the street sign I was looking for: Didion Court. The tract houses were there because, according to the author Michelle Chihara, Joan and her family had once again sold a parcel of land.

What happened to the yellow fields and the cottonwoods and the rivers rising and falling? None of my business, I guess.

Sacramento was a bust. I had the feeling that I could stay on the road forever and not understand Joan Didion. But as soon as we got on the freeway, it stopped raining, and after a while there were actual patches of sunshine and dry cement.

In Berkeley, things would begin to look familiar.

Berkeley

I was sitting on the floor of the "television room" in the Tri Delta sorority house on Warring Street in Berkeley. I hadn't been in a sorority house in 40 years, but it all came back to me: the sleepy, underwater feel of the house at midday; the muffled sounds of a meal being prepared in the

Didion, John Gregory Dunne, and Quintana Roo Dunne at their Franklin Avenue home in 1968



kitchen; the constant effort to keep a mild depression from growing; and the endless interest in candies and snacks.

The house was large and attractive, dove gray and—like all sorority houses—fortified. A gate, a locked door, a security camera, and a housemother, busy on the phone. The chapter's president, Grace Naylor, gave me a tour and we chatted with a few girls sitting in the TV room. There was a wide staircase with a landing, perfect for making a dramatic entrance in a new dress or storming upstairs in a fit of anger. The rooms on one side looked out onto pretty Warring Street; the ones on the other side were filled with the view burned into the retinas of everyone who has ever lived in Berkeley: the beautiful campus and campanile, the flatlands, and beyond them the Golden Gate and the bay, the alluring city on the other side.

Naylor told me that until she'd gotten my email, no one had known that Joan Didion had lived in the house, although

several members were fans of her writing. How could they possibly not know that, I wondered, and then was faced with the obvious answer: Didion had lived there 70 years ago.

When we sat down in the television room, I suddenly realized that I didn't have a single question I could ask. *What is it like to live in a sorority house that you recently discovered Joan Didion once lived in?* I was at a loss. But Naylor was the chapter president of a top-tier sorority, and she certainly knew how to organize a house visit.

"All our old scrapbooks are in here," she said, gesturing toward some cupboards, and I glanced at them, suddenly on high alert. Would I like to look through them to see if we could find one from Didion's years in the house?

I thought two things simultaneously: *Eureka!* (which is the California state motto) and *This is the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me.*

The scrapbooks were piled in the cupboards and weren't necessarily in the best condition—what were the chances of finding one from 70 years ago? They were at once just some old scrapbooks of minor sociological interest, and also a slice of Didion's life that the other vultures hadn't yet picked over. Regarding Joan Didion, Tri Delt, I was vulture No. 1.

We started shuffling through the crumbling scrapbooks, and then suddenly the 1954 volume appeared. Because Joan Didion is cool, and because UC Berkeley is cool, many people assume she was in some way part of the revolution. But she arrived at Berkeley a decade too early.

The 1954 scrapbook was a testament to the Tri Delt house being the next right place for a rich girl from Sacramento who had gone to ballet class and Sunday school. It contained a photograph of the winners of a father/daughter look-alike contest, and a press clipping describing "one of the Gayest Parties for the young

set,” which had taken place “in the Pebble Beach home of Dr. and Mrs. A. Carol McKenny.” It also contained so many engagement announcements that marriage seemed to be not just one tacit aim of ballet class, Sunday school, and Tri Delt but the entire point.

Toward the end of the scrapbook and with the vague suggestion that even our tiny, troubled Joan Didion had something of her own to look forward to: a *Daily Cal* clipping announcing that two Berkeley undergrads were headed to New York to take part in the *Mademoiselle* magazine program. Didion’s selection for the program revealed, if nothing else, that the people who chose the winners had an uncanny ability to spot early talent, all the way from Sylvia Plath in the ’50s

to Mona Simpson in the late ’70s. The famous era was the 1950s. Girls from around the country were brought to the city of dreams, housed in the Barbizon Hotel, taught about layouts and martinis, and—should the worst happen—given the names of certain Park Avenue doctors.

Didion’s editorship took place between her junior and senior years of college; when she returned to Berkeley, she moved out of the Tri Delt house and into an apartment. I didn’t have much hope for the little brown-shingled apartment building she had lived in after the Tri Delt house. The house on 22nd Street in Sacramento had been interesting, but cold. The sorority house had presented me with a historically accurate picture, but a remote one.

JULIAN WASSER



Didion in Los Angeles in 1968

Yet I pulled open the wooden gate of 2520 Ridge Road and stepped into a little garden that was shaded and filled with dark-green plants—and just like that, her living ghost rushed past me. She lingered for a few moments, and then she left, stepping into the vivid past, wearing her dirty raincoat and heading to the seminar that most freighted and engaged her: the writing class of the great Mark Schorer, whom I knew very well when I was growing up. He was a very kind person and also a peerless literary critic, and he found in Didion's early work evidence not just of a great writer. "One thinks of the great *performers*—in ballet, opera, circuses," he said. "Miss Didion, it seems to me, is blessed with everything."

And then Berkeley was over, and she headed back to New York because she had

Their house had been the absolute crossroads of thrilling, louche Hollywood and the crackling world of ideas that was pouring in from the East.



won the really big prize in the world of women's magazines: the Prix de Paris at *Vogue*, which led to a job at the magazine. This was a marker of being the right kind of young woman—of having the right family, or the right schools, or the right wardrobe—in New York in the glamorous 1950s.

It had begun.

JOAN DIDION'S GREATEST ESSAY is "Goodbye to All That." It's about the excitement and intoxication of being young in New York, from the moment she got off the plane "and some instinct, programmed by all the movies I had ever seen and all the songs I had ever heard sung and all the stories I had ever read about New York, informed me that it would never be quite the same again. In fact it never was."

She had "come out of the West and reached the mirage," and the epigraph to the essay is part of an old nursery rhyme:

How many miles to Babylon?
Three score miles and ten—
Can I get there by candlelight?
Yes, and back again.

For years it was known as the greatest leaving-New York essay of all time. It's about the revolving door, the way you can arrive there young, innocent, and new,

but the very process of adapting to the city will coarsen and age you.

In 1996, a writer for *New York* magazine revealed something that had been carefully protected from the press, and that gives the essay a completely different meaning: What's tearing her apart is a love affair that has ended. With that reading, you understand the essay's insistently romantic tones: She can no longer bear to look at blue-and-white-striped sheets, to smell certain perfumes or Henri Bendel jasmine soap. "I cut myself off from the one person who was closer to me than any other," she wrote.

Soon after coming to the city, she had fallen for a figure on the New York literary scene, Noel Parmentel, a southerner who attended several parties a night, where he was famous for getting drunk, insulting hostesses and guests, and letting loose with ethnic slurs. The heart wants what it wants.

In 2014, Parmentel agreed to be interviewed about the relationship by Tracy Daugherty, who wrote the indispensable biography of Didion, *The Last Love Song*. "She was better than all of them," Parmentel said of the *Vogue* editors. "Far above those people in every way." A lot of her colleagues at *Vogue* were jealous of her, he said: "This little nobody from Sacramento shows up in her little dresses and outshines them all. She's smarter. Mannered. Better-bred."

He helped her sell her first novel, which was in part dedicated to him, and which has an epigraph from the Robert Lowell poem “Man and Wife.” He would call her service and leave long messages; he would insult her, forget about her, reappear—but he wouldn’t marry her.

“This is the guy you ought to marry,” he famously told her about his mentee John Gregory Dunne. And—after visiting Dunne’s family home and noting the orderliness of its routines and the impeccable way that his mother kept house—she did.

The marriage “was a very good thing to do but badly timed,” Didion wrote. She was emotionally devastated, she didn’t know what to do with herself, and one night she and John ended up getting ferociously drunk at a party. They went to a diner for breakfast, and she cried. Later that day, he called her from his office at *Time* and asked her, “Do you mind if I quit?” She said no, and soon they were in California for a six-month trial that lasted 24 years.

Franklin Avenue

How many miles to Babylon? One and a half, as it turned out, but I didn’t know it yet.

I moved to Los Angeles in 1988 with a new job, a first husband, my Joan Didion books, and the gray-and-pink jersey dress I’d worn to my rehearsal dinner. Every day I drove through Hollywood on my way to the Valley, and I’d cross Franklin and think to myself, *That must be the same Franklin Avenue that Joan Didion lived on.*

I never went looking for the house, because Didion had explained in *The White Album* that it had been slated for demolition: “The owners were only waiting for a zoning change to tear the house down and build a high-rise apartment building.”

Once, it had been the most happening place in a certain world, the absolute crossroads of thrilling, louche Hollywood and the crackling world of ideas that were pouring in from the East.

Franklin Avenue Joan Didion is the one we all fell in love with. In that house she became the woman who walked

barefoot on hardwood floors and onto airplanes, and went to the supermarket wearing a bikini. She’s the reason so many readers misunderstood the obvious fact of her conservatism—because she was cool. (How conservative? Throughout the ’60s she was famous for telling Hollywood friends that if she could she would vote for Barry Goldwater over and over again.)

She’s the one who paid the babysitter who told her she had death in her aura, then opened the French doors and went to sleep in the dark of a “senseless-killing neighborhood.” This is the Joan Didion who invented Los Angeles in the ’60s as an expression of paranoia, danger, drugs, and the movie business. The Joan Didion who took amphetamines to work and bourbon to relax, the tiny girl who was entirely in command of the helpless ardor she inspired.

The parties. How to account for what a huge hit the couple were almost as soon as they got to Hollywood? And also, how to account for Joan Didion, one of the century’s greatest prose stylists, doing all of that cooking, while being pestered by Nora Ephron for her Mexican-chicken recipe, keeping in mind the eccentric drinks orders of various rock-and-roll people

(brandy and Benedictine for Janis Joplin), and clearing the drug takers from the landing outside her daughter’s bedroom?

Those parties were something to see. But in 1979, Didion published *The White Album* and revealed that this period had been the hardest time in her life. In the opening pages of that collection, she reproduces part of her psychiatrist’s report, which caused a sensation; it was an advertisement for whichever idea you had of Joan Didion, either that she was bravely exposing what others might work hard to conceal, or that she was an exhibitionist.

In the report, she is said to have an “increasing inability of the ego to mediate the world of reality and to cope with normal stress,” and a “fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. It is as though she feels deeply that all human effort is foredoomed to failure.” She is, the report reveals, being pushed “further into a dependent, passive withdrawal.”

Didion writes that things she had been taught all her life no longer seemed to apply, that the script for how she had been raised to lead her life was never meant to be improvised on. “It was hard to even get my attention,” she says; her mind was on other things.

When I fell in love with Joan Didion, it was just the two of us and all of those electric sentences, and that was enough.

• BOOKS

CLASSICAL LIBERALISM IS IN CRISIS

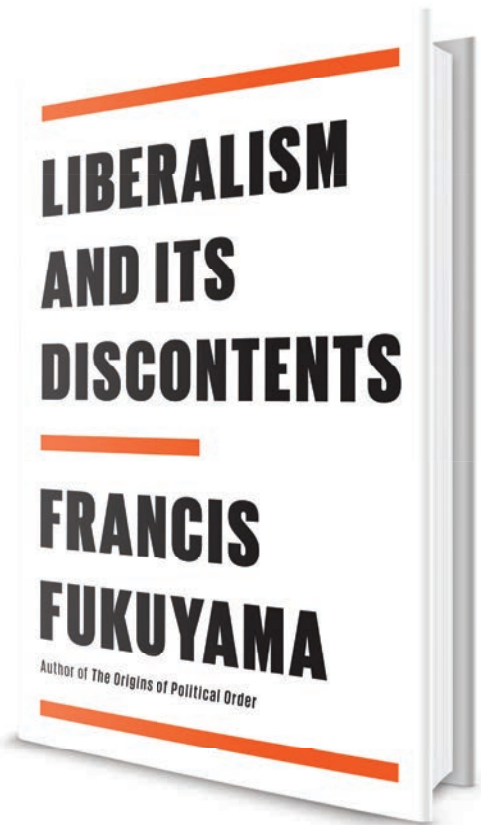
The bestselling author of *The Origins of Political Order* looks at the challenges that liberalism is facing from the right and the left in his new groundbreaking work.

Excerpted from *Liberalism and Its Discontents*
by Francis Fukuyama

It is clear that liberalism has been in retreat in recent years. According to Freedom House, political rights and civil liberties around the world rose during the three and a half decades between 1974 and the early 2000s, but have been falling for fifteen straight years prior to 2021 in what has been labeled a democratic recession or even depression.

In established liberal democracies, it is the liberal institutions that have come under immediate attack. Leaders like Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and America's Donald Trump were all legitimately elected, and have used their electoral mandates to attack liberal institutions in the first instance. These include the courts and justice system, nonpartisan state bureaucracies, independent media, and other bodies limiting executive power under a system of checks and balances. Orbán has been quite successful in packing the courts with his supporters and bringing the bulk of Hungarian media under the control of his allies. Trump was less successful in his attempts to weaken institutions like the Justice Department, the intelligence community, the courts, and the mainstream media, but his intention was much the same.

Liberalism has been challenged in recent years not just by populists of the right, but from a renewed progressive left as well. The critique from this quarter evolved from a charge—correct in itself—that liberal societies were not living up to their own ideals of equal treatment of all groups. This critique broadened over time to attack the underlying principles of liberalism itself, such as its positing of rights in individuals rather than groups, the premise of universal human equality on which constitutions and liberal rights have been based, and the value of free speech and scientific rationalism as methods of apprehending truth. In practice, this has led to intolerance of views that deviate from the new progressive orthodoxy, and the use of different forms of social and state power to enforce that orthodoxy. Dissident voices have been ousted from positions of influence and books effectively banned, often not by governments but by powerful organizations that control their mass distribution.



Available wherever books are sold
FrancisFukuyama.com
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Populists on the right and progressives on the left are unhappy with present-day liberalism not, I would argue, because of a fundamental weakness in the doctrine. Rather, they are unhappy with the way that liberalism has evolved over the last couple of generations. Beginning in the late 1970s, economic liberalism evolved into what is now labeled neoliberalism, which dramatically increased economic inequality and brought on devastating financial crises that hurt ordinary people far more than wealthy elites in many countries around the globe. It is this inequality that is at the core of the progressive case against liberalism and the capitalist system with which it is associated. Liberalism's institutional rules protect the rights of everyone, including existing elites who are reluctant to give up either wealth or power, and who therefore stand as obstacles to the march towards social justice for excluded groups.

