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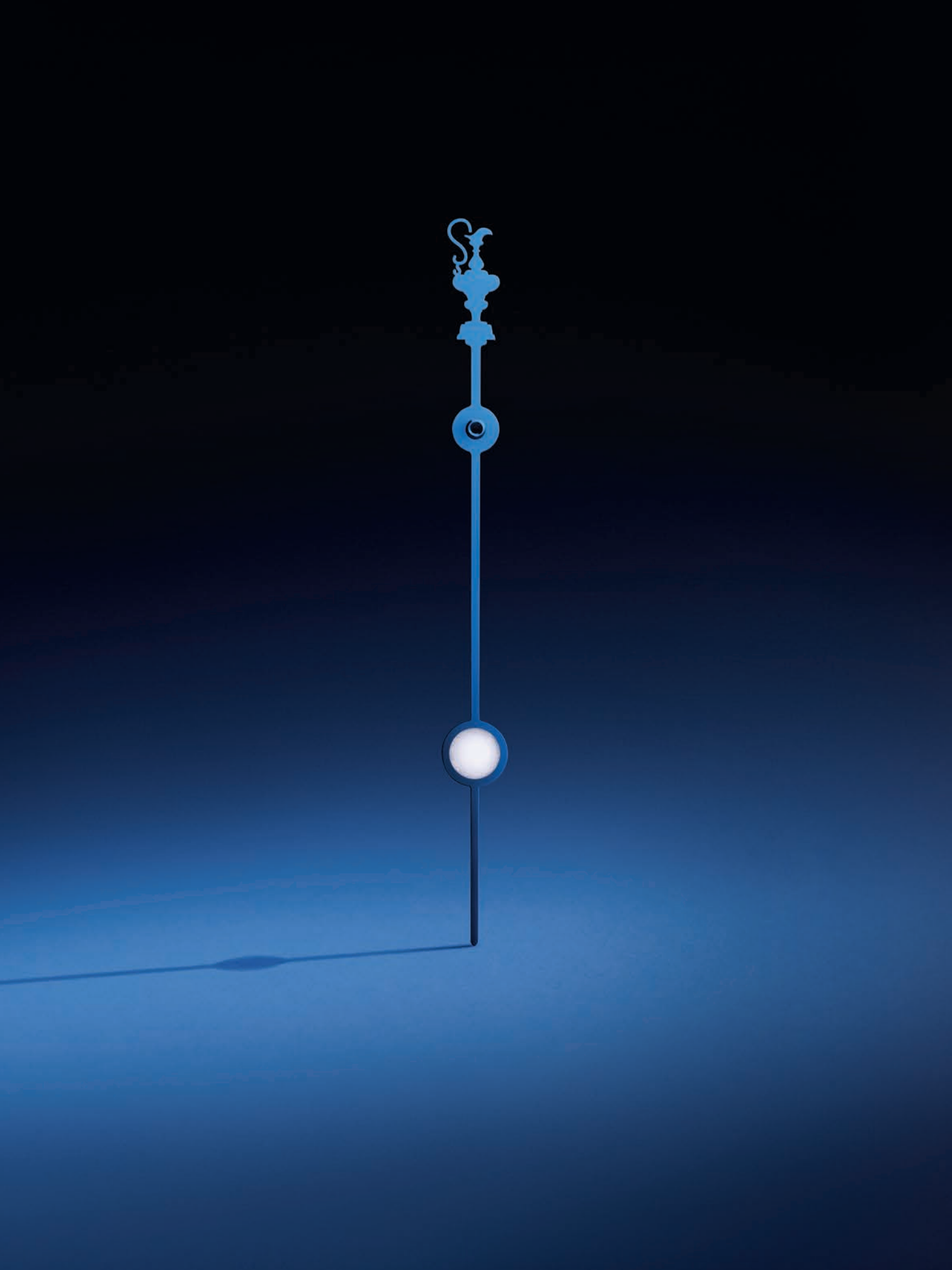

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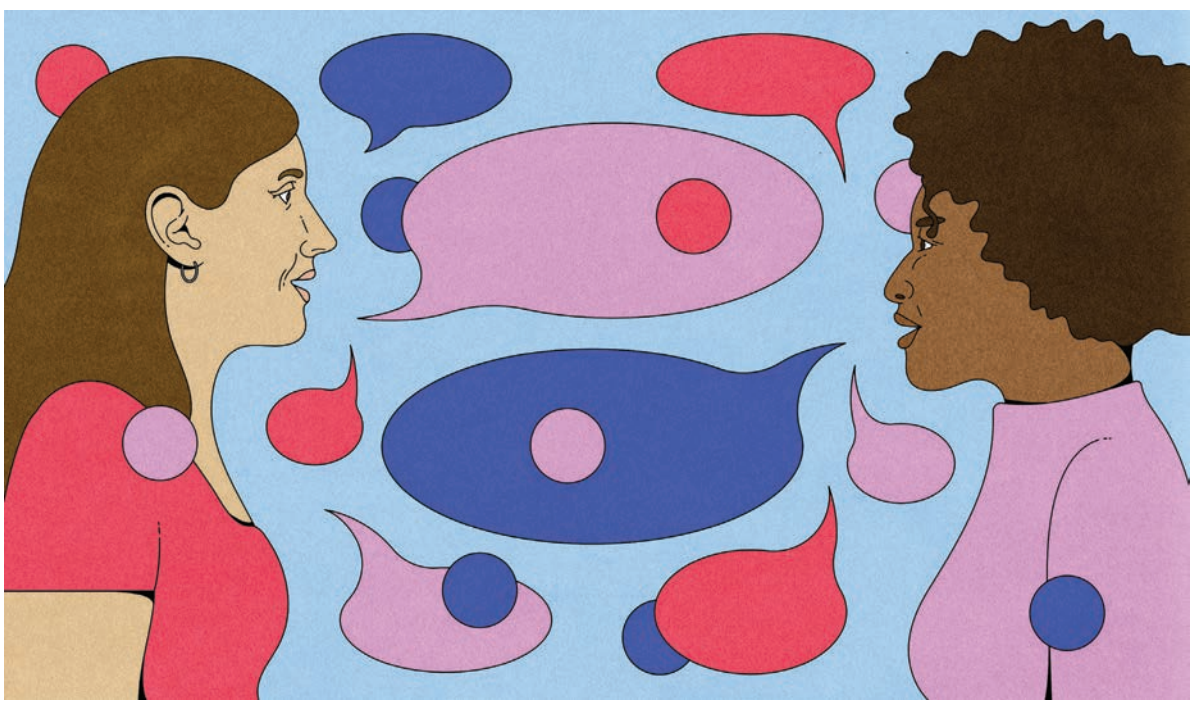
MENOPAUSE IS MORE THAN A MOMENT



Illustrations by: Allie Sullberg

Conversation around a phase of life that has historically been hush-hush has moved into the media spotlight. There is a global movement demanding better menopause care.

Each year, 2 million women in the U.S. reach menopause, a life stage marked by the permanent cessation of menstrual periods for 12 months, which most commonly occurs in women between their mid 40s and early 50s.[1] By 2030, the global population of menopausal and postmenopausal women is projected to increase to 1.2 billion.[2] But due to social stigmas and lingering misinformation, many women often suffer through menopause without treatment.[3]

At a recent roundtable discussion in San Francisco, sponsored by Bayer and co-hosted by *The Atlantic*, an intimate group of health-care providers, women's health advocates, and menopause experts discussed the importance of thoughtful support, potential treatment planning, and coverage for a condition that is both universal and inevitable. "There are very few guarantees in life," quipped Yesmean Wahdan, vice president of medical affairs at Bayer Women's Healthcare and a former practicing ob-gyn. "Taxes, death, and menopause."

But what isn't inevitable, the group agreed, is that women today will experience menopause the way their mothers and grandmothers did. In recent years, conversation around a phase of life that has historically been hush-hush has moved steadily into the media spotlight, with celebrities and politicians publicly discussing the challenges and impact of menopause. There is a global movement demanding better menopause care, and many of the women present at the roundtable are part of it.

PROGRESS STARTS WITH EDUCATION

In a recent study of 829 postmenopausal women, more than 94% said they had never been taught about menopause and 49% said they didn't feel informed at all.[4]

While women associate menopause with the end of reproductive ability, most don't fully comprehend the effect of declining

“There are very few guarantees in life: taxes, death, and menopause.”

– Dr. Yesmean Wahdan, vice president of medical affairs at Bayer Women’s Healthcare

estrogen on their health, added Linda Goler Blount, the president of the Black Women’s Health Imperative.[5] “Maybe that’s the conversation we need to have,” she said. “Forget about your period stopping, let’s talk about how your body changes as you age and how you can adapt.”

Along with more private and government funding for menopause research, the group stressed the importance of updating the current curriculum for physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, and pharmacists. “We’re trained to see patients but not educate them on menopause,” said Dr. Joy Cooper, an ob-gyn and the co-founder of Culture Care, a telemedicine service that connects Black women virtually with Black doctors. In a recent survey from The Menopause Society, only 31.3% of ob-gyn program directors reported including menopause curriculum for residents.[6]

Conversations about menopause also need to happen on a grassroots level, in “all the places that people are going and talking already,” said Dr. Claudia Levine, a primary care physician, Menopause Society Certified Practitioner, and co-founder of Pausology, a menopause and perimenopause educational platform and community space.

TO PREVENT THE MOVEMENT FROM FIZZLING OUT, EMPHASIZE VALIDATION

While menopause is slowly being recognized as a significant and inevitable phase of life for women, many are still reluctant to discuss symptoms, some of which may be treatable, with their doctors for fear of being dismissed or discounted.[3] Though Black and Latina women reach menopause earlier and experience certain symptoms longer than white and Asian women,[7,8,9] they “are less likely to get any treatment recommendations for menopause, even when they bring the issues up with their providers,” Goler Blount said.

It’s crucial, too, not to paint menopause as a monolith. “There is diversity in how women will show up, what their symptoms will be, what works for them, what won't work for them, what is culturally appropriate,” Wahdan said.

In the U.S., female life expectancy is around 80 years.[10] That means many women will live a significant portion of their lives in menopause, the symptoms of which may also impact their partners and families.[8] Ideally, the group agreed, menopause care should be expanded to include a host of midlife health concerns and brought up when a woman is in her early forties. “I love this idea of, ‘in the next three to five years, you may expect this’,” said Barbara Dehn, a nurse practitioner specializing in women’s health.

The group agreed that while the momentum around menopause care is encouraging, in order to galvanize lasting change, we need more research and awareness, revisions in policy, open dialogue between healthcare providers and patients, and funding for FemTech initiatives. Still, there’s no doubt that there is a burgeoning community of people rallying to uplift women’s healthcare—and some of them were represented in the room.

“I certainly got goosebumps,” said Wahdan. “Just thinking about the possibility of what could be, and the power that we all have to help change what the outlook for women is in the future.”

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Behind the Cover: For our cover image, the illustrator Justin Metz borrowed the visual language of old Ray Bradbury and Stephen King paperbacks to portray a circus wagon on its ominous approach to a defiled Capitol. *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, Bradbury's 1962 masterpiece, was a particular inspiration; it is the story of Mr. Dark, who grifts strangers into joining his malevolent carnival. We believe that this is the first cover in *The Atlantic*'s 167-year history that bears no headline or typography. The imagery speaks for itself.

THE

The Valley

For the July/August 2024 issue, George Packer searched for the nation's future in Phoenix.

Letters

What was absent to me from George Packer's recent article on Phoenix and Maricopa County was any discussion of Tucson and Pima County, barely 100 miles south. As political entities go, these two neighbors couldn't be more different: There is only one single Republican across both the Tucson City Council and the Pima County Board of Supervisors, for instance, and attitudes toward water and immigration differ significantly. Grass and water features are rare, and Pima County, which actually borders Mexico, suffers from less vitriol with respect to immigration. The Phoenix-versus-Tucson divide is not the only or even the best example of America's divisions, but it is certainly one worth exploring given the proximate geography involved. I'd love to read a follow-up.

Bruce Skolnik
Tucson, Ariz.

George Packer's exhaustive investigation of Arizona and its water constraints lacked an essential element: the role of innovation in marshaling water resources in ever smarter ways. As new homes are built, Phoenix and the surrounding areas have a chance to employ new types of water-efficient appliances, garden designs, and swimming pools. These could prove pivotal in addressing the state's water crisis.

The 37,000-acre Teravalis project that Packer mentions offers a case in point. Teravalis will include infrastructure to capture rain for reuse, a plant to treat the community's wastewater and reuse it for public spaces, water-usage monitors, leak detectors, and stringent lawn requirements to encourage natural landscapes that don't need irrigation. All appliances will be more efficient than what is now commonly found in Arizona and around the country. In all, the development has committed to reducing water consumption by as much as 35 percent compared with current standards.

In considering Arizona's future, the water news doesn't have to be gloomy. Israel has had a fast-growing population for more than 75 years in a water-constrained region. Thanks to an array of new technologies and smart policies, people there live water-rich lives no different from those of people in New York or London—and this can be Arizona's future too.

There is water in Arizona—lots of it. What has been missing is the ingenuity to use it for maximum impact. Rather than run from development in Arizona, let's see the state as a laboratory for other places that are, or soon will be, facing the same constraints.

Seth M. Siegel
New York, N.Y.

Although there's much to commend about George Packer's extensive story on Phoenix and what the city's dysfunction can teach us about the future of America, he makes a mistake that so many visitors and transplants make when discussing the city: buying into its founding mythology. Packer opens his article by writing, "No one knows why the Hohokam Indians vanished," before describing how in the 1860s, white settlers

discovered the irrigation canals left behind by the ancestral Sonoran Desert peoples and decided to repurpose them, naming their town as a nod to "a lost civilization in the Valley."

This founding myth has been repeated ad nauseam for well over a century, despite it never having much of a relationship to historical fact. The O'odham peoples of southern Arizona claim to be directly descended from the Hohokam (the name is a corruption of the O'odham word for "ancestor"). One of the earliest American visitors to the region, a U.S. Army lieutenant named Nathaniel Michler, was amazed by the farms of the Akimel O'odham he observed around the Gila River, writing that they were more sophisticated "than anything we had seen since leaving the Atlantic States" and included plots of "cotton, sugar, peas, wheat, and corn." This was in 1855, nearly two decades before Phoenix was founded just 20 miles to the north.

By framing his inquiry with the ahistorical notion of Phoenix as a city born from the ashes of an inexplicably vanished people, Packer allows the reader to think of it as an inherently ephemeral place, doomed to evaporate into the blistering sun. A more edifying approach would have been to engage with the full scope of Arizona's history and contend with the fact that people have found ways to live and thrive in the Sonoran Desert for millennia. Surely those generations upon generations of original Arizonans have lessons to teach us, if only we could bring ourselves to listen.

Kyle Paoletta
Cambridge, Mass.

I admire the detachment and empathy with which George Packer engages the principal characters of "The Valley." At 77, though, I am not as capable of such empathy toward the MAGA tribe, especially those who create their own messes with their self-destructive values and choices. "That was our civilization down in the Valley, the only one we had," Packer concludes. "Better for it to be there than gone." Really? Is the insanity of Phoenix what we have to look forward to? I hope not.

Carl Flowers
Olympia, Wash.

George Packer's thoughtful article asks a common question: Why do people live in Arizona?

I've lived here for almost two years now, and I can confirm his reporting. The state is absurd, expensive, and, in so many ways, completely untenable. As Packer notes, the politics are bad, the water is drying out, and unhoused people often have nowhere to go. When the thermostat registers more than 110 degrees for 31 days in a row, life gets pretty bleak. So why do we live here?

I don't pretend to know why anyone does anything. But occasionally, when I pass through the parts of town where strip malls give way to rusted fences, this humming starts. And once you've been out here long enough, you realize that it never really stops. If you listen carefully, you might hear it in the mountains, reverberating somewhere between dusk and twilight. Yes—this place has a pulse, if you pay attention.

I felt it once at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, that sedimentary cathedral, where, as I gazed upward, sweaty and wearing the wrong shoes, the only thought that occurred to this lifelong agnostic was *I understand why people pray*.

I never want to leave.

Kallen Dimitroff
Phoenix, Ariz.

GEORGE PACKER REPLIES:

Even with 25,000 words, it wasn't possible to say everything that needs to be said about the Valley. It wasn't possible to tell the story of the region since the 15th century, though the disappearance of the Hohokam remains an important historical mystery. (I did find space to mention their connection to the Tohono O'odham Nation and Gila River Indian Community.) Tucson and Pima County deserve a report of their own, but my assigned target lay north of them. I wanted to make room for the testimony of Trump supporters—almost half the population—even if we didn't agree. As for the future of the region, its contradictions, and its allure, these are subjects on which everyone I met had strong personal views.

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

Backstory: "The Anti–Rock Star" (p. 100), by Stephen Metcalf, features an ink-line portrait of Leonard Cohen made by Bono, who also drew the cover of our June 2023 issue. Bono told us about celebrating Cohen's 79th birthday with him at a Los Angeles restaurant. At the dinner, Bono asked Cohen if he had plans for his 80th. "Oh yes—serious plans," Bono recalls Cohen answering. "I've not been smoking for 23 years, and there's a cigarette maker off Jermyn Street in London who has a way with Virginia Gold tobacco. A single handmade cigarette will be my delight." Bono said he couldn't make Cohen's 80th, "but I'm shamefully proud to say I sent him a highly polished silver cigarette box."

Corrections: "The Valley" (July/August) misstated the amount of water held in the Salt River Project's lakes. The lakes hold more than 650 billion gallons of water, not 650 trillion gallons. "The Wild Adventures of Fanny Stevenson" (September) misstated how Stevenson traversed Panama in 1868.

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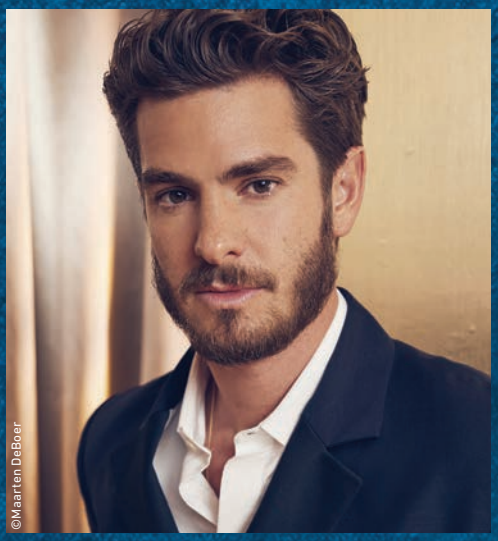

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THE END OF JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE

One of America's greatest achievements could disappear overnight.

BY ANNE APPLEBAUM

In December 1761, King George III dispatched an order to the American colonies. In a recent defiance of convention, some American colonial judges had been appointed for life, the same tenure that British judges enjoyed. Now the king intended to make it clear that all colonial judges were to serve only "at the pleasure of the crown."

A wave of protest engulfed the colonies. In North Carolina, opponents of the decision spurned the order right up until the outbreak of the Revolution. In New Jersey, the governor disobeyed it and was promptly removed from office. In New York, the colonial assembly continued to argue that judges on its colony's supreme court should have lifetime tenure. New York's acting governor, Cadwallader Colden, who was sympathetic to the king, developed a grudge against the assembly that turned

into what one historian called "almost psychopathic rage," ending with him accusing the legislators of seeking to "obtain a most extensive power over the Minds of the rest of Mankind." Four years later, a mob angered by unfair taxes, another symbol of arbitrary rule, hanged Governor Colden in effigy, smashed up his coaches, and threw the bits of wood into a huge bonfire on Bowling Green.

Where did these intense feelings about judicial independence come from? A few colonists knew the work of the British political philosopher John Locke or the French essayist Montesquieu, especially their writings on the theory of separation of powers, which gives different branches of government the ability to check and balance one another, preventing any from accruing too much authority. But most people, probably including the mob that burned Governor Colden's carriages on Bowling Green, wanted independent judges for the same reason they wanted a revolution: instinctive resentment of distant, arbitrary, illegitimate royal power.

That instinct stayed with them. In 1776, the Declaration of Independence accused the king of having "made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries." A decade later, delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, although bitterly divided about many things, stayed unified on the need for independent federal judges.

One South Carolina delegate to the convention thought judges' salaries should be high, to attract "men of the first talents." James Madison worried that if legislators could raise and lower salaries at will, then judges might be hesitant to rule against members of Congress. To solve this problem, he suggested pegging judicial salaries to the price of wheat "or some other thing of permanent value."

Eventually, the Framers of the Constitution arrived at the system we have today. To preserve their independence, federal judges are nominated by the president but must be approved by the Senate. Members of Congress set judicial salaries, which cannot be reduced. Judges have lifetime tenure, so they don't fear that they will be removed for any particular decision. They can be impeached by Congress for misconduct, but this is rare—only 15 federal judges have been impeached since 1789, all but five of them before 1937.

But in practice, they are also constrained by norms and conventions. Since the early 20th century, for instance, Congress has not dissolved federal courts whose judges displease it—which did happen in the more distant past. The idea of court packing has been considered out of bounds ever since Franklin D. Roosevelt tried and failed to reshape the Supreme Court in the 1930s by proposing to appoint up to six additional justices. Since 1957, when Dwight Eisenhower sent federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce *Brown v. Board of Education*, powerful politicians have mostly agreed to honor and enforce the decisions of the Supreme Court, a convention that had been flagrantly defied by several southern governors of that era. (It had been defied earlier, too, by President Andrew Jackson, who, when Chief Justice John Marshall ruled in 1832 that treaties made with the Cherokees must be respected, was alleged to have said, "Let him enforce it"; that quote is apocryphal, but Jackson's sentiment was not.)

Ultimately, judicial independence has a more important protection: the character of the judges themselves. They have to avoid political influence. They have to base their arguments in the law. They have to at least try not to do the bidding of a president or governor. This might be the most important convention of all. Although fears of a politicized U.S. judiciary date back to the fights between the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans in the very early days of the republic—and although they have reemerged at just about every important moment of social or political change—Americans in the modern era have generally assumed that judges appointed to the highest courts will act in good faith. The political philosophers of the early republic, the authors of the Constitution, and the law-school professors of the present day have all mostly assumed that federal judges will strive, in the words of Alexander Hamilton, to "unite the requisite integrity with the requisite knowledge."

At least in recent times, few have imagined that federal judges who are well paid, unafraid of dismissal, and under no financial, legal, or political pressure of any kind would nevertheless seek to alter the law in egregiously partisan ways, not merely in support of conservative or progressive ideas, but in support of particular politicians, or in aid of their own careers. A recent Supreme Court decision on presidential immunity that appears designed to assist former (and possibly future) President Donald Trump; a Trump-appointed district-court judge who went against decades of legal precedent to shield the 45th president from the law—these must be taken seriously as signs that the independence of our courts is cracking, not because judges aren't protected but because some judges are quite happy to serve "at the pleasure of the crown."

BEFORE I GO FURTHER, let me make clear that I am not a legal scholar, a historian of the Constitution, or even a historian of the United States. I became interested in the origins of the independent judiciary because in 2015 I was living in Poland, where my husband is involved in national politics. (He is the foreign minister in the administration of Donald Tusk, a member of the Civic Platform party.) That year, a government with a legitimate, democratically elected parliamentary majority decided, with the cooperation of the equally legitimate president, to bring judicial independence to an end. Unexpectedly, this turned out to be extremely easy.

The political party that carried out this judicial coup is called Law and Justice (many noted the irony at the time), and its assault on the constitution had several elements. Among other things, the ruling party passed legislation in Parliament that forced older high-court judges into immediate retirement, a move that eventually gave Law and Justice the ability to appoint a large number of new judges (not unlike FDR's plan to pack the U.S. Supreme Court). Law and Justice legislators created a new, unconstitutional body that had the power to investigate and

sanction judges whose rulings displeased the government. When the Constitutional Tribunal (the Polish equivalent of the American Supreme Court) overruled one of the government's laws, the prime minister refused to publish the ruling in an official court journal. In other words, she simply ignored it. And that was that: Nobody could force the prime minister or the governing party to obey the ruling.

The result was both confusion about the legitimacy of judges appointed under the new rules and a sharp rise in judicial partisanship. After a few years, it became common for anyone with a court case in Warsaw to assess their likelihood of winning not on legal grounds but according to which kind of judge was presiding. One of the "neo-judges," illegitimately appointed by Law and Justice, might rule differently from one of the judges appointed according to the more neutral system that had been in place for the previous quarter century.

Some were shocked by the change. The strongest objections came from older people who had lived in Poland under Communism. Paulina Kieszkowska, one of the leaders of Free Courts—a group that organized protests, lobbied vigorously, and filed lawsuits in European Union courts against the so-called judicial reform—told me recently that the older protesters remembered "the concept of Stalinist and Communist judges, of verdicts which were totally politically driven, of heroic people being sentenced to death," and they didn't want that era back. Kieszkowska is the granddaughter of a Polish judge who resigned for political reasons. Like the American colonists, she and her colleagues had direct experience of living under rule by law—meaning the law is whatever the ruling party, the dictator, or the monarch says it is—as opposed to rule of law, when the law is enforced by courts loyal to the constitution, not to whoever happens to be in power.

OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTOGRAPH BY SHEALAH CRAIGHEAD; DNY59 / GETTY

But not everyone was attuned to the danger. I went to some of the first, spontaneous marches in favor of an independent judiciary and was struck by how few young people were there. The threat of a politicized judiciary didn't, at first, seem to affect elections, or to move opinion polls very much either. Although the legal campaign led by groups such as Free Courts did have some success—EU courts found that Poland was in violation of European law—the truth is that the decline of the judiciary remained a distant, theoretical problem to the majority of Poles. Separation of powers was an abstraction that they just didn't worry about.

Eventually, the politicized courts produced legal changes that affected people in real ways. In October 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal, which by then had been packed with highly partisan judges who had close ties to Law and Justice, narrowed Poland's already strict abortion laws to a near-total ban. Following that ruling, doctors began refusing to give women abortions, even when their lives were in danger. Several women died.

Only then did younger people, especially younger women, react. They marched, they organized—and eventually they voted, in atypically high numbers, to oust the Law and Justice government. They were almost too late. The judicial system remains a tangled mess. Hundreds of neo-judges

remain in place, their loyalties unclear, maybe even to themselves. Are they meant just to interpret the law, neutrally? Or are they there to express the will of the political party that appointed them? The Polish courts will be tainted by illegitimacy and treated with suspicion for years to come.

IN THE UNITED STATES, even a dedicated, malevolent president and a venomous Congress would find it difficult to replicate the Polish experience. Life tenure for judges is written into the Constitution. No president could easily replace dozens of judges all at once, or establish an extraconstitutional body to exert control over them. Even making bipartisan compromises is no simple matter: President Joe Biden has proposed Supreme Court reforms, including possible term limits for judges, that are intended to be acceptable to everyone. But because this could require a constitutional amendment, or at least serious support from the Republican Party, the gesture will probably turn out to be symbolic.

But one element of the Polish experience might be relevant: the speed with which norms and conventions can shift, and the depth of the disorientation that can follow. Consider what we have seen or learned in just the past few months and years. Two Supreme Court justices were accepting large, undisclosed gifts from people who might have had an interest in their jurisprudence; the wife of one of those justices played a role in seeking to overturn the results of the 2020 election; more than one justice misled Congress during confirmation hearings about their intentions to overturn *Roe v. Wade*; money and lobbyists have played an enormous role in the transformation of the Court; the Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell broke convention to block one nomination and then enable another; and now that Republican-dominated Court has extended immunity to a Republican ex-president who has broken the law—all of this has had a cumulative and damaging effect. The Supreme Court and all other federal courts now appear to both halves of the polarized political spectrum to be weaker, more political, easier to manipulate, less bound to the Constitution. A Gallup poll conducted in July showed that a yawning gap has emerged between the 15 percent of Democrats who still approve of the Court and the 66 percent of Republicans who do. Overall, respect for the courts is at historic lows.

The peculiar case of Aileen Cannon might be a harbinger. The minimally qualified (per the American Bar Association) Judge Cannon, of the Southern District of Florida, has made a series of unprecedented and legally questionable decisions that seemed deliberately designed to help Trump, the president who'd appointed her, evade legal consequences for criminal acts. In mid-July, she dismissed Special Prosecutor Jack Smith's case against Trump for sequestering sensitive national-security documents at Mar-a-Lago and lying about it to the FBI—a violation of the Espionage Act. Mainstream legal scholars consider Cannon's ruling to rest on highly dubious grounds: that Smith should never have been appointed by Attorney General Merrick Garland in the first place, and that Smith was exercising authority he "did not lawfully possess."

After this decision, Joëlle Anne Moreno, a legal scholar at Florida International University, told *The New York Times* that Cannon had "single-handedly upended three decades of established law historically used fairly and in a bipartisan manner." Laurence Tribe, one of America's preeminent constitutional scholars, wrote that Cannon's decision amounted to "dropping a sledgehammer on the rule of law." Cannon's previous rulings had already earned her a harsh and unusual rebuke from the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals, and two of her more experienced colleagues—including the chief judge, a Republican appointee—on the Southern District bench had suggested that she hand off the Trump case.

> THE INDEPENDENCE OF OUR COURTS IS CRACKING BECAUSE SOME JUDGES ARE QUITE HAPPY TO SERVE "AT THE PLEASURE OF THE CROWN."

Now imagine a second Trump presidency, during which dozens more Aileen Cannons are appointed to the courts—dozens more minimally qualified people who believe their role is to defend the president or avenge his enemies, not to defend the rule of law. Then imagine another president, a Democrat, elected in 2028, who feels no obligation to adhere to the decisions made by these highly partisan courts. Or imagine a contested 2028 election in which Vice President J. D. Vance backs insurrectionists attempting to prevent the lawful transfer of power, as he has said he would have done in 2020—when courts rejected dozens of claims from Trump's legal advisers who sought to overturn the result. What if, in 2028 and 2029, courts were to rule in the opposite direction, with the intention of helping install an unelected president?

These are very small leaps of the imagination—in fact, they are hardly leaps at all. We are already living in a country very different from the one we inhabited a decade ago: An insurrectionist ex-president with multiple indictments now leads the Republican ticket, and much of the American public seems indifferent to the threat. The colonists of the revolutionary era had been ruled by a king and were determined not to be ever again, and some Poles remembered Communist justice and so fought to prevent its return. Americans today have no experience living with a federal judiciary whose rulings are based on allegiance to a particular politician or political party. Perhaps this has lulled us into a comforting it-can't-happen-here quiescence. But as Tribe has said, we face the real possibility of "an imperial judiciary walking arm in arm with an imperial executive": a new political order, one in which the laws and norms that have insulated America from dictatorship slowly degrade. *A*

Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

The Bel Canto: what all the noise is about

On its launch day, the C1 Bel Canto sold out immediately. A second version, released days later, went in under three hours. (Or just three chimes.) Never before has a watchmaker launched a 'Sonnerie au Passage' to such a clamour. Never before has a 60-minute chiming mechanism (a 60-part adaptation of an already-modified movement) resembled a songbird. Cometh the hour, cometh the hammer (the bird's tail) striking the titanium case – resulting in a crystal-clear, 'D' note. Since launching in November 2022, it's somewhat appropriately attracted a number of industry gongs. And a cacophany of ringing endorsements, like Hodinkee's "Shockingly affordable". Can we look forward to hearing from you?

Do your research

Christopher Ward

christopherward.com

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SCAN ME

MAPPING MISSISSIPPI'S VIOLENT PAST

I wanted to understand the forces that shaped my state's dark history. I ended up in Spain, holding an object I'd never known existed.

BY WRIGHT THOMPSON

The city of Seville awoke early, the old streets alive with singing birds and distant bells. The cobblestone alleys smelled faintly of hidden gardens. I'd flown here for a chance to hold a 480-year-old map in my hand. The archive's curators had given me no guarantees but said that I could come, in person, to make the request. For a century after Christopher Columbus, this town was the white-hot center of global exploration, teeming with sailors who'd been to the New World and returned to tell the tale. Now it was mellow and quaint.

I'd come researching my new book, *The Barn*, a history of the 36 square miles of dirt around the place where Emmett Till was tortured and killed in 1955. The barn, which I first wrote about for this magazine, sits in the southwestern quarter of Section 2, Township 22 North, Range 4 West, measured from the Choctaw Meridian. The township has been home to the civil-rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer; to the family of the Confederate general and early Ku Klux Klan leader Nathan Bedford Forrest; to farmland owned by James R. Binford, an original legal architect of Jim Crow. It's borne witness to the creation of the blues at Dockery Plantation; to the erasure of a Native American community; and, of course, to the death of Till. With so much violent history in such proximity, this project almost inevitably became a mapping. That led me on a hunt for the very first map of this land, which was likely drawn in 1544 by a Spanish cartographer named Alonso de Santa Cruz. (There had been earlier maps of the North American shoreline, but none of the interior until this one.)

The map lives in the Archive of the Indies, where records of every ounce of conquistador gold and every atrocity committed in the quest for it are carefully preserved. The Spanish invented the modern world and ruled without equal until the English defeated the armada and invented the factory. The archive sits in a plaza by the crenellated castle walls and a gate to the old palace. Moss grows on the stones. I stood outside the archive and waited for the building to open. Other researchers waited too.

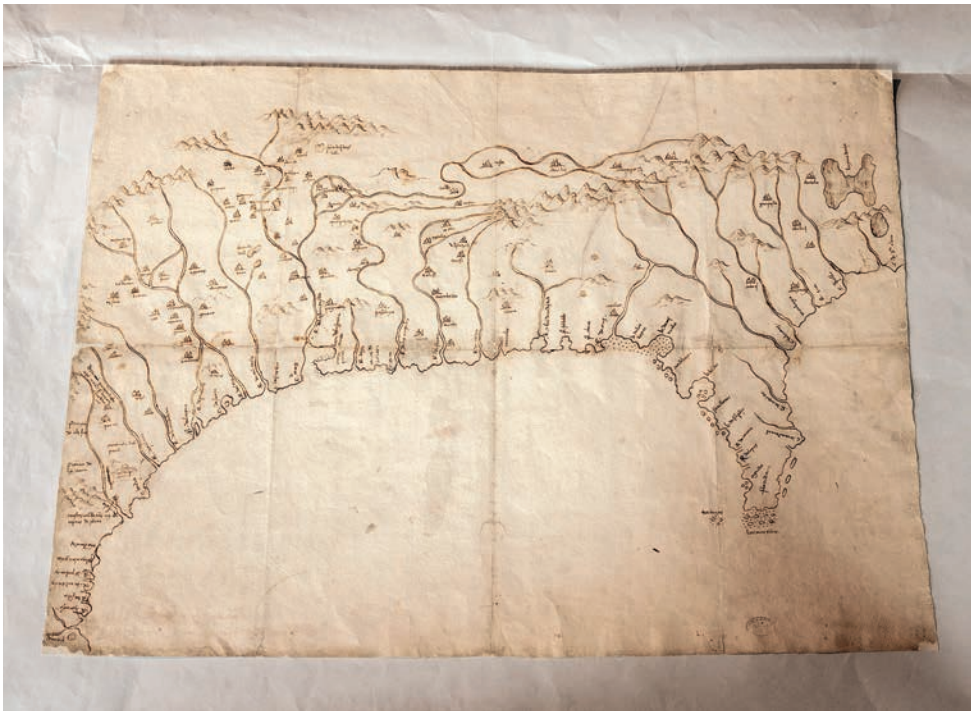
The 9 o'clock bells finally rang all over the city, and a man let me inside.

"Second floor," he said.

I LIVE a bifurcated life. On the one hand, I am a journalist, and I write for what I hope is a sophisticated global audience. On the other hand, I am from a Mississippi Delta farming family, with land in our possession for more than a century. As a son of Mississippi, particularly a son of old, land-owning Mississippi, I have an obligation to understand what it means to inherit this dirt, and to pass it on to my children. Our farm is 23 miles from the barn where Till was murdered, for instance, and I never heard his name until I left the state for college.

Many, many volumes have been written about the Delta,

and I think I've read them all. None really captured for me what it felt like to claim it as home, to have a firm grasp on the economics of the place, to understand the alluvial insidiousness that drove our history. Often the very act of setting a story in Mississippi creates a portrait of a puppet but accidentally erases the strings. Mississippi didn't make itself; it was shaped by far-flung investors and speculators, by a river of global capital flowing through it. Malcolm X famously said that everything south of Canada is Mississippi. I liked to ask myself how close was too close to live to the barn? Fifty feet? A mile? A thousand miles? Seeing Mississippi requires seeing all of its history all at once, more of a collage than a chronology.



And that required mapping a buried world. Finding out who owned the land, then and now, understanding how capital moved in and out of my home, following the profit. As I collected dozens of maps of the Delta, I imagined uncovering the very first one, the one whose blank spaces were an animating call to commerce and arms—to all the people and forces unleashed on a place that would one day be called Mississippi.

The archive staff showed me to a reading station, No. 18, at a wooden table in a high-ceilinged room. I requested the document, and waited.

I COULD HEAR horse hooves clip and clop on the cobblestones outside, pulling tourists in old-fashioned carriages. I looked up to see a man standing over me, gently holding a big white paper envelope. The map. With slow, exaggerated movements, he opened the folds. There it was, two steno pads wide and a steno and a half tall. He pointed to little drawings of houses in what is now the Mississippi Delta.

"*Indios*," he said.

I held it in my hand. The ink on Santa Cruz's map is now the color of copper. The white space covering most of the bottom third of the page is the Gulf of Mexico; Florida is labeled and recognizable on the far right. Santa Cruz drew little circles just south of what is now Miami. The Florida Keys. He drew three small circles just to the west and called them the Tortugas. Moving up the west

Top: *Alonso de Santa Cruz's map*
Bottom: *The Archive of the Indies in Seville, Spain*

coast of Florida, he marked a large bay with islands, then two rivers, then another bay. As the coastline turned west and flattened into the panhandle, he drew a big, cloud-shaped body of water fed by a river. That's Mobile Bay, Alabama. He drew many rivers that he'd apparently heard about but that didn't exist. The sixth river, moving east to west starting from the southern tip of Florida, was named Flores, and the seventh was named Los Angeles. The ninth river, however, did exist. This was the Río del Espíritu Santo—the river, nearly every scholar agrees, that local tribes called the Mississippi.

Santa Cruz's map shows an oval expanse, covering the whole Mississippi Delta and stretching north to include the future city of Memphis—the land where the barn would one day exist. Santa Cruz marked some scattered Native settlements, but mostly he left empty space. The whole future sat there, unwritten yet ordained, on the page. The map signaled the birth of the Age of Exploration, of extraction, of colonies pumping raw materials into swelling empires. It foreshadowed the violence that protected the profit margins, even if the people getting really rich never had to raise a finger against another man. Enslavement, sharecropping, the rise of cotton, and the physical and economic coercion that fueled the whole global system—this map made that future possible. The starting gun for all the ships headed across the ocean to remake a world.

A security guard walked over to look at the old map.

"Florida," he said with a point and a smile.

The map had been repaired carefully along its central fold. There's a water stain in the gulf and an ink stain in southern Louisiana. It's beautiful with its delicate copper lines.

I just sat for a long time and stared. Everything that would happen in or near that oval was set in motion when it appeared empty on a map: the lynching of Emmett Till, the murder of three civil-rights workers in 1964, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. The dominant urge of the Industrial Revolution was to fill every space on every map with people who could extract resources and multiply wealth.

I kept turning it over in my hands, the heavy paper, which made faint but perceptible rustles when it moved. The emotion the map provoked surprised me.

Finally, I nodded at the clerk.

"Finished?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

A woman came over carrying a heavy black-and-white wooden box with a black plastic handle. She folded the map back in the white paper and slid it into the box, tying the edges tight with red ribbon. It went back on a cart, which returned it to the bowels of the archives.

I WALKED DOWN the stairs and went outside. A horse cantered over the stones, pulling a carriage with bright-yellow rims. The old part of Seville exists outside time. *Game of Thrones* filmed here in Season 5. They didn't need to change a thing. Street musicians played, and their music filled the alleys. The absence of ruling nobles contemplating the next frontier—replaced now by stroller-pushing tourists—is a reminder that what rose here also fell.

In 1503, the Spanish government created La Casa de la Contratación, which was responsible for maintaining the Padrón Real—a secret, constantly updated map of the known world. As early as 1575, rumors started reaching the royal court about the terrible state of the map. Finally, in 1593, an audit prepared for the king revealed that the Padrón had not been updated since 1567. Private mapmakers still created their own charts, but because the government required all pilots to carry and use authorized copies of the faulty Padrón, some pilots began keeping two charts. They used the real ones to sail and the phony ones to tick boxes for a swollen government office.

THE WHOLE FUTURE SAT THERE, UNWRITTEN YET ORDAINED, ON THE PAGE.

In 1599, the government finally replaced the Padrón with six different charts of the various routes sailors might take. Seven years later, in 1606, Andrés García de Céspedes published a new navigational guide. Sailors had previously been instructed to report back on the cultures of the people they met, but the crown was no longer interested in anthropology. Only raw data mattered. The new system wanted information, just the facts, not a poet's mix of mathematics and literature. An era ended in Seville. The only thing left of that world is the buildings. The sailor-quarter alleys glow now with neon. The older bars have faded bullfighting posters above the doors. Working people eat thin slices of grilled meat with red wine or cold beer, with olives or radishes on the side. There are often ceramic squares depicting Don Quixote hanging near the kitchen.

Miguel de Cervantes, a contemporary of Santa Cruz's, published the book in two parts, a decade apart, and in the second installment, characters have read the first one. The first volume was published in 1605, just as the Padrón Real ceased to exist and the Spanish empire teetered. The second arrived in 1615, the year before Cervantes died. His novel captured the fever and foolishness of the Sevillian Century. It evoked the signature residue of an epoch change. New forces had been unleashed by all these maps, which marshaled a violent remaking of a new world as much as a rational depiction of an old one.

Three years after Cervantes died, as war burned throughout Europe, a ship of enslaved people arrived in the New World, less than 200 years after it had been discovered by the Spanish and carefully drawn by Santa Cruz. The boat landed in Virginia, 833 miles northeast of the barn. *A*

Wright Thompson is a contributing writer at The Atlantic *and the author of* The Barn: The Secret History of a Murder in Mississippi.

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EXPANDING FOOD ACCESS *in* AMERICA

If you live in a food desert—an area with limited access to affordable, nutritious food—it may be difficult to make healthy meal choices.

Yet that's the daily experience of millions of people, many of them in low- and fixed-income neighborhoods both big and small, urban and rural.

Short on money, time, and other options, people might grab what they can find, even though it may not be the best choice for their overall well-being. For many, even incrementally improving access to fruits, vegetables, and other healthy ingredients—like dairy, eggs, lean proteins, and grains—can make a big impact.

Over the past several years, Dollar General has invested in underserved areas by adding produce to many of its existing stores and introducing new formats like DG Market. The retailer now has more individual points of produce distribution than any other mass retailer or grocer in the United States.

"I appreciate the fact that Dollar General has come into our community and increased the ability for our folks to remain here—serviced with good food and good products."

— Mayor Nikki Hibdon, Talihina, Oklahoma

Now, in places that were once food deserts—like Jacobsville, a working-class neighborhood in Evansville, Indiana, and Talihina, a close-knit rural town in Oklahoma—things have changed. Residents can now access healthier foods at their local Dollar General.

← Hear from the residents and leaders who are seeing the positive change that increased food access is bringing to their communities.

SCAN TO READ THE WHOLE STORY, OR VISIT THEATLANTIC.COM/FOODACCESS

PORTRAIT BY DENISE NESTOR

TR MP
WHERE WE GO ONE WE GO ALL
JUSTICE FOR
J6

THE INSURRECTIONISTS NEXT DOOR

Ashli Babbitt's mother and the wife of a notorious January 6 rioter are at the center of a new mythology on the right. They are also my neighbors.

