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# Ukraine Defiant

On Democracy's  
Front Lines

*By George Packer*

The Belarusian  
Volunteers

*By Anne  
Applebaum*

Life in the  
Bunker

*By Franklin  
Foer*



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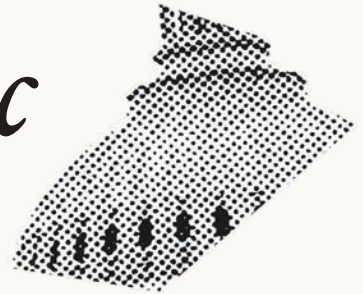
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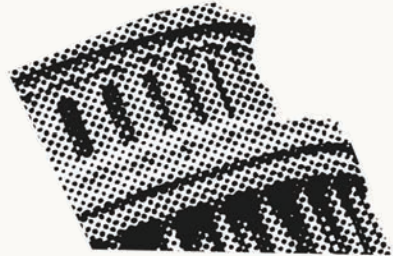
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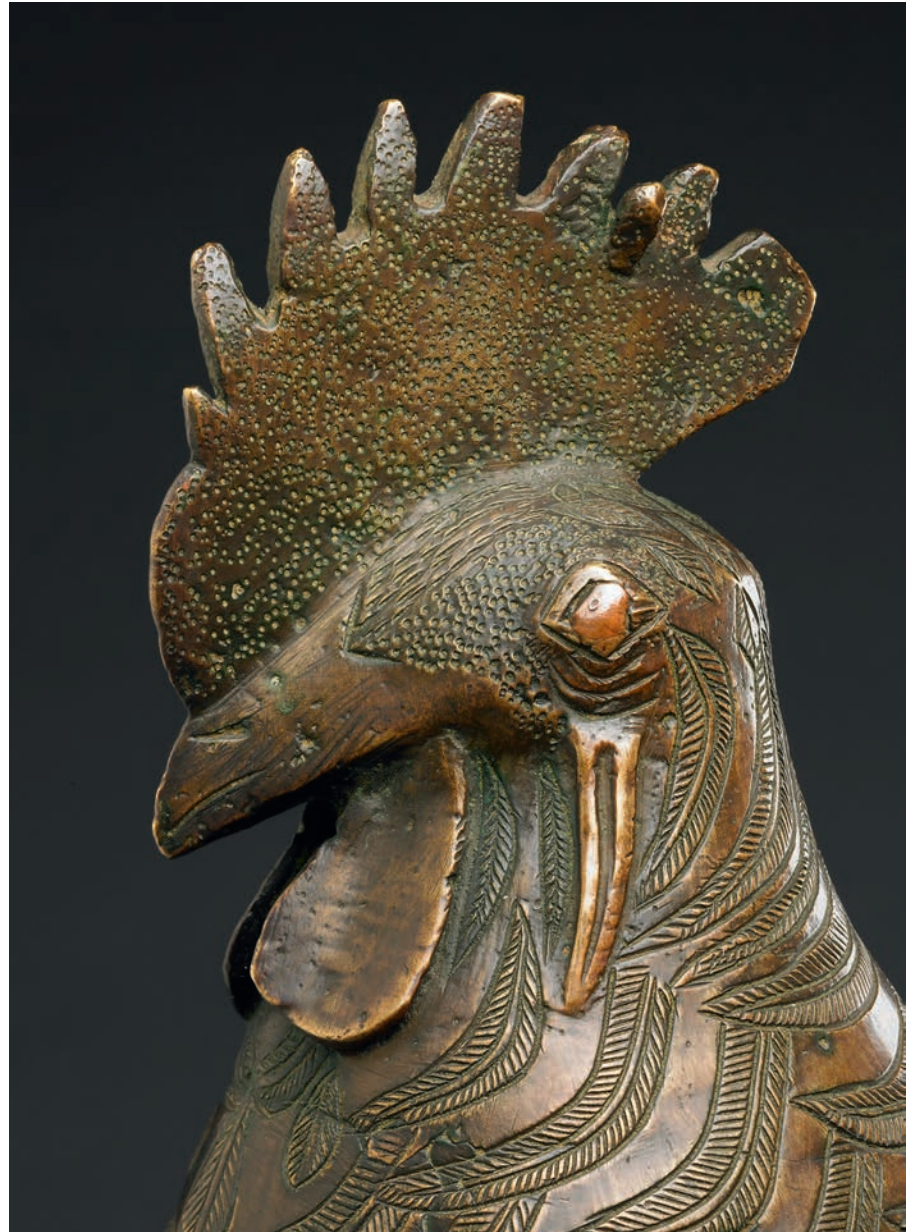
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Detail of a Benin bronze from the 18th century

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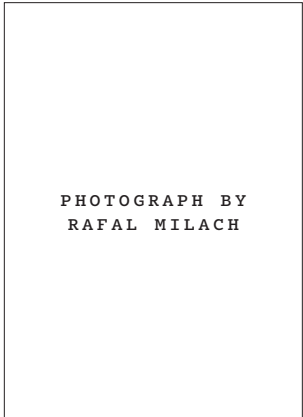
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*Behind the Cover:* The three features that make up this month's cover package—by Anne Applebaum, Franklin Foer, and George Packer—describe the realities of the war in Ukraine through on-the-ground reporting. For the cover, we looked for a photograph that would represent the resilience

of the Ukrainian people as they defend their country against Russian aggression. In the image, plumes of yellow and blue smoke—the colors of the Ukrainian flag—flare skyward, suggesting both a call for help and a defiant patriotism.

— Genevieve Fussell, *Senior Photo Editor*

# THE

## We Have No Nuclear Strategy

*The U.S. can't keep  
ignoring the threat  
these weapons pose,  
Tom Nichols wrote in  
the July/August issue.*

of cultural and political biases affecting decision making, one wonders if we have been asking the wrong questions. What if—looking squarely at the cognitive (and affective) vulnerabilities of our species—we were to admit that we are not fit for the job of managing the threat that nuclear weapons pose to our longevity on this planet?

Donna Brasset-Shearer  
*Petaluma, Calif.*

Nichols, along with NATO and the U.S., failed to note that Vladimir Putin has “used” his nuclear arsenal to good effect, neutering the response to his criminal war in Ukraine just by mentioning the obvious fact that he has one. We halted a routine test of an intercontinental ballistic missile out of fear of alarming Putin. More important, we have stood by while Ukraine is systematically destroyed. It would have been far better to recognize that Putin's nuclear threat was a hollow one, because none of his military or political objectives would be advanced by any use of a nuclear weapon. Our timidity will play out in dangerous ways, including increasing the likelihood that China will move on Taiwan by force.

Colonel Michael R. Gallagher  
*Hillsboro, Ore.*

Mr. Nichols is right. The prospect of nuclear war lacks the salience that it once had. I find that college students worry about climate change and do not think much about the possibility of a nuclear holocaust.

### Letters

T

Tom Nichols provides a sobering reminder that the threat of nuclear catastrophe did not recede with the fall of the Soviet Union, but actually grew—even as public engagement diminished. And yet, Nichols's article is itself partially trapped in cobwebbed Cold War thinking. Focusing solely on the threat of nuclear confrontation with Russia, Nichols devotes not even one word to the possibility of cataclysmic Indian-Pakistani nuclear war, or to the terrifying prospect of extremists in Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.

Benjamin Shinewald  
*Winnipeg Beach, Manitoba, Canada*

Tom Nichols is right to remind us that the Cold War years were characterized by widespread engagement among academics, politicians, and activists of all stripes for whom the nuclear threat was a compelling preoccupation. I, too, was among those who “cared a lot about nuclear weapons,” having spent my graduate years at UC Berkeley researching the attitudes of the Pentagon's top brass on a possible U.S.-Soviet nuclear war in Europe.

In light of the enormous body of data that has since surfaced regarding the limitations of human perception and calculation, and the wide range



Like the author, I have spent most of my life worrying about nuclear war, in government service and teaching at our National War College and at various universities. But I do not favor the same prescriptions as Mr. Nichols.

He argues that if our government wants to rely on nuclear weapons to make up for inadequate conventional-military capability to meet our security commitments, it should say so. Or, alternatively, if the sole purpose of our nuclear weapons is to deter an adversary from using *their* nuclear weapons against us or our allies, then the government should say that.

But for the U.S. to publicly acknowledge our need to rely on nuclear weapons to meet our global security commitments would be to encourage adversaries to challenge those commitments, and discourage allies from trusting them. This is particularly true when an adversary possesses nuclear weapons of its own and believes it can deter us from making the first strike. Think here of Russia, China, and now even North Korea. As long as uncertainty over the first use of nuclear weapons when our vital interests are threatened deters adversaries from aggression, we should not abandon the benefits of that uncertainty.

Alternatively, if the U.S. were to assure friends and foes

alike that the only circumstance under which it would ever launch a nuclear strike would be after deterrence had failed and we or an ally had already been the victim of a nuclear attack, we would be inviting a conventional attack and face the prospect of a protracted conventional war to deal with the consequences.

Robert L. Gallucci  
*The Plains, Va.*

## American Rasputin

*Steve Bannon is still scheming, Jennifer Senior wrote in the July/August issue. And he's still a threat to democracy.*

Many thanks to Jennifer Senior for her illuminating piece on Steve Bannon and his obsessions. Or maybe no thanks, given that what she portrays is a callous (or worse) personality that advocates for tearing down all institutions no matter what good they do, with no thought given to replacing or rebuilding them.

Christopher E. Klots  
*Towson, Md.*

I share *Atlantic* articles with an 89-year-old friend in assisted living. After reading the Jennifer Senior article on Bannon, she remarked, “Why would such a respected publication waste ink on another angry

white man and insurrectionist who is a buffoon?” My sentiments exactly!

Robert Pelrine  
*Arnold, Md.*

Jennifer Senior’s loathing of Steve Bannon comes through loud and clear. It’s a pity that her analysis of his appeal falls short. Why are Bannon’s ideas so apparently influential that they translate into a surge of Republican and even Trumpian support? The Hillary Clinton answer, that these supporters are all “deplorables”—idiots and puppets being manipulated by a master—doesn’t wash, as it didn’t for Clinton in 2016. A sensible and humble starting position would be that the priorities and policies of the liberal establishment don’t resonate with large swaths of ordinary Americans, who therefore don’t trust politicians who are mouthpieces of that establishment. Rather than rail against the malign influence of Bannon and his ilk, would-be future leaders of America should ask themselves how they lost the hearts and minds of so many of those they expect to put them in power. Is there any Democrat, or moderate Republican, who has the courage to do that?

Chris Morey  
*Marsaskala, Malta*

I just finished rereading Jennifer Senior’s terrifying and excellent

article on Steve Bannon. She writes with razor-blade precision, cutting into Bannon’s personality such that the pain of what he is doing to our nation is somewhat delayed by the fascination with his weird charisma. She made a man out of the monster, but also let the reader know why he is, in fact, a monster.

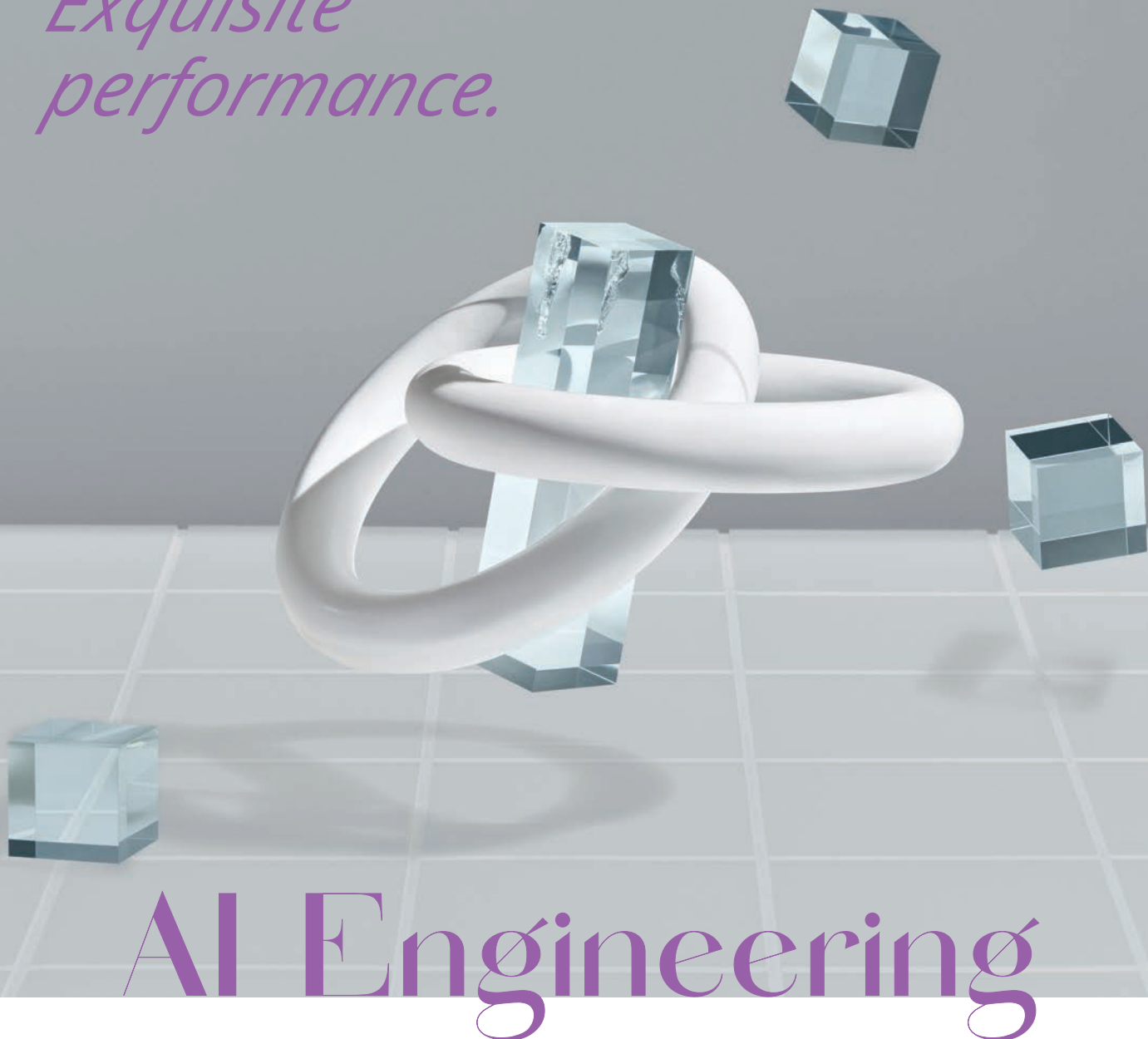
Barbara St. Hilaire  
*Asheville, N.C.*

One detail in particular struck me: Bannon was radicalized by his father’s suffering during the economic meltdown of 2008. I believe this was an important turning point for him. The tragedy is that neoliberal economics is the handmaiden to Donald Trump and Stephen Miller. Neoliberal capitalism destroys more than it builds, producing moments of crisis that it solves by handing the bill over to the 99 percent. Name a more infamous duo than economic desolation and authoritarianism. Bannon understands full well that every disaster for which neoliberalism goes unpunished encourages rage, isolation, malignant fantasy, and the percolation of conspiracy theories.

Eric Baylis  
*East Lansing, Mich.*

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# DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

## REDSHIRT THE BOYS

*Why boys should  
start school a year  
later than girls*

BY RICHARD V.  
REEVES

“

“It was a light-bulb moment for me,” Christopher Schroeder, an entrepreneur, an investor, and a father of two boys, told me. His son Jack had been accepted to Beauvoir, the National Cathedral Elementary School, in Washington, D.C. But “it was clear to the school that Jack should wait a year,” he said—not because of his academic ability, but to give him more time to become socially and emotionally prepared. “My view was that smart kids should be pushed forward as fast as possible,” Schroeder recalled. “But as I laid out my case to the head of the school,

she listened patiently, waited a moment, smiled at me, and said, ‘What’s your rush?’”

Jack started at the school a year later and ended up flourishing, largely, his father thinks, because of the decision not to rush him. When it was time for Jack’s younger brother, Ben, to attend the school, he also started a year later—at his parents’ insistence. “By then we were thinking, *Why not?*” Schroeder said.

The idea of a delayed school start—often referred to as “redshirting,” a term borrowed from athletics—got a burst of popular attention in 2008, when Malcolm Gladwell presented evidence in his book *Outliers* that children older than their classmates do better on academic tests and in life generally.

The value of a later start, which many teachers and administrators call “the gift of time,” is an open secret in elite circles. And it’s a gift overwhelmingly given to boys. In the past few months, I’ve interviewed dozens of private-school teachers, parents, educational consultants, and admissions officers, largely in the D.C. metro area. I learned that a delayed school entry is now close to the norm for boys who would otherwise be on the young side. One former head of an elite private school who now consults with parents on school choice and admissions told me, “There are effectively two different cutoff dates for school entry: one for boys and one for girls.”

Nationally, delayed entry is uncommon. Before the pandemic (which seems to have caused a surge in the practice), about 6 percent of children waited an extra year before beginning kindergarten. But

here, too, some children were much more likely to be held back than others: specifically, those with affluent or well-educated parents, and who were white, young for their year, and male. Among summer-born boys whose parents have bachelor’s degrees, the rate was 20 percent in 2010.

The reason little boys wear almost all of the proverbial red shirts is not mysterious; the fact that boys mature later than girls is one known to every parent, and certainly to every teacher. According to a Rand survey, teachers are three times more likely to delay entry for their own sons than their own daughters. The maturity gap is now demonstrated conclusively by neuroscience: Brain development follows a different trajectory for boys than it does for girls. But this fact is entirely ignored in broader education policy, even as boys fall further behind girls in the classroom.

On almost every measure of educational success from pre-K to postgrad, boys and young men now lag well behind their female classmates. The trend is so pronounced that it can result only from structural problems. Affluent parents and elite schools are tackling the problem by giving boys more time. But in fact it is boys from poorer backgrounds who struggle the most in the classroom, and these boys, who could benefit most from the gift of time, are the ones least likely to receive it. Public schools usually follow an industrial model, enrolling children automatically based on their birth date. Administrators in the public system rarely have the luxury of conversations with parents about school readiness.

But public-school kids should have the same opportunities as private-school kids, and public-school officials should be able to have those conversations. As a matter of policy, the public schools that aren’t already flexible about school start should be made

ONCE BOYS  
BEGIN SCHOOL,  
THEY ALMOST  
IMMEDIATELY  
START FALLING  
BEHIND GIRLS.

so—and I believe that, as the default, all states and school districts should enroll boys a year later than girls.

A proposal to give a boost to boys may sound odd to some, given the inequities that many girls and women still face. But I am betting on our ability to think two thoughts at once. There is much still to be done to promote female representation in politics and corporate leadership, for example. But as to education, boys and men are the ones who need the most help. And it’s not an issue only for them. When schools fail boys, those boys grow into men lacking the skills to flourish in the workplace, to be strong partners, or to be good providers for their children. Giving boys the gift of time will help create a better society not just for men, but for women and children too.

IN THE SPAN of just a few decades, girls and women have not only caught up with boys and men in the classroom—they have blown right past them. Half a century ago, the landmark Title IX law was passed to promote gender equality in higher education. At the time, there was a gap of 13 percentage points in the proportion of bachelor’s degrees going to men compared with women. Today, the gender gap is a little wider—15 percentage points as of 2019—but the other way around. For every three female college students, there are only about two men. The trend worsened during the pandemic. College enrollment as a whole declined in 2020—but that decline was seven times greater for male than for female students.

These differences on college campuses reflect gender gaps that open up many years earlier. According to a 2012 Brookings Institution study by Julia Isaacs, for instance, American girls are 14 percentage points more likely than boys to be “school ready” at age 5, controlling for parental characteristics. That’s a bigger gap than the one between rich and poor children, or Black and white children, or those who attend preschool and those who do not. The gap is mostly driven by social and emotional factors, or what social scientists label “noncognitive skills,” rather than academic ones.

Once boys begin school, they almost immediately start falling behind girls. A 6-percentage-point gender gap in reading proficiency in fourth grade widens to an 11-percentage-point gap by the end of eighth grade. In a study drawing on scores across the country, Sean Reardon, a

sociologist and education professor at Stanford, found no overall gender difference in math in grades three through eight, but a big one in English. “In virtually every school district in the U.S., female students outperformed male students on ELA [English

Language Arts] tests,” he writes. “In the average district, the gap is ... roughly two-thirds of a grade level.”

By high school, the female advantage has become entrenched. The most common high-school grade for girls is now an A; for boys, it

is a B. Twice as many girls as boys are in the top 10 percent of students ranked by GPA, and twice as many boys as girls are among those with the lowest grades. It’s an international pattern: Across economically advanced nations, boys are 50 percent more likely than

girls to fail at all three key school subjects: math, reading, and science. In the U.S., almost one in five boys does not graduate high school on time, compared with one in 10 girls—the rate for boys is about the same as that for students from low-income families.



The basic trend is clear—at every age, on almost every educational metric, across the world, girls are leaving boys in the dust. Among many of the parents I know, a shorthand explanation has developed to explain the struggles of an adolescent child to stay on track, especially academically: “He’s a boy.”

**WHAT IS GOING** on here? There are many potential explanations. The feminization of the teaching profession—three out of four K–12 teachers are now women—is not ideal for boys. Neither is the rigid rhythm of the school day, with gym class and recess squeezed out. And the focus on narrow academics rather than vocational learning puts many boys at a disadvantage as well. All true, and all worth addressing.

But I believe the biggest reason for boys’ classroom struggles is simply that male brains develop more slowly than female brains—or at least those parts of the brain that enable success in the classroom. The gaps in brain development are clearly visible around the age of 5, and they persist through elementary and middle school. (As Margaret Mead wrote of a classroom of middle schoolers: “You’d think you were in a group of very young women and little boys.”)

The brain-development trajectories of boys and girls diverge further, and most dramatically, as adolescence progresses—with the widest gaps around the age of 16 or 17. I hardly need to say that these are crucial years for educational achievement.

Adolescents are wired in a way that makes it hard to make good choices. As the

joke goes, when we are young, we sneak out of bed to go to parties; when we get old, we sneak out of parties to go to bed. Laurence Steinberg, a neuroscientist and psychologist at Temple University, has shown how adolescence is essentially a battle between the sensation-seeking part of our brain (*Go to the party!*) and the impulse-controlling part (*I need to study tonight*). During the teenage years, the sensation-seeking part is quite powerful. Our impulse control develops later.

The problem of self-regulation is much more severe for boys than for girls. Flooded with testosterone, which drives up dopamine activity, teenage boys are more inclined to take risks and seek short-term rewards than girls are. Meanwhile, the parts of the brain associated with impulse control, planning, and future orientation are mostly in the prefrontal cortex—the so-called CEO of the brain—which matures about two years later in boys than in girls.

Other relevant centers of the brain follow suit. The cerebellum, for example, plays a role in “emotional, cognitive, and regulatory capacities,” according to Gokcen Akyurek, an expert on executive functioning at Hacettepe University, in Turkey. It reaches full size at the age of 11 for girls, but not until age 15 for boys. Similarly, there are sex differences linked to the timing of puberty in the development of the hippocampus, a part of the brain that contributes to memory and learning.

These baseline biological facts are consistent with survey evidence on attention and self-regulation, where the biggest sex differences occur

during middle adolescence. “In adolescence, on average girls are more developed by about two to three years,” Frances Jensen, the chair of the neurology department at the University of Pennsylvania’s Perelman School of Medicine, told *School Administrator* magazine in a 2017 interview.

It is important to note that we are talking averages here. But Jensen’s point won’t shock many parents. I have three sons, now grown. When they brought home female friends during their middle- and high-school years, the difference in maturity was startling. (We delayed the school start for one of our boys by a few months, but given his struggles, we wish we’d done so for a full year.) The typical 15-year-old girl and boy don’t seem like different sexes; they seem like different species.

There’s a heated argument today over the extent of biologically based differences in adult male and female psychology. For what it’s worth, I think both sides—one asserting large, consequential differences and the other denying any real differences at all—overstate their case. But almost entirely overlooked in this debate is the uncontroversial evidence for differences in brain maturation. By far the biggest sex difference is not in how female and male brains develop, but when. The relationship between chronological age and developmental age is different for girls and boys. From a strictly neuroscientific perspective, the education system is tilted in favor of girls.

This was never the intention, of course. After all, the education system was mostly created by men. The gender

bias was just hard to see when girls were discouraged from pursuing higher education and careers. But now that these opportunities have been opened, girls’ advantages in school have become more apparent with every passing year. An unexpected result of feminism has been to reveal the ways in which education is failing boys.

**WOULD A DELAYED** start for boys meaningfully narrow, or even eliminate, the gender gap? I don’t know for sure. This kind of proposal demands a series of pilot programs before widespread adoption by school districts or states. But the evidence already available on the benefits of an extra year of maturity for boys makes me hopeful. Studies of redshirted boys have shown dramatic reductions in hyperactivity and inattention during elementary school, lower chances of being held back later, higher test scores, and higher levels of life satisfaction.

One striking study, by Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach of Northwestern and Elizabeth Cascio of Dartmouth College, drew on data from Tennessee to study the impact of a delayed school start. The children in their sample were allocated randomly into different classrooms. They were disproportionately from poor homes and were racially diverse: Half were getting free or reduced-price lunch in kindergarten, and a third were Black.

Overall, Schanzenbach and Cascio found that being a year older had a positive impact on eighth-grade test scores, reduced the risks of repeating a grade before high school, and

improved the chances of taking the SAT or ACT. The benefits for boys were at least twice as big as for girls on all measures through eighth grade. By high school, only boys were seeing any gains.

Cascio and Schanzenbach also found that lower-income students benefited most from redshirting. The risk of being held back a grade is massively unequal by race, gender, and economic background: One in four Black boys has repeated at least one grade before leaving high school. Redshirting boys from the outset greatly reduced that risk.

Lastly, they found that the younger classmates of redshirted children suffered no negative consequences. If anything, they wrote, there were modestly positive spillover effects. That's one reason to believe that girls would only be helped by this shift—having more mature boys in classrooms would likely improve the learning environment. In schools with high rates of delayed school entry for boys, such as the private schools in the D.C. area that I examined, the girls appear to be doing very well.

Cascio and Schanzenbach's research is the most robust to date, but their findings have been confirmed by a number of other studies as well. And related research has shown that redshirted boys are happier, too. Suzanne Stateler Jones of Collin College interviewed summer-born boys and found a much higher level of life satisfaction among those who had been redshirted compared with their peers. Among those who started school at the prescribed age, she has said, a common refrain was "I'm always trying to keep up." But she said the

overall message from the older boys was "They loved it, liked being older, no problem with it, can't think of any way it's hurt, it's only helped." Jones also interviewed parents and asked them what they would do if they had another summer-born son. Overwhelmingly, they told her, "We would redshirt."

Redshirting has the virtue of simplicity. Changing the default school-starting age would be much easier, for example, than moving toward single-sex schools, which don't appear to help boys (or girls) very much in any case, and may introduce social distortions by segregating boys from girls throughout childhood. Boys and girls don't need to go to different schools, but rather to the same school at different times in their life.

The policy could be phased in gradually, starting with the youngest boys and then expanding each year until all boys are covered. Parents should be at liberty to override the default, for both sons and daughters, just as they can at many schools in the current system.

**THERE IS ONE** major drawback: Delaying school entry would put pressure on parents to provide child care for another year. This is no doubt one reason low-income parents are less likely to redshirt their children now. In my view, any large-scale redshirting program would need to be paired with public investments in child care and pre-K. But these investments are much needed in any case—and if I'm right about the benefits of redshirting, they will almost certainly outweigh the costs.

Those benefits are of course lifelong, and they extend well beyond the fortunes of any

particular boy. Boys who fail at school grow into men who are likely to struggle in life. Poorly educated men face a brutal labor market, as job opportunities in traditionally male, blue-collar occupations evaporate. Among men with only a high-school education, one in

STUDIES OF  
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BACK, AND  
HIGHER LIFE  
SATISFACTION.

three is out of the labor force. For those who have a job, typical earnings are \$881 a week, down from \$1,017 in 1979.

The social consequences of these economic woes are profound. The marriage rate of men ages 40 to 44 with a high-school education or less has dropped by more than 20 percentage points over the past 40 years (versus 6 percentage points for those with a four-year college degree). One in five fathers lives apart from his children, and these fathers are disproportionately less educated. Rates of "deaths of despair," from suicide, alcohol, or an overdose, are almost three times higher among men than women.

Boys from affluent families are generally doing okay, in part because their parents have the time and resources to help them out—including by having them start school a year later. And men at the top of the earnings distribution have seen a steep rise in wages in recent decades. It is working-class boys and men—and disproportionately Black boys and men—who are at the sharp end of the stick.

It's hard for some people to get their head around the idea that in many areas of life, and above all in education, boys and men are now the ones who need the most help. We have a National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, but no equivalent for men. Thousands of academic scholarships are aimed at young women, almost none at young men. This lag is understandable, given the dizzying speed with which the gender gap has reversed. But we can start to address this new gap—right now, at the very beginning of the educational journey—simply by giving boys an extra year to mature.

"We were incredibly lucky to have been given this opportunity to give our boys this chance to go at their own pace," Christopher Schroeder told me of his sons' delayed start, a gift of time made at the urging of their school. "Why can't everyone have that?" *A*

*Richard V. Reeves is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. This essay is adapted from his forthcoming book, Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It.*

## JOHN ROBERTS'S LONG GAME

*Is this the end of the Voting Rights Act?*

BY LINDA GREENHOUSE

**T**he Supreme Court delivered appalling decisions in June—on abortion, guns, and environmental regulation—but the conservative supermajority is poised to strike an even greater blow against American democracy. The justices now have the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in their

sights. On October 4, the second day of the new term, they will hear Alabama's challenge to a federal district court's finding that the state has to create a new majority-Black congressional district. This is no ordinary case of statutory interpretation. At stake is a crowning achievement of the civil-rights era, and the meaning and measure of racial equality in the

hands of a Supreme Court reshaped by Donald Trump.

Back in February, in a 5–4 vote, the Court's conservative majority temporarily blocked the district court's order; the majority didn't even deign to issue an opinion explaining its reasoning. The justices' audacious move freed Alabama to hold November's congressional elections in districts that

the lower court had declared invalid. This went too far even for one of the Voting Rights Act's best-known critics, Chief Justice John Roberts, who dissented. To resurrect a pungent phrase, his colleagues out-segged him. But it would be a mistake to read his dissent as a sign that he has abandoned a project that has obsessed him since his days as

a young lawyer in the Reagan Justice Department.

The most likely explanation for his dissent was that he flinched at the optics: Alabama's request for a stay had arrived on the Court's "shadow docket." Every court maintains an emergency docket to handle matters that can't wait for a full hearing. But during the Trump years, the Supreme Court exploited this device to hand victories to the president without a full briefing, public argument, or even advance notice.

Although Alabama is 27 percent Black, only one of its seven congressional districts—the one that includes Birmingham—has a Black majority, despite large Black populations concentrated in Mobile and in the "Black Belt" counties that stretch across the state. It may have struck the chief justice that using the shadow docket to preserve this status quo in defiance of the lower court's decision was an unappealing step, and an unnecessary one at that.

When the justices decide the case, *Merrill v. Milligan*, this term, they will be free not only to overturn the lower court's decision, but to rewrite the rules governing how the Voting Rights Act applies to similar cases anywhere in the country. Roberts conceded in his dissent that the district court had correctly followed precedent. He also made it clear that, in his view, the precedent is overdue for revision. As we saw in June, overturning precedent is no obstacle to a majority ready and willing to use its power to get what it wants.

The justices have framed the question for this round



as "whether the State of Alabama's 2021 redistricting plan for its seven seats in the United States House of Representatives violated Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act." But the real question, the perilous one underlying that seemingly benign formulation, is this: Is Section 2 itself constitutional? And in the dangerous space forced open by that question,

the young John Roberts and the chief justice of the United States meet.

**SECTION 2 OF THE** Voting Rights Act prohibits any electoral practice that "results in a denial or abridgment of the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color." A violation has occurred if

members of a racial or language minority group "have less opportunity than other members of the electorate to participate in the political process and to elect representatives of their choice." Section 2 is about the allocation of political power. It takes aim at "vote dilution," defined as dispersing a cohesive minority group among

several districts or lumping members of the group into one district. “Cracking” and “packing” seem to be what was happening in Alabama.

A 1986 decision, *Thornburg v. Gingles*, laid out a road map for how to prove such a case, requiring plaintiffs to demonstrate that the minority group was “sufficiently large and geographically compact to constitute a majority.” That test is central to the Alabama case. Obviously, applying that test requires an awareness of race. How can line-drawers, or courts, know whether a minority group’s vote is being diluted without knowing where the members of the group live, and how many of them there are?

And yet Alabama argued that, by taking race into account at all, the district court indulged in “the noxious idea that redistricting begins and ends with racial considerations.” The creation of a new majority-Black district, the state claimed, was therefore nothing more than a “racial gerrymander,” a phrase that Alabama’s lawyers used multiple times in the application for a stay. Unless the justices blocked the order, the state warned, “Alabamians will suffer the constitutional harm of being assigned to racially segregated districts, irreconcilable with the Fourteenth Amendment, the Fifteenth Amendment, and the VRA as initially conceived.” Section 2 is supposed to be a “shield against racial discrimination,” the state’s formal brief reads. “It is not a sword to perpetuate it.”

These sentences merit parsing with care. The words invite a dramatic conclusion: that the heart of the Voting Rights Act, as interpreted by the Supreme

Court a generation ago and as applied many times since, is unconstitutional.

WHAT ALABAMA is saying, essentially, is that any effort to eradicate racial discrimination is itself racial discrimination. But how can that be? How can we know when a Voting Rights Act remedy is called for unless we can take account of race? Alabama is trying to turn the statute inside out and upside down. The district court, in rejecting the state’s argument, observed that it was “obvious” that its logic would “preclude any plaintiff from ever stating a Section Two claim.”