“Urgent and timely . . . A vital strength of this slim, elegant book is that it is crystalline in its definitions, even while acknowledging the complexities of practice . . . A brilliantly acute summary of the way some aspects of liberal thought have consumed themselves.”

—Andrew Anthony, *The Guardian*

The house on Franklin Avenue was the only one that brought tears to my eyes.

It was also in this place—and in this heavy weather—that she raised her only child, Quintana, from infancy through age 5. The couple had adopted the little girl a few days after her birth at Saint John's Hospital in Santa Monica, and she appears throughout these essays as a dream, a perfect child, almost as an abstraction. Her name alone—Quintana Roo, the name of a Mexican state—seemed to me, at 14, the perfect name for a baby: unique, mysterious, feminine. The kind of name a girl would give to a doll.

What really happened during those years? There is no reason, now, not to ask.

“WE ARE HERE on this island in the middle of the Pacific in lieu of filing for divorce.”

Everyone who loves Joan Didion remembers that sentence—the shock of it, the need to race back up to the top of the essay to see if you'd missed something. “I had better tell you where I am, and why,” that essay, “In the Islands,” begins. She's at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in a high-ceilinged room, the trade winds making the long, translucent curtains billow. She's with her husband and 3-year-old Quintana, “blond and barefoot, a child of paradise in a frangipani lei.”

But Didion hasn't gone to Honolulu merely for the flowers or the trade winds. She is there “trying to put my life back together.”

When I first read *The White Album*, I was in my bedroom in my parents' house and it was the deep middle of the night, and there it was, this flaming arrow. What could I do? Reach for my cellphone and type *Did Joan Didion get divorced?* There were no cellphones then. Reading, in those days, was just you and the writer, and all she had to reel you in with was a line of words. When I fell in love with Joan Didion, it was just the two of us and all of those electric sentences, and that was enough.

Everyone remembers that line about divorce, but no one seems to remember a different and perhaps more consequential line that appears later. She reports that during that week in Honolulu, husband and wife were considerate of each other, and no mention was made of “kicked-down doors, hospitalized psychotics, any chronic anxieties or packed suitcases.”

Kicked-down doors?

We all know about the famous and in many ways marvelous (in the sense of the miraculous, the supernatural) marriage of Joan Didion and John Gregory

Dunne. We know about it from *The Year of Magical Thinking* and from countless interviews and profiles and perhaps from personal experience. We know that their lives and writing careers were so deeply intertwined that they were rarely apart. They kept to a daily schedule that was like a dream writing life, each writing in the morning, then breaking for lunch; each returning to work until the early evening, when they had drinks and dinner together. If Joan went to get her teeth cleaned, John read the newspapers in the waiting room.

Dunne was fantastic company; he loved gossip and he always had A-plus intel. Calvin Trillin wrote a novel, *Floater*, in which a character is based on Dunne. When they both worked at *Time*, Dunne was forever coming into Trillin's office, dramatically holding up his hand, and saying, “*This* you will not believe.” The Didion-Dunnes' marriage was one long conversation between two writers completely in sync about their beliefs on writing and always interested in what the other had to say.

But Dunne also had a legendary and vicious temper, and he was an incredibly mean drunk. Even his pals reported as much, because it would be impossible to assess the man without admitting to these central facts of his nature. They had read about the kicked-down doors, and many who were close to the couple had witnessed more examples of his rage.

Susanna Moore, who was the couple's close friend and lived with them for a while on Franklin Avenue, writes in her memoir, *Miss Aluminum*, that there was “love between them, and respect.” But she adds that Joan “was also afraid of him, given the violence of his temper.”

Moore recounts a time when she was out to dinner with the couple, and she mentioned a bit of gossip she'd heard: There was talk in town that Jann Wenner was gay. Dunne exploded in rage, and took after her in such a manner that he had to excuse himself from the table. As he walked away, Moore started to get out of her chair. “Joan grabbed my arm and begged me to stay, making me promise that I would not leave her alone with him.”

There weren't words in those days for how a man's rage could shape the life of a woman who lived with him, but we have one now: *abuse*.

Didion never spoke openly about Dunne's rage until near the end of her life. In 2017 her nephew, Griffin Dunne, made a documentary about his aunt, *The Center Will Not Hold*, which is full of photographs and family memories. As far as I know, the interviews she gave him are, poignantly, her last statements to the public.

At one point, she's talking about marrying Dunne and the idea of falling in love, and she almost flinches. "I don't know what falling in love means. It's not part of my world."

Later, she adds: "He had a temper. A horrible temper."

What would set him off? Griffin asks. "Everything would set him off."

SOMEONE RECENTLY TOLD ME that the house on Franklin was, in fact, still there—and when I thought about it, I remembered that at the very end of the street, the apartments give way to rambling 1920s houses. That's where she lived.

I drove west on Franklin until I got to Camino Palmero, where the zoning changes. I parked down the street from the house, realizing I'd been walking right past it for 30 years. With each step closer, I felt more emotional. And there it was, in better shape than when Didion had lived in it, the cracked front path now covered in smooth pavement, the house freshly painted white, the lawn in perfect condition. It's a healing center now, for a new-age spiritual group.

I stood looking at it as though I had found the way to Manderley, as though it were possible to take something out of the dream of reading and into the bricks and mortar of the other thing, Life. The tall French doors looked into the living room where there had been so many parties, the doors Joan had opened before going to sleep.

The house on Franklin was the only one that brought tears to my eyes. But of course they were tears for myself, not her. When she was in New York, there was a

song on all the jukeboxes: "But where is the schoolgirl who used to be me?"

Gone, gone, gone.

Malibu

When Joan Didion was living in Malibu, she learned that in one of the canyons there was a nursery that grew only orchids, and she began to visit it. Even as a child she had loved greenhouses; once she was informed that the purchase of a five-cent pansy did not entitle her to "spend the day."

The orchid nursery was owned by the Hollywood producer Arthur Freed and his brother Hugo, but it was in the care of Amado Vazquez, a gentle and courtly person, transmitting, "in his every movement, a kind of 'different' propriety, a correctness, a cultural reserve." She spent hours in those greenhouses filled with "the most aqueous filtered light, the softest tropical air, the most silent clouds of flowers." Vazquez seemed to assume she had her own reasons for being there, and he would speak only to offer her "a nut he had just cracked, or a flower cut from a plant he was pruning."

This was before orchids were widely cloned, imported by the millions, and sold in Walmart and Trader Joe's. This was when orchids were rare, expensive, often propagated by hand. And, as Didion eventually realized, Vazquez was "one of a handful of truly great orchid breeders in the world."

Didion learned how to read the labels of the hybrids he was growing, two orchids cross-pollinated and resulting—with luck, and after four years—in a new variety: AMABILIS X RIMESTADIANA = ELISABETHAE. Eventually, she learned that the orchids there were worth "ten thousand to more than three-quarters of a million dollars," and occasionally she would watch "serious men in dark suits" come to talk with Hugo, their voices hushed, "as if they had come to inspect medieval enamels, or uncut diamonds."

The passage about the nursery comprises some of the final pages of *The White Album*, and I have thought about it so many times. From the tumult of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and the

near divorce to the danger of living in the "senseless-killing neighborhood" in a rented house slated for destruction—after all of that, she wants us to know, she had gotten to safety.

After seven years in Malibu, and very much against her own desires, she and Dunne moved to Brentwood—carefully groomed, hugely expensive, and with easy access to the best private schools—which was the beginning of the end of my great interest in her.

But in Malibu there was the house, and the crashing ocean, and Quintana was a little girl in elementary school, whose troubles had yet to emerge. Of all the things receding from Didion, Quintana was always the most urgent. Didion wrote two novels—*A Book of Common Prayer* and *Democracy*—about a daughter leaving her mother.

A few months after Didion and her family moved away, the notorious Agoura-Malibu firestorm roared through the canyons. Birds exploded in midair; more than 200 houses were destroyed; people waited on the beach to be rescued, because nowhere else was safe.

Shortly before the fire, Amado Vazquez had saved enough money to buy out the Freed brothers, and now the greenhouses were destroyed. He and Didion stood in the ruins, almost in tears. Years of his work destroyed, a fortune in stud plants.

ONE WINTER DAY, my husband and I made good time up the Pacific Coast Highway to Joan's house. It had 132 private stairs down to the beach, and a long driveway. From the street, all you could see was the house number, 33428, on a simple, weathered sign. It wasn't the kind of sign you associate with Malibu; it was the kind you associate with Stinson Beach or any of the other Northern California beaches where underplaying your hand is the thing to do, and putting your house number on a piece of driftwood nailed to the fence is the right way to do it. The setting was perfect. But the old house that she loved so much was gone, replaced with the modern one that's there now.

The Didion-Dunnes would sometimes drive over the Ventura County line to eat fried fish. We did the same,

Quintana Roo, having tea with her stuffed animals on the terrace of her family's home in Malibu in 1972

unusual that they lifted the flowers entirely out of the realm of Walmart and Trader Joe's and once again elevated them to something precious and rare.

My husband picked out a few plants, and I worried that they would cost \$10,000, but they didn't. They were beautiful orchids, not stud plants. At one point Alvarado asked us how we had heard of the nursery—he must have seen something of the reverence I had for the plants, my sense of wonder.

I said that I had read about the nursery in a book by Joan Didion.

"Oh yes," he said, brightening. "Amado made a hybrid for her."

For a moment everyone was alive—Amado and also Joan and John and Quintana. But they're all gone, of course. The difficult husband she adored, the difficult daughter she shaped her life around, and then Joan herself.

When I looked for the Joan Didion orchid, I couldn't find it. But then I realized that I'd been looking for the wrong name.

PHAL. JAMES MCPHERSON X PHAL.
STUARTIANA = PHALAENOPSIS
QUINTANA ROO DUNNE

"WHEN JOHN WAYNE rode through my childhood, and perhaps through yours,"

eating in the huge open-air dining room at Neptune's Net—established in 1956—and feeling very cheerful. That's the thing about marriage: You can go for two whole weeks thinking, *That's it, we've gotten to the very bottom of things to talk about*, but then you go for a drive on a sunny day and there you are, same as you ever were.

I hadn't looked up the house on Franklin Avenue, because I thought it had been destroyed, and I had never looked up Vazquez's nursery, because how could he have ever rebuilt it? But a few days before heading up the coast, I looked up the name—Zuma Orchids—and found it, about a mile up Zuma Canyon from the beach.

When I was young, I was so troubled for so long. My mind would rage beyond my control, and many times I would think of those trembling clouds of blossoms and that soft tropical air and wish I could go there, and now here I was, driving down a canyon road, all but deserted—and there it was.

I almost wanted to turn around. I realized—perhaps the lesson of the whole excursion—that I didn't want these places to be real, because they lived so vividly in my mind. But I stepped through the greenhouse door and landed in Oz: more color and beauty than I could take in. An extremely kind man—Oliverio Alvarado—chatted with us. He had worked with Vazquez, who had died about a decade ago, and he welcomed us to look at the flowers. There were some of the common moth orchids, but there were other orchids, some so delicate and



HENRY CLARKE / CONDÉ NAST / SHUTTERSTOCK



Left: *Joan Didion's Malibu living room in 1972. Below: Didion with her family in Malibu in 1976.*



Here was a book that said that even a troubled woman, or a heartbroken woman, or a frightened woman could be a very powerful person.

Joan Didion wrote in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, “he determined forever the shape of certain of our dreams.”

The only John Wayne movie I’ve ever seen all the way through is *The Searchers*. But when Didion walked through the front door of my parents’ house when I was 14 years old, that’s what she did for me. She was a hot stock rising and I was a young girl falling, and she broke my fall.

She was in Berkeley as a Regents’ Lecturer, and because my father was then the chair of the English department, he was sort of serving as her host. She came to our house for dinner, and she hardly said a word. But a week or so later, when my father said, “There’s something *weird* going on with Joan Didion and women,” that got my attention. Apparently, her office hours—usually the most monastic of an academic’s life—were being mobbed. Not just by students; by women from the Bay Area who had heard she was there and just wanted to see her. All of these women felt that *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* had changed them.

It wasn’t a book that was supposed to change anyone. Not only because that was by no means Joan Didion’s intent, but also because—look at the subjects. How can an essay about Alcatraz (as an attractive, mostly deserted place, not as a statement on either incarceration or the land theft

perpetrated against California’s Indian tribes); an essay about a baby’s first birthday party; a forensic investigation of the marital tensions that led Lucille Miller to kill her husband—how can all of those add up to something life-changing?

Because in 1968, here was a book that said that even a troubled woman, or a heartbroken woman, or a frightened woman could be a very powerful person. In “Why I Write”—which was, in fact, the Regents’ Lecture—she famously described writing as an act of aggression, in which a writer takes control of a reader and imposes her own opinions, beliefs, and attitudes on that reader. A woman could be a hostage-taker, and what she held you hostage to were both shocking public events and some of the most interior and delicate thoughts a woman can have. This woman with the vanda orchid in her hair and her frequent states of incapacitation could put almost anyone under her power.

I had no power growing up, but I did have books and ideas, and I could be funny. I know I could have ended up being a magazine writer without ever having that chance experience. But what Joan Didion taught me was that it didn’t matter that I had such a messy, unenviable life—I could sit down, all alone, and write enough drafts to figure out what I thought

about something and then punch it out into the culture.

Two years after her lecture, Mark Schorer died, and the year after that, my parents sold the house we lived in on Bret Harte Road. For reasons I don’t know, the current owner has allowed the house to return to nature. My mother’s flower beds are gone, and the lemon and lime trees, and the two glazed ceramic pots on either side of the front door that were always filled with flowers. Over the years, it’s been returning to the ground at the same rate I seem to be. When I was in Berkeley this fall, I only slowed down when I drove past it, because everyone was inside—Mark and my parents and so many of the professors who were in many ways my own professors. The only people who weren’t in there were my sister and me. The Flanagan girls—somehow the point of the whole thing.

I didn’t cry the day in December I learned Joan Didion had died, because I’d been told by so many people that it was going to happen soon. But I realized that in some part of my mind, I thought she’d pull it off, that she’d show illness and death a thing or two.

A couple of months later, during one of my endless Google searches, I came across one of those companies that track down addresses and phone numbers and public records. “We found Joan Didion!” it said, and offered to provide access to her cellphone number, address, email, and even “more!”

And for some reason, that was when I finally cut my losses.