BY HANNA ROSIN

ILLUSTRATION BY FROMM STUDIO

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

This story starts with, of all things, a dog walk. My partner, Lauren, and I were doing our usual loop—past the playground, onto Third Street—when we saw the car again. A black Chevy Equinox with Texas plates, a luggage rack, and, on the back windshield, an exuberant profusion of slogans: FREE OUR PATRIOTS; THE THREE PERCENTERS, ORIGINAL; and J4J6, among others. We'd seen the SUV parked in the same spot a couple of times over the summer and Googled the slogans (J4J6 = "Justice for January 6ers"), but assumed, based on nothing, that it must belong to someone's parents who had come to help them move in for the school year and would soon go back home.

Our neighborhood in Northeast Washington, D.C., is mixed-race, mixed-income, and, like the rest of the city, about 90 percent Democratic. On a map someone made on TikTok that overlaid Washington neighborhoods with New York ones, Northeast D.C. equated to Brooklyn. Surely the Chevy wouldn't even stay long enough to get dirty. But now here we were in early November and the car was still there, silently taunting us on our dog walk.

"There's that fucking militia-mobile again," Lauren said—loudly, because she is loud. Strong language, but perhaps justified: The Three Percenters—according to the National Institute of Justice, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Anti-Defamation League—are one of the largest (though loosely organized) anti-government militias, and adherents regularly engage in paramilitary training to combat perceived government "tyranny."

But what Lauren had failed to notice was the puff of smoke curling out of the driver's-side window into the darkening sky. Someone was in the car.

"Justice for January 6!" shouted a voice from inside. The voice, hoarse from smoking, sounded joyous and self-satisfied.

"Well, you're in the wrong neighborhood for that, honey," Lauren said, equally self-satisfied.

"We live here now," Smoker answered. "So SUCK IT, BITCH."

And that's what launched us into all this. Not the "bitch" part; we probably deserved that for being such unfriendly neighbors. No, it was the "We live here now." Who was "we"? Why were they living "here," in Northeast D.C.? Why "now"?

The big event Smoker was shouting about—the violent assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021—was by then almost three years in the past. The House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol had made its case to the American public and adjourned. The thousand-plus January 6 suspects were making their way through the federal court system. The marauders had done their damage, and justice was well under way. So what exactly did our new neighbors want? Our walk home was tense; unwelcome memories returned.

If you live in Washington, January 6 was not just some abstract chaos unfolding distantly in the nation's capital. That afternoon I was at the optometrist, getting new glasses for my youngest child. The optometrist, normally a goofy Norman Rockwell type, came out of his office gray-faced, his equipment still strapped to his head. "There's an attack on our city," he said. "Everyone go home." People were texting about guns and pipe bombs and what streets might not be safe to walk on, and we had no idea what would happen next. I rushed home, where I found my other two kids and some of their friends watching TV. They were very aware that what was playing out on the screen was happening 15 minutes from the house.

For the next few weeks, we lived under curfew. Streets were closed. Armed troops surrounded the Capitol. I remember biking around downtown D.C. and seeing stores boarded up, National Guardsmen everywhere, very few regular people on the streets, and thinking, *Where am I?* Lauren bought a baseball bat for protection. (It still sits by the front door, gathering dust.) So, no, we did not welcome supporters of January 6 insurrectionists creeping back to the scene of the crime.

After our exchange with Smoker last November, Lauren and I would pass the Chevy Equinox and wish it would just disappear. Instead, what happened was this: A couple of months and many halting interactions later, Lauren was invited to come to the house where Smoker and her compatriots live. We ended up spending the next year wandering through their world, an alternate universe blooming with new American heroes and myths, the main one being that January 6 was not a fire to be extinguished but embers with which to ignite something glorious. Our neighbors, it turned out, are luminaries in that world, hallowed martyrs whose mere existence inspires men to say they will fight and even die for their country—by which they mean they will fight and die for the rightful restoration of Donald Trump to office. Their names are invoked reverentially, albeit often strategically (which is not to say cynically), by self-described patriots, MAGA superstars, and Trump himself.

By late summer of this year, we looked during our dog walks for our neighbors on their screened-in porch and waved hello as we passed by. Sometimes their kittens (Donald and Barron) peeked through the screen. We knew that the kittens were a source of joy for the house's residents, but also that they made one of the women panic because she couldn't stop worrying that a heavy door in the house would swing hard and kill them. Doors bring her nightmares.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY COLIN HUNTER

OPENING PAGE: MICHAEL A. MCCOY / GETTY; STEPHANIE KEITH / GETTY

Sometimes I wonder why Lauren and I chose to get closer to a group of people aiding and abetting the unraveling of our country. Journalistic curiosity? That was definitely a primary motivation. We are both podcasters, and we were thinking that we should start recording this experience. Anxiety about the future? When we discovered who they were, Trump was just starting to look like he had a serious chance of getting reelected president. (Our podcast series, *We Live Here Now*, starts rolling out on September 18.)

But there was another reason, one that crystallized for me only when I witnessed the following scene: I happened to be present when another D.C. resident I know, who was alarmed that champions of the J6ers had moved into the neighborhood and had tweeted some trollish things at them, ran into one of them in person. I expected some human instinct to kick in—maybe a moment of sheepish eye contact, or a neighborly nod. It didn't. The troll said the exact same things to her face that she'd said on Twitter. They were very cruel things about her child—things no one should say to anybody, ever.

Outside the context of social media, the exchange seemed jarring and unnatural, like suddenly seeing your dog talk. And I thought to myself, *Not that*. We can't allow ourselves to morph into our nastiest online selves, in person, with our neighbors. Of course, the path Lauren and I ended up stumbling down—giving space and attention to some potentially destructive people—had its own perils. But not that.

THE HOUSE

I should probably say who these neighbors are, or at least tell you some salient facts we learned about them before we really knew them. They are three middle-aged white women who did not know one another before January 6, 2021, and who are rooming together in a white brick townhouse two blocks away from us. Their rent is paid by donors who support their cause. Smoker's name is Nicole Reffitt. Her husband, Guy Reffitt, was the first person to be tried for crimes associated with January 6. He had come to the Capitol with a handgun in his pocket and an AR-15 stashed in his hotel room. He'd told his fellow Three Percenters that he intended to drag Nancy Pelosi out of the building by her ankles. His 18-year-old son, Jackson, turned him in to the FBI. At his dad's trial, Jackson testified: "He said, 'If you turn me in, you're a traitor. And traitors get shot.'" (Around us, Nicole sometimes refers to Guy as "such a lovebug.")

The second house member was Tamara Perryman, whose boyfriend, Brian Jackson, pleaded guilty to assaulting law-enforcement officers with a flagpole. She goes by Tami, but her online trolls call her Nazi Barbie on account of Jackson's many swastika tattoos. (He got them during a previous stint in prison, when he joined the White Knights prison gang. His attorneys say that he has since denounced his membership in the group but cannot afford to remove his tattoos.)

The anchor of the house, of this whole universe, is Micki Witthoeft, known in the J4J6 movement as Mama Micki. She is the mother of Ashli Babbitt, who was shot and killed by U.S. Capitol Police on January 6. Following instructions that she says Ashli gave to her in a dream, Micki has become a mother figure to hundreds of January 6ers who have been making their way through the D.C. courts and jail.

> Our neighbors, it turned out, are hallowed J6 martyrs whose mere existence inspires men to say they will fight and even die for the rightful restoration of Donald Trump to office.

By the way, their house has a name, which Lauren discovered in *HuffPost*. She read Micki's quote out loud to me: "We do have a team at the 'Eagle's Nest,' which some would say was Hitler's hideout." Of course, the reason some would say that is because it *was* the name of Hitler's hideout, or one of them. "But we're American citizens," Micki said, "and we won that war, and we're taking back the name. So this is absolutely not an ode to Hitler."

Micki rarely talks in any detail about the tragedy that landed her at the Eagle's Nest. But she doesn't need to, because those details are very publicly accessible. A handful of videos, available online, capture the moment from different angles. Ashli, who is small—5 foot 2—and the only woman in the scene, is at the front of a column of rioters. She strides down the hallway like she knows where she's going. The rioters suddenly stop when they encounter a set of doors, with glass window panels, guarded by police. Through the window panels, you can make out in the near distance people walking across the hall. These are members of Congress, who, minutes earlier, were holding the vote to certify what the rioters consider a stolen election. They are now urgently being evacuated. Somehow the growing mob has ended up just outside the Speaker's Lobby doors, with a direct sight line to these mincing traitors who are the target of their ire. Realizing this, their urgency grows.

The policemen guarding the door to the corridor, overwhelmed by the sheer number of rioters, abandon their post, leaving only indifferent wood and glass between lawmakers and the horde. But then in one video, a camera pans to the left and you can very clearly see two hands holding a gun on the other side of the door. "He has a gun, he has a gun!" someone yells. We'll never know whether Ashli heard this; she is fused with the melee that's yelling things like "It's our fucking house! We're allowed to be in here! You're wrong!" and "Break it down!" and "Fuck the blue!" A rioter in a conspicuous fur-lined hat starts smashing a window panel. Then

Micki Witthoeft, the mother of Ashli Babbitt and a leader—"Mama Micki"—of the "Justice for J6ers" movement, listens to a prisoner calling from the D.C. jail during the daily vigil held outside it.

it happens. Ashli climbs through the window panel and ricochets right back down onto the ground, onto her back, bleeding from her mouth. Her hands are like claws grabbing at nothing and her eyes are blank. "She's dead. She's dead," one rioter says. "I saw the light go out in her eyes." There's a sudden stillness, followed by a just-as-sudden light show of cellphones. Someone standing above her body introduces himself as being from Infowars, the far-right conspiracy-mongering site owned by Alex Jones, and offers to buy footage from someone else who was filming closer to Ashli.

Bits of all this footage will circulate, first among the rioters and then among the right-wing press. No headline ever explicitly reads "A Martyr Is Born," but one might as well have, because that's what was happening, starting in the hours after January 6. Early on, rumors spread that Ashli was only 25, then 21, then 16 when she was shot, pulling her further backwards into innocence. In fact, she was 35. Still, a young white woman in the prime of her life—a 14-year U.S.-military veteran, no less—shot dead by, as it turned out, a Black officer of the state. Pro-Trump message boards call her a "freedom fighter" and "the first victim of the second Civil War." "Your blood will not be in vain," one person wrote. "We will avenge you."

Over the years, the myth will grow: She was polite, she was trying to help people, she was trying to stop the fur-hatted guy next to her from breaking the window. There will be books and posters and rap songs and T-shirts: ASHLI BABBITT, AMERICAN PATRIOT. ASHLI BABBITT, MURDERED BY CAPITOL POLICE.

The officer who shot her, Lieutenant Michael Byrd, has described how, once his name was leaked to the right-wing press, he and his family had to move into safe housing on a military base because of the racist messages and death threats. The Capitol Police and the Department of Justice investigated him and cleared him of any wrongdoing.

To Micki, however, he will only ever be the man who murdered her daughter, who was left abandoned on the ground "to bleed out like a fucking animal," or sometimes "bleeding out like a dying dog." This isn't true: Police started rendering assistance within seconds. One of the rioters pulled out a first-aid kit. Tactical officers yelled desperately for the rioters to clear a path so they could get Ashli to an ambulance. All of that is clearly captured on the videos. But Micki refers frequently to that image of her daughter lying on her back, bleeding out; it better correlates with Micki's primary emotion since that day, which is uncontrolled rage.

The first news story that Lauren and I saw about Micki Witthoeft, new resident of D.C., ran in *The Washington Post* on January 7, 2023, months before we discovered that she was our neighbor: "Ashli Babbitt's Mother Arrested on Capitol Riot Anniversary." The photo showed a woman with shoulder-length gray hair and a beanie with an American-flag patch yelling as a member of the Capitol Police restrained her. He'd told her to get on the sidewalk, but she stayed in the street, blocking traffic. Cops handcuffed Micki, and had started frisking her when someone filming the scene shouted: "Micki, anything you want to say?"

"Uh, yeah," she answered. "Capitol Police suck ass."

THE CORNER

Lauren can be awkward, and also short-fused when tested. I've seen her get into squabbles at coffee shops, red lights, hotel lobbies. So when she told me, one night just before Christmas 2023, a few weeks after our first interaction with Smoker—whom we did not yet know was Nicole Reffitt—that she wanted to go down to the D.C. jail to check out the nightly vigil that Micki holds there, I was a little nervous. But she's a professional journalist, and she scripted her opening lines to Micki on her Notes app: "Hi. I'm Lauren and I make audio documentaries and I heard about your vigil and …" I stayed behind, and waited. A couple of hours later, Lauren came back and gave me her report.

The vigil attendees, along with a cadre of true believers across the country, believe that the people in the jail are "political prisoners." Every night at 7 o'clock, these "true patriots" hold a vigil for all of the January 6 defendants who are being detained there, awaiting either trial or sentencing. And every night, they get a few January 6 inmates on speakerphone, and then they join together in singing the national anthem and chanting "Ashli Babbitt, Ashli Babbitt" in a ceaseless drone. The evening usually ends with people singing along to a recording of "God Bless the U.S.A.," by the conservative, Trump-supporting country singer Lee Greenwood.

I've since attended a few vigils—and watched a lot more of them, because every night, three or four loyalists stream them in full—so I can tell you what they are like. For starters, not much to look at. About a dozen people gather on a corner—they've named it "Freedom Corner"—wedged between an access road behind the jail and Congressional Cemetery, where people who live on Capitol Hill walk their dogs. A table with speakers is set up in front of an array of American flags. Leaning against the table are some crosses set up by the handful of Chinese American evangelicals who show up every night, as well as drawings of Ashli and others who died that day, including rioters who died of natural causes or possibly were trampled by the mob, and a Capitol Police officer who was assaulted by insurrectionists. (The drawings are on posters that say, inaccurately, MURDERED BY CAPITOL POLICE.) Another table has snacks and coffee. Some camp chairs are randomly strewn about. Micki paces back and forth, smoking, silently overseeing the event. It's been the same every night since August 1, 2022. And I do mean every night, rain or 100-degree heat. I imagine some cemetery dog walkers must have looked over and wondered, *What is this little fringe gathering?* But these days, fringe has a way of rerouting history.

The J6ers in the D.C. jail are held together in a single segregated unit. The population of the D.C. jail is about 90 percent Black—and judges were importing a bunch of guys whose collective reputation was "white supremacist." But the consequences of putting them together were the same as they are when any group of extremists are housed together: They got more extreme. The groups of men who went through the jail suffered together, protected one another, and, in their ample free time, created a mythology—effectively a set of alternative facts—about who they were. They came to call their unit the "Patriot Pod." Their surroundings told them one story: *You are temporarily banished from decent society on account of crimes you have committed.* But as they hung out together, they gradually built a different story about themselves: *We* are *the decent society. It was the outside that was wrong.* This view soon caught on more broadly, and right-wing media started to refer to the jail as the "D.C. Gulag."

Every night, the men of the Patriot Pod call one of the Eagle's Nest women's cellphones, and every night, they broadcast those calls, featuring a mixture of comments from inmates and vigil attendees. Here is a sample from the first night Lauren was there, which, remember, was nearly three years after January 6.

> They want to quiet our voice and we won't let them … I never thought I'd see the day when people go to jail for thought crimes … Hypocrites … I saw things that were grossly exaggerated … The way I see it, I never really committed a crime … When exposing a crime is treated as committing a crime, you are being ruled by criminals … I was a strong-spoken electrician from New Jersey that was a patriot, and this is who you turned me into … When you have a government that has taken everything from you, what else do you have to lose? … Disgusted. I'm disgusted … If we don't win in the next year—that's it, that's it! Who gives a shit? … [Automated recording interrupts: *You have one minute remaining.*]

To get an idea of these calls' impact, think about the distance, in myth miles, traveled by the "Star-Spangled Banner" as sung by what's now known as the J6 Prison Choir. If you've been paying close attention to the election, you've probably heard it. Donald Trump walks onstage at rallies to a version of the song mixed with his own voice reciting

COLIN HUNTER; TWITTER

Scenes from Freedom Corner, outside the D.C. jail, where relatives and supporters of prisoners detained for crimes committed on January 6, 2021, have held a vigil every evening for more than two years

the Pledge of Allegiance. The singing originated with the first batch of detainees brought to the Patriot Pod, in early 2021. D.C. was under COVID lockdown, and the detainees spent a lot of time in isolation, so this was their way of communicating. Every night just before 9 o'clock, someone would yell out the countdown to the singing—"Three minutes!"—which would echo down the hallway. They would sing together solemnly until they reached "and our flag was still there," intoning "still there" with extra vigor. I asked Scott Fairlamb, who pleaded guilty to assaulting a police officer and was held at the jail in 2021, why those words got such emphasis. "Because we were still there," he said. It was a reminder, he continued, "that we stood up for what we believe in, that we were still patriots no matter who wanted to deem us as less than that. It was something that really kept up my morale, and my love of country intact." When he recalled the singing, his voice broke, even though we were talking a year after he'd been released from prison.

News of the singing in the Patriot Pod is what first brought Micki to Freedom Corner, in the summer of 2022. Nicole's husband, Guy, was in the jail at the time, and told her about it. So on the day of Guy's sentencing, Nicole and Micki just showed up at 9 p.m. outside the jail and sang along with the detainees. That first night, they got into a scuffle with some of the prison guards but eventually achieved a rapprochement, and then figured out how to broadcast the song to the world. Soon, the choir had a nightly national audience.

Then comes March 25, 2023: Trump's kickoff campaign rally for the 2024 election, held in Waco, Texas, a site that for the far right is a reminder that the government is willing to murder its own citizens. As Trump stands with his hand on his heart, the J6 Prison Choir mix gets broadcast through the speakers, and scenes of the assault at the Capitol play on giant screens. The anthem has a scratchy, lo-fi quality, but that only amplifies its power. If you haven't watched the Waco video, you should. Your mind might resist, but your body will understand why people succumb to demagogues. Trump says:

> In 2016, I declared, "I am your voice." And now I say to you again tonight, "I am your warrior. I am your justice" … For those who have been wronged and betrayed, of which there are many people out there that have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution. We will take care of it. We will take care of it.

TO SAY THAT Micki Witthoeft orchestrated any of this would be absurd. Before her daughter died, Micki was a housewife from San Diego whose version of civic engagement was, as she says, "I vote. I pick up my trash. Yay me." But by showing up in front of the D.C. jail night after night, she became imprinted on the national consciousness: Mama Micki holding in her arms her martyred daughter and sons. In January 2023, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene gave Micki a shout-out at a meeting of the House Oversight Committee, saying that Micki's daughter had been "murdered" and "there's never been a trial." Representative Barry Loudermilk praised Micki's work on behalf of J6ers. Representative Matt Gaetz showed up at the vigil one night, apologizing to those suffering inside. And in September 2022, Trump called in to the vigil: "It was so horrible, what happened to her. That that man shot Ashli is a disgrace … What they're doing here, it's a disgrace."

"*They*": The "deep state" had shot Ashli Babbitt and covered up what really happened. The same "they" responsible for the death of

the Branch Davidians in Waco were the "they" who left Ashli, who could have been any one of us, bleeding out like a fucking animal.

That night in December 2023 when Lauren went to the vigil for the first time, she introduced herself to Micki. She noted that Mama Micki had a quiet but commanding presence—as though she was in charge of the space, almost like, as Lauren put it, "a cult leader who doesn't need to say a lot." But Lauren and I wondered what Micki got out of being around people who had never met Ashli but chanted her name, over and over, night after night. Maybe that was the point. For a grieving mother, a nightly vigil was a place to suspend herself in Ashli time, with no past or future. Micki had a husband she'd been married to for 35 years, plus four sons and two grandchildren, one of whom she barely knew, because most of his life she's been 3,000 miles away, on Freedom Corner. "It's been suggested to me that maybe therapy would help so I could let some of this anger go," she once told Lauren. "I'm not ready to. It's my anger, and I'm gonna hold on to it."

One more detail about the vigil: It was cold that December night, so Micki offered Lauren coffee and blueberry pie. Lauren doesn't drink coffee and she hates blueberry pie. Still, the pie was another kind of beginning.

THE BOAT

I had a dream about Ashli. I feel like she spoke to me in the dream. And she was like, "I'm a goner." She had been arrested for shooting a red, white, and blue rocket around the moon. And she said, "They're gonna execute me" … I have this cross-body leather purse. And I was like, "Get in my purse and let's go!"

And she was like, "No."

In the months after Ashli's death, Micki lay in bed all day, aware of the metaphor she was inhabiting. She and her husband were living in a boat moored in San Diego Bay, so her bedroom was half-submerged underwater, like her entire being.

She hadn't even known that Ashli had gone to D.C. for January 6. They'd lived only 12 minutes apart but hadn't seen each other that Christmas or New Year's. Fuggles, the family dog, was old and afraid of fireworks, so Micki had stayed home with him on New Year's Eve. Besides which, Micki and Ashli's relationship could be scratchy. What if she'd been less worried about the dog? What if she'd known Ashli was going? "But I just would have said, 'Have fun, be careful, who are you going with,'" Micki says. "I didn't realize what was going on in D.C. was gonna be such a big frickin' deal!" What if she'd gone with Ashli? What if she'd chained her to a chair? *Slosh*, *slosh*, *slosh*, like that, for months.

For a while, all Micki could manage was to get out of bed once a day and make a phone call to someone in Washington, D.C., which for her was something. In the past, when Ashli would talk to her about mask mandates or lost ballots or whatever, Micki would say, "You know what, baby, go get 'em!" But Micki herself had no patience for politics. She was of the *You can't fight city hall so might as well live your life* school. "I'm gonna sit on my boat. I'm gonna read my book. I'm gonna eat my popcorn. I'm gonna pet my dog. I'm gonna stick my feet in the water." But now here she was, dialing the 202 area code every day, doing the Erin Brockovich thing: Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senator Dianne Feinstein, Representative Darrell Issa, the general counsel for the Capitol Police … "Hello, my name is Micki Witthoeft, and I want answers about my daughter." She kept a running log of names and numbers in what she called her death notebook. "I know it's kind of a morbid thing to say, but that's what it was."

STEPHEN VOSS FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

Then one day her best friend, Wilma, stopped by the boat and told her, "You have to get up, get in the shower, and get the fuck outside." After that, Micki's life took a *Thelma & Louise*–ish turn: The men, including her husband and sons, sort of fell away, and she allied herself with forceful women. Wilma suggested a healing Mother's Day trip, and Micki chose Sacramento as the destination. They loaded up Wilma's camper van with Ashli Babbitt bracelets and flyers that Micki had made. The trip was kind of a bust. No one in the state capital really wanted to hear about Ashli Babbitt and January 6. But then—a small miracle. On the way home, when they stopped one night at a campsite, Micki got a text from a friend. It linked to a video of someone in Washington named Paul Gosar, talking about her daughter. "It was my first glimmer of hope that somebody is paying attention," Micki says.

After that, the signs intensified. She and Wilma drove to Arizona for Reawaken, a MAGA-supported Christian-nationalist festival led by Michael Flynn, the former U.S. Army general and short-lived national security adviser to Trump who spouts QAnon slogans. "It was kind of like a weird mix of political advocates and Christian-revival stuff," Micki says. "And when they were singing 'Raise a Hallelujah' onstage, the air was just electric in there."

Gosar kept publicly invoking Ashli. (Gosar is a far-right congressman from Arizona known for his association with white supremacists and his efforts to overturn the 2020 election, but Micki wasn't really attuned to all that.) He tweeted a photo of Ashli in her Air Force uniform with the caption "They took her life. They could not take her pride," a paraphrase of a lyric in the U2 song "Pride (In the Name of Love)," which is actually about Martin Luther King Jr. He described Michael Byrd as "hiding, lying in wait," to kill Ashli. And then he invited Micki to be his guest at a conference in Phoenix. "She has given everything—her daughter," Gosar said onstage. "We need answers." He shouted her out to the crowd, calling her by the wrong name, "Mick Wilbur." But still, she had been called.

THE BASEMENT

I said, "Well, then, just tell them you didn't do it." And [Ashli] said, "I won't tell them I didn't do it, and I'd do it again. And I'm a goner. These are the people you need to worry about."

So we were in a cell full of people. It was more like a cage, more like a chain-link cage. With just a whole bunch of people …

I know she spoke to me in the dream. 'Cause I had not watched any television. Couldn't listen to music. Couldn't turn on the radio … It was about political prisoners.

For a while, Micki tried to be home with her husband, Roger. But in the emotional state she was in, she knew she could not really be much of a wife. "It's really hard to live with somebody who just wants to be angry," she says. In August 2022, she got on a plane and left, with enough money to live in D.C. for a month and not much of a plan. With Ashli's dream-words in mind ("These are the people you need to worry about"), she went straight to the courthouse, where Guy Reffitt was about to become the first J6er who'd stood trial to be sentenced. She was coming to support Guy, but she noticed his wife, Nicole, standing with her two daughters and looking very alone.

"She just had this defiant, strong-ass-woman look on her face, and I just knew she was somebody I could be friends with," Micki says. Nicole instantly grabbed her hand. "I just felt that she needed that," Nicole says. "And it's just one of those things, you really can't explain … Maybe we were so brokenhearted, and we could see that in each other." Micki "just looked at me and I looked at her and it was just like, 'Let's go. They can't do anything else to us.'" And so they moved in together.

After bouncing around a bit, they landed at the Eagle's Nest, partly because it was only a 15-minute drive to the jail. What sealed Micki's relationship with Nicole was the day it came time to put Fuggles down. "I was on the couch with Fuggles, and I couldn't make it happen," Micki says. She wanted to call the vet, but she couldn't. So Nicole did it. "I just thought at that minute, I truly loved her. I do … I feel like the ladies in this house know me better than a lot of people that I've known for years in my life," Micki says. Nicole has stayed in D.C. all this time, even though her husband is serving out his sentence in Texas.

If this were a different movie, it could lean more into its obvious feminist plotline: Two working-class American women who have only ever known themselves as mothers and wives realize what they are actually capable of. They cook for each other, clean for each other, become chosen family for each other.

At night, Micki has had panic attacks that take her breath away and dreams that make her weep. She can't bear to sleep in a room by herself. So she and Nicole sleep in the basement of the Eagle's Nest, their mattresses head to head. Nicole's dog, Oliver, plops himself in between them like a canine headboard. Just hearing Nicole and her dog softly breathing, Micki says, is a comfort to her.

Men come through the Eagle's Nest sometimes, but they never stay long. Micki's kicked a few out. Too bossy, or too messy, or too obviously trying to make money off their plight. In the meantime, they've been improvising for themselves a first-rate civic education, covering all three branches of government. They attend trials at the federal courthouse, Supreme Court oral arguments, congressional hearings, campaign rallies. At many important events around the country, Micki Witthoeft, the mother of Ashli Babbitt, gets invited onstage to say her lines, which generally run like this: "I think that this is a blueprint for what they're doing to American people. My daughter was murdered by this government on January 6, 2021, as a result of her protest against the stolen election at the Capitol."

By the time Lauren and I came around, Micki and Nicole had become more comfortable engaging with the "fake-news media," so after a few months of interacting, we got along reasonably well. Lauren and Micki, especially, engage in lively debates about immigration, gun control, term limits, homelessness, gay rights, health care. Lauren eventually broached the topic of why Micki had told a vigil crowd that Michael Byrd "needs to swing from the end of a rope, along with Nancy Pelosi."

MICKI: I am not calling for a lynching. A hanging and a lynching are two different things. A hanging occurs after a trial and you're pronounced guilty and your ass gets hung. That's how it happens. Hangings are retribution for something that you got coming to you. And they used to do it right on the battlefield. If you got convicted of treason, they would either shoot you or hang you. And that's the way I meant that. And I said it about Nancy Pelosi too, and she's about as white-bread as you come.

Micki goes on to say that she doesn't necessarily buy the idea of "white privilege," because she and Ashli worked hard for what they have. Lauren gives a delicate but effective lesson on how white privilege works, and explains that having had to work hard doesn't exempt you from it. Micki doesn't respond directly, but judging from what she says next, she has heard Lauren, and even shifted a little.

MICKI: I understand that Black people have been treated in a different way than white people have in this country for a long time—well, forever. But I thought that we were making huge strides in that until, you know, I came to this city, actually … Because you don't know until you know. I mean, for years there were these Black children being gunned down by police officers … And it does make me identify somewhat with Black and brown mothers who have been going through this for decades. Because their children have been murdered under color of authority without any avenue for retribution for years and decades and centuries.

When I listen to the recordings of these conversations, I recognize my partner as the quick, combative, sympathetic person she is. And I recognize raucous but nuanced debate of a kind I haven't heard anywhere else in ages. When you read books about how we can come back from the brink of civil war, this is what they tell you: Don't go into a discussion trying to change anyone's mind. Just listen, and have faith that maybe the ice will start to melt a little. For their part, Micki and Lauren's debates often end with:

LAUREN: "You are too smart for that, actually, Micki!"
MICKI: "Please, Lauren, I believe *you're* too smart for it too!"

All of this in a tone you would reserve for an exasperating friend. But then there are moments like this one:

Nicole Reffitt (*left*) in the Eagle's Nest, in Washington, where she lives with Micki Witthoeft (*right*) and others. Nicole's husband brought a gun to the Capitol on January 6 and was the first to be tried for crimes committed that day.

STEPHEN VOSS FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

MICKI: So you do not believe adrenochrome is a thing?
LAUREN: What now?
MICKI: Adrenochrome.
LAUREN: I literally don't know that. What is that?
MICKI: Really?

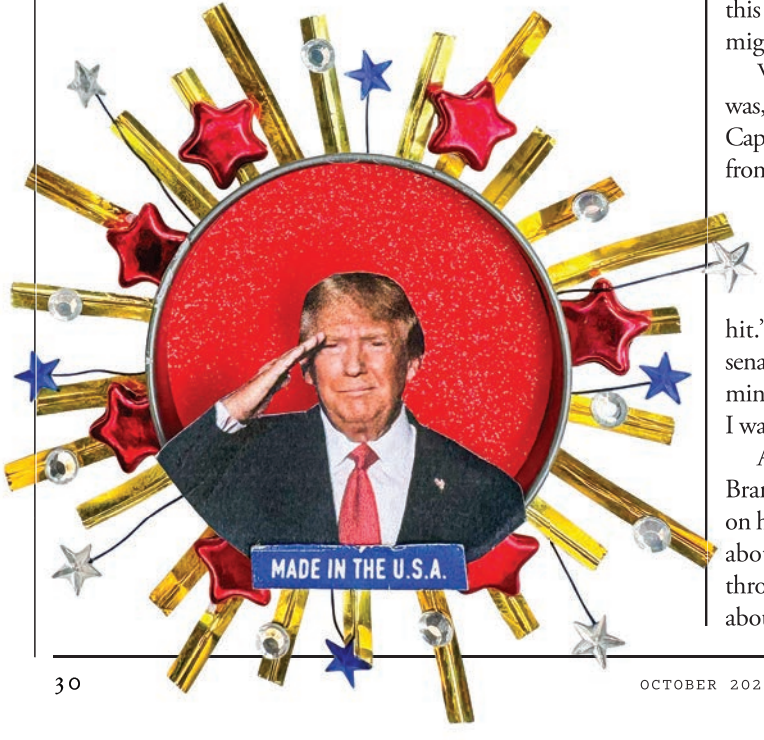
Micki is referring here to the QAnon-fueled conspiracy theory that global elites kidnap children to drink their blood for its adrenochrome, a chemical compound that is supposedly an elixir of youth. What can you do with a moment like this? How do you breach this epistemic chasm of cuckoo?

I've thought about this a lot, and come up with one generous explanation for why Micki would even consider that such a theory might be true. Bear with me here: Micki is not deluded about who Ashli was. She describes her daughter as someone people either loved or "felt the complete opposite" about. When Ashli was young, she was a tomboy who played with lizards, surfed, and rode dirt bikes. When she was 13, she announced that she would join the military one day, even though her nervous mother prayed that she wouldn't. You get the impression that they didn't have an easy, cozy mother-daughter dynamic.

"I love my daughter always," Micki says. "I'm proud to be her mother always, but we're two very separate people … Sometimes we saw things differently, and I'll just leave it at that."

Micki had had no idea how deeply taken her daughter was with conspiracy theories. Micki was just not interested in those kinds of conversations. She was not even on social media. So she had no way of knowing that on Twitter, Ashli was calling out judges and politicians as pedophiles, and using QAnon slogans such as "Where we go one, we go all!" Could looking into the global scourge of child trafficking be Micki's way of figuring out what she'd missed? Of seeing what Ashli saw?

Death can make you obsess about unfinished business. Micki says that when her father died this year, she completed an intricate puzzle involving Chinese symbols that he'd left on a table, even though it took her hours and she had so much to do. When my own father died, my very unadventurous mother decided to jump out of an airplane, because the one thing my father had done entirely without her was serve in the military as a paratrooper. Exploring parts of your loved one's mind or experience postmortem can be the only available way to move the relationship forward.



But a more straightforward explanation for Micki's openness to adrenochrome conspiracies has to do with the state of our political culture. When you want to hold on to your anger, as Micki does, your tribe will feed you enough stories about *them* and what *they* are capable of to fuel that anger as long as you want or need. "When they killed Ashli, they took a lot more from me than my daughter," Micki says. "They took my whole belief in the system that runs America from me. Even though you know it's a little bad, it's mostly good—I don't believe that anymore. And so in that process, I don't know what I believe them capable of. Is it eating babies and drinking their blood? I don't think so. But I don't know what they're up to. I really don't know." In this way, the wound can stay open forever and ever … and bleed all over the country.

THE POD

In May 2024, a new person started hanging around the Eagle's Nest. He was 30 and fresh out of prison, and Micki let him stay a few nights, meaning that an actual J6er was now down the block. Around us, Micki referred to him as "the little boy," but his real name was Brandon Fellows. I'd been corresponding with him while he was in prison—talking to him now seemed like a decent way to explore something I'd been wondering about. Micki had been holding the vigil for more than 700 days. The Patriot Pod had been in existence for three years. People who had been convicted were starting to get released, and the next presidential election was only a few months away. What had all this amounted to? Where was the J4J6 movement heading? What might be bearing down on us on January 6, 2025?

When Brandon arrived at the Patriot Pod in August 2021, he was, in his own words, "the nonviolent guy." He had traveled to the Capitol armed with a fake orange beard that looked like it was made from his mom's leftover yarn, and a weird knitted hat. He was having fun outside the building until someone in front of him started smashing a window with a cane, which prompted a cop to swing his baton, and then Brandon freaked out. "Holy shit, holy shit," he recalls saying to himself. "I'm not getting hit." But eventually Brandon did go in, and ended up in some senator's office with his feet up on the desk, smoking a joint. In my mind, I'd classified him as the Seth Rogen of insurrectionists. And I was curious whether his time in the Pod had changed him at all.

As soon as he arrived in his cell, he told me, he was starstruck. Brandon had spent the preceding few months under house arrest on his mom's couch. She is a Democrat and would not talk to him about January 6, so he spent a lot of time processing the event through his phone. And now here they were, the people he'd read about or watched on YouTube. "People started coming up to my

cell and talking to me. One standout was Julian Khater. He said, 'Hey, I'm the guy that they accused of killing Officer Sicknick.' I'm like, 'No way!'" Brian Sicknick was a Capitol Police officer whom Khater had pepper-sprayed in the face on January 6. He's the officer whose picture is up at the vigil along with Ashli's. A medical examiner attributed his death to natural causes, but responsibility for Sicknick's death has always shadowed Khater. (Khater pleaded guilty to two felony charges, for assaulting officers with a dangerous weapon.)

Fellow J6ers came by Brandon's cell and asked, *Hey, you need a radio? Pen and paper? Some extra clothes?* They dropped off beef jerky, ramen, macaroni and cheese. A bunch came by just to introduce themselves, talk to the new guy. By the end of his first day in the pod, Brandon had a stack of items outside his cell and a lot of new friends. "We had a good sense of community … And we were taking care of each other … This isn't like the other wings, where it's like, 'Oh, what are you in for?' We're all from the same event." (Ordinarily, if even three people commit a crime together, the jail separates them.)

Many of the J6ers had never been incarcerated before, and jail came as a shock. The difference, though, between them and the average person in the D.C. jail, or any American jail, is that they were going through hell together. Proud Boys. Oath Keepers. Julian Khater. Guy Reffitt. And Brandon, the stoner with the goofy disguise. He had read about these guys. Maybe cosplayed as one of them on January 6. But now he was getting to know them, and that changed how he thought about them. "These guys are the real people, the real heroes," he says he thought to himself. "I'm just some idiot that took selfies inside and smoked somebody's joint that was passed around."

The way Brandon was starting to see it, there was a bright line in the Pod. On one side were the nonviolent guys like him. When they'd seen trouble on January 6, they'd flinched. And on the other side were heroes—men like Nicole Reffitt's husband, Guy, who'd brought an actual gun to the Capitol. Six months into his stint in the Patriot Pod, Brandon had decided that he wanted to be on the other side of the line.

Because a lot of the evidence against the detainees consisted of videos, they had been given access to laptops so they could watch them as they prepared their legal defenses. Brandon noticed that on his device, the camera hadn't been turned off. Wanting to make his mark—among the guys in the Pod, certainly, but maybe also in the world at large—he started filming, with an eye toward exposing what he said were squalid conditions. He leaked the videos to the right-wing site Gateway Pundit, and on May 25, 2022, it published a story with the long headline "EXCLUSIVE FOOTAGE: Secret Video Recordings LEAKED From Inside 'The Hole' of DC Gitmo. First Footage Ever Released of Cockroach and Mold Infested Cell of J6 Political Prisoner."

After Brandon leaked the footage, fellow detainees started calling him brave. "I feel like I earned my respect, because remember, some of them used to say, 'You're not even a January 6er,' because I didn't do anything violent."

When Brandon was released this past spring, he'd planned on going back home to upstate New York. That didn't work out. And, like Micki, he felt the pull of D.C. Demi-celebrity was more exciting than his regular life anyway. People from all over the world have extended invitations for him to stay with them. He's had job offers, and people have asked him if he will run for political office. In June, he went viral on social media after making a pouty face behind Anthony Fauci at a public hearing. That got him a warning from his probation officer. Now he needs permission to enter any government building.

He also got a warning from Micki, but for a different reason. By this point in her evolution as an activist, she was seeking to avoid pointless negative attention on her, the cause, or the house. In July, people were urgently sharing this tweet on our neighborhood text chain: "Community Safety Alert. J6er, Brandon Fellows … in a MAGA group house called the 'Eagle's Nest' (yes like Hitler) is bragging on Twitter about PUNCHING WOMEN at local bars."

The bar happened to be five minutes from my office. I wouldn't say this made me feel scared, exactly, but it did make me extremely curious about what Brandon had planned for the coming months.

In the videos of the incident, a snide comment made by a woman about Brandon's MAGA hat eventually leads to a thrown drink and then punches between Brandon and the woman and her boyfriend. Brandon, who is extremely fit post-prison, is quickly on top of the man, pinning him down.

Is this juvenile trolling that got out of control? Or something politically significant? Does one lead to the other? I had many questions. So I arranged to interview him.

HANNA: How long are you going to stay in D.C.? Do you have a plan?
BRANDON: Yeah. I plan to stay 'til, like, January 7, January 6–ish?
HANNA: That feels vaguely threatening.
BRANDON: I could see why you would say that, especially considering, you know, my feelings.
HANNA: About violence.
BRANDON: Well, about how, man, I wish, after seeing all the chaos that's happened in the world and to the country, how I wish people did more on January 6, instead of like me, taking selfies and just smiling … I think it would have been better if more people would have actually been there for an insurrection …
HANNA: I can't tell with you, what is—
BRANDON: I'm not making it up. I'm saying, I hope that it doesn't come to this. You know, it'd be nice if Trump just got in.
HANNA: But there's a possibility that he will legitimately lose this election at the ballot box.
BRANDON: Yeah, I think at that point, people might have to do something.

Later, I called Brandon to ask if he even believed in democracy. In response, he asked if I'd seen the protesters outside the Republican National Convention holding signs that read DICTATOR ON DAY ONE. "I'd be down with that," he said. "That's what we might need," and then he said something about George Washington that I don't recall because I was at this point realizing that I should be taking him very seriously.

If ever you doubt the depth of feeling among the J6ers, listen to the vigil recorded on July 13, the evening of the assassination attempt on Trump. One of the detainees calls the gathering on

COLIN HUNTER; JUSTIN SULLIVAN / GETTY

Freedom Corner and describes the scene in the Patriot Pod when they saw the news on TV: "I had to hear fucking a bunch of us scream and yell and freak out and be trapped in this box with the inability to do anything except to basically run around like a trapped rat in a maze. And it was a very scary feeling." And as he is talking, he is choking on the memory of that desperation, and starts to cry. "I'm just—I'm just really glad Trump's okay. Because I didn't know if he was … That shit really fucked me up … It would just kill me to know because, not only for the man who sacrificed so much for all of us, but just the country as a whole. Fuck the whole J6 thing and pardons; I don't even care about that. I just talk about the status of our nation, and what it meant—and what it meant for us, for everybody, whether you're MAGA or not." [*You have one minute remaining.*]

"OUR HOUSE"

In mid-July, I went to visit Representative Jamie Raskin of Maryland. One thing I learned from reading his 2022 book, *Unthinkable*, was that the revisionist history of January 6 began *on* January 6, when the representatives were called back to the House floor to certify the election. "I remember it so clearly," he told me. Matt Gaetz rose and said something kind about Raskin, which touched him. And then Gaetz changed his tone and said he was hearing "pretty compelling evidence" that some of the violent people who'd breached the Capitol were not Trump supporters but members of antifa. He was saying this to his colleagues in Congress, who just hours earlier had seen the mob with their own eyes, who'd just had to barricade the doors of their offices against rioters brimming with rage and carrying Confederate flags and makeshift gallows and other inflammatory, insurrectionist iconography and yelling "Stop the Steal!" Raskin could already see where this was heading: January 6 was going to be folded into the Big Lie that Trump had won the 2020 election.

"There are lots of those micro lies that fit into the pattern of the Big Lie about the election," Raskin told me. "So Donald Trump calls the J6ers 'political prisoners,' which is a lie, and he calls them 'hostages,' which is a lie." These people have been prosecuted for assaulting officers and invading the Capitol, he went on. "And most of them pled guilty, right? So how are they hostages? What makes them political prisoners? Suddenly they're like Alexei Navalny, who died at the hands of Vladimir Putin? They're like Nelson Mandela? I don't think so."

In his book, Raskin refers to Trump's Big Lie as "the new-and-improved Lost Cause myth." In less than four years, January 6 has gone from a horror that even many hard-core MAGA supporters, and Trump himself, felt politically compelled to distance themselves from … to being an event that Trump makes central to his political message. January 6 has taken on sacred power; for many, like Brandon Fellows, it was the crucible that gave their lives meaning. It is the furnace that still fuels the Big Lie.

Dozens of people who participated in the "Stop the Steal" rally, including some who ended up serving time for crimes committed on January 6, have run for political office—federal, state, and local. I have yet to encounter one who shies away from their actions on that day. Consider Derrick Evans, "J6 Prisoner running for U.S. Congress," as the pop-up image that greets you on his campaign website says. One of the photos on the site shows him in a REBELS sweatshirt after being arraigned. Another shows him smiling in a sunny field with his wife and four small children. The juxtaposition of images suggests that the Lost Causification of January 6 is working: Storming the Capitol is something that a God-fearing, patriotic family man or woman does.