That conundrum will be obvious to the Supreme Court as well. But for the conservative justices, the problem is not how to satisfy the *Gingles* test but rather the test itself. Roberts made that point in his dissent from the stay. “While the District Court cannot be faulted for its application of *Gingles*,” he wrote, “it is fair to say that *Gingles* and its progeny have engendered considerable disagreement and uncertainty.” He then quoted Justice Anthony Kennedy, who warned in a 1994 vote-dilution case that “placing undue emphasis upon proportionality risks defeating the goals underlying the Voting Rights Act.”

*Proportionality* is a loaded word. Section 2 explicitly disclaims the goal of proportional representation: “Nothing in this section establishes a right to have members of a protected class elected in numbers equal to their proportion in the population.” But the justices who decided *Thornburg v. Gingles* remained worried about the specter of proportionality.

While nominally unanimous, they produced four separate opinions. They were clearly grappling with whether the decision would hardwire a proportionality standard—in

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effect, a quota—into a statute that purported to reject it.

That concern has never fully been put to rest. The statute remains unfinished business, like the fight over affirmative action, which the conservatives on the Court have been trying to finish off for decades. It’s not by chance that voting rights and race-conscious university admissions have both ended up on the docket this term. Why wouldn’t they, when their final unraveling is within reach?

The same law firm—Consovoy McCarthy—is representing Alabama and the plaintiffs in two cases the Court will soon hear challenging any consideration of race in admission to Harvard and the University of North

Carolina. The firm’s founding partner William Consovoy, a former clerk to Justice Clarence Thomas, is one of the right wing’s go-to lawyers; he defended President Donald Trump in his efforts to shield various records from disclosure in 2019. The firm’s two lawyers on the Alabama brief represent the rising generation: One clerked for Thomas and the other for Roberts.

Consovoy’s case against Harvard failed in two lower federal courts, but those defeats were a warm-up act. Now comes the real show. The first line of his petition to the Court is breathtaking for its brash confidence—and its cheekiness: “It is a sordid business, this divvying us up by race.” Instantly recognizable, this is a quotation from one of Roberts’s earliest Supreme Court opinions, in which he dissented from the majority’s finding of vote dilution in Texas, in a Section 2 case.

ALTHOUGH THE COURT decided *Gingles* 19 years before Roberts became chief justice, the case was no abstraction to him. Early in his career, he was deeply involved in a monumental political battle that ultimately led to the decision.

In 1980, the Supreme Court decided *City of Mobile v. Bolden*. At issue was the validity of a common form of municipal government in the South, a commission consisting of three members who were elected at large rather than from individual districts. At-large systems all but guaranteed that even cities with sizable Black populations would have no Black members in elected positions. And indeed, no Black candidate

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had ever been elected to the city government in Mobile, Alabama, where racial polarization ran so deep that even a white candidate viewed as sympathetic to the interests of the Black community was doomed to lose.

The plaintiffs in the class-action lawsuit, representing all Black citizens of Mobile, claimed that the at-large system violated Section 2 and the equal-protection guarantee of the Fourteenth Amendment. In a 6–3 decision, the Supreme Court made short work of both claims. Section 2, Justice Potter Stewart wrote for the majority, was no more than a statutory mirror of the Fifteenth Amendment, which bars racial discrimination in voting and which the Court interpreted as applying only to intentional discrimination. The Fifteenth Amendment “does not entail the right to have Negro candidates elected,” Stewart observed gratuitously. The Fourteenth Amendment was also a lost cause; four years earlier, in *Washington v. Davis*, the Court had ruled for the first time that proof of intentional discrimination was necessary to establish a violation of the equal-protection clause. The fact that a policy disproportionately harmed or disempowered one racial group, in other words, was not enough.

After this devastating ruling, civil-rights activists turned to Congress. The Supreme Court had administered something close to a death blow to Section 2, and only an amendment making clear that the law covered discriminatory outcomes as well as discriminatory purpose could save it. The Democratic-controlled House of Representatives responded

quickly and produced such a bill. John Roberts, 26 years old and having recently completed a clerkship for then-Justice William Rehnquist, was working as a special assistant to President Ronald Reagan’s attorney general. His portfolio included voting rights, and in a series of memos that came to light soon after his 2005 Supreme Court nomination, Roberts argued vigorously against the passage of the proposed amendment.

In one memo, he wrote: “Violations of Section 2 should not be made too easy to prove, since they provide a basis for the most intrusive interference imaginable by federal courts into state and local processes.” The proposed “effects test,” he wrote, “would establish essentially a quota system for electoral politics” that was “inconsistent with this Nation’s history of popular sovereignty.”

Ultimately, the Senate passed the bill and Reagan signed it. But the fight wasn’t over. To the contrary—first under Chief Justice Warren Burger, then under Rehnquist, and finally under Roberts himself, the Supreme Court went assiduously about disengaging the federal government from the civil-rights revolution. Busing for integration ended at the school-district line. White contractors were deemed the victims of city policies aimed at guaranteeing minority-owned businesses a share of the work. The Court weakened the part of the Fourteenth Amendment that gives Congress the power to enforce its guarantees.

No one in a position of power has done more for this cause than John Roberts. One of his first major opinions, the *Parents Involved*

school-integration case in 2007, declared his determination to get government out of the business of counting people by race. (Roberts actually borrowed the most famous line of that opinion—“The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race”—from another federal judge, without attribution.)

In *Shelby County v. Holder*, Roberts’s majority opinion essentially killed Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, the highly successful “pre-clearance” rule under which jurisdictions with a history of racial discrimination in voting had to get permission from the Justice Department or a federal court before making any change in voting procedures. The South had done so well in correcting the sins of its past, Roberts wrote, that the law as applied could no longer be justified.

The impact of the *Shelby County* decision was stunning. Within hours, Greg Abbott, then the attorney general of Texas and now the state’s governor, announced that a stringent voter-ID law that had been blocked under Section 5 the previous summer would go into effect “immediately.” That was just the beginning. States across the South and the Southwest have been quick to exploit their new freedom from the federal scrutiny that once would have deterred changes in voting hours, ID requirements, and other seemingly neutral moves with disproportionate effects on minority voters.

The end of Section 2 could be even more damaging because, in many respects, it is the more powerful provision. It applies nationwide, and

does not require, as Section 5 did, proof that the challenged policy has made things worse for minority voters, only that such voters have been deprived of an opportunity that should have been theirs. The prospect that Section 2 may now follow Section 5 into oblivion feels at once scarcely believable and sadly inevitable. If this comes to pass, it will be almost impossible to prove that a state has gerrymandered its electoral districts to disempower minority voters, or for a court to order that its map be redrawn.

Look again at that curious phrase from Alabama’s lawyers, the one describing the district-court order as “irreconcilable with the Fourteenth Amendment, the Fifteenth Amendment, and the VRA as initially conceived.” What is “initially conceived” supposed to mean? It can only be a reference to that 1981 fight over the meaning of Section 2, when the young John Roberts argued that it should not be “too easy to prove” that a state had violated the voting rights of its citizens. The Alabama lawyers are speaking directly to Chief Justice Roberts, telling him that the law has been constitutionally problematic for decades, and that now, in this very case, in this very year, he finally has the chance to make it right. *A*

*Linda Greenhouse teaches at Yale Law School. She is the author of Justice on the Brink: A Requiem for the Supreme Court, an updated edition of her 2021 book about the coming to power of the Court’s conservative supermajority.*



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## The Angels of Lviv

*Photographs by Elena Subach*

As soon as the first air-raid sirens sounded last winter, Elena Subach, a photographer and curator in Lviv, began to worry. “Lviv is itself an open-air museum,” she told me. “You cannot hide it in a bomb shelter.” All over Ukraine, curators mobilized to try to protect what they could and transfer movable items for safekeeping. In Lviv, museum staff and volunteers rushed to preserve the city’s treasures, putting steel plates over stained-glass windows and preparing canvases for transport. Subach photographed these efforts. At the Lviv National Gallery, she found a woman’s portrait obscured by bars of packing tape—the same tape that Ukrainians soon learned to use to prevent their windows from shattering under the impact of Russian attacks.

The protected artworks remind us of all that could not be saved, of the scale of Ukraine’s irrevocable loss. While Lviv’s artworks have so far survived, the same cannot be said of those in Melitopol, Mariupol, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, and far too many other cities where museums—and communities—have been leveled by missile strikes.

When we spoke recently, Subach recalled watching curators ready the 18th-century baroque wooden sculptures of Johann Georg Pinsel, “the Ukrainian Michelangelo,” for storage. On that day, in late February, Pinsel’s angels could barely be seen beneath their bubble wrap. The angels (*opposite page, top right and bottom left*) now reside in an unknown location, Subach told me, silently guarding Lviv from their temporary refuge. “Until the victory, no one will take them out.”

— Linda Kinstler

# ON DEMOCRACY'S FRONT LINES

*By* **GEORGE PACKER**

How ordinary Ukrainians rallied  
to save their nation—and defend  
the values Americans claim to hold



ILLUSTRATIONS BY SERGIY MAIDUKOV

I had no business going to Ukraine. The country didn't need another reporter to cover the war. Ukrainian journalists were already doing that much better than I could hope to, and so were plenty of foreigners. I had never set foot in Ukraine; I spoke neither of its languages; I was, my children told me, too old to be a war correspondent again. It would be completely pointless to get killed over there. But selfishness is an underrated motive among journalists. I told myself and others that Ukraine is the most important story of our time, that everything we should care about is on the line there. I believed it then, and I believe it now, but all of this talk put a nice gloss on the simple, unjustifiable desire to be there and *see*.

Because these motives seemed dubious, I looked for another way to be useful. Fortunately, a friend who had started an organization called Assist Ukraine needed a courier to bring medical supplies to combat doctors in Lviv and Kyiv. The group sent me its contacts in Ukraine along with the supplies: a dozen junctional tourniquets and 40 pairs of holstered Raptor shears. The tourniquets, which came in khaki-colored nylon pouches and cost \$350 each, looked like high-tech seat belts, with a compression pad on either end and a black rubber hand pump attached. Cinched and inflated under the armpits or around the hips, they're designed to stop massive bleeding from major arteries where the body's limbs join the trunk.

I also received a thick batch of homemade cards from a Ukrainian Catholic elementary school in Chicago, with messages of encouragement in English and Ukrainian and cheerful drawings of sunflowers and blue-and-yellow flags, to be distributed to random soldiers. Some of the schoolchildren were refugees, and many had relatives in the fight. I set out with exactly 50 pounds of donated supplies in a battered black suitcase that I'd been trying to lose.

Journalism that waves the banner of moral clarity makes me uneasy. Moral clarity can be blinding, and most subjects worth writing about are complicated. But a few things *are* morally clear: slavery, and genocide, and Russia's attempt to destroy Ukraine. The suitcase full of medical supplies didn't trouble my professional conscience. Nor did the Ukrainian flag my daughter and I painted on white paper and taped to our living-room window. Nor, I have to admit, did the money I sent to Razom, a Ukrainian American charity, and Come Back Alive, a volunteer outfit in Kyiv that provides nonlethal equipment such as night-vision goggles to Ukraine's armed forces—though by now certain media ethicists would have barred me from going anywhere near Ukraine.

It's absurd to approach this war from a position of neutrality. As a journalistic stance, neutrality is worthless, and usually spurious, because everyone is a partisan of some kind. Objectivity is different: the necessary effort, always doomed to fall short, of rendering reality exactly, like a carpenter striving for plumb, level, and square. What's most crucial is independence: refusing to surrender your judgment of the truth for the sake of a political cause. Journalism doesn't require an anesthetized moral faculty. It ought to be possible to want Ukraine to win this war and still tell what you see and hear there honestly.

After the Russian invasion, some commentators in the United States expressed a hope that Ukraine's fight for survival might inspire Americans to rededicate ourselves to renewing our own democracy. Polls showed that a war in Eastern Europe was doing what the pandemic and global warming had failed to do: bring Americans together across partisan lines. You could find the same blue-and-yellow flag planted in the front yard of a ranch house in rural Maine and hung from a parking sign on my Brooklyn street. A country that hardly anyone here knew anything about seemed to offer a model of what we all believe to be good and want for ourselves—courage and freedom and unity. But the model had this power only because it was far away, and its flag's colors weren't ours.

In the days before my trip, I had a feeling of nausea that I recognized as dread. Not of the place I was going, but of the place I was leaving behind, of the LET'S GO BRANDON signs and the school-board showdowns and the next mass shooting, the prospect that our experiment in people coming from all over to run their own affairs together was finished. For the first time in my life, I felt hopeless about America. And because I have no transcendent beliefs, the loss of this earthly one left a void of meaning that made me sick.

Here was another motive—the strongest and most dubious of all. I wanted a gulp of Ukrainian air. I wanted to breathe its hope. What a thing to ask of people fighting for their lives.

**"AH!" OLESYA VYNNYK** closed her eyes and inhaled the factory odor of new nylon from my black suitcase. "I can already smell the American tourniquets!"

We were standing by the open trunk of her Audi, on a cobblestone side street near the center of Lviv. Olesya is 31 years old ("same age as Ukraine"), a doctor in internal medicine, with long dark hair and black-framed glasses and skinny jeans and a droll smile. She woke up on the morning of February 24 to the Russian invasion. "My first thought," she told me, "was that I have to do something." She threw on some clothes and got in her car and started driving, with no idea where to go. She ended up in downtown Lviv, where she saw someone she knew in the bright-yellow jacket of Motohelp—a local civic group of first responders on motorcycles who reach the scene of accidents ahead of ambulances.

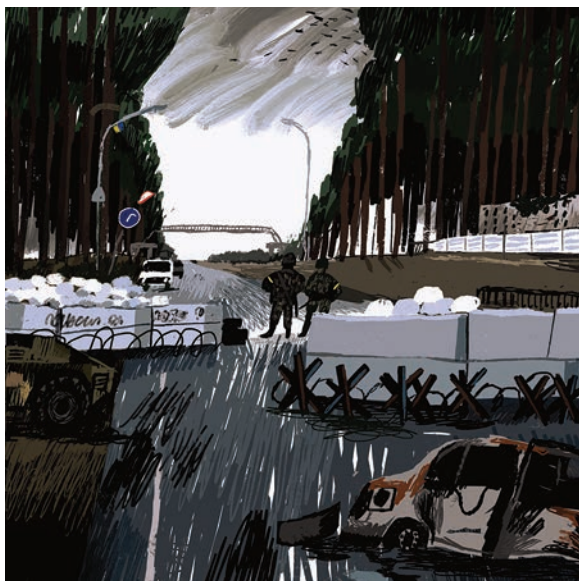
"Hey!" Olesya shouted to the Motohelp guy. "Let's do something!"

By the next day she had set aside her medical practice and joined a group of doctors who were instructing the first civilian volunteers of the Territorial Defense Forces in combat medicine. Olesya helped organize Lviv's Volunteer Medical Battalion, the unit that would receive the junctional tourniquets.

"That was the common idea, that's who Ukrainians are," she told me. "We just have to move and do something if we really need it. If the war comes to your home, you cannot just remain silent, you cannot remain still. You have to do something."

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*Sergiy Maidukov is a Ukrainian illustrator living and working in Kyiv. He has been documenting the war since it began.*



On our way to the battalion's compound, I asked what she was fighting for.

"Democracy, a new nation, survival—all together," Olesya said. "This is a sacred war. It's everything good against pure evil." And Ukraine would win, she assured me. She was relentlessly optimistic.

At the compound—a children's recreation center in a residential neighborhood—Olesya gave me a tour of classrooms where medical dummies lay bloody on the floor, and of improvised storage rooms stacked high with cardboard boxes of donated supplies. In the courtyard I met a young truck driver and an even younger graphic designer. At the start of the invasion, both of them had returned from jobs in Poland to volunteer.

I asked if they expected to win.

"We don't even think about anything else," the graphic designer said. "We need victory. Not-victory is not even in the mind. We have no choice."

"It's up to the outside world to help or not," Olesya said. "But we will still win this war. It will be much easier with the help of the international friends. We're trying to do a really huge thing: to build a new country while we fight the war. When we win, it will be beautiful."

Didn't they feel angry and tired?

"We are angry," the graphic designer said. "We are tired."

"We are doing this, but with a huge cost to the life of our soldiers," Olesya said. "Sometimes it feels like too much. We will cry a bit later, after we win the war."

Lviv, a lovely Habsburg town, had been turned into a refugee center and logistics hub, with tent camps in open fields, windows of 18th-century buildings sandbagged, and donated material piled up everywhere. It was all a little helter-skelter—no central

department masterminded orders, inventory, or distribution. An ancient Greek Catholic church stored flak vests in a room off the entryway and boxes of boots in a loft next to the defunct organ. Father Andrew, the youthful priest, sometimes changed out of his black cassock into street clothes and drove military materiel some 700 miles across Ukraine, to the front. In the first 80 days of the war he had officiated at almost 70 funerals.

A whole society mobilized: This was my first, and most lasting, impression. The mayor of Lviv, Andriy Sadovyi, described Ukraine in crisis as "a beehive." Nearly everyone I met had looked for something to do as soon as Russia attacked—some way to be useful without waiting for instructions from a higher authority. In Lviv a young behavioral scientist and serial entrepreneur named Sviatoslav Hnizdovskyi used his professional network to create the Open Minds Institute, beginning a campaign of phone calls to ordinary people in Russia, family members of soldiers fighting in Ukraine, with the aim of slowly puncturing the Kremlin's bubble of lies. On the day the invasion started, Vira Krutilina, a sculptor, and Dmytro Levenko, a theatrical-lighting designer, went to volunteer at a local Territorial Defense post in Kyiv and were given instant training in the use of AK-47s. Neither had ever fired a gun in their life, but within 24 hours they were standing on a rooftop in the north of the capital, scouting the streets below for the first Russian tanks. Vira described these early months of the war as "a magical time. People are connected with each other in a way we normally aren't, and connected to people we would never be connected to." She admitted that, on some level, she dreaded the day when the air-raid sirens would no longer go off.

The word Ukrainians use for all this spontaneous activity is *self-organization*.

"I think self-organization comes from an idea of community which is very deep in our culture," Volodymyr Yermolenko, a philosopher and journalist, told me. "In Ukrainian we call it *bromada*. The idea is that politics is about horizontal relations between people and not about vertical relations of power." He traced the political concept to a circle of 19th-century intellectuals in Kyiv, and the spirit of community even further back, to the self-governing Cossacks of the 17th-century steppe.

"I wouldn't dig so far back as the Cossacks—maybe go back to the Soviet time," Stanislav Lyachynskyy, an activist who works on projects to strengthen Ukrainian civil society, told me. This tradition of self-organization came from the "mutual networks of survival from the 1980s, when there was a deficit of goods, and from the '90s, when the old economy collapsed." Both Lyachynskyy and Yermolenko observed that Russia, from the czars through the Soviet Union to the revanchist reign of Vladimir Putin, has always ruled its vast empire of nations from an authoritarian center, with power strictly vertical. In Ukraine, where the struggle for an independent identity was repressed for centuries, suspicion toward central power runs deep.

In 2014, when Ukrainians in Kyiv's Maidan rallied to overthrow their corrupt Russian-backed president, Viktor Yanukovich, pressure from below for sweeping reforms intensified—for the rule of law, against corruption. But the Revolution of Dignity was far from universally popular. Not even Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea and the eight-year separatist insurgency in the Donbas region could fully overcome the historical divisions in Ukraine's conflicting pulls toward democratic Europe and autocratic Russia.

Then came February 24. From the first hours of the Russian invasion, self-organization characterized the response. Towns and villages spontaneously set up what Ukrainians call "block posts," manned by armed civilians in Territorial Defense units. When Lyachynskyy drove his family three hours south from Kyiv to the relative safety of his sister's house in central Ukraine, they passed 15 or 20 of these block posts. Some were built with sandbags, others with tires, lumber, concrete blocks, even steel anti-tank obstacles. "Every block post is unique," Yermolenko said.

A number of Ukrainians blamed the local and national governments for failing to arm civilians in advance in towns—Bucha in

the north, Kherson in the south—that fell immediately. Where early resistance succeeded, it was partly due to the ability of Ukraine's armed forces and civilian defenses to seize advantages without waiting for orders from higher up. Where Russian troops became occupying forces, as in Kherson, they were faced with a local population that they couldn't understand. "They didn't know the real active leaders on the ground, so they pulled people off

the street in huge numbers," Serhiy Danylov, a researcher who spent years working in Kherson, told me. "The Russians asked the same questions of the activists they arrested: 'Who is the organizer? Who is paying for all this? Who is behind it?' They didn't believe in spontaneous protest and self-organization."

Later, when the war shifted to an artillery duel in the east, where Russia flattened entire towns and Ukrainian forces were badly outmatched, self-organization was less effective. But the Russian invasion has elevated the idea of *bromada* from local communities to the whole country. By killing Ukrainians regardless of their

region or language or politics, Russia is helping forge Ukraine into something it's never been—a national community.

**OLESYA VYNNYK COMMANDEERED** nine of the tourniquets, as well as the 40 pairs of Raptor shears. The next day, another volunteer would drive them across the country to troops on the Donbas front. My instructions were to take the remaining tourniquets to Kyiv.

Before going there, I spent a day following Olesya around Lviv's hospitals. I was told not to take pictures, or even name the hospitals, for fear of identifying them as targets for missile attacks. (Russia has destroyed or damaged hundreds of medical facilities across Ukraine, along with schools, libraries, theaters, and cultural centers.) Some hospitals were still in decrepit, post-Soviet condition, but others were being renovated to European standards, with state-of-the-art cardiology facilities and MRI machines. All of this improvement was going on in spite of the fact that it could be obliterated in an instant.

One hospital I visited was caring for dozens of wounded soldiers and civilians from the east. The hospital director asked me not to interview the fighters: Most of them were suffering from trauma and extremely depressed to be stuck here, away from their units. So instead I went room to room with my batch of



homemade cards. It was a rather mortifying errand. Soldiers in their underwear, lying or sitting on hospital beds in bare-bones rooms, faces bandaged, white tape wrapped around shrapnel wounds in their legs and arms, glanced up without interest or with resentment at a stranger intruding on their private pain. They took the cards I handed out and opened the envelopes, showing glimmers of curiosity. They tried to make sense of the handwritten scrawl, most of it in English, of Chicago school-children. I left a few of them faintly smiling.

In a room with yellow walls and a view of the suburban hills there was an old couple, Ivan Yakovenko and Nataliia Sukhina, who had just been evacuated from a town in the Donbas called Popasna. Their house no longer existed, and neither did their town. At the start of the invasion they had waited too long to flee—“We thought it would be like 2014,” Nataliia said: “Some houses damaged, but not on this scale.” For two months they were trapped in their house, without electricity, windows shattered, caught in the cross fire of constant shelling. They lost all contact with their children and grandchildren, who lived on the side of town under Russian occupation. A 67-year-old neighbor was taken away at gunpoint and deported to Russia. Ivan, a retired factory worker, drove part-time for a funeral service, and for a few weeks he collected bodies around town that had begun to decompose.

Before dawn on April 26, a shell landed on their house and buried them in rubble. Popasna had by then become the small-scale Stalingrad that Russian forces created everywhere. The couple was dug out and evacuated to Lviv. They had no money, no clothes, nothing.

Ivan, bearded, missing most of his teeth, a flannel shirt hanging off his skinny shoulders, sat on a bed in utter bewilderment. “We don’t know where we’re going next,” he said. “There’s nothing to go back to.” The trauma had left his wife unable to walk, and she lay under a bedsheet from which a catheter extended. Her left arm was covered in bruises, her left hand was missing two

fingers, and her cheeks were wet. But Nataliia was not too broken to fume. When I asked what she thought of Putin’s promise to “liberate” Russian speakers like them in the Donbas, her blue eyes hardened, the red in her cheeks deepened, and she answered, for the first time, in Ukrainian: “Let him drop dead. We had a good life without him.”

Ivan and Nataliia, like the soldiers separated from their units, were alone, and being alone and helpless rendered their suffering meaningless. Self-organization connected people to one another with a purpose that made the war more bearable. It shaped an expression that I associated with Ukrainian faces: open, direct, uningratiating, a little tough but on the verge of being amused—alive. People walked fast. Armed men and women in uniform were a natural part of the population, hardly separable from civilians, and it was strange to be constantly in their presence, on trains, in cafés, and feel no danger except from the sky. In America a uniformed soldier among civilians is a curiosity, and a young man with a semiautomatic weapon is not a welcome sight. I needed a few days to realize why a Ukrainian city felt somehow less tense than an American one: It was because you knew no Ukrainian was going to shoot you, and everyone you met was on the same side.

While I was with the wounded, Olesya disappeared to see a military friend who had suffered a serious head injury at the front. When she returned, her easy smile was gone. As we drove back to town, she played a music video that had been posted to YouTube in April by the armed forces—clips of badass military action set to a heavy dubstep score. The song’s title, and its refrain, was “Don’t Fuck With Ukraine.” Olesya, a devout Greek Catholic, apologized for the language but said she found the song helpful.

I had come from a country where the bonds of trust have been worn down to nothing, where earnest declarations about building a new country while winning a war can’t be swallowed without a heavy dose of irony, and where cynicism is a protective reflex against these losses. So, as an American, I had begun to

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CHEERFUL OPTIMISM. YET ALMOST EVERY UKRAINIAN I MET  
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question Olesya's cheerful optimism. Yet almost every Ukrainian I met shared it: "We will win." And also: "No compromise."

After the hospital, as we drove through Lviv's pretty, sunlit streets to the beat of "Don't Fuck With Ukraine," I understood a bit better. The song—Olesya called it "the music of war and marching"—made her feel brave and resolute. It was like that bit of bravado from the war's first days, "Russian warship, go fuck yourself," which had practically become a national motto, printed on posters and chocolate wrappers and inspiring a collectible stamp. Ukrainians *need* to be brave and resolute, because they face immense odds against winning and terrible consequences if they lose, and meanwhile every day brings crushing loss. There can be no compromise because the alternative, they've learned, is annihilation. Shouts of "Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!" might make certain European bureaucrats and American pundits smile with uneasy condescension, but Ukraine under invasion is not a place where the clever refinements of a detached intelligence have much use.

**IN KYIV ONE NIGHT,** I was invited to dinner by the Svystovych family. They were staying in the apartment of friends who had left at the start of the war. The Svystovychs' home—in Irpin, the northern suburb that, along with Bucha, had been a front line of occupation and become the site of mass killings before the Russians were repelled—lay in ruins. Mykhaylo Svystovych was a business consultant and civic activist with unruly gray hair and a middle-aged belly and squinting eyes behind thick glasses. He had participated in every popular movement since the 1990 student hunger strike that helped lead to Ukraine's overwhelming vote for independence from the Soviet Union. Myroslava, his wife, was a real-estate agent, with the wide cheekbones and long straight hair of so many Ukrainian women. She had once served briefly as Irpin's mayor before being voted out (she said she was pushed out for standing up against corrupt land deals). Their son, Yaroslav, was 24 and studying IT. Their daughter, Lada, 22, was still recovering from a Russian bullet wound in her

side; she smiled throughout the meal but didn't say a word. The family also had two dogs, including a pointy-eared stray they'd adopted at the start of the invasion, and a black cat missing its left eye. The pets turned out to be the key to the story the family told me over borscht, lamb, rice, and Bison Grass vodka, while a television in the corner aired continuous war news.

In Irpin they had lived in two cramped rooms on the ground floor of a two-story complex. When the Russian invaders approached from Belarus, the Svystovychs decided to stay put, because the Ukrainian forces seemed to be holding their own. The Svystovychs didn't want to abandon their elderly neighbors. And anyway, the family had no car.

Many Ukrainians I asked, like Afghans in Kabul just before the arrival of the Taliban, simply didn't believe that the Russians would start a full-scale war. There's a profound resistance to imagining the end of everything you know. Some people from the Donbas who had already fled the Russians once, in 2014, refused to run again. Some Ukrainians couldn't imagine the brutality that lay in store for them until it was too late. "You always wait until you have only 15 minutes," Stanislav Lyachynskyy, the civic activist in Kyiv, said. "You see the otherness of your flat, your world. You are still here, but your previous life is just faded away. And you have 15 minutes."

By March 6, the Svystovych family had no power or water. That day, a shell exploded in the yard, 75 feet from their apartment. Myroslava was standing by the stove at the moment the kitchen window blew in and filled her hair with bits of glass. Mykhaylo had just taken a step back from the bedroom window, and shrapnel peppered the walls around him. A piece ricocheted off a wall into the bathroom and chipped the bathtub, just missing Lada. Given the tiny size of the rooms and the thousands of flying glass and metal fragments, it was miraculous that no one was hurt, except the cat, which took a piece of glass in the eye.

A few hours later a second shell landed in the yard, doing more damage to the building's exterior. The apartment was now

**WE DROVE ALONG DOSTOYEVSKY STREET.  
SOMEONE HAD SPRAY-PAINTED BLACK OVER  
THE RUSSIAN AUTHOR'S NAME ON THE SIGN.**

too cold for habitation, and the family spent the night with others in the basement of a jewelry shop. Even then, they didn't intend to leave. But the next day they could find no veterinarians left in town. Lada insisted that they had to evacuate the wounded cat to Kyiv.

On the afternoon of March 7, the Svystovych family tried to get out of Irpin. Their phones were almost dead, so they didn't know that Russian troops were only 200 yards away. The family split up into three evacuation cars driven by volunteers—Yaroslav with the stray, Mykhaylo with the other dog, and Myroslava and Lada with the wounded cat in a carrier. But on the way out of Irpin the women's car left the convoy and ran straight into Russian troops. Suddenly the windshield exploded. Myroslava screamed for Lada to get down. The driver fell out through his door—he'd been shot—and the car rolled half a mile downhill until it slowed enough for Myroslava to jump out. She shouted for Lada to do the same, but the cat carrier was in the way and Lada had trouble moving—there was something heavy in her right side. When the car finally stopped, she managed to get out, bringing the cat with her.

Myroslava couldn't reach Mykhaylo—his phone was dead—so she tried to call a friend. Russian troops, their faces masked, were approaching on foot. Myroslava cried out for help.

"Who are you calling?"

"My husband."

A soldier took her phone and crushed it under his boot.

The Russians ordered Myroslava and Lada to walk to a nearby road where they were picked up by an evacuation car. By then it was clear that Lada had been shot. She was weakening fast, and at the Irpin River she had to be carried over the temporary wooden crossing that had replaced the blown-up bridge to Kyiv. Lada was taken by ambulance to a city hospital, where doctors repaired her perforated intestine just in time to save her life.

A few weeks later, Ukrainian forces pushed the Russians out of the area around Kyiv, and the Svystovych family returned to check on their apartment. It was in ruins, along with much of the suburb. Neighbors told them that Russians had defecated on the floors. One neighbor found the amputated leg of a Russian soldier in his house. He brought the leg to the local authorities, but no one knew what to do with it, so the neighbor wrapped

it in plastic and left it between the bars of a fence. Eventually someone took the Russian leg away, as if this part of the tale had been invented by the Ukrainian native Nikolai Gogol himself.

As the family told their story over dinner and vodka, they kept exchanging glances and laughing, amazed and relieved at having survived the ordeal, and the two dogs prowled around the table for handouts, and the one-eyed cat dozed in a chair,

and the TV news reported that the siege of Mariupol was ending, and there was an incongruous lightness in the room, even when Mykhaylo laid on the table a fistful of rust-colored, jagged-edged pieces of Russian shrapnel from the apartment in Irpin. He placed one in my hand. I have it beside me now.

The next day I accompanied Mykhaylo and his friend Serhiy Glynianyi, a former Irpin councilman, on a mission to bring supplies to elderly people in their town. On the road out of Kyiv, where sandbags and anti-tank obstacles marked the farthest point of the Russian advance on the capital, we stopped to buy groceries. One minute

we were in a modern European supermarket, with a brightly lit cheese counter and shoppers unloading their carts at the checkout belts and cashiers efficiently scanning items. A few minutes later we drove into a cozy suburban neighborhood that had become a scene of destruction. Broken stucco walls, gabled roofs caved in, tan brick facades blackened by fire, wrecked furniture in rooms open to the sky, a pile of corrugated iron in a yard, someone's car left by the roadside with flat tires and shattered windshields, its body riddled with bullet holes.

Every street was like this.

On some streets one house lay in rubble while its next-door neighbor 10 feet away was perfectly intact, as if the victims had been determined by some malevolent lottery. "It seemed like they had to hit one house in every neighborhood," Ighor Glynianyi, Serhiy's son, said when we stopped by his house. His neighbor's house was in ruins, while his had sustained only light damage. "Keep away from the fields," Ighor, a recruiter for Ukrainian technology companies, told us. "They mined everything—even children's pianos and toys." There were skull-and-crossbones warnings at the edge of the forest. Recently, an old man had ventured down a path into the woods and stepped on a mine.

We drove along Dostoyevsky Street. Someone had spray-painted black over the Russian author's name on the sign.



Three old women were sitting in the yard outside Mykhaylo's flat. He handed out bags of provisions and medicine, and the women kissed his hand. In the apartment, the food Myroslava had been preparing when the shell hit still lay scattered about the kitchen. Water was leaking from a broken pipe onto the floor. Mykhaylo ignored it. He had more errands. A bag with cooking oil and water for an old woman who was waiting for him in a veterinary office. Thyroid medicine for a younger woman we encountered on a shopping street. Pills for an old bald man in a tiny, sour-smelling seventh-floor apartment. Anatoly Sherstyuk had been unable to evacuate because his wife is paralyzed. He had been an artilleryman in the Soviet army, and now he had Russian shrapnel in his foot from a shell that landed nearby while he was cooking on an open fire in the yard. Limping to the door, he chuckled at the irony.

We crossed over into Bucha. According to Mykhaylo, the Russians had killed 300 people in Irpin—there were still unidentified bodies in the morgue and graves being discovered. In Bucha the number killed was more than 450. Both suburbs had become shorthand for Russian war crimes.