I hadn’t gone looking for the actual Joan Didion or your Joan Didion or even “the reader’s” Joan Didion. I went looking for the Joan Didion who was partly a historical figure, and partly a great writer, and partly a fiction of my own design. And she lives right where she always has.

How many miles to Babylon?

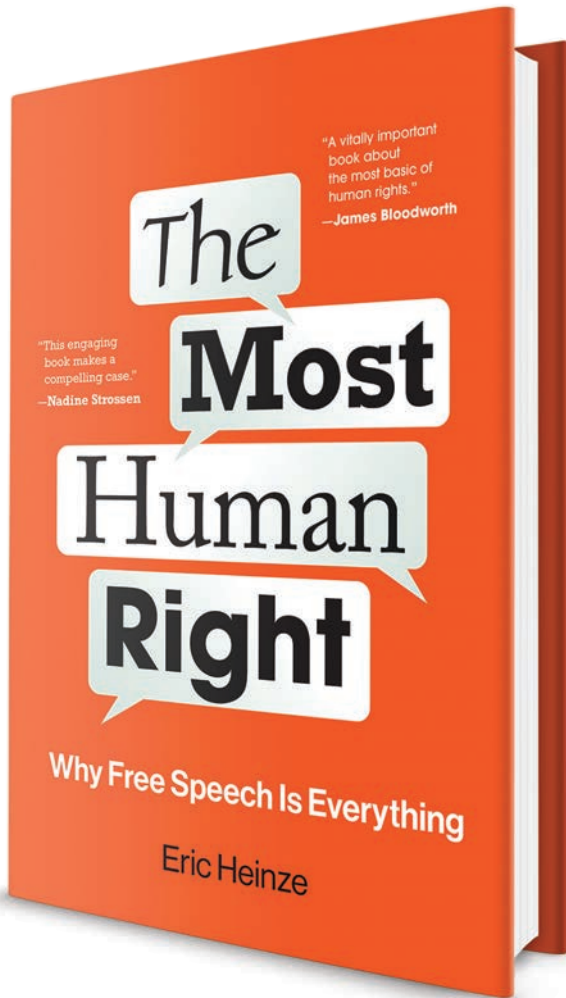
Three score miles and ten—

Can I get there by candlelight?

Yes, and back again. *A*

Caitlin Flanagan is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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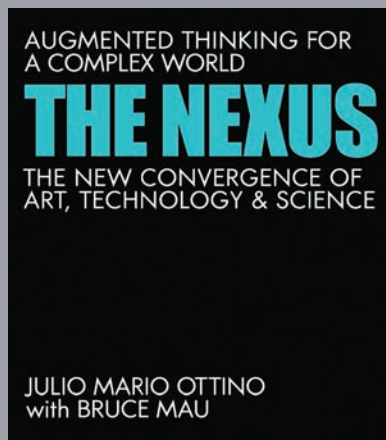
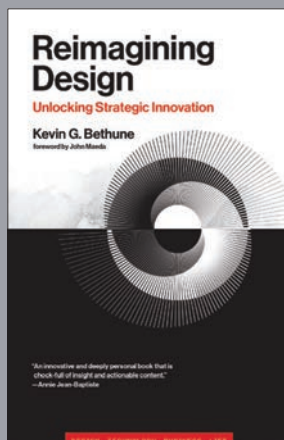
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Culture & Critics

OMNIVORE

Fox News Does Late Night

Greg Gutfeld has owned the libs all the way to the top of the ratings.

By James Parker

The first thing you notice about *Gutfeld!*, Greg Gutfeld's ratings-gobbling, Colbert-battling, have-some-of-that-Don-Lemon phenomenon of a late-night political-satirical talk show on Fox News, is the silences. The pockets of dead air. Gutfeld cracks a joke, one of his reliably and knowingly terrible jokes, and you hear not well-fed mirth but crickets, tumbleweeds, a nightclub vacuum: maybe a few reluctant yuks from his guests, maybe a whoop or a groan from some



OMAR VEGA / GETTY

hollow depth beyond the set. It's as if he's bombing on his own show.

You notice this, of course, because like me you're a simpering liberal reared on toothless consensus comedy. We're used to *The Daily Show With Trevor Noah* and *Last Week Tonight With John Oliver*, where a one-liner about Ted Cruz's facial hair will be bathed in eager applause. Clapping as ideology, tier upon tier of it, an orgy of herd affirmation.

Not for Gutfeld. His gags die of exposure, they perish proudly in a frisson of awfulness, while Gutfeld, very charming, gleams and grins and does heavy work with his eyebrows.

Because it is currently one of the most popular late-night shows on television—it regularly beats *Jimmy Kimmel Live* and *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* in the ratings and has even, on occasion, supplanted *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*—I watched *Gutfeld!* for a week, growing more and more fascinated as the days went by. Here's Gutfeld on Monday. "Hope you had a great weekend," he says. "I know I did." A jovial leer into the camera. "Although the last thing I remember was Larry Kudlow putting on the leather mask ..." Cue a split screen with Kudlow, Donald Trump's former economic adviser and one of Monday's guests, cackling and rocking creakily in his chair. What?! What is happening?

But this is the Gutfeld vibe, and you must get used to it. He's not a blow-dried Fox News supervillain like Hannity or Carlson; he's crass and hacky-on-purpose, with a deplorable private life. That's the conceit, at any rate. Now he's steaming into his monologue, castigating Joe Biden for his confused/confusing statements about Vladimir Putin. "For us," booms Gutfeld in his beefed-up, semi-ironic WrestleMania voice, "toppling regimes has worked out about as well as dating a stripper. At least for the people I dated when I was stripping." See what I mean?

It's post-Trump, all of this, in the sense that Trump—the worst stand-up comedian in the world, with the world's weirdest timing—introduced into the culture a tremendous uncertainty about what was actually funny. And it had to happen, didn't it: a fizzy late-night space where the pieties of all the other fizzy late-night spaces are inverted, where the jokes are not about Trump being orange but about Joe Biden being senile, where the lost gospel is not the Mueller report but Hunter Biden's laptop.

Gutfeld, though, is not just Seth Meyers through the looking glass. The writing on *Gutfeld!* is clunkier and more hostile, and the riffs meaner, because he's got a job to do for Fox News. "When I was a kid, I had a dog named Chipper ... And whenever the dog got out, you'd think it would run to the park to pee or poop—you know, like vagrants in Democrat-run

cities. But no, it always ran up the street towards the traffic." He's making (tortuously) some point about liberals, but Jesus Christ—vagrants in Democrat-run cities, peeing and pooping in the park? Nowhere in the universe is that funny. But it's good for some of that flickering, snickering Trumpian anti-laughter.

Gutfeld, who was once the editor in chief of *Men's Health* and spent long years on Fox's graveyard-shift talk show *Red Eye*, is a proud metalhead. On the back of the clipboard holding his show notes you can see the skull icon of horror-punks the Misfits. He has a friend (he mentions on Tuesday) called Buzzo—that's King Buzzo, of absurdist crunch gods the Melvins. This is important, because a love of metal gives you a sophisticated relationship with bombast. And a sophisticated relationship with bombast is what Gutfeld—or the character he plays on TV—is all about. He's serious/unserious, loud/empty, doing end runs around his own personality: "I'm never morally outraged," he says, "because I'm so disgusting."

ONCE GUTFELD has wrapped up his always-appalling monologue, once the guests start talking and opining and being guests on a late-night talk show, the atmosphere shifts. Gutfeld is a great host. Now we're having fun. Now we're learning something. Did you know that Eric Trump has views on the state of American cinema? Could you have guessed that they involve slagging off lefty celebrities and complaining about Hollywood's obsession with representation? Maybe you could. "They don't make good stuff anymore!" says Trump on Tuesday. "I mean, go back 10 years, with *Saving Private Ryan* and *Gladiator*, and, you know, these great movies—" "Only white people!" Gutfeld yells in mock outrage, and then grins his expensive, fiendish, but strangely vulnerable grin.

Along with Gutfeld himself, two of the show's regulars are the libertarian podcaster Kat Timpf, who wears lethal-looking high heels and gamely fields a lot of Gutfeldian banter, and Tyrus, a National Wrestling Alliance champion who sits there in a backward baseball cap with his championship belt slung over his left shoulder, petting it with a huge, tattooed hand. They are both excellent panelists, very watchable. Tyrus's pronouncements in particular have a trenchant, last-word quality, even when they don't 100 percent make sense.

The guests are mostly Trumpers and renegades, all in bubbly late-night mode. On Friday, Piers Morgan points out the hypocrisy of vegans who drink almond milk, because the process of growing almonds is injurious to the bee population. Why, the panel muses, should bees be less important than cows? "We assign consciousness to size. So we assume that bees don't think," says the whimsical Gutfeld. "But they have their own little thoughts." "Of course they do, yes," says Kayleigh

It had to happen: a fizzy late-night space where the pieties of all the other late-night spaces are inverted.



McEnany, Trump's former press secretary. "Like Jim Acosta. He has his own thoughts."

I do appreciate the doggerel: the vigorously crude rhyming couplets with which Gutfeld tees up a new segment. "Is Will Smith in Oscar disgrace / Because he left his *fresh prints* on Chris Rock's face?" Or—my favorite, introducing McEnany—"When she was behind the podium / The media needed Imodium!" And the in-house Biden impressionist—Tom Shillue, who speaks in hoarse, nonsensical reams of Biden-bluster while his head, seemingly via some special effect, throbs at the edges like a stubbed toe—is very good.

But a week of *Gutfeld!* wore me out, in the end, because the messaging is bloody relentless. "Hey there, my friendly Friday friends! So how do you know when you're living in a delusion? I mean, other than Joe Biden thinking he's president. I mean when people suddenly believe something is happening when it really isn't." In the counterworld of *Gutfeld!*, there is no eclipse of the republic, no fascist sludge on the rise, no QAnon nibbling at the roots of reason, and barely any racism—or at least not as much as everybody says there is. There are only regular, *Gladiator*-loving, cow-eating Americans, and the

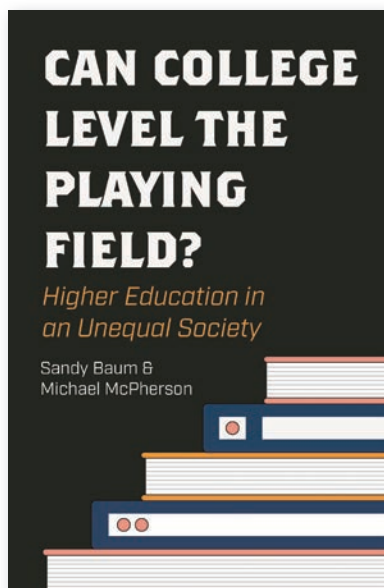
In the counterworld of Gutfeld!, there is no eclipse of the republic, no fascist sludge on the rise, no QAnon nibbling at the roots of reason.

venomous wokery that seeks constantly to bum them out. "The left in this country," says Gutfeld, "is like that mentally ill homeless guy screaming at someone on the sidewalk, but there's actually nobody there."

Is *Gutfeld!* a completely cynical operation? It would be cynical to say so. The Gutfelders love saying naughty, unliberal things; they kick with energy against the smothering jargon of the left; and they enjoy, contagiously, one another's company. But there's a hard sell going on here. That new Parental Rights in Education law, for example, down in Ron DeSantis's Florida—it's not anti-gay. No, no, no. It's not even controversial. "Like my extra nipples," says Gutfeld, "the bill seems pretty benign to me."

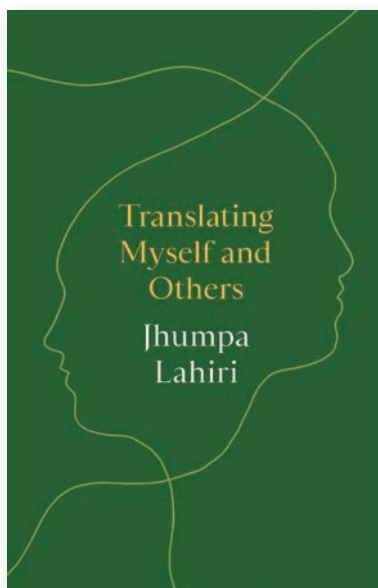
So get with the program. As Jello Biafra, punk-rock gadfly, put it back in 1987: "Do not attempt to think, or depression may occur." Don't be a scold, don't be a moaner, don't be a finger-wagging elitist, don't be an eco-bore, don't be a mentally ill homeless guy. Relax, and hang with *Gutfeld!*, where comedy goes to die. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



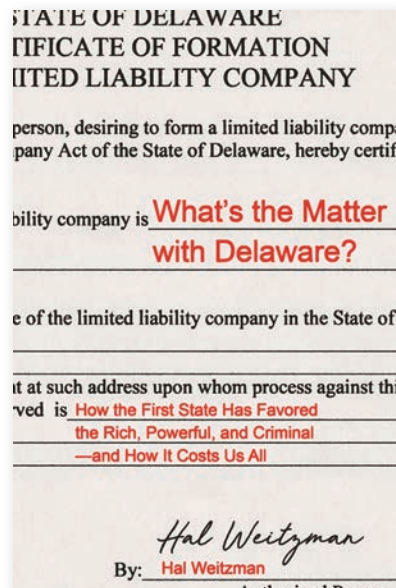
“This book’s unique contribution is to examine higher education not in isolation but in the context of inequality in American society.”