I had another reason I wanted to talk with Raskin: He and Micki Witthoeft had lost their adult children less than a week apart. On December 31, 2020, Tommy Raskin died by suicide. *Unthinkable* is about January 6 but also about Tommy. Raskin told me that people would ask him, "'What do those two things have to do with each other?' And to my mind, they are absolutely inextricable. It's all intertwined." Raskin believes that the story of Tommy's demise began with the pandemic, when people were "atomized and isolated and depressed." Ashli's troubles were compounded during COVID—her pool-cleaning business struggled, and Micki says the combination of COVID lockdowns, mask mandates, and Ashli's belief that the election was stolen made her very "angry and agitated."

Although Raskin has his own experience with trying to integrate grief into a belief system, he was reluctant to psychoanalyze Micki. But when I told him that Micki has often said she'd rather be angry than sad, he took this as a clue. "I think what you're talking about is something that is post-grief, which is trying to make meaning of a loss. I assume she experienced just overwhelming grief and despondency and shock and sorrow to lose her daughter. Then, after that shock is somehow metabolized, I assume she has to figure out what her daughter's death means." I asked him if he would ever try to talk with Micki about this, in the way Joe Biden often bonds with people over shared grief. He said, "I can't imagine she would want to meet me," but added that he would think about it.

OVER THE SUMMER, Micki and Brandon Fellows "had words" about his antics. As the movement's matriarch, Micki is used to setting the rules. But she has nurtured legions of sons who are used to breaking them. At some point, the kids just move on, and you're left wondering what you should be doing. The movement she's helped birth has escaped her full control, and seems to be seeking things—including, possibly, the restoration of Trump to the White House by violent means—that she doesn't support.

Not that Micki is entirely clear on what she wants. What would justice for Ashli even look like? A public funeral procession? Michael Byrd in jail? What about Trump getting elected and pardoning all the J6ers? Would that be enough? After all, that's what Ashli talked about in Micki's dream. Lauren once asked Micki what would happen if no one were to be held accountable for Ashli's death in a way that felt sufficient to her. "Well, that's a good question," Micki said. "But I guess then I will just have to take my dying breath trying to bring that about."

At a press conference in August, Trump again said that the J6ers have been "treated very unfairly." He has also continued to say that, if reelected, he will pardon them. Weirdly, it doesn't occur

to Micki that the person ultimately responsible for her daughter' death *is* Donald Trump. His narcissism and pathological fear of losing are what set in motion Ashli's fatal journey to the Capitol in the first place.

But the Big Lie's hold on Mama Micki may be loosening. The last time Lauren and I went to the vigil, in July, only five people showed up. Tami, the third house member, has just moved out. "You know, I'm feeling real, real tired, to be honest," Nicole Reffitt said recently. She also admitted that she felt guilty for having encouraged some of the J6ers not to take a plea deal and to stand up against the government instead. For many of them, that has meant more time in prison. "They could be at home, and instead they're in jail." About Micki, Nicole says, "I'm a ride-or-die person. I don't have a lot of those people. But the ones I do have, it's 'til the end. Micki is one of those people. Guy is one of those people."

But Guy will get out of prison soon, and where will that leave Micki? Nicole's family lives in Texas. Micki's family—what's left of it—lives in San Diego. Micki and her husband are separated now. She used to have a life there that she loved, riding horses, gardening, reading mystery novels. She loved being a wife and a mother. But she isn't a wife anymore, and her remaining kids are grown, and she doesn't have a place to stay. When she visits San Diego, she stays in her friend Wilma's RV.

STEPHEN VOSS FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

Brandon Fellows was radicalized by his stay in the D.C. jail's "Patriot Pod." After doing time for his actions on January 6, he says that if Trump loses this election, people might have to "do something."

Lauren won't necessarily admit this, but she worries about Micki. What happens to a nervous person who used to have some moments of serenity but who now fixates on wackadoodle things like her government coming after America's children? Does she get stuck there or go back to riding her horses and dipping her feet in the water? Lauren has been watching her closely. At the nightly vigil, Micki no longer reacts with anger when the police instruct her to do this or that. In fact, she now tells her own people to stay calm and follow the rules.

This summer, Lauren asked Micki if she could ever imagine being, if not truly happy, then at least at peace, or maybe even being able to savor small moments of contentment. No, Micki said quickly, she doesn't foresee contentment for herself, because she's "just too damaged." But then she told a story. A while ago, she and Nicole were driving. It was fall. "The leaves were all different colors, and Nicole was like, 'Look at how pretty those leaves are. Look at this gorgeous [view].' And I'm like, 'Yeah, it's dead fucking leaves, Nicole.'" But, she continued, "I do now enjoy the smell of a flower. I will walk up to a rose and put my nose right in it. So that's, you know …" That's not nothing. *A*

Hanna Rosin is a senior editor at The Atlantic *and the host of the podcast* Radio Atlantic. *Additional reporting by Lauren Ober. Rosin and Ober's podcast about the Eagle's Nest,* We Live Here Now, *can be found at www.theatlantic.com/podcasts/we-live-here-now starting September 18.*

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HYPOCRISY, SPINELESSNESS, AND THE TRIUMPH OF DONALD TRUMP

He said Republican politicians would be easy to break. He was right.

By Mark Leibovich

Illustrations by Ben Hickey

In the summer of 2015, back when he was still talking to traitorous reporters like me, I spent extended stretches with Donald Trump. He was in the early phase of his first campaign for president, though he had quickly made himself the inescapable figure of that race—as he would in pretty much every Republican contest since. We would hop around his various clubs, buildings, holding rooms, limos, planes, golf carts, and mob scenes, Trump disgorging his usual bluster, slander, flattery, and obvious lies. The diatribes were exhausting and disjointed.

But I was struck by one theme that Trump kept pounding on over and over: that he was used to dealing with "brutal, vicious killers"—by which he meant his fellow ruthless operators in showbiz, real estate, casinos, and other big-boy industries. In contrast, he told me, politicians are saps and weaklings.

"I will roll over them," he boasted, referring to the flaccid field of Republican challengers he was about to debate at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library that September. They were "puppets," "not strong people." He welcomed their contempt, he told me, because that would make his turning them into supplicants all the more humiliating.

"They might speak badly about me now, but they won't later," Trump said. They like to say they are "public servants," he added, his voice dripping with derision at the word *servant*. But they would eventually submit to him and fear him. They would "evolve," as they say in politics. "It will be very easy; I can make them evolve," Trump told me. "They will evolve."

Like most people who'd been around politics for a while, I was dubious. And wrong. They evolved.

"I've never seen anything like it," Trump told me the following spring, as he was completing his romp to the 2016 nomination. We were talking on the phone, and Trump had just wrapped up a rally in Anaheim, California. Former Texas Governor Rick Perry had recently endorsed him, despite dismissing Trump earlier as a "cancer on conservatism" and "a barking carnival act."

"He made a statement saying something like I'm 'the smartest guy ever to run for office,'" Trump told me (Perry didn't say exactly that, but close). "How do you get from 'cancer on the party' to that? I get it, I get it; it's how politicians are. But I couldn't do that."

Trump accepted Perry's support, and then promptly taunted him. "He was going [around] saying the worst things about me!" Trump said at the Anaheim rally. "I have never seen people able to pivot like politicians."

"It's happening with all of them," Trump said. "Lindsey Graham just called and was very nice … even though he used to say the worst things." (Graham had called Trump, among other not-nice things, "a race-baiting, xenophobic religious bigot" and "a kook.") Soon enough, the last holdouts would come around too. "It's just so easy, how they do that," Trump said.

As went individual Republican politicians, so went the party. Reince Priebus, the chair of the Republican National Committee in 2016, would become frustrated with Trump over his obvious scorn for his organization. Still, Priebus would gamely try to assure me that the GOP was shaped not by one man but rather by a set of traditions, principles, and conservative ideals. "The party defines the party," Priebus kept telling me.

After Trump won the nomination in 2016, "The party defines the party" became a familiar feckless refrain among the GOP's putative leaders. House Speaker Paul Ryan vowed to me that he would "protect conservatism from being disfigured." Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell told the radio host Hugh Hewitt that "Trump is not going to change the institution," referring to the GOP. "He's not going to change the basic philosophy of the party."

In retrospect, this was hilarious.

BY THE SECOND NIGHT of the 2024 Republican National Convention at Milwaukee's Fiserv Forum in July, some attendees had started showing up with a gauze pad slapped over their right ears, a tribute to the boxy white dressing Trump wore to cover the injury he'd suffered in an attempt on his life in Pennsylvania just days earlier.

The near miss had cast a peculiar aura over Trump's jubilee in Milwaukee. For one thing, the bloodshed reaffirmed the popular Republican notion that Trump is a uniquely marked and defiant figure, as reflected by the T-shirts being sold depicting the wounded nominee raising his fist (as well as the still-fashionable mug-shot merchandise). But I spoke with several convention-goers who appeared stunned into a heightened sense of vulnerability by the event: Trump's physical vulnerability, yes, but perhaps something shared as well. One could view the ear bandages in the crowd as a communal gesture of humanity, or even empathy.

Whatever was behind them, the ear accessories quickly spread through the crowd and became ubiquitous. In a sense, the entire Republican Party has become an accessory. To no one's surprise, everything in Milwaukee revolved around its unavoidable protagonist, "our 45th and soon-to-be 47th president, Donald J. Trump."

On the first night of the convention, Trump made what would become his familiar WWE-style entrance. His head filled the big screen as the Republicans' official cantor, Lee "God Bless the U.S.A." Greenwood, provided the walk-up sermon. "Prayer works," Greenwood called out as Trump stood in the wings. And God ensured, "as Donald Trump turned his head just slightly, that the bullet missed him just enough." Trump was then seen on-screen doing a quick twirl of his finger, the universal gesture for *Let's get on with this*.

"We have believed for so long that God will make some changes in this country," Greenwood continued. (This was a few days before the other party's God, Joe Biden's "Lord Almighty," would finally get through the White House switchboard.) Greenwood persisted in bestowing his blessings until Trump could wait no longer and began his slow walk onto the convention floor.

The roar was colossal. Trump waved and clapped for himself. Everyone he passed stepped back in reflexive obedience, or awe. I'd been watching Trump's adulators work the arena all week, trying to outdo one another. "My fellow Americans," Senator Marco Rubio said from the podium while Trump—his Audience of One—squinted up at him like a building inspector. As with

many other brand-name Republicans in the arena, Rubio had once despised Trump. He ran against him for president in 2016. It got ornery. Rubio implied that Trump had a small penis; Trump derided Rubio as "Liddle Marco" and called him "weak like a baby." That last assessment held up well.

"The only way to make America wealthy and safe and strong again is to make Donald J. Trump our president again," Rubio declaimed from the podium. Trump nodded along from his center box, radiating pride of ownership—Liddle Marco had grown up so beautifully.

Not all that long ago, Rubio had told me that "we should not have cults of personality" in the U.S. His parents and grandparents had fled dictatorship in Cuba. Their journey made him appreciate the gift of freedom and the danger of strongmen.

I talked a lot with Rubio in the last days of the 2016 primary, back when he was happy to speak candidly about Trump, and about how he knew better than to entrust the leadership of the United States to a "fraud," "lunatic," and "con artist" with autocratic instincts. And they all knew better—the Rubios, the Ted Cruzes, the J. D. Vances, the Doug Burgums, the Nikki Haleys, the Mitch McConnells, the Vivek Ramaswamys, all of them. They probably still know better. But they are all expedient, to their political core. "If you don't want to get reelected," Graham once told me, "you're in the wrong business."

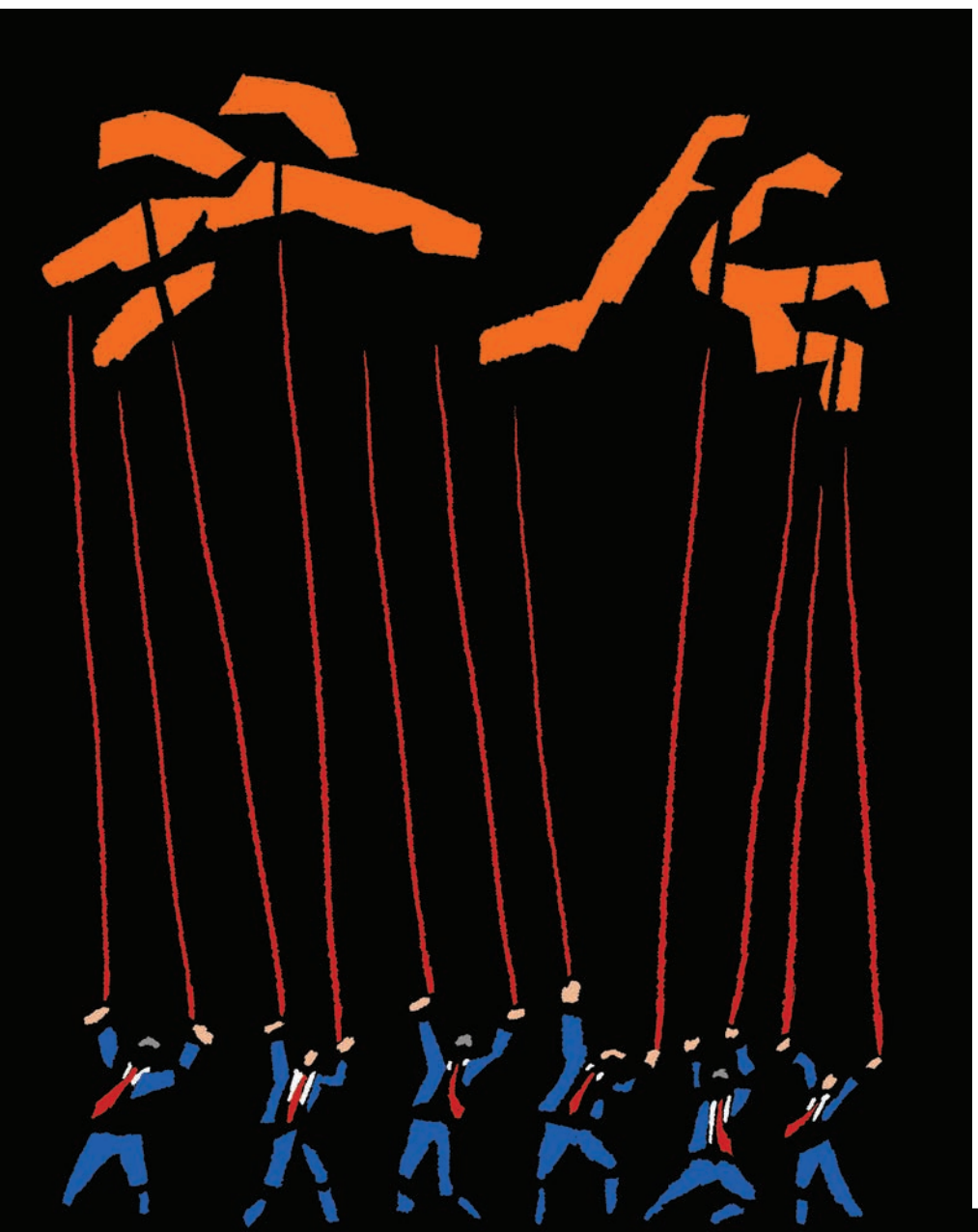
For years, many had predicted a reckoning, a shared realization that the noisy, grievance-packed redoubt that the GOP had become—marked by servile devotion to one man—was perhaps not aligned with the party's best traditions of rugged, free-thinking individualists. "Anytime a leader builds an entire movement around himself, it almost always leads to disaster," Rubio had told me.

After so many party defections, electoral defeats, and broken spirits, surely some Republican self-correction was inevitable. But although there have been flashes, they haven't lasted. I've heard all the private doubts about Trump from his most public of validators. These private doubts were once very public. "Mark my words, there will be prominent people in American politics who will spend years explaining to people how they fell into this," Rubio told *The New York Times* in 2016, right before he "fell into this" himself.

"I don't think so," Doug Burgum, the North Dakota governor, said during his Republican-primary campaign last year, when asked whether he would ever do business with Trump. "I just think it's important that you're judged by the company you keep." Within a few months, however, Burgum would be eager to tell everyone what regular company he was keeping with Trump. "It's been a real honor for Kathryn and I to have spent as much time with the president as we have," Burgum said in June as he was auditioning to be Trump's running mate.

I'd thought that maybe 2024 would be the year the GOP finally began some semblance of a post-Trump future. At the very least, new voices of resistance had to finally assert themselves.

"I feel no need to kiss the ring," Nikki Haley, Trump's most competitive primary challenger in 2024, had vowed in February. Haley even made what passed for a subversive remark in her convention speech, when she said that not everyone agrees with Trump all of the time. "That's their problem," someone yelled out from the crowd.



BEN HICKEY

But the ring, it would be kissed. "Donald Trump has my strong endorsement, period," Haley said.

I ran into former Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson on the arena concourse. He was one of the only Republican-primary challengers who dared question Trump's worldview. His campaign had gone nowhere, but Hutchinson held relatively firm. "I'm troubled," Hutchinson told me. "I don't want our party to be defined by attacks on our judiciary system. I don't want it to be defined by anger."

Hutchinson had previously distinguished himself as one of the few Republicans to have held elected office who said he would not vote for Trump. "I've made some commitments about not voting for a convicted felon," Hutchinson conceded to ABC News later at the convention. Then he softened his position. "But that seems like a long time ago."

Also a long time ago: the 2016 Republican convention in Cleveland, where Ted Cruz had delivered his plucky "vote your conscience" speech in defiance of Trump, whom Cruz had called "utterly amoral" and "a sniveling coward."

"God Bless Donald J. Trump" is how Cruz's speech in Milwaukee began. "Let me start by giving thanks to God Almighty for protecting President Trump," he said, while the bandaged Almighty himself preened up at the sniveling coward onstage, who would follow him anywhere.

BIDEN'S DEFEAT OF Trump in 2020 had seemed certain to weaken Trump's grip on the Republican Party, if not end his political career. No relevant precedent existed for any one-term president to become his party's default front-runner in the next election. Especially not an extremely unpopular one-term president who lost by 7 million votes, refused to concede, incited a lethal insurrection in an attempt to overturn the result, was impeached for a second time, defied long-honored tradition by skipping the swearing-in of his successor, left behind a traumatized nation (with 25,000 National Guard troops defending the capital against his own supporters), became the first former president to be indicted … and the rest of the whole loser litany.

Yet the speed with which Trump has settled back into easy dominance of his party has been both remarkable and entirely foreseeable—foreseen, in fact, by Trump himself. Because if there's been one recurring lesson of the Trump-era GOP, it's this: Never underestimate the durability of a demagogue with a captive base, a desperate will to keep going, and—perhaps most of all—a feeble and terrified opposition of spineless ciphers ("weak like a baby").

"You know what I liked about Trump?" Lindsey Graham asked, waxing nostalgic about the former president—and yearning for his return—during a speech in Nashville in 2022. "Everyone was afraid of him. Including me." It was a killer line, Graham in his amiable-mascot mode. It would also suffice as a preview of the 2024 Republican presidential primaries. "Resistance" to Trump, lame as it was, had become an inside joke among the party faithful.

Trump's last remaining primary challenger, Haley, quit the race on March 6. That same day, Mitch McConnell—who had criticized the then-president for his "disgraceful" conduct on January 6, 2021—endorsed Trump. Two days later, the spring meeting of the Republican National Committee, in Houston, featured a final address by the outgoing chair, Ronna McDaniel.

KENT NISHIMURA / GETTY; EVA MARIE UZCATEGUI / BLOOMBERG / GETTY; JOE RAEDLE / GETTY; NOAM GALAI / GETTY; ALEX WONG / GETTY

LINDSEY GRAHAM

2015: "You know how to make America great again? Tell Donald Trump to go to hell"; "he is a race-baiting, xenophobic religious bigot."
2016: "If we nominate Trump, we will get destroyed … and we will deserve it."
2024 [To Trump]: "I love you."

TIM SCOTT

2016: "If Donald Trump can't take a stand against the KKK, we cannot trust him to stand up for America against Putin, Iran, or ISIS."
2024 [To Trump]: "I just love you."

MARCO RUBIO

2016: "Donald Trump is a con artist." He is "the most vulgar person to ever aspire to the presidency."
2024: "The only way to make America wealthy and safe and strong again is to make Donald J. Trump our president again."

TED CRUZ

2016: Calls Trump a "pathological liar" and "a narcissist at a level I don't think this country has ever seen." Also says, "Donald, you are a sniveling coward."
2024: "God Bless Donald J. Trump."

KEVIN McCARTHY

2016: Likens Trump to Benito Mussolini.
January 6, 2021: *Trump to McCarthy:* "Well, Kevin, I guess these people are more upset about the election than you are." *McCarthy:* "More upset? They're trying to fucking kill me!"
2024: When asked if the Republicans should nominate a convicted felon, he says: "The answer is 100 percent yes."

McDaniel can get a little weepy at times, especially during goodbyes—or, in her case, an eviction. She started the job in 2017, the day before Trump delivered his mood-setting "American carnage" speech at his inauguration. She had done her best for Trump, taken so much of his abuse and carried so much of his water. She sacrificed her dignity, her reputation, her future employment prospects—even her dynastic family surname, Romney, because Uncle Mitt had fully established himself as a MAGA infidel.

The granddaughter of a Republican governor of Michigan (George Romney) and niece of her party's last pre-Trump nominee (Mitt), McDaniel was always the wrong nepo baby for this dynasty. Yet she tried to adapt. She said all the right things and made herself MAGA-friendly and reliable, enough to persuade Trump to make her his RNC chair.

Even then, McDaniel had to know that an inelegant end would come, as it usually does for even Trump's most fervent flunkies and flatterers. She steadied herself at the podium on the fourth floor of the Hilton Americas–Houston, acknowledged her family, and gave a special nod to her staff. "Thank you for all your hard work to send our candidate, Donald J. Trump, back to the White House," she said. A few RNC employees wiped away tears. They were surely aware that their own days were numbered in this consolidating family business.

Sure enough, 60 RNC staffers would quickly be axed by the incoming regime, executed by the new RNC co-chairs, Michael Whatley and—the real new boss—Lara Trump, Eric Trump's wife, who had been handpicked by the holy father (in-law) himself.

The message was clear: "That Republican Party, frankly, no longer exists," Donald Trump Jr. gloated on Newsmax the day of the RNC staff purges. "The moves that happened today—that's the final blow. People have to understand that … the MAGA movement is the new Republican Party."

LARA TRUMP ROSE from her seat, slim, cocksure, and angular in the classic style of the family wives. Her father-in-law called Lara "his most valuable asset," the Maryland committeeman David Bossie would say in his speech seconding her. She was fully fluent in the family language: victimhood. How unfair it all is. All of the witch hunts. "The scales are always tipped against him," the new co-chair would later tell Sean Hannity on Fox News. "It's rigged so heavily."

"Since the day my father-in-law came down the golden escalator—everyone remembers that famous day—this has never just been about each of us as individuals," she said in her acceptance speech in Houston. "It is about us as a family, and it's been about our country."

"This isn't about just right versus left, Republican versus Democrat," she said. "It's about good versus evil."

These were big stakes indeed. Heads nodded in every row as Lara gazed upon the crowd, and her voice softened in reverence.

"I'd be remiss," she said, "if I didn't thank President Donald J. Trump."

She would never be remiss.

After Lara's speech, I made a quick sweep of the place in search of McDaniel, but she had disappeared, possibly never to be seen again.

VICTOR J. BLUE / BLOOMBERG / GETTY; TOM WILLIAMS / GETTY; DREW ANGERER / GETTY; TIERNEY L. CROSS / BLOOMBERG / GETTY; ANNA MONEYMAKER / GETTY

VIVEK RAMASWAMY

2021: Calls Trump "a sore loser" and his election denialism "abhorrent." Describes January 6 as "a dark day for democracy."
2023: Calls January 6 "an inside job."
2024: "Donald Trump was the greatest president of the 21st century."

ELISE STEFANIK

2015: "I think he has been insulting to women."
2016 [Speaking of some of Trump's policies]: "I don't think that's who we are. That's not according to our constitutional principles."
2024: "I'd be honored to serve in a future Trump administration."

TOM COTTON

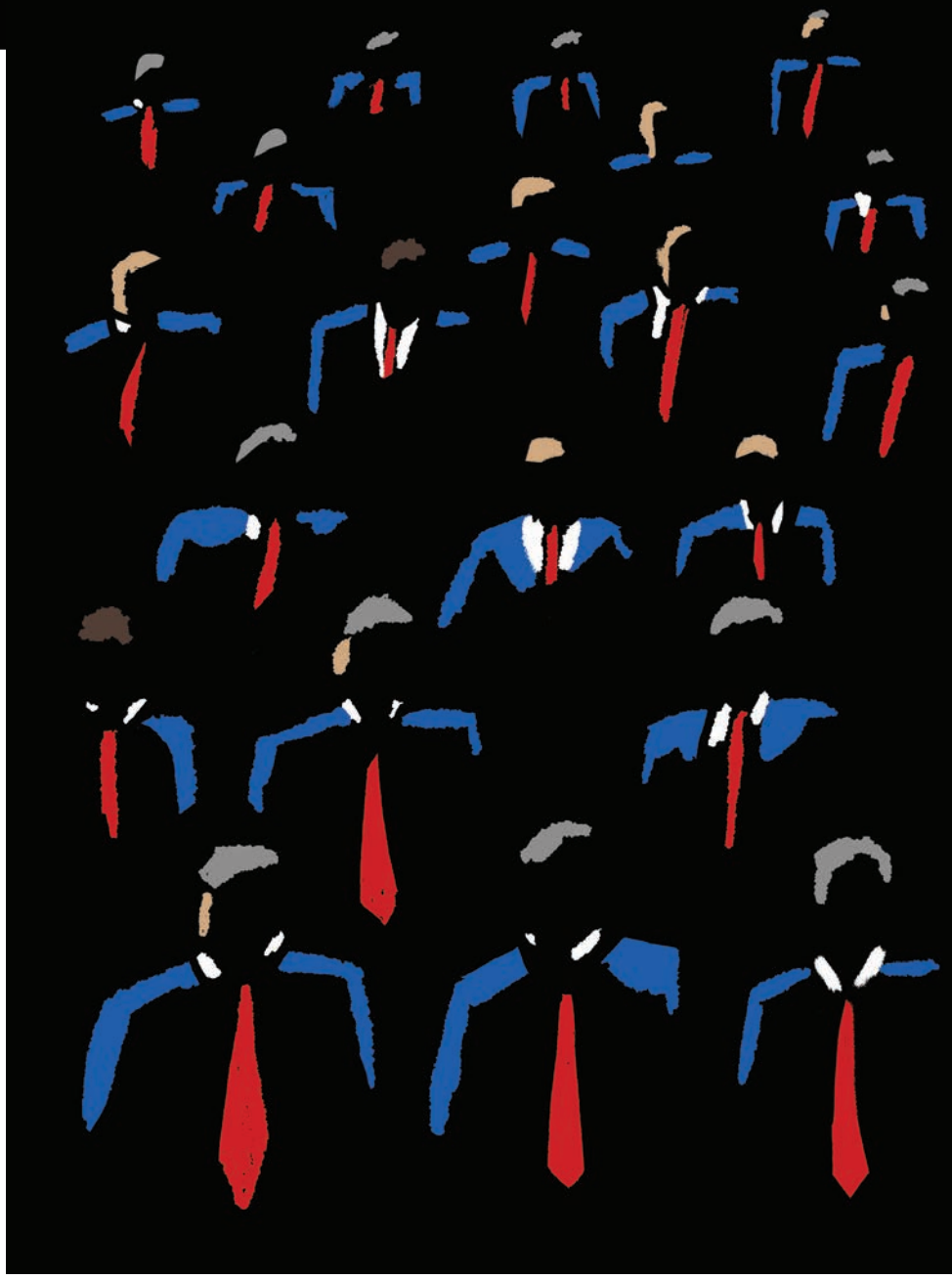
2021: "It's past time for the president to accept the results of the election, quit misleading the American people, and repudiate mob violence."
2024: "When Donald Trump was president, America was safe, strong, and prosperous."

MIKE JOHNSON

2015: "The thing about Donald Trump is that he lacks the character and the moral center we desperately need again in the White House … He is a hot head by nature, and that is a dangerous trait to have in a Commander in Chief … I just don't think he has the demeanor to be president."
2023: "I'm all in for President Trump."

J. D. VANCE

2016–17: Trump is "cultural heroin" … "Never liked him" … "I'm a 'Never Trump' guy" … "Mr. Trump is unfit for our nation's highest office" … "a moral disaster" … "America's Hitler."
2024: Named Donald Trump's running mate.



As I left the Hilton, I ran into Ron Kaufman, a Republican committeeman from Massachusetts. I was surprised to find that Kaufman, a vestige of the pre-Trump party—he served in George H. W. Bush's administration—was still involved with the RNC. As it would turn out, he would not be there much longer: Kaufman was voted off by the MAGA-fied committee a month later.

He had to have seen this coming. Kaufman remained close to Mitt Romney and, unlike McDaniel, did nothing to hide this association. After Houston, Kaufman told me, he was heading down to Florida to celebrate Romney's 77th birthday, not far—geographically, anyway—from Mar-a-Lago, where Trump would be receiving a dear friend of his own the same weekend: Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, an authoritarian whom Trump hailed as the best leader in the world.

Kaufman told me he was fine with Trump, explaining to me in the common parlance of a practiced Trump apologist that "not everybody likes his style."

"Don't you have any ambivalence at all about Trump?" I asked.

"I have ambivalence about my first wife," Kaufman replied.

This was not an answer I was expecting.

"But you probably wouldn't vote for her as president, either," I said. "Or would you?"

I include this exchange because it typifies how some longtime Republican officials—clearly uneasy about Trump—can become comically evasive whenever asked about him. I interviewed several who veered straight into spheroid equivocation.

Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, whom Trump famously tried to strong-arm to "find 11,780 votes" to overturn Biden's 2020 victory in the state, seemed especially anxious when I had breakfast with him in Atlanta in May. "Why are you so afraid of saying what you really feel about Trump?" I asked.

"Because no one gives me the platform to do that," he replied.

"But I just did," I said.

"That's not the platform," Raffensperger said, looking down at the phone on which I was recording our discussion.

(Raffensperger's communications aide then jumped in, effectively shutting down whatever platform this was or wasn't.)

The night before, which happened to be primary night in Georgia, I'd attended an election watch party hosted by Mike Dugan, a former Republican majority leader in the state senate who was running for an open congressional seat near the Alabama border.

"Does anything about Trump give you pause?" I'd asked him.

"Oh yeah, I don't want to hang out with him," Dugan had told me, adding that he likes many of Trump's policies.

But what about all of the outrage, distraction, and controversy Trump tends to generate?

"He's not asking me to come play golf with him," Dugan had explained to me.

"What if he did ask?"

"I'm not a golfer."

Unluckily for Dugan, his main Republican rival for the congressional seat, Brian Jack, used to work for Trump in the White House. Back in March, Trump had traveled to Rome, Georgia, for a rally in which he would praise Jack as "a fighter" and "a MAGA man."

Jack seemed like a savvy operative with good political instincts (proof: he did not respond to my texts). "I am both humbled and honored to earn your endorsement," he said at the rally for the

BEN HICKEY

man he called "the greatest president and political athlete of all time." As someone who has hung around Trump a lot, Jack knew enough to focus on the boss's main erogenous zone: his golf game. Trump appears to reserve special appreciation for those attendants who are willing to exult in his alleged physical prowess—right out of the authoritarian playbook of the bare-chested and robust Vladimir Putin on horseback.

"I'm not sure if I should say this," Jack said faux-sheepishly, "but, just a few weeks ago, President Trump put to shame two professional golfers." He then revealed that Trump had shot a 70 on 18 holes. This sounded impressive, I thought, though not as impressive as the 11 holes in one that the North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il shot in the first golf game he ever played (source: North Korean state media, 1994).

Although Jack was not yet well known in this heavily Republican district, he was "Trump-endorsed"—all the yard signs said so—which is akin to a golden ticket in today's GOP. (Jack wound up winning the primary by a large margin.) The path always starts with a beeline to Trump's rump. As Florida Governor Ron DeSantis observed in January: "You can be the most worthless Republican in America, but if you kiss the ring, he'll say you're wonderful."

In 2022, J. D. Vance proved himself a master. Although the Senate candidate from Ohio had previously dismissed Trump as "noxious," "reprehensible," and "cultural heroin," among other things, he worked to convince Trump that he was reformed. Trump may or may not have believed him, but he very much relished the grovel of it.

"J.D. is kissing my ass. He wants my support so bad!" Trump bragged at a campaign stop with Vance in Youngstown in 2022. He also claimed that Vance had fallen "in love" with him. If anything, this is the fun part for Trump: showing off that he has snapped up another politician like a distressed condo asset. He had made another Republican candidate—a rich Ivy League ex-Marine, no less—self-emasculate on his behalf.

If Trump had a mustache, his acolytes would all grow and groom one just like his—as Baath Party loyalists did for Saddam Hussein.

THEY ALL WORE RED TIES, or most of them did. Fat and long, the signature Trumpian garments hung just below their belts. It was not clear whether Trump himself cared (he probably did; such an honor!), but dressing in the boss's full uniform—white shirt, navy suit, and the signature neckwear—was an added curtsy. If Trump had a mustache, his acolytes would all grow and groom one just like his—as Baath Party loyalists did for Saddam Hussein.

They made their pilgrimage to the Manhattan Criminal Courthouse, where Trump spent a good part of May facing 34 criminal counts stemming from his ill-fated attempt to hide a $130,000 payment to his alleged porno paramour. The acolytes flanked their victim/defendant on the 15th floor as he sat with his arms crossed, jacket open, and eyes closed through prolonged stretches. "I do have a lot of surrogates, and they are speaking very beautifully," Trump bragged during one of his news conferences.

My visit to 100 Centre Street coincided with the arrival of a large retinue of Trump's defenders: 11 Republican House members made the trip that Thursday. They would take turns decrying ("very beautifully") the "political persecution" that was taking place and the travesty of how Biden had "weaponized" the courts against the "greatest president in history." I waited for the House members at a park across the street from the courthouse, along with a daily clot of reporters and camera-people, clusters of pro- and anti-Trump demonstrators, and some bemused tourists, most of them from other countries, who had no idea what they'd stumbled upon.

"Standing back and standing by, Mr. President," said Representative Matt Gaetz, the poofy-haired provocateur from Florida who led that day's brownnoser brigade. Gaetz's words, which appeared on X, intentionally echoed Trump's from the 2020 debate where he'd been asked to condemn neofascist groups who had been disrupting some of that summer's Black Lives Matter protests. "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by" is how Trump responded to the debate question, less a call for restraint than a call to action. ("A dog whistle through a bullhorn" is how Kamala Harris described it at the time.)

Each of the Trump toadies in attendance outside the courthouse said their piece about the towering injustice that was occurring inside. Trump is "in good spirits," Representative Anna Paulina Luna of Florida reported, while Gaetz complained that their hero was facing "the Mr. Potato Head doll of crimes," which is not technically a legal classification, by the way.

A group of New York hecklers greeted the traveling-circus caucus with Bronx cheers. One man stood behind the field-trippers holding a BOOTLICKERS sign.

"Lies, lies," the hecklers cried out.

"Get the fuck out of New York!"

"Go to fucking hell!"

"Matt Gaetz is a pedophile!"

Representative Lauren Boebert of Colorado started to speak but was interrupted by chants of "Beetlejuice, Beetlejuice," which, for the uninitiated, referred to an incident at a Denver theater in September 2023 when Boebert was evicted from the musical comedy for performing a series of infractions in her seat: vaping, giggling, and fondling her date below the belt.

Straining to be heard over the hecklers, Boebert vowed that neither Trump nor his supporters would be gagged. "President Trump is not going anywhere … And we are not going anywhere, either."

A few minutes later, they were all gone.

BOEBERT SAVED HER BEST WORK for that night back at the Capitol, where the House Oversight Committee held a session to debate contempt charges against Attorney General Merrick Garland. (Originally scheduled for that morning, it had been postponed because so many members were in New York.) Boebert took the opportunity to boast on Trump's behalf about one of his favorite topics: his supreme intelligence—as evidenced by the fact that, as Trump loves to mention, he allegedly once "aced" some cognitive test.

But here's what Boebert actually said: "President Trump, when he was in office, underwent testing for his cognitive dissonance."

I've noticed that for whatever reason, Trump is a magnet for these kinds of mangled phrases, misstatements, and malapropisms. This might be because those who speak excitedly about Trump, including Trump himself, tend to talk fast and off-the-cuff and perhaps have less capacity than most for shame and embarrassment (and grammar). They can be desperate to please and maybe get careless or lapse into Freudian candor. "We've been waging an all-out war on American democracy," Trump announced in Iowa this past December.

Boebert's "cognitive dissonance" claim made me think of the early days of COVID, in 2020, when Trump tried to convince everyone that the pandemic would soon disappear. Why? Because you'll develop "a herd mentality," Trump explained at a town hall in Pennsylvania. He presumably meant "herd immunity," but this felt like an apt malapropism, if there is such a thing.

Trump's movement had in fact drawn his followers together as a self-reinforcing herd. They were joined in contempt for a unified enemies list—defined loosely as liberal elites. They also shared the buoyant faith that supporting Trump would be a panacea. "Four more years, it'll be fixed, it'll be fine, you won't have to vote anymore," Trump reassured a gathering of Christian conservatives this past July.

"What Trump offers is an easy escape from the pain," as Vance wrote in this magazine in 2016. He was a fierce critic of Trump before he became a Republican Senate candidate who saw an obvious path to the front of the herd.

Vance was one of several vice-presidential prospects who trekked to New York to audition to be Trump's next Mike Pence. He donned the red tie and nailed his umbrage marks. Vivek Ramaswamy, the super-thirsty former GOP-primary candidate, performed his own star turn at the courthouse, but with one notable hiccup. "Let's pray for our country being stronger on the other side of this disgusting sham politician," Ramaswamy said. He tried to correct himself—"prosecution"—but it was too late. The word had escaped. The moment went viral.

Cognitive dissonance can be exhausting, and there's a lot of that going around the herd these days. I kept thinking about this as I ambled through the Republican convention. It was such an upbeat and cheerful affair, not characteristic at all of these gatherings since Trump took over the franchise and made it a grievance-filled and even menacing place. Trump was solidly up in the polls. He'd just survived an assassination attempt, which lent a charmed-life quality to the proceedings.

Several delegates I spoke with said the near miss proved that Trump either had been touched by God or possessed a superhuman ability to withstand danger. Biden, meanwhile, seemed old and tired, and his campaign appeared terminal (and in fact it was).

Yet beneath the Republicans' triumphalist excitement in Milwaukee, I sensed an undercurrent of disbelief. They were projecting confidence, yes, but there was a tight, gritted-teeth quality to this, of a once-serious party that had now been subdued, disoriented, and denuded of whatever their convictions once were. The final scene of *The Graduate* came to mind: Dustin Hoffman and Katharine Ross were out of breath after catching the bus. They had gotten what they thought they wanted. But what had they really just done—again?

Republicans had expressed these doubts before, and not so long ago, before they all capitulated. I watched a lot of Trump's biggest former skeptics as they peacocked their way through the arena: Rubio, Cruz, Graham, Vance, DeSantis, Burgum, Ramaswamy, Elise Stefanik, and the rest. They had made their calculations, wore their practiced faces of satisfaction, and had somehow found a way to live with the learned helplessness that Trump had reduced them to. But others who had served Trump had made different judgments. I kept recalling the words of retired Marine Corps General James Mattis, who had been Trump's first secretary of defense. Mattis, who was of course nowhere near this convention, had issued a statement on the night of January 6, 2021, blasting Trump as well as those who enabled him as "pseudo political leaders whose names will live in infamy as profiles in cowardice." In other words: They all knew better.

That was the nagging dissonance of this spectacle: the gap between what the GOP traditionally believed and what it now allows itself to abide. The party that allegedly reveres the Constitution is going all in on someone who has called for its termination. A party that cherishes freedom is willing to cede authority to a candidate who says he would be a dictator on his first day in office. A party that supposedly venerates law and order is re-upping with an actual felon. A party whose rank and file overwhelmingly wants Russia to defeat Ukraine believes that Biden stole the 2020 election, and that Trump's legal shambles are entirely a Democratic plot. This is now a party whose standard-bearer has not been endorsed by any former Republican president or nominee, or even his own vice president, who barely escaped death by hanging the last time. And to what end, any of it?

Or maybe the dissonance doesn't matter. Trump can do as he pleased, as he predicted. "Well, I think we've had very weak people," he said in 2015. "I look at some of the people that are running, and I think they're not strong people." I remember hearing that as bombast at the time, the kind of casual dismissals Trump tosses around. In retrospect, though, Trump was prospecting, sizing up the Republican "leaders" he would be competing against. If nothing else, Trump has a keen eye for finding soft targets: pushovers he can bully, rules he can flout, entire political parties he can raze and remake in his image. He would roll over them. *A*

Mark Leibovich is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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THE RADICAL CONVERSION OF MIKE LEE

BY TIM ALBERTA

Photographs by Justin T. Gellerson

When it was finally his turn to speak during the televised roll call at this summer's Republican National Convention, Senator Mike Lee wore the canny smile of a man who was selling something bigger than his home state of Utah. "It's a place where we love freedom, we love the Constitution," Lee said, "and we *despise* tyranny."

Watching Lee from some 20 feet away as he spoke, I felt a twinge of déjà vu. Hadn't I heard him deliver these same patriotic bromides at a Republican convention before? Yes, I had. It was 2016, in Cleveland. Lee had gone there with a radical agenda: to sabotage Donald Trump's nomination for president. First, he maneuvered his way onto the convention's rule-making committee. Then, he led a push by Never Trumpers to unbind the convention's delegates—that is, to release them from their obligation to vote for Trump as the party's nominee. I was there, watching the drama up close, talking with Lee and other ringleaders in a cramped corridor just outside the committee room as they schemed and argued and tried every trick imaginable to outsmart the party enforcers who'd been tasked with putting down their rebellion.

In public remarks and private discussions leading up to Trump's coronation, Lee invoked nothing less than the survival of American democracy. "I'd like some assurances that he is going to be a vigorous defender for the U.S. Constitution," Lee said on Newsmax TV. "That he's not going to be an autocrat, that he's not going to be an authoritarian."

Cleveland was the climax of Lee's yearlong effort to stop Trump. During the primaries, he had implored activist leaders to rally their organizations behind his best friend, Senator Ted Cruz, who had emerged as Trump's chief rival. With Cruz headed for defeat in the spring of 2016, Lee had tried to broker a meeting between the senator from Texas and their Florida colleague, Marco Rubio, hoping they might form a joint ticket to take down Trump. When the Cleveland plot fell apart, it marked Lee's third failure. He still refused to endorse the party's new standard-bearer. Then, that fall, Lee spotted one final opportunity. Hours after the *Access Hollywood* tape was published, he became one of the first Republicans in Congress to call on Trump to quit the race. "If anyone spoke to my wife, or my daughter, or my mother, or any of my five sisters the way Mr. Trump has spoken to women, I wouldn't hire that person," Lee said in a Facebook Live video. "I certainly don't think I'd feel comfortable hiring that person to be the leader of the free world."

And then Trump was hired as the leader of the free world—triggering an about-face from Lee that rivals even that of J. D. Vance, who once wrote that he feared Trump could be "America's Hitler" before becoming his running mate.

What began as a reluctant, transactional alliance—advising on judicial picks, working with Trump on criminal-justice reform—soon became personal. Lee grew to relish dining at the White House and flying on Air Force One. He told friends that Trump was funny, charming, kindhearted. Before anyone could make sense of it, Lee emerged as one of Trump's staunchest defenders. He steered the Senate Republicans' strategy to acquit the president following his first impeachment. Then, after Trump lost his reelection bid, Lee conspired with right-wing extremists inside and outside the White House to keep the president in office.