On a bench outside a high-rise complex I spoke with a Bucha councilwoman named Kateryna Ukraintseva. She had short black hair and tired green eyes, and she wore the green fleece of the Territorial Defense Forces. She'd spent the first two weeks of the invasion as a spotter on her rooftop, reporting the movement of Russian troops and helicopters that were landing at nearby Hostomel Airport, and guiding evacuation convoys. When the water was cut off, she and her neighbors drank melted snow. She told me that Bucha fell quickly, and that was why the physical destruction wasn't as great as in Irpin, though the human losses were worse. When her activities were discovered, she went into hiding, and then escaped the town.

"We need Javelins," she said, referring to American-made anti-tank missiles, "to cover Hostomel Airport."

Did she think the Russians might come back?

"They might. You never know." She smiled wryly. "We need the U.S. to do a bin Laden operation."

It took me a moment to realize whom she intended as the target of the operation.

I spent the next day in another Kyiv suburb, Brovary, to the east. The villages around it had endured weeks of occupation. Special police investigators from Lithuania were filming a destroyed school to gather evidence of war crimes. Even the unoccupied neighborhoods were in ruins from random artillery fire. In one village a man showed me how his house had been spared thanks to the community library across the street, which had stood in a shell's path and taken a direct hit. Its broken walls exposed a mass grave of books.

"These targets have no military value," the lucky homeowner pointed out, superfluously.

After two days in Kyiv's suburbs, buildings in rubble began to seem normal, while an intact street looked artificial, like a deceptively pretty painting, and the sight of a child anywhere around the capital was almost startling. Compared with Kharkiv or Mariupol, the scale of this destruction was fairly small. The cost of rebuilding

Ukraine will be staggering—some estimates put it at \$1 trillion—and so will the effort to revive its shattered economy. The Russian way of war is a form of shock and awe whose intended effect is not just to leave cities and towns uninhabitable and undefended, but to overwhelm the survivors and render them utterly passive, as if they are facing not a recognizable human enemy but a force of nature, or some kind of supernatural power, an impersonal god that destroys whatever it touches.

But one evening something happened that put me in a different frame of mind. I was walking back to my hotel along Khreshchatyk, the main avenue that runs through Kyiv's Maidan. The streets were nearly empty as the 10 o'clock curfew approached. An air-raid siren began to wail. Few Kyivans paid the alarms much attention anymore, but I quickened my pace. I passed two women in the orange uniforms of city workers. At this hour, they were sweeping out the gutters. I suddenly realized that Kyiv's streets were incredibly clean, with hardly a scrap of trash anywhere. A lot of effort went into keeping the city, with its broad squares and grand facades in pale blues and pinks and yellows, orderly and pleasing. Everywhere you looked, lilac bushes were in bloom—they were blooming all around the ruins of Irpin and Bucha, too, and along the embankments of the railroad tracks between Lviv and Kyiv—and chestnut trees were covered in shaggy white flowers, and beds of red and yellow tulips spread out around monuments. None of this was natural, any more so than the destruction that artillery and missiles rained down on innocent people going about their lives. Human hands had tried to ruin the city, and human hands were keeping the ruins beautiful.

I had heard that so many people wanted to help clear the rubble from Ukraine's destroyed cities, wait lists were needed to organize all the volunteers. But somehow it was the sight of those two women sweeping the street just before curfew that brought home to me the obscene wrongness of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Here was a country with a tragic history that had at last begun to build, with great effort, a better society. What made Ukraine different from any other country I had ever seen—certainly from my own—was its spirit of constant self-improvement, which included frank self-criticism. For example, there's no cult of Volodymyr Zelensky in Ukraine—a number of Ukrainians told me that he had made mistakes, that they'd vote against him after the war was won. Maxim Prykopenko, a hospital director in Lviv, called Ukraine "a free country aspiring to be better all the time." The Russians, he added, "are destroying a beautiful country for no logical reason to do it. Maybe they are destroying us just because we have a better life."

Sitting on the floor of a newly renovated house after killing or driving out its owners—that, in an image, is Russia's war against Ukraine.

**BABYN YAR, WHERE** the Nazis killed 33,771 Kyivan Jews on September 29 and 30, 1941, is a stretch of urban parkland cut through by a series of ravines that were once part of an immense pit. In 1976, after decades of silence, the Soviet Union built a monument there to "Soviet" victims of the Nazis. After independence, memorials to other victims—children, Romani,



Ukrainian nationalists—were added to the site. The fact that most of the dead were Jewish is acknowledged only by a single monument in the shape of a menorah, placed by Ukrainian Jews in 1991. To this day Ukraine has not looked the Holocaust—and the collaboration of Ukrainians who participated in the mass killings—fully in the face.

In 2016, the Ukrainian government announced plans for a \$100 million state-of-the-art museum and research center that would supposedly do justice to Babyn Yar. Much of the funding would come from Jewish oligarchs, who had ties to Russia. The first elements, by international artists such as Marina Abramović, were a travesty of narcissistic kitsch. Olena Styazhkina, a historian from Donetsk, told me that she saw the project not as an honest memorial but as Russian propaganda—a cynical attempt to highlight the crimes of the past as a way to suggest that present-day Ukraine remained anti-Semitic. The Russian-backed project would help buttress the falsehood that Ukraine was a neo-Nazi state, which became Russia's chief pretext for invading.

On the street outside the unfinished research center, as if to remind visitors that innocents continue to be slaughtered here, were the remains of a fitness club and an ice rink—twisted steel and tangled wires, fallen branches and blackened tree trunks,

all stinking of char—where, in the first days of the invasion, a Russian rocket had missed its intended target, the television tower across the road. Much more than the park's smorgasbord of monuments, the bitter smell of things not meant for burning made me think of cruelty and death. In the woods at the far edge of Babyn Yar, a few hundred yards and 80 years away, a steep brown gash in the earth had the same effect.

I asked Alla Zamanska, a Jewish television director in her 60s, how Babyn Yar should be memorialized. "It has to be an empty place, with only a menorah where there's a natural ravine," she said, "and people can bring candles, and that's enough."

Alla lives with her husband, Mark Belorusets, who is also Jewish, in a narrow, book-filled apartment in central Kyiv. My friend with Assist Ukraine, the group that had given me the tourniquets, asked me to bring the couple some basic supplies—pain-management kits, catheters—as a way for them to thank the Kyiv hospital that had just removed part of Mark's cancerous lung. He sat at the kitchen table, gaunt and fragile, with his bald head in his hands, while Alla served tea and pastries.

They had stayed here throughout the invasion. "I couldn't have left," Alla said, "knowing some people would be killed, some places destroyed in this city where I'm so attached."

Alla exists only because her mother was evacuated from Kyiv to Tajikistan at the start of the German invasion; her father fled Ukraine to serve with the Red Army in the Arctic Circle. By the vagaries of Soviet history, Alla had been born in Siberia and spoke Russian. “From the very moment of independence in 1991,” she said, “Ukrainian anti-Semitism has started to disappear.”

“Diminish,” Mark corrected.

“Face-to-face it continued, but not from the state. No Jews could work for the U.S.S.R.-era state radio. But our daughter worked there.”

“Ukraine has a historical anti-Semitism,” Mark insisted.

Alla explained that each republic in the Soviet Union had a “titular nation”—the dominant ethnic group that gave the republic its name. Until very recently, Ukrainian nationalism had been based on Ukrainian ethnicity. It was strongest in the west of Ukraine, and it excluded Jews, Poles, Tatars, and Ukraine’s second-largest ethnic group, Russians. The Revolution of Dignity in 2014 began to change the idea of the nation’s identity from an ethnic to a civic one. “During Maidan, the first person killed was ethnic Armenian; the second was from Belarus,” Alla told me. “This somehow erased the Soviet idea of the ‘titular nation.’” In 2019, Ukrainians voted overwhelmingly to elect a Jewish president.

Ukraine’s democratic transformation is far from complete, but the invasion greatly accelerated and was, in a way, motivated by it. The idea of a nation that includes all of its citizens as equals directly threatens Putin’s Russia—as a model of a post-Soviet democracy, a challenge to Russian imperialism, and a refutation of the “neo-Nazi” charge with which Putin justified his invasion. Ukraine’s far right has a much greater presence in Russian propaganda than in Ukrainian politics. Right-wing nationalists won barely 2 percent of the vote in the 2019 parliamentary election, far lower than their shares in most European countries; the paramilitary units that arose with the start of the war in 2014, such as the notorious Azov Battalion, have mostly assimilated into the country’s regular armed forces.

It is impossible to know what public opinion is like in the occupied regions, but Russian behavior can hardly have won the hearts and minds of Ukraine’s Russian speakers in the east and south. Ukraine’s present unity is unprecedented, but war—always intolerant of complexity and ambivalence—is pushing Ukrainians to construct an identity that is simpler than the country’s history. The war will not resolve the abiding question of what it means to be Ukrainian.

**JUST OUTSIDE THE** wall of Lychakiv Cemetery in Lviv, where military and cultural heroes from history are buried, there’s a field with dozens of fresh graves dug since February: mounds of dry dirt covered in flowers, small bottles of colored glass, crosses, portraits and names of the dead. **HERE RESTS SOLDIER KMITB YAROSLAV ROMANOVYCH 04.06.2004–05.04.2022. ETERNAL MEMORY.** They are decorated with the ubiquitous blue-and-yellow flags, as well as a few red-and-black ones. These are the flags of the armed wing of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, an insurgent movement of the ’30s and ’40s in what is now western Ukraine, which fought against first Polish and then Soviet rule.

A stone’s throw from the new graves, actual members of that movement lie buried against the cemetery wall.

Their leader was a radical nationalist named Stepan Bandera. In 1941 he and his fighters collaborated with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. But when the OUN sought Hitler’s blessing for an independent and ethnically pure Ukrainian state, Bandera was arrested by the Nazis and spent most of the rest of the war in a concentration camp near Berlin, while in western Ukraine his insurgent army massacred Poles and Jews. Years after the war, Bandera was murdered by a KGB agent in Munich. By almost any definition he was a fascist, but he still has a passionate following among some western Ukrainians, who have erected Bandera statues and museums throughout the region. At the same time, he’s a useful tool for Russian propaganda.

Alla Zamanska was the one who put me in touch with Vira Krutilina and Dmytro Levenko, the sculptor and lighting designer. They worked together at a cultural center named after Les Kurbas, a theater director of the ’20s and ’30s who belonged to the Executed Renaissance—a generation of anti-Stalinist writers and artists in Ukraine who were murdered by the Soviet regime. A play of the same name had just been performed in the center’s basement—for safety reasons—in a room now crowded with boxes of food that five young actors were busily assembling into delivery bags. Outside, Vira and Dmytro were having a smoke on a small fenced-in terrace. They were surrounded by a dozen identical plaster busts, made by Vira, of a man with a weak chin, stern frown, and fanatically staring eyes. I immediately recognized Stepan Bandera.

Smiling, slouching, hands in the pockets of her torn and plaster-spattered jeans, Vira didn’t seem like a fascist. When I asked about Bandera’s views, she had little to say. To her he was just a symbol of resistance—the plaster equivalent of “Don’t Fuck With Ukraine” and “Russian warship, go fuck yourself.” The more Russia invoked Bandera as a pretext for “de-Nazifying” Ukraine, the more popular he became. Vira could hardly keep up with requests from Territorial Defense units. The busts were a contribution to the war effort.

When I mentioned Vira’s Bandera project to Alla, she wasn’t bothered. “He’s no longer seen as a historical person,” she said. “He’s become a myth, made by Russia.”

Babyn Yar and Bandera are bound up together in Ukraine’s unresolved history. Decades of Soviet repression, then decades of a chaotic and contested independence, made it almost impossible to grapple openly with their meaning. The Russian invasion brought a surge of civic feeling, but along with solidarity and self-organization came a burning hatred of all things Russian, whether Putin or Pushkin, and open contempt for the Russian people, who are widely regarded as Putin’s slaves. Streets and landmarks named after famous Russians have been rechristened, the special status accorded Russian literature is fading, and in Kyiv, a largely Russian-speaking city (in the Soviet system, Russian was the language of career advancement), Ukrainian is becoming dominant, especially among the young.

Olena Styazhkina, the historian from Donetsk, fled the Donbas amid heavy shelling not long after the start of the pro-Russian insurgency in 2014. She asked herself how, if she lost and regained consciousness, she would know she was safe: “If the

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## **“PUTIN MADE A BIG MISTAKE. HE DIDN'T KNOW THESE PEOPLE. ONCE A MAN TASTES THE TASTE OF FREEDOM, HE WON'T LET ANYONE TAKE IT FROM HIM.”**

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people around me spoke Ukrainian.” She called Russian, her native tongue, “a weapon of death and blood. I don’t want to speak Russian anymore.” Instead she has taught herself to speak and write in Ukrainian. Styazhkina predicted that Russian would gradually disappear from Ukraine.

I wondered how postwar Ukraine would make a place for its uprooted, its occupied, its citizens with lingering attachments to Russia. Would people who had survived the Russians in Donetsk or Mariupol come under suspicion as collaborators? Would there have to be—as one Ukrainian told me—large population transfers, questionable Ukrainians sent to Russia and others resettled in their place, like in the old days of the Soviet Union? Then what would be left of the democratic struggle that continued alongside the war?

None of these questions—which are about the country’s past as well as its future—can be answered while Ukraine is fighting for survival. But I took some hope from the responses I heard whenever I asked what the war was about. “From the Ukrainian perspective, and also from the Russian perspective, this is certainly not about religion, not about a piece of land, not about natural resources,” Oleksandr Sushko, the executive director of the International Renaissance Foundation, an organization promoting democracy in Ukraine, told me. “Normally war is about something like this. But here it is not. It is not even about the ethnicity. But it becomes very clear what this conflict is about if you talk about democracy to the people who represent different sides of this war.” Someone on the Russian side, he went on, would tell you that democracy was a manipulative fairy tale. But “when you ask a Ukrainian what this battle is about, he will tell you this is not about ethnic belonging but this is about freedoms, free choice, and the right to determine your life.”

**IT WASN'T HARD** to meet American volunteers in Ukraine. In a hospital corridor in Lviv I ran into an anesthesiologist and Navy veteran from Chicago named Rom Stevens. In a cemetery in Irpin, where the civilian victims of Russian atrocities lay buried alongside fallen soldiers in rows of fresh graves, I met a retired paratrooper from Portland, Oregon, named Paul Wall;

the International Legion had declined to admit him, so he was driving supplies to Ukrainian troops on the Kherson front. On a long train ride I fell into conversation with a former Green Beret from Texas named Ramiro Carrasco Jr., who had just spent 10 weeks training Ukrainian snipers at a base outside Kyiv. These men were in their 50s and 60s. They had left behind families and jobs, and paid their own way to Ukraine.

The reasons they gave for coming were simple and personal. When Ukraine didn’t fall at the start of the invasion, Carrasco thought: *I’m here sitting in my beautiful home watching this on TV, and they’re over there fighting to save their home.* “I needed to go,” he told me. Stevens had been about to embark on a two-month sailing trip with a Navy buddy when they looked at each other and said: “We can’t go sailing when people are fighting and dying and we can do something to help.” Unlike humanitarians, these men had chosen sides. Europe seemed to have something to do with it—they didn’t go off to risk their lives on behalf of Ethiopians or Yemenis. “Wars in Africa—we don’t really assimilate them,” Wall said. “But I lived in England, it’s Europe, we’re all brothers.” Racial identity has played an undeniable role in the outpouring of Western support for Ukraine, and perhaps it tarnishes the value of the support. All of us should care more when those doing the dying aren’t blond-haired and blue-eyed or parking a bike share as the missiles explode.

But the motives of these men were, broadly speaking, political. A tyrannical Goliath was trying to kill a democratic David. That’s why Ukraine was worth the risk. Anyone with a human heartbeat who came and saw knew it. “They’re fighting for an ideal,” Stevens said: to “determine their own government, their religion, their culture.” Carrasco put it in more basic terms. “Slaves can never defeat free people—it can never happen,” he said. “Putin made a big mistake. He didn’t know these people. Once a man tastes the taste of freedom, he won’t let anyone take it from him.”

I didn’t know what these men thought of American politics, and I didn’t want to know. Back home we might have argued; we might have detested each other. Here, we were joined by a common belief in what the Ukrainians were trying to do and

admiration for how they were doing it. Here, all the complex infighting and chronic disappointments and sheer lethargy of any democratic society, but especially ours, dissolved, and the essential things—to be free and live with dignity—became clear. It almost seemed as if the U.S. would have to be attacked or undergo some other catastrophe for Americans to remember what Ukrainians have known from the start.

Volodymyr Rafeyenko, one of Ukraine's most important novelists, fled west to Kyiv from his hometown, Donetsk, in 2014; in March he had to flee west again, this time from his temporary home in a friend's cottage in Bucha. Rafeyenko has lost almost everything to Russia's war. "It's a bad idea to have to face invasion in order to remember values," he told me when we met in Ternopil, his latest dwelling place. "Not recommended by those who experience it." He added that, by arming Ukraine, Americans might regain the values they've lost without having to endure war. Rafeyenko was offering democratic renewal at a reasonable price.

But Ukraine can't solve America's problems. We wouldn't know what to do with their values, and they don't need ours. What Ukraine needs is our weapons.

The U.S. has provided just enough of them just fast enough to keep Ukraine alive, but not enough to give it a chance of winning. For months, the Biden administration, not wanting to provoke Russia, delayed sending long-range precision rocket launchers that Ukraine desperately sought. The administration finally agreed to send the equipment, and it arrived in late June, but soon after that Russia achieved a breakthrough in the Donbas, seizing all of the region of Luhansk and much of Donetsk. With the help of the new weapons, Ukraine began to turn the tide, but the needless delay had a high cost in lives, territory, infrastructure, and momentum.

**BEFORE I LEFT UKRAINE,** Olesya Vynnyk put me in touch with her friend Ighor Kholodylo, a paramedic and sergeant in the National Guard. We met outside his battalion headquarters and went to have coffee at a nearby hole-in-the-wall. He had a trim salt-and-pepper beard and keen eyes, and was about to return to the front after two weeks off. I gave him the last three tourniquets.

"This is an artillery war," Ighor said. "They have 220-millimeter shells; they can cut trees in half. I've been looking for these for

such a long time." He met my eyes. "We lost troops because we didn't have these."

I don't know if Ukraine can win this war, but I know it must. Putin's Russia is committing crimes that have not been seen in Europe since Hitler and Stalin—leveling cities, terror-bombing civilian populations, creating millions of refugees, using rape and torture to break the will of those under occupation, separating families, detaining and interrogating at least

1 million Ukrainians and sending many to far-off internment camps, preparing to annex entire regions, erasing their language and culture, burning crops, using vital food and energy supplies to blackmail the world. If Western leaders are too afraid of Putin and their own voters to stop him and punish him for these crimes, he'll know that the West is as weak and pleasure-seeking as he's always believed. He'll go on taking more of Ukraine, and then the region, in his quest to be another Peter the Great. The anti-Western, antidemocratic partnership that China and Russia proclaimed at



the Beijing Olympics will look like a map of the 21st century. Authoritarians in Ankara and Tehran and Beijing will understand that history is on their side. The much-abused "rules-based international order"—the idea that might does not make right—will no longer stand for anything, not even hypocrisy.

But if Ukraine can push Russia back at least to the February 24 borders, deplete Putin's military machine, keep Russia sanctioned and isolated, avoid a split in NATO, and retain the support of Western publics, then the idea that human life and freedom have value will be strengthened everywhere. Declining democracies won't suddenly come off oxygen, but Ukraine will stand as an example for people around the world who refuse to accept a future of brutality and lies.

But I won't pretend that these geopolitical arguments are my main reason for wanting Ukraine to win. Instead it's Olesya Vynnyk I'm thinking of, Ivan and Nataliia, Lada and her family and pets, Alla and Mark, the cleaning women in orange uniforms. I can't stand the idea that, after so much loss, they might lose everything. It would be so unfair. *A*

*George Packer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*



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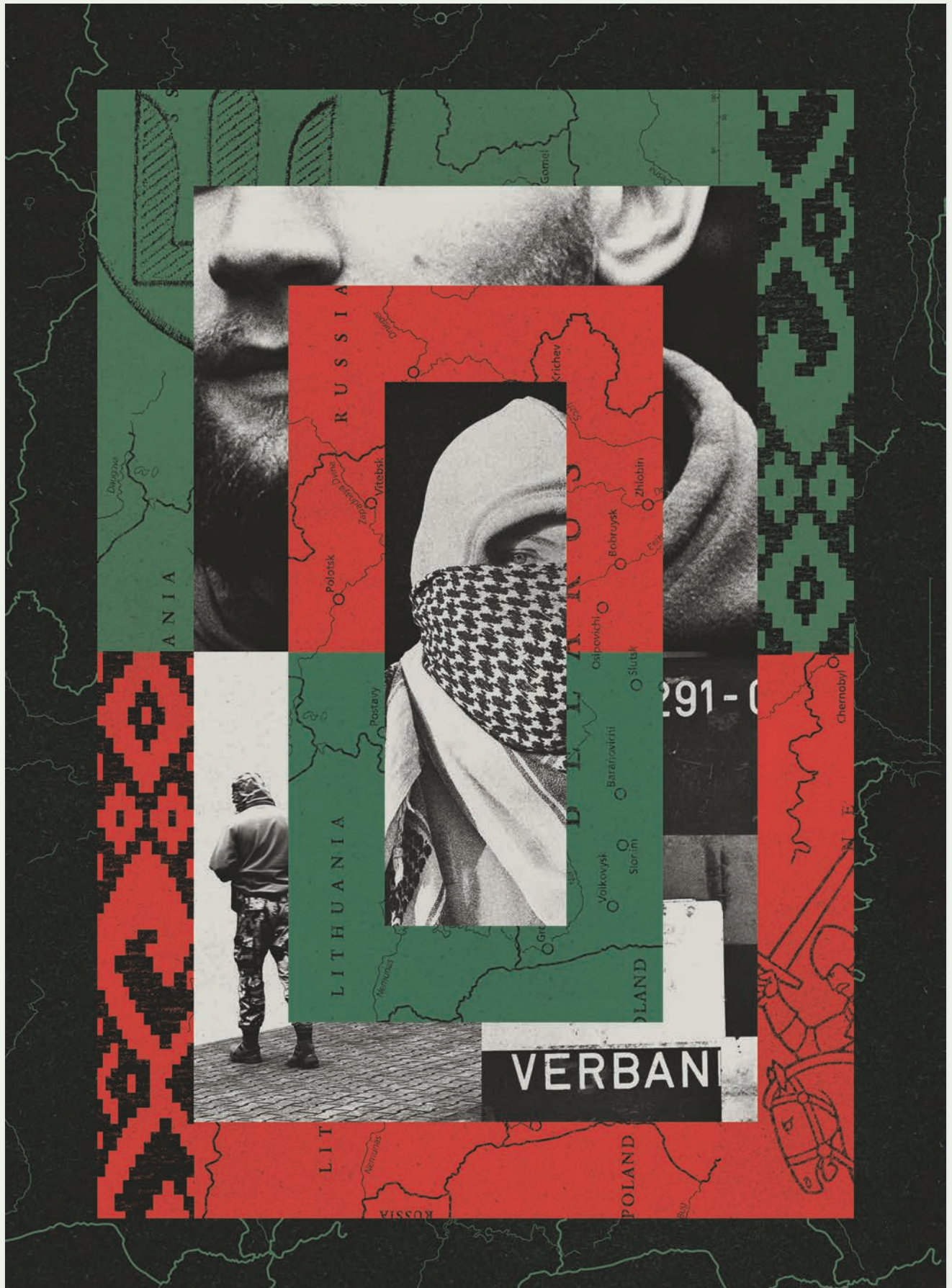


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To bring change to Belarus,  
a band of fighters is  
taking up arms in Ukraine.

## **THE KALINOUSKI REGIMENT**

*By* **ANNE APPLEBAUM**



# No revolutionary posters line the streets,

“flaming from the walls in clean reds and blues,” as they did when George Orwell left Barcelona to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Nor can you hear loudspeakers “bellowing revolutionary songs all day and far into the night,” as Orwell did in 1936. Instead, gathered in a basement on a quiet, tree-lined street, the Belarusians preparing to leave Warsaw to join the Ukrainian army look more like a bunch of computer programmers getting ready for a long car trip.

Maybe that’s because they *are* a bunch of computer programmers—or anyway, some of them are—gathered in a basement on a quiet, tree-lined street, getting ready for a long car trip. Canned food, dried sausage, and bags of nuts and raisins are neatly stacked on the floor beside a pile of backpacks. A couple of SUVs are parked just outside. The cars have been donated by Polish or Belarusian sympathizers, or else were left behind by others who have departed for the front. The group I am meeting will be leaving for the Ukrainian border in an hour, and they are speaking with me on the condition that I don’t take pictures and don’t ask for names. If they are identified, members of their families could be visited, harassed, even arrested by the Belarusian police. “Our relatives are hostages,” one of them told me. Already, mothers of Belarusian soldiers fighting in Ukraine have been forced to make public statements denouncing their children.

I can tell you that they are young, in their 20s and 30s, and that they are on their way to join the Kastus Kalinowski Regiment, a military unit founded in March as a part of the Ukrainian army but with a separate, Belarusian status. I can also tell you that, appearances to the contrary, they and their leaders are thoroughly grounded in the international history of armed rebellion. They know their 19th-century antecedents: Kastus Kalinowski fought in the failed 1863 uprising against the Russian occupation of what was then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. They know their 20th-century antecedents too, among them not just Orwell in Spain but Józef Piłsudski, a Polish general who fought with the Austrian army in 1914 because he hoped, eventually, to liberate Poland. Although Kalinowski was executed and Orwell’s cause ultimately failed, Piłsudski marched his Polish Legions into Warsaw. By 1918, he was the leader of independent Poland. The men in the basement are going to Ukraine both because they are, like Orwell in Spain, sympathizers with another country’s democratic cause, and because they hope, like Piłsudski in Poland, to eventually liberate Belarus from the dictatorship of Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power for nearly three decades.

Hope is tempered with realism—they are headed for the front line of one of the most brutal wars of the 21st century—and bolstered by desperation, the feeling that other, better roads to political change have disappeared. K, a man in his 20s—floppy blond hair, green T-shirt, ripped shorts—told me he had begun

his career working in a government office in Minsk, but quickly realized what that meant. “Your work, everything that you do, is to make sure that the Lukashenko regime remains in power,” he said. During a series of mass protests following a stolen election in 2020, a moment all of them call “the revolution,” K and a friend distributed leaflets with slogans criticizing the regime. The friend is now in prison, serving a four-year sentence (K tells me his name; later I find it on a list of political prisoners). After Russia invaded Ukraine, K was racked with guilt, unable to sleep, angry that the failure of the Belarusian revolution meant that Russian rockets could be launched at Ukraine from Belarus. “I understood that we have an obligation to go to Kyiv,” he says. “And afterwards, we will go to Minsk.”

*We didn’t finish our revolution, we didn’t remove Lukashenko, we didn’t prevent Russian troops from crossing our border to attack Ukraine*—all of these are reasons, now, to fight in Ukraine. A long-haired man, R (one of the computer programmers), told me that he, too, took part in the 2020 demonstrations, and that he, too, left Belarus afterward. But then R returned home for a visit. What he saw shocked him. People had stopped protesting: “People aren’t fighting. This life”—he means life under the dictatorship—“is enough for them.” How can they just go on as if nothing is happening, as if rockets are not flying? “To me it’s surreal.”

Most of the men I spoke with have other options; they could have good lives outside Belarus if they wanted to. B, wearing a white T-shirt printed with the slogan INSPIRE, revealed halfway through our conversation that he speaks good English, and we switched from Russian. He has family in the U.S., and has been there several times (“Bay Area ... Yosemite National Park ...”). His dream was to watch Woody Allen playing jazz in New York, but on the night he went to Café Carlyle, Allen wasn’t there. He describes himself as a “digital nomad”—“or maybe better to say international homeless”—and has been traveling around Europe for the past few years. He, too, works in the world of computers, but he has wanted to fight in Ukraine since the war began. In March, “it was very cold, and I was very scared.” Although “I am still scared,” he said, those “emotional videos,” watching them one after another, over and over again, “month by month, week by week,” finally persuaded him to sign on with the Kalinowski Regiment.

K, R, and B might all be roughly described as Minsk intellectuals. Their leaders, organizing papers in the next room, tell me that among the volunteers are also recent high-school graduates, factory workers, ex-policemen. Some arrive in Warsaw on overnight buses from Belarus with no money and no plans, other than to join the Ukrainian army. On the front gate of the Kalinowski Warsaw headquarters is a sign with a phone number, in

case volunteers show up when no one is around. How do they know where to go? “Everyone knows,” one of them told me.

I was also told about much rougher recruits, including former criminals, though I didn’t encounter any myself. One of the exiles who staffs the Warsaw recruitment office put it like this: “Certain kinds of people are drawn to the idea of weapons, fighting.” Several former members of the Belarusian military and security services are also known to be fighting with the Ukrainian army, some in the Kalinouski Regiment and some in other units. Slowly, they are linking up with one another, and with sympathizers elsewhere. On August 9, a congress of the unified Belarusian opposition appointed Valery Sakhashchik, the former commander of a legendary paratrooper unit in the Belarusian army, as the effective minister of defense in exile; I spoke with him while he was in a car, driving to Ukraine for his first formal meeting with the Kalinouski Regiment. Sakhashchik left Belarus six years ago—it was impossible “to be a free person” there, he told me—and has been running a successful construction firm in Poland. He thinks the regiment might not yet be important militarily, “but it is important emotionally, because a lot of people believe it represents the future of the Belarusian army.”

Whether they make contact in advance or just appear on the doorstep, whether their background is in the military or at a university, all of the volunteers go through a verification process. Pavel Kukhta, the head of the Kalinouski Warsaw recruitment office (and one of the few people who has been public about his association with the regiment), told me that Belarusian *kiberpartizanti*—cyberpartisans—have hacked most of the databases used by the Belarusian KGB and can check whether residential, educational,

originally in the Donbas, is clearly a man of few words. For this role, he doesn’t need many. A couple of times while I am talking with the new recruits, he comes into the room where the men are waiting. He collects their passports, checks their names. There are no inspirational speeches and no drama: Everyone here has already made their decision and accepted the consequences. When I leave, they are lining up in the garden.

**THE NEXT TIME** I see them—or I think I see them—is a week later, in a scraggly field behind a parking lot in a suburb in central Ukraine. New recruits, perhaps including some I met in Warsaw, are dressed in camouflage, carrying weapons, and, in a nod to my presence, wearing balaclavas to hide their faces. Their uniforms were crowdfunded or donated by sympathizers in both Poland and Belarus. Their guns came from the Ukrainian army. Their trainer is from one of the Baltic states. He is particularly valued by the Belarusians because he has passed several NATO courses, and they want to learn to fight like NATO soldiers. One of the many ironies of the current moment is how many opponents of Putin’s Russia, from the Baltic to the Black Sea (and indeed all the way to Central Asia), share Russian as a common language and can use it to organize, even to teach American military doctrine, across national lines.

I watch them with “Rokosh,” the alias of a man who has been part of different Belarusian-democracy movements since the 1990s. He explains that today’s exercises involve training to fight in cities. On other days they go to the Ukrainian army’s shooting ranges, or practice trench warfare; the field has been dug up for that purpose. They follow a strict schedule—morning

**THEIR UNIFORMS WERE CROWDFUNDED OR DONATED.  
THEIR GUNS CAME FROM THE UKRAINIAN ARMY.  
THEIR TRAINER IS FROM ONE OF THE BALTIC STATES.**

and professional information is genuine. If it’s not, the men get sent on to the border anyway, where Ukrainian border guards will stop them and question them further. What happens after that to those who have given false information, Kukhta doesn’t know.

Kukhta doesn’t know a lot of things. He won’t say where the new recruits will be training, or where they will be sent afterward. He can’t say with any precision exactly how many of them are already fighting (“hundreds”). The less you know, the less you can accidentally reveal.

Even putting aside the need for operational security, Kukhta, who has been fighting with the Ukrainian army since 2016,

exercise, all-day training, films or lectures in the evenings—and live together in a run-down dormitory nearby.

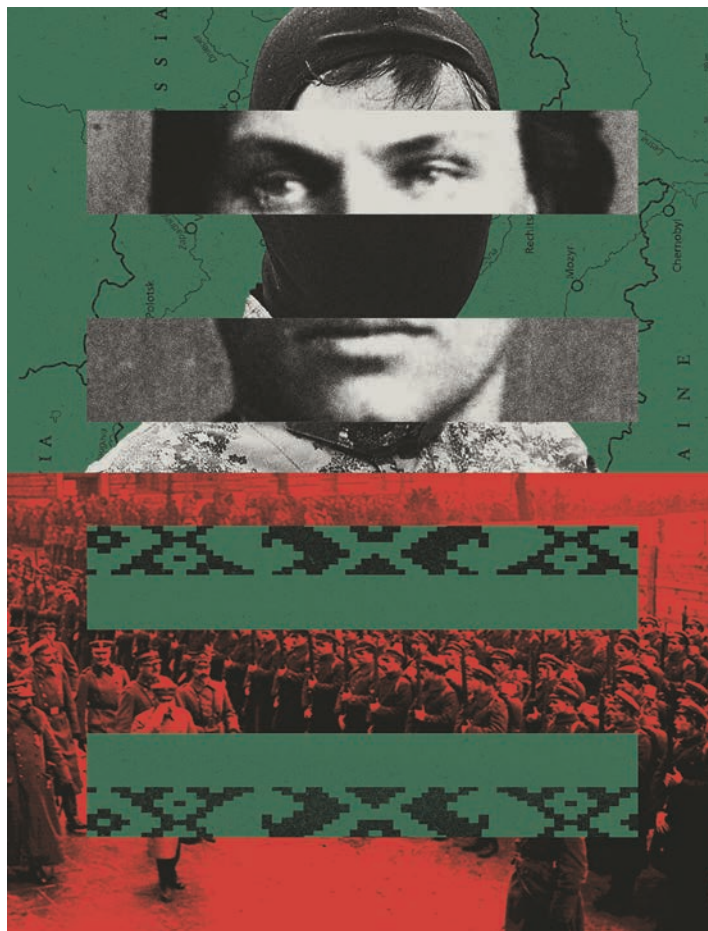
Rokosh earlier joined me for a longer conversation in an unremarkable basement bar with three other Belarusians associated with the regiment or with the Belarusian opposition. All of them belong to a different generation from the men in the field. They have watched the rise and fall of various opposition movements and leaders since 1994, when Lukashenko first came to power. They watched his regime turn from the soft authoritarian rule of a collective-farm boss into a vicious, violent autocracy that tortures political prisoners and allows

the Russian army to launch missiles into Ukraine from its territory. They remember the Soviet Union, and they do not want their country to become part of a neo-Soviet empire. What they want instead, one of them told me, is “a radical change in the political system, legal system, economic system, and deep reforms of the entire society to bring Belarus to the principles of democracy and the rule of law.” But they do not believe the current regime will disintegrate peacefully.