—Matthew M. Chingos, coauthor of *Game of Loans*



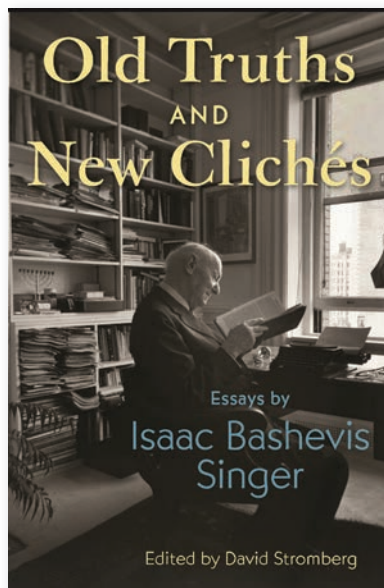
“Lahiri explores her relationship with literature, translation, and the English and Italian languages in this exhilarating collection.... Lucid and provocative.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review



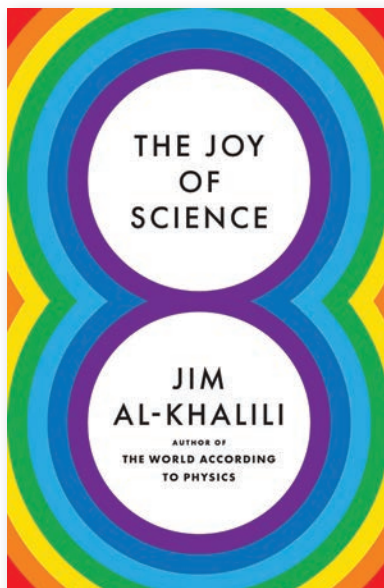
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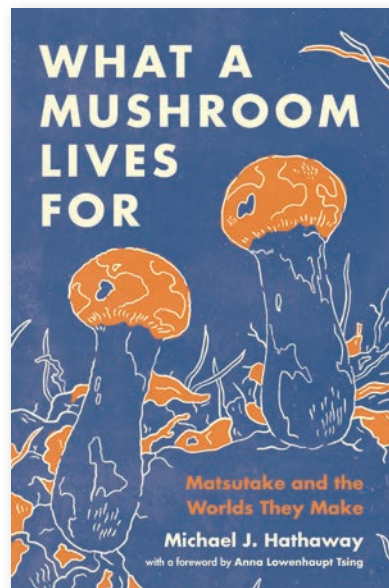
“A wonderful and important new volume, *Old Truths and New Clichés* is game-changing for our understanding of Isaac Bashevis Singer.”

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“Engaging and illuminating, Al-Khalili argues that a scientific approach is ‘one of humankind’s great riches and the birthright of everyone.’”

—Hannah Beckerman, *The Observer*



“A poetic story of fungi and some of the ways in which they are beautiful, fascinating, and endowed with stories that entangle humans yet remain all their own.”

—Rob Dunn, author of *A Natural History of the Future*



BOOKS

Tracy Flick for Principal

Tom Perrotta's '90s antihero returns.

By Judith Shulevitz

Election, the satirical movie directed by Alexander Payne, met with critical euphoria when it opened in 1999. *Election* the satirical novel had occasioned less fuss when it came out the year before; indeed, its then-unknown author, Tom Perrotta, had barely managed to get it published. ("People don't know whether it's YA or adult," his agent had told him. "They don't know what to do with it.") Both works used a gladiatorial high-school election to send up the national kind. But the movie had the magnificently chipper Reese Witherspoon as Tracy Flick, a relentless candidate for student-body president who was both drill sergeant and object of sexual desire. "A buzzing flytrap of determined overachievement ... ambitious to the point of dementia," Wesley Morris wrote in the *San Francisco Examiner*.

“Machiavelli-minded” and “pitiless,” Manohla Dargis wrote in *LA Weekly*. Roger Ebert compared Tracy to Sammy Glick, the protagonist of Budd Schulberg’s 1941 novel, *What Makes Sammy Run?*, and the Broadway musical of the same name. *Sammy Glick* was shorthand for “backstabbing Jewish Hollywood operator,” until the anti-Semitism of the stereotype made it unacceptable. Tracy Flick, however, still has name recognition. If you want to say that a female politician is ruthlessly ambitious, you call her a Tracy Flick. The first Tracy was Elizabeth Dole. This year’s is the up-and-coming Republican representative Elise Stefanik. The ultimate Tracy, of course, was Hillary Clinton.

But then the Clinton-bashing became terrifying—“Lock her up!”—and the #MeToo movement opened our eyes to structural misogyny, and critics began to take another look at Tracy. Maybe her persistence was admirable, like Elizabeth Warren’s, rather than unhinged. Maybe she was a vulnerable teenager exploited by a teacher in “a textbook case of predatory grooming,” as A. O. Scott put it in 2019, 20 years after the film came out. Jim McAllister, the history teacher who narrates the movie along with Tracy and happens to be the groomer’s best friend, doesn’t touch the girl. Still, enraged by her brazen competitiveness and her red, red lips (and distraught over the firing of his fellow teacher), he slut-shames her and tries to sabotage her campaign by lining up a popular jock to run against her. The actor Matthew Broderick gives McAllister a bumbling charm, but watch the movie now and the charm comes off as oily; he’s more of a Humbert Humbert than an endearing screwup. Like *Lolita*, Scott observed, *Election* “invites misreading in a way that puts readers’ souls at risk.”

Election the movie, these critics mean, not the novel. Tracy reinterpreters never bring up the book except to dismiss it as the lesser work. I disagree. I’d argue that it’s actually better—leaner, less broadly farcical, its characters more layered, its traps more subtle. The book consists of a series of monologues, each a master class in misdirection, self-justification, and the occasional glimmer of self-awareness. Perrotta’s Tracy doesn’t come off as sympathetic, exactly. But we learn about her threadbare life and the single mother who assiduously cultivates her daughter’s quest for success—the movie barely mentions them—and we’re given inklings of the pain that makes Tracy hold her chin so high. In short, Perrotta never sells Tracy out for a laugh. Payne, however, never stops playing Tracy for laughs, starting with the opening credits: While they roll, we watch her unfolding her campaign table with a slapstick militarism. The table legs slice upward like rifles being raised for an execution. They snap into place with sharp cracks.

By contrast, the novel opens with the history teacher setting himself up for a fall. Mr. M (the

book’s version of Mr. McAllister) is one of those cool teachers who perch on their desk and keep everything relevant. He’s trying to eke out a civics lesson from a notorious rape case involving football players, a broomstick, and a developmentally disabled girl. When his students side with the jocks, he asks, “Don’t the strong have a responsibility not to hurt or humiliate the weak?” Moments afterward, he’ll set in motion his plot to hurt and humiliate Tracy. The way he sees it, he’s the weak one; Tracy’s a blitzkrieg. “She was a steamroller,” he says. “I wanted to slow her down before she flattened the whole school.”

WITH **TRACY FLICK CAN’T WIN**, the sequel to *Election* the novel, Perrotta joins the ranks of the revisionists. The new book is harsher than the earlier one, reflecting the uglier tenor of our times, as well as, I suspect, Perrotta’s desire to clear up any possible confusion about whose side he’s on. You will not close this book commiserating with the likes of Mr. M. Nor will you wonder whether you missed the nuances. *Tracy Flick Can’t Win* is frankly didactic. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. Satire has always had an admonitory function, and besides, some people are so obnoxious that a writer has to slow-walk the reader through their awfulness. Plus, Perrotta has what it takes to revisit the past without being predictable.

Roughly two decades after the benighted election, Tracy is back where she started. She made it to Georgetown on a full scholarship, but then went home during law school to take care of her dying mother and never returned to the glide path to political stardom. She did get a Ph.D. in education, and has been at her old high school, Green Meadow, ever since. She has become the assistant principal, and once again she’s vying for the top slot—the principal has just announced his retirement. She’s still hyper-competent, still not well liked.

Only one thing about her has changed: She’s been given a soul. She berates herself for being a loser, but we know that she gave up her dreams because she’s a mensch. She’s finally starting to drop her brittle defenses. She’d always dismissed that tenth-grade affair as “a few regrettable weeks of my teenage life” and refused to blame her seducer, who she figured had been punished enough. “That was my narrative, the one I’d lived with for a very long time,” she says (like the original, the sequel is a series of monologues). But America is having its post-Harvey Weinstein sexual reckoning, and as “one powerful man after another” is “toppled from his pedestal, exposed as a sexual predator,” she begins to wonder whether she’d been damaged in ways she hasn’t let herself acknowledge; the old narrative, she says, “was starting to feel a little shaky.” She had been very lonely—is still very lonely—and her teacher had taken advantage of that, isolating her,

*One thing
about Tracy
has changed:
She’s been
given a soul.*

overpraising her, freezing her into an adolescent belief in her own superiority that has done her no favors.

Green Meadow High School, though, is the same center of jock worship it has always been. This takes a while to become apparent. Perrotta has introduced a new kind of creep, a tech entrepreneur, Kyle Dorfman, who left Silicon Valley to return to Green Meadow because it seemed like a better place to raise kids. But the high school has slipped academically and athletically, and no longer fields a winning football team, as it did back in the early '90s. Dorfman, who has become the president of the school board, figures he should creatively disrupt things. He meets with Tracy to discuss an idea. Will it be a new roof? Merit pay for the best teachers? Smarter test prep?

Of course not. Dorfman wants to endow a Hall of Fame. The school board loves the idea. The selection committee never considers the “musicians and astronauts and public servants and stay-at-home moms” who Dorfman had claimed would be honored. Instead, it fixes immediately on Vito Falcone, the greatest football player in the history of Green Meadow and the only one to go on to the NFL, until a knee injury sidelined him. It’s “the same old crap as always,” Tracy thinks. “From as far back as I could remember, no matter where I went or what I did, there was always a Vito Falcone. The Golden Boy. The Handsome Jock. The Big Man on Campus.”

SINCE *ELECTION*, Perrotta has published seven novels and short-story collections, most of them set in suburbia, thereby acquiring a reputation as a suburban novelist—not another Cheever or Updike, exactly, whose hamlets, however soul-destroying, kept up a veneer of gracious gentility. Perrotta’s are unmistakably in decline. His characters don’t dream of upward mobility. Dorfman sees that his hometown is “less vital. More pessimistic about the future.” He and his wife hire an architecture firm to build them a modernist house. Jack Weede, the retiring principal, observes that the Dorfman spread, “three misaligned boxes stacked one on top of the other,” makes the other houses on the street “look even more dull and hopeless than they already were.”

But I don’t think socioeconomic decay is Perrotta’s central concern. What intrigues him is just as pernicious, and not unrelated: American masculinity, or, to be more specific, bro culture. Plots and subplots in many of Perrotta’s better-known works—such as *Little Children* (2004), *The Abstinence Teacher* (2007), and *Mrs. Fletcher* (2017)—turn on a male character’s efforts to free himself from destructive norms, or at least become aware of them. To put this another way, Perrotta is simply more enthralled by how men school one another than he is by anything else. His dialogue

is never as exuberant as when his guys talk guy talk, reveling in “the ass on that girl” (*Election*), debating the relative merits of Hot Kayla and Less-Hot Kayla (*Mrs. Fletcher*), rejoicing in the thrill of fucking while driving (*The Abstinence Teacher*). Principal Weede wistfully recalls that, back at the start of his career, in the 1970s, teachers debated “the best tits, the nicest legs, the sexiest mouth”—a glimpse of the predatory swamp Tracy swam in when she was in high school two decades later. Sexual boasting, that quintessential guy-bonding ritual, is passed down from father to son and mentor to mentee. According to Weede, he learned that “girls were fair game” from his superiors, such as the head of the math department, who bragged about having a female student go up to the blackboard every day to write out equations because he wanted to “enjoy the view.” Men know now not to say that sort of thing in public; instead, they pickle themselves in internet porn. Their sons stream it 24/7. Really, Perrotta seems to be asking in *Mrs. Fletcher*, how much can we fault the basically well-meaning college kid Brendan Fletcher for not foreseeing the consequences of saying to the intersectional feminist who is fellating him, “Suck it, bitch”?

Tracy Flick Can’t Win replaces sexual spectacle with football mania. It’s equally unedifying. No one at Green Meadow remembers that, back in the day, its Hall of Fame nominee was a world-class prick. Vito Falcone ghosted his knocked-up girlfriends, bullied the vulnerable, and betrayed his Black teammate and best friend by never writing the letter he’d promised he would to explain the racist incident that doomed his friend’s collegiate and athletic career.

The adult Falcone is a cautionary figure, a man broken by the manly vocation that was supposed to bring him glory. He has symptoms, such as brain fog, that come from too many untreated concussions. He has refused to tell anyone about his condition, though, not even his doctor. Instead, he began drinking, “because if you were drunk and your brain malfunctioned, you could blame it on the alcohol.” Alcoholism led to spousal abuse and the proverbial descent to rock bottom. Now he’s trying to make amends, as recommended by his recovery program. This entails apologetic visits and phone calls that usually confuse or infuriate people who have done their best to move on.

Perrotta doesn’t write only about men, of course. His female protagonists probably outnumber the male ones, and they’re perfectly well drawn. But they’re not quite as interesting. They’re better people, smarter, more self-aware, nicer—too nice, perhaps. Tracy’s saving grace is that she’s abrasive and intermittently out of control, barging furiously into parties she wasn’t invited to (though she should have been), sabotaging

TRACY FLICK
CAN'T WIN

Tom Perrotta

SCRIBNER

herself by admitting to the local school superintendent how much she hates football, kicking and crumpling the door of Dorfman's Tesla when she realizes that he has stabbed her in the back. And she refuses to relinquish her loveless solitude. She breaks up with the most eligible bachelor in town when he tries to get serious, even though she likes him, and repels repeated attempts by Dorfman's wife, Marissa, to befriend her.

What Tracy mostly does in the novel is note carefully how men go about derailing her promotion. Just as, in *Election*, Mr. M recruited a jock, Paul, to defeat Tracy, in the sequel the school superintendent brings a venerated ex-coach into the candidate pool, four months after the application deadline has passed. Paul was a sweet kid in over his head; Larry Holleran, the head coach during Green Meadow's "golden age," when the whole town turned out to cheer on the football team, is the kind of hard-ass who gets clapped on the back for refusing to tolerate "losers"—even though he himself, in additional roles as science teacher and then assistant principal, was openly lazy and inept. Everybody swoons at the thought that he could make the football team great again. And he knows how to work a room with "an easy masculine charm," while Tracy, marooned at the outsiders' table in that same room, can do nothing but seethe. History has repeated itself. Once again, it's "me against Paul, Competence vs. Popularity."

Tracy Flick just can't win. Actually, she can, but only at an appalling price. The novel's surprise ending is both shocking and inevitable, given the abuses of power that Green Meadow has yet to deal with. But things don't turn out as badly for Tracy as one might expect. For one thing, she finally stops rebuffing Marissa, a sympathetic woman also disenchanted with her blowhard husband.

Indeed, Tracy is not the tragic figure in this novel. That would be Vito Falcone, who tries to rise to the Herculean task of repairing the harm done by him and by everything that chews up boys and men like him—his coach and his sport and his social impunity, "everybody acting like your shit didn't stink," he thinks. "Because after a while you started to believe it too, and a person like that could do a lot of damage." Perrotta's female protagonists are stymied, but his male protagonists are stunted, often in ways that lead straight to disaster. The best of them realize they've got to recover their humanity. Perrotta makes that look pretty hard. *A*

Judith Shulevitz is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the author of The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time. She is working on a book for the Yale University Press Jewish Lives series.