Listening to Lee as he addressed the 2024 convention in Milwaukee, I was baffled by the impossible symmetry of it all. Here was the senator speaking about freedom and tyranny—not as a rebuke of the man who he'd feared was an authoritarian, but as an endorsement of him. "Utah, the 45th state admitted to the union," Lee declared from the convention floor, "today proudly casts all of its 40 delegate votes for President Donald J. Trump!"

To hear Lee's friends, allies, and former staffers tell it—and they did, by the dozens, though many requested anonymity to avoid retaliation from the senator—Lee is all but unrecognizable. Once a good-natured Latter-day Saint whose idea of edgy was doing corny impersonations of his fellow senators, he now regularly engages in crude conspiracy theories. Once a politician who seemed to be fashioning himself as a modern Daniel Patrick Moynihan of the right, Lee is now a very online MAGA influencer. It's as if Ned Flanders became a 4chan troll.

Lee will be a top candidate for attorney general if Trump wins in November, according to people close to the former president. This might prove to be the most treacherous position in Washington in 2025: the nation's chief law-enforcement officer, serving at the pleasure of a lawless president who has vowed to wield the justice system against his political opponents as "retribution" for his own criminal prosecutions. Trump has openly toyed with terminating the Constitution. He has also

The more we dwelled on Lee's actions during the 2016 campaign—suggesting that Trump was an aspiring autocrat, attempting to sabotage his nomination, calling for him to quit the race—the more contrite Lee sounded for ever having doubted Trump in the first place.

floated subversive ideas—military tribunals for his critics, religious litmus tests for immigrants—that, during his first term, would have been opposed by a remnant of principled Republicans. Today it's unclear whether any such remnant exists. In our many hours of conversation this spring and summer, Lee did not sound to me like a man interested in holding the line.

The day after his floor speech in Milwaukee, Lee sat down across from me at a small table inside the convention's security perimeter. When I showed him a photograph—the senator himself, on the convention floor back in 2016, screaming in opposition to a rules package that effectively ended the campaign to free delegates to vote against Trump—Lee grimaced. I asked him whether he'd changed over the past eight years.

"All of us change as times change," he said, shrugging.

As our conversation went on, however, the senator's tone shifted. He began to insist that, in fact, he hadn't changed; that what the world was seeing and hearing from him was no Trump-induced abnormality but rather the realest, rawest version of himself. "Those who know me," Lee said, "know that privately, this is who I am."

Everyone I talked with wanted to know the same thing: What happened to Mike Lee? Of all the possible answers to that question, this one—that nothing has changed about the man—is the least satisfying. It may also be the most revealing.

REX EDWIN LEE was a giant of the conservative legal movement. Raised in small-town Arizona, Lee graduated as valedictorian from Brigham Young University and finished first in his class at the University of Chicago Law School. At 36, he was recruited to become the founding dean of BYU's law school, a position he held until a newly elected president, Ronald Reagan, came calling. Serving as solicitor general during Reagan's first term, Lee argued before the Supreme Court with "an astonishing rate of success," according to the *New York Times*' obituary, winning a great majority of his cases and earning renown, according to former Justice David Souter, as "the best solicitor general this nation has ever had."

CHIP SOMODEVILLA / GETTY

Lee and the Utah delegate Phill Wright shout "No!" to the rules package that secured Trump's nomination at the 2016 Republican National Convention, in Cleveland.

But Lee's real legacy is independence as much as intellect. Not long after Reagan appointed him, the *Times* noted, "White House political aides soon discovered that he was not automatically their man." Lee was reliably conservative on a host of matters—busing, abortion, prayer in schools—yet he sometimes set aside his own views, and those of the administration he represented, for what he described as "the broad interests of the nation." The resulting conflicts with Reagan's Republican Party, and criticism from far-right conservatives, wore Lee down. Resigning his post in June 1985, Lee remarked of the political pressure he faced: "I'm the solicitor general, not the pamphleteer general."

Lee had seven children. His two sons followed him into the legal profession. The elder, Thomas, would emulate his father's career arc: graduating with high honors from the University of Chicago Law School, arguing before the U.S. Supreme Court, and accepting an appointment to the Utah Supreme Court. Six and a half years behind him was Rex's other son, Michael.

The younger Lee moved at age 10 with his family to the wealthy suburbs of Washington, D.C., and spent his formative years there. His in-home Mormon mentor was a congressman named Harry Reid; his friends and classmates were the children of politicians. Lee still remembers the first time he was allowed to skip school and watch his father litigate before the high court, he told me. The sight of those ancient lawgivers, carved into marble, adorning the courtroom walls. The booming baritone of the marshal. The nine justices emerging from behind a grand red-velvet curtain. The senator doesn't recall the details of the case his dad was arguing. But he knew that he'd stepped into a realm of the powerful and profound—and, before long, he found himself wanting to be a part of it.

Like his father and brother, Lee attended BYU for his undergraduate degree. Unlike them, he stayed there for his legal studies. There was no shame in this; Rex, who had since returned to BYU, this time as the university's president, had helped build the law school into one of America's top-tier programs. Even so, it was apparent that Mike wasn't a legal prodigy like Thomas. While the older Lee was clerking for the U.S. Supreme Court, the younger brother failed, in his first attempt, to qualify for the *BYU Law Review*. Classmates described this as a humiliating setback: The *Law Review* was effectively a prerequisite for earning prestigious clerkships down the line, and Lee was suddenly forced to consider the limitations of his own career.

"I remember having conversations with him. He was disappointed he didn't get onto *Law Review*, trying to figure out, 'Well, where do I go from here?'" Elizabeth Clark, Lee's classmate, said. "He

anticipated, you know, having a career more like his father or brother."

In 1996, during Mike's second year of law school, his father died of cancer. He was just 61 years old. Rex was eulogized by his eldest son, as well as by two Supreme Court justices—the Reagan appointee Sandra Day O'Connor and Byron White, a retired Kennedy appointee—who celebrated the solicitor general for something far more enduring than his obvious legal genius. "He was," White said, "the epitome of integrity."

Mike Lee did eventually qualify for the *Law Review* and was on staff during his final year in law school, with Clark as editor in chief. By that point, however, his priorities were shifting. Classmates recalled that he seemed more interested in arguing for Republican policies than debating constitutional minutiae. "He started to come across as really partisan—frankly, in a way that stood out, because it was the opposite of his father's reputation," Richard Blake, who worked alongside Lee on the *Law Review*, told me. Clark added: "Mike was trying to sort of form his own identity and way forward. And I think political life was definitely part of that."

What Lee lacked in achievement—he did not graduate with honors—he made up for with raw ambition. In the decade after he finished law school, he checked the boxes of elite American jurisprudence: prosecuting for a U.S. Attorney's Office, working in private practice, and clerking for two federal judges, including Justice Samuel Alito. What changed the course of Lee's career was a stint as general counsel to Utah Governor Jon Huntsman Jr. A wealthy moderate from the state's most powerful Republican political family, Huntsman took a liking to Lee. Before long, the young lawyer was making a name for himself among Utah's ruling class of Republicans.

One of those Republicans was Enid Mickelsen, a former congresswoman who would soon become chair of the state party. Mickelsen had the highest regard for Rex Lee—she had taken his constitutional-law class at BYU and "idolized him like everyone else did," she told me—and had heard great things about his son. But before long, Mickelsen began to develop misgivings about Mike Lee. She remembers thinking: "Something's off with this guy."

In 2009, around the time Barack Obama's presidency sent the GOP spiraling into paranoia and mass folly, Lee began holding pop-up "Constitution seminars" across Utah. Meeting with small groups of activists, he would warn them about the dangerous consolidation of power in the executive branch and the creep of an imperial presidency. There was not yet a visible movement of Gadsden flags and tricorn hats. Yet Lee was every bit the Tea Party prototype, declaring war on a corrupt Republican establishment while raising hysterical alarms about Obama and the Democratic Party. Lee never embraced the "birther" lie—he was too smart for that—but he found ways to wink and nod at the fringe of the new right. Most notable, as he parlayed the popularity of those seminars into a long-shot bid for the U.S. Senate in 2010, Lee promised that, if elected, he would work to end birthright citizenship, which is guaranteed under the Fourteenth Amendment.

"That's when the hair on the back of my neck stood up," Mickelsen told me. "He was telling people what they wanted to hear, not what was true."

Lee had the perfect foil in Senator Bob Bennett, an institutionalist and a close ally of the GOP leader Mitch McConnell. Bennett had spent decades cutting deals and keeping Washington working. Now he was the target of a populist uprising led by the unlikeliest of agitators: the Beltway-raised progeny of Ronald Reagan's solicitor general. When GOP delegates voted in the May 2010 nominating convention, Bennett placed third. Lee and the top vote-getter, the businessman Tim Bridgewater, advanced to a runoff.

By that point, the Tea Party wave had begun to crash over the Republican Party—Rand Paul in Kentucky, Marco Rubio in Florida. Suddenly, in the six weeks between the Utah convention and the runoff election, the Senate Conservatives Fund poured money into Lee's campaign, while FreedomWorks exported a ground game to Utah on his behalf. These organizations were promising to remind a wayward GOP of its foundational small-government ethos. With their help, Lee won the runoff by two points—fewer than 5,000 votes—and, having secured the GOP nomination in safely red Utah, was on his way to Washington.

Lee was now indebted to leaders of a conservative movement who viewed him as their proxy in a brewing war with the Republican establishment. Several of Lee's contemporaries back then told me that, had the new senator been accepted by McConnell and his allies, he would have fallen in line and become a team player. But he wasn't—and he most certainly didn't.

"Had he not gotten caught up in Tea Party movement when he first got elected, he might have had a very different career. He might have been much more of a mainstream Republican," Spencer Stokes, Lee's first Senate chief of staff, told me. "But Mike craves respect. Those groups on the right gave it to him. And because there were no accolades from the mainstream, he stayed where the accolades were." (Lee's response to this: "I stayed where the truth was.")

He was certainly convincing. Several of Lee's colleagues from that era told me they believed that, perhaps more than any other conservative in Congress, Utah's new senator was the real deal. He spoke the language of limited government—constitutionalism as a check on the executive branch, federalism as a hedge against the abuses of Washington—in a more grounded and less delusional way than many of his Tea Party allies did. Which, they said, is what makes his career arc so baffling.

"If someone told me back then that Mike Lee would sell his soul to Donald Trump, I would have never believed it," Joe Walsh, the former representative from Illinois who came to D.C. alongside Lee in the Tea Party class of 2010, told me. "I still can't believe it."

LEE DID NOT ENJOY his first two years in Congress, several of his friends told me. Republicans were in the minority, and he was adrift—not effective enough to be a real problem for the GOP leadership, but not relevant enough, like Rubio and Paul, to garner much attention of his own. Lee passed no meaningful legislation, made few real friends, and built no obviously distinct profile. And then along came Ted Cruz.

Lee first met Cruz in November 2010 at a Federalist Society event in D.C. Lee

"All of us change as times change," he said, shrugging.

told the former solicitor general of Texas that he'd seen him argue in front of the U.S. Supreme Court and was impressed; Cruz told Lee he planned to run for Senate in 2012 and wanted an endorsement. Lee had never given an endorsement before. When Lee decided to back him—"You're probably the closest thing to my ideological twin that I'm gonna find," he told Cruz—he envisioned a new dynamic duo in the Senate, a pair of separated-at-birth freedom fighters who would storm McConnell's castle and revolutionize the GOP.

Things didn't quite work out that way. Lee and Cruz did indeed become inseparable in 2013 as the Republican Party clashed with the Obama administration on spending, a government shutdown, and the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Yet while Lee logged countless hours thinking through policy proposals and parliamentary tactics that Republicans might try, it was Cruz who became the front man. The new senator from Texas was less interested in incremental wins than in dramatic standoffs that would prove his never-say-die mettle to the GOP base. Several former Lee staffers described to me his intermittent fury with Cruz for taking legitimate legislative plans and turning them into kamikaze missions ahead of a presidential run in 2016.

Still, Lee could feel the tide shifting in his and Cruz's direction. Since the 2010 midterm elections, Tea Party conservatives had continued to barrage the GOP establishment. Now, with the 2016 presidential cycle drawing near, Lee sensed an opening to seize control of the party—and Cruz appeared best positioned to lead the charge. It didn't matter, at this point, that Lee was the Robin to Cruz's Batman; Robin would be in line for a Cabinet post at minimum, or, more likely, either a Supreme Court seat or the role of attorney general.

Of course, Donald Trump had other ideas. After laying waste to the large, talented field of Republican hopefuls in the primaries, Trump wound up in a head-to-head contest against Cruz. The scorched-earth campaign that ensued—questioning Cruz's citizenship, calling his wife ugly, suggesting that his father had played a part in John F. Kennedy's assassination—was just as unsettling to Lee as Trump's philosophical incoherence was. The Republican front-runner had no apparent reverence for the nation's founding documents; he had, in one meeting with congressional conservatives, promised to protect Article XII of the Constitution—despite the Constitution having only seven articles. If anything, he could come across as a liberal, swearing off entitlement cuts and defending Planned Parenthood during the campaign.

I observed to Lee how, at that point, he seemed bewildered. He nodded.

"Bewildered," he said, "and frightened."

This was a disorienting time for Tea Party conservatives. The long-tread-upon GOP base had finally risen up against the domineering party elite, demanding transparency and a return to small-government piety—only to then flock to a thrice-married philanderer for whom lies were a second language and conviction came only in the form of self-glorification.

"This is not how I would've predicted things," Lee told me. "Or wanted things."

The closest he ever came to making sense of it, Lee said, was in conversation one day with a trusted member of his staff. The way the staffer saw it, American politics had turned into a raucous bar fight at a Wild West saloon. "Donald Trump walks up to the bar, and he's got a beer bottle in his hand, and he breaks the beer bottle in half over the counter and brandishes it," Lee said, recalling the metaphor. "Immediately, a bunch of people in the room get behind him. Because he's being assertive. And odds are lower, as they perceive it, that they'll be hurt if they get behind him."

Lee didn't care about getting hurt—at least, not back then. He began taking meetings with fellow conservatives in Washington—elected officials, think tankers, movement leaders—in hopes of preventing Trump's nomination. The best idea anyone could come up with was an effort to free the convention delegates in Cleveland. This would set a dangerous precedent, effectively disenfranchising the millions of voters who'd chosen him as their party's nominee. But to Lee, Trump represented enough of a menace to justify such drastic measures.

In the weeks before the convention, both the senator and his wife procured spots on the rules committee that would finalize the bylaws governing the event. The leadership of the Republican National Committee had hand-selected a group of experienced party officials to manage the rule-making process. And the chair of that committee, as luck would have it, was Enid Mickelsen—hardly a Trump enthusiast, yet an enforcer of party norms all the same.

The uprising was a flop. After he failed to fix the rules against Trump in committee, Lee resorted to histrionics. When it came time for the whole convention to vote on the rules, Lee stood at the fore of Utah's delegation shouting "No!"—a scene captured by media outlets worldwide. The senator then began telling Utah's delegates that they would still have the chance to oppose Trump's nomination on the convention floor, because Cruz had carried the state's primary contest. But this wasn't true. Cruz was no longer technically a candidate for president, so pursuant to the proceedings of a convention, no state could cast its delegate votes in his favor. Lee knew that—but charged ahead anyway, dramatizing his show of defiance. "He lied to those Utah delegates. He manipulated them," Mickelsen said. "All so he could get them riled up for this demonstration on the floor to prove how anti-Trump he was."

Lee insisted then and now that his real mission in Cleveland was to correct long-standing problems in the party's rule book; that it had nothing to do with resisting Trump. But everyone who was there and who watched his wrangling knew better. Numerous Utah Republicans who spent time with Lee in Cleveland told me he was devastated by the

failure to stop Trump's nomination. One of them was Todd Weiler, a state senator who'd tutored Lee as a teaching assistant in law school. At one point, as Weiler and I compared notes about that mutiny, I mentioned that Lee had been motivated by a belief that Trump represented a threat to American democracy.

"Was he wrong?" Weiler asked.

After the convention fiasco, Lee went dark for a while. He mused to friends about leaving the GOP; about registering as an independent, or perhaps as a Libertarian. Then came the *Access Hollywood* tape in October 2016. Lee immediately called a meeting with his top staffers. They agreed that it was best for him to keep quiet and let the situation play out. A few hours later—to the shock of his aides—the senator posted a four-minute video online calling for Trump to quit the race.

I had long wondered, given Lee's foresight in diagnosing the dangers of Trumpism, whether he harbored any regret about allying himself with the man. Instead, the more we dwelled on Lee's actions during the 2016 campaign—suggesting that Trump was an aspiring autocrat, attempting to sabotage his nomination, calling for him to quit the race—the more contrite Lee sounded for having doubted Trump in the first place.

"I was a jerk," the senator said. "I was a jerk to him."

It was a remarkable moment. After all of Trump's cruel, ad hominem venom throughout that 2016 campaign, I said to Lee, *you're* the jerk?

"Fair enough," the senator said. "But his decisions don't have to determine mine."

IN THE WEEKS after Election Day 2016, Trump Tower was the world capital of kissing and making up. Republicans who'd spent part of the past year and a half denouncing Trump were now coming to terms with reality: They needed him. This was a tactic of self-preservation, but even more so, it was an opportunity. The incoming president had no perceptible governing agenda. In that vacuum, everyone realized, ordinary lawmakers were about to become extraordinarily powerful. Hence the pilgrimage of countless erstwhile critics—Republicans from every possible rank, including ones who'd called Trump a con artist, a cancer, and worse—who came bearing the gift of surrender.

To hear Lee tell it, he made the trip for a different reason.

"At the request of some mutual friends, I went to Trump Tower after he was elected," he recalled. The purpose of this summit, Lee said, was to "clear the air." He described a conversation in which he tried politely to defuse tensions as Trump harped on the senator's past criticisms. Finally, Lee told me, he ran out of patience.

"I just said, 'Look, let me be frank. I just got reelected. You just got elected. So, for the next four years, we're gonna have some interaction. So let me just be very clear about where we stand,'" Lee recalled. "'Insofar as you undermine constitutionally limited government … I will be a thorn in your side, a pain in your neck. I will be your worst nightmare. You will wish I was never born.'"

Lee was hissing every syllable now, leaning toward me, reenacting this moment of machismo. "'And insofar as you fight to protect those things, I'll be your friend and your ally, and we can work effectively together,'" Lee concluded, offering a practiced scowl that suggested he'd told this story before. "'Do I make myself clear?'"

The obvious questions around this account notwithstanding—from what I've gathered, never in his life has Lee spoken to anyone this way—he and Trump did seem to broker a peace. His first year in office, Trump traveled to Utah and Lee rode along on Air Force One. "I got to know him as a person. I realized that there's a lot more to him than people realize," Lee told me. "He has deep empathy for Americans. You find him to be a genuinely likable person."

By this point, Republicans controlled the White House and both chambers of Congress, and onetime skeptics like Lee were racing ahead, eager to squeeze as many policy and political wins out of this unforeseen presidency as possible. In fairness to Lee, he wasn't a rubber stamp for the administration—he broke with Trump on raising the debt ceiling, reauthorizing surveillance measures, funding a wall at the southern border, and other issues. (He wanted the border wall, but opposed the funding contrivances Trump pushed for.)

The true test, though, was always going to be what Lee would do when Trump began abusing power. The first impeachment trial was one harbinger. Some Republicans concluded that, although Trump's actions—withholding aid from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky while pressuring him to investigate Joe Biden—were inappropriate, they did not rise to the level of high crimes and misdemeanors. Lee went further. He met with White House attorneys to plot Trump's defense. He bragged on Fox News that he was going to "embarrass the heck out of the Democratic Party." He said, in a floor speech before voting to acquit, that the Zelensky phone call was "exactly the sort of thing the American people elected President Trump to do."

This rationale for Trump's behavior—that he'd been handed a mandate by pissed-off voters to change the way Washington operates, etiquette and standards be damned—worked for many politicians in many places. Utah was not always one of them. Trump had won the state with just 46 percent of the vote in 2016. And although one wing of the Republican base there became Trumpier during the president's first two years in office, the other wing became that much more moderate. The result, in 2018, was Utah electing as its newest U.S. senator a man known for being perhaps Trump's biggest antagonist in the Republican Party: Mitt Romney.

Once again, Lee found himself playing second fiddle. And, according to friends, he could not stand it. His annoyance with Romney exerted a sort of magnetic push on Lee, moving the senior senator closer to the MAGA base with the junior senator's every motion away from it. "Maybe," Romney told one confidant, according to my colleague McKay Coppins's book *Romney: A Reckoning*, "he just can't stand being in my shadow." When Romney became the only GOP senator to vote for Trump's conviction, it wasn't enough for Lee to say that Trump had done nothing wrong. He needed to argue that, actually, Trump had done something *right*.

Lee began to see, his friends told me, something fundamentally unfair about the way the president was treated. The more

JUSTIN T. GELLERSON FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

he studied the man, the more he came to see him as bold, even valiant, taking on all comers and keeping a sense of humor about it. By the time of the president's reelection bid in 2020, the senator who'd once tried everything to derail Trump's nomination was now one of his biggest cheerleaders.

"To my Mormon friends, my Latter-day Saint friends, think of him as Captain Moroni," Lee said at a rally in Arizona in the fall of 2020, pointing to Trump nearby. "He seeks not power, but to pull it down. He seeks not the praise of the world or the fake news, but he seeks the well-being and the peace of the American people."

It was a stunning remark—comparing Donald Trump to one of the LDS faith's most heroic figures, who symbolizes humility and selflessness—that angered even some of Trump's most ardent Mormon supporters. Lee had to quickly walk it back.

This episode, however, was about more than an errant turn of phrase. The senator had begun to view Trump as something greater than a president. He was an avatar of masculinity and individuality, a middle finger to the governing class that had shown insurgents like Lee the same disrespect it had shown Trump. Lee was more than smitten; he was spellbound. And it was under that spell that he turned his back on American democracy.

THE SENATOR LIKES to tell a tidy, self-respecting story about his role in Trump's attempted coup. It goes something like this: Lee began to suspect that the people advising Trump in the aftermath of the 2020 election, and the ideas they were putting into his head, were unhelpful.

The only realistic way to keep Trump in office—the only *constitutional* way—was if certain states submitted alternative slates of electors to be considered by Congress when the Electoral College votes were cast on December 14. When no states did so, and the votes were tabulated, and Biden was declared the winner, there was nothing left to do but certify those counts on January 6, 2021. And that's what Lee did.

But this version of events omits certain key details that call into question both his honesty and his allegiance to the Constitution.

In early November, the day the networks called the election for Biden, Lee sent multiple text messages to Mark Meadows, Trump's chief of staff, endorsing the work of the attorney Sidney Powell. Lee called Powell a "straight shooter" and asked that she be brought into the White House to advise the president. A couple of weeks later—after Powell had held a press conference at Republican National Committee headquarters during which she spouted wild allegations and claimed that Trump had "won by a landslide"—Lee recommended to Meadows a new lawyer: John Eastman. This was before Eastman wrote his infamous memo arguing that the vice president had the authority to unilaterally overturn the election results on January 6. But Eastman had already gone public with bogus, uninformed statements suggesting that Democrats had cheated to defeat Trump—and Lee called Meadows's attention to the attorney's "really interesting research."

With the December 14 deadline closing in, Lee told Meadows "there could be a path" to overturning the election if states appointed alternative electors. Meadows replied that he was working on it. But when the states cast their electoral votes in favor of Biden on December 14—and sent no competing electors to Congress—it was over. Legally, constitutionally, and otherwise: Trump was defeated. Lee acknowledged as much to me in our conversations, saying repeatedly that there was no recourse for Trump at that point.

Yet in his texts to Meadows, which were obtained by the House committee investigating the January 6 insurrection and published by CNN, Lee kept pushing. On December 16, he asked Meadows for the White House to provide "some guidance on what arguments to raise" so senators might object to the certifying of Biden's victory. As late as January 4, he told Meadows, "I've been calling state legislators for hours today, and am going to spend hours doing the same tomorrow." The senator said that he was "trying to figure out a path that I can persuasively defend," adding, "We need something from state legislatures to make this legitimate and to have any hope of winning. Even if they can't convene, it might be enough if a majority of them are willing to sign a statement indicating how they would vote."

Lee wants credit because, unlike his friends Ted Cruz and Senator Josh Hawley of Missouri, he ultimately voted to certify all the states' election results. But what he did prior to that was every bit as much an affront to the Constitution, to the peaceful transition of power, and to the institutions of American democracy.

To this day, the senator denies that he—or even Trump—did anything wrong. "Remember," Lee told me, "he in fact left office." The senator paused. "Now, sure, he did some unconventional things beforehand—"

I started to laugh. "Unconventional?"

He shot me a look. "Some *unorthodox* things," Lee said. "Things that I would not have advised him to do."

A mob of protesters tried to kill the vice president inside the U.S. Capitol building, I responded, and Trump did nothing to stop them.

Lee smirked. "Who actually tried to kill Mike Pence?" he asked. "Who actually tried to kill him?"

I pointed out that people chanting to hang Pence had come within yards of the vice president. That was surely more than unconventional, right?

"Okay. Let's strike the word *unconventional*," Lee replied. "He handled it in a way that I wouldn't have advised and didn't advise."

When I asked Lee whether he had any regrets about the events leading up to January 6, he thought for a moment.

"Well, you know," Lee said, "had I known that my texts would be leaked to the public selectively, perhaps I would've said less in text messages."

The senator doesn't seem to regret actively participating in an attempted coup. He regrets being caught.

As we sat in his Washington office this past spring, I asked Lee whether he still worried about Trump's dictatorial tendencies. He responded by running through the former president's accomplishments—a reduced regulatory footprint, lower tax rates, the usual—but skirted any reference to January 6.

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I reminded Lee of Trump's specific comments since leaving office—about terminating the Constitution, about using his office to seek retribution against political opponents—and reminded him of his own prescient warnings, back in 2016, about Trump becoming an authoritarian.

So, again, I asked: Is he still worried?

"I worry about [that] with every president, with every person we elect to any office," Lee replied. "That's why I believe so strongly in federalism and separation of powers." He said that every recent president has expanded the powers of the executive branch, and he cited Biden's unilateral actions on forgiving student loans as the most recent example that concerned him.

I conceded that the expansion of presidential authority in the post-9/11 era was cause for concern. But is there really a comparison between using executive power for loan forgiveness and using executive power to overturn election results and stay in office?

Lee glared at me. "Did he stay in office?" he asked.

This, it seemed, was the best argument that Mike Lee—self-celebrated constitutionalist, sounder of alarms about an "imperial presidency"—could muster. Because Trump had failed in his attempt to subvert the election, it was no big deal.

"You know, both his brother and his father—as the solicitor general and as a judge—they felt bound by precedent. That was their north star," Blake, Lee's old law-school classmate, told me. "Mike's a politician. I'm not sure he feels bound by anything like that."

IN THE SUMMER of 2022, Lee launched a new Twitter account: @BasedMikeLee. Allies noticed that the senator's personal style had begun to evolve rather dramatically, between shaving his head, befriending MAGA figures such as Benny Johnson and Donald Trump Jr., and using saltier language than anything his peers thought was in his vocabulary. But it was the embrace of *based*—Millennial slang for being one's unapologetic true self, regardless of what others might think—that signaled a transformation to the broader world. Two of Lee's friends told me they worried he was having a midlife crisis.

To give a sense of the senator's new online persona: During one stretch this summer, he used the vulgar sexual phrase *raw dogging* to describe Mormons' approach to life; amplified a baseless far-right rumor that Biden was having a medical emergency aboard Air Force One; earned nearly 10 million views by posting a debunked video that purported to show a "badass" Trump golfing one day after he was shot; and insinuated more than once that Biden might in fact be incapacitated or even deceased, suggesting that a "proof-of-life" video be provided by the White House to satisfy his and his followers' concerns.

I was surprised, then, to discover just how different Lee was in person. There were no taunts, no confrontational insults. The guy who posted on X to his hundreds of thousands of followers about false-flag operations against conservatives was mellow and circumspect in our interactions. At one point, speaking in his office, Lee described the current attorney general, Merrick Garland, as a brilliant and decent man who'd found himself in the untenable position of running an ostensibly nonpartisan Justice Department while facing, Lee believes, pressure from a president who "literally tried through multiple angles to imprison" his political rival.

Lee himself could, ironically enough, soon find himself in that very position. When I asked Lee if he would accept Trump's offer to become attorney general, he asked to discuss the topic off the record. I declined. After thinking for a moment, Lee told me he'd have "a lot of questions" about the job before accepting it. But then he clarified: The questions would primarily be about himself—about his career, whether it was the right fit—and not about the man he'd serve.

If Trump does in fact win, and does in fact choose Lee as his attorney general, it's a near certainty that Trump will lean on him—as he did Bill Barr and Jeff Sessions—to use the Justice Department for his political purposes. When I asked Lee about the importance of insulating the attorney general's office from the self-interested whims of a president, his answer wasn't reassuring.

"We speak in romanticized terms about depoliticizing this or that arm of the government," Lee said. "You don't want a government that operates in a manner that's detached from the electoral process and from individuals who are elected … If you insulate the Department of Justice—you truly insulate it from political realities altogether—that means they're subject to no one. And that's its own kind of problem."

But what happens when those political realities drive the nation toward catastrophe? Lee knows that the next four years could be crucial for the future of American politics, jurisprudence, and democracy. A former president and his allies have been criminally prosecuted. And Trump has shown every intention of getting revenge.

"I think there are some doors that just shouldn't be opened," Lee told me. Now that this one is open, he added, "you ought to do everything you can to slam the door."

Would Lee actually defy Trump and slam the door? I put that question to Weiler, the state senator who was Lee's teaching assistant back in law school.

"Umm. I, I, I—I don't know," Weiler answered. "Certainly, he's evolved into a Trump loyalist."

The senator himself believes that the prosecutions of Trump were motivated by a desire to appease the Democratic Party's base. If the Republican base demands that Trump deliver on the "retribution" he's been promising—perhaps against critics such as former Representative Liz Cheney and former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley—then, according to Lee's logic, it might be warranted for the Justice Department to carry out the will of the people.

The first time I visited Lee's office in Washington, I kept staring beyond him at a bronze statue in a corner of the room. It depicted a man, elegantly dressed and evidently deep in thought, his right hand hovering just below his chin as he looked off in search of answers. It was Rex Lee.

I asked the senator whether he ever wonders what his father would have made of all this.

"All the time," Lee answered, looking wistful. He closed his eyes. "All the time."

He didn't elaborate, and I found myself wondering too. *A*

Tim Alberta is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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THE LOYALIST
KASH PATEL WILL DO EXACTLY WHAT TRUMP WANTS.

By Elaina Plott Calabro

Illustrations by Diego Mallo

KASH PATEL WAS DANGEROUS: ON THIS, BOTH TRUMP APPOINTEES AND CAREER OFFICIALS COULD AGREE.

A 40-year-old lawyer with little government experience, he joined the administration in 2019 and rose rapidly. Each new title set off new alarms.

When Patel was installed as chief of staff to the acting secretary of defense just after the 2020 election, Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, advised him not to break the law in order to keep President Donald Trump in power. "Life looks really shitty from behind bars," Milley reportedly told Patel. (Patel denies this.)

When Trump entertained naming Patel deputy director of the FBI, Attorney General Bill Barr confronted the White House chief of staff and said, "Over my dead body."

When, in the final weeks of the administration, Trump planned to name Patel deputy director of the CIA, Gina Haspel, the agency's head, threatened to resign. Trump relented only after an intervention by Vice President Mike Pence and others.

Who was this man, and why did so many top officials fear him?

It wasn't a question of ideology. He wasn't a zealot like Stephen Miller, trying to make the bureaucracy yield to his agenda. Rather, Patel appeared singularly focused on pleasing Trump. Even in an administration full of loyalists, Patel was exceptional in his devotion.

This was what seemed to disturb many of his colleagues the most: Patel was dangerous, several of them told me, not because of a certain plan he would be poised to carry out if given control of the CIA or FBI, but because he appeared to have no plan at all—his priorities today always subject to a mercurial president's wishes tomorrow. (Patel disputes this characterization.)

What *wouldn't* a person like that do, if asked?

Most Americans had no idea Patel existed, yet rarely a day passed when administration leaders weren't reminded that he did. In a year and eight months, they had watched Patel leapfrog from the National Security Council, where he became senior counterterrorism director; to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, where he was principal deputy to the acting director; to the Department of Defense, where his influence rivaled that of the acting secretary himself.

But in the officials' warnings about the various catastrophic ways the rise of an inexperienced lackey to the highest levels of government might end, all Patel seemed to detect was the panic of a "deep state" about to be exposed. Such officials understood, as Patel later wrote, that he "wouldn't sit quietly and accept their actions to stonewall direct orders from the president."

Patel was ultimately denied a role at the pinnacle of the national-security establishment, but Trump has promised to learn from his mistakes. Should he return to the White House, there will be no Milleys, Haspels, or even Barrs to restrain him as he seeks revenge against his political enemies. Instead, there will be Patels—those whose true faith and allegiance belong not to a nation, but to one man.

"Get ready, Kash," Trump said before a gala of young Republicans this past December. "Get ready."

A cursory appraisal of Patel's activities since the Trump administration might suggest that his days as a senior official in the United States government are behind him—that Patel, like countless others on the right, has learned the art of commodifying his association with the former president.

There is, for example, merch: "the official K$h wine!" ($233.99 for six bottles) and the Fight With Kash Punisher Intarsia Reversible Scarf ($25), which Patel wore for his remarks at this year's Conservative Political Action Conference. There are TAKE A LAP

PREVIOUS PAGES: DIEGO MALLO; MARK PETERSON / REDUX

RHINO tank tops ($35), JUSTICE FOR ALL #J6PC tees (also $35), and Kash Krew Golf Polos ($50–$53).

There are the books. *Government Gangsters: The Deep State, the Truth, and the Battle for Our Democracy* is Patel's account of his years fighting the "corrupt cabal" of federal officials trying to take down Trump. And in *The Plot Against the King*, a children's book, Patel tells the story of a wizard named Kash who sets out to save King Donald from the sinister machinations of Hillary Queenton and a "shifty knight." Head over to fightwithkash.com, and for a "special low offer" of $19.99, one can purchase playing cards ("the collector's item of the century") featuring the story's characters; the king card belongs to "Kash, the distinguished wizard and corruption combatant."

There is at least one song: Patel produced "Justice for All," a version of the national anthem sung by jailed January 6 defendants and played by Trump at his first 2024 campaign rally. Patel professes to make no money from the song or the merch—he says proceeds go to January 6 defendants and their families, or to the Kash Foundation. Few details are available about the charity, but according to Patel, it has funded meals for needy families and defamation lawsuits on behalf of Ric Grenell, Patel's friend and former boss at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and Daniel Bostic, a "Stop the Steal" activist.

All the while, Patel churns out promotional content on Truth Social—for a conservative cellphone carrier ("Freedom in cell phones, switch today") and a Christian payment processor ("Why not just give your money to the enemy, or switch now")—and hawks pills that he says "reverse" the effects of COVID vaccines ("Mrna detox, reverse the vaxx n get healthy").

He has also worked as a national security adviser to Trump (bringing in more than $300,000 over the past two years from the former president's Save America PAC, according to campaign-finance records) and as a consultant for Trump Media & Technology Group, the owner of Truth Social ($130,000 last year, according to a Securities and Exchange Commission filing). In addition, Patel has spoken of work abroad, though public paper trails are hard to come by—he has claimed, for example, that he worked as a security consultant for Qatar during the 2022 FIFA World Cup, in Doha.

Nevertheless, Patel has at times vented that he deserves more, according to two people I spoke with. "He complains about money all the time—like, he doesn't have any money, can't make any money, nobody will hire him," a longtime Trump adviser told me. "Anybody who was as big of a deal as he was in the past administration would come out and they'd be on the board of Raytheon and Boeing." (This person, like many of the nearly 40 Patel associates I spoke with for this story, requested anonymity for fear of retribution. Patel, who declined to be interviewed, denied this through a spokesperson.)

From the time Patel left the administration, he appeared committed to finding opportunities to reinforce his loyalty to Trump. In spring 2022, after the FBI opened a criminal investigation into Trump's handling of federal records at Mar-a-Lago, Patel insinuated himself into the story, telling *Breitbart News* that he witnessed Trump verbally declassify "whole sets of materials" before leaving the presidency. The claim ensured a starring role for Patel throughout the probe—ending with Patel testifying before a federal grand jury in exchange for a grant of limited immunity. More crucially, Patel's assertion to *Breitbart* seemed to preview Trump's own approach to the case: In August, shortly after federal investigators executed a search on Mar-a-Lago, Trump's office claimed that, as president, he had a standing order that any materials moved from the Oval Office to Mar-a-Lago were considered declassified. It did not appear to bother Patel that numerous Trump officials flatly denied the existence of such an order.

That October, the far-right personality Benny Johnson asked Patel on his podcast how he would respond if Trump offered him the job of FBI director in a second term. Patel leaned back, laughed, and waved off the question, but a minute later he decided to chime in after all. "Yes, to answer your question, of course," he said. "Who would turn that down?" Some in Trump's orbit acknowledge that Senate confirmation is unlikely for Patel—that if he were to lead an agency, it would probably be in an acting capacity. On a podcast in November 2023, Donald Trump Jr. floated the idea of installing Patel as an "interim" attorney general at the outset "just to send that shot across the bow of the swamp."

"A LOT OF PEOPLE SAY HE'S CRAZY," TRUMP ONCE SAID OF PATEL, ACCORDING TO A LONGTIME TRUMP ADVISER. "BUT SOMETIMES YOU NEED A LITTLE CRAZY."

Such is the present dynamic of Kash Patel's life: marketing "Orange Man Bad" Punisher-skull license plates and dubious supplements while fielding questions about which major national-security or law-enforcement agency he might soon like to run.

DIEGO MALLO; JUSTIN SULLIVAN / GETTY

"Kash, I know you're probably going to be head of the CIA," Steve Bannon said on his podcast, *War Room*, this past December. "But do you believe that you can deliver the goods on this in pretty short order, the first couple of months, so we can get rolling on prosecutions?"

Bannon was talking here about "receipts," the supposedly incriminating documents and emails that a second Trump administration would use to bring cases against deep-state dwellers and members of the press. Patel expressed no doubt about his capacity to deliver the goods. "We will go out and find the conspirators, not just in government but in the media," he said. "Yes, we're going to come after the people in the media who lied about American citizens, who helped Joe Biden rig presidential elections—we're going to come after you."

"A lot of people say he's crazy," Trump once said of Patel, according to the longtime adviser. "*I* think he's kind of crazy. But sometimes you need a little crazy."

It was only a matter of time before they found each other, is how Patel seemed to see it. Just a "couple of guys from Queens," he has said, trying to synonymize his brand with Trump's home borough, and the scrappy knuckle-crack caricature that comes with it. In *Government Gangsters*, Patel reminds readers of this piece of shared heritage four times.

Perhaps it makes sense, then, to go back to the beginning, to the affluent Nassau County village of Garden City, New York, where Kashyap Patel was actually born and raised. Just north of the Garden City Golf Club, one finds the charming corner-lot home to which he returned after school and football practice and hockey games and occasionally, yes, a father-son jaunt for butter chicken about an hour away in Queens. *Just a guy from Garden City*—it's true; it doesn't quite sing.

Patel, who is of Gujarati ancestry, has said that his parents both grew up in East Africa; in the 1970s, his father, Pramod, fled the despotic regime of Idi Amin in Uganda. The young couple immigrated to the United States and settled on Long Island. Children soon followed. Their first chapter in America began in close quarters, according to Patel, with his family and Pramod's eight siblings all sharing the same home.

Before long, Patel writes in his book, his family gained access to the thrills of "milquetoast Americana"—New York Islanders hockey games, annual sojourns to Disney World. It was the Reagan era, and in 1988, Patel's parents registered to vote for the first time in the U.S., as Republicans. But their conservatism, according to Patel, was "dispositional"—they valued hard work, fairness, personal responsibility. American opportunity, meanwhile, arrived just as advertised: Pramod ultimately became CFO at a global distributor of aircraft bearings.

Patel was raised Hindu, the family going to temple together and praying in their shrine room at home. It's difficult to envision many neighbors joining them. Of the roughly 22,000 residents recorded in Garden City in the 1990 census, 96 percent were white. Four years later, when Patel began his freshman year at Garden City High School, he was one of only a handful of people of color in his class.

His senior-yearbook quote came from the Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel: "Racism is man's gravest threat—the maximum of hatred for a minimum reason."

In Garden City, Patel caddied for "very wealthy" and "important" New Yorkers at the local country club, some of them defense attorneys, he writes in *Government Gangsters*; as they played, he listened to their stories about the drama of court. "I could be a first-generation immigrant lawyer at a white shoe firm making a ton of money," Patel thought. After he graduated from the University of Richmond and then Pace University's law school, however, his dreams of Big Law and high retainers were complicated when, by his account, no firm would hire him.

On the advice of a friend, he sent an application to the Miami-Dade County public defender's office in Florida, considered one of the best state defender's offices in the country. Many of the people I spoke with for this story were quick to highlight his time as a public defender—how incongruous it seems in the context of the revenge-driven exploits that now appear to consume him. Public records show that Patel moved into a condo in a new building in Coral Gables, which his parents bought in the summer of 2005. "He just was a normal, good lawyer; did a good job, never stood out," recalled Bennett Brummer, who was the Miami-Dade elected public defender for 32 years. Patel writes that, by this time, he was shifting "more and more to the right." But even if he struck his colleagues as a little more conservative than the norm, as Todd Michaels, who was an attorney in the Miami-Dade office, put it to me, he was not overtly partisan.

State court was well suited to Patel's strengths as an attorney, his former colleagues told me. He was personable and quick on his feet, and adept at "marketing" and "presenting" himself. After a few years, however, Patel moved to the federal public defender's office in Miami. There, the work was more complex, more writing- and research-intensive. Despite some successes, he developed a reputation for "style over substance," a former colleague said—one he seemed aware of but not terribly motivated to change. "He always was like, 'Look, I'm really good at trial skill. But all of this reading and writing and arguing about, like, the intricacies of the law—I'm not really interested,'" a second former colleague recalled. (Patel disputed this characterization, referring to a complex drug-trafficking case he'd handled.)

"I'm not saying he wasn't capable of it," this person added. "But I think he always liked being the face."

Transcripts from Patel's cases reveal a lawyer comfortable before the bench, many of his presentations sharp and clever and peppered with flatteries for Your Honor. ("Judge, I think you hit it on the head last week.") They were also embroidered with performative modesties: "On my best day, I'm an average defense attorney"; "I'm not a mathematician, but …"; "I'm not saying I'm a Spanish expert, Judge, but …"; "I know I've been doing this by far the shortest time of any lawyer sitting here."

Many times, this worked. "There were certain judges that he kind of had magic in front of," the second former colleague said.

This former colleague began to notice flashes of grievance in the young attorney, but they didn't seem grounded in politics so

much as insecurity. This person recalled that when Patel would ask for help on legal research, he would occasionally offer some version of *Well, thank God I talked to someone who is book smart and went to all the right schools and checked all the right boxes*. "He would always phrase it like a compliment, but there was an edge to it."

It became clear that Patel "did kind of have a chip on his shoulder," this former colleague said—that he seemed caught between a brewing resentment of elites and an abiding desire to be seen as one.