Like everybody else in the post-Soviet world, Rokosh and the other men have read Gene Sharp, the philosopher of nonviolent revolution and civic activism who died in 2018. They admire his ideas, but they don’t think they apply to their situation anymore. Nonviolence was tried in Belarus. It failed. “Flowers and demonstrations could not change this situation,” one of them says, so it is time to try something else. They tell me about partisan underground movements inside their country—one of them is called “Flying Storks”—which have, they say, racked up a few minor victories, including a drone attack on the headquarters of OMON, the Belarusian riot police, in Minsk. They also say they have distributed clandestine training videos designed to help people counter the tactics of the riot police: “The people’s right to revolt is justified because all civilized methods of changing the situation were exhausted,” one said. Even so, the Russian invasion of Ukraine

was a turning point, a different level of threat, a shock to the system, a “spit in the face.” If Ukraine does not win, one of them told me, “we will have to say goodbye to any idea of a free Belarus.” They aren’t the first to draw that conclusion. In the very early days of the war, inspired by another piece of history—the Belarusians who blew up railway lines and train stations to stop the Nazi advance into the Soviet Union in the early 1940s—a group of Belarusian railway workers, helped by the *kiberpartizanti*, sabotaged some of the Russian trains carrying soldiers and supplies to the front. They mixed the signals, snarled the tracks, took down the computer system, damaged equipment. One group of saboteurs came under police attack while setting fire to a signaling box. A Belarusian Telegram channel, “Belaruski Gayun,” also helped by providing constantly updated information from anonymous subscribers on troop and equipment movements along the border, allowing Ukrainians to prepare. The channel is still going, and is still read carefully by those guarding the territory of northern Ukraine.

The members of the Kalinouski Regiment are motivated by a belief that the Belarusian regime is both much weaker and much more dangerous than many assume. Lukashenko, they



argue, is deeply unpopular. They reckon that no more than 10 to 20 percent of the population supports him—mostly pensioners, bureaucrats, and security-service employees who depend on the state for jobs in a failing economy—and he knows this. Lukashenko has no ideology, but he will do anything to stay in power. That means that when Russian President Vladimir Putin threatens, as he did at the end of June, to transfer nuclear missiles to Belarus, the world should pay attention. Putin might want to avoid the geopolitical consequences of using nuclear weapons for the first time since 1945—but Lukashenko might not care.

Putin could also force Lukashenko to send Belarusian troops to fight in Ukraine, but that kind of decision could have unintended consequences. Kukhta, Rokosh, and the others all say their regiment has been contacted directly by soldiers and officers now serving in the Belarusian army who want instructions on how to surrender if they are ordered to cross the border into Ukraine. Kukhta, the man of few words, gave them blunt advice: “Put your hands up and your weapons down.” He predicts that the majority of the Belarusian army’s tanks and trucks would wind up in the control of the Ukrainian army. Although there is

no way to verify that claim, at least one Belarusian border guard has successfully escaped to the Ukrainian side already, declaring that he wanted to join the fight against Russia. Sakhashchik, who also predicts that the majority of ordinary soldiers would not fight, made a video appeal back in February, calling on Belarusian soldiers not to join the invasion: “This is not our war. You will not defend your homeland, home, or family and will not receive glory—only shame, humiliation, and death.”

The Kalinouski fighters think Belarus has another kind of significance too. After all, if the Russian leader wants to reunite Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine into some kind of neo-Soviet empire, Lukashenko’s loyalty is a necessary ingredient. But what if the Belarusian pillar disappears? Then everything else—the empire, the war with Ukraine, Putinism itself—might crumble as well. This, they want the world to know, is an opportunity that should be taken, not least because, as one of them put it, “Lukashenko is easier to unseat than Putin.” Right now nobody other than the Poles and of course the Ukrainians is assisting the Kalinouski fighters. But maybe someday others will. Rokosh tells me that he wants the fighters eventually to get access to better Western and NATO intelligence about what goes on inside their country so that they can plan their next steps better. The Biden administration’s warnings last autumn about the coming war in Ukraine convinced many people across Eastern Europe, Belarus included, that the Americans know a lot more than they let on. Alongside Gene Sharp, the fighters have also read *Charlie Wilson’s War*, the book that describes how, in the 1980s, a single congressman persuaded Washington to help the Afghans overthrow their Soviet occupiers. If it happened once, maybe it could happen again?

**BEFORE I LEAVE THE SCRUFFY FIELD,** I watch the volunteers get put through their paces. They are walking in groups of three, one behind the other, as if they were in an occupied city. Some of them are slow and awkward, giving the impression that this is the first time they’ve ever held a gun. Some move faster, seem more experienced; one of them told me back in Warsaw that he’s had some police training, and I wonder if he is one of the men moving lightly, adeptly, across the field. Several other people, including a young woman, are watching from the sidelines, listening intently to the words of the Baltic trainer. One of them has a Cossack haircut—shaved head, except for a ponytail—and arms covered in patriotic tattoos.

The trainer turns on heavy-metal music, and that adds a bit more drama to the scene. The sun beats down on the suburb, and I begin to feel bad about the balaclavas. The trainees repeat the same exercises over and over again. Rokosh explains that the idea, as with all military training, is for these moves to become automatic, instinctive. Computer programmers, high-school graduates, government bureaucrats, and maybe the odd thief must learn in just a few weeks to react without thinking when they are attacked.

However wearisome the exercise might be, this is the easy part, the predictable part. They will train, they will prepare, they will be sent to the front—all of that, they know. What they don’t know is the true nature of the historical moment they inhabit, or how it will end. They have made a bet, but is it the right one?

Here is one more story told to me by the group in the basement bar: In 2021, a few members of the Belarusian underground started communicating clandestinely with some senior Belarusian officers who said they were ready to oppose the regime. After many months of conversation, the partisans finally agreed to travel outside the country, to Russia, in order to meet them; the officers said they didn’t dare do so at home but could not travel abroad anywhere else. The meeting was a trap. As soon as the Belarusian-underground leaders arrived, they were all arrested and imprisoned.

I hear the historical echo in the story, as do the Kalinouski fighters. In the winter of 1945, 16 officers of the Polish resistance, all veterans of the struggle against Hitler, began to communicate clandestinely with Ivan Serov, the Red Army general who had just arrived to run the occupation of Poland. Convinced he wanted to help, they arranged to meet him in March. But it was a trap. They were all arrested, flown to Moscow, and imprisoned in the Lubyanka, the Soviet Union’s most notorious prison, where three of them eventually died.

That story unfolded at a moment of maximum Soviet strength, when the Second World War was mostly won, the Yalta Agreement had already divided Europe into spheres of Soviet and Western influence, and no outsiders—not the British, not the Americans—were in a position to help the Poles. In 1918, by contrast, Piłsudski liberated Warsaw from czarist occupation at a moment of maximum Russian weakness, when the Bolshevik revolution had begun, the Russian army had collapsed, and Europe’s other imperial autocracies, in Germany and Austria-Hungary, were failing as well.

But is this 1918, with Russian power waning? Or is this 1945, when it is finally consolidating? The Belarusians don’t know, of course, but they want to influence the answer. In the bar, I asked the men if they are waiting for the right moment to return home. “We are not waiting for the moment,” one of them corrected me. “We are working on creating the conditions” that will make the right moment arrive.

They believe that if they lean hard on the scales of history and help the Ukrainians win, then both Russia and its Belarusian satrap will be far weaker. They could pay a high price—not just with their time and effort but with their lives. On June 26, the commander of one of the Belarusian battalions died during the battle for Lysychansk. Ivan Marchuk, alias “Brest,” was 28. Others have also been killed, wounded, or captured.

But if they don’t fight, they might pay another kind of price: If Ukraine loses and Russia is empowered, then Belarus will remain a dictatorship, and they will never be able to go home. Those of us who live in luckier countries, with better geography, don’t know what it feels like to have a choice between fighting and exile, but all of the people sweating in this field truly do. Back in Warsaw, one of the volunteers told me that since leaving his country in 2020, he had done nothing but move from place to place, trying to make a different life but never really finding a home. Belarus is his only home, but before he can return there, he has to help change it. “I run. And I run. And I run. I would like to stop running.” *A*

*Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*



*Photograph by* **ALEXANDER CHEKMENEV**

The journalist  
Sergii Leshchenko  
has a knack for  
inserting himself  
into the pivotal  
moments of  
Ukraine's history.  
I wanted to see  
the war through  
his eyes.

# In February, when the bombs began falling on Kyiv,

I immediately thought of Sergii Leshchenko. He isn't a friend or colleague exactly, but I feel indebted to him. Over the years, at a series of Kyiv cafés, he has patiently explained the dark corners of Ukrainian politics to me, sharing insights gleaned from his long career as an investigative reporter. In those earliest hours of the war, as I watched CNN correspondents crouching in the parking garages of their hotels, I worried about what might befall him. I sent him a text extending my "solidarity and prayers," a gesture that, even as I made it, felt inadequate to the moment.

I had first met Leshchenko in May 2014, in the back room of a sleek Kyiv restaurant serving food from the republic of Georgia. A group of journalists, both local and foreign, had assembled, and the mood was ebullient. Three months earlier, a revolution had chased President Viktor Yanukovich, a Russian-backed kleptocrat, from power.

Leshchenko seemed young then: wiry, bespectacled, clad in a button-down shirt, a quiet presence. He had been something of a prodigy; the son of engineers, he had obtained his first press pass when he was 17. In the early years of independence from the Soviet Union, he roamed the corridors of Parliament, gawking at the new titans of the nation's politics.

He didn't set out to be an investigative journalist. The vocation was thrust upon him. In 2000, two weeks after he began working for a newspaper, his editor went missing. Two months later, the editor's corpse was discovered in the forest, decapitated, drenched with chemicals, and charred. Investigating the murder, which was never officially solved but strongly implicated a former president, provided Leshchenko with an advanced education in the hideous tactics of the powerful.

Revealing the corruption of the elite was dangerous but also exhilarating. Perhaps Leshchenko's greatest subject was Yanukovich's extravagant lifestyle, especially his ornate palace, built on 340 illegally obtained acres. Among the amenities were a museum

for the president's car collection and a pirate ship anchored in a river that passed through the property. Leshchenko's stories helped stoke the anger that brought protesters into the streets.

On the night I met him, however, Leshchenko was contemplating a new career. His small circle of reformers shared a growing belief that the moment demanded more than just railing against the rot. Ukraine's democracy needed builders. With the encouragement of the political theorist Francis Fukuyama, Leshchenko ran for Parliament and won. At age 34, he occupied one of the seats of power that had so dazzled his teenage self.

It never occurred to me that I would see Leshchenko again. Then, in 2016, he made a brief but consequential cameo in American politics. Soon after Donald Trump won the Republican nomination, Leshchenko held a press conference in Kyiv. Waving a sheaf of documents, he revealed the existence of a "black ledger," which contained notations of furtive payments disbursed by Yanukovich's party. A few months later, *The New York Times* reported the presence of Trump's campaign chair, Paul Manafort, in the pages of the ledger. He had apparently received millions in illicit payments from powerful backers of the party. Manafort immediately resigned from the campaign.

I emailed Leshchenko asking if we could meet. On my subsequent reporting trips to Kyiv, I came to appreciate how his capacity for outrage coexisted with a sly sense of humor. He once showed me selfies he'd taken in front of properties that Manafort owned in New York.

It took a sense of humor to appreciate the strange fate of his political career. In 2019, he had grown close to Volodymyr Zelensky, then a comic actor running for president. But the bylaws of Zelensky's newly formed party forbade Leshchenko from running as a candidate on its slate. Only outsiders, who'd never held political office, were allowed to represent the party, which promised sweeping change. The outsiders won in a wave election, taking down their ally Leshchenko in the process.

Leshchenko filled the void with a medley of projects. He hosted a television talk show and consulted at the *Kyiv Post*. Emulating the nation's new president, he even dabbled in show business.

Brian Keith Etheridge, a writer from Hollywood, had spent months living in Ukraine so that he could be closer to the source material for what he hoped would be his masterwork. Little in Etheridge's past suggested the depth and sweep of the project. His previous credits included sitcoms such as *The Goldbergs* and *Mike & Molly*.

This series would be darker, more award-worthy—a docudrama about Ukraine's tumultuous post-Communist years. He told me he had the project distilled to a formula that might catch the attention of a Netflix executive: "It's *Narcos* meets *House of Cards*, but set in Kyiv." The working title was *Sovereign State*.

Etheridge turned to Leshchenko for help. He was learning the history as he wrote; Leshchenko had lived the plot points.

Etheridge asked him to apply the precision of investigative journalism to the script. In one draft, a powerful oligarch tells the Ukrainian president, "Suck my dick." Leshchenko protested that he wouldn't use that particular turn of phrase, because its recipient would interpret it as a slur and therefore grounds for violent reprisal.

On February 23, Leshchenko and Etheridge were storyboarding episodes. “It was our best day of work,” Etheridge told me. But at 3 p.m., they were interrupted.

A member of Parliament Etheridge had befriended arrived in the writers’ room. He looked pale. He had just met with Zelensky. The president told him that the Russians were going to begin bombing Kyiv the next morning. The subject of their show—the history of Ukraine—was about to take another momentous turn.

Etheridge made hasty plans to drive to Lviv, in western Ukraine, a safe distance from the amassed Russian troops, and implored his partner to join him. Like me, he worried about Leshchenko’s safety in what promised to be a short, lopsided war. But Leshchenko sensed an opportunity to participate in the next chapter of Ukraine’s history. “I’ve got to be here,” he told Etheridge.

**JUST BEFORE 5 O’CLOCK** the next morning, Leshchenko turned over in his bed and saw the ominous glow of breaking news on his phone. President Vladimir Putin had announced that Russia was launching its invasion of Ukraine.

Soon after, he heard a distant rumble. He went outside and watched cars flow from garages, clotting the city’s arteries. His

In the weeks leading up to the invasion, Leshchenko told me, Ukrzaliznytsia had sent specific instructions: At the first sign of war, he was to report to the organization’s headquarters, in central Kyiv. The building was a short subway ride from his apartment. Rushing out the door, he instinctively stuffed his backpack with his official documents, a wad of cash, his laptop, and underwear.

The railway management had good reason to worry that the Russians would seek its destruction. Taking out the leadership of the railway would debilitate the nation’s primary transportation network and, therefore, the entire country.

When Leshchenko arrived at headquarters, a functionary told him that the plans were already scrambled. He needed to head to a satellite office nearby, a building unlikely to make the Russian list of targets. With explosions in the distance, the CEO of the railway, Alexander Kamyshin, delivered a locker-room talk to the small group of executives who had assembled at the new rendezvous point. “We’re going to keep the railways operating at any cost,” he said.

To hedge its bets, the group split in two and fled in different directions. One team made its way to Lviv, where it would set up an improvised headquarters.

## **LESHCHENKO WATCHED CARS FLOW FROM GARAGES, CLOTting KYIV’S ARTERIES. NEIGHBORS WERE FLEEING WESTWARD TO SAFER GROUND— BUT HE HAD ORDERS TO GO ELSEWHERE.**

neighbors were fleeing westward to safer ground—but he had orders to go elsewhere.

When Zelensky had taken office, he’d appointed Leshchenko to the Supervisory Board of the Ukrzaliznytsia, the national railway. Some members of the intelligentsia dismissed the job as a second-rate sop to a loyalist. But the prospect of working with the gritty stuff of locomotives fired Leshchenko’s imagination. He would help oversee one of Europe’s largest firms, with 230,000 workers, an organization that needed hardheaded reform. “I liked that it was concrete,” he told me this summer, over dinner at the restaurant in my hotel.

I had returned to Kyiv, once again seeking Leshchenko’s insight. I wanted to see the war through his eyes, to understand how the country had survived the Russian onslaught—and whether the war had changed the trajectory of Ukraine’s still nascent democracy. He has a nose for a story and a knack for inserting himself into pivotal events. He’s also a raconteur, and good company.

Leshchenko joined the second group, which included Kamyshin. They piled onto a specially designed railcar, called an *automotrice*. From a distance, it looked like a souped-up terminal shuttle from an American airport: With engineer’s perches at both ends, it could quickly change directions. Kamyshin announced that the car would ride the rails of central Ukraine in a deliberately desultory pattern, making it a slippery target.

The group in the *automotrice* intended to run the system while on the move, but that proved impossible. In the early hours of the war, mobile phones worked erratically, if at all. To stay in touch with station managers at remote outposts, they relied on a communication system that might have been cutting edge in the Soviet era: Every hour or so, the car would pull into a station. Leshchenko and the executives would head into a room called the studio, equipped with a microphone. A switchboard operator would use a system of cables to patch them through to far-flung stations.



KYIV-PASAZHYRSKYI TRAIN STATION, FEBRUARY 25. BY JUNE, UKRAINIAN TRAINS HAD EVACUATED MORE THAN 3.8 MILLION REFUGEES.

What Leshchenko heard in these conversations gobsmailed him. At 8 a.m., a station manager on the border with Crimea reported that he had witnessed a train carrying dozens of tanks roll into Ukraine. Another manager relayed that he'd just seen Russian tanks a two-hour car ride from Kyiv. "We had people at even tiny stations," Leshchenko told me. "We heard what nobody had known before."

Conventional wisdom held that if Russia attacked, it would merely escalate the long-standing conflict in the country's east. But Leshchenko could see, from the strangely panoramic vantage of the *automotrice*, that the Russians were pouring into the country from every conceivable angle. "We understood the total invasion," he said.

Leshchenko became the railway's de facto intelligence liaison. As a former journalist, he could take accurate notes of phone calls, and typed up the accounts of the disparate station managers on his MacBook. Each time he collected fresh information about Russian movements, he forwarded his notes to Serhii Shaptala, the army's chief of staff.

The group on the *automotrice* felt torn between conflicting imperatives. Conductors were scrambling to facilitate a massive evacuation of panicked women and children from besieged cities. Two thousand passengers, sometimes more, were crammed into trains designed to carry 600. But the rails were also being exploited by the invading Russians, allowing them to quickly import heavy weaponry deep into the country.

To stall the onslaught, the Ukrainian army began deliberately detonating tracks that might carry Russian tanks into the heartland. Explosives ripped bridges from their moorings. These were significant alterations to the system that needed

to be relayed down the hierarchy to station managers and engineers. From the mobile headquarters, the railway management remade the network's map so that evacuations could continue, despite all the self-inflicted damage.

As the *automotrice* caromed from station to station and the hours wore on, Leshchenko began to regret that he'd forgotten to pack his toothbrush. He managed to briefly cadge a bed in the car's small bunk room, where the executives took turns napping.

At the end of the war's second day, just after midnight, the *automotrice* pulled into a small town. To avoid advertising targets to the Russians, everything remained shrouded in the thickest darkness. "I'm in a World War II movie," Leshchenko thought. The *automotrice* slowed to a halt alongside another railcar. Standing on the tracks, he saw Ukraine's infrastructure minister.

*Thank you for your good work*, the minister told the assembled officials. *But it's time to consolidate operations in Lviv immediately.*

Before the invasion, the railroad was hardly beloved. It was notorious for its corruption and unreliability. But in those first days of war, when nearly every institution collapsed, the trains miraculously kept running. By June, Ukrzaliznytsia had evacuated more than 3.8 million refugees, including 1 million children. Every day, the company hauled an estimated 300,000 tons of cargo, compensating for the Russian blockade of Black Sea ports and a fuel shortage that incapacitated trucking.

That night, as management followed the infrastructure minister's orders and began the trip to Lviv, Leshchenko's mind began to wander. He felt that the railway had survived its greatest moment of crisis. His nose for the story told him that history was going to be made elsewhere.

**ON THE EVE** of Zelensky's inauguration, in 2019, Leshchenko believed he was going to join the president's inner circle. During the campaign, he had arranged briefings for the candidate, lining up experts to teach him the intricacies of foreign policy and the necessity of battling corruption. After the election, Leshchenko discovered that Zelensky would answer his texts if he sent them in the early morning, as the president-elect prepared his kids for school. He began sending Zelensky advice, without having to filter it through a gatekeeper.

Then, just as he stood poised to assume a position of power, his investigations of Paul Manafort returned to damage him. In May 2019, Rudy Giuliani appeared on Fox News and warned that Zelensky was "surrounded by literally enemies of the president." Giuliani assured viewers that he wasn't insinuating a vague conspiracy; he was pointing the finger at a specific adviser. "I'll give you his name." He paused. "A gentleman by the name of Leshchenko."

Giuliani's denunciation was transparently part of his ploy to pressure Zelensky into launching an investigation into the Ukrainian business dealings of Joe Biden's son Hunter. But Leshchenko knew it would ruin his chance for a job. Even if Zelensky largely resisted Giuliani's importuning, he wasn't going to risk angering the leader of Ukraine's most powerful ally. "I'm not stupid," Leshchenko said. "If you're considered a troublemaker by an American president, it's best not to be involved."

Now, with Ukraine at war—and Trump out of office—the landscape shifted. Three days before the invasion, Andriy Yermak, Zelensky's chief of staff, had unexpectedly called Leshchenko to ask him to join the government's Disinformation Prevention Center, an agency focused on combatting Russian propaganda.

It was an aborted conversation. They made vague plans to meet and discuss the details further. Having arrived in Lviv after his time on the *autotractor*, Leshchenko called to press the issue. "Do you still need me?"

"Take the next train back to Kyiv," Yermak told him.

At 7 o'clock the following morning, Leshchenko arrived in Kyiv and called Yermak again.

"I'm here," he told him.

"A car will pick you up at your apartment in an hour."

Leshchenko stuffed his toothbrush in his bag and replenished his cache of T-shirts.

The streets of Kyiv were devoid of civilian life, but the trip to the presidential bunker required wending through a maze of checkpoints. Anxious guards scrutinized documents passed to them through the car's window. Days earlier, Russian agents, some of whom had supposedly laid low in Kyiv for months, had been activated. They'd descended on the center of power to capture, or perhaps eliminate, the leadership of Ukraine. The plots had been foiled, but anxiety remained.

When Leshchenko finally arrived at the presidential bunker, he found slumbering soldiers strewn across the floors. Presidential aides sidestepped them as they went about their jobs. Leshchenko, however, was shown to his own room—an office that doubled as a dorm. He could unfold a cot and place his pair of white hotel slippers next to it.

Although Leshchenko had a room, he didn't have a clear set of responsibilities, at least not at first. Needing to improvise his job into existence, he set about making himself useful. Unlike most members of the president's inner circle, he spoke English well and without self-consciousness. From his days at the center of the Manafort scandal, foreign journalists had his number stored in their contacts. If he needed to play the role of gofer—helping arrange Zelensky's interviews—he didn't mind.

Despite all the tension of the bunker, its ethos felt familiar to him. When Leshchenko had first met Zelensky, he'd noticed that he shared his office with a pair of brothers, Boris and Serhiy Shefir. They were longtime producers in Zelensky's entertainment empire, like-minded comedic talents. Zelensky fed off their jokes. He liked to stay close to the creative process. Even after he left entertainment for politics, his inner circle still had the informality and bonhomie of a writers' room.

Somehow, the windowless bunker retained the same camaraderie. Most public figures would scoff at living with their closest aides, but it suited Zelensky. "We lived like a family," Leshchenko told me. As he observed the president at close distance, it struck him: "He doesn't like to be alone." Zelensky's extroversion propelled him to talk through every decision. "He liked to be able to see the reaction to his ideas." The close company of his advisers allowed him to socialize the burden of running a nation at war.

When Leshchenko went to the bunker's canteen or stuck his head into a colleague's office, he would often bump into the president, who would quiz him: "What's the news?" When an adviser expressed his horror at a video of wartime destruction—or discovered a hilarious meme—Zelensky would crowd around a laptop along with everyone else.

Zelensky let his generals manage the war, which felt far beyond his own capacities. But there was another war, the one for hearts and minds, which the president made his own. Leshchenko became one of his foot soldiers.

Zelensky and Yermak (himself a film producer) fervently believed in the ability of celebrities to influence opinion and had impeccable instincts for casting. Part of Leshchenko's job was to book talent that could bring international attention to Ukraine's plight. Through his partnership with Brian Keith Etheridge, Leshchenko arranged for Mila Kunis and Ashton Kutcher to join a videoconference with Zelensky, though he failed in his campaign to get the president a virtual cameo at the Academy Awards. Zelensky settled for the Grammys.

Since he was a young reporter, Leshchenko had stayed in touch with Michael McFaul. A longtime Russia expert and ambassador to Moscow under Barack Obama, McFaul was a fiery presence on Twitter and television, passionately advocating for the Ukrainian cause. When McFaul was going to address more than 200 Democratic members of Congress at a retreat in Philadelphia on March 10, he set up time to talk with Leshchenko and Yermak.

Ninety minutes before he was scheduled to speak, McFaul dialed the men on Skype and was jolted by the presence of another face on the screen. There was Volodymyr Zelensky, smiling at him. "Mike, you look great over there," the Ukrainian president told him. Zelensky needed House Democrats to

fund arms packages for Ukraine and to pass more sanctions on Russia—and he needed McFaul to press that case.

“Did he rile me up? Absolutely. Was it orchestrated? Absolutely,” McFaul told me. Even in the moment, he marveled at the expert manipulation.

**IN OUR CONVERSATIONS,** Leshchenko referred to the bunker by a euphemism, “The Special Place.” The term betrayed his emotional attachment to the months he spent living there. He felt connected to the patriotic mission, but he also admitted that the experience had fulfilled a yearning to “touch history with my fingertips.” What made the Special Place so special was that he was running his hand along a moment that would live in national legend.

On March 19, Leshchenko left the Special Place for a few hours to grab a drink at a bar with the handful of his friends who’d remained in Kyiv. In his social circle, these friends were outliers. They hadn’t decamped to Poland, but had chosen to endure the empty grocery shelves and the blaring air-raid sirens.

A DJ spun vinyl while hipsters in beanies downed shots in the name of victory; in the kitchen, volunteers were cooking meals for the Territorial Defense Forces. A devotee of underground techno clubs, Leshchenko felt transported back to his old haunts. Under different circumstances, the gathering would have spilled into the morning hours. But the government had imposed an 8 o’clock curfew, which meant the group needed to disperse at 7 so that nobody would be marooned on the streets on the wrong side of the deadline.

As the gathering wrapped up, Leshchenko felt overcome by the moment, or perhaps it was the pair of Aperol spritzes he’d imbibed. His friend Anton Ptushkin, a YouTuber with a popular channel devoted to his international travels, had brought a camera. He grabbed Leshchenko and asked him, “What’s your attitude towards parties during the war?” In his mushy, slightly buzzed mood, Leshchenko exclaimed: “We have to come back to normality as much as possible; if we don’t come back to normality, people won’t come back to Kyiv. If they don’t come back to Kyiv, they won’t pay taxes; they won’t buy milk or bread in the store; the economy won’t come back to life. War is not for death; it’s for life.”

Two weeks later, Ptushkin posted the video, which had been shot at the very moment that Ukrainian troops were fighting a pitched battle in the suburbs of Kyiv. Leshchenko’s cameo was brief, his monologue edited down to a few seconds embedded in a 20-minute documentary about Kyiv in wartime. But the response to the snippet of Leshchenko was instant and hostile. “The elite of Kyiv hangs out in disco bunkers,” one tweet excoriated.

Back when Leshchenko was an ink-stained wretch, he enjoyed a reputation for adversarial zeal and superhuman integrity. When he entered politics, however, he found himself subject to the same scrutiny he had made a career of applying to those in power. Newspapers ran stories about his apartment, for which he’d paid about \$300,000—far pricier than a former journalist’s salary could muster. (Leshchenko said he could afford it thanks to a loan from a former boss and the fact that his girlfriend was a renowned DJ playing lucrative gigs around the world.) Old enemies, and even erstwhile friends, skewered him.

When the video appeared, he thought, “I’m in the middle of another shitstorm.” He braced himself for a reprimand. But nobody in the bunker mentioned the controversy to him. It didn’t register in the midst of a battle for the survival of the nation.

Leshchenko understood why the video ranked; he even sympathized with his critics’ point of view. A return to normalcy might exact an intolerable price: “People could begin to feel distant from the war.” But he also stood by the sentiment that people under attack deserve to smile, to recover small pieces of the happiness that Russia had stolen from them.

**TWO DAYS AFTER** the video appeared, Leshchenko and Oleksiy Arestovych, an actor turned frequent government spokesman, hopped in a car and began driving away from the city. Ukrainian troops had liberated the Kyiv suburbs, but few from the bunker had ventured beyond the city center. The two men wanted to survey the wreckage of the Russian occupation for themselves.

They drove silently through Bucha and Irpin, names that weren’t yet synonymous with the horrors that transpired in them. Arestovych would steer the car onto the sidewalk when burned-out Russian equipment barricaded the streets. Leshchenko had heard secondhand accounts of battle, but it was nothing like seeing the totality of the wreckage with his own eyes, the detritus of kitchens and laundry rooms strewn across the horizon of rubble, the stains of blood on the pavement, the lifeless eyes of the survivors.

When they returned to the bunker, they sought out Zelensky. “You really need to see this yourself,” Leshchenko told him. The president agreed.

Dislodging the Russians from the environs of the city was one of the great upsets in modern military history—a victory that most analysts in the West hadn’t dared to imagine. But the revelation of atrocities in the liberated villages muffled any celebratory impulse in the bunker.

Although the Ukrainian public largely believed that victory was within grasp, Leshchenko began to understand that the war likely would end not in months, but in years. If the Russians were going to treat the Ukrainians they conquered as vermin, then the occupation of Ukrainian territory was an intolerable concession. And if there weren’t any tolerable concessions to offer, were there any plausible grounds for a negotiated peace?

Still, it slowly dawned on Leshchenko and his colleagues that the bunker was no longer a necessity, at least for the time being. They could return home. On April 28, Leshchenko slept in his apartment for the first time in seven weeks.

**ON A CLOUDY JUNE AFTERNOON,** I accompanied Leshchenko to the Office of the Presidential Administration, where Zelensky works. Residential apartments peer into the back of the hilltop complex. “See the clotheslines,” he said. Amused by the incongruous detail, he pointed at a woman’s leopard-print housecoat drying in the wind.

Even though the Russians had largely stopped attacking Kyiv, sandbags remained piled in front of the building’s windows. A hallway was illuminated only by a cheap desk lamp sitting on



LESHCHENKO HOLDS AN ARTILLERY SHELL IN TORETSK, DONETSK REGION, IN JUNE.

the floor. Walking through the building felt like a stumbling trip to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

Leshchenko led me into the press-briefing room, which had theater seats and a podium that Zelensky frequented. He wore his signature T-shirt, which announced I'M UKRAINIAN. Twice a week, Leshchenko appears in the room to record a short video debunking the latest in Russian agitprop. Today, he wanted to poke holes in an interview that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had given a day earlier—"full of outright lies and cheap manipulation." Among his baseless provocations, Lavrov had accused Ukrainian soldiers of using drugs that prevented them from experiencing pain and fear.

When he's making conversation, Leshchenko tends to take long pauses to gather his thoughts, carefully calibrating his answers to questions. Over meals, he will look down and slurp his soup as he composes his sentences. At the podium, he inhabits a fast-talking persona whose every sentence sounds punctuated by an exclamation mark. He takes pride in not needing a script in his briefings, and razed a colleague for reading from a teleprompter.

"When I speak, I speak from the heart," he teased.

Rhetorically shredding the Kremlin's ludicrous claims required him to lean on his old reporting skills, to muster facts. But he admitted that the task didn't demand much of his intellectual capital—Russian propaganda tends to beggar belief. His job wasn't so much to persuade as it was to remind the world how much the Russians hated Ukrainians. He wanted to relentlessly highlight the extravagant desperation of Russian lies. His counterpropaganda was its own form of propaganda.

His briefings were a small part of how the Zelensky administration had overcome a historic impediment to Ukrainian democracy. When the country emerged from the Soviet Union, its people harbored a radical distrust of the state. The government was "them"—a distant entity that never represented or reflected the public interest. Not incorrectly, it was viewed as a mechanism oligarchs used for plunder. But in wartime, with the benefit of an external enemy, the government became "us"—a body worthy of trust, more organically connected to its citizenry. When its official mouthpieces, including Leshchenko, conveyed a message, the public tended to heed it—more so, at least, than it would have in the past.

When we left the briefing room, Leshchenko took me for a bowl of borscht in the canteen. On our way, he suggested we stop in the building's formal entrance. "Maybe we should take a selfie," he said. We were standing near a colonnade, where the gaps between the columns were filled with rows of sandbags, piled 10 feet high. "This is a very famous place." It was where Zelensky liked to greet visiting foreign leaders, a setting that never failed to impress, even if it was obviously an overwrought display that served no clear military purpose. A month later, Zelensky's wife, Olena, would pose in the same place for an Annie Leibovitz spread in *Vogue*.

As we left the foyer, we ran into a woman who had lived with Leshchenko in the bunker. While I stood to the side, they shared a reverie. "Whenever I see someone from there, it feels like a significant moment," she told him.

For Leshchenko, the Special Place had become an object of longing, a time that had passed. He may very well spend the rest of his life seeking to replicate it.

**IN EARLY SUMMER**, before the intolerable heat arrived, Kyiv was swept with an energy that surprised its residents. The trains from Poland were packed with returning refugees. Despite the curfew, young people went to the city's dance clubs. Drivers on mopeds delivered food ordered on mobile apps.