Hi-Fi By Sydney Lea

As yet there was only one sister,
still too young for school.
We three brothers weren't much older.

I suspect that what I say is
more than a bit sentimental
and may not have a basis

in what was real back then.
So be it but let me keep it,
the four of us hearing the tune,

the strings and horns so alive.
It's good to be where we are,
near our parents' new hi-fi,

which spills into every corner.
The fidelity—almost shocking.
They've told us about its wonders,

and now at last they own one.
Having adjusted some knob,
they stand stone-still for a moment,

as if in a sort of trance.
Of course, they're both in the grave now
and of course they no longer dance,

cheeks touching—or anyhow—
but as long as I say so they do.
Indeed the song I hear now

is precisely "Cheek to Cheek."
Now, why would it talk about swimming
in a river or a creek?

Or maybe it's actually fishing.
Who cares? Strange bliss pours forth
as long as the record keeps spinning.

Sickness, regret, and death
will all arrive in time.
And rancor. I won't forget

the rancor. This evening, however,
we siblings sit and watch,
enchanted, four children together

on the couch with the fancy lace
while our faithful parents glide
in what looks like a fond embrace.

Sydney Lea's most recent collection of poems is Here (2019). He served as the Vermont State poet laureate from 2011 to 2015.



BOOKS

Blaming Our Inner Ape

Humans love to pin retrograde gender dynamics on our primate cousins. Is that fair?

By Rebecca Giggs

One morning in January 1961, following a breakfast of baby cereal, condensed milk, and half an egg, a male chimpanzee from Cameroon known to his handlers as Ham was strapped into a pressure-controlled capsule, loaded aboard a NASA rocket, and shot into space. No human had yet been where he was headed. At the time of Ham's foray to the stars, physicians still feared that crucial bodily functions (including swallowing and cardiac activity) might not weather the weightlessness of astronautic flight. When Ham returned to Earth's surface with only a bruised nose to show for the adventure, he entered history as the first hominoid to endure outer space.

Chimpanzees—along with their cousins the bonobos—are our closest living relatives. Little wonder we are prone to view them as human prototypes. At least 96 percent of our DNA is shared, and we have many anatomical traits in common, including some of the same blood groups and skeletal features such as delicate sinuses. Using a chimpanzee to aid in “human rating” a NASA space vehicle for astronauts was a test of our mutual fragility. It was also a symbolic gesture, marking space travel as the culmination of our evolutionary trajectory into social beings and tool-users sophisticated enough to leave Earth. One way to understand the moment when Ham was flung into that inhuman realm where the universe skims the planet would be to say that we were, as a species, looking to our ancestral past to forge the frontiers of our future.

The story of our evolutionary congruence with primates is perhaps our most powerful collective origin myth. It has a lineage that is scientific: The prehistoric ancestry of *Homo sapiens* shares a bough of the tree of life with several primates, including gorillas and orangutans, but most recently forked from that of the chimpanzees and bonobos, about 6 million to 8 million years ago. But that lineage isn't purely a matter of science. The conjoined heritage of apes and humans has been put to political use, invoked by those seeking to explain aspects of human society as an intractable function of our inner ape. Others have been motivated by that very debate to assert fundamental differences between people and our primate kin.

Now in his 70s, Frans de Waal, the pre-eminent Dutch American primatologist, has a career's worth of perspective on the major through lines of simian research, and an

abiding interest in how his field's findings have been drawn on to support narratives of intrinsic human tendencies. De Waal's own work with chimpanzees in the 1980s loaned the term *alpha male* to the zeitgeist. He has decried its contemporary connotations of chest-beating chauvinism as a departure from the actual strategies of chimp leadership, which can include more generous and prosocial deeds than acts of bullying.

Issues of sex and gender have been on de Waal's mind for decades. In *Different: Gender Through the Eyes of a Primatologist*, de Waal is concerned with the ways in which we look to primates for precedents of communal life and social cohesion, dynamics that are intimately tied up with movements for equality in our human world. Until surprisingly recently, the notion that the prehistory of patriarchy stretches back to a time before humans were human—that a zoology of patriarchy exists—was leveraged to perpetuate discriminatory aspects of culture, situating them as daunting or obdurate scripts of nature. To understand how primatology was partway captured by sexist ideologies, and how it is being freed from those strictures, *Different* suggests, we must look not just to scientists' shifting mindsets, but also to social and political concerns that inevitably shape research and its reception.

When Ham arrived back at Cape Canaveral the next day, he was delivered to a scrum of reporters and photographers. He screamed with such ungoverned agitation that he soon had to be removed. However distressing Ham's outbursts appeared, onlookers may not have been surprised to see him acting beastly. The earliest accounts of chimpanzee temperament portrayed the animals as placid, forest-dwelling frugivores, but their profile started to shift during the Cold War, based on observations of males in the wild vying ferociously with one another over territory and status. Scattered reports of infanticide among primates were later borne out by fieldwork.

After World War II, the brutality of apes had become an anthropological preoccupation that promised answers to the question: Does our capacity for depravity divide us from the animal kingdom, or does violence lie at the core of our nature, an upshot of our evolution? Such unease only intensified as the brinkmanship of nuclear powers threatened to tilt into even more catastrophic conflict. Against this backdrop, a corrosive vision of primate life grew more vivid: Front and center was a portrait of male tyranny, aggression, antagonism.

Fuel for this conviction can be traced back to the 1920s and the notorious carnage at Monkey Hill, a captive-primate colony at the London Zoo. The Monkey Hill enclosure had been designed with the latest thinking on animal welfare in mind. Rather

than consigning apes to stuffy, shadowy cages where lung diseases ran rife, the open-air attraction featured artificial-rock monoliths furnished with heat and light. To this impressive diorama, the zoo sought to introduce an equally impressive animal. Amid a popular craze for all things Egyptian (King Tut's tomb had lately been discovered), it settled on the hamadryas baboon, a creature that appears in hieroglyphics and, rendered as a deity, on pharaonic jewelry.

With the benefit of hindsight, as de Waal tells it, the exhibit was doomed from the get-go. In their natural habitats in countries such as Somalia and Ethiopia, hamadryas baboons form polygynous groups. Marauding, virile males snatch juvenile females from their kin before they become reproductively mature and amass "harems." But the zoo wanted only resplendent males, which can weigh nearly twice as much as females and sport a frost-gray ruff around a narrow, pumice-pink face. About 100 were ordered. When the baboons arrived, the zoo staff found that the batch included a handful of surplus females. On release, a bloody furor unfolded. The males grievously injured or killed one another; they butchered or maimed more than half the females, and some copulated with corpses. The event would be retold over the years as an archetypal narrative of male supremacy and barbarity and abject female subservience. This, some were quick to pronounce, was what the animal within us looked like: We're naturally led to dominate and oppress, or to be oppressed.

The conjoined heritage of apes and humans has been put to political use.

BUT WHAT IF we hadn't anchored this debate in the behavior of chimpanzees and baboons, and had begun otherwise, with different members of the primate family? De Waal is joined in pursuing this provocative line of inquiry by Lucy Cooke, a British documentary filmmaker with zoological credentials (and the author, in 2018, of *The Truth About Animals: Stoned Sloths, Lovelorn Hippos, and Other Tales From the Wild Side of Wildlife*). Her new book, *Bitch: On the Female of the Species*, ranges more widely across natural history, species, and varieties of sexual relationships than *Different* does. Cooke charts the rising influence of feminism on the "phallocracy" of evolutionary biology over the past several decades, arguing for the power of more recent female-led science to, for example, reframe core beliefs about sexual selection, maternal instinct and self-sacrifice, and proclivities for monogamy or nymphomania. In doing so, she introduces us to a marvelous zoetrope of animals—not just primates, but venomous intersex moles, hyenas that give birth through their clitoris, filicidal mother meerkats, and postmenopausal orcas. Where Cooke and de Waal come together is on the

subject of bonobos, our lesser-known close relations, and what their biological blueprint may have to tell us about our own.

Bonobos, rain-forest dwellers that live wild exclusively in the Democratic Republic of Congo, were distinguished from chimps only in 1929. Before that, they had been deemed pygmy chimpanzees, and were believed to mirror chimps in all ways save their diminutive size. Behaviorally, the species are poles apart. A bonobo troop is organized around ranking coalitions of females; power is stratified according to matriarchal authority, and so is access to food. High-up bonobo mothers make matches between their own sons and females to whom they are allied. They wield this control even though males are larger and stronger than females. What gels the community is not physical coercion, implicit or otherwise; it is sex. Bonobos are rightly famous for engaging in frequent sexual activity, much of it nonreproductive (occurring in same-sex pairings or during windows when females cannot conceive).

They kiss. They French kiss. Bonobos practice oral sex and frottage; on one occasion, a female bonobo was observed making use of a knobbled stick as a stimulatory toy for masturbation. Females are said to orgasm, which was once thought a rarity in the animal kingdom, though evidence now supports the theory that female chimps, orangutans, rhesus monkeys, stump-tail and Japanese macaques, and even tiny tamarins also experience pleasure and possibly climax. Bonobo copulations are short, about 13 seconds, but the animals often position themselves face-to-face and hold eye contact throughout. This comparatively harmonious suite of behaviors proved so challenging to androcentric models of primate dominance that early researchers, seeking to integrate bonobos into their existing frameworks, were forced to rely on patently contrived explanations: They chalked up female preeminence, for example, to strategic male deference, or ape chivalry.

Had we learned of bonobos first, de Waal observed in 2006 in *Scientific American*, we would “most likely believe that early hominids lived in female-centered societies, in which sex served important social functions, and in which warfare was rare or absent.” Our picture of the monopolist alpha-male chimp might also have changed if a wider set of observations had colored it. Many of the data on wild-chimpanzee interactions come from East Africa, but troops living in the Taï forest, in Ivory Coast, clash less frequently; their conflicts are not so brutal and the females are subject to less of a power differential—a dynamic de Waal partially attributes to the greater vigilance and cooperation needed to fend off predatory leopards. Male chimps at West African sites have also been seen

adopting the dependent young of a deceased or missing parent, a shouldering of fatherly duty at odds with newborn killings witnessed elsewhere.

A corrective is now under way, and if female dominance in the animal kingdom was once overlooked or quashed, in some quarters it is lauded with the language of empowerment. Yet, as de Waal observes, and as Cooke amplifies, there is something reductive in its own way about supposing that a matrilineal society will tend toward a cordial sorority of disseminated power, in which consensus is brokered by affinity. To hold that women are natural peacemakers given to placation is to neuter women’s rage, to turn “female” into a partial, defanged category, foreclosing on the full range of motivations available to males—including status seeking, resource hoarding, nepotism, and vanity. Intransigence, too, is human.

Female ascendancy in the animal kingdom does not, as a matter of course, result in nonviolence. Both books show that aggression exists in bonobo society, directed principally by females. Scuffles might end with fingers or toes bitten clean off, punctured testicles, and deep lacerations. Among western lowland gorillas, Cooke writes, females will sometimes harass silverback males and interrupt their copulations with subordinate females. In the late 1970s, Jane Goodall’s research on chimpanzees in Gombe, Tanzania, showed that infanticide wasn’t only a male prerogative: The mother-daughter pair Pom and Passion also attacked the young of others, and ate them.

The most striking example of female-to-female intimidation comes from savanna baboons. Cooke describes ascendant females tormenting their underlings, obstructing access to water and food, and snatching their babies away only to overhandle and then neglect the infants. This hierarchy has a physiological effect: Lower-ranked female baboons breed later in their development and ovulate less frequently. What’s more, because female baboons pass their status on to their daughters, subordinate ones are best served by having sons, who not only are spared the raids but are more able to climb the social ladder. And biology accommodates: Through an evolutionary mechanism yet to be fully explained, these baboons give birth to more males than females; their social position essentially sex-selects their fetuses.

Were we to seek out a broader vantage on simian life, as Cooke suggests we must, we would find several other paradigms of sexual difference and interrelation. New World monkeys—tailed primates that inhabit the Americas—offer alternative snapshots of collaboration and cooperation. Male black-headed owl monkeys share equal, if not more, duties in rearing their offspring. During the pregnancy of his mate, a male cotton-top tamarin also puts on weight—he will shed

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it later, carrying their twins on his back. His levels of estrogen and prolactin (hormones associated with birth and bonding) rise in tandem with hers. Some lemurs, natives of Madagascar, have shared child-care arrangements that permit mothers to socialize, forage, and eat without distraction. They build nests for their young, where sentinel adults—typically unrelated, not only females—watch over them.

COOKE AND de Waal are both invested in showcasing a range of animal behaviors—including mate choice and gender expression—that usefully redraw the boundaries of “natural” sex difference. In *Different* we meet Donna, a captive chimp that de Waal describes in our human parlance as asexual and gender-nonconforming. Whether identity markers like “butch” and “femme” have any currency for chimpanzees is clearly an inscrutable matter, but as de Waal is at pains to point out, the norms of gender are impressed upon young chimps by their elders. Sex-typical customs are not entirely a matter of biological destiny: Some are nurtured, some are learned; extraordinarily, there are gendered habits that resemble fashions. De Waal collects anecdotes of female-chimp self-adornment—grass blades tucked inside an ear and crushed fruit smeared over the upper body. Labor can be gendered, and can stem from expertise that is taught. Daughter chimps will pay keen attention to their mother’s efforts to extract termites from a mound using twigs selected for the task. Mothers share their favored grub-spearing tools with their female offspring and instruct them, but not so much their sons: Male chimps are less likely to master the skill, or even attempt it. If these can be said to be cultural phenomena, then they are not coercive; chimps that diverge from the settled habits of their sex are not fated to be pariahs.

De Waal’s accounts of chimpanzee interactions show some aspects of gender to be performative and communal in animal worlds, and he resists categorical absolutes when it comes to the sexes, eager to unpack the pronounced inequalities they have led to in the human world. At the same time, though, he emerges sure that, at root, biological sex and gender are linked—that sex difference is neither the pure product of upbringing and socialization nor a matter of choice. One lesson de Waal takes from his studies is that striving for a genderless society is more than anathema; he regards it as arrogant. In his view, sex and power can be decoupled, but to do away with difference altogether is to cut ties with nature and suppose ourselves to be beyond animality.