By early 2014, Patel had left Miami to become a federal prosecutor in Washington, D.C. He'd landed a job in the counterterrorism section of the Justice Department's National Security Division. Yet in Patel's telling, what should have been a dream chapter in the career of a young lawyer fast became a study in the rot of bureaucracy—and the malicious repercussions for those who dared to challenge it.

This education began with Benghazi.

Patel was one of the attorneys from the main Justice Department office who assisted the U.S. Attorney's Office in Washington in pursuing foreign militants for the September 11, 2012, attacks that killed four Americans. In his book, Patel writes that as the Justice Department moved to bring the Benghazi terrorists to court, "I was leading the prosecution's efforts at Main Justice." He claims that he proceeded to watch firsthand as senior DOJ leadership and other Obama officials—"political gangsters, frauds, and hypocrites" such as Attorney General Eric Holder and his successor, Loretta Lynch—chose to "go soft" on the terrorists by prosecuting only one perpetrator. It was for this reason, Patel writes—a lack of trust in the prosecution's decisions—that when his supervisors asked him to join the trial team itself, he declined.

When I put this version of events to three people familiar with the prosecution, I was met with astonishment. One of these people said simply: "Good God."

Although Patel was Main Justice's representative on the case for a period, the U.S. Attorney's Office led the prosecution, they said. The department prosecuted a single suspect, they added, because he was the only one the government had been able to capture. (DOJ later prosecuted a second suspect, and reportedly brought charges against multiple others.) Patel was tasked with coordinating approvals for warrants and indictments, among other responsibilities. Moreover, he did not decline an invitation to join the team working on the actual trial; according to two of his former DOJ colleagues, he was never asked. After clashing with the U.S. Attorney's Office, he was removed from the case altogether. (Patel denied this, saying he was simply reassigned to a different position.)

What all parties seem to agree on is that the young attorney had grown bitter toward the system that had employed him for the better part of his career. And an unexpected confrontation in Texas transformed the building friction into a personal declaration of war.

In January 2016, Patel traveled to Tajikistan to interview witnesses for an Islamic State–related case. While he was there, a federal judge in Houston scheduled a surprise hearing in another terrorism case Patel was involved in. He had less than 24 hours to make it to Texas, and having brought only slacks and a blazer on his trip, he contacted the local U.S. Attorney's Office asking for a tie. But when Patel finally arrived at the courthouse, for reasons that remain in dispute, there was no tie.

Judge Lynn Nettleton Hughes lost it. "If you want to be a lawyer, dress like a lawyer," Hughes snapped in chambers. "Act like a lawyer." Hughes proceeded to berate Patel as "just one more nonessential employee from Washington." "What is the utility to me and to the people of America to have you fly down here at their expense?" he said. "You don't add a bit of value, do you?" The judge dismissed Patel from chambers.

Patel's bosses were furious on his behalf. Hughes, then 74, had a history of eruptions in court, including disturbing remarks about race. Three years earlier, an Indian American plaintiff had tried but failed to have the judge removed from his discrimination case after Hughes held forth in a pretrial conference on "Adolf Hitler's use of swastikas, the origin of Caucasians and the futility of diversity programs at universities," the *Texas Observer* reported. DOJ officials' attempts to get a transcript of the Patel exchange only enraged Hughes further; the judge issued an "Order on Ineptitude" castigating the "pretentious lawyers" at Main Justice.

The Washington Post included all of this in a report on the incident. In the article, Patel comes across as a sympathetic figure.

PATEL SEEMED CAUGHT BETWEEN A BREWING RESENTMENT OF ELITES AND AN ABIDING DESIRE TO BE SEEN AS ONE.

But the Justice Department chose not to comment, and for Patel, this was what counted. He writes in his book that, although his superiors privately praised him for keeping a level head, they "refused to say any of that publicly," standing by as the media "dragged my name through the mud."

Patel brought complaints again and again to the leadership of the department's National Security Division—adamant that something be done to hold the Texas prosecutors to account for not standing up for him in front of the judge, one of his former DOJ colleagues recalled. It wasn't that his superiors had failed to understand his frustration; yes, they agreed, the judge was a "wack job," in the words of the second former DOJ colleague, and they had called the U.S. Attorney's Office to express their disappointment. "I finally said, 'I don't really know what else you want,'" the first former colleague recalled. "'The U.S. attorney is presidentially appointed, like, I—what do you want us to do?'"

"He just felt so aggrieved," this person added, "and this continued throughout the rest of his tenure. And I actually think it was part of why he left."

The lesson of the bench slap and its aftermath, as Patel explains in *Government Gangsters*, was this: Although he had tried "to do my best to serve my country," senior government officials had "refused to step up to the plate" for him in return. Patel decided to stop working for "cowards."

The next year, he met Devin Nunes.

In Patel's children's book *The Plot Against the King*, Duke Devin bursts into the home of Kash, the wizard. The duke is distressed because ever since Choosing Day, a "shifty knight" (otherwise known as Democratic Representative Adam Schiff) has been proclaiming that King Donald cheated his way past Hillary Queenton to the throne. He begs Kash, known throughout the Land of the Free as the "Distinguished Discoverer," to enlist in "the Quest for the Truth about the Plot against the King," and after some consideration, Kash agrees.

Patel tends to emphasize his reluctance when he recounts going to work for the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence in April 2017, whether he is a teal-caped wizard in the telling or just another 30-something civil servant looking for the next thing. He has said that when he first met with Nunes, the committee's Republican chair, about a staff opening on the committee's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election, he thought the job sounded boring; what Patel had really wanted, since Trump's election, was to work in the White House. But Nunes won him over, Patel writes in *Government Gangsters*, by promising to recommend him for a spot on Trump's National Security Council once the probe concluded.

Patel would devote the next several months to examining the FBI's rationale for wiretapping the former Trump-campaign adviser Carter Page, and to uncovering the origins of the infamous Steele dossier. In interviews, staffers and committee members recalled Patel as personable, hardworking, and not noticeably partisan. "He was instrumental in helping us understand what the FBI would have had in their possession," Mike Conaway, a Republican member of the committee at the time, said. A former Democratic committee staffer told me that Patel at first impressed even some in the minority as "exceedingly nice."

Some of the Republicans on the committee grew frustrated, however, by Patel's emerging tendency to go rogue. One of the more surprising examples of this came just a few months into his tenure, when Patel and a colleague turned up unannounced at the London office of Christopher Steele's lawyer, where Patel left his business card. ("We did everything by the book," Patel later wrote of the incident.) One Republican staffer, initially taken by Patel's charisma, came to view him as a "spotlight ranger."

In January 2018, as the committee's majority neared the completion of a report on its findings, Nunes and his staff, including Patel, met with then–Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein at the Justice Department. By all accounts, the conversation grew contentious as Nunes pressed Rosenstein to furnish more documents to the committee. According to a statement later issued by the Justice Department, Nunes warned that he would act to hold Rosenstein in contempt of Congress, and Rosenstein issued a warning of his own: Should Nunes pursue that route, Rosenstein was prepared to subpoena the committee's communications to defend himself.

Patel interpreted Rosenstein's warning as a "direct and personal threat against" him—one of the nation's top officials retaliating against a House staffer out of fear of the "corruption I was about to expose." As Patel tells it in his book, he immediately contacted senior staff to House Speaker Paul Ryan to share news of the attack on one of their own employees, and Ryan's office "flatly refused to have my back." A former Ryan aide described the exchange to me this way: "Kash seemed to think there was some magic wand the speaker had to stop people from saying things Kash didn't like."

Suddenly everything seemed to make sense to Patel. Different setting, different time, but same deep state, same story: Here, in new form, was the Justice Department refusing to defend him against "the unstable judge in Houston," he writes; here was Washington's dogmatic lack of interest in "defending what's right" made coldly manifest.

The majority's four-page report, of which Patel was a primary author, was ultimately found to have credibly identified errors and omissions in the FBI and DOJ's applications to surveil Carter Page, though an inspector general did not corroborate the memo's suggestion that the surveillance was politically motivated. When it was released, the so-called Nunes memo was framed by much of the media as politically charged fiction, and Patel was identified for his role in writing it. On February 2, 2018, *The New York Times* published an article headlined "Kashyap Patel, Main Author of Secret Memo, Is No Stranger to Quarrels."

The article cited Patel's run-in with the Houston judge as a key example of his history of "quarrels," offering a pared-down version of events that seemed to render Patel the irresponsible offender of a sober-minded judge. The incident, in other words, had been elevated to a defining place in the public narrative of Patel's career—just as he'd always seemed to fear. "He felt extraordinarily mistreated," another former Republican member of the House Intelligence Committee told me.

As Patel came to feature in more and more stories about the Russia investigation, he seemed to embrace the view that any criticism of him or his work—valid or not—was evidence of a coordinated smear campaign. "All their attacks only convinced me that we were on to something big," Patel writes in his book.

A few months later, by his own admission, he decided to leak intelligence-committee emails regarding Rosenstein's "chilling" and "sustained personal attack" against him to Fox News. Shortly after an article ran, according to Patel, Ryan approached him on the House floor and asked him to stop shopping stories to the press.

"Absolutely," Patel claims to have replied. "I would have no problem doing that the moment he, as the Speaker of the House, started having the backs of people falsely attacked for their work on behalf of the House." (A spokesperson for Ryan told me that neither Ryan nor his staff has "any recollection of this occurring.")

They'd given him no choice, Patel reasoned. Somewhere along the way, the plot against the king had turned into a plot against the wizard himself.

By the winter of 2018, Republicans had lost the House, and Schiff was set to take over the intelligence committee. Patel later wrote that Nunes, as promised, urged Trump to hire his protégé onto the National Security Council. According to Patel, when Trump realized just whom Nunes was referring to—the man who "had saved his presidency by revealing the unprecedented political hit job designed to take him down"—he ordered his chief of staff to onboard Patel at once.

Former administration officials told me that, from his first days as a staffer on the National Security Council, in February 2019, Patel was fixated on trying to get face time with Trump. He had a script, and it wasn't long before many of his colleagues could recite it themselves: "Mr. President, the deep state is out to get you," as the longtime Trump adviser paraphrased it, "and I'm going to save you from it." Five months into his tenure, Patel was made the senior director of the NSC's counterterrorism directorate.

Much has been written about Patel's year on the National Security Council, including the early suspicions among his colleagues that he was funneling information about Ukraine directly to Trump, outside official channels. In the former president's first impeachment inquiry, the NSC official Fiona Hill testified about learning from another colleague that Trump apparently viewed Patel as the council's director on Ukraine policy, though his portfolio had nothing to do with Ukraine. Hill said she had been sufficiently alarmed to report the conversation to her superior and then warn her colleagues to be "very careful" in their communications with Patel. "Let's just say it's a red flag," she testified, "when somebody who you barely know is involved on one of your policy issues" and "clearly providing materials outside of the line"—particularly when she didn't know what those materials were.

Patel has repeatedly denied ever discussing Ukraine with Trump. In his rendering, his colleagues were jealous of his close relationship with the president and still hated him for the Russia investigation. Not only was the deep state's plot against him still in motion, Patel seemed to decide, but it had expanded.

For the most part, this is how he explains the rest of his time in the Trump administration, why it is that at virtually every turn—from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence to the Department of Defense to very nearly the FBI and CIA—there emerges yet another crop of officials who object to his accrual of power. It could not possibly be the case, for example, that Bill Barr harbored genuine concerns about Patel's qualifications to serve as deputy FBI director: In Patel's version of events, Barr was simply one more top bureaucrat bent on foiling Patel's success as payback for the "mess" he'd exposed in their agency. And if this narrative begins to feel less and less plausible, if Patel's latest detractors have to date seemed as reliably pro-Trump as Patel himself—well, that just goes to show their cunning.

SOMEWHERE ALONG THE WAY, THE PLOT AGAINST THE KING HAD TURNED INTO A PLOT AGAINST THE WIZARD HIMSELF.

Patel has a talent for casting himself as the ultimate hero or the unjustly persecuted. I have wondered if this is why he chose not to include in his book the events of October 30, 2020—if, in the end, not even he could figure out a way to make himself the martyr of the story.

On that Friday, according to multiple reported accounts, SEAL Team 6 was awaiting the Pentagon's green light on a rescue mission in West Africa. The day before, the administration had learned where gunmen were holding Philip Walton, a

27-year-old American who had been kidnapped that week from his farm near Niger's border with Nigeria. As multiple agencies now coordinated on final details for the evening operation, the State Department worked to resolve the last outstanding task—securing airspace permission from Nigerian officials. Around noon, Patel called the Pentagon with an update: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, he said, had gotten the approval. The mission was a go.

The SEALs were close to landing in Nigeria when Defense Secretary Mark Esper discovered that the State Department had not, in fact, secured the overflight clearance, as Patel had claimed. The aircraft were quickly diverted, flying in circles for the next hour as officials scrambled to alert the Nigerian government to their position. With the operation window narrowing, Esper and Pompeo called the Situation Room to put the decision to the president: Either they abort the mission and risk their hostage being killed, or they proceed into foreign airspace and risk their soldiers being shot down.

But then, suddenly, the deputy secretary of state was on the line, Esper later wrote in his memoir: They'd been cleared.

Soon Walton was reunited with his family.

What had happened?

Celebratory feelings gave way to anger as officials tried to make sense of Patel's bad report. According to Esper, Pompeo claimed that at no point had he even spoken with Patel about the mission, much less told him he'd received the airspace rights. Esper wrote that his team suspected that Patel had simply "made the approval story up."

Anthony Tata, the Pentagon official and retired Army general to whom Patel had originally given the green light, confronted Patel in a rage. "You could've gotten these guys killed!" Tata shouted, according to two people familiar with the exchange. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

Patel's response was: "If nobody got hurt, who the fuck cares?"

Patel denies saying this, or making up the approval story. He "would never jeopardize an operation, American hostages or our soldiers," he said through his spokesperson. "In every situation, including this one, I followed the chain of command."

But three former senior administration officials independently cited the near catastrophe in West Africa as one of their foremost recollections from Patel's tenure. They remain unsettled by Patel's actions in large part because they still have no clue what motivated them. If Patel had in fact just invented the story, as Esper's team concluded, then why? Was it because the election was in four days, and Patel was simply that impatient to set in motion a final potential victory for Trump, whatever the risk—was it as darkly cynical as that? Did his lack of experience mean he just had no grasp of the consequences?

Some people close to the former president privately vent about Patel and whatever they last heard him say on a far-right podcast or at a fundraiser, particularly if it involves some overstatement of his administration activities. The longtime Trump adviser said he had been in Patel's presence, more than once, when he'd claimed he was the person who "gave the order" for U.S. forces to move in and kill the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019—an operation for which Patel, by his own admission, wasn't even in the Situation Room. (Asked about this, Patel said through his spokesperson: "Trump made that brave and courageous call.")

One of the former senior administration officials, meanwhile, sent me a photo of what he said was Patel's challenge coin, a small, customizable medallion for service members and government officials. In addition to a curious image of a drone illuminating (targeting?) a dollar sign in front of the White House, the coin features an assortment of national-security-adjacent terms, including DIRECT ACTION, SANCTIONS, HEZ/IRAN, and CYBER. "It's just random shit," the former official said. "Half of this stuff, he wasn't even involved in." (Through the spokesperson, Patel neither confirmed nor denied having such a coin.)

Yet the prevailing sentiment in Trump's inner circle, according to the longtime adviser, is that there is no upside to calling out Patel's exaggerations or lies. By now, this person explained, Trump is entrenched in his view of Patel as a "useful tool." The former president, the adviser said, understands that "Kash is the one you say to, 'Hey, I'm not *telling* you to go break into the DNC. *But* …'"

What Trump might also understand is this: For Patel, the urgency of victory in November is personal. He recently described Trump as the candidate "fighting for everybody else's right to have fame, to have money"—the central prongs of a prosperity that Patel, after nearly a decade in Washington, appears convinced is his due, and of which the leaders of a corrupt system have conspired to deprive him.

Little wonder, then, that Steve Bannon mused on his podcast that Patel, far from simply being the person most likely to oversee Trump's retributive plans in a second term, could have helped inspire them in the first place. "I think President Trump might've read *Government Gangsters*," Bannon said. "Yeah, look, he probably did," Patel responded, fetching a copy to display on camera. "That's probably why it's a best seller, and he keeps talking about it."

To the extent that Americans might struggle to grasp what any of this has to do with their own life—how a federal agenda of score-settling corresponds to their ability to be famous and make money—Patel has yet to offer a theory. He tends to frame political vengeance as an end in itself. In a second term, Trump's top law-enforcement and national-security officials would immediately focus on exposing and prosecuting those who "did Russiagate" and are already planning their next "election-rigging scam," he told Bannon—paying special attention, perhaps, to the 60 names in Patel's compendium of "Members of the Executive Branch Deep State," found in Appendix B of *Government Gangsters*.

And then—well, it's not altogether clear what then. But Patel's value to Trump has never revolved around precise plans. As Richard Nixon's plumbers understood, the hallmark of loyalty is a flexible constitution. *A*

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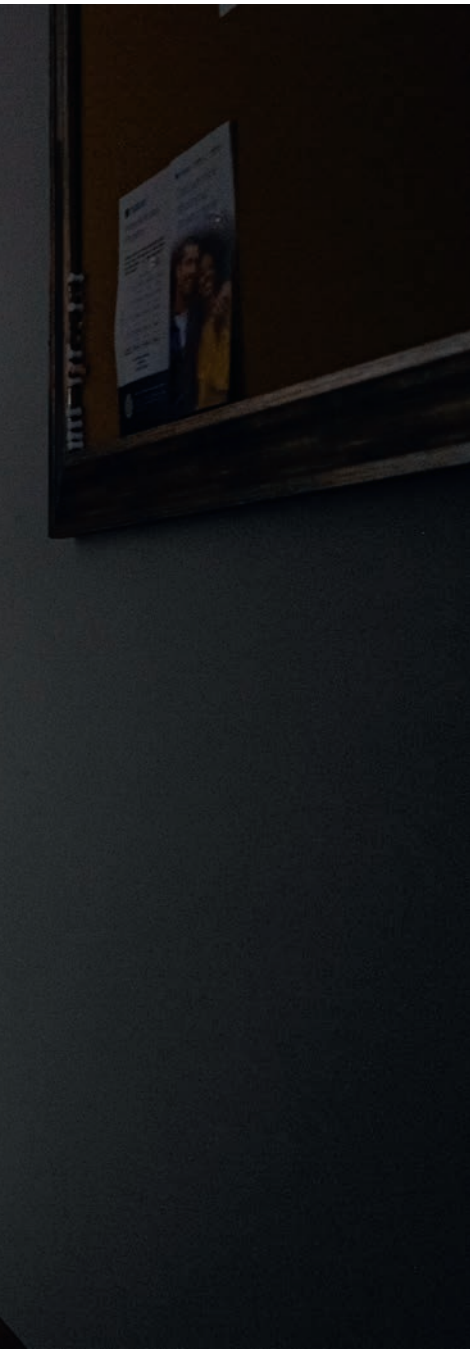
Photographs by Bethany Mollenkof



What Abortion Bans Do to Doctors

In Idaho and other states, draconian laws are forcing physicians to ignore their training and put patients' lives at risk.

By Sarah Zhang

Kylie Cooper has seen all the ways a pregnancy can go terrifyingly, perilously wrong. She is an obstetrician who manages high-risk patients, also known as a maternal-fetal-medicine specialist, or MFM. The awkward hyphenation highlights the duality of the role. Cooper must care for two patients at once: mother *and* fetus, mom *and* baby. On good days, she helps women with complicated pregnancies bring home healthy babies. On bad days, she has to tell families that this will not be possible. Sometimes, they ask her to end the pregnancy; prior to the summer of 2022, she was able to do so.

That summer, Cooper felt a growing sense of dread. Thirteen states—including Idaho, where she practiced—had passed "trigger laws" meant to ban abortion if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned. When this happened, in June 2022, some of the bans proved so draconian that doctors feared they could be prosecuted for providing medical care once considered standard. Soon enough, stories began to emerge around the country of women denied abortions, even as their health deteriorated.

In Texas, a woman whose water broke at 18 weeks—far too early for her baby to survive outside the womb—was unable to get an abortion until she became septic. She spent three days in the ICU, and one of her fallopian tubes permanently closed from scarring. In Tennessee, a woman lost four pints of blood delivering her dead fetus in a hospital's holding area. In Oklahoma, a bleeding woman with a nonviable pregnancy was turned away from three separate hospitals. One said she could wait in the parking lot until her condition became life-threatening.

Idaho's ban was as strict as they came, and Cooper worried about her high-risk patients who would soon be forced to continue pregnancies that were dangerous, nonviable, or both.

She was confronted with this reality just two days after the ban went into effect, when a woman named Kayla Smith walked into Cooper's office at St. Luke's Boise Medical Center. (St. Luke's was founded by an Episcopal bishop but is no longer religiously affiliated.) Smith was just over four months pregnant with her second baby—a boy she and her husband had already decided to name Brooks.

Her first pregnancy had been complicated. At 19 weeks, she'd developed severe preeclampsia, a condition associated with pregnancy that can cause life-threatening high blood pressure. She started seeing spots in her vision, and doctors worried that she would have a stroke. The only cure for preeclampsia is ending the pregnancy—with a delivery or an abortion. But Smith had chosen to stay pregnant, despite the risks, and she was able to eke it out just long enough on IV blood-pressure drugs for her daughter to be born as a preemie, at 33 weeks. The baby ultimately did well after a NICU stay, one of those success stories that MFMs say is the reason they do what they do.

This time, however, Smith's ultrasound had picked up some worrying fetal anomalies, raising the possibility of Down syndrome. "Okay, that's fine," Smith remembers saying. "But is our son going to survive?" The answer, Cooper realized as she peered at his tiny heart on the ultrasound, was almost certainly no. The left half of the heart had barely formed; a pediatric cardiologist later confirmed that the anomaly was too severe to fix with surgery. Meanwhile, Smith's early-onset preeclampsia in her first pregnancy put her at high risk of developing preeclampsia again. In short, her son would not survive, and staying pregnant would pose a danger to her own health. In the ultrasound room that day, Smith started to cry.

Cooper started to cry too. She was used to conversations like this—delivering what might be the worst news of someone's life was a regular part of her job—but she was not used to telling her patients that they then had no choice about what to do next. Idaho's new ban made performing an abortion for any reason a felony. It contained no true exceptions, allowing doctors only to mount an "affirmative defense" in court in cases involving rape or incest, or to prevent the death of the mother. This put the burden on physicians to prove that their illegal actions were justifiable. The punishment for violating the law was at least two years in prison, and up to five. The state also had a Texas-style vigilante law that allowed a family member of a "preborn child" to sue an abortion provider in civil court for at least $20,000.

Because Smith had not yet developed preeclampsia, her own life was not technically in danger, and she could not have an abortion in Idaho. Merely protecting her *health* was not enough. Lawmakers had made that clear: When asked about the health of the mother, Todd Lakey, one of the legislators who introduced the trigger ban in 2020, had said, "I would say it weighs less, yes, than the life of the child." The fact that Smith's baby could not survive didn't matter; Idaho's ban had no exception for lethal fetal anomalies.

If she did get preeclampsia, Smith remembers asking, when could her doctors intervene? Cooper wasn't sure. Idaho's abortion law was restrictive; it was also vague. All Cooper would say was *When you are sick enough*. Sick enough that she was actually in danger of dying? That seemed awfully risky; Smith had a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter who needed her mom. She also worried that if she continued her pregnancy, her unborn son would suffer. Would he feel pain, she asked, if he died after birth, as his underdeveloped heart tried in vain to pump blood? Cooper did not have a certain answer for this either.

Smith decided that getting an abortion as soon as possible, before her health was imperiled, would be best, even if that meant traveling to another state. She knew she wanted her abortion to be an early induction of labor—rather than a dilation and evacuation that removed the fetus with medical instruments—because she wanted to hold her son, to say goodbye. She found a hospital in Seattle that could perform an induction abortion and drove with her husband almost eight hours to get there. Unsure how much their insurance would cover, they took out a $16,000 personal loan. Two weeks later, Smith again drove to Seattle and back, this time to pick up her son's ashes.

The logistics kept her so busy, she told me, that "I wasn't even allowed the space to grieve the loss of my son."

If Smith had walked into Cooper's office just a week earlier, none of this would have been necessary. She would have been able to get the abortion right there in Boise. But at least she had not yet been in immediate danger, and she'd made it to Seattle safely. Cooper worried about the next patient, and the next. What if someone came in tomorrow with, say, her water broken at 19 weeks, at risk of bleeding and infection? This happened regularly at her hospital.

As summer turned to fall, Cooper started to feel anxious whenever she was on call. "Every time the phone rang, or my pager went off, just this feeling of impending doom," she told me. Would this call be *the* call? The one in which a woman would die on her watch? She began telling patients at risk for certain complications to consider staying with family outside Idaho, if they could, for part of their pregnancy—just in case they needed an emergency abortion.

Cooper described her feelings as a form of "moral distress," a phrase I heard again and again in interviews with nearly three dozen doctors who are currently practicing or have practiced under post-*Roe* abortion restrictions. The term was coined in the 1980s to describe the psychological toll on nurses who felt powerless to do the right thing—unable to challenge, for example, doctors ordering painful procedures on patients with no chance of living. The concept gained traction among doctors during the coronavirus pandemic, when overwhelmed hospitals had to ration care, essentially leaving some patients to die.

In the two-plus years since *Roe* was overturned, a handful of studies have cataloged the moral distress of doctors across the country. In one, 96 percent of providers who care for pregnant women in states with restrictive laws reported feelings of moral distress that ranged from "uncomfortable" to "intense" to "worst possible." In a survey of ob-gyns who mostly were not abortion providers, more than 90 percent said the laws had prevented them or their colleagues from providing standard medical care. They described feeling "muzzled," "handcuffed," and "straitjacketed." In another study, ob-gyn residents reported feeling like "puppets," a "hypocrite," or a "robot of the State" under the abortion bans.

The doctors I spoke with had a wide range of personal views on abortion, but they uniformly agreed that the current restrictions are unworkable as medical care. They have watched patients grow incredulous, even angry, upon learning of their limited options. But mostly, their patients are devastated. The bans have

Opening pages: *Megan Kasper, an ob-gyn in Nampa, Idaho, considers herself pro-life, but she believes the state's abortion ban goes too far.* This page: *Kylie Cooper is an obstetrician who manages high-risk patients.*

BETHANY MOLLENKOF FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

added heartbreak on top of heartbreak, forcing women grieving the loss of an unborn child to endure delayed care and unnecessary injury. For some doctors, this has been too much to bear. They have fled to states without bans, leaving behind even fewer doctors to care for patients in places like Idaho.

Cooper had moved to Idaho with her husband and kids in 2018, drawn to the natural beauty and to the idea of practicing in a state underserved by doctors: It ranked 47th in the nation in ob-gyns per capita then, and she was one of just nine MFMs in the state. But in that summer of 2022, she began to fear that she could no longer do right by her patients. What she knew to be medically and ethically correct was now legally wrong. "I could not live with myself if something bad happened to somebody," she told me. "But I also couldn't live with myself if I went to prison and left my family and my small children behind."

AT FIRST, Cooper and other doctors distressed by Idaho's ban hoped that it could be amended. If only lawmakers knew what doctors knew, they figured, surely they would see how the rule was harming women who needed an abortion for medical reasons. Indeed, as doctors began speaking up, publicly in the media and privately with lawmakers, several Idaho legislators admitted that they had not understood the impact of the trigger ban. Some had never thought that *Roe* would

be overturned. The ban wasn't really meant to become law—except now it had.

Frankly, doctors had been unprepared too. None had shown up to testify before the trigger ban quietly passed in 2020; they just weren't paying attention. (Almost all public opposition at the time came from anti-abortion activists, who thought the ban was still too lax because it had carve-outs for rape and incest.) Now doctors found themselves taking a crash course in state politics. Lauren Miller, another MFM at St. Luke's, helped form a coalition to get the Idaho Medical Association to put its full lobbying power in the state legislature behind medical exceptions, both for lethal fetal anomalies and for a mother's health. Cooper and a fellow ob-gyn, Amelia Huntsberger, met with the governor's office in their roles as vice chair and chair, respectively, of the Idaho section of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

The results of these efforts were disappointing. The lobbying culminated in a bill passed in March 2023 that offered doctors only marginally more breathing room than before. It changed the affirmative-defense statute into an actual exception to "prevent the death of the pregnant woman," and it clarified that procedures to end ectopic and molar pregnancies—two types of nonviable abnormal pregnancies—were not to be considered abortions. But an exception for lethal fetal anomalies was a nonstarter. And an exception to prevent a life-threatening condition, rather than just preventing the death of the mother, was quashed after the chair of the Idaho Republican Party, Dorothy Moon, lambasted it in a public letter. The previous year, the Idaho GOP had adopted a platform declaring that "abortion is murder from the moment of fertilization" and rejected an exception for the life of the mother; it would reiterate that position in 2024.

Cooper and Huntsberger felt that their meeting with two of the governor's staffers, in December 2022, had been futile as well. It had taken months to schedule a 20-minute conversation, and one of the staffers left in a hurry partway through. "There was a lot of acknowledgment of *Yeah, this is really bad. The laws may not be written ideally*," Huntsberger told me. "There was also no action."

After the meeting, the two women sat, dejected, in a rental car across from the state capitol, Huntsberger having traveled more than 400 miles from Sandpoint, Idaho, where she was a general ob-gyn in a rural hospital. That was when Cooper turned to her colleague and said she had something to confess: She had just been offered a job in Minnesota, a state where abortion is legal. And she was going to take it. She had reached a point where she just couldn't do it anymore; she couldn't keep turning away patients whom she had the skills to help, who needed her help. "There were so many drives home where I would cry," she later told me.

Huntsberger was heartbroken to lose a colleague in the fight to change Idaho's law. But she understood. She and her husband, an ER doctor, had also been talking about leaving. "It was once a month, and then once a week, and then every day," she told me, "and then we weren't sleeping." They worried what might happen at work; they worried what it might mean for their three children. Was it time to give up on Idaho? She told Cooper that day, "Do what you need to do to care for yourself." Cooper and her family moved to Minnesota that spring.

Huntsberger soon found a new job in Oregon, where abortion is also legal. A week later, her rural hospital announced the shutdown of its labor-and-delivery unit, citing Idaho's "legal and political climate" as one reason. Staffing a 24/7 unit is expensive, and the ban had made recruiting ob-gyns to rural Idaho more difficult than ever. Even jobs in Boise that used to attract 15 or 20 applicants now had only a handful; some jobs have stayed vacant for two years. The three other ob-gyns at Huntsberger's hospital all ended up finding new positions in states with fewer abortion restrictions.

During Huntsberger's last month in Idaho, many of her patients scheduled their annual checkups early, so they could see her one last time to say goodbye. Over the years, she had gotten to know all about their children and puppies and gardens. These relationships were why she had become a small-town ob-gyn. She'd never thought she would leave.

Two other labor-and-delivery units have since closed in Idaho. The state lost more than 50 ob-gyns practicing obstetrics, about one-fifth of the total, in the

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After the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, *St. Luke's Boise Medical Center started airlifting pregnant women with certain complications to other states to receive treatment.*

first 15 months of the ban, according to an analysis by the Idaho Physician Well-Being Action Collaborative. Among MFMs, who deal with the most complicated pregnancies, the exodus has been even more dramatic. Of the nine practicing in 2022, Cooper was the first to leave, followed by Lauren Miller. A third MFM also left because of the ban. Then a fourth took a new job in Nevada and a fifth tried to retire, but their hospital was so short-staffed by then that they were both persuaded to stay at least part-time. That left only four other MFMs for the entire state.

The departure of so many physicians has strained Idaho's medical system. After Cooper and others moved away, St. Luke's had to rely on traveling doctors to fill the gaps; the hospital was eventually able to hire a few new MFMs, but the process took a long time. Meanwhile, ob-gyns—and family doctors, who deliver many of the babies in rural Idaho—had to manage more pregnancies, including high-risk ones, on their own. The overall lack of ob-gyns has also had implications for women who aren't pregnant, and won't be: Idaho is an attractive place to retire, and the state's growing population of older women need gynecological care as they age into menopause and beyond.

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Anne Feighner, an ob-gyn at St. Luke's who has stayed in Boise for now, thinks all the time about her colleagues who have left. Every day, she told me in June, she drove by the house of her neighbor and fellow ob-gyn, Harmony Schroeder, who at the moment was packing up her home of 20 years for a job in Washington State. She, too, was leaving because of the abortion ban. Across the street is the pink house where Cooper used to live and where her daughters used to ride scooters out front.

"I still have a lot of guilt over leaving," Cooper told me. She had made the decision in order to protect herself and her family. But what about her patients in Idaho, and her colleagues? By leaving, she had made a terrible situation for them even worse.

SARA THOMSON WORKS 12-hour shifts as an obstetrician at a Catholic hospital in Idaho; she is Catholic herself. Even before the abortion ban, her hospital terminated pregnancies only for medical reasons, per religious directive. "I had never considered myself a quote-unquote abortion provider," Thomson told me—at least not until certain kinds of care provided at her hospital became illegal under Idaho's ban. It started to change how she thought of, as she put it, "the A-word."

She told me about women who showed up at her hospital after their water had broken too early—well before the line of viability, around 22 weeks. Before then, a baby has no chance of survival outside the womb. This condition is known as previable PPROM, an acronym for "preterm premature rupture of membranes."

In the very best scenario, a woman whose water breaks too early is able to stay pregnant for weeks or even months with enough amniotic fluid—the proverbial "water"—for her baby to develop normally. One doctor, Kim Cox, told me about a patient of his whose water broke at 16 weeks; she was able to stay pregnant until 34 weeks, and gave birth to a baby who fared well. Far more likely, though, a woman will naturally go into labor within a week of her water breaking, delivering a fetus that cannot survive. In the worst case, she could develop an infection before delivery. The infection might tip quickly into sepsis, which can cause the loss of limbs, fertility, and organ function—all on top of the tragedy of losing a baby.

In the *very* worst case, neither mother nor baby survives. In 2012, a 31-year-old woman in Ireland named Savita Halappanavar died after her water broke at 17 weeks. Doctors had refused to end her pregnancy, waiting for the fetus's heartbeat to stop on its own. When it did, she went into labor, but by then, she had become infected. She died from sepsis three days later. Her death galvanized the abortion-rights movement in Ireland, and the country legalized the procedure in 2018.

Doctors in the United States now worry that abortion bans will cause entirely preventable deaths like Halappanavar's; the possibility haunts Thomson. "We shouldn't have to wait for a case like Savita's in Idaho," she said.

Previable PPROM is the complication that most troubles doctors practicing under strict abortion bans. These cases fall into the gap between what Idaho law currently allows (averting a mother's death) and what many doctors want to be able to do (treat complications that could become deadly). The condition is not life-threatening right away, doctors told me, but they offered very different interpretations of when it becomes so—anywhere from the first signs of infection all the way to sepsis.

No surprise, then, that the trigger ban provoked immediate confusion among doctors over how and when to intervene in these cases. Initially, at least, they had more legal leeway to act quickly: The Biden administration had sued Idaho before the trigger ban went into effect, on the grounds that it conflicted with a Reagan-era federal law: the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act (EMTALA), which requires ERs to provide stabilizing treatment when a mother's

BETHANY MOLLENKOF FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

Sara Thomson, an obstetrician at a Catholic hospital in Idaho, says the state's ban has changed how she thinks about "the A-word."

health, not just her life, is at risk. The Department of Health and Human Services interpreted "stabilizing treatment" to include emergency abortions, and a federal judge issued a partial injunction on Idaho's ban, temporarily allowing such abortions to take place. But Idaho appealed the decision, and when the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear the case in January 2024, it stayed the injunction. With that, any protection that the federal law had granted Idaho doctors evaporated.

Thomson was still working under these severe restrictions when I met her in Boise this past June. She missed the days when her biggest problem at work was persuading her hospital to get a new ultrasound machine. A former military doctor, she struck me as soft-spoken but steely, like the most quietly formidable mom in your PTA. At one point, she pulled out a Trapper Keeper pocket folder of handwritten notes that she had taken after our first phone call.

The cases that most distressed her were ones of previable PPROM where the umbilical cord had prolapsed into the vagina, compressing the cord and exposing the baby and mother to infection. When this happens, Thomson said, a developing fetus cannot survive long: "The loss of the baby is sadly inevitable."

Previously at her Catholic hospital, she would have offered to do what was best for the mother's health: terminate the pregnancy before she became infected, so she could go home to recover. Now she told patients that they had no choice but to wait until they went into labor or became infected, or until the fetus's heart stopped beating, slowly deprived of oxygen from its compressed umbilical cord, sometimes over the course of several days. Thomson did not know that a fetus could take so long to die this way—she was used to intervening much sooner. She found forcing her patients to wait like this "morally disgusting."

"Every time I take care of a patient in this scenario, it makes me question why I'm staying here," she told me. It ate at her to put her own legal interests before her patients' health. She knew that if a zealous prosecutor decided she had acted too hastily, she could lose years of her career and her life defending herself, even if she were ultimately vindicated. But if she made a "self-protective" decision to delay care and a patient died, she wasn't sure how she could go on. "From a moral perspective, that's something that you won't recover from as a doctor."

AT ST. LUKE'S, the largest hospital in Idaho, doctors started airlifting some patients with complications like previable PPROM out of state after the trigger ban took effect. Rather than delay care to comply with the law, they felt that the better—or, really, less bad—option was to get women care sooner by transferring them to Oregon, Washington, or Utah.

After the Supreme Court stayed the injunction allowing emergency abortions for a mother's health, in January 2024, Idaho doctors became even more cautious about performing abortions, and the transfers picked up. Over the next three and a half months alone, St. Luke's airlifted six pregnant women out of state. Smaller hospitals, too, transferred patients they would have previously treated.

One woman described fearing for her life as she was sent away from St. Luke's last year, after losing a liter of blood when

her placenta began detaching inside her. "I couldn't comprehend," she later told *The New York Times*. "I'm standing in front of doctors who know exactly what to do and how to help and they're refusing to do it." Another woman whose water broke early went into labor en route to Portland, her doctor told me, and delivered her fetus hundreds of miles from home. Her baby did not survive, and she was left to figure out how to get back to Idaho by herself—a medical transport is only a one-way ride. Another became infected and turned septic in the hours it took her to get to Salt Lake City. She had to go to the ICU, says Lauren Theilen, an MFM at the Utah hospital where she was taken. Other patients were sick when they left Idaho and even sicker when they arrived somewhere else.

Where exactly was that line between a patient who could be transferred versus one who needed care immediately, then and there? "I have sometimes wondered if I'm being selfish," says Stacy Seyb, a longtime MFM at St. Luke's, by putting patients through medical transfer to avoid legal sanction. But no doctor works alone in today's hospitals. When one of the first legally ambiguous cases came up, Seyb saw the unease in the eyes of his team: the nurses, the techs, the anesthesiologists, the residents—all the people who normally assist in an emergency abortion. If he did something legally risky, they would also be exposed. Idaho's law threatens to revoke the license of *any* health-care professional who assists in an abortion. He came to feel that there was no good option to protect both his team and his patients, but that an out-of-state transfer was often the least terrible one. In Portland or Seattle or Salt Lake City, health-care providers do not have to weigh their own interests against their patients'.

In April, when the Supreme Court heard the Idaho case, the media seized upon the dramatic image of women being airlifted out of state for emergency abortions. Justice Elena Kagan made a point of asking about it in oral arguments. In a press conference afterward, Idaho's attorney general, Raúl Labrador, pushed back on the idea that airlifts were happening, citing unnamed doctors who said they didn't know of any such instances. If women were being airlifted, he said, it was unnecessary, because emergency abortions were already allowed to save the life of the mother. "I would hate to think," he added, "that St. Luke's or any other hospital is trying to do something like this just to make a political statement." (St. Luke's had filed an amicus brief with the Court in support of the federal government.)

Labrador's comments echoed accusations from national anti-abortion groups that doctors and others who support abortion rights are sowing confusion in order to "sabotage" the laws. When Moon, the chair of the Idaho Republican Party, had rallied lawmakers against any health exceptions back in 2023, she'd also evoked the specter of "doctors educated in some of the farthest Left academic institutions in our country." (Neither Labrador nor Moon responded to my requests for an interview.)

It is true that doctors tend to support abortion access. But in Idaho, many of the ob-gyns critical of the ban are not at all pro-abortion. Maria Palmquist grew up speaking at Right to Life rallies, as the eldest of eight in a Catholic family. She still doesn't believe in "abortion for birth control," she told me, but medical school had opened her eyes to the tragic ways a pregnancy can go wrong. Lately, she's been sending articles to family members, to show that some women with dangerous pregnancies need abortions "so they can have future children."

Kim Cox, the doctor who told me about a patient who had a relatively healthy child after PPROM at 16 weeks, practices in heavily Mormon eastern Idaho. Cox said that "electively terminating" at any point in a pregnancy is "offensive to me and offensive to God." But he also told me about a recent patient whose water had broken at 19 weeks and who wanted a termination that he was prepared to provide—until he realized it was legally dicey. He thought the dangers of such cases were serious enough that women should be able to decide how much risk they wanted to tolerate. Because, I ventured, they might already have a kid at home? "Or 10 kids at home."

Megan Kasper, an ob-gyn in Nampa, Idaho, who considers herself pro-life, told me she "never dreamed" that she would live to see *Roe v. Wade* overturned. But Idaho's law went too far even for her. If doctors are forced to wait until death is a real possibility for an expecting mother, she said, "there's going to be a certain number of those that you don't pull back from the brink." She thought the law needed an exception for the health of the mother.

In the two-plus years since the end of *Roe*, no doctor has yet been prosecuted in Idaho or any other state for performing an abortion—but who wants to test the law by being the first? Doctors are risk-averse. They're rule followers, Kasper told me, a sentiment I heard over and over again: "I want to follow the rules." "We tend to be rule followers." "Very good rule followers." Kasper said she thought that, in some cases, doctors have been more hesitant to treat patients or more willing to transfer them than was necessary. But if the law is not meant to be as restrictive as it reads to doctors, she said, then legislators should simply change it. "Put it in writing." Make it clear.

She does wonder what it would mean to test the law. Kasper has a somewhat unusual background for a doctor. She was homeschooled, back when it was still illegal in some states, and her parents routinely sent money to legal-defense funds for other homeschoolers. "I grew up in a family whose values were *It's okay to take risks to do the right thing*," she told me. She still believes that. "There's a little bit of my rebel side that's like, *Cool, Raúl Labrador, you want to throw me in jail? You have at it*." Prosecuting "one of the most pro-life OBs" would prove, wouldn't it, just how extreme Idaho had become on abortion.

WHEN I VISITED BOISE in June, doctors were on edge; the Supreme Court's decision on emergency abortions was expected at any moment. On my last day in town, the Court accidentally published the decision early: The case was going to be dismissed, meaning it would return to

Anne Feighner, an ob-gyn at St. Luke's, has decided to stay in Boise for now.

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THE MORAL DISTRESS OF PRACTICING UNDER THE BAN HAD SENT SARA THOMSON TO SEE A COUNSELOR. "I WAS IN A WAR ZONE," SHE TOLD ME, "AND I DIDN'T SEE A COUNSELOR."

the lower court. The injunction allowing emergency abortions would, in the meantime, be reinstated.

As the details trickled out, I caught up with Thomson, who was, for the moment, relieved. She had an overnight shift that evening, and the tight coil of tension that had been lodged inside her loosened with the knowledge that EMTALA would soon be back in place, once the Court formally issued its decision. Doctors at St. Luke's also felt they could stop airlifting patients out of state for emergency abortions.