On a Saturday night, Leshchenko and Anton Ptushkin took me to a chic Thai restaurant overflowing with patrons, some of whom ate on blankets, spilling down a grassy lawn in front of the establishment.

As a native of Kyiv, Leshchenko likes to wax lyrical about the “city of scars,” a metropolis that has survived centuries of successive traumas. The Russian invasion, he predicted, would eventually take its place in this lineage of suffering. This history of resilience made him strangely optimistic. There was even a chance that the

Dining in the dark, Leshchenko heard the screech of a Russian shell falling in the hotel's direction. Before Ptushkin had time to react, he saw Leshchenko lying facedown. “He was the only one on the floor,” he remembered, with a touch of mockery. The woman running the hotel advised the group to crowd into a room in the middle of the building, protected by a pair of concrete walls.

Heading to bed at that point didn't make any sense. Leshchenko felt as if he had spent the evening pounding espresso. At one in the morning, another shell arced toward the hotel. When it landed about 200 meters away, the walls of the structure wobbled. “He was really scared,” Ptushkin remembers.

But Leshchenko also admitted that he felt alive—pulsing with the same sense of vitality that he'd felt in the Special Place. “I've become an adrenaline junkie,” Leshchenko told me. “But I think it's very human.”

That craving kept propelling him back toward the front. As he described the feeling, he showed me a short clip that a friend had

## **“I’VE BECOME AN ADRENALINE JUNKIE,” LESHCHENKO TOLD ME. “BUT I THINK IT’S VERY HUMAN.”**

war might leave the city with a greater self-confidence, a more expansive sense of its own possibilities. Squinting one's eyes, it was possible to see that future on the lawn of the Thai restaurant.

Leshchenko could easily inhabit the normalcy he'd extolled in his now-notorious monologue, but it also left him feeling inadequate, a bit empty. It was a sentiment I heard echoed by other men leading civilian lives in Kyiv. Some, like Leshchenko and Ptushkin, compensate by becoming amateur arms dealers. They raise money from abroad or dip into savings to procure trucks and drones, importing them from Poland and then hauling them to soldiers in the thick of action. It's at least as much a salve to the anxieties of the benefactors as it is a boost on the battlefield.

Two nights before our Thai dinner, Leshchenko and Ptushkin had driven east to deliver a caravan of Toyota trucks. It was a 14-hour ride into the Donbas, first along broad highways, then along constricted country roads.

The caravan made its way to a village called Mykolaivka, about seven kilometers from the front line. They arrived at a small hotel late at night. Like every building in town, the hotel kept its lights off—a necessary defensive tactic, but hardly fail-safe.

taken of him, running through thick brush, wearing body armor and sunglasses, as artillery exploded around him. He fetishized these moments and tried to hang on to them. In his apartment, he keeps shards of Russian bombs and missiles that he has collected on the battlefield, his own personal museum of the war.

When Leshchenko returned to Kyiv, he went to a party. Arriving a bit late, he saw Ptushkin surrounded by a crowd of women, recounting their trip with great relish. “It used to be cool to go to the Maldives or the Seychelles,” Leshchenko joked. “Now it's cool to say, ‘I was in the Donbas.’” The joke betrayed an anxiety that I heard Leshchenko express on multiple occasions. The war, which Kyiv experienced so intimately in the late winter, now risked becoming a distant piece of exotica. He worried that the public would lose touch with the conflict, and then lose interest. It wasn't hard to imagine that he was also worrying about himself, that history, which he touched at every turn, might slip beyond his reach. *A*

*Franklin Foer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

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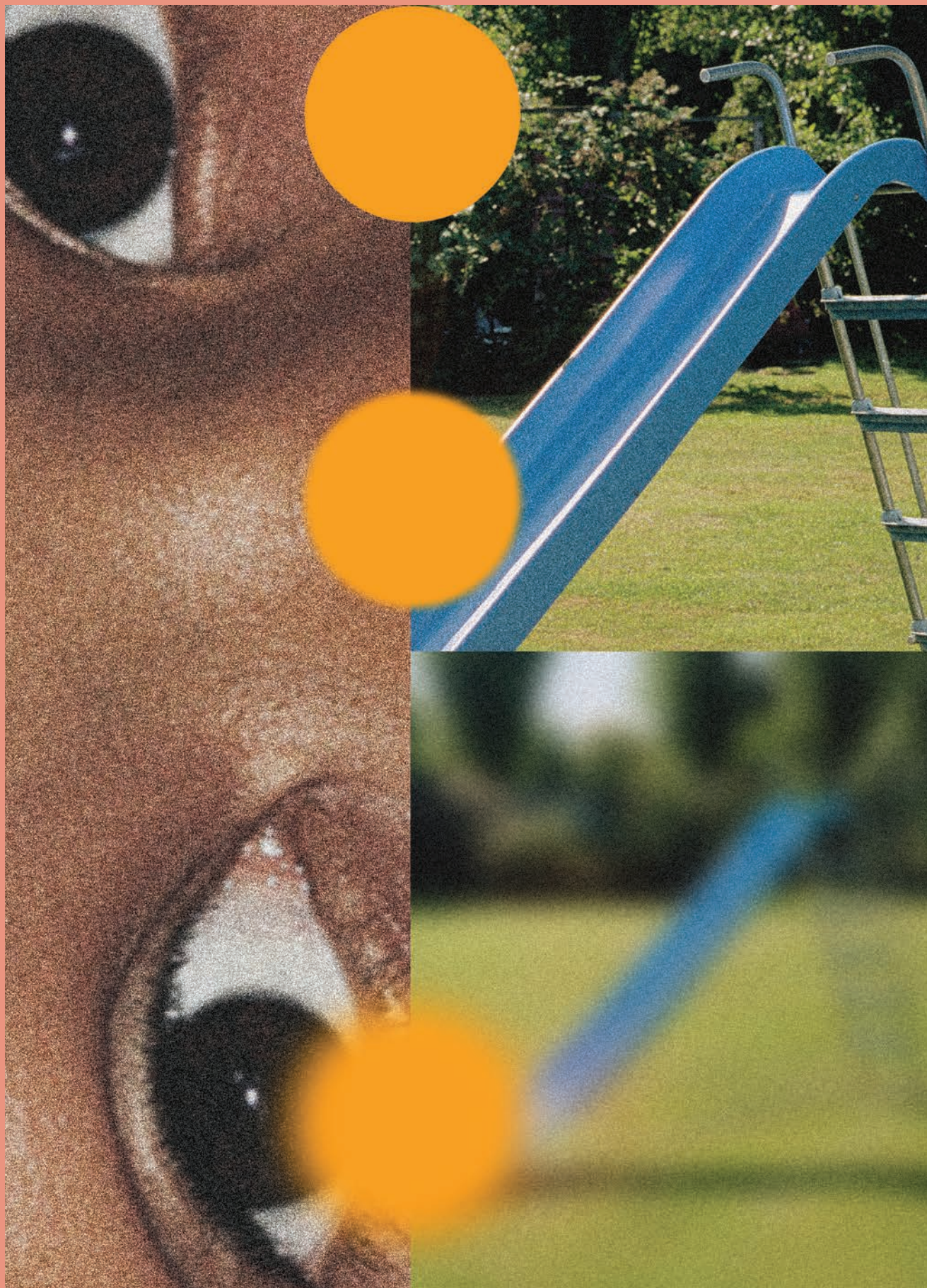
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# The Myopia Generation

Why do so  
many kids need  
glasses now?

*By Sarah Zhang*





A decade into her optometry career, Marina Su began noticing something unusual about the kids in her New York City practice. More of them were requiring glasses, and at younger and younger ages. Many of these kids had parents who had perfect vision and who were baffled by the decline in their children's eyesight. Frankly, Su couldn't explain it either.

In optometry school, she had been taught—as American textbooks had been teaching for decades—that nearsightedness, or myopia, is a genetic condition. Having one parent with myopia doubles the odds that a kid will need glasses. Having two parents with myopia quintuples them. Over the years, she did indeed diagnose lots of nearsighted kids with nearsighted parents. These parents, she told me, would sigh in recognition: *Oh no, not them too*. But something was changing. A generation of children was suddenly seeing worse than their parents. Su remembers asking herself, as she saw more and more young patients with bad eyesight that seemed to have come out of nowhere: “If it's only genetics, then why are these kids also getting myopic?”

What she noticed in her New York office a few years ago has in fact been happening around the world. In East and Southeast Asia, where this shift is most dramatic, the proportion of teenagers and young adults with myopia has jumped from roughly a quarter to more than 80 percent in just over half a century. In China, myopia is so prevalent that it has become a national-security concern: The military is worried about recruiting enough sharp-eyed pilots from among the country's 1.4 billion people. Recent pandemic lockdowns seem to have made eyesight among Chinese children even worse.

For years, many experts dismissed the rising myopia rates in Asia as an aberration. They argued that Asians are genetically predisposed to myopia and nitpicked the methodology of studies conducted there. But eventually the scope of the problem and the speed of change became impossible to deny.

In the U.S., 42 percent of 12-to-54-year-olds were nearsighted in the early 2000s—the last time a national survey of myopia was conducted—up from a quarter in the 1970s. Though more recent large-scale surveys are not available, when I asked eye doctors around the U.S. if they were seeing more nearsighted kids, the answers were: “Absolutely.” “Yes.” “No question about it.”

In Europe as well, young adults are more likely to need glasses for distance vision than their parents or grandparents are now. Some of the lowest rates of myopia are in developing countries in Africa and South America. But where Asia was once seen as an outlier, it's now considered a harbinger. If current trends continue, one study estimates, half of the world's population will be myopic by 2050.

The consequences of this trend are more dire than a surge in bespectacled kids. Nearsighted eyes become prone to serious problems like glaucoma and retinal detachment in middle age, conditions that can in turn cause permanent blindness. The risks start small but rise exponentially with higher prescriptions. The younger myopia starts, the worse the outlook. In 2019, the American Academy of Ophthalmology convened a task force to recognize myopia as an urgent global-health problem. As Michael Repka, an ophthalmology professor at Johns Hopkins University and the AAO's medical director for government affairs, told me, “You're trying to head off an epidemic of blindness that's decades down the road.”

**THE CAUSE OF** this remarkable deterioration in our vision may seem obvious: You need only look around to see countless kids absorbed in phones and tablets and laptops. And you wouldn't be the first to conclude that staring at something inches from your face is bad for distance vision. Four centuries ago, the German astronomer Johannes Kepler blamed his own poor eyesight, in part, on all the hours he spent studying. Historically, British doctors have found myopia to be much more common among Oxford students than among military recruits, and in “more rigorous” town schools than in rural ones. A late-19th-century ophthalmology handbook even suggested treating myopia with a change of air and avoidance of all work with the eyes—“a sea voyage if possible.”

By the early 20th century, experts were coalescing around the idea that myopia was caused by “near work,” which might include reading and writing—or, these days, watching TV and scrolling through Instagram. In China, officials have become so alarmed that they've proposed large-scale social changes to curb myopia in children. Written exams are now limited before third grade, and video games are restricted. One elementary school reportedly installed metal bars on its desks to prevent kids from leaning in too close to their schoolwork.

Spend too much time scrutinizing text or images right in front of you, the logic goes, and your eyes become nearsighted. “Long ago, humans were hunters and gatherers,” says Liandra Jung, an optometrist in the Bay Area. We relied on our sharp distance vision to track prey and find ripe fruit. Now our modern lives are close-up and indoors. “To get food, we forage by getting Uber Eats.”

This is a pleasingly intuitive explanation, but it has been surprisingly difficult to prove. “For every study that shows an effect of near work on myopia, there's another study that doesn't,” says Thomas Aller, an optometrist in San Bruno, California. Adding up the number of hours spent in front of a book or screen does not seem to explain the onset or progression of nearsightedness.

A number of theories have rushed to fill this confusing vacuum. Maybe the data in the studies are wrong—participants didn't record their hours of near work accurately. Maybe the total duration of near work is less important than whether it's interrupted by short

breaks. Maybe it's not near work itself that ruins eyes but the fact that it deprives kids of time outdoors. Scientists who argue for the importance of the outdoors are further subdivided into two camps: those who believe that bright sunlight promotes proper eye growth versus those who believe that wide-open spaces do.

Something about modern life is destroying our ability to see far away, but what?

Asking this question will plunge you into a thicket of scientific rivalries—which is what happened when I asked Christine Wildsoet, an optometry professor at UC Berkeley, about the biological plausibility of these myopia theories. Over the course of two hours, she paused repeatedly to note that the next part was contentious. “I’m not sure which controversy we’re up to,” she said at one point. (It was No. 4, and there were still three more to come.) But, she also noted, these theories are essentially two sides of the same coin: Anyone who does too much near work is also not spending much time outside. Whichever theory is true, you can draw the same practical conclusion about what’s best for kids’ vision: less time hunched over screens, more time on outdoor activities.

By now, scientists have moved past the faulty assumption that myopia is purely genetic. That idea took hold in the ’60s, when studies of twins showed that identical twins had more similar patterns of myopia than fraternal ones, and persisted in the academic world for decades. DNA does indeed play a role in myopia, but the tricky factor here is that identical twins don’t just share the same genes; they’re exposed to many of the same environmental stimuli, too.

Glasses, contacts, and laser surgery all help nearsighted people see better. But none of these fixes corrects the underlying anatomical problem of myopia. Whereas a healthy eye is shaped almost like an orb, a nearsighted one is more like an olive. To slow the progression of myopia, we would have to stop the elongation of the eyeball.

Which we already know how to do. Treatments to slow the progression of myopia—called “myopia control” or “myopia management”—exist. They’re just not widely known in America.

**OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES**, eye doctors—mostly in Asia—have discovered that special lenses and eye drops can slow the progression of nearsightedness in children. Maria Liu, a myopia researcher who grew up in Beijing, told me that she first became interested in nearsightedness as a teenager, when she began watching classmates at her school for gifted children get glasses one by one. In this intensely competitive academic environment, she remembers spending the hours of 6:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. on schoolwork, virtually all indoors. By the time she finished university, nearly all of her fellow students needed glasses, and she did too.

Years later, when she started an ophthalmology residency in China, she met many young patients who wore orthokeratology lenses—also known as OrthoK—a type of overnight contact lens that temporarily alters the way light enters the eye by reshaping the clear front layer of the eyeball, thus improving vision during the day. Liu noticed, anecdotally, that those who wore OrthoK seemed to have better vision down the line than those who wore

glasses. Could long-term use of the lenses somehow prevent elongation of the eye, thus impeding myopia’s progression? It turns out that other scientists and doctors across Asia were noticing the same trend. In 2004, a randomized controlled study in Hong Kong of OrthoK confirmed Liu’s hunch.

By then, Liu had moved to the U.S., and she soon began a doctoral program in vision science at Berkeley to study myopia. Her classmates, she recalls, were tackling exotic-sounding topics such as gene therapy and retinal transplants and wondered why she was studying “something that’s so boring.” She ended up working in Wildsoet’s lab, researching the development of myopia in young chick eyes.

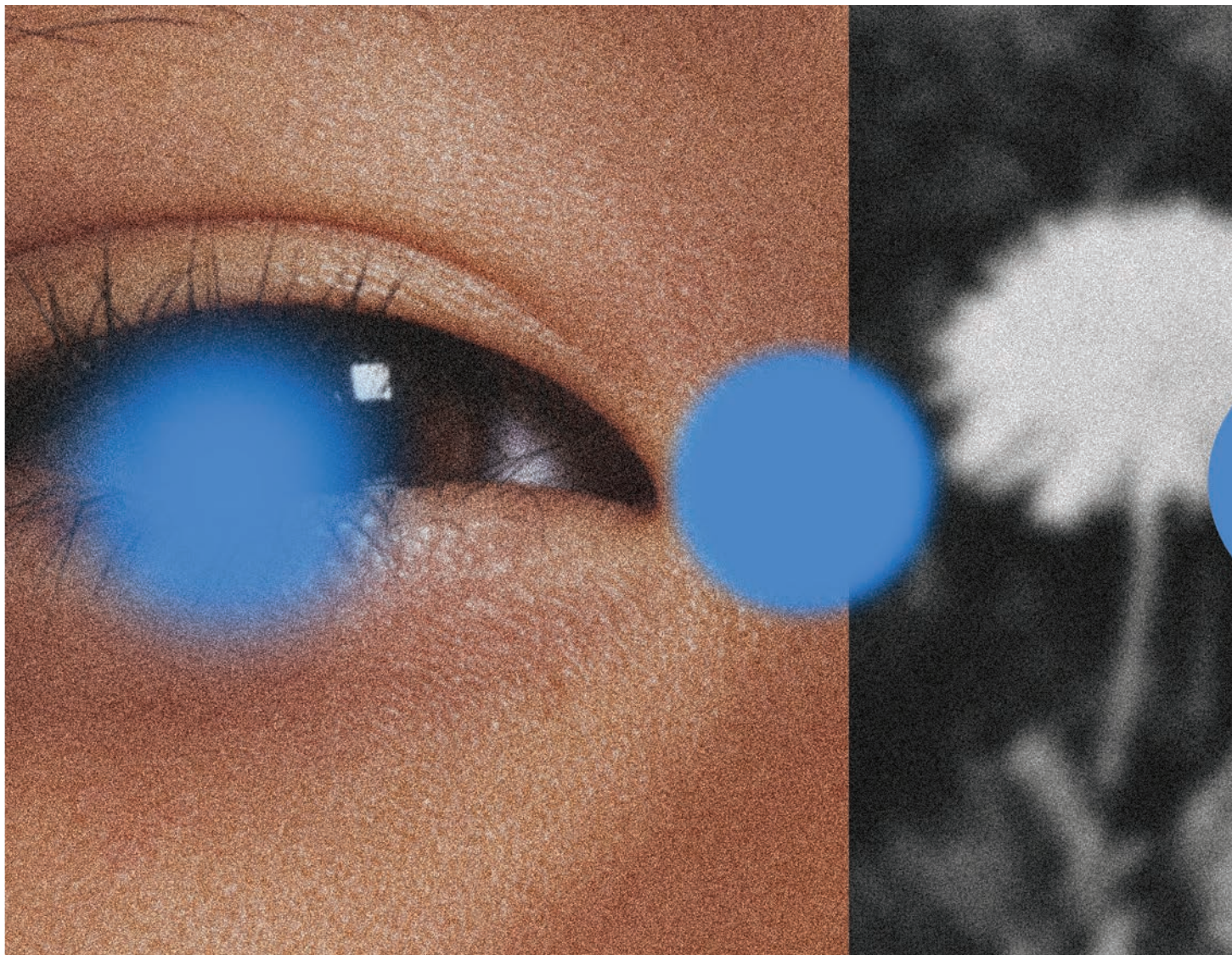
In humans, the majority of babies are born farsighted. Our eyes start slightly too short, and they grow in childhood to the right length, then stop. This process has been finely calibrated over millions of years of evolution. But when the environmental

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signals don’t match what the eye has evolved to expect—whether that’s due to too much near work, not enough outdoor time, some combination of the two, or another factor—the eye just keeps growing. This process is irreversible. “You can’t make a longer eyeball shorter,” Liu said. But you can interrupt growth by counteracting these faulty signals, which is what myopia control is designed to do.

When Liu became a professor at Berkeley after receiving her Ph.D., she started envisioning a myopia-control clinic—the first of its kind in the U.S.—that could bridge the gap between research and practice. By then, she knew that many doctors in China were already successfully using OrthoK for myopia control.

The school administration was skeptical. Liu says that the clinical director didn’t see how the clinic would benefit optometry students, or how it could attract enough patients to be worthwhile financially. But in 2013, Liu started it anyway, as a one-woman operation. She began seeing patients on Sundays in borrowed exam rooms with no extra pay and without relinquishing any of her teaching or clinical duties. Within months, her schedule was full. The Berkeley Myopia Control Clinic now runs four days a



week and has 1,000 active patients—some of whom drive hours through Bay Area traffic to get there. Liu was one of the only people at the school who anticipated the clinic's massive success. Jung, who is also an assistant clinical professor at Berkeley, told me that Liu's knowledge of the latest myopia-control treatments made it feel like she came "from the future."

**WHEN I ARRIVED** at the clinic at 8 a.m. on a Saturday morning this past spring—an hour at which the rest of the campus was still quiet—it was already filling up with optometry students and residents who work there as part of their training. Liu, who is petite with neat, wavy hair, moved through the clinic with frightful efficiency. One moment she was examining eyes, the next talking down a parent whose son's contact-lens shipment had gone missing, the next warning staffers about a malfunctioning printer.

The clinic offers three different treatments: OrthoK, multifocal soft contact lenses, and atropine eye drops. The first two both work by tweaking how light enters the eye, producing a signal for the eyeball to stop lengthening. Atropine, in contrast, is a drug that seems to chemically alter the growth pathway of the eye when used at low doses. (It also dilates the pupil; Cleopatra reportedly

used it to make her eyes more beautiful.) These treatments slow myopia progression on average by about 50 percent. The original clinical trials validating them were mostly conducted in Asia starting in the mid-2000s. And the American Optometric Association's evidence-based committee published a report advising its members on how to use myopia control last year. Until quite recently, though, none of these treatments had been approved by the FDA for myopia control. Any optometrists who wanted to offer them had to go off label. And any patient who wanted to use them had to find the right doctor.

It's not a coincidence that Liu's clinic found early success in the Bay Area, which has a large Asian population. Eye doctors I spoke with in multiple cities across the U.S. said it was usually Asian parents who came in asking for myopia control. The parents I met at the clinic skewed Asian and, on that Saturday, particularly Chinese—first-generation immigrants who speak Mandarin seek Liu out on the days she is personally in the clinic. Many of them heard about myopia control from fellow immigrants or friends in Asia. George Tsai, whose 8-year-old son was at the clinic for an OrthoK appointment, told me that his wife, who grew up in China, had learned of myopia control through WeChat, the messaging



app popular in the country and among the Chinese diaspora.

Liu has a second phone, which she uses to manage three WeChat groups full of parents with kids in myopia control across North America. The questions flood in day and night. “First thing in the morning, I look at this WeChat group. Who has lost a lens? Who has red eyes? Who has other problems?” she said. “And again, before I go to bed.” She started the first group with a parent of one of her patients. When it hit the maximum number of members allowed on WeChat, they created a second, and then a third. The groups now contain a total of 1,500 parents.

In general, Liu told me, Asian parents tend to be a lot more motivated because myopia “is much better perceived or accepted as a disease in Asian culture.” I know this firsthand, as the child of Chinese immigrants. Distressed about my worsening vision in elementary school, my mother would regularly admonish me, standing my pencil case upright to measure the distance between my head and my desk. She also made me do eye exercises developed in China, which I was vindicated to finally learn, in the course of reporting this story, do not work. This was the late ’90s, when there really was nothing to be done about myopia progression. But in the parents I met at the Berkeley clinic, I saw the same determination I once saw in my own. They had uprooted their lives and come to a foreign

country and now here they were, hoping to bestow upon their kids any advantage, any edge that modern science could give.

**THERE IS ANOTHER** reason that the Bay Area, with its high median income, has been fertile ground for myopia control: The treatments are expensive. Many of the parents I met at the clinic were engineers or doctors. At Berkeley, OrthoK costs more than \$450 for one pair of lenses, plus \$1,600 for the initial fitting, not including the fees for several follow-up appointments a year. Soft contact lenses can run from several hundred to more than \$1,000 a year. And a year’s supply of atropine eye drops costs hundreds of dollars. Kids are typically in myopia control until their mid-teens to early 20s. Vision insurance does not cover any of these treatments.

Multinational eye-care companies now see myopia control as a hot potential market. They’re vying for FDA approval of new lenses and improved formulations of atropine, which can be patented rather than sold as a cheaper generic. The business case is obvious: If half of the world is myopic by 2050, that’s a huge pool of would-be customers. “How often do you have an opportunity to have an impact on a condition that will affect one out of two people? There’s nothing else on the planet that I’m aware of,” says

Joe Rappon, the former chief medical officer of SightGlass Vision, a small California company whose myopia-control technology was jointly acquired by the eye-care giants CooperVision and Essilor.

In November 2019, the FDA green-lighted the first—and currently only—treatment specifically designed to slow the progression of myopia in the U.S., a soft contact lens from CooperVision called MiSight. Many more treatments, though, are in trials in the U.S., including several types of spectacles that tweak the way light enters the eye in order to slow its growth. Some are already on the market in Europe and Canada.

Once those glasses get approved in the U.S., “that’s going to open the floodgates of myopia management,” Barry Eiden, an optometrist in Deerfield, Illinois, told me. The earlier you can start slowing myopia progression in kids, the better the outcome, he explained, but parents sometimes balk at the idea of putting drugs or contacts into the eyes of their young children. They don’t have the same problem with glasses.

In the future, Liu told me, she hopes FDA approvals will spur vision insurance to cover myopia control at least partially, making the treatments affordable to more parents. Meanwhile, CooperVision has already revved up its MiSight marketing machine. It’s targeting exactly the parents you would expect: In my own Brooklyn neighborhood of Park Slope, where you regularly see toddlers in \$1,000-plus Uppababy strollers, an optometry shop recently hung a big banner advertising MiSight with two smiling kids. An optometrist in downtown San Francisco told me that parents who have seen MiSight’s ads are now coming into her office asking for it by name. The word-of-mouth era of myopia control is ending; the mass-advertising era is beginning.

Within the optometry business, myopia control often gets compared to braces—another treatment for which middle- and upper-class parents who want the best for their kids will dutifully shell out thousands of dollars. This comparison feels apt in a different way, too. Braces are also a modern solution to a relatively modern affliction. The teeth of cavemen, anthropologists have marveled, were incredibly straight. Crooked teeth appear in the archaeological record only when our ancestors transitioned from chewing raw meat and vegetables to eating cooked and processed grains. Our jaws are now smaller and weaker from disuse, our teeth more crowded and crooked. Today, braces are the way we retrofit our ill-adapted bodies for contemporary life.

We may not know exactly how ogling screens all day and spending so much time indoors are affecting us, or which is doing more damage, but we do know that myopia is a clear consequence of living at odds with our biology. The optometrists I spoke with all said they try to push better vision habits, such as limiting screen time and playing outside. But this only goes so far. Today, taking a phone away from a teenager may be no more practical than feeding a toddler a raw hunter-gatherer diet.

So this is where we’ve ended up, for those of us who can even afford it: adding chemicals and putting pieces of plastic in our eyes every day, in hopes of tricking them back to their natural state. *A*

*Sarah Zhang is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

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WHO DO  
THE BENIN  
BRONZES  
BELONG TO?

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*Thousands of pieces of art  
were looted by the British in  
what is now Nigeria, and  
are held mostly in Western  
museums. What to do  
with them is a harder question  
than it might seem.*

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BY DAVID  
FRUM

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The world's most famous collection of African art arrived in Britain after a spectacular act of colonial violence.

In February 1897, an expeditionary force of 1,200 British soldiers and African auxiliaries crossed the moats and ancient mud walls around the city of Benin, in what is today southern Nigeria. Against defenders armed with swords and muskets, the British-led force deployed machine guns and mobile artillery. Hundreds of Benin residents likely lost their lives.

The British drove into exile—and would later capture—Benin's oba, or king, a man of semi-deified status known to history by his regnal name, Oba Ovonramwen. They looted the royal compound and packed the most beautiful contents into crates to ship home. Then a fire ignited, perhaps accidentally, perhaps not. Shrines, storehouses, the homes and burial places of past obas—all were destroyed.

Most of the spoils were auctioned off in London. The artworks of carved ivory and cast metal were immediately acclaimed as masterpieces: heads of kings and queen mothers, symbolic animal figures, bells to summon the spirits of the ancestors, metal plaques that depicted court life and the great deeds of the obas. The artistry of the finest pieces is extraordinarily delicate. Seen from the side or bottom, a metalwork from the great age of Benin art, from roughly 1450 to 1650, is astonishingly thin, only about an eighth of an inch thick.

A small but telling mistake of nomenclature conveyed the impact of these African works on the European art world. Most of the Benin metal pieces are made of brass, an alloy of copper and zinc. But in London, the pieces were instantly dubbed “the Benin bronzes”—identifying them with the slightly different alloy of copper and tin used in the traditions most admired by the 19th-century British: those of classical Greece and Renaissance Italy. The misnaming stuck as Benin art headed into public and private collections in Britain and around the world.

In British eyes, justice had been served. The 1897 expedition was ostensibly launched in retaliation for the massacre of a British diplomatic mission to Benin earlier that year. Gruesome evidence

of a spasm of human sacrifice by Benin's rulers immediately before the kingdom's last battle only strengthened the British conviction that their attack had been righteous.

To the people of Benin, however, the sack of their city reverberated as overwhelmingly as if an invading army had captured London, burned Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey, and stolen the contents of the National Gallery and the National Archives. The obas of Benin had once ruled an empire that extended from the Niger River westward hundreds of miles toward what is today Lagos. Ancient Benin had no system of writing other than the stories told in cast brass and carved ivory. Art was the kingdom's culture, its wealth, its literature, its memory. And then the art was pillaged, leaving behind only ashes where palaces and temples had stood for centuries.

The remains of the Benin kingdom were annexed by Britain. (The country now known as the Republic of Benin, situated on Nigeria's western border, is an unrelated polity.) In 1914, Britain would merge all its Niger River possessions into the colony of Nigeria, an entity that comprised dozens of ethnicities, many alien to one another and some mutually hostile. Even the word *Nigeria* was a British invention, coined by a journalist named Flora Shaw to describe British holdings in and around the Niger River watershed. (Shaw's future husband, Frederick Lugard, would become the united colony's first governor-general, ruling over a territory about the size of Texas and Oklahoma combined.)

At least 3,000 Benin artworks are now owned by public museums or held in private collections around the world, especially in Britain, Germany, and the United States. Nigerians have long demanded the objects' return. In 2007, a consortium of Western museums joined Nigerians in a “Benin Dialogue Group” to open discussions about repatriation. For more than a decade, the dialogue moved slowly. Then the George Floyd protests of 2020 jolted the group into hyperactivity. The University of Aberdeen, in Scotland, and Jesus College at the University of Cambridge have each surrendered the single Benin piece it had owned. The German government has committed to returning all of its Benin objects; the first two were delivered to Nigerian authorities in July. The Smithsonian Institution has likewise pledged to give most of its small collection of Benin works to a museum in modern-day Benin City. In August, London's Horniman Museum of anthropology and natural history pledged to return its Benin items. The University of Oxford and its museums may also soon surrender their significant collections.

The campaign for restitution is spreading beyond the Benin treasures. A collection of regalia captured from the Ethiopian empire by the British in 1868 was returned in 2021. Two months later, France returned 26 objects seized from the former West African kingdom of Dahomey. A Munich museum is investigating the origins of dozens of pieces of Cameroon art it holds. All through the museum world, curators face heated questions about what they are holding and why.

To those on the receiving end of this interrogation, the questions can feel deeply ironic. Getting African art accepted *into* Western art museums was a lifework for many of them. A generation ago, artifacts from Africa were usually displayed in ethnographic museums: the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, not the Louvre; the



Opening pages: A metalwork head made in the kingdom of Benin between 1515 and 1550. Above: The former site of the palace of the obas of Benin, destroyed by the British in 1897. Now a traffic circle, it is designated to be developed into part of a cultural district.

Museum of Mankind in Mayfair, not the British Museum's main building, on Great Russell Street; the African museum in suburban Tervuren, not the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in central Brussels.

A great cultural shift occurred in 1982, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, opened its Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, displaying art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. The British Museum opened its Sainsbury African Galleries in 2001. The Musée de l'Homme's most important collections migrated to the magnificent new Musée du quai Branly in 2006. Among those engaged in the fight to recognize African art as art were my late parents, Barbara and Murray Frum. They began collecting African art in the early 1970s. Today the highlights of their collection can be viewed in the Art Gallery of Ontario. (Members of my family and I still own some of their pieces. They

did not collect Benin art, but the demand for repatriation could ultimately also reach the art they donated to the Canadian public.)

Scarcely had the hopes of my parents' generation prevailed before the result was challenged by a fierce demand to get the art back out again. Each museum that pledges to surrender some or all of its African collection intensifies the pressure on the holdout institutions to follow. But each of these pledges also intensifies the uncertainty about what exactly is being pledged. What does it mean to return an object "to Nigeria"? What will happen to the objects once they get there?

**WHERE THE ANCIENT PALACES** of the obas of Benin once stood, traffic now whizzes through a large roundabout. Benin City is not a megalopolis like Lagos, but its 1.8 million people still generate

a lot of traffic. The most conspicuous structure inside the oval is a huge metal billboard frame. The surrounding fencing is lined by advertisements too. These bright splotches of color distract the eye from other features inside the oval: a derelict monumental fountain; a column that serves as a war memorial; a small, dusty park.

Three buildings give a hint of what used to be here. Two are from the colonial era, with verandas and sloped roofs: the remains of the government compound that the British erected atop the destroyed home of the obas. Nearby stands a rust-red circular structure whose color pays tribute to the mud that coated the exteriors of ancient Benin dwellings. This is the three-story Benin City National Museum, a collection of artwork and memorabilia showing the former grandeur of Benin.

If you turn to the south and then muster your courage to dash across the lanes of traffic that define the oval, you will come face-to-face with a deteriorating hospital: 1970s-vintage concrete, over-spread by green tropical mold. But what could sit here one day, relatively soon, has inspired enthusiasm among local leaders and Western curators alike. The crumbling hospital building and its precincts would be replaced by a gleaming museum complex to display Benin art repatriated from the West. David Adjaye, the Ghanaian British architect who designed the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in Washington, D.C., has already drawn preliminary plans. A long stretch of ground behind the hospital would be developed as a grand “cultural district”: ambitious new archaeological digs, handsome studios and workshops, world-class schools for artists and artisans.