Cooke, too, argues that greater respect should be paid to difference—but where de Waal frames *Homo sapiens* as a tailless ape, she is motivated to find new

ways for humans to see themselves reflected in nature. With a broader set of examples to pull from, she dedicates more attention to nonbinariness, sexual fluidity, and queerness in species of crustaceans, reptiles, birds, and fish. As it turns out, the planet’s wildlife abounds with varied examples of family-making, shape-shifting, and connectedness (or celibacy) that can help recalibrate pejorative and exclusionary understandings of who is entitled to see themselves reflected in nature.

As I read *Different*, and *Bitch* too, I was struck by the number of instances in which the traditionally gendered behavior and biological functions of humans mold the lives of primates in care or captivity. Women are brought into zoos to breastfeed their babies as a demo for naive apes with young who do not yet know how to nurse. Cooke does a stint as a stand-in mother for a juvenile monkey that nests in her hair as she sleeps—an experience that brings her to reflect on her own maternal urgings, or lack thereof. In *Different*, an orangutan male stalls in his development and fails to acquire the fleshy flanges (cheek pads) of maturity until after the retirement of a senior zookeeper, when the change is at last triggered—as it would be in the wild, following the decline or death of a dominant orangutan male.

I came to wonder whether primates of different species within audible and olfactory range—if not in visual contact, as at a zoo—also influence one another. If chimpanzees have a worldview inflected by what we call patriarchy, are they blind to the sisterhood of bonobos? If bonobos have a matriarchy, would they consider the sexual obstructions of female lowland gorillas to be traitorous? These triangulations are playful, of course, though they illuminate one thing apes could contribute to the development of human society: an expansion of empathy arising from our affinity with the animal kingdom.

Yet not all affinities are helpful; some are harmful. Having retired from the U.S. space program, Ham had difficulty settling into the life of a zoo animal, given how habituated he had become to people. And it’s perhaps worth noting that our evolutionary closeness with primates has changed human sex lives, in ways that have radically altered the course of history: We can’t forget that AIDS is a zoonosis, a disease that crossed species, from chimpanzees to human beings. At their core, *Different* and *Bitch* both pursue a question that does, in the end, set us apart from the animal kingdom. We are the sole primate to explore how much our self-knowledge owes to a history of science. *A*

Rebecca Giggs, a writer from Perth, Australia, is the author of Fathoms: The World in the Whale.

DIFFERENT:
GENDER
THROUGH THE
EYES OF A
PRIMATOLOGIST

Frans de Waal

W. W. NORTON

BITCH:
ON THE FEMALE
OF THE SPECIES

Lucy Cooke

BASIC



NADAV KANDER / TRUNK ARCHIVE

The Defiant Strangeness of Werner Herzog

The director brings his signature theme—adventurers who share his quixotic compulsions—to his debut novel.

By A. O. Scott

Twenty-five years ago, while in Tokyo directing an opera, the German filmmaker Werner Herzog turned down the offer of a private audience with the emperor of Japan. “It was a faux pas, so awful, so catastrophic that I wish to this day that the earth had swallowed me up,” Herzog writes in the preface to his first novel, *The Twilight World*. Nonetheless, his hosts wondered whether he might like to meet some other Japanese celebrity. Without hesitation, he asked to visit Hiroo Onoda.

Even if you don’t recognize the name, there’s a good chance that you are familiar with Onoda as a legend, a symbol—what we might nowadays call a meme. A lieutenant in the Imperial Army during World War II, stationed on the Philippine island of Lubang, he kept fighting long after the Allied victory, until he was finally relieved of his duties in 1974. Onoda wasn’t the only Japanese soldier to wage a lonely, endless war. Shoichi Yokoi was captured in Guam in 1972 and, like Onoda, struggled to make peace with the radically altered reality of postwar Japan.

Beyond their home country, these men have come to serve as illustrations in an informal dictionary of received ideas, accompanying the entries for *fanatical loyalty*, *fighting the last war*, and *general cluelessness*. The guy who stays in the field long after the war is over is, to modern eyes, a comical, cautionary figure, an avatar of patriotism carried to ridiculous extremes. We rarely pause to look for motives other than blind obedience, or to imagine what those years of phantom combat in the wilderness must have felt like.

In making Onoda the subject of his first novel—a slender chronicle rendered in efficient, idiosyncratic English prose by the poet and translator Michael Hofmann—Herzog declines to treat him as a joke. He is clearly fascinated by the absurdity of this hero’s situation, and also determined to defend the dignity of a man who had no choice but to persevere in an impossible mission.

The orders Onoda receives from his commanding officer in December 1944 could hardly be more explicit, at least as Herzog renders them:

As soon as our troops have been withdrawn from Lubang, it is your duty to hold the island until the Imperial Army’s return. You are to defend its territory by guerrilla tactics, at all costs. You will have to make your own decisions. No one will give you orders. You must be self-reliant.

As the years go by with no sign of the army, Onoda interprets evidence of Japan’s defeat—including leaflets dropped from the sky—as Allied propaganda. Near the end of his ordeal, he is baffled by the movements of American planes and ships that are heading west, toward Vietnam. The account of geopolitics he gleans from his observations is that, in 1971, “India . . . has freed itself from the British, and Siberia has split away from Russia. They have now joined Japan, to form a powerful triple alliance against America.”

Onoda isn’t entirely alone in his isolation. During his time on Lubang, he leads a small squad of similarly unlucky, but lower-ranking and somewhat less zealous comrades: a corporal named Shimada and two privates, Kozuka and Akatsu. His instructions to them are an echo of the orders he was given: “The war is different now, heroic gestures have no place. Our tasks are to remain invisible, to deceive the enemy, to be ready to do seemingly dishonorable things while keeping safe in our hearts the warrior’s honor.” And so they live like bandits or ancient hunter-gatherers, foraging in the bush and stealing from the local peasants, pilfering crops, killing the occasional water buffalo, and learning to extract oil from wild coconuts. They are both the hunters and the hunted: “In the thirty years, just under, of his solitary war,” Herzog writes, “Onoda will survive one hundred eleven ambushes.”

His solitary war. Even when he is with Shimada, Kozuka, and Akatsu, Onoda seems radically alone. Those three are pragmatic souls, trying to make it through rough circumstances under the command of an unyielding superior officer. As Herzog imagines him, Onoda operates on a wholly different level, his tactical acumen and delusional certainty infused with a pure warrior spirit. Rather than dramatizing those ambushes and similar adventures, *The Twilight World* emphasizes the existential dimensions of Onoda’s

strange, looping odyssey in language that often veers from the concrete data of jungle sounds and smells into dizzying abstraction:

Onoda's war is of no meaning for the cosmos, for history, for the course of the war. Onoda's war is formed from the union of an imaginary nothing and a dream, but Onoda's war, sired by nothing, is nevertheless overwhelming, an event extorted from eternity.

Whatever that last phrase might mean in this context—can three decades really be said to constitute a single event?—it could describe most of Herzog's films. (Onoda's war has been brought to the screen by the French director Arthur Harari, whose *Onoda: 10,000 Nights in the Jungle* premiered at Cannes in 2021.) Any movie might be said to represent a radical distillation and reshaping of time, an episode extracted, at significant cost in labor, money, and endurance, from the infinite flow of experience. Watching Herzog's films, you somehow feel the weight of the infinite, the metaphysical shadows that bring the physical world into relief.

HERZOG, WHO was born in Bavaria in 1942, has made more than 55 films since 1968, divided between documentaries and fictional features, though that is a distinction he disdains. (Roger Ebert, a critical champion of Herzog's who became a friend, once wrote to him that “the line between truth and fiction is a mirage in your work.” That could also be said of *The Twilight World*.) Herzog is not interested in psychological or historical realism, or for that matter in literal facts, but in “ecstatic truth,” a quality that almost by definition eludes classification, residing as it does in a vatic realm of images, experiences, and feelings.

Reviewing *Nosferatu*, Herzog's 1979 remake of F. W. Murnau's silent vampire classic, the critic Dave Kehr noted, with some exasperation, Herzog's defiance of the patterns and protocols of cinematic storytelling. “With its petulance over matters of form and development,” Kehr wrote, “*Nosferatu* sometimes made me wonder why Herzog was attracted to narrative filmmaking at all—why he hadn't invested his talents in a more accommodating medium like photography or poetry.” The answer, which may be more apparent now than it was at that stage in Herzog's career, is that accommodation is the last thing he wants. One of his previous books, a diary kept during the filming of his Amazonian epic, *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), is called *Conquest of the Useless*, a title that summarizes the grandiose, quixotic attitude that, more than any formal or aesthetic concern, has governed his approach to cinema.

“Let me offer a metaphor,” Herzog once said: “All my films have been made on foot.” It isn't really a metaphor. Walking is the key to all Herzogian

mythologies. His first book, *Of Walking in Ice*, chronicles a winter trek from Munich to Paris, undertaken in late 1974 out of a characteristic blend of magical thinking and practical determination. A beloved mentor, the critic Lotte Eisner, had fallen ill in France, and Herzog decided that if he went to visit her by the slowest, hardest, least accommodating means, she would stay alive until he got there. And so she did.

A few years later, an event took place at the UC Theatre, in Berkeley, California, that has been immortalized in a 20-minute documentary directed by Les Blank, forthrightly called *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe* (1980). The shoe in question, an “ankle-high Clarks desert boot,” was prepared in the kitchen of Chez Panisse and consumed by Herzog in front of an audience gathered for a local premiere of his friend Errol Morris's debut film, *Gates of Heaven* (1978). The intention was to teach a lesson and make good on a promise. As Herzog explained the stunt in an interview:

Herzog, who rejects the label “artist,” prefers to think of himself as a craftsman, a wanderer, “a foot soldier of cinema.”

As a young man Errol had great talent as a cellist, but he suddenly abandoned the instrument, and dropped his book project after collecting thousands of pages of conversations with serial killers. Then he said he wanted to make a film, but complained about how difficult it was to find money from producers and that all the subsidies had dried up. I made it clear that when it comes to filmmaking, money isn't important, that the intensity of your wishes and faith alone are the deciding factors. “Stop complaining about the stupidity of producers. Just start with a roll of raw stock tomorrow,” I told him. “I'll eat the shoes I'm wearing the day I see your film for the first time.”

It might be more conventional, idiomatically, to say, “I'll eat my hat,” but the shoe is in every way a more apt piece of apparel, both practically and symbolically. Herzog, who rejects the label “artist,” prefers to think of himself as a craftsman, a wanderer, “a foot soldier of cinema.” Filmmaking, though it may thrive in the marketplace of popular culture and occasionally ascend into the empyrean of the fine arts, is for him above all a physical activity, comparable among human endeavors to cooking and walking. (That Blank's film unites those three practices secures its place in the Herzog canon.) “Cinema doesn't come from abstract academic thinking,” Herzog has said; “it comes from knees and thighs, from being prepared to work twenty-hour days.” And as a craft, it is best learned not through schooling or industry ladder-climbing but through hard, real-world experiences. His advice to young filmmakers:

Beware of useless, bottom-rung secretarial jobs in film-production companies. Instead, so long as you are able-bodied, head out to where the real world is.

Roll up your sleeves and work as a bouncer in a sex club or a warden in a lunatic asylum or a machine operator in a slaughterhouse. Drive a taxi for six months and you'll have enough money to make a film. Walk on foot, learn languages and a craft or trade that has nothing to do with cinema.

"Walk on foot" could be the slogan of a man who seems constitutionally incapable of standing still. Herzog, who currently lives mainly in Los Angeles, has the distinction—unique in the history of the medium, as far as I know—of having shot at least one feature film on every continent, including Antarctica.

He is a character in many of his movies, in particular recent documentaries such as *Grizzly Man* (2005), *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007), *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), and *Into the Abyss* (2011). His unmistakable voice—the critic David Thomson calls it "one of the great incantatory elements in film"—has been heard in episodes of *The Simpsons* and in *Penguins of Madagascar*. Its owner has shown up on multiplex screens as a milky-eyed villain in the Tom Cruise vehicle *Jack Reacher* and in prime-time living rooms as an eccentric homeowner on an episode of *Parks and Recreation*. The man is something of a meme in his own right.

But his celebrity, his pop-culture ubiquity, shouldn't diminish the power or domesticate the strangeness of his work, which amounts to a defense of individual idiosyncrasy—not only his own—in the face of standardization, groupthink, and cultural practices that are accommodating in the worst sense of the term. *The Twilight World* strikes me as too flimsy, too elliptical to count as essential Herzog, but it did send me back to his films with a renewed appreciation of what they put at stake and why they matter.

The best of them are, in a literal way, pedestrian: at once the representation and the result of hard travel, of journeys made one step at a time. *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), the film that brought Herzog international attention and the first of his five collaborations with the actor Klaus Kinski, follows the grueling, ill-fated slog of a group of Spanish conquistadores through the jungles of Peru. The fact that they are speaking German may detract from the verisimilitude, but strict naturalism has never been a priority of Herzog's. What makes *Aguirre* so much more powerful than most other historical dramas, made with larger budgets and ostentatiously "epic" ambitions, is the sense of physical immediacy—of heavy mud and clanking armor, of danger and fatigue, of perseverance and fanaticism. Lasting a bit more than 90 minutes, it not only feels much longer, but is one of the only films about which that can be said as praise. Treading a fine, heretofore undiscovered boundary between tedium

and intensity, it transports the audience into the hallucinatory reality of Aguirre and his comrades as they stumble through a strange and terrifying new world.

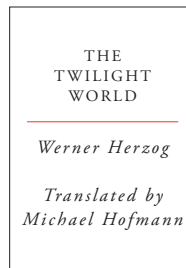
Aguirre also introduced what has become the most familiar Herzogian archetype. His oeuvre is crowded with solitary characters whose compulsions take them beyond the limits of conventional, rational behavior toward a mania that can feel—by turns or all at once—destructive, ridiculous, and sublime. Most of these avatars of extremity, real and invented, are men, with the notable exception of the British traveler and writer Gertrude Bell, played by Nicole Kidman in *Queen of the Desert* (2015). They include Timothy Treadwell in *Grizzly Man*, the adventurers played by Kinski in *Fitzcarraldo* and *Cobra Verde* (1987), and Dieter Dengler, a former U.S. military pilot and Vietnam-era prisoner of war who is the subject of both a 1997 documentary (*Little Dieter Needs to Fly*) and a 2006 scripted feature (*Rescue Dawn*, starring Christian Bale). The list goes on. *Quixotic* is a mild term for the compulsions that grip these people, and their adventures are more harrowing than anything Cervantes's knight of the doleful countenance ever experienced.