But Thomson grew frustrated when she realized that this was far from the definitive ruling she had hoped for. The decision was really a nondecision. In dismissing the case, the Court did not actually resolve the conflict between federal and state law, though the Court signaled openness to hearing the case again after another lower-court decision. The dismissal also left in place a separate injunction, from a federal appeals court, that had blocked enforcement of EMTALA in Texas, meaning that women in a far larger and more populous state would still be denied emergency abortions. This case, too, has been appealed to the Supreme Court.

Moreover, the federal emergency-treatment law has teeth only if an administration chooses to enforce it, by fining hospitals or excluding them from Medicare and Medicaid when they fail to comply. The Biden administration has issued guidance that says it may sanction hospitals and doctors refusing to provide emergency abortion care, and as vice president, Kamala Harris has been a particularly vocal advocate for abortion access. A Trump administration could simply decide not to enforce the rule—a proposal that is outlined explicitly in Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation's blueprint for a second Trump term. If the emergency-treatment law is a mere "Band-Aid," as multiple doctors put it to me, it is one that can be easily torn off.

EMTALA is also limited in scope. It covers only patients who show up at an ER, and only those with emergency pregnancy complications. It would not apply to women in Idaho whose pregnancies are made more dangerous by a range of serious but not yet urgent conditions (to say nothing of the women who might want to end a pregnancy for any number of nonmedical reasons). It would not apply to the woman carrying triplets who, as an MFM recounted to me, wanted a reduction to twins because the third fetus had no skull and thus could not live. She had to go out of state to have the procedure—tantamount to an abortion for just one fetus—which made the pregnancy safer for her and the remaining babies. And it did not apply when Kayla Smith, already grieving for her unborn son, worried about preeclampsia. Her family ultimately left Idaho for Washington, so she could have another child in a safer state; her younger daughter was born in late 2023.

Smith has joined a lawsuit filed by the Center for Reproductive Rights challenging the limited scope of exceptions under Idaho's ban. A group in Idaho is also planning a ballot initiative that will put the question of abortion to voters—but not until 2026. In the meantime, doctors still want Idaho to add medical exceptions to the law. After the disappointingly narrow exceptions the state legislature passed in 2023, it did nothing more in its 2024 session. A hearing that Thomson was slated to speak at this spring got canceled, last minute, by Republicans, who control the legislature.

Still, Thomson told me she was set on staying in Idaho. She and her husband had moved their family here 11 years ago because they wanted their four kids to "feel like they're *from* somewhere." Having grown up in a Navy family, she'd moved every few years during her own childhood before joining the military for medical school and continuing to move every few years as a military doctor. When her son was just 14 months old, she deployed to Iraq. She got her job in Idaho after that. When she and her husband bought their house, she told him this was the house she planned to live in for the rest of her life.

In the past two years, she'd seriously wavered on that decision for the first time. The moral distress of practicing under the ban had sent her to see a counselor. "I was in a war zone," she told me, "and I didn't see a counselor." This past fall, she came up with a backup plan: If she had to, she could stop practicing in Idaho and become a traveling doctor, seeing patients in other states.

But then she thought about all the women in Idaho who couldn't afford to leave the state for care. And she thought of her kids, especially her three girls, who would soon no longer be girls. The eldest is 20, the same age as a patient whose baby she had recently delivered. "This could be my daughter," Thomson thought. If everyone like her left, she wondered, who would take care of her daughters? *A*

Sarah Zhang is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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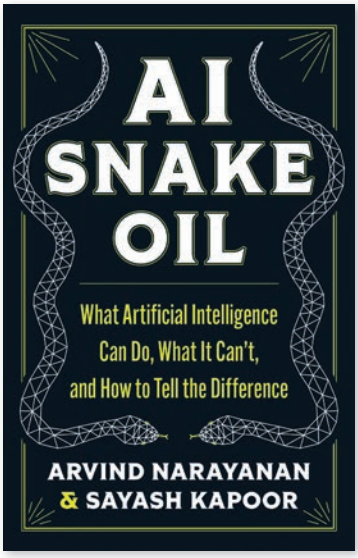

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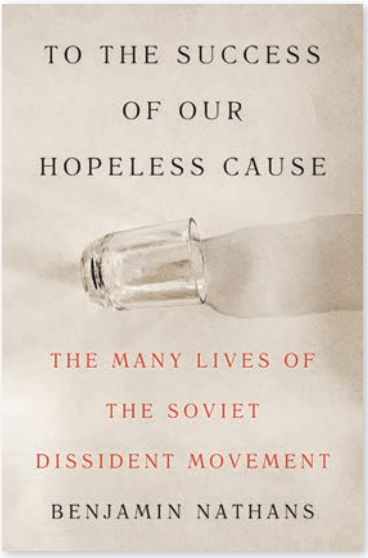

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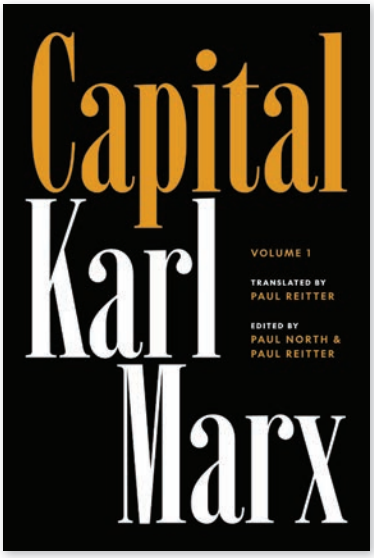

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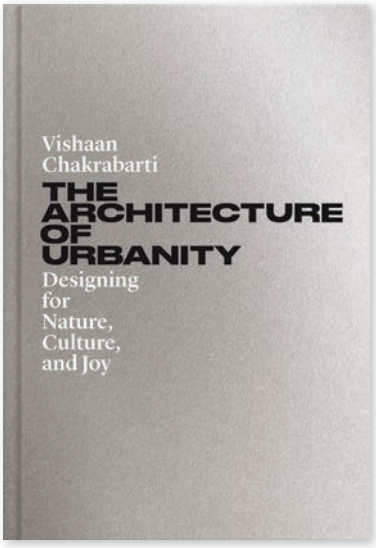

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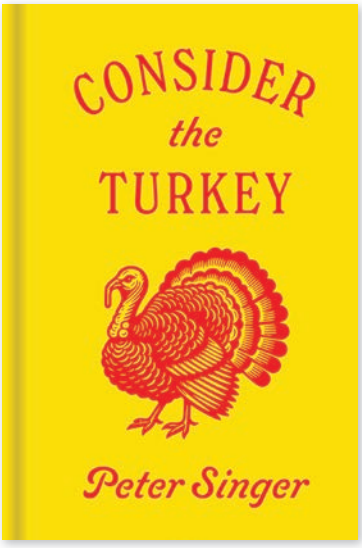

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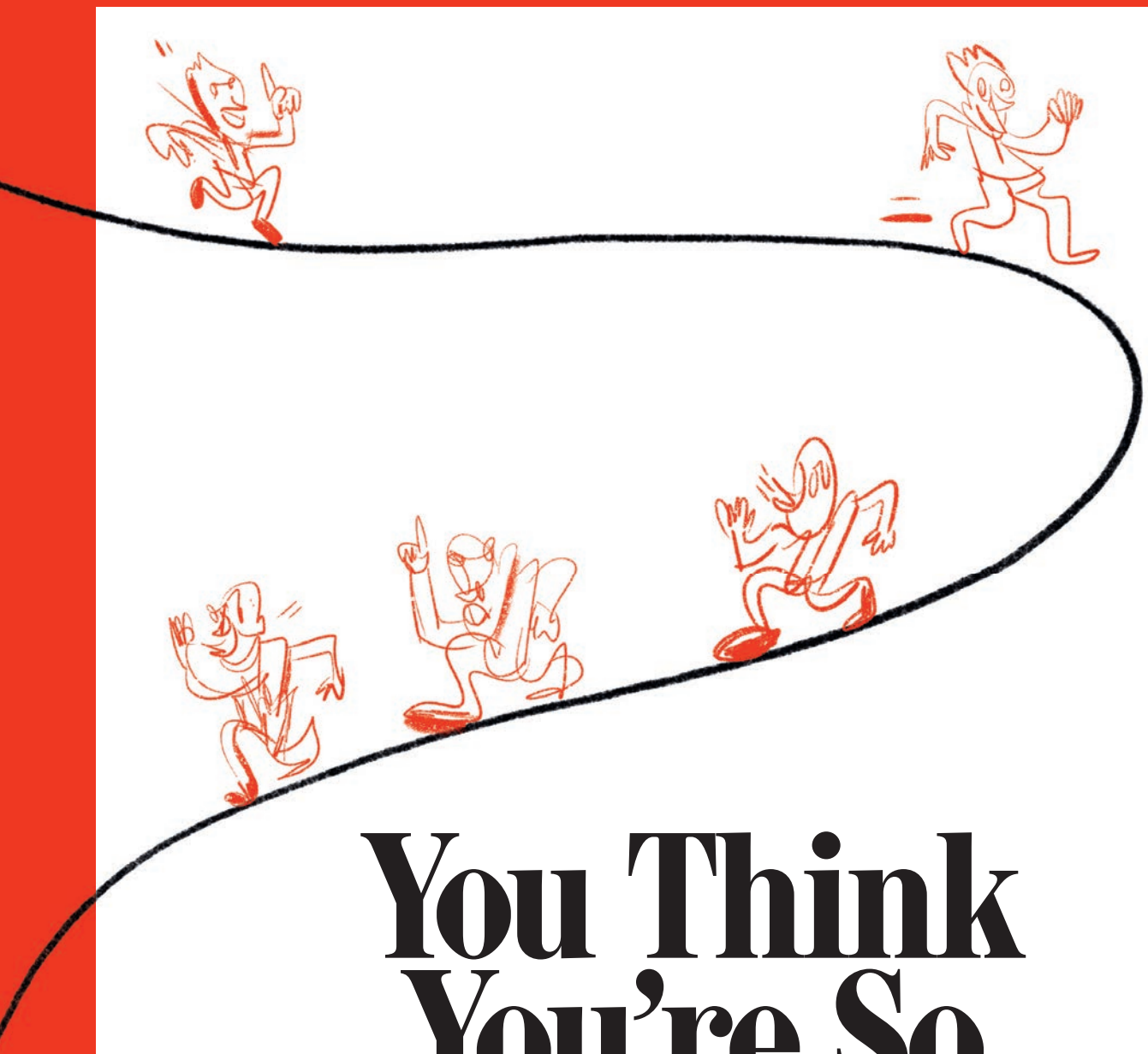


You Think You're So Heterodox

Joe Rogan has turned Austin into a haven for manosphere influencers, just-asking-questions tech bros, and other "free thinkers" who happen to all think alike. ***By Helen Lewis***

ILLUSTRATION BY MATT HEBERMEHL

It's a Tuesday night in downtown Austin, and Joe Rogan is pretending to jerk off right in front of my face. The strangest thing about this situation is that millions of straight American men would kill to switch places with me.

Centimillionaires generally pride themselves on their inaccessibility, but most weeks you can see Rogan live at the Comedy Mothership, which he owns, in exchange for $50 and a two-drink minimum. About 250 tickets for each "Joe Rogan and Friends" show go on sale every Sunday at 2 p.m. central time, and disappear within seconds. When you arrive at the Mothership, the staff locks your phone in a bag, which both ensures that you cannot leak footage online and makes you think you're about to see some *really forbidden shit*.

You are not. What you will see is four comedians, plus Rogan himself, with routines that might shock the Amish, the over-80 set, college students, *Vox* staffers, or John Oliver superfans—but not anyone who, say, went to a comedy club in the 1990s. Of the many recent failures of the American left, one of the greatest is making entry-level battle-of-the-sexes humor seem avant-garde. (Did you know that women often run relationship decisions past their female friends? *Bitches be crazy!* That sort of thing.) As Rogan himself says after he emerges in stonewashed jeans, clutching a glass of something amber on ice: "Fox News called this an anti-woke comedy club. That's just a comedy club!" To underline the point that these jokes can survive outside the safe space of the Mothership, much of the material I saw Rogan perform ended up in his latest Netflix special, which was released in August.

In Austin, the masturbation mimicry happens during a riff about concealing his porn consumption from his wife—"the best person I know," he says, sweetly. That routine captures the essence of the Joe Rogan brand: He is bawdy around his fans, respectful of his wife, loyal to his friends, and indulgent with his golden retriever, who has 900,000 followers on Instagram. He maintains a self-deprecating sense of humor that's rare among men who could buy an island if they wanted one. His politics defy easy categorization—he hates Democratic finger-wagging but supports gay marriage and abortion rights. ("I'm so far away from being a Republican," he said on a podcast in 2022.) He voted for a third-party candidate in 2020, and has lately expressed his admiration for Robert F. Kennedy Jr. He also wonders if President Biden might have been replaced by a body double. (Does he have any evidence? Sure, the guy looks taller now.) He sees himself as an outsider, non-tribal, just an average Joe. The best way to think of him, one of my friends told me, is as if "Homer Simpson got swole."

Another way to think of him: as perhaps the single most influential person in the United States. His YouTube channel has 17 million subscribers. His podcast, *The Joe Rogan Experience*, which launched in 2009, has held the top spot on the Spotify charts consistently for the past five years; he records two or three episodes a week, each running to several hours. The former Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang, whose campaign for universal basic income went viral after a Rogan appearance five years ago, calls him "the male Oprah."

Rogan now lives in Austin, which has recently become known for its transformation from chilled-out live-music paradise to a miniature version of the Bay Area—similarly full of tech workers, but with fewer IN THIS HOUSE, WE BELIEVE … signs. Early in the coronavirus pandemic, the Texas capital saw the biggest net gain of remote employees of any major city in America; its downtown is now filled with cranes and new skyscrapers. It is also the center of the Roganverse, an intellectual firmament of manosphere influencers, productivity optimizers, stand-ups, and male-wellness gurus. Austin is at the nexus of a Venn diagram of "has culture," "has gun ranges," "has low taxes," and "has kombucha." The science and technology writer Tim Urban, who runs the popular Wait but Why website, told me that he moved to Austin from New York City because "I would have the experience of talking to someone I respect—some writer friend of mine, or someone who's in a similar kind of career—and I would think, *Oh, you're in Austin too*."

The city attracts people with a distinct set of political positions that don't exactly line up with either main party. They might be religious but are equally likely to be "spiritual." They shoot guns but worry about seed oils. They are relaxed about gay people but often traditional about gender. They dabble with psychedelic drugs but worry about drinking caffeine first thing in the morning. Their numbers might be relatively small in electoral terms, but they transmit their values to the rest of America through podcasts, YouTube, and other platforms largely outside the view of mainstream media.

Go to a cocktail mixer, an ayahuasca party, or a Brazilian-jiu-jitsu gym here and you might run into Tim Ferriss, the author of *The 4-Hour Workweek*; or the podcasters Lex Fridman, Chris Williamson, Ryan Holiday, Michael Malice, or Aubrey Marcus. Elon Musk is so keen to get people to move to Texas that he is planning an entire community outside Austin called Snailbrook for workers at his Tesla Gigafactory and the Boring Company. (In case you're wondering: Yes, every one of these men has been on Rogan's podcast.) "It's amazing that the arrival of one person could change a whole town, but it does feel like Rogan did that," the journalist Sarah Hepola, who started her career at *The Austin*

Chronicle, told me. "It's a lot like the dot-com invasion of the '90s, like something that *happened* to the town."

Rogan and his fans are often called "heterodox," which is funny, because this group has converged on a set of shared opinions, creating what you might call a heterodox orthodoxy: Diversity-and-inclusion initiatives mean that identity counts more than merit; COVID rules were too strict; the pandemic probably started with a lab leak in China; the January 6 insurrection was not as bad as liberals claim; gender medicine for children is out of control; the legacy media are scolding and biased; and so on. The heterodox sphere has low trust in institutions—the press, academia, the CDC—and prefers to listen to individuals. The Roganverse neatly caters to this audience because it is, in essence, a giant talk-show circuit: Go on *The Joe Rogan Experience*, and you can book another half dozen appearances on other shows to talk about what you said there.

I wanted to ask Rogan about all this: about the world that has coalesced around him, about the intellectual culture that he is exporting from Austin, about what his appeal might mean for November's election. Past research by the marketing firm Morning Consult suggests that his fans are mostly male, predominantly white but a quarter Hispanic, and right-leaning but not locked in for Donald Trump. In other words, he has a nationwide base that both major parties would be delighted to win over—and that Kennedy, a former guest on *The Joe Rogan Experience*, is clearly desperate to recruit.

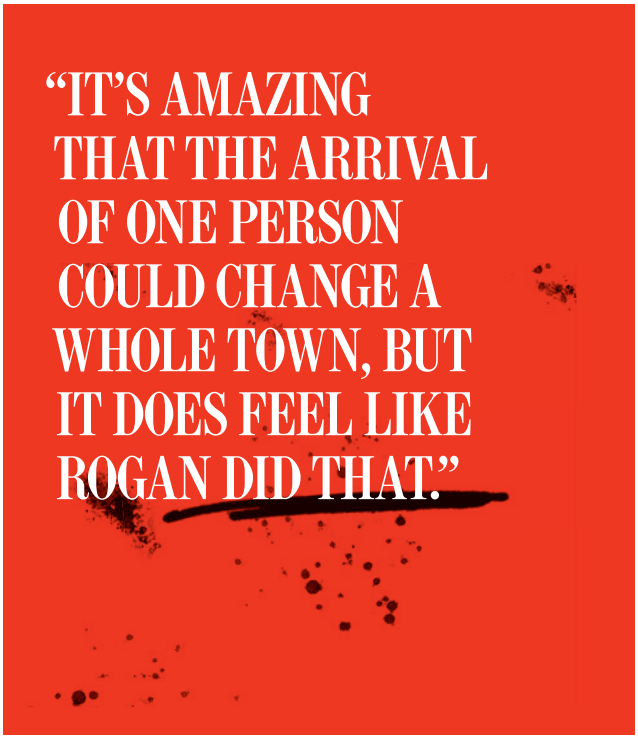
But one does not interview Joe Rogan. No human in history has needed publicity less, and he routinely turns down requests, including mine. So that's how I ended up in the front row at the Comedy Mothership, cheerfully observing the two-drink minimum with the $8 canned water Liquid Death, face-to-groin with the male Oprah.

IN MAY 2020, a couple of months into the pandemic, Rogan—then living in Los Angeles—visited Austin. "I went to a restaurant with my kids and they were like, 'We don't have to wear a mask?'" he recalled three years later. "Two months later, I lived here." He bought an eight-bedroom house for $14.4 million just to the east of the city, backing onto Lake Austin. Barely half an hour from the congested traffic of downtown, Rogan's house is set among scrubby hills, behind a gated driveway on a dead-end road. Although Rogan's ability to make headlines blew up during the pandemic, he has been famous for a long time. He was in the cast of the '90s sitcom *NewsRadio* and hosted NBC's reality show *Fear Factor*, while building a parallel career as a mixed-martial-arts commentator. Follow his Instagram, and his tastes soon become apparent: energy drinks, killing wild animals, badly lit steaks, migraine-inducing AI graphics, dad-rock playlists, and shooting the breeze with his buddies.

The last of these has been greatly helped by the opening of the Comedy Mothership, in March 2023. The newest star here is Tony Hinchcliffe, who in April took part in Netflix's gleefully offensive roast of Tom Brady and was featured on a *Variety* cover. The latter was a sign of a mood shift, given that he has never apologized for using an anti-Chinese slur onstage in 2021 to describe a fellow comic. Hinchcliffe hosts his own podcast, *Kill Tony*, which is now recorded at the Mothership, and he has helped set the tone for Austin's new comedy scene. "There is no victim mentality whatsoever in Texas," Hinchcliffe told *Variety*, adding, "It's a different little island that we've created." He was on the bill both nights I went to the Mothership, and wore a huge belt buckle with TONY HINCHCLIFFE written on it—presumably for situations in which he is both taking off his trousers and unable to remember who he is. He has very white teeth and a predatory grin, and he throws out jokes that double as tests: *Can you handle this, wimp?*

On the first night, Rogan was also accompanied by Shane Gillis, a puppy dog of a comedian. In 2019, Gillis was hired as a *Saturday Night Live* cast member and then fired four days later, after it was reported that he'd previously used an anti-Asian slur in a bit on his podcast and once described the director Judd Apatow as "gayer than ISIS." Gillis apologized, lay low for a while, and built what is now the biggest podcast on the crowdfunding platform Patreon. He then self-financed his own comedy special, *Live in Austin*, which has 30 million views on YouTube—and promoted it with an appearance on *The JRE*. (Gillis has since been on Rogan's show more than a dozen times.) His continued appeal thus demonstrated, Gillis returned to *SNL* as a host in February.

Rogan's support of Gillis demonstrates why members of his inner circle are so loyal to him. Not only has Rogan personally boosted their careers on his podcast and in his club, but his popularity has forced the comedy industry to recalibrate its tolerance for offense. The best marketing slogan in American history has to be "People don't want you to hear this, but …" What fans love about Rogan is the same thing his critics hate: an untamable curiosity that makes him open to plainly marginal ideas. One guest tells him that black holes are awesome. A second tells him that the periodic table needs to be updated because carbon has a



JOSH HEDGES / GETTY

Rogan sees himself as an outsider, nontribal, just an average Joe.

"bisexual tone." A third tells him that a deworming drug could wipe out COVID. He approaches all of them—tenured professors, harmless crackpots, peddlers of pseudoscience—with the same stoner wonderment.

THE LIBERAL CASE against Rogan usually references one of two culture-war flash points: COVID and gender. Media Matters for America, a progressive journalism-watchdog organization, has accused Rogan and his guests of using his podcast to "promote conspiracy theorists and push anti-trans rhetoric."

In March 2013, the mixed martial artist Fallon Fox knocked out an opponent in 39 seconds and afterward revealed that she had been born male. A few days later, in an eight-minute riff on *The JRE*, Rogan said he was happy to call Fox "her," but didn't think she should compete against biological females. "I say if you had a dick at one point in time, you also have all the bone structure that comes with having a dick," he added. Rogan's choice of language aside, this was a claim that most Americans would deem uncontroversial: In general, biological males are physically stronger and faster than biological females. His comments prompted a media backlash, because he had violated an emerging consensus on the institutional left that trans women could compete fairly in women's sports and that sex differences were overstated.

"Free health care—yes!" Rogan tells his audiences these days onstage in Austin, riffing on the political demands of the left. "Education for all—right on! … Men can get pregnant—fuck! I didn't realize it was a package deal."

During the pandemic, *The JRE* also drew audience members who were frustrated with the limits of acceptable discussion, at a time when Facebook and YouTube were banning or restricting what they labeled misinformation. Rogan didn't accept the proposition that Americans should shut up and listen to mainstream experts, and that led to him hosting vaccine denialists and conspiracists, and promoting an unproven deworming drug as a treatment for COVID. True, he has a fact-checker—his producer Jamie Vernon, known to fans as Young Jamie, or "Pull That Up, Jamie," after Rogan's frequent instruction to him. But correcting what Rogan and his guests say about multiple conflicting studies during a live podcast is impossible. And to give you an idea of Vernon's place in the hierarchy, he also makes Rogan coffee.

During the pandemic, the decision to host cranks such as Robert Malone—a researcher who claimed to have invented mRNA technology but sought to cast doubt on vaccines that employ it—resulted in a critical open letter signed by hundreds of health experts, a warning label from Spotify, and a gentle rebuke from the White House press secretary. However, Rogan also gave voice to those who felt that some COVID policies, such as outdoor masking and long-running school closures, were unsupported by evidence. A phrase that you will find throughout the right-wing and heterodox media ecosystems is *noble lie*. This refers to the fact that Anthony Fauci initially told regular people not to wear masks

in part because he was worried about supply shortages for doctors and nurses, but it has come to stand in for the wider accusation that public-health experts did not trust Americans with complex data during the pandemic, and instead simply told them what to do.

You don't have to look far in Austin to find the caucus of disaffected liberals that Rogan represents. On my second night at the Mothership, the ushers parked me next to Stephan, a house renovator whose business was booming thanks to all the rich newcomers to the city. He had left San Diego during the pandemic, he told me, because "they caution-taped the whole coastline."

A few days earlier, I had met another of these "leftugees," as one transplant jokingly nicknamed them, over coffee at Russell's Bakery. The writer Alana Joblin Ain is a rabbi's wife and a lifelong Democrat who before the pandemic lived happily in New York City and then San Francisco. In the summer of 2020, though, her children's public school announced that it would remain closed into a second academic year, making her worry about the effect on their social skills and academic progress. She moved her son and daughter to a private school nearby—but on the penultimate day of the summer term in 2021, the head of school announced plans to convert its main bathrooms to gender-neutral ones, in part to help "kindergartners who [are] non-binary" and "kindergartners who are trans."

When Ain questioned the policy—suggesting instead that some gender-neutral bathrooms should be provided alongside the existing girls' and boys' bathrooms—she was ostracized, she said. One father told her that her "wanting a space I feel more comfortable in, that's a female space, reminded him of segregationists." The dispute reminded her of other ways she'd felt alienated from the left. While helping her husband tend to his congregation, she had seen marital strife, substance abuse, suicide attempts, and other harms that she attributed to prolonged lockdowns.

MANY ON THE LEFT SUSPECT THAT *HETERODOX* JUST MEANS "RIGHT-WING AND IN DENIAL."

And so she made the same journey that Rogan did, leaving California for Texas in 2022. She now runs an off-the-record discussion group called Moontower Verses, which meets in person to discuss culture-war topics. She doesn't know how she will vote in November. Her experience echoes that of other Rogan fans on the coasts, for whom the pandemic brought the realization that their values differed from those around them; at the time, the persistence of masking was a visible symbol of that difference. "It's the Democrats' MAGA hat," Rogan told a guest in November 2022. "They're letting you know, *I'm on the good team*." Move to Texas, went the promise, and you won't have to see that anymore.

A sense of left-wing overreach also drove the creation of the new University of Austin, or UATX. (The school's website once boasted about Austin, "If it's good enough for Elon Musk and Joe Rogan, it's good enough for us.") The announcement of the university's launch in 2021 attracted immediate mockery, with *The New York Times*' Nikole Hannah-Jones describing it as "Trump University at Austin," after the former president's scam-bucket operation.

That was unfair: UATX is run by serious academics, and has raised enough money to give free tuition to its entire founding class of 100. It has, however, leaned into the Roganite philosophy that people must tolerate wacko ideas in order to hear intriguingly heretical ones. In 2022, UATX offered a first taste of its politics when it ran a summer school, called Forbidden Courses, in Dallas. The speakers included UATX co-founder Bari Weiss (canceled by haters on Slack and Twitter), Peter Boghossian (canceled by Portland State University), Ayaan Hirsi Ali (canceled by a literal fatwa), Kathleen Stock (canceled by the University of Sussex), and my fellow *Atlantic* writer Thomas Chatterton Williams (inexplicably not canceled).

When I visited the UATX offices, in an Art Deco building in downtown Austin, the provost, Jacob Howland, told me that he wanted "to get the politics out of the classroom," and that faculty members will have succeeded if the students can't guess how they vote from what they say in class. Just as in Rogan's comedy club, smartphones are banned in class—"so that students can't be distracted by them, or, for example, record other students and tell the world, 'Oh, you know, this student had this opinion, and it's unacceptable, and I'm putting it out there on TikTok.'"

Many on the left, however, suspect that *heterodox* just means "right-wing and in denial." An attendee at last year's Forbidden Courses sent me a slide showing survey results about the students' political leanings: Out of 29 respondents, 19 identified as conservative. One major UATX donor is Harlan Crow, the billionaire who has bankrolled Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas's lifestyle for years; he sat in the back of some 2023 summer-school lectures. Another is the Austin-based venture capitalist Joe Lonsdale, who co-founded Palantir with Peter Thiel and others. He recently gave $1 million to a pro-Trump super PAC.

"We really are open to all comers," Howland told me. He wondered whether some people on the left simply didn't want to hear any debate.

THE JOE ROGAN COALITION may indeed represent a real strand in American intellectual and political life—a normie

suspicion of both MAGA hats and eternal masking, mixed with tolerance for kooky ideas. But it is fracturing.

"Anti-wokeness" once encompassed everyone who could agree that Drew Barrymore's talk show was annoying, that some left-wing activists on TikTok were out of control, and that corporations were largely banging on about diversity to sell more products rather than out of a genuine commitment to human flourishing. Underneath those headline beliefs, however, were two distinct groups: disaffected liberals and actual conservatives, bound together by a common enemy. "Some of the people who seemed like my comrades on Twitter a while back," Tim Urban told me, "I start to see some of them say stuff like 'See, you start with gay marriage, and now you've got drag queens in this kindergarten class.' And, well, hold on a second."

Today, fractures are obvious across the wider anti-woke movement—and they must be serious, because people have started podcasting about them. Watching Rogan's stand-up set, I realized that much of his culture-war material was now three or four years old; his podcast is one of the only places I still hear COVID mentioned, as Rogan relitigates the criticism he received during the pandemic. There's a real tension in the Roganverse between the stated desire to escape polarization and the appeal of living in an endless 2020, when the sharp definition of the opposing sides yielded growing audiences and made unlikely political alliances possible.

Those contradictory impulses are evident in Austin. Jon Stokes, a co-founder of the AI company Symbolic, described the city to me as the "DMZ of the culture wars," while the podcaster David Perell put it like this: "Moving to Austin is the geographical equivalent of saying 'I don't read the news anymore.'"

But national politics inevitably intrude. In front of the Texas capitol one sunny day, I found myself surrounded by a sea of pink and blue—a Christian rally against the "grooming" of children by LGBTQ activists through sex education in schools. A speaker was telling the crowd about a concealed, well-funded agenda centered on "the dismemberment of the heart and soul of your children."

These are not Rogan's politics. But relentless criticism from the left has pushed him and his fellow travelers closer to people who talk like this. Look at Elon Musk, who has developed an obsession with defeating the "woke mind virus" and an addiction to posting about his grievances.

At its worst, *The Joe Rogan Experience* is one of America's top venues for rich and powerful people to complain about being publicly contradicted, and Rogan's own feelings of kinship with the canceled mean that he has repeatedly hosted guests whose views are recklessly extreme. This unwise loyalty is most evident in his friendship with the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. In 2022, the Infowars founder was ordered to pay nearly $1.5 billion in damages to the families of children killed in the Sandy Hook school shooting; his speculation that they were actors had led to a massive harassment campaign against them. At the trial, one father told the court that conspiracy theorists emboldened by Jones had claimed to have urinated on his 7-year-old son's grave and threatened to dig up his body.

During his stand-up set, Rogan said that Jones was right about the existence of "false flags"—events staged by the government or provocateurs to discredit a cause. Then he whispered to himself that Jones had gotten "one thing wrong." He had gotten a lot of things right too, Rogan said at normal volume. Then his voice dropped again: "It was a pretty big thing, though."

Rogan's sympathetic treatment of his friend demonstrates why power is better mediated through institutions than wielded by individuals: It's too easy to be sympathetic to a man sitting in front of you, whom you know as a complete person, rather than to his distant, unseen victims. Also, it's good to be open-minded, but not so much that your brain falls out.

If Rogan is the male Oprah, he is also the human embodiment of America's vexed relationship with free speech: a complex tangle of arguments and conspiracy theories all boiled down into one short, swole man who likes to wear a fanny pack. Rogan is a guy who started a podcast in 2009 to smoke weed with his fellow comics and talk about martial arts—and who, like many Americans, has taken part in a great geographical sorting, moving to be closer to people whose values he shares. He speaks to people who feel silenced, both elite and normie, even as he's turned the very idea that opinions like his are being "silenced" into a joke in itself. As I walked into the Comedy Mothership, I saw a sign on the wall. It read HECKLERS WILL BE ALIENATED. *A*

Helen Lewis is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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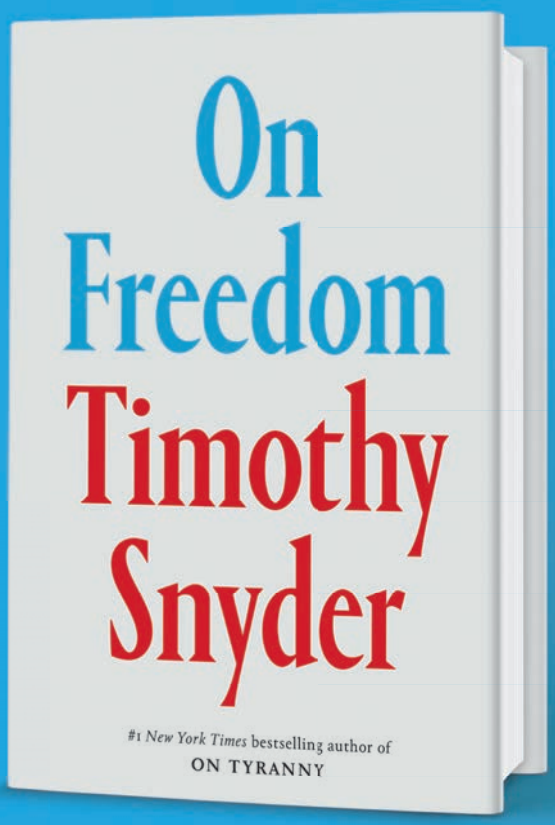

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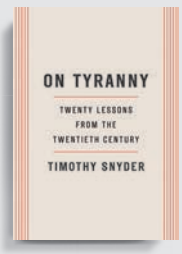

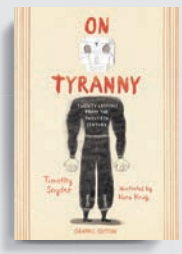

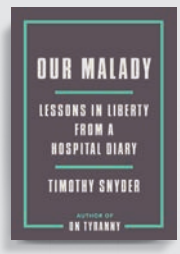

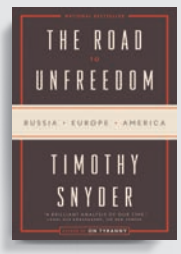

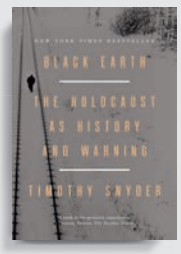

CROWN

Culture & Critics

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Men on Trips Eating Food

Why TV is full of late-career Hollywood guys at restaurants

By James Parker

As a reverse foodie—a rudie, a gastronomically ungluedie, a don't-bother-cooking-for-that-dudie—I'm not exactly a target viewer for the eating-and-traveling shows. I'm happy sitting behind my stacked-up cans of Dinty Moore Beef Stew, reading Frederick Seidel. But now and again I'm touched; an image or a moment from one of these shows will move me. Like the sequence in Season 6, Episode 8, of *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown* in which Bourdain (God rest his troubled soul) sits down with Sean Brock at a Waffle House in Charleston, South Carolina.

To set the scene: Bourdain has never been to a Waffle House before. Brock, by contrast, a southern chef in a baseball cap, is a lifelong connoisseur not just of the food—that golden-griddled, all-forgiving food; that eternal breakfast, mystically charged with the democratic yellow glow of Waffle House neon—but of the open-all-hours, come-all-ye-faithful, come-all-ye-fucked-up Waffle House vibe. "This was action to me," he tells Bourdain. "I would see these people cooking at a pace, and cooking for people who were completely out of control, but still providing hospitality." For his guest, he has devised "a tasting-menu experience," one delirious grease-load after another, and as the food hits them, the two men lose their minds. They slump and surrender and dissolve into a single namelessly buzzing poetic orality: "Patty melt! Augh … Mmmm … Come on … That's not insanely delicious? … That's not insanely delicious? Ooohhh … God *damn*."

Why is this so beautiful? Because the ambience and the cultural context—the pure, generous, flavorous, spiritually flowing Waffle House–ness of the moment—are enfolded in the reaction: the faces that Brock and Bourdain make, and the noises coming out of these faces, as they express (and share) the intensely and otherwise invisibly subjective experience of tasting something. It's the primal spark, I think, of the eating-and-traveling show.

White-guy-goes-a-wandering, white-guy-goes-a-gourmandizing—that's the rubric. Specifically, right now, late-career Hollywood white guy. Phil Rosenthal, the creator of *Everybody Loves Raymond*, has *Somebody Feed Phil* on Netflix. Eugene Levy has *The Reluctant Traveler* on Apple TV+. Stanley Tucci has *Stanley Tucci: Searching for Italy* on Discovery+. Nice work if you can get it. And the genre has been formalized: drone shots of fjords, mesas, and Mumbai street markets; glistening porno food close-ups; tinkly twinkly music; voice-overs saying things like "The Venetians are a thrifty people." These are the common elements, episode after episode proposing itself as a kind of anemic picaresque in which the host/hero visits a strange place where no misadventures occur, no sex is had, and everyone is very obliging and laughs a little too readily—hahaha!—and gives him nice pieces of pork and yummy desserts.

No misadventures occur, no sex is had, and everyone is very obliging and laughs a little too readily.

Each of these guys has his shtick. Rosenthal is childlike and immoderately gleeful, always doing little dances in the street and giggling before he takes a bite of something. And he, too, has his Waffle House moment: It happens to him, it claims him, at Bait Maryam, a Levantine restaurant in Dubai. Chef Salam Dakkak, her face illumined by some kind of beatific culinary compassion, prepares for Phil, with her hands, a dish of *kibbeh nayyeh*: raw meat, ground with bulgur and spiced with cumin, cloves, marjoram, and cinnamon. Phil builds himself a mouthful with bread and a slice of onion, giggles, shoves it in, and he is gone. Overcome by sensory resonance. The Tigger energy is abruptly stilled, replaced by a silently welling solemnity. It's a stirring sight: Phil as low-rent Proust, unable to find the words. "I have to tell you something," he says at last. "It's so wild to feel an emotion in the food."

Levy is deadpan, anhedonic, a prisoner of his own eyebrows: Some of his observations seem to be a challenge to the very concept of interestingness. (Breakfasting on a balcony in Saint-Tropez: "The food is exceptionally good and, you know, the view is stunning. I mean, you can see why this is such a popular place in Europe. It's absolutely gorgeous. Really.") Tucci in Italy is mysterious, saturnine. Bald as a saint. Strolling about in a subdued ecstasy of dapperness, sockless and stubbled, scarf knotted just so. His fine downward-tending actor's cadence ripples through the commentary. Reaction-wise, he's a minimalist, relying on the calligraphy of his thick-framed glasses and the lean planes of his face to communicate a deep inwardness of foodie joy. Except in Sicily, for some reason, where he becomes particularly expressive: "I want to live with you!" he tells one chef after a bite of raw fish, and "I want to take a bath in it!" after a swallow of local wine.

THERE'S A COUNTERCULTURAL ASPECT—given the state of things right now, given the roar in the ether—to these shows. The niceness in them is pervasive, like a contagion. People are taking their

time, perfecting their crafts, enjoying their lives. Tremendous local pride, but no tribalism. A spirit of welcome everywhere. Very alienating after a while. You'll crave some anarchy, some venom, some madness. As Jim Henson put it when he was pitching *The Muppet Show* to TV stations: "The time is right for a variety show hosted by dogs, frogs and monsters." Which is why, after Phil, and Eugene, and Stanley, you must watch Conan.

Conan O'Brien has been getting more and more interesting. Now 61, he's an elder statesman of comedy, chortling away with the celebrity guests on his podcast *Conan O'Brien Needs a Friend* and reminiscing about the high days of *Saturday Night Live*. But as he ages, he's also becoming wilder and clownier and more unstably and violently ginger, as if there's an Eric André crashing around inside him, or one of the *Jackass* crew.

Did you see him on *Hot Ones*? This is the YouTube talk show, sort of an anti-food show, where guests—while attempting to answer the eloquent and searching questions of the host, Sean Evans—must work their way through progressively more annihilating levels of hot sauce on a chicken wing. It's a great show: Guests are regularly reduced to, in Martin Amis's phrase, "tears of barbaric nausea." And O'Brien really goes for it. Sauce by sauce and wing by wing, he devastates himself. He gnaws, he drools, he emits steam. He changes color, and then changes again. His quiff twanging madly, he rubs hot sauce onto his shirted nipples. Then—to the mild alarm of Evans—he guzzles the hottest, most dangerous sauce straight from the bottle, crying, "Why can't I *feel*?"

So here he is, in the Dantean wood of midlife, advancing upon decrepitude, his palate destroyed by lethal peppers. The intro to his new show on Max, *Conan O'Brien Must Go*, is spoken by Werner Herzog: the voice from the iceberg, crystallizing its syllables. "Behold the *defiler*." (Cue a montage of O'Brien variously writhing, collapsing onto bystanders, and floating down a Thai canal with a rubber chicken in his hand.) "His character is vile, base, and depraved … This clown with dull, tiny eyes, the eyes of a crudely painted *doll*."

O'Brien knows all the tricks of the eating-and-traveling show. In Norway, he invites the ubiquitous drone into his hotel room; it floats down across Bergen Harbor ("Oh man," O'Brien says in voice-over. "Look at this incredible drone shot! … You gotta use drone cameras on these travel shows"), flies in through the balcony window, and hovers by his bed as he sips a glass of red wine. In an Irish butcher's shop, he explains that he's gotta taste the local food and react lavishly to it. The butcher gives him a couple of slices of black pudding—nothing fancy, a breakfast staple in Ireland—and O'Brien has a fake gastronomic fit. He falls to the floor, eyes closed, caressing his long thighs in erotic rapture. The butcher stands by, deadpanning like Eugene Levy.

Has O'Brien fluked his way to the dark, dark heart of it? Because maybe this is what they're all about, the eating-and-traveling shows: It's late in the day, and our taste buds have been blasted, and we've got to feel something. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Suddenly

By Peter Gizzi

street light
can do things
other light can't

all that was to be
was what it was

clownish light
nothing more

then suddenly
you find yourself
in something's
abject glory

a trill of color
on dirty winter ice

street light
can do what
other light can't

to wander
the soft dark
outside the
circle of light

ragged circle
from the street light

it was always
this way here

darkness
like expression
of doubt
spills over

when excess
thought leads
to starlings

a geometry
taking wing

Peter Gizzi is the author of several collections of poetry, including, most recently, Fierce Elegy.

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BOOKS

Rachel Kushner's Surprising Swerve

She and her narrators have always relied on swagger—but not this time.

By Lily Meyer

"Sometimes I am boggled by the gallery of souls I've known. By the lore. The wild history, unsung," Rachel Kushner writes in *The Hard Crowd,* her 2021 essay collection. "People crowd in and talk to me in dreams. People who died or disappeared or whose connection to my own life makes no logical sense, but exists as strong as ever, in a past that seeps and stains instead of fades." As a girl in San Francisco's Sunset District, Kushner ran with a group whom she has described as "ratty delinquents"—kids who fought, who set fires, who got high too young and too often, who in some cases wound up incarcerated or addicted or dead. At 16, she headed to UC Berkeley for college, but returned to the city after graduating, working at bars and immersing herself in the motorcycle scene. Almost immersing herself, anyway. Even when she was a 14-year-old sampling strangers' drugs at rock concerts, some piece of Kushner was an observer as well as a participant, a student of unsung histories.

In her fiction, Kushner gravitates toward main characters who occupy that same split psychological place. All of her novels—her latest, *Creation Lake*, is her fourth—feature a young woman, usually a narrator, who shares her way of viewing the world. Kushner often loans her protagonists her own biker swagger, the hard layer of confidence that helps a woman survive in a very male environment. Preferring to write in the first person, she also gives her central characters her distinctive style: Kushner is alternately warm and caustic, funny and slippery, able to swing from high-literary registers to street slang and back in an instant. Her recurring theme has been the limits that even groups of outsiders impose on women, and yet her female characters, no matter how constrained they find themselves, are roving, curious thinkers, using their keen powers of observation to escape subjugation and victimhood—in their minds, if not in their circumstances.