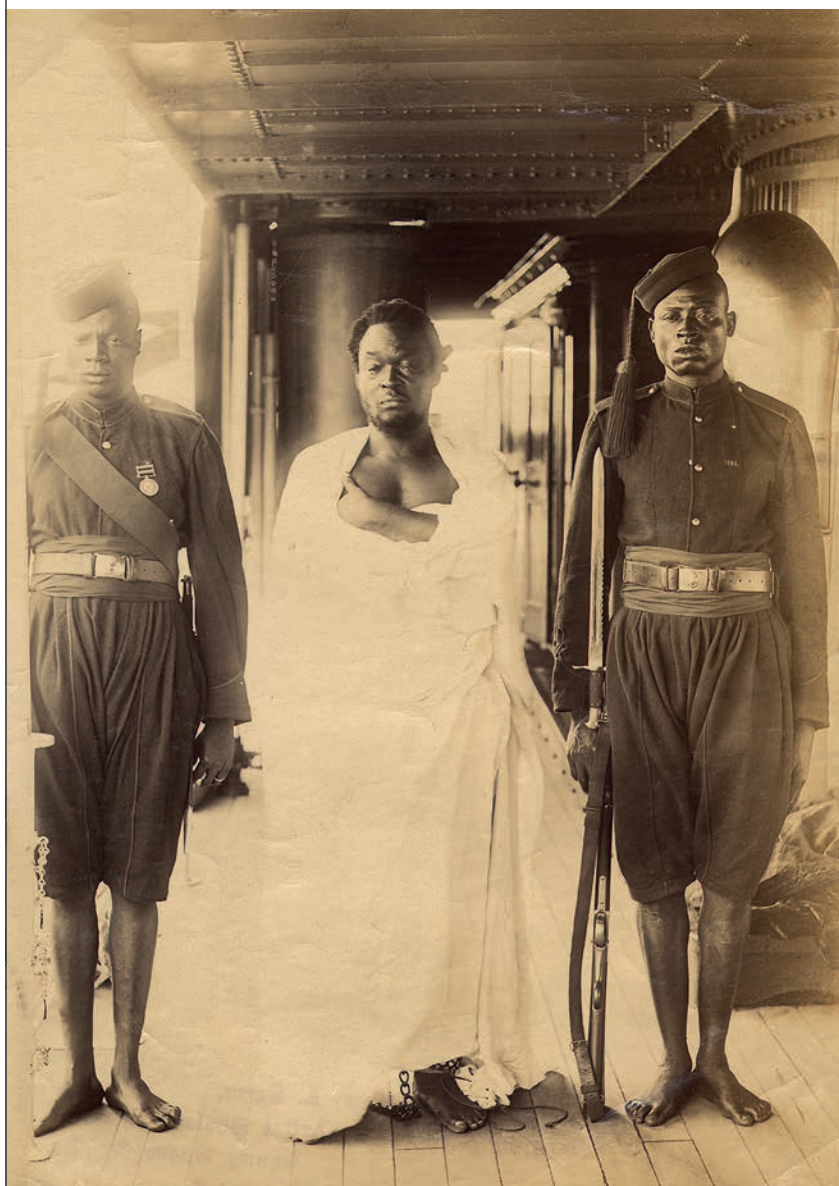
This new museum, it is hoped, might elevate Benin City into a global destination, much as Frank Gehry’s spectacular museum helped revive the fading industrial city of Bilbao, Spain. New hotels would rise; new businesses would flourish. Underemployed young people would discover productive futures in art, archaeology, tourism, and other services. The traumas of the past would be converted into resources for the future.

The dream of an Edo Museum of West African Art is the brainchild of the dynamic and accomplished governor of the state of which Benin City is the capital. Godwin Obaseki was born in Benin City in 1957. He earned an M.B.A. at Pace University, in New York, then returned to Nigeria to build a firm that grew into one of the country’s leading financial-services companies.

His business acumen led to his appointment as the chair of the economic-development team for Edo State. In that role, Obaseki scored some success against one of Nigeria’s most overwhelming problems: unreliable electricity. Three-quarters of the Nigerian national electrical system has collapsed into dysfunction. On any given day, the national power grid delivers less electricity to approximately 200 million people than the Pepco utility delivers to about 894,000 customers in and around Washington, D.C. Nigerians rely instead on expensive, noisy, and polluting diesel generators that choke the air with scorching fumes.

Obaseki organized the construction of a privately managed gas-turbine facility just outside Benin City. I had the opportunity to visit last fall, and found a clean, efficient, safety-conscious project. From the top of the private-sector power plant, I observed across the road a power plant that was owned and operated by the federal government. That day, as on

*Oba Ovonramwen (center), the king of Benin, after his exile in 1897*



almost every day, it lay idle, producing not a watt of power. The privately managed facility, by contrast, supplies 8 percent of all the power delivered to the national grid. That achievement and others like it won Obaseki election as governor of the state in 2016, and then reelection in 2020. He hosted the sixth meeting of the Benin Dialogue Group, in Benin City, in 2019.

Obaseki is a tall, elegant man who shifts deftly from the Edo language to formal English or colloquial speech. In his office, I asked him why he attached so much significance to the repatriation of looted art.

“It’s important to understand who you are, how you came to where you are today,” he said. “For us, this project is very important, very significant, because it serves as a reconnection with the past.” And that past really was not so long ago. “Come 1897, there was an invasion. A system, a system we knew then, was brought down . . . This is an opportunity to try and begin to relate to these works, to reestablish our relationship with them and that connection with the culture and process and tradition that brought them into being.”

To make the Benin museum a reality, Obaseki went to his friend, one of the stars of African finance, Phillip Ihenacho. Ihenacho was born to a Nigerian father and an English mother. He was educated at an elite preparatory school in Nigeria, then at Yale and Harvard. He started his career at McKinsey, the global consulting firm, then earned a fortune by engineering financial deals in the African energy sector. His company helped finance the Benin City power plant that did so much to boost Obaseki’s political career.

For the museum project in Benin City, Ihenacho turned again to the public-private model that had worked so well at the Edo State power plant. He created a private entity, the Legacy Restoration Trust, later renamed the Edo Museum of West African Art Trust. The new trust would assume control over the objects surrendered by foreign museums, then build and operate the proposed museum. Overseen by a board that includes both Nigerian and foreign trustees, the organization is self-financing, seeking support from international donors, not the Nigerian government. The Legacy Restoration Trust proposal almost instantly won international acclaim. Glowing stories appeared in *The Times* of London, *The New York Times*, and the house journal of the art world, *The Art Newspaper*. Many of the stories were illustrated with David Adjaye’s beautiful concept drawings.

The momentum of Ihenacho’s idea seemed almost unstoppable. Almost.

TO THE SOUTHWEST of the traffic circle, less than half a mile away from the hospital, spreads an imposing walled compound. The gates are shut most of the time to most people. On the rare occasions they open, they reveal a white colonnaded mansion set within a large courtyard. This is the residence of the current oba of Benin, who took the name Ewuare II upon his ascension to the throne, but is commonly referred to by his title alone.

The oba captured by the British in 1897 died in exile. In 1914, the British colonial authorities permitted his eldest son to return home, resume the throne, and rebuild a royal seat. Ewuare II is the great-grandson of the oba who restored the monarchy.

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I arrived in Benin City on the present-day oba’s 68th birthday, which also happened to be the fifth anniversary of his elevation to the monarchy. I had spent months unsuccessfully negotiating for an audience with the oba, who seldom grants interviews. I’d hoped that once I arrived in town, he and his advisers might change their minds. The radio in the car driving me from the airport buzzed with excited congratulations and birthday wishes. The buzzing only deepened my worry that I might have miscalculated, and that the festivities would bar the oba’s doors to international visitors while I was in town.

The oba of Benin wields little political power. Unlike a European constitutional monarch, his signature is not required to formalize a bill into law. His former kingdom has been folded into a Nigerian republic that now counts 36 states plus a federal capital district, Abuja.

The oba’s economic resources are diminished as well. He is entitled to a stipend from the state government. He receives gifts from supporters and loyalists. He collects earnings from property of his own. With these funds, he is expected to maintain the attendants of his royal court and to support his many dependents, including the households of his five wives.

The royal palace occupies more ground than any private residence in Benin City. But the dwelling itself is overshadowed by the larger and more stylish modern mansions that surround the city’s golf course. In fact, with its short portico, it looks rather like a golf clubhouse itself.

Yet even in his straitened material circumstances, the oba commands tremendous prestige and reverence, verging on awe. One of the most arresting images in the iconography of Benin is that of the “messenger of death”—a frightening head set atop lifelike feet. If a subject of ancient Benin displeased the oba, the spirit represented by the icon was believed to end the life of the transgressor. The night before I traveled to Benin City from Lagos, I had dinner with a Nigerian friend who had grown up near Benin City. Educated abroad, he is now one of the country’s most

successful tech entrepreneurs. I asked, “Do people in Benin still believe that the oba can send death?” He laughed uproariously. “Nobody wants to find out!”

And today again, the oba of Benin has a message to send the world: Every last piece of the art removed in 1897 rightfully belongs to him and his family. On May 11, 2021, Nigerian newspapers carried a statement, signed by two high officials of the royal court, that read: “The individuals and persons who parade themselves as ... the ‘Legacy Restoration Trust’ ... were neither known nor authorised by the Oba of Benin.” The statement affirmed the oba as the only legitimate owner and custodian of royal Benin art. It warned that anyone who contradicted his claim would be considered a “fraudster” and “an enemy working against the interest of the great Benin kingdom.”

People involved in the Benin Dialogue Group would later say this statement came as a shock. But when I did at last get an audience with the oba, he minced no words about the long-boiling grievances that had prompted his denunciation of the governor’s museum plan.

The oba of Benin does not practice the false informality of the modern global upper class. My audience opened with a stately parade of courtiers and attendants. I was required to kneel, clasp my hands, and chant in mangled Edo an incantation of deference and respect. Seated on a gilded throne, with modern Benin metalwork heaped around it, the oba wore white robes and a matching columnar headdress. His body was adorned with the strands of heavy coral beads that symbolize royal power in Benin. He directed my attention to photographs of himself with members of the British royal family.

Like Obaseki and Ihenacho, the oba is a worldly man. He was educated in Britain, then served Nigeria as ambassador to Angola, Sweden, and Italy, among other appointments. I’d clinched my audience with him by emailing his staff an old photo of myself shaking hands with President George W. Bush, autographed by the former president (for whom I’d been a speechwriter). The oba is not such an admirer of the most recent Republican president. Almost the first words out of his mouth were a question to me: “What about this man Trump? Is he still sticking with his Big Lie?”

Protocol forbade me to put questions directly to the oba, so I’d submitted mine in writing in advance. I need not have bothered. Over the ensuing two hours, he spilled out, unprompted, a tale of hurt and betrayal.

The royal family of Benin, the oba said, had joined the Benin Dialogue Group at the very start. It was usually represented by a younger brother of the oba, Prince Aghatise Erediauwa, who is an important Nigerian business figure in his own right. The royal family had imagined a museum to be built on or near the palace grounds, along with some formal recognition of the family’s legal and moral claims to the Benin artworks. The royal family had believed that the entire Nigerian side was united on this point. As late as 2019, the Edo State budget had allocated a sum of 500 million naira (about \$1.2 million) to help build a new “royal museum” of Benin art.

Then came a startling new proposal: the replacement of the royal-museum project with a museum controlled by an independent board headed by Ihenacho.

PROTOCOL FORBADE  
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According to the oba, the first he heard of the concept was from a terse letter dated March 21, 2021. The letter requested that the oba authorize the trust to undertake all negotiations about the artworks, to act as the custodian of any artworks returned to Nigeria, and then to hold and display the artworks in its own museum. The letter was signed by Ihenacho. It provided a small blank space for the expected countersignature by a representative of the royal palace.

The oba found every line of the letter insulting, beginning with the salutation, “Your Excellency”—a breach of etiquette so offensive to the court that on the copy provided to me, somebody had actually scratched it out and substituted, in handwriting, the preferred “Your Royal Majesty.”

The oba insisted to me that this request had come out of nowhere. He had never even met Ihenacho. But it was not Ihenacho at whom the oba directed his fiercest ire. It was Obaseki.

“We had our dear governor”—the oba pronounced the phrase with heavy irony—“saying, ‘We are collaborating with the palace. We are collaborating with the palace.’ But I didn’t see this collaboration!”

The oba accused the governor’s camp of plotting to sideline him. He lingered on a particular humiliation: the vision of a future in which visitors would come to Benin to view the treasures of his royal ancestors in a museum owned by a private company, designed by an architect not of the oba’s choosing, on state land rather than royal ground.

Courtiers showed me the plans for the museum they want—an edifice blending more and less classical elements, similar in style to the oba’s own residence. Decorum prevented me from saying it aloud, but I liked the David Adjaye sketch much better. Yet was that not exactly the problem? The contrast between the global cool of the Adjaye sketch and the much more flamboyant design unrolled before me in the throne room almost too neatly illustrated the central question of the Benin restitution debate: Whom exactly is this project for?

A long and tense history divides the families of the governor and the oba. In the mid-1890s, Obaseki’s great-grandfather

served then-Oba Ovonramwen as keeper of the royal accounts. According to Obaseki, as British emissaries traveled from the coast toward Benin, his great-grandfather urged negotiation and conciliation. He had traded with the British, and he knew their power. His advice was disregarded. Then followed the ambush and the catastrophic retaliation. The victorious British executed the Benin nobles whom they blamed for the conflict—and installed Obaseki's great-grandfather as acting ruler of the Benin kingdom.

The Obaseki family benefited from the educational and economic opportunities that the invaders offered. Family members mastered the invaders' language. They learned to play by the invaders' rules. They grew rich and influential—but they paid for this success with the enduring distrust and dislike of the Benin royal family.

Both Obaseki and the oba are patriots of Benin. Both crave the honor of regaining Benin's artistic treasures and renewing Benin's urban grandeur. The governor's plans anticipate, as his great-grandfather warned in 1897, that Benin's goals are most likely to be achieved by accepting Western terms. The oba insists, like his great-great-grandfather, that Benin will meet the world on its own terms, without concessions to outside pressure.

Who will win? Nigeria is an intensely religious country. In Edo State, the dominant religion is Christianity. To get a sense of local public opinion, I visited several prominent Pentecostal elders and evangelical pastors. As Christians, all of them were ambivalent about the idolatrous aspects of traditional Benin art. But when pressed about the outcome of a power struggle between the oba and the governor, they were emphatic and unanimous: The oba would prevail.

Whoever ends up as the decision maker over repatriated Benin artworks and the accompanying grants from Western governments and foundations will control hundreds of jobs and tens of millions of dollars in building and operating contracts. The ability to award jobs and dispense contracts translates into enormous political power—and oftentimes into personal wealth for the hirer and contract-dispenser. Edo State's budget was only about \$500 million this year. An entity or person spending tens of millions of dollars to construct a museum—and many millions to operate it—would instantly become an overwhelmingly important player within the former kingdom of Benin. That's a prize worth fighting for. However, as the governor and the oba circle each other, another contender lurks, the most powerful of them all: the Nigerian national government.

**THE OBASEKI-IHENACHO** CONCEPT of an independent, private museum was not devised to spite the oba. It was developed, fairly obviously, to protect returned Benin art from a national government that has miserably—and often maliciously—failed to protect Nigeria's cultural heritage. The dismal record is well described by Oluseun Onigbinde, the head of a fiscal-transparency group called BudgIT. Onigbinde is the author of a 2021 book, *The Existential Questions*, an unblinking analysis of contemporary Nigeria's most urgent problems. He, too, hopes to see the Benin pieces returned someday, he told me recently. Here and now, however, "the management is very, very poor at our museums. A lot of times, people find themselves in those places not because they are qualified, but by chance. You have a lot of people working in

those places who do not understand the mission, especially at the leadership level. There are no strong rules around the management of museums: who gets access to the art, who is accountable for it. I went to the museum in Kano. It was really poor, how pieces were kept. Someone could break in and walk away with anything."

This is not the first time an effort has been organized to return art from Nigeria to Nigerian control. Years before the reckoning of 2020—years before this article's principal characters were even born—a British colonial official named Kenneth Murray set out to endow Nigeria with a museum worthy of its heritage. The eventual degradation of Murray's legacy by corrupt officialdom haunts every discussion of Nigerian cultural property. The story is well told in Barnaby Phillips's *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*, published last year.

Murray arrived in Nigeria in 1927 to teach art. He became fascinated with Nigeria's artistic heritage. For decades, local people in the central Nigerian hill country had unearthed clay heads and figures of unusual fineness and beauty. In 1943, the colonial government subjected some of these pieces to scientific testing. They dated back 2,000 years or more. The discovery inspired the colonial authorities to create a Nigerian Antiquities Service, and to appoint Murray as its first director.

At the end of the Second World War, Murray approached his superiors with an idea. In the decades after 1897, German museums had acquired hundreds of Benin artworks. Now Germany was defeated and bankrupt, while Nigeria was flush with earnings from its wartime exports to Britain. What if Nigeria used some of its windfall funds to buy its own art back from Allied-occupied Germany? The occupation authorities eventually vetoed that idea. But in the meantime, Murray had secured a substantial budget. He bought pieces from British private sellers. And then a bigger opportunity opened up.

Murray's top aide in Nigeria, Bernard Fagg, had a brother, William, who worked in the ethnography department of the British Museum. William Fagg, too, was seized by the vision of a great museum for Nigeria. He used his power at the British Museum to sell pieces out of its collections to Murray's Nigerian Antiquities Service.

In 1951, Murray acquired two Benin plaques for Nigeria from the British Museum in return for some objects from the Nigerian Antiquities Service and 25 pounds, a shockingly low price even then. William Fagg bought other important pieces at auction in London on Murray's behalf. Murray leaned on British companies that did business in Nigeria to donate money to fund his purchases. Fagg ensured that the deeper-pocketed British Museum did not bid against Murray.

In 1957, a new Nigerian National Museum opened its doors in the then-capital, Lagos. It possessed 90 Benin pieces. Fifty-five of them had formerly belonged to the British Museum. When Nigeria gained its independence, in 1960, Lagos held a collection of Benin art exceeded only by those in London and Berlin, plus many more treasures from Nigeria's numerous other artistic traditions.

I visited the Nigerian National Museum twice during my visit. Built in a low-slung style around a courtyard, the building has gradually crumbled upon itself. Between the museum building and the



*Metalwork objects (clockwise from the top left) depicting an oba of Benin (late 16th or early 17th century); the palace of Benin (16th–18th century); a horn player (1550–1680); a warrior with two attendants (date unknown); a cockerel (18th century); and three figures with batons (16th or 17th century)*





parking lot, a scruffy expanse of what might once have been a garden is speckled with litter. Inside, long-defunct wires dangle untrimmed from stained and broken ceiling tiles. The huffing-puffing sound and diesel smell of the museum's weak electrical generator penetrate everywhere. Where the sun does not reach, the museum is cast in gloom, owing to its many burned-out light fixtures.

The National Museum does not entirely lack resources. It employs about 200 people, from the museum director through the curators to the attendants, the security guards, and the woman sleeping head-down on the counter of the tiny gift shop. During my first tour of the museum, at midday on a Monday, I saw no other visitors—this in a metropolitan area of more than 20 million people. There were none on my second either, at midday on the following Sunday.

During my first visit, I was being led by a curator toward the Benin section when all the lights cut out. The day's diesel-fuel allocation had been exhausted. I viewed a few Benin pieces by the light of my cellphone. I would have to return, I was told, to see the most iconic of the items acquired by Murray and the Fagg brothers.

The number of Benin pieces on display in the National Museum falls far short of the number acquired by Murray and the Faggs. It is of course not uncommon for a museum to display only a portion of its holdings. But important pieces have disappeared from the Lagos museum over a period of many years.

In June 1980, Nigerian diplomats bought four Benin pieces at auction in London for £532,000. Soon after the pieces arrived in Lagos, the ceiling of the museum's storeroom was breached and the new pieces were stolen. Barnaby Phillips's reporting proved that two Benin plaques acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1991 had been stolen from the Murray-era collection in the National Museum. (The Met has since returned them.) Phillips traced another of the Murray-era pieces to a private collection in Europe.

When thefts have been detected, Nigerian authorities have typically blamed low-level museum employees. But in 1976, the

head of the ethnography section at the British Museum warned the British government that Nigerian politicians were "plundering their own collections." At times, the plundering was not even surreptitious. In 1973, Nigeria's head of state at the time, General Yakubu Gowon, paid an official visit to the United Kingdom. He wanted to thank the British for their support of the federal side during the Nigerian civil war of 1967–70, a bloody conflict in which as many as 2 million people died. So before he departed Nigeria, Gowon walked into the Lagos museum and selected one of the Benin heads collected by Murray and the Fagg brothers, which he then presented to Queen Elizabeth. The British apparently at first assumed that the head was a reproduction. It remains in the Windsor collection to this day, posing political quandaries that embarrass both the British and the Nigerian governments.

Governor Obaseki's museum concept and its independent board were designed to prevent the recurrence of these bad practices. That is the hope, at least. But how realistic is it?

One of the very first people I met in Nigeria was the minister of information and culture, Lai Mohammed. We spoke in the lobby of a hotel near his Lagos home. Mohammed is a lawyer, businessman, and deft political operator. When we spoke, in October 2021, his ministry was enforcing a ban on Twitter in Nigeria—punishment for Twitter's brief suspension of Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari's account. Buhari had threatened violence against opponents. His threats should not be dismissed as bluster. As a general in the army, he had seized the presidency in a 1983 coup. He governed repressively before he was toppled by a counter coup in 1985. Popular disenchantment with civilian rule enabled Buhari to regain power by election in 2015 and to win reelection in 2019. Now 79, Buhari remains a vigorous and even menacing presence.

Mohammed pronounced to me an emphatic statement of federal supremacy over all other claimants to the heritage of the Benin kingdom. "There is no doubt, no contest, about the exclusive authority of the federal government to the exclusion of either state or traditional authorities in matters relating to monuments, museums, and artifacts," he said.

Since Nigeria gained independence, political power has been closely held at the federal center—and that center has intentions of its own about the Benin artworks. The artworks thus far returned have been claimed by the federal authorities. Buhari has presented some of the first repatriated artworks to the oba as a matter of executive discretion. Assuming Buhari leaves office on schedule, in May 2023, the next president will wield discretion of his or her own. Antiquities collectively worth many hundreds of millions of dollars could soon exit Western museums without any agreed-on plan for how those antiquities will be displayed or how they will be protected from the sad fate of Nigeria's other government-managed cultural institutions.

The corruption of the Nigerian state is an unavoidable fact. The country ranks 154th out of 180 countries included on Transparency International's index of public-sector corruption, as perceived by experts and businesspeople. Its federal government is almost purely predatory, providing little physical security and few public services to its people. Nigeria is a society of incredible dynamism and innovation. Drive through central Lagos, and you

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see the buildings where Google, Microsoft, and Oracle employ the talent they recruit there. The whole world dances to music by Nigerian artists like Burna Boy. The country is also home to a successful movie industry, locally nicknamed “Nollywood.” On my visit to Benin City, I watched the filming of a scene for a historical drama set on the eve of the British invasion. All of these creative energies must operate around and against an indifferent and parasitic national government.

Much of Nigeria’s oil wealth is stolen by political and bureaucratic elites, then removed from the country altogether—stashed in Dubai banks or London real estate. What remains is shared within patronage networks that exist to maintain the rulers’ power. The predation at the top is emulated by lower-ranking officials: police who demand bribes, customs officials who demand rake-offs from imports. Nigerian political elites claim to speak in the name of their people, but too often show scant regard for their people’s well-being.

It’s possible to imagine a corrupt state sustaining a prestigious cultural institution in the same self-advertising way it might build a flashy new airport. Mexico, which is ranked No. 124 on the Transparency International index, hosts a magnificent anthropological museum and takes reasonably good care of cultural sites. But many of those who have controlled the Nigerian state have looked at any assets and seen only valuables that will be seized sooner or later by somebody. So why not now, and by you, if you have the opportunity and the means?

WHEN I RAISED the Nigerian government’s past record with Lai Mohammed, the culture minister, he retorted, “You can’t steal my property and then when I ask you to return it, you answer that you don’t have confidence how I’m going to keep it.”

This line of reasoning resonates powerfully in the West, supported by the work of radical critics of Western museums such as Dan Hicks. Hicks is a curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum, at the University of Oxford, and a fierce advocate for the return of Benin works. In 2020 he set forth his views in a passionate polemic, *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*:

The arrival of loot into the hands of western curators, its continued display in our museums and its hiding-away in private collections, is ... an enduring brutality that is refreshed every day that an anthropology museum like the Pitt Rivers opens its doors.

Hicks urges the immediate return of artworks taken by European colonial powers to their places of origin. Western people, he believes, have no business worrying about what happens to the art after that. Instead, their focus should be inward, upon themselves and the iniquities of their own culture. “It’s time to start to bring this episode to a conclusion, by understanding, rejecting and dismantling this white infrastructure,” he wrote.

Yet the consequences of viewing restitution as a ritual of guilt and atonement, of self-purification through self-purgation, cannot be waved away. Western museums are extremely reluctant to express their doubts about the uncertain fate of pieces returned to Nigeria. The curators I interviewed all spoke only on deep

background. At one major Western museum, the curator I interviewed was accompanied by a professional minder who recorded every cautious word uttered.

In a Lagos art gallery, I met by chance one of Nigeria’s pre-eminent collectors, Olufemi “Femi” Akinsanya. Only a few hours earlier, I’d been looking at a book whose cover was graced by a piece from his collection. Nigeria is home to a lively art market, much of it contemporary. Akinsanya collects modern art too, but the core of his collection consists of older works from Nigeria’s many different cultural traditions. He invited me to his townhouse in one of Lagos’s richest neighborhoods for a tour of his collection, which he’d begun to accumulate years before. I asked his views of the three-way tussle among the oba, Obaseki’s group, and the federal government.

“We don’t have a very good tradition with government institutions in culture,” he told me. “African art always belonged to individuals, groups, and families. The claim of ‘Nigeria’ to the art is kind of dodgy. The record of government with museums, I am sorry to say, is disappointing.”

Akinsanya believes that the Benin bronzes “should go to an institution not directly controlled by the government,” and that “there ought to be a binding commitment that every returned object is recorded in a register. We have to make it difficult for objects to disappear.” Phillip Ihenacho, in our last of several Zoom conversations, said that such a registry would be a priority for his trust. But he also wearily acknowledged that he could not guarantee that no returned piece would be stolen.

Art security aside, there would be a certain irony to the federal government of Nigeria becoming the custodian of the Benin bronzes. The British colonial authorities favored the Hausa and Fulani peoples of the north for their military recruitment. Since independence, the north has tended to dominate the Nigerian state. That domination triggered the Nigerian civil war of the 1960s, when the Igbo people of the south tried to form their own independent state, Biafra. The area around Benin City attempted to stay neutral in the war. Instead, it was first invaded from the south, then occupied by the north. The federal forces eventually starved Biafra into submission. In some ways, the present Nigerian federal state has continued rather than replaced the system that overthrew the kingdom of Benin in 1897.

In 1991, the capital of Nigeria was moved from Lagos to Abuja, a planned city almost 500 miles by road to the northeast, on the dividing line, more or less, between Nigeria’s Christian south and Muslim north. Abuja is the seat of Nigeria’s presidency, its National Assembly, and the offices of state governments seeking grants and favors from the central authorities. What the city lacks is national cultural institutions. It is Washington, D.C., without the Smithsonian museums or the National Gallery of Art. In January, Abba Tijani, the director general of the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments, gave a speech that proposed the development of a major museum in the capital as one logical destination for repatriated Benin artworks. What exactly would be accomplished by relocating the art of Benin from the former imperial capital in London to an only somewhat less remote imperial capital in Abuja?

**BUT WHO, THEN,** should be the ultimate steward of the Benin bronzes?

The plundering of Africa's artistic heritage inflicted a double injury upon the people of Africa. First, and most obviously, Africans were severed from their history and culture. Their greatest treasures were expatriated from their places of origin to the public and private collections of foreign conquerors. Second, the relocation memorializes Africa's history of subordination. When Nigerians must travel to London or New York to see the masterworks of their homeland, they are symbolically reminded that this history of subordination has not ended yet. The injury hurts all the more because it is so difficult to institute an effective means of redress.

Dreams of Benin City as the next great cultural destination bump into the tough practical difficulties of travel to and within Nigeria: slow and expensive tourist visas, unsafe roads, unreliable air connections, and physical danger to travelers, including a significant kidnapping industry. What's more, Governor Obaseki is term-limited. He will be out of office by the end of 2024. Nigerian states have troubled records of starting ambitious projects under one governor, only to abandon them under the next. Rivers State, in the Niger Delta, commenced building a new monorail system in 2010 for its capital. The state spent \$400 million on the prestige project. Then the governorship changed hands, and the project was abandoned unfinished.

The claims of the oba, meanwhile, are shaped by the legal reality that he's not the head of any government. Returning the objects to him means converting what was once the sacred property of a reigning king into the personal wealth of a single family. In precolonial Benin, the oba was the only permitted commissioner of cast-metal art. The oba might present metalworks as gifts to supporters, but before 1897, Benin art was not a marketed good. Today's Nigeria is governed by British-style property laws. If a contemporary Nigerian owns a piece of art, he or she can of course sell it. And while the present oba has vowed to preserve in a future museum any art objects returned to him, he has heirs, and they will have heirs. There will be expenses and business reversals and divorces in the decades ahead—and now a new portfolio of family assets to cover any shortfall.

There are more fundamental questions to be pondered here, questions about whether history can be—or should be—unwound. Projecting the identities of the present upon the art of the past almost inevitably yields illusions, or worse. Consider another famous expatriated treasure, the Pergamon Altar, now in Berlin. It was commissioned by a Hellenistic Greek-speaking king for his capital near the western coast of what is now Turkey. Should the altar be restored to Greece? To Turkey? Museum collections are human institutions. They can and should be scrutinized and criticized. But the standards of scrutiny must likewise be scrutinized. A standard that art should belong to the present-day government of the place where that art was created centuries ago is not, to me, sustainable.

Nor can present-day owners of art erase the brutalities of the past by casting the art away. The human past was a grim place for almost everybody, and few of those with the resources to

command art in the first place were free of culpability for something dreadful—very much including the rulers of Benin.

The kingdom of Benin rose to greatness at almost exactly the same time as the Portuguese carved the nearby island of São Tomé into sugar plantations. In the early 1500s, São Tomé was the largest sugar producer in the world, and Benin provided many of the human bodies that did the work.

Ancient Benin produced cloth, pepper, and ivory—but not its own metal. The obas of Benin obtained the material for their glorious artworks by trading people they'd enslaved for brass sold by Portuguese merchants.

Changing patterns of commerce relocated the sugar industry from São Tomé to Brazil by the early 17th century. The slave trade shifted westward along the African coast. The Benin kingdom and its art went into decline soon afterward. Like the Roman Pantheon and Thomas Jefferson's mansion at Monticello, the art of Benin flaunts the wealth gained by slavers. That history does not detract from the objects' beauty. But it cannot be detached from the objects' meaning.

**ALMOST EVERYBODY I SPOKE WITH** in Nigeria expressed a wish that the Benin pieces be returned to one or another of the competing claimants. The wish was expressed even by people with otherwise scant interest in art. European colonialism brought Africa into the modern world, but always on someone else's terms. Colonialism left behind road networks built to serve international markets, not local commerce; armies and police forces in which orders are issued in the former colonizer's language; governments that to this day regard their people as subjects to be exploited, not citizens to serve. The removal of so much of Africa's material heritage to foreign capitals may not be the most urgent or important of the negative legacies of colonialism. As Oluseun Onigbinde cautions, only a small, elite minority in Nigeria would list the repatriation of art among the country's top-10 problems. But for that minority, the removal of heritage objects is among the most visible and emotional traumas of colonialism. What we are talking about when we talk about the expatriated art of Africa is much, much more than the art itself. "Art is a powerful way to see what binds us together: *This is what I came out of*," Femi Akinsanya told me. "And it's a way of reckoning with that heritage, in all its complexity."

It's a compelling thought. But it raises another question: In the realm of art, which human beings count as "us"? In 1907, a 25-year-old Pablo Picasso saw African masks in the dust of Paris's very first anthropological museum, then housed across the Seine from the Eiffel Tower. The encounter launched Picasso into a new phase of his own art, by teaching him that painting "is not an aesthetic process; it's a form of magic that interposes itself between us and the hostile universe, a means of seizing power by imposing a form on our terrors as well as on our desires." A few weeks later, Picasso completed work on his famous *Les Femmes d'Alger*, in which African masks substitute for the faces of two of the five nude female figures. In Picasso's vision, Africa had become a fountainhead of the art of the modern world.

An infrastructure of art curatorship is rising in West Africa. The Chinese government has donated millions of dollars to help build

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an impressive new museum in Senegal to house works that the French government has loaned. Across the road from the dilapidated National Museum in Lagos stands a center dedicated to the culture of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. The Rele Gallery, in Lagos and Los Angeles, offers for sale new works of pulsing vitality. It's all there to be admired and celebrated.

But along with that celebration of the emerging, I suggest a defense of the existing. The Western museum is a great accomplishment of human civilization. Museums may trace their origins to the crimes of kings and the arrogance of colonizers. In the here and now, they allow tens of millions of people to enjoy what were once the personal pleasures of a wealthy, powerful, titled few. Museums within stable states offer unmatched security for fragile and valuable treasures. Museums at centers of international commerce and travel connect rare artifacts to mass audiences. Before the coronavirus pandemic, the British Museum drew nearly 4 million visitors a year from outside the United Kingdom. Three-quarters of the Louvre's nearly 10 million annual pre-COVID visitors came from countries other than France. The large and growing African diaspora in North America, too, should be able to see its heritage in museums in New York, Chicago, Washington, and Toronto.

There is more great art in this world than there are places to properly display it. I toured the Benin collection in the British Museum with Barnaby Phillips, the author of *Loot*, a few hours before my flight to Lagos. "How many Benin pieces do you see here?" he asked. I counted some 65. He replied that in 1897, the British hauled away at least 3,000 ivory and metal objects. How many objects would a new West African museum of Benin art wish to display? Thirty? Forty? A hundred? "Surely," Phillips said, "there's enough to go around?"