Hiroo Onoda—a man on an "endless jungle march"—belongs in their company, as a not-so-secret sharer in the filmmaker's hardships and obsessions. "We found much common ground in our conversations," Herzog says of Onoda near the end of the book, "because I had worked under difficult conditions in the jungle myself and could ask him questions that no one else asked him."

This is a dry, self-directed joke, and also a plainly literal statement. The affinity between Herzog and Onoda is evident on every page of *The Twilight World*, though to identify the author with his subject too closely would be a mistake. Herzog's sympathy for his errant heroes is always evident, but so is the detachment required to represent them honestly, to find the truth that they themselves might be too absorbed in their own circumstances to see. It takes imagination to intuit the shape of a journey, and Herzog's imagination, visual and literary, is above all located in the soles of his feet:

After all his millions of steps, he had understood that there was—there could be—no such thing as the present. Each step of the way was past, and each further step was future. The raised foot was past, the same foot placed in the mud in front of him still ahead. *A*

A. O. Scott is a film critic for The New York Times and the author of Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth.



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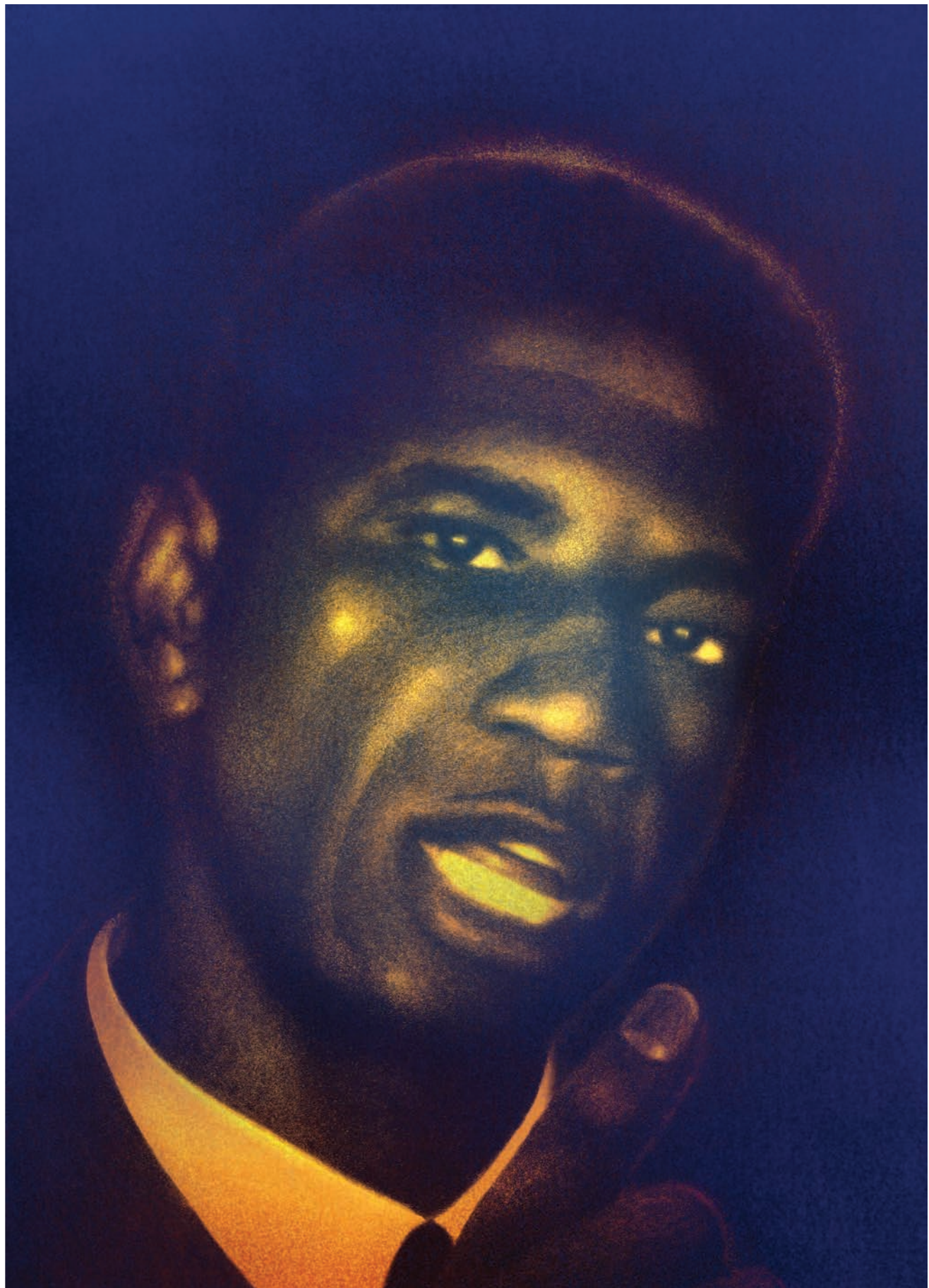


Losing Medgar

After the civil-rights leader was assassinated, the movement was never the same—and neither was my father.

By
David
Dennis Jr.

There's a video of James Baldwin interviewing a stranger with my daddy's face. The VHS tape of this interview has been in my family for 40 years. The cassette bears a label that reads, "James Baldwin Interviews Civil Rights Workers (1981)." Baldwin himself gave the tape to my dad, who doesn't recall ever watching it. It stayed at my mother's house after my parents' divorce, collecting dust until I started researching my father's life a few years ago. ¶ The man whose face appears on the screen is my father, but not the one



who figures in my memories from childhood. The man in the video is scowling, his hands pressed against his temples, the skin around his jaw drooping. I'd thought that the Dave Dennis Sr. I'd seen behind podiums with his finger to the sky, the civil-rights veteran who galvanized crowds, was the man who'd emerged from the movement. The Baldwin tape tells a different history. In this grainy video, the stranger dad is lost in his own fury. All that's left is a hardness. A calloused, impenetrable husk. His nostrils flare and he looks like he wants to set the world on fire. I'd seen him angry before. But never like that.

In the video, he talks about the 1964 Freedom Summer, when he and thousands of other activists campaigned for voter registration in Mississippi, facing unchecked violence from white protesters and police. He talks about the murders of his friends and the way the search for their remains also uncovered the mutilated, decapitated, desecrated bodies of long-forgotten and nameless Black Mississippians.

My father had told me these stories, but watching the video, I realized that I hadn't fully appreciated how they had affected him. I asked my father to tell them again, so I could better understand the man on the tape and so I could pass those stories on to my own children. Though his recollections were vivid, memory is always imperfect, so I talked with his friends in the movement and pored over historical documents and newspaper clippings as well, trying to fill in the gaps as best I could. But these are my father's stories, and I found that the only way I could tell them was in his voice. The dialogue you'll read in this essay all comes from my father's recollections. As he recounted events like the murder of his friend Medgar Evers, I saw flashes of that stranger on the tape.

The first time I met Medgar Evers, he was standing in his office at the Masonic Temple in West Jackson. "Looks like my desk is the first tour stop for outsiders, huh? Someone must have told you that I like it when you all come to Mississippi looking for trouble." It was spring 1962. I was part of a flood of out-of-towners trying to do what we could to help the Mississippians who were already putting their lives on the line. An activist named Tom Gaither had

given me the names of people I needed to get to know if I was going to survive in Mississippi, and Medgar was at the top of the list.

Medgar was the son of a sawmill worker and a laundress from Decatur, Mississippi. He'd served in World War II, fighting in France and Germany before heading back home. Then, in 1954, he became the NAACP's field secretary, traveling throughout Mississippi to visit churches and preach the sermon of voter registration. He also spent his time investigating killings and searching for missing

*These are my
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Black folks, doing what he could for every family who lost someone.

Being caught with an NAACP membership card could mean danger for a Black person in Mississippi. I knew a member who hid his card in a tin can in his backyard. "Here's what you need to know about Medgar," Tom had told me. "He keeps his membership card in his damn pocket."

"Where you from, kid?" Medgar's warmth and confidence were evident from behind his desk, even though he was trying to give me a hard time. "Actually, you don't have to answer that. I've known about you since the Freedom Rides"—when a few dozen of us had been arrested in Jackson in 1961 for protesting

segregated bus stations. I'd come from Louisiana to Mississippi as a field secretary for the Congress of Racial Equality, known as CORE, and I was enamored of the way the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, had taken on the mission of voter registration. "I knew y'all were coming back," Medgar said. "You never really leave Mississippi."

I told him I'd returned because I wanted to do what I could to get as many Black voters as possible. Medgar paused. "What if I told you that you outsiders are going to just show up here and get people killed?" he said. "What if I told you that you and those SNCC kids running around were reckless?" Maybe, he said, the sharecroppers and seamstresses were doing what they could on their own time, and doing it safely. "What if I told you we didn't really need you here?"

I started talking before I had formed an answer. I said that if the people I met in Mississippi told me they didn't need me, I'd knock on Medgar's door again and ask him to drive me to the bus station so I could head back to Louisiana.

Medgar got up from his desk and slowly walked over to me, his navy-blue suit fitting immaculately. He extended his hand and smiled this big smile that felt like a hug. "Well then, all I can say is welcome to the real Mississippi. You got time for Smackover's?"

Smackover's was the place Medgar and I would go to for coffee or a plate of soul food and sweet tea. It's where I would get to know the man I'd eventually call my best friend.

"I admire you kids over there in SNCC and CORE, even though y'all all got screws loose." He was 15 years older than me, so he loved calling us kids. "Sometimes the NAACP won't mix it up on the street level like we need to, and you kids just ... Y'all just get your tails beat like it's nothing."

I told him I'd never quite learned how to get anything done without taking a beating. But he was the one with the NAACP card. He was just as ready to die as any of us.

That was where we differed, he said. "I love us and I want us to be free. But I have a wife and three babies at home. You got kids, Dave?"

I said I did not. I'd never even considered such a possibility.



Medgar Evers (center) is arrested while picketing outside a Woolworth's department store in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963.

“Didn’t think so.” He said that the movement would go on without him if it had to. But his children needed him. He insisted that I’d be less willing to fall in front of bullets if I had to kiss a family goodbye every day. “And I got two guns in that trunk that say that even if I invite danger,” he told me, “danger coming to me is getting a hell of a welcome gift.”

Medgar drove me around Mississippi, introducing me to every person he thought I needed to know. He could talk business with Black lawyers and doctors and chat with farmers about how the crops were growing, from Indianola to Hattiesburg. All the while, he taught me about Mississippi. People embraced me because Medgar told them to. He introduced me to countless locals whose practical knowledge helped keep me safe. I would never have survived without him.

THE BULLET that tore through Medgar’s flesh on June 12, 1963, changed the movement forever. Returning from an NAACP event after midnight, he was shot in the back as he got out of his car and walked toward his house. The country couldn’t deny the truth of what had happened to Medgar. I remember hearing the word *assassination* used for the first time

to describe the killing of a Black activist. Death was always possible, but some deaths we’d had time to prepare for—after a wrong turn down the wrong dark road, or whistling at a white woman. That’s what death had looked like for us before. The act of registering Black people to vote and the quest to dismantle the American power structure made us feel a different kind of terror. We were going to change the country, after all, and that meant we were going to face coordinated, organized, directed murder.

In the 1950s, Mississippi formed a government entity called the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission with the goal of preserving segregation. The commission actively spread disinformation and privately funded white-supremacist groups. The state helped prepare the legal defense for Medgar’s assassin. Long before that, the commission had been a daily nemesis in our lives, routinely employing spies to attend our meetings and follow us around. Some of these spies were Black people who had been paid off. All we could do was go about our regular business and hope for the best.

Whatever sense of adventure we were feeling disappeared with Medgar. We weren’t just fighting racists and cops. We were fighting the entire government. This

is something we had always known, but the way Medgar was killed became a ringing in our ears that kept us from sleeping.

For me, losing Medgar ripped my soul apart. The last words I said to him—“Someone’s gonna get killed riding around with you”—still bounce off my walls at night and haunt me when I wake up, sweat trickling down my chest. Why Medgar? Why him and not me?

LIFE AFTER Medgar’s assassination felt like a series of moments between tragedies. And the tragedies started the very next morning, before I could even grieve.

Some local students had already gotten riled up enough to start marching, so I wanted to make sure they could do it as safely as possible. Two hundred or so of us set out from Medgar’s office at the Masonic Temple. The march didn’t last long. The police had dozens of students locked up at the Mississippi State Fairgrounds. But I barely had time to worry about that, because I was still occupied with another crisis that had been brewing: Mrs. Hamer was in trouble.

Three days earlier, Fannie Lou Hamer, a former sharecropper who had quickly become a guiding force of the Mississippi movement, and nine other activists

had been on a bus trip back from a voter-registration training led by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, or SCLC, in South Carolina. When the bus stopped, the group would periodically sit at an interstate bus station's lunch counter or use its restrooms to test compliance with the federal regulations prohibiting segregation at such places. This upset the white bus driver, who began making phone calls at stops along the way. As the journey continued, Mrs. Hamer led the group in singing freedom songs, maybe in part to needle the driver. When Mrs. Hamer's group got to Winona, Mississippi, they realized that the driver had alerted the police.

Five of the riders—June Johnson, Annell Ponder, Euvester Simpson, Rosemary Freeman, and James West—got out to use the “whites only” restrooms and sit down at the segregated lunch counter. The police were ready, and the riders were arrested. Mrs. Hamer saw the arrests from the bus and got out to talk with her friends. The police intercepted her, told her to get in their car, and kicked her. The jailhouse in Winona would become a torture chamber for her and the others who were forced inside.

First was June Johnson.

The sheriff asked her if she was in the NAACP. June could have said no, but she said yes. The officer hit her in the face and stomach, asking her who ran the NAACP; she told him the people did. Then the sheriff, the chief of police, a state trooper, and another cop threw her to the floor and beat her, stomping her and tearing her clothes. They cracked her head with a blackjack, leaving her bloodied. She never gave them the answers they wanted. She was 15 years old.

Annell Ponder, an SCLC field supervisor, was a Georgia native and graduate of Clark College. The officers put her in the booking room and beat her with blackjacks and a belt, and said they'd keep beating her until she said “Yes, sir” when addressing them. She refused to say it.

The police tossed James West, the lone male in the group, in a cell with a few other incarcerated Black men. The cops then handed those men a blackjack and told them to beat on West. After they finished, the officers gave them shots of corn liquor as a reward for the violence.