With every book, Kushner has grown more interested in the push-pull between material restriction and psychic freedom. She's especially intrigued by the effect that gender roles have on her characters' strategies for navigating that tension. In each of

ILLUSTRATION BY SARAH MAZZETTI

her novels, a woman tries to both resist and exploit conventional ideas about female behavior. One of the main characters in *Telex From Cuba*, her 2008 debut, is a burlesque dancer named Rachel K (her name is taken from a real historical figure, though of course Kushner is winking in the mirror), whose very literal performance of femininity attracts some of the most powerful men in prerevolutionary Cuba. Her evident goal is to use these men to her own ends, but she winds up getting conscripted into their service instead.

Such failures of self-liberation continue through Kushner's next novel, 2013's *The Flamethrowers*, which was a breakout for her. Its protagonist, Reno, is a biker and an emerging artist who covets the independence and aura of influence that seem to come so easily to the men in both the art world and the 1970s Italian radical underground, of which she briefly becomes a part. Unlike Rachel K, Reno's not a seductress. She's not interested in seducing the reader, either. What Reno offers in place of charm is commentary so wryly smart and dispassionate that, especially in contrast with the male blowhards she repeatedly encounters, she seems powerful. But over the course of the novel, Kushner builds a skidding sense of perilousness, a feeling that no one, Reno included, is in charge or exempt from the mounting chaos. In the end, as Reno and the reader may have sensed all along, her detachment is just another performance, a cool-girl put-on not so different from Rachel K's burlesque.

The irony that the aloof-observer stance turns into yet another trap is not lost on either Kushner or her narrators. Romy, the protagonist of *The Mars Room* (2018), takes especially bleak stock of her plight, and for good reason. She's serving two life sentences after killing a stalker who latched on to her at the Market Street strip club where she worked and began menacing her and her child in their private life. For Romy, her flat narration (counterposed with excerpts from the Unabomber's diary and chapters voiced by a sex-obsessed crooked cop) is a way of walling herself off, creating the mental freedom to imagine escape. Whether flight is a real act of hope, though, remains deliberately ambiguous. It may be an attempt at suicide.

AGAIN AND AGAIN, Kushner scrambles conventional ideas about gender, skewering male bravado while also subverting familiar ideas of femininity. Who and what counts as weak, she wants to know, and why? Stubborn stereotype portrays women as prey to emotion, unable to rein themselves in, yet in book after book, her protagonists' relentless restraint has stood in stark contrast to the egotistical, violent impulsiveness of the men around them. In *Creation Lake*, Kushner complicates this dynamic. Her protagonist, Sadie Smith, is another dispassionate observer, but one who appears to have far more independence and agency than her predecessors. She's a lone wolf, a private intelligence agent who has shucked off her home, her past, and even her name: "Sadie Smith" is an alias.

Kushner scrambles conventional ideas about gender, skewering male bravado while also subverting familiar ideas of femininity.

At the novel's start, she's en route to the Guyenne, a rural region in southwestern France, where she's been hired to spy on Pascal Balmy, the leader of Le Moulin, a group of environmental radicals intent on sabotaging Big Agriculture. She has no idea who's paying her or what their larger agenda might be, and yet she's convinced that she's playing her assigned part to perfection. Indeed, she has such faith in her toughness, acuity, and ability to dupe men that she considers herself all but invincible. Her vigilant predecessors Romy and Reno were much warier and wiser than Sadie, who loves bragging that any innocence she displays is just a pose.

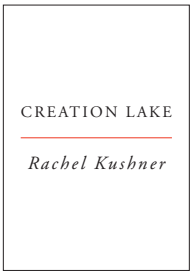
Creation Lake is not a conventional spy novel, but, unlike Kushner's shaggy earlier books, it often feels as tight as a thriller. Sadie's "secret bosses" have sent her to the Guyenne not just to embed herself in Pascal's group, but to undermine it. Gradually, readers understand that her assignment has a deadlier side—a realization that Sadie either suppresses or notices less quickly than she should, perhaps the most glaring giveaway that she's not quite the clever spy she thinks. She's sloppy, distractible, as drunk on her perception of her own power as any engine-revving "king of the road," to use her derisive phrase for the swellheaded bikers among whom she first went undercover.

Sadie is also more impressionable—and less happy—than she's ready to admit, which generates psychological ferment beneath the surface espionage plot. *Creation Lake* gets some of its suspense from its action, but Kushner mainly builds tension inside her narrator's head. Sadie spends much of the novel reading Pascal's correspondence with Bruno Lacombe, an aging philosopher whose opposition to modern civilization inspired Le Moulin at its founding. Living in a cave now, he reveres the collaborative and artistic Neanderthals, "who huddled modestly and dreamed expansively." Initially, she dismisses Bruno's ideas as crackpot, but they come to preoccupy her. For years, she's told herself that she was content to carry out small parts of big, murky plans, duly suppressing her curiosity. Bruno's emails urge her to take a broader, more inquisitive view: of humanity, of history, of alternative ways she could live. But once Sadie starts asking questions, things inside her start falling apart.

Not least, she starts questioning masculinity—or, rather, her ideas about it, which have dictated her espionage strategies and what she considers her success in the field. In the presence of others, Sadie the

operative plays up her feminine sexual allure and compliance, but Sadie the narrator treats readers to a distinctly macho version of swagger. More than once, she notes that her breast augmentation is a calculated professional asset; she seems convinced that the same is true of her rootlessness and emotional disengagement. A hard drinker and frat-boy-style slob, she often seems to be trying to outman the men around her in her own mind, even as she must submit to them in reality.

Perhaps Sadie's most traditionally masculine quality is her terror of weakness. But over the course of *Creation Lake*, as Sadie's mission within Le Moulin gets riskier, she sees that her constant projection of control is alienating her from her desires, hollowing out her vaunted autonomy, making her easy to manipulate. She's shattered—doubly so, because falling apart emotionally shocks her. It's a fate Kushner withheld from her previous, more guarded protagonists. By letting tough-guy Sadie break down, she writes a radical conversion that is also a bold authorial leap: Kushner lets herself ask, for the first time in her career, what happens to a woman unmoored by masculine and feminine categorizing.



PUTTING SADIE under such intense pressure changes *Creation Lake*'s nature as a story. Once Sadie starts cracking, the novel doesn't become digressive and loose like its predecessors, but it certainly stops feeling like a thriller. After many chapters that seemed to build to a dramatic act of sabotage, the story shifts register, heading into a very different, more emotional denouement. Relinquishing some swagger, Kushner opens up in her writing to new levels of feeling and possibilities for change.

In the process, she shakes up gender stereotypes in new ways. *Creation Lake* asks what sources of strength might be found in the kind of vulnerability, physical and emotional, that is associated with femininity. Sadie has prided herself on her supremely instrumental view of sex; she'd never get hysterical, never get too attached or lose her reason over a man. Although the strategic romance she's begun with Lucien, a friend of Pascal's, physically disgusts her, she boasts about not letting that get in her way. Kushner leans into the irony here: The reader sees well before Sadie does that her employers are exploiting precisely this blind willingness to obey them at real emotional cost to herself.

For all that she wants to treat her body as a professional resource, she can't do it. Kushner's exploration of sex as a catalyst for Sadie's emotions breaking free is fascinating. Repelled by Lucien, she risks her job by beginning an affair with a partnered member of Le Moulin that starts out enjoyable but leaves her feeling abject; in its aftermath, Sadie begins nursing bigger doubts about her life. This drama could seem retrograde, but coming from Kushner, a restored connection between female body and mind feels less traditional than transformative.

Sex isn't Sadie's only route to a softer self. She also follows a more intellectual path to which she is led by Bruno, the cave-dwelling philosopher. Although Bruno has retreated from contemporary society, his reflections are what get Sadie to reconsider her pride in her nomadic self-sufficiency. She has long bridled at the notion that women should do—and enjoy—domestic work, and is emphatic that she will never have a baby. But she's swayed by Bruno's devotion to the painted caves and their former inhabitants, and by her own images of Bruno as a father, after she learns that he has grown children. Indeed, she develops a sort of daughterly love for Bruno.

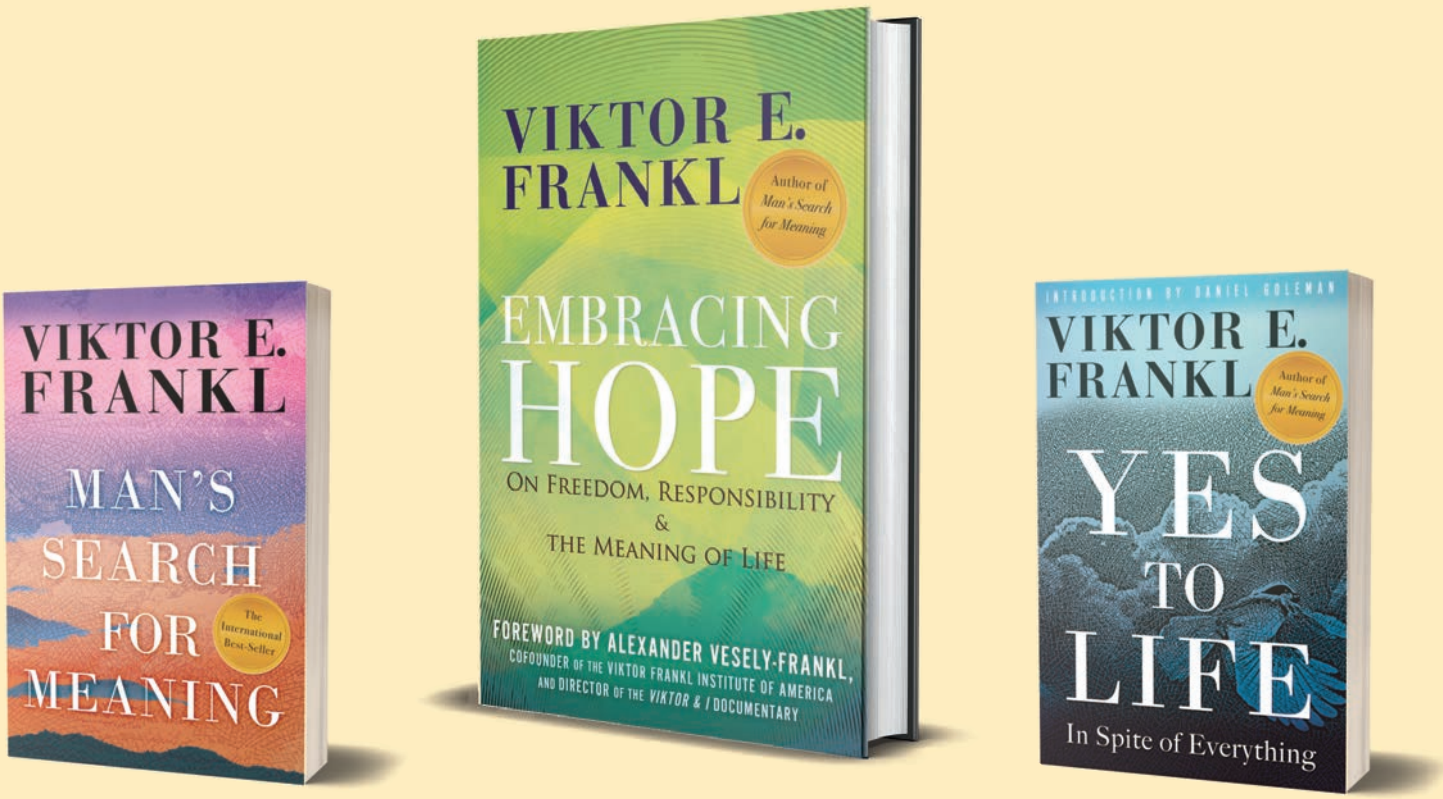
By the end of the novel, his meditations bring out the feelings that she has most wanted to suppress: homesickness, nostalgia, loneliness. After reading an email in which Bruno describes his sense of being existentially lost, she says aloud, "I feel that way too." The sound of her voice "let something into the room," Sadie goes on, "some kind of feeling. The feeling was mine, even as I observed it, watched myself as if from above." What Sadie sees is herself crying alone in bed, an image more suited to a teen movie than a Kushner novel. Yet this moment is no performance. In the grip of uncontrollable emotion, Sadie recognizes both her vulnerability and her desire to drastically change her life.

For Kushner, too, lowering the barricades against the clichés of femininity has an effect at once jarring and liberating. Her earlier novels veer away from culminating clarity, their explosive yet enigmatic endings reminding readers that her characters are too trapped and disempowered to change in the ways they want to. In *Creation Lake*, Sadie's transfigured consciousness is a kind of resolution that might be mistaken for a sentimental promise of sunniness ahead—except that Kushner gives her narrator a new, daunting challenge. At the novel's close, Sadie has already started experimenting with a life in which she engages fully rather than contorting herself to perform roles that others expect. She's now armed with an agenda of her own, one that promises to turn her into a woman who couldn't care less about what anyone thinks *woman* means. *Creation Lake*'s radicals aren't likely to upend society, but Sadie's swerve suggests that Kushner is ready for big change. *A*

Lily Meyer, a contributing writer at The Atlantic*, is the author of the novel* Short War.

“Viktor Frankl gives us the gift of looking at everything in life as an opportunity.”

-EDITH EGER, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE CHOICE*



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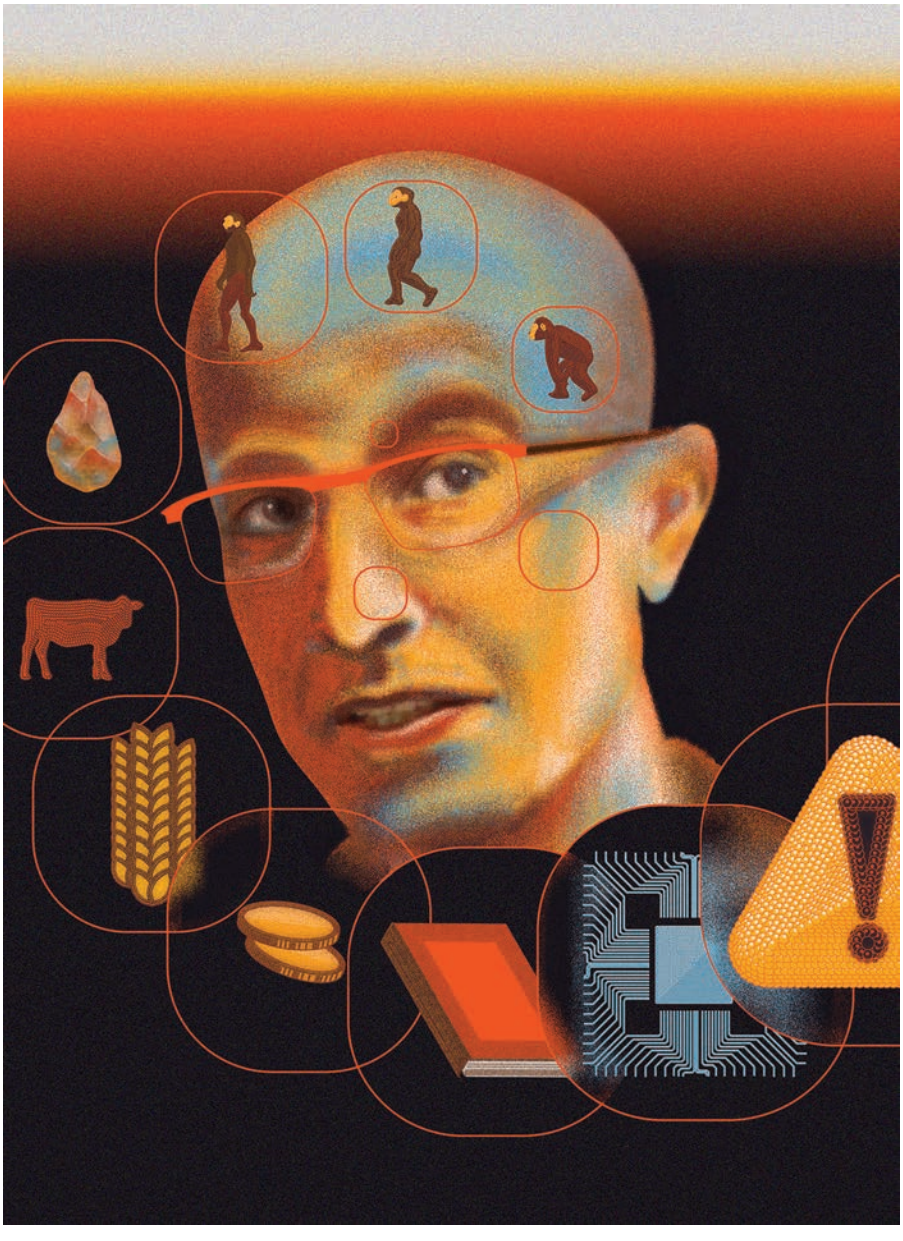
BOOKS

A Brief History of Yuval Noah Harari

How the scholar became Silicon Valley's favorite guru

By Daniel Immerwahr



"About 14 billion years ago, matter, energy, time and space came into being." So begins *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2011), by the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, and so began one of the 21st century's most astonishing academic careers. *Sapiens* has sold more than 25 million copies in various languages. Since then, Harari has published several other books, which have also sold millions. He now employs some 15 people to organize his affairs and promote his ideas.

He needs them. Harari might be, after the Dalai Lama, the figure of global renown who is least online. He doesn't use a smartphone ("I'm trying to conserve my time and attention"). He meditates for two hours daily. And he spends a month or more each year on retreat, forgoing what one can only presume are staggering speaking fees to sit in silence. Completing the picture, Harari is bald, bespectacled, and largely vegan. The word *guru* is sometimes heard.

Harari's monastic aura gives him a powerful allure in Silicon Valley, where he is revered. Bill Gates blurbed *Sapiens*. Mark Zuckerberg promoted it. In 2020, Jeff Bezos testified remotely to Congress in front of a nearly bare set of bookshelves—a disquieting look for the founder of Amazon, the planet's largest bookseller. Sharp-eyed viewers made out, among the six lonely titles huddling for warmth on the lower-left shelf, two of Harari's books. Harari is to the tech CEO what David Foster Wallace once was to the Williamsburg hipster.

This is a surprising role for someone who started as almost a parody of professorial obscurity. Harari's first monograph, based on his Oxford doctoral thesis, analyzed the genre characteristics of early modern soldiers' memoirs. His second considered small-force military operations in medieval Europe—but only the nonaquatic ones. Academia, he felt, was pushing him toward "narrower and narrower questions."

What changed Harari's trajectory was taking up Vipassana meditation and agreeing to teach an introductory world-history course, a hot-potato

NICOLAS MAETERLINCK / BELGA PHOTO / ALAMY

ILLUSTRATION BY PETRA PÉTERFFY

assignment usually given to junior professors. (I was handed the same task when I joined my department.) The epic scale suited him. His lectures at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which formed the basis for *Sapiens*, told the fascinating tale of how *Homo sapiens* bested their rivals and swarmed the planet.

Harari is a deft synthesizer with broad curiosity. Does physical prowess correspond to social status? Why do we find lawns so pleasing? Most scholars are too specialized to even pose such questions. Harari dives right in. He shares with Jared Diamond, Steven Pinker, and Slavoj Žižek a zeal for theorizing widely, though he surpasses them in his taste for provocative simplifications. In medieval Europe, he explains, "Knowledge = Scriptures x Logic," whereas after the scientific revolution, "Knowledge = Empirical Data x Mathematics."

Heady stuff. Of course, there is nothing inherently more edifying about zooming out than zooming in. We learn from brief histories of time and five-volume biographies of Lyndon B. Johnson alike. But Silicon Valley's recent inventions invite galaxy-brain cogitation of the sort Harari is known for. The larger you feel the disruptions around you to be, the further back you reach for fitting analogies. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* famously compared space exploration to apes' discovery of tools.

Have such technological leaps been good? Harari has doubts. Humans have "produced little that we can be proud of," he complained in *Sapiens*. His next books, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2015) and *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (2018), gazed into the future with apprehension. Now Harari has written another since-the-dawn-of-time overview, *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks From the Stone Age to AI*. It's his grimmest work yet. In it, Harari rejects the notion that more information leads automatically to truth or wisdom. But it has led to artificial intelligence, whose advent Harari describes apocalyptically. "If we mishandle it," he warns, "AI might extinguish not only the human dominion on Earth but the light of consciousness itself, turning the universe into a realm of utter darkness."

Harari is to the tech CEO what David Foster Wallace once was to the Williamsburg hipster.

THOSE SEEKING a precedent for AI often bring up the movable-type printing press, which inundated Europe with books and led, they say, to the scientific revolution. Harari rolls his eyes at this story. Nothing guaranteed that printing would be used for science, he notes. Copernicus's *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* failed to sell its puny initial print run of about 500 copies in 1543. It was, the writer Arthur Koestler joked, an "all-time worst seller."

The book that did sell was Heinrich Kramer's *The Hammer of the Witches* (1486), which ranted about a supposed satanic conspiracy of sexually voracious women who copulated with demons and cursed men's penises. The historian Tamar Herzig describes Kramer's treatise as "arguably the most misogynistic text to appear in print in premodern times." Yet it was "a bestseller by early modern standards," she writes. With a grip on its readers that Harari likens to QAnon's, Kramer's book encouraged the witch hunts that killed tens of thousands. These murderous sprees, Harari observes, were "made worse" by the printing press.

Ampler information flows made surveillance and tyranny worse too, Harari argues. The Soviet Union was, among other things, "one of the most formidable information networks in history," he writes. When Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn griped about its leader, Joseph Stalin, in letters, he took the precaution of referring to him euphemistically as "the man with the mustache." Even so, his letters were intercepted and understood, and Solzhenitsyn was sentenced to eight years in the Gulag. Much of the material that Moscow gathered about conditions in the country was either unreliable or poorly understood, Harari notes. But that stream of paper fed fantasies of total control, which killed millions of Soviet citizens.

Information has always carried this destructive potential, Harari believes. Yet up until now, he argues, even such hellish episodes have been only that: episodes. Demagogic manias like the ones Kramer fueled tend to burn bright and flame out. It's hard to keep people in a perpetually frenzied state. Their emotional triggers change, and a treatise that once would have induced them to attack their neighbors will, a month or a year later, seem laughable.

States ruled by top-down terror have a durability problem too, Harari explains. Even if they could somehow intercept every letter and plant informants in every household, they'd still need to intelligently analyze all of the incoming reports. No regime has come close to managing this, and for the 20th-century states that got nearest to total control, persistent problems managing information made basic governance difficult.

So it was, at any rate, in the age of paper. Collecting data is now much, much easier. A future Solzhenitsyn won't need to send an impolitic letter in clumsy code through governmental mail to have his thoughts revealed. A digital dictatorship could just check his search history. Some people worry that the government will implant a chip in their brain, but they should "instead worry about the smartphones on which they read these conspiracy theories," Harari writes. Phones can already track our eye movements, record our speech, and deliver our private communications to nameless strangers. They are listening devices that, astonishingly, people are willing to leave by the bedside while having sex.

Harari's biggest worry is what happens when AI enters the chat. Currently, massive data collection is offset, as it has always been, by the difficulties of data analysis. We're used to reports of, say, police arresting innocent Black people on the advice of facial-recognition software (algorithms trained on databases full of pictures of white people, as many are, struggle to distinguish among nonwhite individuals). Such stories illustrate the risks of relying on algorithms, but they can offer false comfort by suggesting that AI is too glitchy to work. That won't be true for long.

What defense could there be against an entity that recognized every face, knew every mood, and weaponized that information? In early modern Europe, readers had to find, buy, and potentially translate Kramer's deranged treatise (it was written in Latin) to fall under its spell. Today's political deliriums are stoked by click-maximizing algorithms that steer people toward "engaging" content, which is often whatever feeds their righteous rage. Imagine what will happen, Harari writes, when bots generate that content themselves, personalizing and continually adjusting it to flood the dopamine receptors of each user. Kramer's *Hammer of the Witches* will seem like a mild sugar high compared with the heroin rush of content the algorithms will concoct. If AI seizes command, it could make serfs or psychopaths of us all.

This might happen. Will it, though? Harari regards AI as ultimately unfathomable—and that is his concern. When a computer defeated the South Korean Go champion in 2016, one move it made was so bizarre that it looked like a mistake. The move worked, but the algorithm's programmers couldn't explain its reasoning. Although we know how to make AI models, we don't understand them. We've blithely summoned an "alien intelligence," Harari writes, with no idea what it will do.

Last year, Harari signed an open letter warning of the "profound risks to society and humanity" posed by unleashing "powerful digital minds that no one—not even their creators—can understand, predict, or reliably control." It called for a pause of at least six months on training advanced AI systems, backed by law if needed. Remarkably, some of the researchers who'd developed those systems signed the letter, as did Elon Musk. The implication was that AI is so powerful, even its inventors fear it.

Perhaps, but cynics saw the letter as self-serving. It fed the hype by insisting that artificial intelligence, rather than being a buggy product with limited use, was an epochal development. It showcased tech leaders' Oppenheimer-style moral seriousness. Yet it cost them nothing, as there was no chance their research would actually stop. Four months after signing, Musk publicly launched an AI company.

NEXUS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF INFORMATION NETWORKS FROM THE STONE AGE TO AI

Yuval Noah Harari

RANDOM HOUSE

HARARI SITS above the fray of Silicon Valley politicking. The hope is that his elevated vantage will allow him to see farther. But just as it's possible to be too narrowly focused and miss the forest for the trees, it's also possible to be too zoomed-out and miss the forest for the solar system. Although Harari is a good guide to how future technologies might destroy democracy (or humanity), he's less helpful on the present-day economics bringing those technologies forth.

The economics of the Information Age have been treacherous. They've made content cheaper to consume but less profitable to produce. Consider the effect of the free-content and targeted-advertising models on journalism: Since 2005, the United States has lost nearly a third of its newspapers and more than two-thirds of its newspaper jobs, to the point where nearly 7 percent of newspaper employees now work for a single organization, *The New York Times*. In the 21st-century United States—at the height and center of the information revolution—we speak of "news deserts," places where reporting has essentially vanished.

AI threatens to exacerbate this. With better chatbots, platforms won't need to link to external content, because they'll reproduce it synthetically. Instead of a Google search that sends users to outside sites, a chatbot query will summarize those sites, keeping users within Google's walled garden. The prospect isn't a network with a million links but a *Truman Show*–style bubble: personally generated content, read by voices that sound real but aren't, plus product placement. Among other problems, this would cut off writers and publishers—the ones actually generating ideas—from readers. Our intellectual institutions would wither, and the internet would devolve into a closed loop of "five giant websites, each filled with screenshots of the other four," as the software engineer Tom Eastman puts it.

Harari has little to say about the erosion of our intellectual institutions. In a way, he is symptomatic of the trend. Although flesh and blood, Harari is Silicon Valley's ideal of what a chatbot should be. He raids libraries, detects the patterns, and boils all of history down to bullet points. (Modernity, he writes, "can be summarised in a single phrase: humans agree to give up meaning in exchange for power.") He's written an entire book, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, in the form of a list. For readers whose attention flags, he delivers amusing factoids at a rapid clip.

All of this derives from Harari's broad reading. Yet, like a chatbot, he has a quasi-antagonistic relationship with his sources, an *I'll read them so you don't have to* attitude. He mines other writers for material—a neat quip, a telling anecdote—but rarely seems taken with anyone else's views. Nearly all scholars, in their

acknowledgments, identify the interlocutors who inspired or challenged them. In *Nexus*, Harari doesn't acknowledge any intellectual influences beyond his business relationships: Thanks go to his publishers, his editors, and the "in-house research team at Sapienship"—that is, his employees.

His asceticism is relevant here, too. Harari meditates, he says, to prevent himself from getting "entangled in" or "blinded by" human "fictions." The implication is that everything out there is, in some sense, a trap. Intellectually, Harari is more of a teetotaler than a connoisseur; somehow it's easier to picture him deep in his own thoughts than absorbed in a serious book.

Harari's distance from the here and now shapes how he sees AI. He discusses it as something that simply happened. Its arrival is nobody's fault in particular. At the start of *Nexus*, Harari brings up, as a parable, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's story of the sorcerer's apprentice, about a well-meaning but hubristic novice who conjures with a magic beyond his ken. People tend to "create powerful things with unintended consequences," Harari agrees, though he faults Goethe for pinning the blame on an individual. In Harari's view, "power always stems from cooperation between large numbers of humans"; it is the product of society.

Surely true, but why are we talking about the sorcerer's apprentice at all? Artificial intelligence isn't a "whoopsie." It's something scientists have been working on purposefully for decades. (The AI project at MIT, still operating, was founded in 1959.) Nor have these efforts been driven by idle curiosity. Individual AI models cost billions of dollars. In 2023, about a fifth of venture capital in North America and Europe went to AI. Such sums make sense only if tech firms can earn enormous revenues off their product, by monopolizing it or marketing it. And at that scale, the most obvious buyers are other large companies or governments. How confident are we that giving more power to corporations and states will turn out well?

AI might not become an alien intelligence with its own aims. But, presuming it works, it will be a formidable weapon for whoever is rich enough to wield it. Hand-wringing about the possibility that AI developers will lose control of their creation, like the sorcerer's apprentice, distracts from the more plausible scenario that they won't lose control, and that they'll use or sell it as planned. A better German fable might be Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*: A power-hungry incel forges a ring that will let its owner rule the world—and the gods wage war over it.

Harari's eyes are more on the horizon than on Silicon Valley's economics or politics. This may make for deep insights, but it also makes for unsatisfying recommendations. In *Nexus*, he proposes four principles. The first is "benevolence," explained thus: "When a computer network collects information on me, that information should be used to help me rather than manipulate me." Don't be evil—check. Who would disagree? Harari's other three values are decentralization of informational channels, accountability from those who collect our data, and some respite from algorithmic surveillance. Again, these are fine, but they are quick, unsurprising, and—especially when expressed in the abstract, as things that "we" should all strive for—not very helpful.

Hand-wringing about the possibility that AI developers will lose control of their creation distracts from the more plausible scenario that they'll use it as planned.

Harari ends *Nexus* with a pronouncement: "The decisions we all make in the coming years" will determine whether AI turns out to be "a hopeful new chapter" or a "terminal error." Yes, yes, though his persistent first-person pluralizing ("decisions *we* all make") softly suggests that AI is humanity's collective creation rather than the product of certain corporations and the individuals who run them. This obscures the most important actors in the drama—ironically, just as those actors are sapping our intellectual life, hampering the robust, informed debates we'd need in order to make the decisions Harari envisions.

Taking AI seriously might mean directly confronting the companies developing it. Activists worried about the concentration of economic power speak—with specifics—about antitrust legislation, tighter regulation, transparency, data autonomy, and alternative platforms. Perhaps large corporations should be broken up, as AT&T was.

Harari isn't obviously opposed. His values would in fact seem to justify such measures, especially because some of the nightmarish what-if scenarios he sketches involve out-of-control corporations (and states). Yet Harari slots easily into the dominant worldview of Silicon Valley. Despite his oft-noted digital abstemiousness, he exemplifies its style of gathering and presenting information. And, like many in that world, he combines technological dystopianism with political passivity. Although he thinks tech giants, in further developing AI, might end humankind, he does not treat thwarting them as an urgent priority. His epic narratives, told as stories of humanity as a whole, do not make much room for such us-versus-them clashes.

Harari writes well at the scale of the species. As a book, *Nexus* doesn't reach the high-water mark of *Sapiens*, but it offers an arresting vision of how AI could turn catastrophic. The question is whether Harari's wide-angle lens helps us see how to avoid that. Sometimes, for the best view, you need to come down from the mountaintop. *A*

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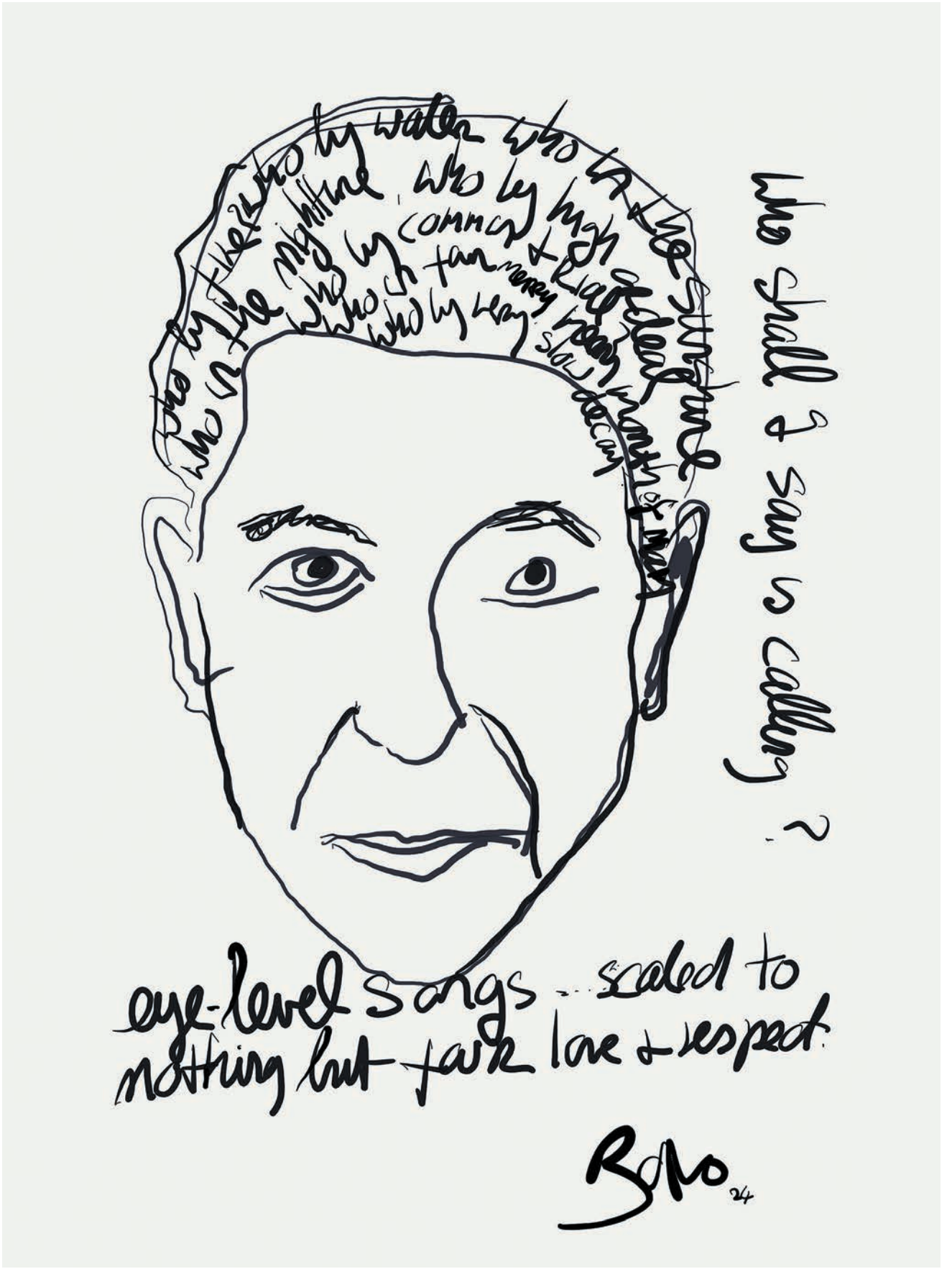


ILLUSTRATION BY BONO

The Anti–Rock Star

Leonard Cohen's battle against shameless male egoism

By Stephen Metcalf

Leonard Cohen never liked touring. "It's like being dropped off in a desert," he once said. "You don't know where you live anymore." By the time he hit his late 50s, he hated it so much that, after supporting his 1992 record, *The Future*, he moved into a Zen monastery and all but retired from the music business. Even after he returned with *More Best of Leonard Cohen* (1997), a wonderful celebration of his mid-career prime, he refused to cash in with a fresh calendar of live shows. Then, in 2005, he discovered that his bank account had been nearly emptied by his business manager.

Cohen spent months in rehearsal with a band, fine-tuning his songs as he now wanted to play them—more quietly, more elegantly than ever. In 2008, at 73, he went back out on the road. Other than at a book signing, he hadn't performed live in more than a decade. But something had happened in the interim.

His audience was larger—lines curving around blocks, scalpers demanding hundreds above face value. More striking, though, was the depth of feeling. Leonard Cohen, master of a cool, ironic, deadpan remove, had come to signify something new that mystified the performers themselves. "I saw people in front of the stage shaking and crying," a backup singer noted after opening night. "You don't often see adults cry, and with such violence."

The highlight of the tour came at the Glastonbury Festival, where Cohen played the main stage in front of listeners young and old. As the sun set and Cohen sang "Hallelujah," concertgoers "sang along, clutching each other's arms," an Australian journalist reported, "and many were openly weeping." Cohen hadn't been dropped off in a desert.

How to account for such emotion, felt across generational divides? Where does the widely perceived authenticity—hardly an untroubled term—of this music come from? And why has its power to move listeners sustained itself so forcefully, turning Cohen's afterlife into one long canonization?

With some optimism, I turned for answers to Christophe Lebold's *Leonard Cohen: The Man Who Saw the Angels Fall*. Lebold has written three dissertations about Cohen (master's and doctorate, and one in between), and, as a lecturer at the University of Strasbourg, in France, created two college courses on him. His subtitle captures the guiding insight of his book, and is a plausible starting point: Cohen's music is devoted to the idea that human beings are inherently fallen creatures, and therefore, as Lebold writes, "frivolity sucks; gravity heals."

Lebold describes his portrait, newly translated from the French, as "part biography, part analysis, and part ode," though over 500 pages, "ode" comes to predominate. Along the way, Lebold compares Cohen to (among others) Joan of Arc, John Donne, Steve McQueen, Casanova, and King David. Garrulous excesses aside, stretches of the book are beautifully and sympathetically written, and please don't mistake me, especially now, in 2024—love need not be the antonym of truth.

But by the 20th or so invocation of Cohen as an "archangel," the heartfelt panegyric starts to backfire. Cohen's music is distinctive in its utter lack of bombast, preening, or rhetorical inflation. To my ear, the tone always presumes in the listener the presence of an equal and thus forbids the aura of cultic idealization that pervades Lebold's book. In many respects, of course, Cohen was a garden-variety rock celebrity. He sold a lot of records (if mostly outside the United States) and, his disdain for touring notwithstanding, his life was full of the usual slurry of hotels, roadies, groupies, gurus, and drugs. But at his core, he was the antithesis of a rock star.

I'd go further: In his music and person, he bore a kind of witness against the messianic redeemer who has dominated the Boomer entertainment complex, and who's now the default paradigm for the winner at the top of a winner-take-all society. Over and over, Cohen slipped away unseduced, terrified that such a life would kill the muse he'd courted so assiduously as a young

poet. He created an astonishing musical persona, not to mention catalog of songs, because he never lost touch with his fealty to ordinary experience, and his lonely intimacy with an immense sense of failure.

THAT HIS MUSIC sounds like nothing else in the universe is owed to the quiddity that is Leonard Cohen, no doubt, but also to an accident of timing: His career happened substantially apart from the dynamic of apotheosis and adulation that converts teenage boys with guitars into that salvific demigod, the rock star.

Canonically speaking, the rock era unfolded as follows: Elvis Presley appeared in 1956 and, in a stroke, invented the rock star, established rock and roll as a dominant commercial force, and remade the inner lives of, among others, Bob Dylan (who called him "the deity supreme of rock 'n' roll religion as it exists in today's form") and John Lennon (who, upon hearing "Heartbreak Hotel," said he "thought of nothing else but rock 'n' roll"). They then came of age and, starting in the early '60s, turned rock and roll into rock by giving it literary and avant-garde aspirations.

It was a series of begats (Elvis begat the Beatles, the Beatles begat Jann Wenner, etc.) involving identity-famished teenagers and their heroes, and it soon coalesced into "the full-blown phenomenon of rock stardom" as "a career path" to emulate, the scholar David Shumway writes in *Rock Star* (2014). Cohen is absent from this narrative for one simple reason: He was the same age as Elvis.

Cohen was born in 1934 and grew up uninfluenced by rock and roll because it didn't exist yet. For a teenage Cohen, the guitar never took on the priapic mystique invested in it by Elvis, or Chuck Berry, or Duane Eddy. (He liked Hank Williams and Pat Boone.) His first one was a pawnshop cheapie, a nylon-stringed Spanish guitar that he learned to play at sleepaway camp, working through the rudimentary tunes in *The People's Song Book* over a summer. This was about as non–rock-and-roll a childhood as it gets.

If anything, playing the guitar fit right into his role as sweet, pampered, well-to-do nerd. He was born in Montreal and grew up in Westmount, a predominantly English Protestant enclave in a predominantly French Catholic city. The Cohens were among the most venerable families in the area's affluent Jewish population. In the depths of the Depression, the household employed a gardener, maid, and nanny.

With all due respect to *I'm Your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen*, Sylvie Simmons's still-definitive 2011 biography, the best portrait of him is the one in his own surprisingly good debut novel, *The Favourite Game* (1963), a thinly fictionalized memoir published when he was 29. Implicit in its exquisite turns of phrase and imagistic condensations is Cohen's future greatness as a songwriter. In remarkably few pages, he conveys the essence of his childhood, ascribing it to his alter ego, Lawrence Breavman: the early loss of his father; his sense of diminishment in the face of so prominent a social inheritance; his suspicion of a "prosaic adult world, the museum of failure"; and, most curiously, a growing dismay at what he fears are his own powers of hypnotic influence over others—a poetic power, yes, but also a demagogic one. It's worth remembering that the defining charismatic of Cohen's childhood was not Elvis Presley, but Adolf Hitler.

He refined his persona: part lounge lizard, part chansonnier, part ancient mariner—a man whose last delusion has been shed.

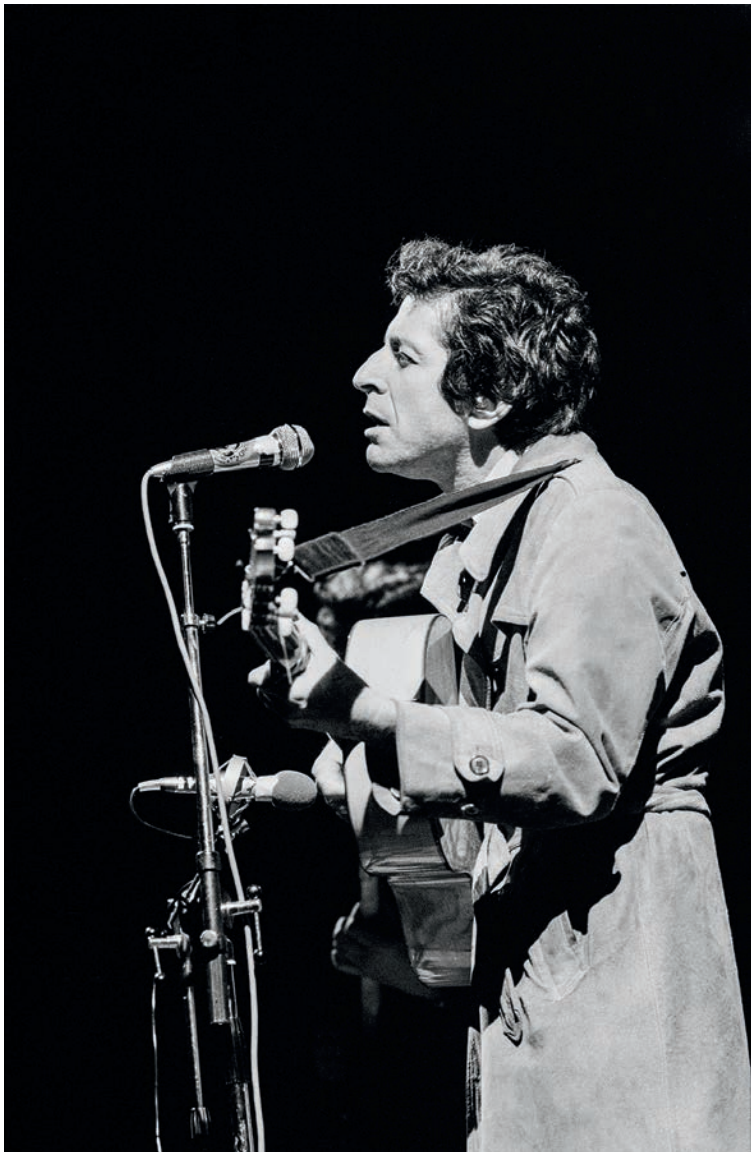
The idea that charisma—his own especially—is ugly carries over into Breavman's young adulthood, as into Cohen's. At McGill University, Cohen was a star campus litterateur, and his first book of poems, published in 1956, a year after he graduated, began the process of turning him into a literary celebrity in Canada. Breavman is a literary poseur—"The world was being hoaxed by a disciplined melancholy"—taking advantage of a small pond. "Canadians are desperate for a Keats," he says, and he begins to hate himself for servicing their need.