Other accommodations could be imagined as well, including museum collaborations and financial compensation. International exchange programs could bring warehoused art from Berlin and London to traveling temporary exhibitions across

Nigeria. Those could be joined to new projects to expand opportunities for careers in the arts and culture—fields where, right now, Nigerians find their best opportunities by emigrating. Scholarships for promising artists and artisans could be expanded, and the contemporary art of Africa brought more urgently to the attention of world markets. I had the pleasure of visiting the museum founded by Prince Yemisi Adedoyin Shyllon at Pan-Atlantic University, east of Lagos. Unlike the government museum downtown, here everything was meticulously curated by a small and efficient staff. I discovered artists previously unknown to me whose work I now follow closely.

Displays in Western museums could be revised to provide better insight into the culture that created the art. In the British Museum, for example, there's the Benin art and there's text on the wall about the expedition of 1897. Why not a modeled reconstruction of the palace compound, to draw attention to the civilization that created the art before 1897? Benin City itself is crying out for archaeological investigation, and for the restoration of the historic city's ambitious network of walls and moats, now sadly tumbled and garbage-strewn. Archaeological work was envisioned in Governor Obaseki's concept for an independent museum of Benin art. But even if that concept falters, outside support can help the digs proceed. Perhaps a replica of some of the old royal quarters could be built, much as the city palace of the Prussian kings has been reconstructed on its former site in Berlin. The claims of the royal family of Benin could be answered with financial restitution, perhaps in the form of a foundation under their patronage to support the arts and culture of Edo State.

New technology offers even wider possibilities. A consortium of German museums is launching a website, Digital Benin, that will make the artworks of Benin—and scholarship about those artworks—instantly accessible to anyone with an internet connection. As virtual-reality technology comes to market, that art could become viewable in three dimensions and at full scale. Perhaps the day will come when we can put on goggles and gloves and go for a walk through the royal palaces of Benin at the zenith of their glory.

There is a crucial need for expansive, optimistic thinking to replace the polemical rancor that often distorts discussion today. Some of this work has already begun. More should follow.

Too many people look to art objects to do things that art cannot do: redress grievances, salve shame, absolve guilt.

We should be able to honor the past; empower the descendants of those from whom the art was taken; protect the art itself from theft and decomposition; and ensure that the art can be seen as widely as possible. It took enormous effort to overcome the supremacist view that African art was inferior to European art, or that it was not art at all. Now the whole world celebrates the cultural achievements of Africa and the artistic genius of Benin.

That celebration should only grow larger. The artistic works of all humanity are the common heritage of all humanity: all of those works, and all of us. *A*

*David Frum is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

# Culture & Critics



# Cursive Is History

*My students can't read script.  
How will they interpret the past?*

By Drew Gilpin Faust

It was a good book, the student told the 14 others in the undergraduate seminar I was teaching, and it included a number of excellent illustrations, such as photographs of relevant Civil War manuscripts. But, he continued, those weren't very helpful to him, because of course he couldn't read cursive.

Had I heard him correctly? Who else can't read cursive? I asked the class. The answer: about two-thirds. And who can't write it? Even more. What did they do about signatures? They had invented them by combining vestiges of whatever cursive instruction they may have had with creative squiggles and flourishes. Amused by my astonishment, the students offered reflections about the place—or absence—of handwriting in their lives. Instead of the Civil War past, we found ourselves exploring a different set of historical changes. In my ignorance, I became their pupil as well as a kind of historical artifact, a Rip van Winkle confronting a transformed world.

IN 2010, cursive was omitted from the new national Common Core standards for K–12 education. The students in my class, and their peers, were then somewhere in elementary school. Handwriting instruction had already been declining as laptops and tablets and lessons in “keyboarding” assumed an ever more prominent place in the classroom. Most of my students remembered getting no more than a year or so of somewhat desultory cursive training, which was often pushed aside by a growing emphasis on “teaching to the test.” Now in college, they represent the vanguard of a cursiveless world.

Although I was unaware of it at the time, the 2010 Common Core policy on cursive had generated an uproar. Jeremiads about the impending decline of civilization appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and elsewhere. Defenders of script argued variously that knowledge of cursive was “a basic right,” a key connection between hand and brain, an essential form of self-discipline, and a fundamental expression of identity. Its disappearance would represent a craven submission to “the tyranny of ‘relevance.’”

Within a decade, cursive's embattled advocates had succeeded in passing measures requiring some sort of cursive instruction in more than 20 states. At the same time, the struggle for cursive became part of a growing, politicized nostalgia for a lost past. In 2016, Louisiana's state senators reminded their constituents that the Declaration of Independence had been written in cursive and cried out “America!” as they unanimously voted to restore handwriting instruction across the state.

Yet the decline in cursive seems inevitable. Writing is, after all, a technology, and most technologies are sooner or later surpassed and replaced. As Tamara Plakins Thornton demonstrates in her book *Handwriting in America*, it has always been affected by changing social and cultural forces. In 18th-century America, writing was the domain of the privileged. By law or custom, the enslaved were prohibited from literacy almost everywhere. In New England, nearly all men and women could read; in the South, which had not developed an equivalent system of common schools, a far lower percentage of even the white population could do so. Writing, though, was much less widespread—taught separately and sparingly in colonial America, most often to men of status and responsibility and to women of the upper classes. Men and women even learned different scripts—an ornamental hand for ladies, and an unadorned, more functional form for the male world of power and commerce.

The first half of the 19th century saw a dramatic increase in the number of women able to write. By 1860, more than 90 percent of the white population in America could both read and write. At the same time, romantic and Victorian notions of subjectivity steadily enhanced the perceived connection between handwriting and identity. Penmanship came to be seen as a marker and expression of the self—of gender and class, to be sure, but also of deeper elements of character and soul. The notion of a signature as a unique representation of a particular individual gradually came to be enshrined in the law and accepted as legitimate legal evidence.

By the turn of the 20th century, the typewriter had become sufficiently established to prompt the first widespread declarations of the obsolescence of handwriting. But it would be a long demise. In 1956, *Look* magazine pronounced handwriting “out-of-date,” yet cursive still claimed a secure place in the curriculum for decades.

GIVEN A CURRENT GENERATION of students in which so few can read or write cursive, one cannot assume it will ever again serve as an effective form of communication. I asked my students about the implications of what they had told me, focusing first on their experience as students. No, most of these history students admitted, they could not read manuscripts. If they were assigned a research paper, they sought

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subjects that relied only on published sources. One student reshaped his senior honors thesis for this purpose; another reported that she did not pursue her interest in Virginia Woolf for an assignment that would have involved reading Woolf's handwritten letters. In the future, cursive will have to be taught to scholars the way Elizabethan secretary hand or paleography is today.

I continued questioning: Didn't professors make handwritten comments on their papers and exams? Many of the students found these illegible. Sometimes they would ask a teacher to decipher the comments; more often they just ignored them. Most faculty, especially after the remote instruction of the pandemic, now grade online. But I wondered how many of my colleagues have been dutifully offering handwritten observations without any clue that they would never be read.

What about handwriting in your personal lives? I went on. One student reported that he had to ask his parents to "translate" handwritten letters from his grandparents. I asked the students if they made grocery lists, kept journals, or wrote thank-you or condolence letters. Almost all said yes. Almost all said they did so on laptops and phones or sometimes on paper in block letters. For many young people, "handwriting," once essentially synonymous with cursive, has come to mean the painstaking printing they turn to when necessity dictates.

During my years as Harvard president, I regarded the handwritten note as a kind of superpower. I wrote hundreds of them and kept a pile of note cards in the upper-left-hand drawer of my desk. They provided a way to reach out and say: I am noticing you. This message of thanks or congratulations or sympathy comes not from some staff person or some machine but directly from me. I touched it and hope it touches you. Now I wonder how many recipients of these messages could not read them.

"There is something charming about receiving a handwritten note," one student acknowledged. Did he mean charming like an antique curiosity? Charming in the sense of magical in its capacity to create physical connections between human minds? Charming as in establishing an aura of the original, the unique, and the authentic? Perhaps all of these. One's handwriting is an expression, an offering of self. Crowds still throng athletes, politicians, and rock stars for autographs. We have not yet abandoned our attraction to handwriting as a representation of presence: George Washington, or Beyoncé, or David Ortiz wrote here!

THERE IS a great deal of the past we are better off without, just as there is much to celebrate in the devices that have served as the vehicles of cursive's demise. But there are dangers in cursive's loss. Students will miss the excitement and inspiration that I have seen them experience as they interact with the physical embodiment of thoughts and ideas voiced by a person long

since silenced by death. Handwriting can make the past seem almost alive in the present.

In the papers of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., I once found a small fragment with his scribbled name and his father's address. Holmes had emphasized the significance of this small piece of paper by attaching it to a larger page with a longer note—also in his own hand—which he saved as a relic for posterity. He had written the words in 1862 on the battlefield of Antietam, where he had been wounded, he explained, and had pinned the paper to his uniform lest he become one of the Civil War's countless Unknown.

But sometimes handwritten documents tell stories that their creators neither intended nor understood. James Henry Hammond maintained a ledger in which he kept scrawled records of the births and deaths of the enslaved population on his South Carolina plantation. Because he included the names of the newborns' parents and often some additional commentary, it was possible for me to reconstruct family ties among generations of people forbidden to keep their own written history. At one point, Hammond purchased an 8-year-old boy named Sam Jones to work in the house, changing his name to "Wesley" in the process. Nearly three decades later, Hammond recorded the birth of a son to Wesley—a child to whom Wesley had given the name "Sam Jones." As he recorded the baby's birth, Hammond was in all likelihood unaware of Sam/Wesley's act of memory and resistance. More than a century and a half later, we can still say Sam Jones's name.

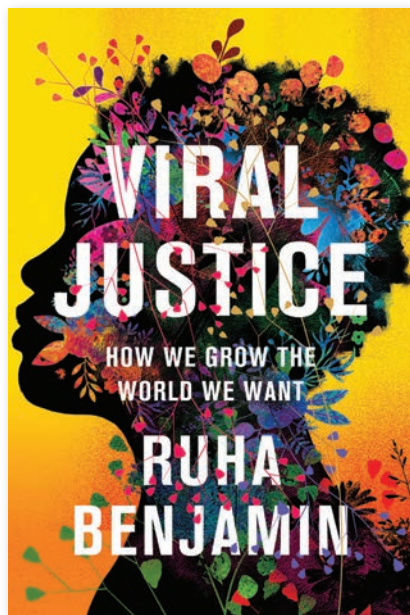
All of us, not just students and scholars, will be affected by cursive's loss. The inability to read handwriting deprives society of direct access to its own past. We will become reliant on a small group of trained translators and experts to report what history—including the documents and papers of our own families—was about. The spread of literacy in the early modern West was driven by people's desire to read God's word for themselves, to be empowered by an experience of unmediated connection. The abandonment of cursive represents a curious reverse parallel: We are losing a connection, and thereby disempowering ourselves.

On the last day of class, a student came up to me with a copy of one of my books and asked me to sign it. I wrote an inscription that included not just his name and mine, but thanks for his many contributions to the seminar. Then I asked, a little wistfully, if he'd like me to read it to him. *A*

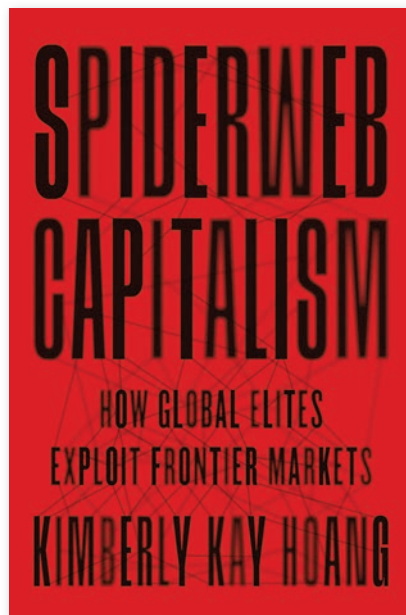
*Drew Gilpin Faust is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and a former president of Harvard University, where she is the Arthur Kingsley Porter University Professor. She is the author of six books, including This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War.*

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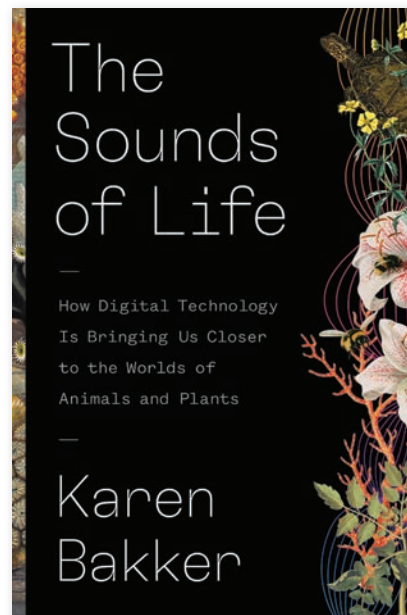
## New from Princeton University Press



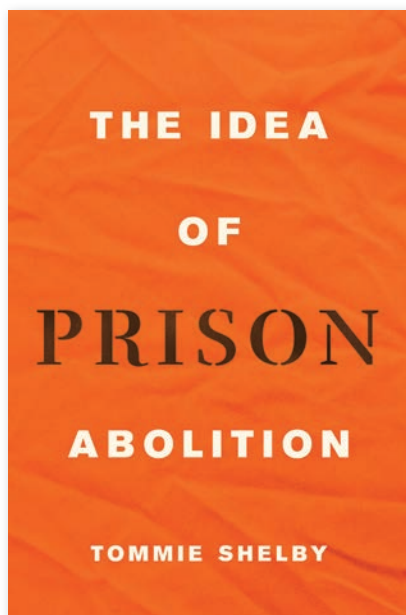
An inspiring vision of how we can build a more just world—one small change at a time



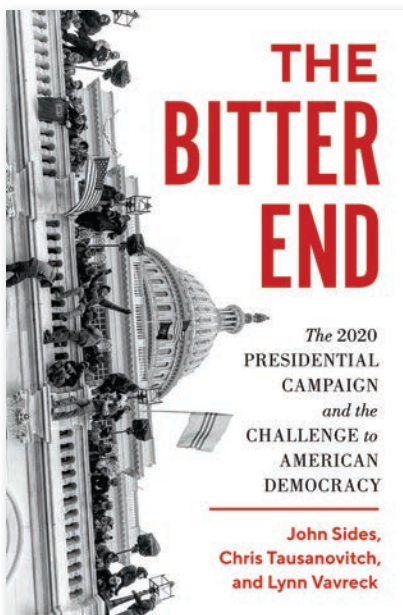
A behind-the-scenes look at how the rich and powerful use offshore shell corporations to conceal their wealth and make themselves richer



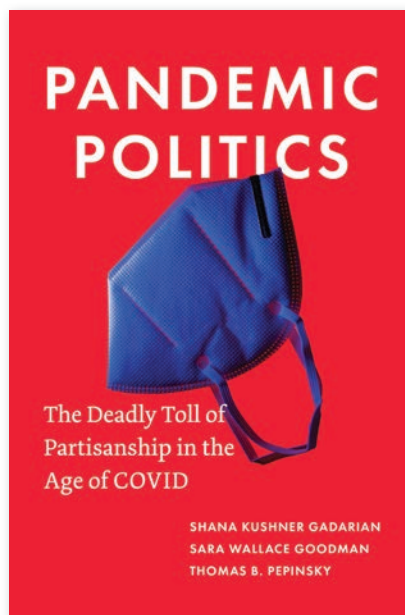
An amazing journey into the hidden realm of nature's sounds



An incisive and sympathetic examination of the case for ending the practice of imprisonment



What an intensely divisive election portends for American politics



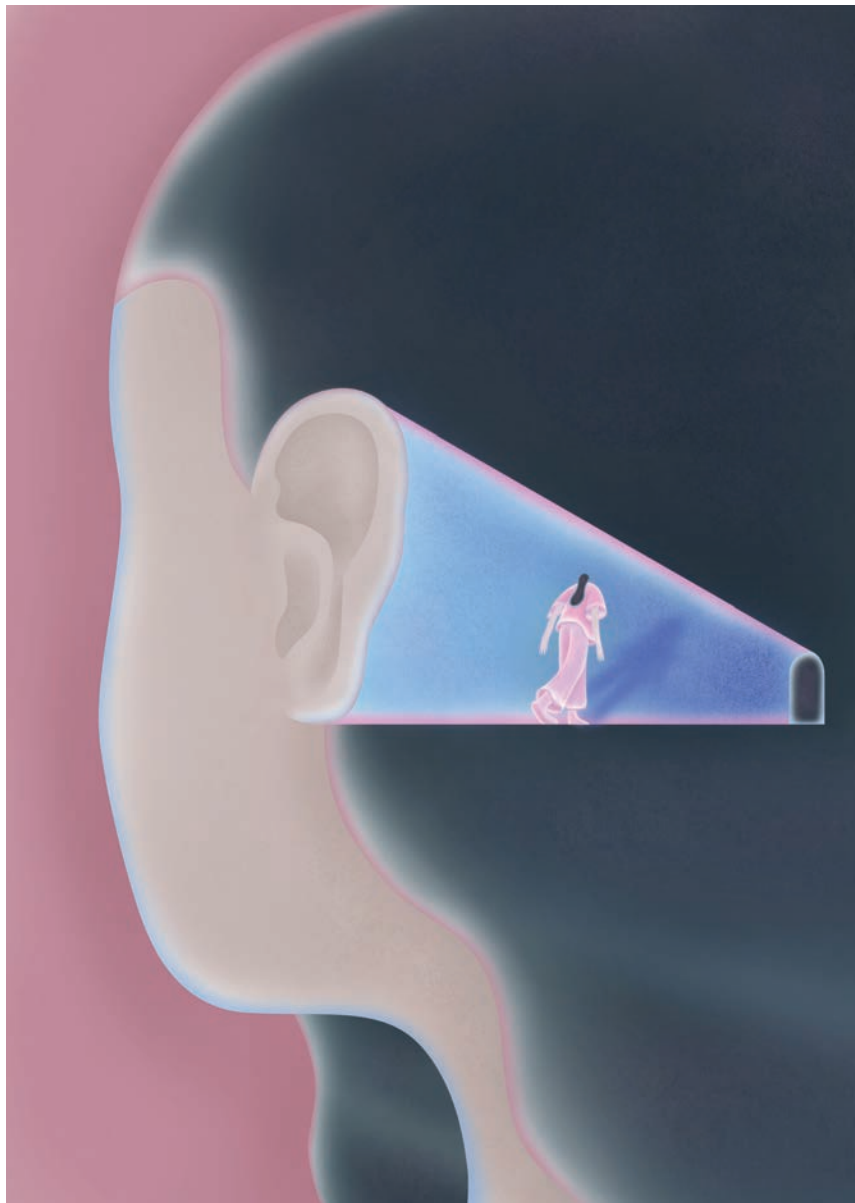
How the politicization of the pandemic endangers our lives—and our democracy

## BOOKS

## The Diagnosis Trap

*Doctors have their stories to tell about mental illness.  
But what about the stories we tell ourselves?*

By Jordan Kisner



Let me explain something about me: When I was 12, I started having panic attacks, brought on by fears that I couldn't shake, even though I knew they were irrational. I was terrified, for example, that I'd become depressed—but I'd never been depressed before, and didn't feel depressed. My junior high school devoted a series of assemblies to warning us budding teenagers that we were entering the most dangerous years of our lives, now ripe targets for cutting, suicide, eating disorders, overdoses, AIDS, and fatal car accidents. I would spend hours, even days, worrying that one of these things might be coming for me. My mind seemed to spin out of control—I couldn't stop fixating, I couldn't calm down, and I couldn't understand what was happening.

Finding language to describe suffering of any kind is hard, but eventually, fearing I was going irreversibly insane, I tried—first for my mother, then for a doctor. Soon I was told there was a name for my particular distress: obsessive-compulsive disorder. Receiving this news at 13 was both relieving and shattering. (And surprising. There had been no assembly suggesting we watch out for anxiety disorders.) With the diagnosis came explanations and context for what I had not been able to interpret, as well as a body of scientific knowledge about treatment. Still, OCD can be an upsetting diagnosis, partly because according to current psychiatric understanding, it's a chronic illness. You don't typically get cured. You "learn to manage it" and, like most chronic conditions, it ebbs and flows based on a variety of factors. I felt horror at being indelibly marked and feared that I'd never get back to "my old self." Who was I now?

Rachel Aviv begins her nonfiction debut, *Strangers to Ourselves: Unsettled Minds and the Stories That Make Us*, with the story of her own childhood introduction to psychiatry—briefer and more unusual than mine. At 6, she tells us, she abruptly stopped eating. She refused to say the names of food, "because pronouncing the words felt like the equivalent of eating," and refused to say the number *eight*, because it sounded like *ate*.

That year, she was admitted to the eating-disorders unit at Children's Hospital of Michigan, thought to be the youngest person on record to be diagnosed with anorexia. Her doctors were perplexed, speculating that her anorexia might be related to the stress of her parents' divorce. Aviv didn't understand her diagnosis, its implications, or its cultural associations—she couldn't even spell it. "I had a disease called anorexia," she wrote in her diary two years later.

In the ward, she was guided by older girls, from whom she learned the conventions of the disorder. "I hadn't known that exercise had anything to do with body weight, but I began doing jumping jacks with Carrie and Hava at night." She refused to sit down after the girls taught her the phrase *couch potato*. But eventually Aviv ate because she'd been forbidden to see or speak to her parents unless she did. "My goals realigned." She was discharged from the hospital after six weeks, and assimilated back into her old life, eventually consenting to sit down with the rest of her class at school. The illness lifted as mysteriously as it had descended. From here, she suggests, she went back to a normal, healthy life.

"To use the terms of the historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg, who has written eloquently about the genesis of eating disorders, I was 'recruited' for anorexia, but the illness never became a 'career,'" Aviv writes. "It didn't provide the language with which I came to understand myself." She proposes that she recovered because she was too young at the time of her illness to decipher or internalize the cultural and psychiatric narratives that attend it. She had no "insight," a term used by psychiatrists to describe the quality of being self-aware and rational regarding one's illness. Typically, insight is crucial to a good prognosis: If you have insight, you have what doctors would call the "correct attitude to a morbid change in oneself," as a 1934 paper in *The British Journal of Medical Psychology* put it. But Aviv, pointing out that a correct attitude to a morbid change "depends on culture, race, ethnicity, and faith," supplies a different, more acerbic definition of insight: "the degree to which a patient agrees with his or her doctor's interpretation."

Being an "insightful" patient in the traditional sense demands accepting the diagnostic categories and language on offer, she writes. (Failure to correctly perform insight can also play a role in the decision to institutionalize a person without their consent.) And insight, Aviv argues, has its dangers. Adopting a dictated narrative about your mind can change your outcomes, for better and worse. "I wasn't bound to any particular story about the role of illness in my life," she writes with relief. "There are stories that save us, and stories that trap us, and

in the midst of an illness it can be very hard to know which is which."

AS A WRITER who has reported on medicine, education, and criminal justice for *The New Yorker* since 2011, Aviv reanimates this early chapter of her life to introduce the collection of essays that follow: five profiles of people whose stories defy or complicate psychiatric models of understanding the mind. Aviv is skeptical of psychiatric diagnosis and the language that accompanies it not because she's fundamentally anti-psychiatry but because psychiatry is a limited and constantly shifting discipline, deeply influenced by the foibles and fashions of culture. More broadly, her interest is in the parts of existence that William James called the "unclassified residuum," which frustrates scientists whose desire, he wrote, is "a closed and completed system of truth."

Each of the people Aviv profiles offers evidence of a different shortcoming of Western psychiatry. Ray is a ruminative depressive who was institutionalized in 1979. Because his illness coincided with a sea change within modern psychiatry, he was offered two very different explanations—and treatments—for what ailed him. One approach endorsed introspective therapy to promote "understanding" of the fundamental personal and social maladjustments producing his distress; the other, corresponding with the rise of the "chemical imbalance" theory of mental illness, proposed that his depression was a natural, biochemical phenomenon, and required psychopharmacology. Ray had begun, medically speaking, as a man with burdensome personal flaws, and emerged a man with bad neurochemistry. "Who is Ray Osheroff, now?" he wrote, late in life, still miserable.

Then there is Bapu, a young Indian woman who in the 1960s experienced a spiritual awakening and became convinced that she had been chosen to "immerse myself in the ocean of devotion," as she wrote in her journal. She spent hours a day in her prayer room, began dressing and living like a Hindu ascetic, and repeatedly tried to leave her husband and children to live in a monastery. She believed she was a bride of Krishna's. Bapu's husband took her to a Catholic psychiatrist trained in Western approaches, who pronounced her schizophrenic. She insisted that she was simply joining a millennia-old tradition of Hindu mystics.

Bapu refers to herself as a madwoman or a lunatic more than a dozen times in her journals, but only sometimes with despair. She saw her alienation from society as proof of her insight. Her inner world had come to feel more substantial than the reality to which her family was bound. The saints she admired

*"There are stories that save us, and stories that trap us, and in the midst of an illness it can be very hard to know which is which."*

had also ruptured ties with family and devoted their lives to phenomena that others could neither see nor touch. Ramakrishna, a nineteenth-century mystic, told his devotees that madness was a mark of devotion and should never be mocked.

Bapu lived for many years on the streets, suffering both physically and psychically, but “she drew from a rich tradition that gave her anguish purpose and structure.” Aviv asks: Whose version of Bapu’s story should be the authoritative one?

The bleakest of the case studies is Naomi, a young Black American who grew up in the 1980s and ’90s in a Chicago housing project that a Housing Authority official described at the time as a “hell hole.” The grinding poverty and violence of her childhood gave way to the grinding poverty of her adulthood: As a teenager, she lived in a shelter with her newborn, but became a teacher’s assistant and went to community college at night. She loved to read and to write music, and after joining a writing group began searching for Black-women-centered histories of American racism, poverty, and police brutality. “She felt debilitated by the historical resonances of her own story,” Aviv writes. “She suddenly had language to describe the kind of pain that had haunted her family for generations.”

Naomi’s grief was all-consuming. She became depressed, and then—after a traumatic childbirth experience—psychotic; a year later, she leaped off a bridge after dropping her twin sons into the water below, believing she was saving them from a life of thwarted potential and unjust suffering. Her subsequent journey through the legal and medical systems, which failed her spectacularly, was complicated by the fact that her delusions were rooted in something so absolutely real and grimly central to her experience. “She wants to convert people into not being racist and accepting her people,” a doctor noted in Naomi’s chart during one emergency-room visit. In some contexts, Naomi’s complaints were described as “bizarre,” evidence of her incapacity—in others, as “astute observations about the society in which she lived.” Which responses to racism are pathological, and according to whom, and when?

One of the pleasures of this book is its resistance to a clear and comforting verdict, its desire to dwell in unknowing. At every step, Aviv is nuanced and perceptive, probing cultural differences and alert to ambiguity, always filling in the fine-grain details. Extracting a remarkable amount of information from archival material as well as living interview subjects, she brings all of these people to life, even the two whom she never met. I zipped through each essay—propelled by curiosity—yet needed to take breaks between them,

both to recover from the intensity of the human experience described and to sit with the implications of the argument Aviv is building, which suggests that it may be more harmful than helpful to see yourself the way doctors see you.

AS I READ, I found myself with a lingering unease about Aviv’s own relationship to her broader subject, sensing more complication there than she initially allows. She presents herself at the outset as someone who was spared a lifelong struggle with mental illness because she was just too young to become ensnared in what the philosopher Ian Hacking calls the “looping effect,” when a diagnosis becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. A new diagnosis can change “the space of possibilities for personhood,” he writes. Unlike the girls Aviv met when she was 6, some of whom never recovered, she is able to study this process rather than live it.

Did Aviv escape an external narrative quite as cleanly as she wants to believe? We are left to wonder until her final essay, in which she wrestles with this question directly. “Laura” tells the story of a young woman who was put on a string of medications in adolescence, none of which seemed to significantly ease her misery, a failure that led to additional medications in various combinations. Here, more explicitly than in her portrait of Ray, Aviv joins an existing discourse about psychopharmacology, raising by now familiar concerns about the overmedication of Americans, and the impulse to treat regular human unhappiness as pathological. And here, she introduces her own fraught relationship with Lexapro.

Aviv started medication in her late 20s, as her writing career was getting under way, to assuage social anxiety and ambient feelings of inadequacy. Her first six months on Lexapro was, she thought, the best period of her life. Her social anxiety vanished. She also felt somehow intrinsically different—more playful, more loving, more engaged in the world. This recalled a telling moment from her childhood diary: “I had some thing that was a siknis its cald anexorea. I had anexorea because I want to be someone better than me.” This central issue—wanting “to be someone better than me”—seemed neither produced by her pediatric brush with diagnosis nor helped by it. She may have escaped a “career” of illness, but this feeling stayed, until Lexapro.

Soon Aviv became disconcerted that so many of her female friends were also taking Lexapro and loving it. “These more and more seem like Make The Ambitious Ladies More Tolerable Pills,” a friend wrote, echoing her suspicion that the medication was more fad than necessity. But Aviv’s attempts to

STRANGERS TO  
OURSELVES:  
UNSETTLED  
MINDS AND THE  
STORIES THAT  
MAKE US

*Rachel Aviv*

FARRAR, STRAUS  
AND GIROUX

quit didn't go well—stopping the medication brought on terrible depression (which can be a passing withdrawal effect of some antidepressants), and she always started her dose again. A couple of years later, still on Lexapro, she decided she wanted to be a mother. Two weeks after going off the medication upon learning she was pregnant (as is sometimes advised), she was immobilized and quietly imagining a miscarriage. Her doctor grew alarmed and suggested she resume the medication. She did, and three weeks later, she writes, “I felt connected again to my reasons for having a baby.”

Aviv tries to take stock: What to make of the enormous hold Lexapro now seemed to have on her life, despite her belief that she'd avoided an illness “career”? She describes growing confused about her “baseline self.” What if she is not the achieving, albeit anxious, person she'd been before Lexapro, the identity she'd embraced as “true,” but “the more dysfunctional self that had occasionally resurfaced—most visibly when I was six and hospitalized”? Aviv is negotiating a complicated formulation here. First, she assumes a “baseline self,” a concept that makes intuitive sense but also stands in tension with the evidence she's offered throughout her essays that the “self” can be determined or altered by external factors. Then she makes a distinction between her “baseline self,” which is functional, and the “more dysfunctional self” that sometimes surfaces. Where did this narrative come from? What is the self? Who gets to say? “To continue as the person I'd become I needed a drug,” she writes after more than a decade on Lexapro. “I wanted my children to remember the version of me that took Lexapro.” “On 7.5 milligrams I'm a better family member,” she tells Laura about her decision not to lower her dose. Who is Rachel now?

The existence of this book—and Aviv's career as a journalist who frequently investigates the depths of human suffering, whether among refugee children who sink into coma-like trances or senior citizens taken from their homes and denied autonomy—indicates unfinished business of the generative sort. She's drawn to the disorienting terrain of shifting self-knowledge, alert to the trauma of having one's agency stripped by an outside authority or an imposed narrative. Still, she doesn't argue for pure self-determination. As I read, I kept returning to Aviv's early diary entry, “Here let me explain something about me. I had a disease called anorexia.” A second moment from the same era also stuck with me. She writes that when she first arrived on the ward, she asked one of the older girls there over and over, “Do you think I'm weird?”

This feels like the core human impulse that Aviv is attempting to parse. Every person in *Strangers to*

*Ourselves* writes to understand their mind. Ray spends decades on an autobiography; Bapu has a kind of graphomania, sometimes scrawling diaries on the walls; Naomi writes songs, a novel, and a memoir; Laura has a blog; Aviv gets access to the many journals kept by Hava, one of the girls she met in the hospital. When we become strangers to ourselves, we are compelled to narrativize. And then we need to know what others make of that story, how they understand us, so that we can understand ourselves. The question “Who am I now?” while directed at the self, cannot be answered only by the self. It requires traversing between the meaning we make inside ourselves and the meaning we encounter in community. Aviv's subjects, she writes,

described their psychological experiences with deep self-awareness, but they also needed others to confirm whether what they were feeling was real. It didn't matter whether they believed they were married to God or saving the world from racism—they still looked to authorities (mystics for Bapu, doctors for others) to tell them how and why they were feeling this way. Their distress took a form that was created in dialogue with others, a process that altered the path of their suffering and their identities too.

Approved insight, the kind that informs “correct” narratives, exerts real and lasting power, whether damaging (Aviv's focus) or healing, as is often the case. But Aviv is more preoccupied with insight in the philosophical sense—finding order and meaning in one's own story—which is anything but straightforward or static. I am not the person I feared I would become after my diagnosis at 13, and the diagnostic language and medication I was offered at that time allowed me, paradoxically, to feel less defined by my experience of anxiety. Still, I have an ongoing, sometimes uneasy relationship with diagnostic categories and with medication—a relationship that necessarily changes as I change. Aviv reminds us that *Who am I now?* is less a momentary question than a koan that suffuses every life, an invitation to revisit and revise the conundrum, whoever you are and whether or not you have a diagnosis. All of Aviv's subjects, herself included, live at the mercy of social and medical constructions, and yet strive to shape and reshape their irreducible, protean selves. It is the most human drama. It doesn't seem weird at all. *A*

*Jordan Kisner, a contributing writer, is the author of Thin Places: Essays From In Between.*



## BOOKS

## The Roots of Republican Extremism

*Three new books attempt to trace the GOP's break with reality.*

By Kim Phillips-Fein

In 1992, Pat Buchanan made a campaign stop at the San Diego–Tijuana border. As a few white-power activists who had tagged along milled in the background, he called for the United States to build a wall—a 200-mile-long physical boundary between the U.S. and Mexico. At the time, Buchanan was seeking the Republican nomination for the presidency, the first of two consecutive efforts that were rebuffed by party voters and leaders alike. Buchanan and his politics seemed to be on the verge of being drummed out of the GOP altogether. (When he made one last try for the White House, in 2000, he ran on the Reform Party ticket.) From the start of the 1990s, his hostility toward free trade and NATO, his extremist proposals on immigration, and his jeremiads against cultural decline marked him as an outlier. Communism was over, the stock market was rising, Silicon Valley was just taking off, and few were interested in Buchanan's grim vision of a looming “illegal invasion.”