Above: David Dennis Sr. at home in South Carolina in April.

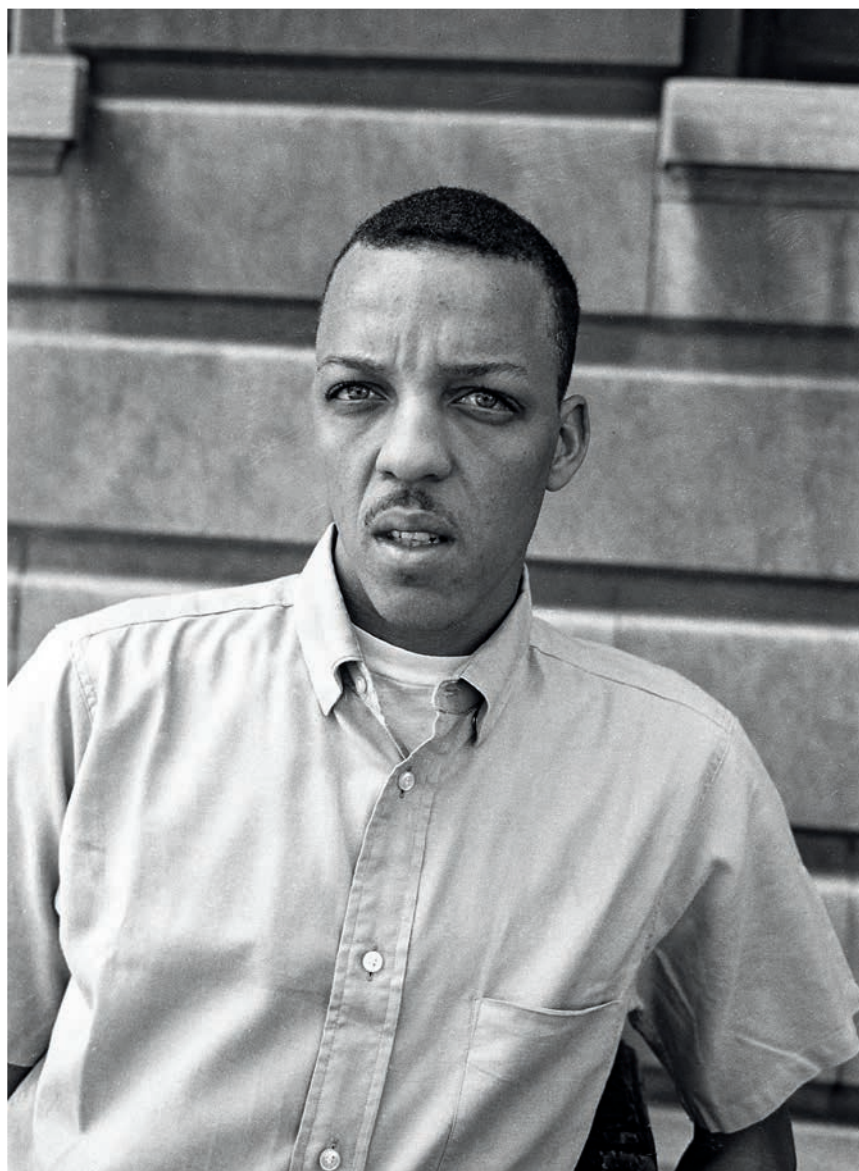
Opposite page: Dennis Sr. in the early 1960s.

Then the cops dragged Mrs. Hamer into the cell with the incarcerated Black men, who reeked of alcohol. The officers made one of the men lash her until his arms gave out. Her booming voice, which had awakened the spirit in so many of us, was now a scream of terror. Then it was another imprisoned man's turn. He hesitated. Mrs. Hamer, her dress pulled up to expose her back and buttocks, blood soaking the sheets below her, looked back

and, as she later told me, said to the man, “Now go on ’head and do what you gotta do, because they gonna do you worse than you do me if you don’t.”

The man wept as he whipped her. He apologized through tears, but his crying didn't pause his swings.

When Mrs. Hamer was finally allowed back into her cell, Euvester Simpson, who was all of 17 at the time, took care of her. In the night, Mrs. Hamer developed a fever



BOB ADELMAN

Police had brutalized activists in Winona, and Medgar had been assassinated. All in one week in Mississippi. A few days later, when I saw Mrs. Hamer, I felt a rage I hadn't felt before.

She looked like she was wearing a mask too small for her face. Her cheeks and forehead were swollen beyond recognition, and she could hardly open her eyes. I remember her trying to smile and her face barely moving as she told me about what had happened in that jail. It was the first time I'd heard the gruesome details. "It's not the physical pain," she said through cracked, bloody lips. "They lifted my skirt, Dave. That's the worst part. They lifted my skirt."

I'll never get over her face. For the first time through all of this—bombings, burning crosses—I felt a desire for revenge. I wanted those white men dead. I wanted to walk to Winona and kill them all in their sleep. I wanted to bring their bodies to Mrs. Hamer and Annell and Euvestor and tell them I had done this for them.

I RETURNED to Jackson, to a city that felt the way I felt. The Black community loved Medgar, and wanted the same revenge I wanted. But I had to betray my own instincts in order to keep as many people alive as I could. It all came to a head at Medgar's funeral.

I didn't want to go to the ceremony. I didn't want to see the pomp and circumstance. I didn't want to believe he was dead. Instead, I roamed Farish Street, in the center of Jackson's Black business district, where the funeral would be held, and walked by an alley where some young Black men were gathered. Medgar had previously introduced me to this crew. They called themselves the "Corner Boys" and had taken on the role of community protectors, always keeping an eye out when white folks drove down Farish Street. They were generally peaceful, but today I noticed the handguns in their pockets and I saw the shotguns they weren't even trying to hide.

I tried to persuade them to put their weapons away—to tell them that, if they started any violence, the police would end it. But they'd heard about our way long enough. Our way got Medgar, whom they all loved, killed. I didn't have any comeback to that.

and her blood pressure spiked. Simpson, wetting a towel, wiped Mrs. Hamer's forehead, the welts on her back, and her hands, which had turned purple from trying to shield herself.

They got through the night by singing. One lyric they sang over and over again was: "*Walk with me, Lord / Walk with me, Lord / While I'm on this tedious journey / I want Jesus to walk with me.*"

Mrs. Hamer and the others had been arrested the Sunday before Medgar was killed, and a group of us spent the rest of that day trying to find them. Hollis Watkins, a wily SNCC member, called jails in the area and threatened them by claiming, falsely, that the FBI was looking for the

missing. Lawrence Guyot, a SNCC field secretary from Pass Christian, Mississippi, figured out that they were in Winona. When he went to the jail demanding answers, he was also arrested. While he was handcuffed, the police pounced. More blackjacks. More swelling and blood. They dragged Guyot to a cell.

I spent hours calling anyone I could, trying to find out what was going on. Eventually, I got word that the SCLC had secured bail money, so an organizer, Andrew Young, and a few other SCLC members drove down from Birmingham, Alabama, to get everyone out of jail. The first thing Mrs. Hamer heard when she left jail was that Medgar was dead.

We were arguing, but saying the same thing. We just wanted the hurt to go away. I kept walking down Farish Street, peeking through alleyways between the buildings. Men were standing by with guns in their hands, like they were ready to fire bullets at anyone who dared to bother the funeral. I kept walking south toward downtown. Then, around a corner and over the horizon, I saw the horsemen of the apocalypse. Not just four, but dozens. Police officers, state troopers, and sheriff's deputies were dressed for a massacre: Riot gear. Rifles. Shotguns. Some were indeed on horseback. Others held back snarling dogs. They were waiting for the funeral march to come their way. Violent or not, it wouldn't matter. I felt certain they had the green light to kill as many Black people as possible.

I turned around and ran to all the alleyways and corners I could find, trying to talk to the men who were waiting with knives and guns. I kept begging them not to do anything, for their own good. I had to stop them from running into that wall of white rage without telling them what exactly was waiting for them. I didn't want them to take the possible war as a challenge. When I looked back up Farish Street, an agitated mass of Black marchers was heading straight toward the white militia.

The police arrested the first few marchers. But they weren't going to stop there. Several of the white men waved their batons with abandon. The Black folks weren't having it. They started tossing bottles and swinging any objects they could get their hands on. The police seemed to want blood. The only thing that eventually slowed them down was a single white man with a megaphone.

John Doar was a Republican lawyer from Wisconsin who had started at the Justice Department in 1960 under President Dwight Eisenhower and stayed to work under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, making it his personal crusade to find justice for Black folks. He put his life on the line to bail the civil-rights

leader Bob Moses out of jail in Mississippi whenever Bob got arrested for marches or for trying to register people to vote. Doar told Moses and me to call the Justice Department if we were arrested. When Black people disappeared, Doar's fingernails may as well have been filled with dirt from digging up bodies. He was there to make sure James Meredith got to Ole Miss, in the face of a furious mob protesting the school's first Black student. And it was Doar's presence that halted the white

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militia's march, most likely because the police knew he was a government official, and they didn't want the FBI on their back.

I'd met Doar in planning meetings, and I would always call him if someone went missing or if I needed help getting somebody out of trouble. Most of the Black protesters on Farish Street, though, had no idea who Doar was. They just saw a white man who looked like an FBI agent. "Please! Just listen to me! This is an unsafe situation! Please turn around!" he kept yelling into the megaphone. As I approached Doar, I saw a Black man running toward him, out of his line of vision. He had a brick in his

hand, raised above his head. I sprinted and got between them.

"Dave?" said the man with the brick. "The hell you doing?"

"He's with the movement, brother. You're making a mistake."

Nearby, another man put down a shotgun he'd aimed at Doar.

"Jesus, thank God, Dave," Doar said. He handed me his megaphone, and asked me to say something to help stop things from going any further.

I grabbed the megaphone and begged everyone to stop their march. To de-escalate, calm down, and go home, even though I wanted to join them and burn everything to the ground. It's what this damn city deserved. But we had to survive to fight. The crowd quieted.

LOSING MEDGAR ultimately galvanized the movement. In the months that followed his death, we would pull ourselves together and find a resolve we didn't know we had. A year after he was killed, we would launch the Freedom Summer, when thousands of activists campaigned for voter registration in Mississippi.

And yet, at that moment, we all just stood around Farish Street like we'd collectively woken up from a nightmare. Like something had taken over us. A few people wandered home, left with their grief and anger. The rest of us stayed behind to clean up the mess.

The kids listened to me because Medgar had brought me in to train them. The rest of the people, rage-filled locals who loved Medgar, listened to me because they'd seen me with him. I think they knew he would have vouched for me if he were there. Medgar was still saving lives from a grave he hadn't yet been buried in. *A*

David Dennis Jr. is the author of The Movement Made Us: A Father, a Son, and the Legacy of a Freedom Ride, from which this essay is adapted.

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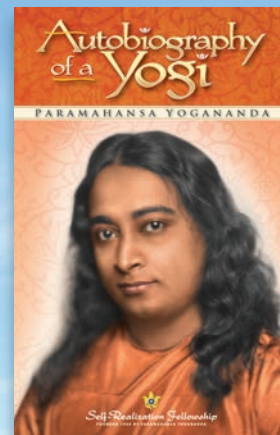
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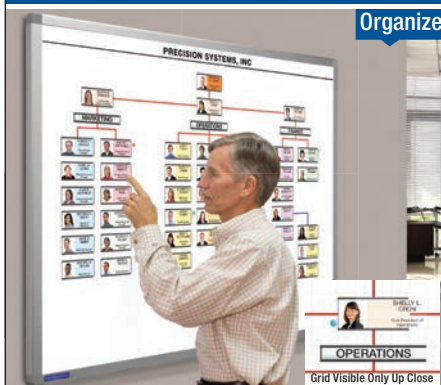
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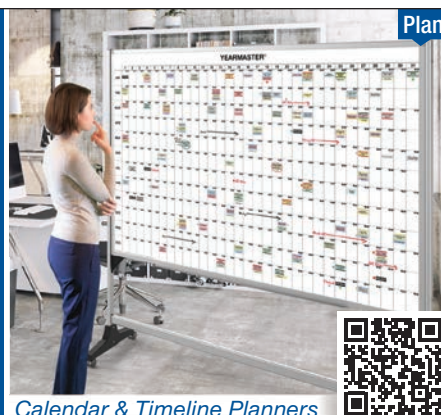
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*Ever
broken a
piece
of gum?*

Broken its spirit, I mean. Chewed it for so long, and with such absentminded, mechanical fury, that its molecular structure finally collapses and it dissolves into a kind of traumatized putty in your mouth. I've done this only once in my life, after a night of what we used to call "raving" (dance floors, chemicals) in London, but it impressed me greatly.

First I was impressed with myself, the up-all-night masticating lunatic. Then I began to think about the piece of gum. Its elasticity. Its resilience. How many hours of thoughtless gnashing had it given me, before I killed it with my power jaws? Its tiny dowry of flavor—spearmint? cinnamon?—was exhausted in the first five minutes; after that it was pure endurance, pure interior technology, shifting and resisting, on and on until dawn rose whitely and everything sort of fell to pieces.

Gum is not exactly a handmaiden to the arts—it's not opium or Earl Grey—but it does enhance concentration. It helps you get on with things. Maybe because it feels almost autonomic, like something our body is taking care of without us, the act of chewing-for-the-sake-of-chewing smooths out anxiety and irrigates the brain. "Dad," my son asked me last week, "do you think you have ADHD?" "No," I said, "but I am quite lazy." If the choice is between two hours of rapturous flow-state composition and a 43rd viewing of *Scent of a Woman*, I'll pick the latter. So I need my gum. It lets me know I'm working.

Of course, once it's served its purpose, it's rather disgusting. Used gum, chewed gum. "What I do is me: for that I came," wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins, a huge fan of Trident Original Flavor. And gum's grand refusal to surrender its form, to be anything but what it is, becomes in the end a bit of a problem. How to dispose of it? Me, I like to throw it from the window of a moving vehicle. Not really a long-term solution.

Someone told me at school that if you swallowed a piece of gum it would wrap itself around your heart. Amazing image. So chew on, humans. Those knobs of used gum—they're tiny monuments to contemplation, really. They memorialize passages of the mind. The thoughts are flown, but the gum remains. Get some on your shoe, wrap it round your heart, and think of me. *A*

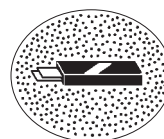
James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

ODE

— to —

CHEWING GUM

By James Parker





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