But Cohen appears to have found an escape. In real life (this would be the early '50s), he formed a country-and-western trio at McGill, though by his own admission, he was an "indifferent" talent: "I banged the chords," he later said. "I never in a thousand years thought of myself as a musician or as a singer." But along the way he became a nimble player, and in a style all his own, combining country with flamenco. In the novel, the guitar makes two cameos, one of them oddly moving. Breavman is in his early 20s and has agreed to entertain guests at a party, but he's wary—he never knows whether he will play well or poorly. The risk is part of the allure. That night, he plays beautifully:

> He watches the intricate blur of his right hand and the ballet-fingers of his left hand stepping between the frets, and he wonders what connection there is between all that movement and the music in the air, which seems to come from the wood itself.

Breavman never seems freer than he does here, for a reason that is all but explicit: His performance is entirely detached from the machinations of literary fame that have come to define his life. The instrument itself, meanwhile, is invested with mystique, but not the crowd-mesmerizing rock-and-roll kind. When he's done, he puts "the guitar away carefully, as though it contained the finer part of him."

IN 1964, rock's annus mirabilis, the year of *Meet the Beatles* and "The Times They Are a-Changin'," Cohen won the Prix Littéraire du Québec for *The Favourite*



GUY LE QUERREC / MAGNUM

Leonard Cohen on tour in France, 1974

Game, published his third volume of poetry, and sold his collected papers to the University of Toronto. He was 30, a respectable junior member of the Canadian literary establishment with a bohemian troublemaker inside struggling to get out.

He had hung around the beatnik scene of Greenwich Village, and one biographer claims that Jack Kerouac inspired him to take up writing prose. But if *The Favourite Game* is to be believed, Cohen was a simulacrum in that subculture and knew it: a cosseted figure playing Canada's token hipster. His third poetry collection, *Flowers for Hitler*—a parody title for a self-serious book—was a desperate attempt, he admitted, to move "from the world of the golden-boy poet into the dung-pile of the front-line writer." His efforts were met with his first scathing reviews. (And meager paydays. "It was very difficult to pay my grocery bill," he later said.)

And so in 1966, now 31, he brought his guitar with him to readings. Among his earliest compositions was a curio titled "Suzanne." A woman, a cup of tea, oranges; a river and a savior, now broken in spirit by our "wisdom" as he once was broken in body on the cross: This isn't, as the honeyed arpeggios first hint, a troubadour's paean to one-off sex. What begins as a Vermeer, a simple enough still life of a man and a woman, defined by an atmosphere of hovering expectancy—they're sharing, we sense, the romance of not becoming lovers—ends as a Chagall, a dreamworld of juxtapositions linked not by linear sense, but by a mood as pervasive as it is unplaceable. And all of it is held together by a simple but spellbinding melodic lilt.

Imagine not knowing, with this one in your pocket, whether you're a songwriter. For now, though, Cohen had no clue. That year, through a chain of mutual connections, he found his way to Judy Collins and played "Suzanne" for her. She was already a folk-scene eminence, but she didn't yet write her own material and felt that something was missing from a forthcoming album. Charmed by Cohen, she fell for his music and recorded "Suzanne."

Suddenly, Cohen was a songwriter. In February 1967, Collins invited him to perform at a fundraiser in Manhattan. "From the wings I could see his legs shaking inside his trousers," she recalled in *Trust Your Heart* (1987), and as soon as he started singing, he stopped; said, "I can't go on"; and abruptly exited the stage. In a letter he wrote to his partner, Marianne Ihlen, he described how elated he'd felt, "how relieved … it had all come to nothing."

Another setback that the golden boy felt he needed. Then (though, tellingly, he left this out of the letter) he recovered: He returned to the stage and, together with Collins, finished the song, and brought down the house. Cohen had taken up music to escape the more sinister aspects of his own charisma, yet here he was, electrifying a crowd of 3,000. Nuanced ambivalence was getting harder to sustain.

That spring, he auditioned for John Hammond, the Columbia Records legend who discovered Billie Holiday (as well as Count Basie, Aretha Franklin, and, later, Bruce Springsteen). Hammond found his songs "hypnotic" and offered him a contract on the spot. The recording itself proceeded in agonizing fits and starts. Tentativeness, intimacy, a fragile sense of himself as a musician—all were preserved on *Songs of Leonard Cohen*, a hushed and ravishing affair that is considered one of the finest debuts in pop history. The singsong dirges, many in waltz time, are so delicate, so self-assured and precise, but what to even call their mode? The conversational sublime? Melody, so unaccountably a product of unconscious forces, had placed his ego in abeyance, allowing a forbearing tenderness to emerge.

The album was released in December 1967, about a month after the first issue of *Rolling Stone* hit newsstands, and the clash of sensibilities could hardly have been starker. To Jann Wenner, the magazine's co-founder, rock musicians weren't just singers. They were tutelary deities to the young, supplanting all elders. Thanks in no small part to *Rolling Stone*, the absolute veneration of the rock star was made into an acceptable attitude for young males, and with this veneration came various cults of personality (rock star as Dionysian overlord, Blakean visionary, Byronic aristo). Lebold's book falls squarely within this lineage. At one point, he even calls Cohen his "master"—a perversely inapt way of honoring an artist who brought together the limits of the pop form with a heavyhearted embrace of the limits of the ego.

The boys' club over at *Rolling Stone* must have been baffled by how beautifully Cohen played to antitype: He trimmed his hair, wore exquisitely tailored suits, carried a briefcase into the studio. Nothing about the man, his music preeminently, flattered the worldview of the credulous teenager. Take "Famous Blue Raincoat," from *Songs of Love and Hate* (1971), his third album, and one of the most beautiful and unsettling songs ever written. It opens with the singer awake in the early-morning dark, his wife asleep next to him. He's composing a letter to someone who, for a spell, was her lover, and the song tells, in its oblique way, the story of a man who cannot separate his anger from his habits of self-blame, or from the realization that his wife liberated some part of herself when she cheated on him:

> Yes, and thanks, for the trouble you took from her eyes
> I thought it was there for good so I never tried.

LEONARD COHEN: THE MAN WHO SAW THE ANGELS FALL

Christophe Lebold

Here was a new possibility for rock music, one that Dylan, in his empyrean self-regard, hadn't yet touched: to break free from the wounded grandiosities of boys. Joni Mitchell, who cited Cohen as "an early influence," understood what he was up to from the beginning. "I remember thinking when I heard his songs for the first time that I was not worldly," she said in an interview. "My work seemed very young and naive in comparison."

For Cohen, worldly maturity ushered in an altogether different woundedness, a mesmeric—and distinctly not adolescent—sadness, deep-seated and temperamental but intensified by crippling doubts about his gifts, about his singing especially. "I hated the sound of my own voice. I thought it was weak and full of self-pity," he said later. He enjoyed celebrity status in England and parts of Europe, but his wasn't a traditionally radio-friendly voice, which meant relative obscurity in America, the largest commercial market for recorded music. As the decade came to an end, Cohen would not have disputed the judgment that he was yet another spent force of the 1960s.

COHEN, LOST AS A MUSICIAN in the early '80s, needed, as he told an interviewer, to "resurrect not just my career but myself and my confidence as a writer and singer." He chose to do the riskiest, most potentially dangerous thing of all: He laid aside the guitar. He flew to New York and called an old producer of his. "Leonard had this shit-eating grin on his face," John Lissauer told Sylvie Simmons. "He had this little crap Casio synthesizer which he'd bought at … one of these camera shops for tourists, where you push your finger down on a key and it'll play a dinky rhythm track." Cohen sang Lissauer a new song, "Dance Me to the End of Love."

Something about the switch from a holy object to an impious one forced Cohen to break himself down, then rebuild himself from scratch as a songwriter. The gamble paid off in a batch of songs bracing in their freshness, the best of which arose out of an ever-shifting jumble of notebooks that he'd been poring over for years. Lissauer took charge of the music for a while, tinkering with the chords to give it some uplift, and when the time came to record, he assembled a small gospel-style choir to lift it up some more. In "Hallelujah," he and Cohen thought they'd created a modern standard, and they believed *Various Positions* (1984) was an album that would mark Cohen's arrival as a star in America. But once again, he was out of step with the timeline.

In the '80s, the entertainment business was becoming a global multimedia oligopoly dominated by a tiny handful of publicly owned players, among them CBS Records, all in pursuit of Wall Street–pleasing superstars—artists who, ideally operating across all media, could act as reliable mega-earners. Walter Yetnikoff, in charge at CBS Records, listened to the tape, hand-delivered by Cohen himself, and said, "We know you're great, Leonard, but we don't know if you're any good," and declined to release the album in the United States. That same year, 1984, Springsteen emerged as an MTV mainstay and thus an arena draw, giving CBS Records proof of concept for multiplatform synergies. "Born in the U.S.A." became an era-defining anthem; "Hallelujah" all but disappeared.

There was no rescaling Cohen to the ethos of bigness, as *rock star* began its semantic drift away from its musical origins toward its current "king of the heap" meaning. Having hit an all-time low in his career, Cohen worked mostly alone and often in Montreal, producing new songs still without the aid of a guitar. The pulsing menace of the synthesizer continued to suit his mood; his raspy, deep singing voice lowered further, becoming a richer, altogether stranger instrument. Pursuing a strain of prophesying ("Everybody knows that the Plague is coming / Everybody knows that it's moving fast / Everybody

knows that the naked man and woman / Are just a shining artifact of the past"), he refined his persona: part lounge lizard, part chansonnier, part ancient mariner—a man whose last delusion has been shed. In 1988, at an age when most rock auteurs have long since fallen back on self-plagiarism, he put out *I'm Your Man*.

If a rock star is someone who gets arrested, developmentally speaking, in their early 20s after being mistaken for a demigod, then sells to a mass audience a fantasy of being a teenager forever, Cohen emerged with *I'm Your Man* as the perfect counterpoint. There was no aging out of being Leonard Cohen, only aging into. He was ready to bear a special kind of witness. Throughout the record, scorn is directed at specific targets—the rich, the bigots, those criminally indifferent to the AIDS crisis, the perpetrators of the Holocaust—but overall, this is an After Times document. The flood has happened. "I got some sense that the thing has been destroyed and is lost," he told an interviewer; "this is the shadow, this is the fallout, the residue, the dust of some catastrophe, and there's nothing to grasp onto."

Here, Cohen's timing was finally apt. A considerable portion of the music-buying public was now ready for someone to testify against a society remade to suit a child's ideal of adult self-realization. (All the seigneurial privileges, none of the responsibilities. What's not to love?) Cohen's witness had a special trenchancy for being levied against himself as much as anyone—against a man who, in erratic jags, had for decades flirted with, fled, returned to, and fled again the temptations of stardom.

And then, the irony of ironies: In late middle age, he became a rock star by standing in pitiless opposition to the type. *I'm Your Man* was his most commercially successful album, and from there the irony compounded further. A proliferation of tribute albums and cover versions of songs (by the Pixies, R.E.M., and Nick Cave, among others) was already making Cohen relevant to younger audiences when Kurt Cobain, bearer of every last hope for rock and roll as a genre, name-checked him in a song in 1993. And in 1994, Jeff Buckley recorded "Hallelujah."

To sing praise to God is to praise the God we've got, with the larynx he gave us; from the evidence that Cohen presented in his version of the song, neither deity nor voice is kind or forgiving. But Buckley, a virtuoso rock performer, possessed a soaring vocal range, supple across multiple octaves and able to achieve euphoric liftoff without the aid of angelic overdubs. Pitting his own tendency toward overreverence against Cohen's self-undercutting ironies, he achieved an improbable gestalt, and turned a song from a half-forgotten Cohen album into the modern standard that John Lissauer had hoped for.

There was no aging out of being Leonard Cohen, only aging into. He was ready to bear a special kind of witness.

Cohen was now a kind of double figure—the man turning into a timeless icon for having written "Hallelujah," and his shadow, a man unafraid of personifying, for his growing fan base, the realities of aging and death. These two Cohens—the rock star and the anti–rock star—came together on the 2008 tour to make a single performer, a man sufficiently liberated, at last, from remorse to lean into the maudlin sorcery of "Hallelujah." Watching the clips now, I'm struck that he is saying something moving in its generosity: *Yes, it's nice to play this arena. But these are, and have always been, songs from a room; eye-level songs. They can take or leave you, and you can take or leave them. And that is why, big as I may be now, as I may yet become, I will remain forever scaled to nothing but your love and respect.*

His celebrity grew bigger, his witness-bearing more lucid, ever less self-regarding and only more humane. In October 2016, he released *You Want It Darker*, a farewell album, and it was greeted with universal acclaim, winning Cohen a Grammy Award for Best Rock Performance. The title cut, with its "*Hineni*, *hineni* / I'm ready, my Lord" chorus, has been commonly interpreted as a gesture of completion and peace.

But *hineni* (Hebrew for "Here I am") is Abraham's response when God asks him to sacrifice Isaac, his only son. Never forget, Leonard Cohen was a Cohen—which is to say, a Kohen—a descendant, as he was told as a child, of Aaron, the older brother of Moses. He didn't trace his existence as a musician to Elvis, but to the liturgies of the synagogue, which, when he was a boy, "sent shivers down my spine." His songs were love songs in the deepest sense: gestures of reconciliation with the mystery of Creation, and the painful anomaly of human consciousness within it.

In addition to its aura of spiritual magnanimity, then, "You Want It Darker" offers up a ferocious lament, and it has taken on a distinctly prophetic cast over the years. Leonard Cohen died on November 7, 2016. His lifelong battle with a particular kind of shameless male grandiosity was over. The following day, Donald Trump—a "rock star" politician, he's been called—was elected president of the United States.

> If you are the dealer, let me out of the game
> If you are the healer, I'm broken and lame
> If thine is the glory, mine must be the shame
> You want it darker
>
> *Hineni*, *hineni*
> *Hineni*, *hineni*
> I'm ready, my Lord. *A*

Stephen Metcalf is the host of Slate*'s* Culture Gabfest *podcast.*

ESSAY

Boat Fish Don't Count

The wild, obsessive, dangerous pursuit of Montauk's biggest striped bass

By Tyler Austin Harper

Photographs by Peter Fisher

The wave comes,
throat-high and hungry.
The last thing
I see before it sweeps
me off the rock
and into the ocean
is a man in a wetsuit
leaning his shoulder into
a wall of water.

When we swam out here around 2 a.m. and hoisted ourselves onto the algae-slick face of a boulder, he had warned me: "If you go in here, it won't be fun." And he was right.

I manage to keep hold of my fishing rod, and I'm reeling in lost line and treading water and trying to forget all the stories I've heard about sharks as a second large wave begins sucking me up its face. By the time the third crashes over me, I've abandoned any pretense of swimming back to our original perch. Sputtering and coughing, I make my way toward another rock closer to shore. A last wave pushes me onto it, and I get my feet under me.

Thirty yards in front of me, having held on to that sloping rock through the entire set, Brandon Sausele makes a long, arcing cast into the pounding surf.

SAUSELE IS 27 years old. Shaggy-haired, tattooed, and muscular, he is a devoted practitioner of an extreme sport known as "wetsuiting," which is both easy to describe and impossible for the uninitiated to understand. When I was first getting into the sport a few years ago, the advice I received from another fisherman was simply: *Don't.*

Wetsuiting is a form of saltwater fishing that involves wearing a wetsuit and wading or swimming out to offshore rocks—almost exclusively at night, often during storms—to access deeper water or faster currents than can be reached in traditional waders. The quarry are striped bass, a fish that migrates every spring, mostly from the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays, to as far north as Maine, and back down again in the fall.

Although "stripers"—one of the most popular game fish in America—can be caught during normal waking hours, the largest members of the species, some more than four feet long, usually come close to shore at night. Stripers prefer inclement weather and rough water, which make ambushing their prey easier, but also make conditions more dangerous for the men—wetsuiters are nearly all men—who chase them.

Catching big stripers requires dedication and sleep deprivation. And if you're wetsuiting, it involves more than a little risk. The hazards of this hobby, coupled with the fact that most of us who do it don't even keep the fish we catch, are often baffling to outsiders, who quite reasonably wonder why we bother. Perhaps not surprisingly, wetsuiting has long attracted highly particular personalities: cranks, brooding combat veterans, adrenaline junkies, recovering alcoholics, and spiritual questers.

Fishing for striped bass from the shore—known as "surf casting"—was once a pastime for the rich, who created clubs and built "bass stands" in places such as Newport and Cuttyhunk Island in the 1800s. But what Sausele does, wetsuiting, was born in the mid-20th century in Montauk, New York, back

PETER FISHER FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

*Brandon Sausele (*this page and previous page*) is one of a dying breed of fishermen in Montauk, New York, who wear wetsuits and wade or swim out to offshore rocks in shark-filled waters—almost exclusively at night.*

when it was a hardscrabble fishing town. Who exactly invented the sport is a matter of substantial debate, but it's generally agreed on that by the early 1960s, a handful of men were donning wetsuits and swimming sometimes 100 yards or more through the churning surf to reach the sandbars and outer rocks on Montauk's shores.

Montauk's geography is uniquely perfect for the sport. Situated at the eastern tip of Long Island's South Fork, which some call simply "The End," the town has a mix of sand beaches, boulder fields, and ripping currents that provides an ideal habitat for stripers, and a singular challenge for those who hunt them. By most standards, I'm a serious wetsuiter; I go out some 80 nights a year. But I was not fully prepared for the nights I spent on Long Island this summer, fishing with one of the most celebrated anglers on Montauk's coastline.

WETSUITERS OFTEN TALK about their "career" in fishing, and Sausele has already had a decorated run. He has seven Montauk Surfmasters tournament victories to his name and a "50" under his belt. Catching a 50-pound striped bass is an achievement that most spend their life chasing, and very few attain.

During the day, Sausele works as a pipeline-rehabilitation specialist, traveling the country to repair lines that carry water, chemicals, and natural gas. But like most die-hard wetsuiters, he treats fishing as his second job, which means forgoing anything approaching a healthy sleep schedule. Sausele regularly fishes from sunset to sunrise before driving 90 minutes from Montauk back home to change; then he goes straight to work. This isn't uncommon: Most dedicated wetsuiters are out in the surf multiple nights a week from May to November. Some junkies log 100 or more nights a year.

In this prolonged state of sleep deprivation, wetsuiters must keep constant track of moon phases, bait migration, wind direction, tide swings, current speed, water temperature, swell and surf conditions—knowing that a single mistake can spell injury or worse. Wetsuiters pursue a fish, yes, but also an old and very human question: What can a body do?

I sought out Sausele because he's a good fisherman, *really* good, but also because he is, as he himself puts it, one of a dying breed. By Sausele's estimate and that of other Montauk fishermen I talked with, only about five or six hard-core wetsuiters fish The End regularly today, down from dozens in the '90s and 2000s. (Many local fishermen still wear a wetsuit, but vanishingly few swim out to Montauk's far-flung reefs at night.)

In part that's because Montauk has long since become a vacation spot for influencers and Wall Street guys, pushing out the working class and making it harder for fishermen to find affordable places to stay. It's also because striper numbers have dropped after years of inadequate conservation. But just as much as any of these reasons, it's a story about sharks. Because if there's one thing keeping Montauk wetsuiters shorebound, it's the shark population. Sausele often takes to Instagram to share videos and images of large bass bitten in half by "the tax man" while he is reeling them in, as well as other encounters he has with large sharks while precariously perched on offshore rocks, most of which are submerged, leaving him belly-deep with predators bigger than he is. In one video, he releases what looks like a sizable bull shark at night. It had hooked itself after eating a bluefish on his line.

More than a few wetsuiters have lost marriages and jobs in their desperate quest for this fish. Some have lost their life.

If this sounds insane, that's because it is. Wetsuiters are all mad, and they always have been. Spending sleepless night after sleepless night up to your chest in the riotous Atlantic, hunting fish the size of a preschooler, isn't a hobby that people who are psychologically grounded pursue. (I do not exempt myself from this charge.) Many disciples speak about their relationship with the sport as a kind of addiction. More than a few have lost marriages and jobs in their desperate quest for this fish. Some have lost their life.

I went down to Long Island in June and again in July—a time of year when shark run-ins are common—to swim to the outer rocks with Sausele in an attempt to understand why he risks life and limb, chasing massive fish only to release them, with nothing but the occasional Instagram post and a few hundred likes to show for it.

Wetsuiters have a mantra: "Boat fish don't count." It's often said tongue in cheek, but most of us sort of mean it. I've thought about the meaning of this phrase a lot: on the long drives to my fishing spots; while wading out, neck-deep, to sandbars in white-shark territory; in a parking lot, gearing up to fish the bleeding edge of a hurricane. Boat fish don't count because, generally, boat fishing can't kill you.

I ARRIVE in Montauk during the first week of June, my wife and seven-month-old in tow. We haven't been away together since our son was born, so we decided to make the trip a family affair, staying in one of the rental homes that are helping drive up the town's housing prices. We get in on a Monday afternoon and spend the evening like tourists, drinking South Fork rosé at a picnic table and watching the sun sink into Lake Montauk.

Twenty-four hours later, Brandon Sausele is giving me a firm handshake in a dirt-and-gravel parking lot. Although we talked on the phone several times in the months leading up to my trip, Sausele takes me a little by surprise. You might expect a man who swims through a shark-infested ocean at night to be brash and full of swagger. Sausele is not quiet, but he is understated and modest. He asks me questions about my gear, whether I like a certain brand of hook, if I have thoughts on a certain kind

of "plug" (an artificial lure). It's a bit like if Phil Mickelson asked an amateur golfer his opinion on a particular nine iron.

After a few minutes of chitchat, we're piling into Sausele's truck and driving to a second location, where we'll slip into our wetsuits and prepare for the night. He tells me he doesn't like to get ready in the same place that he's fishing in case he's recognized by another wetsuiter who might try to horn in on his bite. (This kind of secrecy is typical—I have my own similar routines and rituals that shade from privacy into paranoia.)

We take our time getting our gear together: pool-cue-thick rods and waterproof reels made of aircraft-grade aluminum; plug bags made of sailcloth attached to thick belts made of scuba material; rustproof rescue knives; primary and backup dive flashlights attached to lanyards made of surgical tubing; nitrile-coated gloves; specialized shoes called Korkers fitted with carbide cleats designed to grip rock; an assortment of other tools, including pliers, stainless-steel D rings, and handheld scales to weigh fish. And finally, with those sharks in mind, tourniquets.

By 8 o'clock, we've driven to a third location, and I'm wading deep into the Montauk surf with Sausele. Our first perches are maybe 60 yards offshore, a pair of flat rocks that we can reach without swimming. He directs me to the bigger of the two and we fish until the blue wash of sky turns purple and the ebbing tide sucks out a little farther. He keeps a polite eye on me.

"All right," Sausele announces. Night has fully set in, and soon I'm watching Sausele's dark form side-stroking through the choppy Atlantic, using his 11-foot surf rod to feel for a specific rock that allegedly lies somewhere below the surface. He does this without turning on his flashlight, so as not to spook the fish; as he later explains, he locates these underwater rocks, which he scouts during the day, by triangulating from various onshore landmarks. The water is pushing fast and he starts his swim up current, letting it swing him toward the rock. A few minutes later, I can just make out Sausele's silhouette standing some 40 yards in front of me. He signals for me to join him. I slip into the black water.

Sausele and the author in late July; Sausele caught a 29-pound striped bass.

As Sausele promised, the rock is plenty big but awkwardly shaped. The water is well above my waist, even when I'm standing on the highest part. I've fished plenty of difficult places—my home waters offer miles of ledge-studded coastline, craggy death traps battered by New England tides—but Montauk is an entirely different animal. I'm not used to fishing from rocks that are this deeply submerged, and the surf is frothing and the current tugs at me. Within the first 10 minutes, a big roller comes in and pushes me off into deep water. Sausele extends a hand and pulls me back on only for the next wave to push me off again. This time, I swim around to the front of the boulder and let the next wave deposit me belly-first onto the rock.

We don't catch any stripers that night, and my entire body aches—Sausele stays on that slimy boulder like he's glued to it, while I seem to spend as much time swimming back to our rock as I do fishing from it. Nevertheless, the entire affair is deliriously fun. Wetsuiting can feel illicit, almost juvenile: courting danger while the rest of the world sleeps, the sense that something exciting—catching not just a fish, but

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The Fish—could happen at any moment. When the sky brightens over the distant Montauk Point Lighthouse, Sausele's watch reads a quarter to five and we call it quits. We mostly float back, paddling with the hands not holding our rods, relying on the buoyancy of our wetsuits and letting the waves push us toward shallow water.

Back onshore, we stand on the rocky beach, panting lightly, leaning on our surf rods like canes under Montauk's crumbling bluffs. A sliver of moon is dissolving into the morning. Sausele says he hopes the fishing will be better tomorrow.

THE TEENAGER in the surf shop is tanned and stoned. When I tell him I'm working on a story about fishermen, striped bass, and sharks, his bloodshot eyes flash, his mouth splitting into a grin.

"Oh, the sharks are here, man." He leans back on his stool until it's balanced on two legs. "I've seen them two different times. One night, I was out at dusk. Whole crowd of surfers. And we see this big fin coming down the lineup. Just fucking cruising." He presses his hands together and makes them swim like a fish. "Just fucking cruising," he repeats. "And we're all like … shit! You know?" I agree, *shit*. He forgets to tell me about the second time he saw a shark.

It's been a month since my June trip and I'm back in town. When I pull into the parking lot around midnight, Sausele is tying a monofilament leader to his braided fishing line, fingers lit up by the beam of a headlamp.

We had fished hard the day before, meeting at midnight and staying out through sunrise with only two bass and some hefty bluefish, all released, for our efforts. When I got back to the parking lot of my beachside motel that morning, vacationers were already ambling toward the ocean, weighed down by coolers and sandy beach chairs. I slept until 10 a.m. Sausele went straight to his job.

It's the week of July 4, when sandbar sharks and other species typically begin showing up in Montauk in big numbers. Sausele hasn't had a fish bitten in half yet this season, but during the height of summer, it can be a weekly, sometimes daily occurrence. He expects his first visit from the tax man any day now, a prospect that doesn't seem to cause him much anxiety, though it keeps my heart rate up.

Craig O'Connell—the director of the O'Seas Conservation Foundation, who is also known as the "Shark Doctor" and has appeared on *Shark Week*—told me that on top of a growing sandbar-shark population, the Montauk surf is also home to white sharks, duskies, spinners, bulls, and sand tigers (these are reportedly behind Long Island's recent uptick in attacks).

When I asked Oliver Shipley, a marine biologist who studies Long Island's sharks, if he thought it was safe to go wetsuiting at night during Montauk's summer months, he let out a peal of laughter. He said he's seen some of Sausele's Instagram videos. Shipley emphasized that it's important not to demonize sharks, and that attacks on humans remain extraordinarily rare. Though some fishermen feel like the shark population, especially sandbars, is "exploding," he said, it's actually rebounding after decades of decline, as a result of effective conservation efforts. But he also said that he personally would not go swimming after dark, smelling like fish and eels (common striper bait), looking like a harbor seal in black neoprene.

Shipley's gallows laughter is on my mind tonight as I'm pushing out toward an eddy that marks the location of a submerged rock a short distance from the one Sausele is already on. I'm uncomfortably aware of how soft a human belly is as I swim. I scramble onto my rock and try—and fail—not to look like a wounded seal.

I've spent plenty of time in New England waters at night during the peak of our white-shark season. But I've never actually seen or encountered a white—which are relatively uncommon and often interested in chasing larger prey than striped bass—whereas the ubiquity of Montauk's sandbar sharks, as well as the fact that we're both chasing the same fish, means there's a decent chance I'll come across one of them. While I stand on my rock with the tide incoming, bioluminescent algae sparking around my waist, I think of the stories I've heard from other Montauk wetsuiters: releasing a large bass only to hear the surface erupt 10 feet away as a shark strikes it; exploratory bumps on the leg from curious sandbars; eight-foot-long shadows cruising cresting waves; a large fin surfacing in front of your rock, then slipping beneath the surface.

Two of Sausele's friends join us, swimming out through the incoming tide. They are among the very small number of people he fishes (and shares information) with. During the glory days of Montauk wetsuiting, when dozens of fishermen regularly pushed out to the farthest rocks, wetsuiters often worked in "crews," cooperating to scout new territory and claim choice rocks. As Sausele and his friends banter, getting washed off their rocks and cracking jokes at one another's expense, laughing at the prospect of being eaten, I catch a glimpse of what it might have been like at its peak. As John Papciak, a still-active fisherman who wetsuited in Montauk in the '90s and early 2000s, told me, the crews were in no small part about commiserating amid discomfort.

A season in the surf is an accumulation of petty miseries broken by fleeting triumphs. Permanent sand in your boots. The wetsuit that never fully dries from one night to the next. The October waves that hit you in the face and the feeling that you'll never be warm again. The trudging, flashlight-free walks through the woods or along the beach at night, trying to keep your secret spot a secret. The hunger for sleep. And the all-too-real risks. Papciak warned me that I should not glamorize wetsuiting, and during our hour-long conversation, he reminded me again and again how dangerous the sport is. He mentioned an acquaintance who had washed up lifeless in the surf on Cuttyhunk Island, and told me stories of his own close calls. But I also noticed the twinkle in his eye as he told them.

Anyone who is being honest will tell you that wetsuiting is a sport of considerable torment. But there is also nothing like it. When you feel the bracing hit of a 30- or 40-pound striped bass after six hours of futile casting, and the line goes singing off your reel all at once, and your rod is bucking and the surf is building and you're trying to hold your rock and hold your rod and weather the sea that wants to claim you until suddenly, as if by magic, you see a tail the size of a broom head spraying water at your feet—in that moment, the months of pain are all worth it.

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The truth is, it's worth it even when the fish aren't there. And they aren't in Montauk, at least this time. Neither are the sharks. None that we see, anyway. We swim off our rocks at 3 a.m. Sausele needs a Red Bull, one of his friends needs a cigarette, and another needs to get his car into the driveway before his wife realizes he sneaked out again. "If one of my kids wakes her up, I'm fucked," he says, laughing. Sausele asks if I'm up for regrouping and swimming back out to fish through sunrise. The only sleep he's gotten in two days is the two hours he grabbed in his truck before we met up tonight.

I haven't slept much more than he has, and I have a long drive ahead of me. I remind myself that my wife and son are expecting me to return in one piece, and that the most dangerous part of wetsuiting is what happens not in the water but on the sleep-deprived trip home. I tell him I should get back to my motel and rack out for a few hours.

He understands. His friends disperse. Sausele gives me a fist bump, and I watch him disappear again beneath a maze of stars. I listen to the death rattle of the Atlantic as it sucks sea-polished stones, and one fisherman, back into its embrace.

THROUGH THE SUMMER, I continue to hear from Sausele that the fishing in Montauk is tough. Anecdotally, it seems tough everywhere. Maine. Massachusetts. Rhode Island. Connecticut. The story is the same. The most talented wetsuiters I know report their worst season ever.

So when I return for a third and final trip to The End in late July, my expectations are low. "You take what Montauk gives," Sausele's friend tells me as we're bullshitting on the shore. "And lately she isn't giving much." But tonight Montauk is generous. Around 1 a.m., Sausele's rod doubles over. Minutes later, he's treading in deep water, cradling in his arms a bass that weighed in at 29 pounds, reviving her until she's ready to swim off. "That water's fucking murky," Sausele observes with a grin. I know he's thinking about those sandbars that love to steal an easy meal. We spend the rest of the night on a minivan-size boulder that Sausele's crew calls "shark mountain," the site of his aforementioned bull-shark video. No other fish make an appearance, and I wonder if this is normal now.

For at least a decade, anglers, conservationists, and fisheries biologists have been warning that the striped-bass population is in crisis thanks to a combination of overfishing and poor spawning years due to unusually warm and dry springs and winters. Between commercial fishing, guided charters, and recreational angling, stripers represent a multibillion-dollar industry, composed of stakeholders who always seem to think that someone else is the problem. The recreational fishermen accuse "the comms" of harvesting too many fish. The commercial fishermen respond by pointing out that "the recs" kill more than their share annually, and that a percentage of released fish still die. And on and on.

In the attempt to keep everyone happy, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission has long avoided making the hard decisions—namely, declaring a moratorium on harvesting striped bass—necessary to allow striper numbers to rebound. The species' population collapsed once before, in the 1980s, and many of us think we're on the verge of another collapse, if we're not there already. If it does happen again, it may well prove the final blow to Montauk's wetsuiting scene.

Like any town that was once a fishing town and is now that and something else, Montauk is a sprawl of contradictions. In the past 15 or so years, The End has been transformed into a summer gathering spot for the rich, a fate that was perhaps inevitable given the proximity to the wealthier Hamptons. Nearly every local I spoke with referred, with some degree of ambivalence, to the 2008 appearance of Surf Lodge—a clubby, celebrity-filled hotel, where rooms can start at $600 a night during the peak summer months—as the town's point of no return. "Our B.C./A.D.," one said.

The crusty dive bars that once gave Montauk its character—a local fishing legend, Bill Wetzel, told me that "surf rats" used to pull up a bar stool, still dripping in their wetsuits—are now something like vestigial organs, touchstones from an earlier moment in its evolutionary history that are gradually being pushed to the margins by New Montauk. There are beachside cocktail joints with $22 Negronis. There is SoulCycle and green juice. There are Land Rovers with custom golf clubs in the passenger seat. There are big houses with perfect lawns that sit empty 50 weeks out of 52. There are finance boys lined up outside the Shagwong Tavern, where they will dance badly to a bad DJ on the same floor where commercial fishermen slop beer in the hard winter.

But for now at least, they also remain—the men who ply the dark surf, who fish hard and sleep little and pull a great American fish from the ocean and know, as all fishermen know, that there is a kind of love that is also violence. And if it is around dusk and you take the parkway east toward the lighthouse, and you drive until you can't drive anymore, you might still see them. They will be changing hooks and checking lights and strapping dive knives to their ankles and heavy belts to their waists. They drink Red Bull and gas-station coffee and read texts from their wives that say "Be safe." And when the sun sets over the Atlantic, a few of these last Ahabs will push out past the breakers and swim for the horizon. *A*

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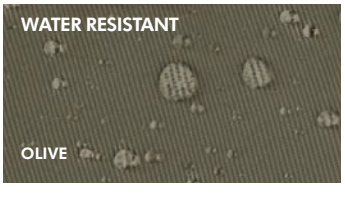

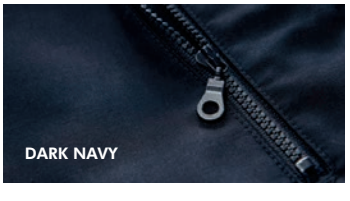

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By Caleb Madison

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ACROSS

1 Possible workplace for a research scientist, briefly
4 One of four for a cat or dog
7 "My lips ____ sealed"
8 Debut at the stock exchange, briefly
9 Exasperated cry in the face of bro-y behavior, maybe
10 Common summer top
11 Sessions in the tub
13 Site where people can sell handmade goods
16 Give a hand
19 Shows of political support
20 Public-transit options
21 Religious septet
22 A perfect one is scary
25 Icebreaker?
27 Pakistani home of the Badshahi Mosque
29 Introduced to a space, as Muzak
30 In
31 Catches a glimpse of
32 Be beat
33 *Queer Eye* first name
36 Jump into action, e.g.
38 Cray
39 Provider of limited support
42 Mestalla cry
43 Contrary *to*?
44 It might help you become cooler or hotter
46 Thin coats
47 The rest of Europe?
48 Swift response?

DOWN

1 Young sheep
2 Length times width, for a rectangle
3 Crooked
4 Sweaty mark at the base of a sleeve
5 Gorilla or gibbon
6 Sorrow
12 Famous line uttered by Joseph Garcin in Sartre's *No Exit*
14 Gets litigious with
15 QB's stat
16 Word after *liberal* or *fine*
17 The City of Light
18 Purchase from a nursery
23 Colossal Greek island?
24 Mooring site
26 Peterson portrayer of classic TV
27 First position for a caller
28 Challenges for young overachievers, briefly
29 Aspen, e.g.
34 Hedge near a burn?
35 Embodied
37 Consumer warning label?
39 Stable youth?
40 False assumption?
41 He originally had Ping-Pong balls for eyes
45 Look out for it!

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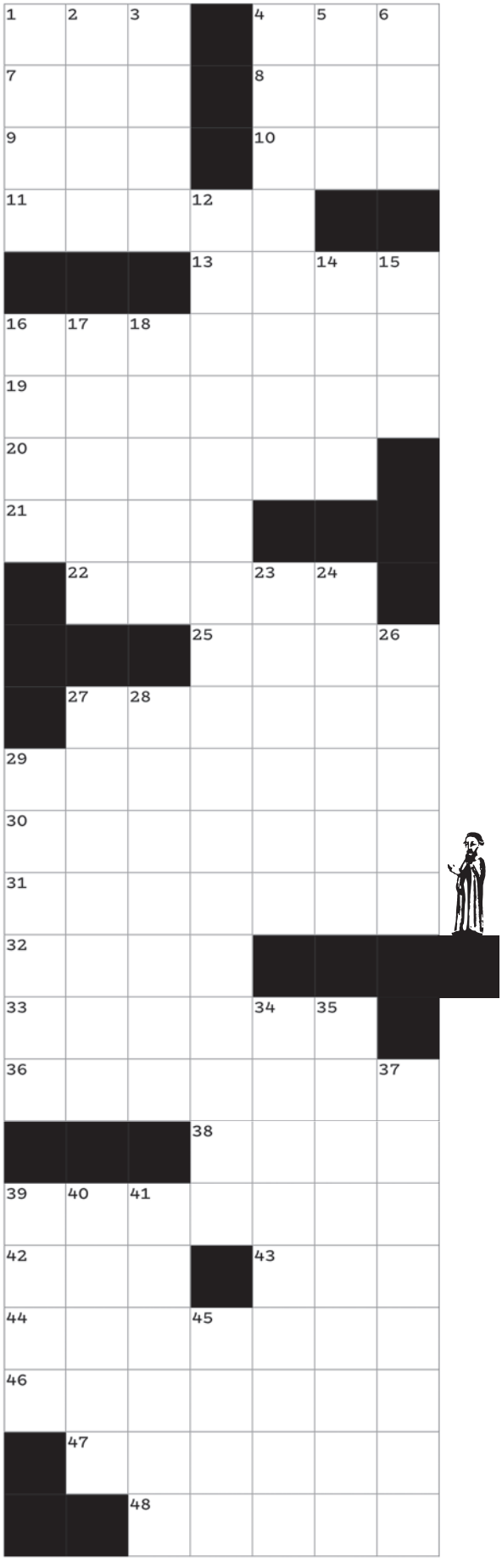

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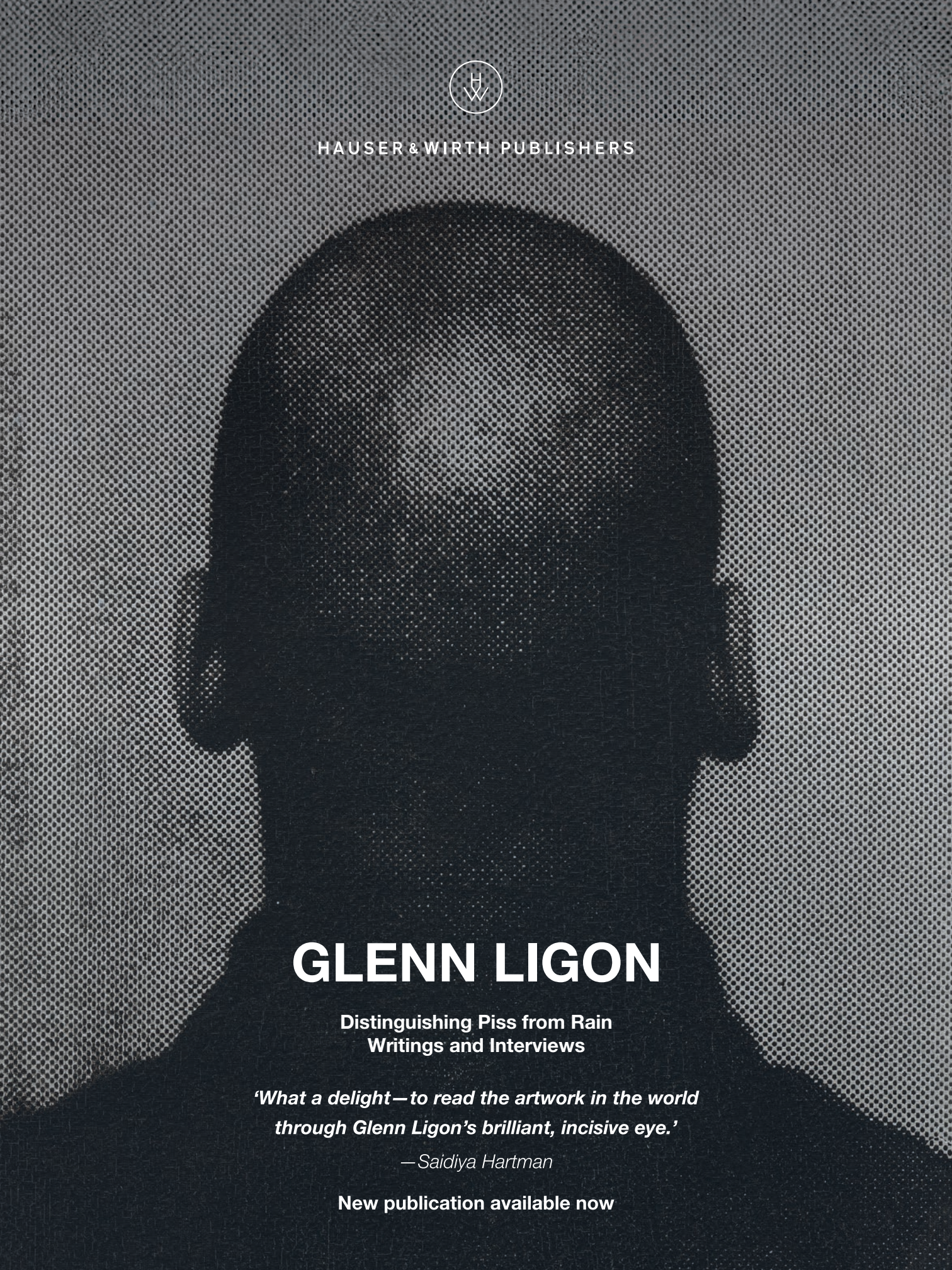
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