CHARLES O. CECIL / ALAMY; INDEPENDENT PICTURE SERVICE / ALAMY; GRANT PETERSON / FAIRFAX MEDIA / GETTY; EVERETT COLLECTION HISTORICAL / GETTY; MARK REINSTEIN / CORBIS; WALLY MCNAMEE / CORBIS / GETTY; FOTOSARCH / GETTY; INTERIM ARCHIVES / GETTY; UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE / GETTY; JOSE MORE / VPICS / ALAMY; RON GALELLA / GETTY

Three decades later, Buchanan's ideas may still seem fringe, but they are no longer marginal. His call for a barrier at the border has become a staple of Republican platforms, as have his denunciations of cultural decadence, his skepticism about free trade, and his warnings about the dangers of the "global elite" and of immigrant incursions. As the midterms approach, Donald Trump's conspiracy-laced version of those views shows no sign of flaming out, which forces the question: Is this ethno-nationalism and pugnacious stance toward cultural "elites" going to be the signature of the Republican Party from now on? And if so, what happened? Not all that long ago, the GOP was the party of Big Business, free markets, "traditional" family values, and anti-communism. Now it has become the party of election denial and the Wall.

When Trump first surfaced as a 2016 presidential candidate, his dizzying ascendance, seemingly out of nowhere, fueled the sense that he was hijacking a GOP theretofore rooted in the confident optimism that had come out of the Reagan era. Historians have considered Ronald Reagan's presidency, and the adoption by the Democratic Party (especially under Bill Clinton) of Reagan's end-of-big-government-and-big-labor-and-high-taxes ideology, as the formative development of the last quarter of the 20th century—the vision that laid out the parameters for American politics in the new millennium.

Yet the recent trajectory of the Republican Party, and its turn against many of the key precepts of Reaganism, calls for a reassessment of this perspective. That is precisely what the historian Nicole Hemmer offers in *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s*. She is joined in rethinking the evolution of conservatism by two journalists who approach the subject from different places on the political spectrum. Dana Milbank, the author of *The Destructionists: The Twenty-Five-Year Crack-Up of the Republican Party*, is a liberal *Washington Post* columnist. Matthew Continetti, the author of *The Right: The Hundred-Year War for American Conservatism*, arrived at *The Weekly Standard* as a 22-year-old in 2003 and is now a Never Trumper at the American Enterprise Institute and a contributing editor to *National Review*. All three books portray a conservatism that was fraught with tensions long before Trump's emergence. Their goal is to explain why the current incarnation of the GOP shouldn't come as a surprise. In showing the deep roots of our present crisis, their analyses also suggest the limits of any politics focused on a dream of salvaging the Republican Party.

**THE CONSENSUS** among political historians of the post–World War II years is that the conservative movement of the period was driven by two connected

concerns: the desire to constrain the welfare state and the labor unions that had been created during the New Deal, and the imperative to fight international communism. In pursuit of both goals, conservatives embraced the ideology of the free market—as articulated, most notably, by Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman—and rejected the isolationism and "America First" mentality that had prevailed among many on the right prior to the war. This was, as Continetti argues, a major political shift: In the 1920s, the American right had been split between open elitists in the intellectual world, such as the journalist H. L. Mencken, who warned in a 1919 essay that "all government ... is a conspiracy against the superior man," and the grassroots mobilization of the Second Ku Klux Klan, which strove through mass rallies and political campaigns to maintain the purity of "the old pioneer stock."

During the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, the fight against the New Deal and the Soviet Union gave the right a new energy. Under the broad umbrella of opposing socialism and communism and defending freedom, all kinds of policies that might otherwise have appeared narrowly self-interested—free-market economics, anti-tax measures, opposition to unions, an aggressive interventionism in Vietnam and elsewhere—acquired an idealistic gloss. Even the ugliest aspects of postwar conservatism, such as its opposition to the civil-rights movement, could be portrayed as a principled defense of localism, or even as part of the anti-communist project: Some conservatives suspected that key advisers of Martin Luther King Jr. were secretly in league with Moscow, and that the entire civil-rights movement was riddled with communist sympathizers.

But this brand of conservative politics—while garnering substantial support, especially from midsize-business owners and prosperous suburbanites, as well as southerners—failed to gain enough traction to win national elections in the '50s and '60s. Victories came only in the '70s, as postwar economic growth faltered and the conservative coalition expanded. Now it included working-class white voters in the North and South animated by resentment, fear, and racism in the aftermath of civil-rights successes. The movement also tapped into a new wave of organizing among evangelical churches, which were able to make common cause with anti-government conservatives in opposing such policies as the IRS denial of tax-exempt status for Christian schools found to be racially discriminatory. For their part, conservatives signed on to much of the evangelicals' cultural crusade against abortion access and gay rights.

Yet these new recruits and the business-oriented conservative establishment, all three authors argue, never fully merged. The New Right, which gathered momentum in the '70s, remained at arm's length from

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emergence.*

the elite intellectual organizations of conservatism, such as the American Enterprise Institute and the libertarian Cato Institute. Its key activists lacked the establishment's intense focus on economic issues, and were angry that their own zealous focus on cultural issues (strictly limiting abortion, banning gay teachers from public schools) wasn't shared. The schism and the fractious extremism at the core of the party, in tone as well as policies, were masked, however, by Reagan's cheerful persona—that of an avuncular, old-school movie-star gentleman whose politics embraced, Hemmer writes, “flexibility and optimism, making movement conservatism genuinely popular for the first time in the Cold War era.”

Not that Reagan, despite the unifying power of his presidency, was a moderate. He had a long history of warning against the “encroaching control” of the liberal state, and his administration's harsh attacks on welfare policies, unions, and busing were extreme; so was his support for his “Star Wars” defense initiative and for violent anti-communists in Central America. But anti-communist internationalism on the right also helps explain Reagan's comparatively genial stance on immigration. As he put it during his 1980 campaign, “You don't build a nine-foot fence along the border between two friendly nations.” An early draft of the speech went further still: “We cannot erect a Berlin Wall across the southern border.”

The collapse of the Soviet Union and decline of communism in the early '90s shook the political world of the right. Suddenly, the lack of common ground between religious and cultural conservatives on the one hand and the libertarian-leaning establishment on the other was exposed. Already, anti-communist hard-liners had denounced Reagan for meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev, and evangelicals had been chafing at his failure to do more to outlaw abortion. In the 1988 presidential race, Hemmer reminds us, the television host Pat Robertson had challenged George H. W. Bush in a campaign that tapped into conservative dissatisfaction with Reagan.

Despite the apparent triumph of capitalism in the Cold War, many conservatives in the 1980s and early '90s were gripped by what Continetti calls a “deep-seated pessimism.” They had managed to take control of the White House for eight years, yet were unable to shrink the state, had trouble holding Congress, and felt unwelcome in Hollywood and academia. A gloomy, bitter conservatism began to spread, from above and from below. Its rhetoric was tinged with loss and preoccupied with themes of masculinity, race, and immigration, a far cry from Reagan's upbeat invocations of freedom and morning in America. The journalist Peter Brimelow's 1995 best seller, *Alien Nation*, for example, opened with the suggestion that the

country had been defined by a “specific ethnic core” that “has always been white”—and was now in danger of being replaced.

The transformation on the right was stylistic as well as substantive. It's hard to imagine Reagan leading cheers of “Lock her up!” or inventing Trump-style nicknames for his enemies. But this jeering patois would have been familiar to followers of Rush Limbaugh, whose nationally syndicated conservative talk-radio program started broadcasting on AM stations in 1988. Limbaugh was a college dropout who had read Pat Buchanan's newspaper columns when he was growing up in Missouri and then found his way to radio, getting his break when Morton Downey Jr. was fired for using openly racist language on the air. Limbaugh immediately began to develop his own style, one that anticipated the bullying sarcasm of Twitter: Rather than harangue his audience or engage in high-minded exegeses of Friedrich Hayek or other conservative thinkers, he set out to “ridicule the left,” as Hemmer puts it. Limbaugh routinely insulted Democratic politicians—Ted Kennedy was “The Swimmer”; Robert Byrd was “Sheets” (referring to his Ku Klux Klan past)—and when critics phoned in to his show, he would cut them off with what he referred to as a “caller abortion” (a loud vacuum-cleaner noise followed by a scream before the line went dead).

A similar shift took place on Capitol Hill, where a program of tax cuts and deregulation was supplemented by constant hyperbolic invective. Newt Gingrich's crusade to rally congressional Republicans to build their base by explicitly embracing political language that demeaned their political opponents is well known. Even so, the intensity of some of this rhetoric—and the ways in which it foreshadowed the style on the right today—remains surprising. Milbank describes the 1990 memo that Gingrich's political-action committee circulated to Republican candidates. Titled “Language: A Key Mechanism of Control,” it instructed them in how to “speak like Newt,” using words such as *sick*, *corrupt*, *bizarre*, *pathetic*, *destroy*, and *decay* when characterizing Democrats. Gingrich himself deployed this strategy incessantly, describing Democratic politicians as the “enemy of normal Americans” and calling for a “war” against the left to be fought with “a scale and a duration and a savagery that is only true of civil wars.”

Meanwhile, conspiracy theories acquired new salience in the movement, having long proliferated in less public ways on the right. (The John Birch Society, for example, specialized in anti-communist paranoia and continued to attract members well after it was repudiated by William F. Buckley and *National Review* in the 1960s.) Stoking doubts about whether Vince Foster, who had been deputy White House counsel to

PARTISANS: THE  
CONSERVATIVE  
REVOLUTIONARIES  
WHO REMADE  
AMERICAN POLITICS  
IN THE 1990S

Nicole Hemmer

BASIC BOOKS

THE RIGHT: THE  
HUNDRED-YEAR  
WAR FOR AMERICAN  
CONSERVATISM

Matthew  
Continetti

BASIC BOOKS

THE  
DESTRUCTIONISTS:  
THE TWENTY-  
FIVE-YEAR  
CRACK-UP OF  
THE REPUBLICAN  
PARTY

Dana Milbank

DOUBLEDAY

President Clinton, had really died by suicide in 1993 proved popular. Helen Chenoweth, the three-term Idaho representative in the '90s, catered to militia supporters and the far right with claims that the United Nations was secretly plotting to institute a "one world" government, a mission enabled by federal agents in "black helicopters" flying over Idaho.

Hemmer and Continetti make the case that the Republican establishment still held sway as late as the George W. Bush years. Hemmer calls Bush "the last Reaganite," intent on pursuing free-trade agreements and tax cuts, while Continetti describes Bush as adopting a principled "freedom agenda" in the War on Terror and notes his efforts at immigration reform. Milbank, by contrast, sees the entire Republican establishment lurching to the right over those same Bush years. In his account, gerrymandering, campaign-finance scandals, and the "Brooks Brothers Riot" in Florida after the 2000 election (in which Republican operatives in suits mobbed the office where a recount was taking place, shouting "Stop the count! Stop the fraud!") all anticipate the naked power grabs of the contemporary right. Milbank himself became the target of Karl Rove's rage after writing a 2002 article headlined "For Bush, Facts Are Malleable," about the administration's efforts to stoke support for the Iraq War; after it appeared, Rove telephoned Milbank's boss and requested that he be removed from the White House beat.

As the authors get closer to the present and to Trump-era chaos, the reading experience becomes disorienting. One source of overwrought, outlandish outrage is rapidly overtaken by the next; any given departure from evidence-based rational assessment is topped by another, as denial of Barack Obama's American citizenship is joined by climate-change denial, COVID denial, and 2020 election denial, while the base declares faith in QAnon and ivermectin. Each dispiriting set of characters gives way to a yet more demoralizing array. Glenn Beck is followed by Tucker Carlson; Ann Coulter and Sarah Palin by Elise Stefanik; the Tea Party by the Oath Keepers. One moment Lou Dobbs is insisting that he's "just asking questions" about Obama's birth certificate; the next, he's been thrown aside for being insufficiently anti-immigrant. Revolutions "devour their own children," goes the truism (credited to a skeptic of the French Revolution)—but among conservatives today, the journey from hero to apostate seems to happen at warp speed. So, among almost all the Republicans in the legislative branch, did the journey from momentarily denouncing Trump, on January 6, to swearing fealty once again.

**WILL THE** Republican Party continue to move ever further to the right? And if so, what does this portend for American politics? Taking the longest view,

*In the "Brooks Brothers Riot" in Florida after the 2000 election, Republican operatives in suits mobbed the recount proceedings, shouting "Stop the count! Stop the fraud!"*

Continetti sees the current struggles on the right as the latest manifestation of a 100-year battle between the "forces of extremism" and those who have sought mainstream acceptance for conservative ideas—the establishment wing to which he has devoted his life. One imagines that he is looking for models when he approvingly refers to Senator Margaret Chase Smith's 1950 castigation of Joseph McCarthy, and her warning that "certain elements of the Republican Party" had chosen to manipulate their way to "victory through the selfish political exploitation of fear, bigotry, ignorance, and intolerance."

But reading these books together does not inspire confidence. For one thing, as Continetti is honest enough to admit, the distinctions between the extremists and the respectable right have never been all that clear-cut. The postwar conservative movement was entwined with opposition to the civil-rights movement from the outset. Such luminaries as Buckley used *National Review* in its early days to argue against federal troops going to Little Rock, Arkansas, to protect Black schoolchildren; he did so on the grounds not only that the "Southern dilemma" was a matter for local control but that white people remained the "advanced race" and thus should be able to discriminate. Given this history, which predates the 1990s by decades, resurrecting an American conservatism free of the taint of racism—and deeply committed to democratic political engagement—is a formidable challenge.

Nor is it so easy to absolve "classical liberalism" and Reagan's free-market policies of responsibility for our current travails. What you won't find in these accounts, focusing as they do on the ideas and programs of conservatives in positions of power in politics and the media, is much sense of the social history of the United States over the past three decades, as the legacies of the Reagan years became clear. The radical tax cuts, hostility toward labor, and deregulation that marked the 1980s facilitated the rapid deindustrialization of American cities and the rise of finance and services as the motors of economic life in the United States. The unionized jobs that had provided meaningful upward mobility for many in the postwar years all but disappeared.

Reagan promoted these shifts, even if they did not originate with him. And as Clinton's presidency went on to demonstrate, the laissez-faire economic agenda of the 1980s and '90s became a largely bipartisan one: It promised a vision of a newly dynamic, globally plugged-in America rescued from boom-and-bust economics by low tax rates and the light hand of regulation. Pursued with a blithe insistence that all would be better in this best of all possible worlds, that agenda helped seed the social chaos and despair that have been such fertile ground for the right.

It has also helped create an economic elite with little connection to the rest of American society. Having benefited from low taxes and tax evasion, this elite has also been well served by the weakening of the public sector and the labor movement, and has every interest in the continued erosion of both. Tracing the history that illuminates Trump's success in commanding popular attention and support is important, even if evidence of a wholesale shift of working-class voters to the Republican Party is far from conclusive. Yet more surprising, in certain ways, is watching those factions of the political and economic elite that have thrown in their lot with Trump and the broader agenda he represents. They have been willing to do more than back candidates who are openly skeptical of democracy, and to continue funding election deniers after promising to cut off support. Abandoning traditional corporate imperatives, especially the desire for stability, some in these circles have relied on the least democratic features of our system (the Supreme Court, the filibuster, the Electoral College) to advance their ends, and made this reactionary politics far more dangerous in so doing.

How best to counter the politics of a Republican Party in thrall to Trump is not obvious. Milbank pleads with the republic to vote (presumably for Democrats), suggesting that the Republican project is an antidemocratic one that speaks for a declining rural white minority and will inevitably be defeated. Continetti rallies conservatives not to flee the scene but to stay and fight for the principles of classical liberalism. Only Hemmer proposes that the Democratic Party might also bear some culpability for the transformation of the partisan landscape—which implies that an overhaul of moral and political vision is crucial.

One of the challenges of our moment is that so many forces seem poised to drive people out of what remains of public life. At some point, arguing with opponents galvanized by a completely different political calculus becomes enervating. It feels like shadowboxing, at a time when the issues our society confronts—the pandemic, climate change, the international role of the United States, stark economic inequality—have never been more pressing. The way forward is daunting because it calls for a new kind of politics that can generate the courage and strength to push back against a politics of fear and demonization. With all due respect to Margaret Chase Smith, the path doesn't lie in trying to reconstruct the old order that helped open the door to our current crisis. *A*

*Kim Phillips-Fein, who teaches American history at Columbia University, is the author, most recently, of Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics.*

## *Floaters*

By Arthur Sze

Magpies fly from branch to branch. In the slow  
tide of the afternoon, you sleep in my arms;  
we drift to shore, as sea turtles beach;

the ocean surf breaks; an incoming  
wave foams up on sand then subsides.  
Stepping into daylight after weeks of smoke,

we smell rain before it begins to rain;  
in the open garage, we exude an aroma  
of juniper bark, roll a Ping-Pong table

into place, and, lowering the legs, stretch  
the net, volley. Sending a white ball  
back and forth, back and forth, we sway

in season. Now we stride into a sloping lava tube,  
and water drips in the dark. As we emerge  
into rain forest, an 'apapane flits

among branches; sunlight dapples our eyelids;  
we follow a path that splits into many  
paths as leaves on 'ōhi'a trees shimmer.

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*Arthur Sze's tenth collection, Sight Lines, received the  
2019 National Book Award for Poetry.*

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## ESSAY

### Ian McEwan's Counterlife

*The author reflects  
on a charmed life—  
and all that could  
have gone wrong.*

By  
Adam  
Begley

Ian McEwan, slumped on a comfortable couch in the large formal sitting room of his Cotswolds manor house, dazzling early-summer sun filtering through the tall, narrow windows, tells me he has been suffering from a protracted bout of pessimism. “I got totally obsessed with Russia invading Ukraine,” he says, an unfamiliar note of pain in his voice. “From February onwards, it filled my thoughts. Massacres in



small villages northeast of Kyiv, like curling black-and-white photographs. Suddenly it's here again—unbelievable, merciless brutality; old ladies shot in their kitchens.” He rubs his eyes (hay fever). A barbaric assault on European complacency, the invasion has reminded him how close we are, all of us, to annihilation.

Aware of his good fortune, of his plush surroundings, he acknowledges “an enormous amount of local happiness” cushioning his geopolitical gloom. Lockdown, perversely liberating, was midwife to his 17th novel, *Lessons*: “It was one of the most pleasant writing experiences I’ve ever had. The stillness here, the long walks, writing every day, seven days a week, 10 hours a day.” The result is his longest book and among his most engrossing, an exploration of a lifetime and an era, the 70-year stretch from the postwar decade to the present day, the bruised and battered Pax Americana. One of the many questions the novel poses: “By what logic or motivation or helpless surrender did we all, hour by hour, transport ourselves within a generation from the thrill of optimism at Berlin’s falling Wall to the storming of the American Capitol?”

*Lessons* thrives on the interplay between seismic global events—the Cold War, Chernobyl, Brexit, COVID-19—and private lives, in particular that of Roland Baines, an alter ego whose parents, siblings, childhood, and early education are all minutely modeled on McEwan’s own. On the brink of adolescence, Ian’s and Roland’s paths diverge. The alter ego suffers a trauma that knocks him off course; thereafter, everything he does and everything done to him begs to be measured against the real-life experience of the author. Life and counterlife: Roland’s mid-30s marital disaster is a fun-house distortion of the gradual collapse of McEwan’s first marriage and the bruising, much publicized custody battle that followed. Whereas McEwan moved on and flourished, Roland floundered.

In his early 70s, having drifted ineffectually through several freelance careers, Roland pictures himself as “the bald and porcine nonentity with the disappointed air.” McEwan, whose hairline has retreated and who nurtures, just shy of his 74th birthday, a modest paunch,

carries himself with the easy confidence of that rare writer who is both a serial best seller and a prize-bedecked darling of the critics. Calm, rational, unhurried, he fixes you with a steady eye, narrowed occasionally to a quizzical squint, his gaze the physiological equivalent of his lucid, neat, economical prose. His wry good humor suggests that he’s a stranger to disappointment and difficulty.

An anti-memoir, a memoir of the life McEwan *might* have led, *Lessons* begins with the memory of a harrowing piano lesson. Eleven-year-old Roland is newly arrived at a boarding school in Suffolk. His parents are 2,000 miles away, in Libya, where his father is a captain in the British army. Here comes the trauma, the genesis of the counterlife. Roland is frightened and confused by Miriam Cornell, his 22-year-old teacher: “Round-faced, erect, perfumed, strict. Her beauty lay concealed behind her manner. She never scowled or smiled. Some boys said she was mad, but he doubted that.” He’s overcome by her rosewater scent. “Her arm was firm and warm against his shoulder, her hands, her painted nails, were right above his lap. He felt a terrible tingling draining his attention.” After he stumbles again and again over the same note, she punishes him, a moment that will change his life:

Her fingers found his inside leg, just at the hem of his grey shorts, and pinched him hard. That night there would be a tiny blue bruise. Her touch was cool as her hand moved up under his shorts to where the elastic of his pants met his skin. He scrambled off the stool and stood, flushed.

Roland doesn’t know it yet, and it will take him half a lifetime to face it, but that hand sliding up under his shorts is a sexual assault. Miriam is grooming him, and three years later, when he’s 14, they embark on a torrid two-year affair—“erotic bliss” for the teenage child, and for Miriam, too. They are in love, or so they believe. At 16, Roland manages to break away, jolted by the creeping realization that Miriam is, after all, mad.

The scene at the piano, an example of the forensic realism McEwan has

perfected, is vivid and convincing. It also sows confusion. A young woman abusing a boy? “I wanted to write about the victim,” McEwan explains. “If I’d done it the usual way, I’d have to ‘culturally appropriate’ a woman.” (The quotation marks are audible, just barely.) He adds that there are of course far more instances of boys being abused by older men. “I could have done it that way, but the sex I know from the inside is heterosexual. So I wasn’t going to appropriate gay experience either.”

Not wholly satisfied with his explanation and aware, perhaps, that it might sound impatient or prickly, he begins again: “I want to go deep into this, the actual seduction scene. The permanence of the experience in memory takes its shape from the fact that, inappropriately, love and desire were aroused in Roland—and that longing is always there. However angry he might be with her, or however much he tries to run away from the thoughts, there was at some point a total obsession and desire, which he thought at the time was his own choice.”

After noting that the novel offers no final judgment on Miriam’s actions, McEwan delivers a verdict, slowly, clearly, as if for the record: “Anyone who activates sexual longing in a child is crossing the line into something resembling rape. Even if it isn’t rape, it’s not consensual; it *cannot* be consensual, because Roland, at 14, is a child.” The damage is enduring. Two decades later, when Roland is told that his piano teacher “rewired” his brain, he recognizes the appalling accuracy of the diagnosis.

The next great turning point in his life occurs soon after he has overcome his trauma-induced aversion to commitment and married a half-German woman, Alissa, an aspiring writer. They have a son, Lawrence, who is only seven months old when Alissa vanishes, leaving a cryptic note saying she’s been “living the wrong life.” She deserts Roland and the baby in order to write, “consumed by an ambition for which she was ready to suffer and make others suffer too.” She goes on to become Germany’s leading novelist, a best-selling author with a formidable international reputation—and a “defiantly realist” voice that might as well be McEwan’s. Lawrence,

meanwhile, remains motherless. The child has no memory of Alissa, doesn't know where she is or why she left. As for poor, jilted Roland, "the common tightly encircled fate of single mothers was his."

Alissa abandoning her baby boy and years later ending the marriage with bloodless efficiency ("papers prepared by German and English lawyers, paid for by Alissa") is the opposite of what happened to McEwan. His 13-year marriage to Penny Allen, a spiritual counselor and freelance writer, fell apart in 1994. She fought to keep custody of their two sons, a fight she lost—and in the midst of losing, she absconded with the younger boy, who was then 13. The tragicomic episode was recounted with glee in British newspapers delighted to see a celebrated author endure a grim plot twist straight out of his own fiction: His third novel, *The Child in Time* (1987), begins with a toddler's abduction.

In his 60s, Roland goes to a lecture on Robert Lowell and his sonnet sequence *The Dolphin*—"the larger subject was the ruthlessness of artists," hence the draw. Roland hears how in these poems Lowell cruelly used and misused the misery of his discarded wife, Elizabeth Hardwick. After the lecture, a woman in the audience argues that Lowell's cruelty fits a recognized pattern of masculine behavior: male artists who abandon their responsibilities toward their families and hide "behind the demands of their high calling, their art." Women artists who do the same, she notes, are harshly condemned.

Three pages on the Lowell scandal might seem like an unnecessary digression (or a clunky way to address another gender flip), yet McEwan knits the episode into the fabric of the novel with a characteristic dither from Roland, who decides he will stand up in the lecture hall and say, "I am a male Hardwick." And then doesn't do it: "The moment passed . . . Roland began to doubt himself." Here again, comparison with McEwan's experience is instructive. In October 2014, when he was speaking at the Cheltenham Literature Festival, he was heckled from the back of the audience by his ex-wife, fodder for more newspaper headlines.

McEwan didn't respond to Allen's heckling and offered no comment to the press. I've been interviewing him on and

off for 30-odd years, and reading him for longer (a few years ago, he proposed that I write his biography), and I know without asking that McEwan won't talk on or off the record about his ex-wife. In 1999, a High Court judge in London issued an injunction preventing Allen from commenting on their marriage—and he in turn observes a self-imposed silence with regards to her. The counterlife of *Lessons* echoes loudly with her absence.

About literature, McEwan is always ready to talk. "Novels at their best name the world," he tells me, not for the first time. His stubborn devotion to realism

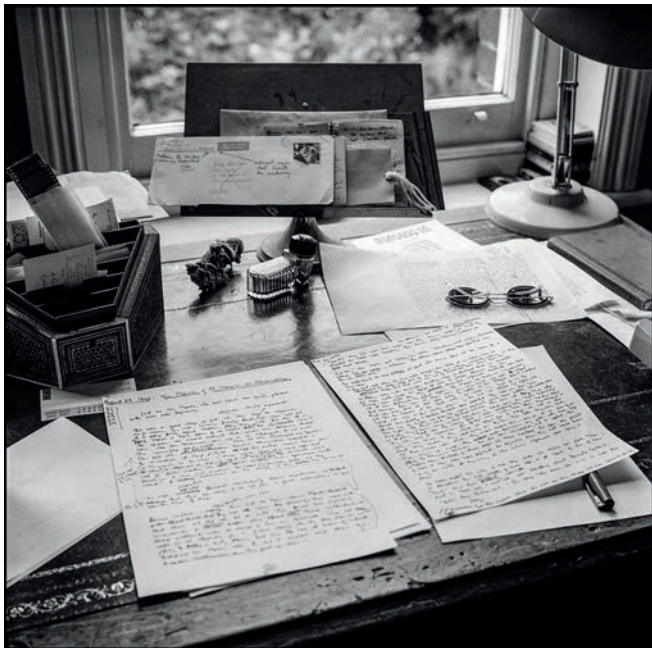
*McEwan's  
stubborn devotion  
to realism is at  
once a strength  
and a weakness; it  
risks making him  
seem old-fashioned  
and conventional,  
too tidy, too slick.*

is at once a strength and a weakness; it risks making him seem old-fashioned and conventional, too tidy, too slick. He names the world, but of course can't apprehend it with unimpeachable objectivity, his worldview distorted by the usual suspects: race, gender, sexual preference, socioeconomic status. A militantly empirical, science-minded secular humanist, he's happy to declare that materialism is "the most freeing of worldviews" and unafraid to bash religiosity: "The word *spiritual*," he told me nearly 20 years ago, "I just don't understand what people mean. I hear that word and I reach for my gun." His realism rests

on certainty tempered by an acute awareness of contingency—and by empathy, a novelist's indispensable attribute. But can empathy wholly compensate for an ingrained point of view, a nexus of obdurate personal bias and cherished belief? Even assuming that the world he wants to name is one we all recognize, how can he be confident that language carries meaning without spillage or slippage? Readers on the lookout for confirmation of radical, existential doubt and fans of the avant-garde thrilled by the instability of language should pluck books from a different shelf.

But readers who prefer an author who says, in essence, *This is who we are, how we live; this is the condition of our modernity* will recognize the authority stamped on McEwan's sentences. *Lessons* begins, "This was insomniac memory, not a dream." Even as he explores what might have been, life's mysterious bifurcations, he's still saying, *We are on firm ground here; the way forward will be clearly signposted*. "It's part of his mastery as a novelist," says his old friend and fellow novelist Julian Barnes, who read an advance copy of *Lessons*. "Already, in the first few pages, you think, *Ah, I'm back with Ian, back with his high intelligence and his clear style*—you know that he knows what he's doing and you'll be in good hands."

AFTER AN HOUR'S CONVERSATION, McEwan suggests we take a stroll through the grounds. Below neatly tended terraced gardens—masses of roses, delphiniums, poppies, the riot of color intensified by the buzzing of wild bees—is a large pond with a jetty and a rowboat. Grass meadows spill into an unspoiled, thickly wooded valley. There are nine acres in all and, hidden away, sequestered by tall yew hedges, an infinity pool with a view over the valley. At the edge of the pond he frets over a variety of water lily that's spread too quickly, then turns back to look up at the house, the limestone glowing warm in the bright sunshine. He bought the property a decade ago with his second wife, Annalena McAfee, a newspaper editor turned novelist whom he married in 1997. Clearly still surprised that he owns it, he mentions the fact that his parents, like Annalena's, came from working-class backgrounds. It's a Gatsby



Top: Ian McEwan in London in 1981.

Bottom: A manuscript of *Black Dogs* on his writing desk in Oxford in 1992.

moment—McEwan taking note of how far he's traveled. His father left school to become a butcher's boy; his mother worked as a chambermaid. He was the first in the family to be educated beyond the age of 16. Growing up, neither he nor Annalena could have dreamed of living in such a house.

*Lessons* is his way of acknowledging what he calls "the colossal degree of the accidental." A hard pinch on his thigh and he might have been Roland—who is himself keenly aware that his haphazard life is a fortunate one. Here he is in Berlin, staring down into the white-tiled basement cells of the demolished Gestapo headquarters:

The accidental fortune was beyond calculation, to have been born in 1948 in placid Hampshire, not Ukraine or Poland in 1928, not to have been dragged from the synagogue steps in 1941 and brought here. His white-tiled cell—a piano lesson, a premature love affair, a missed education, a missing wife—was by comparison a luxury suite. If his life so far was a failure, as he often thought, it was in the face of history's largesse.

*Lessons* measures the distance between a Gestapo cell and Roland's cluttered, rotting house in Clapham (McEwan lived in a house in Clapham for five years, some of that time with Allen and her two daughters from a previous marriage). I can't help measuring the further distance between a Gestapo cell and an infinity pool in the Cotswolds.

Back in the house and nursing a cup of tea, he traces the overlap between his life and Roland's. "My Libyan childhood; the tension between my parents, never acknowledged; the split in the family—again, no one ever said it was a split in the family—all of that is pretty much as I remember it. I've never really written about it, except tangentially."

The split in the McEwan family predates Ian's birth. His mother, Rose, was married to a man named Ernest Wort, with whom she had two children. While Ernest was overseas fighting in the Second World War, Rose had an affair with another soldier, David McEwan, a sergeant major who'd been wounded at Dunkirk.

She got pregnant and in 1942 gave birth to a baby boy whom she gave away after placing a classified ad in a local newspaper: “Wanted, home for baby boy, age 1 month; complete surrender.” Her husband died in 1944, from injuries sustained in combat, and in 1947 the widowed Rose married David. Their affair and the baby they surrendered completely were kept secret. Ian, like Roland, was born in 1948.

Although for two decades they lived no more than 15 miles apart, neither brother knew of the other’s existence. Then in 2002 a man named David Sharp contacted McEwan and his half-siblings and told them his story, which he’d pieced together first through finding the newspaper ad, then with the help of a tracing service run by the Salvation Army, and finally thanks to Rose’s sister, who confirmed that Rose had handed her baby over to a couple named Sharp on a railway-station platform in 1942. The Sharps, also working-class, had provided young David with a happy childhood. At age 14 he learned that he’d been adopted; the next year he left school to become a bricklayer. No wonder McEwan muses on lives he might have led.

His earliest years (and Roland’s) were spent on army bases abroad, including the six years in Libya, after which he was sent to Woolverstone Hall, a boarding school in Suffolk some 90 miles northeast of London. His parents were eager for him to have the education they’d missed out on. “It was an extraordinary semi-experimental school,” he remembers, “mostly working-class kids from central London, from what they used to call broken families.” It was a selective state school, but the McEwans paid no tuition. His piano teacher was a woman and his playing showed promise. (“She never laid a finger on me,” he says flatly.) He gave up the piano, a fork in the road, as he sees it: “If I’d continued, I might never have become a writer. I was so shy, I would have sunk into the piano.”

Woolverstone Hall provided a solid education. “In 1966, at the age of 18, I was well grounded in the canon as it then stood, unchallenged, from Chaucer through to T. S. Eliot.” He might have gone on to study English at King’s College, Cambridge, except for a humiliating stumble in his interview. (He tried to bluff his way

through a question about *Macbeth*, which he’d yet to read; asked point-blank if he’d read the play, he confessed, and was so mortified that he refused to say another word.)

Instead he went to the University of Sussex, newly established and with fresh ideas about how to read literature: Interdisciplinary study was encouraged, historical context taken into consideration. “I got things at Sussex I never would have got at Cambridge: Kafka, Freud, Bruno Schulz, and historiography—Frederick Jackson Turner and Jacob Burckhardt.” It was his reading of Kafka, Freud, and Schulz, with Thomas Mann and others thrown into the mix, that started him writing.

*Wowed by the  
black humor,  
the kinkiness,  
the menace of  
McEwan’s first  
four books,  
the British  
press bestowed  
a nickname:  
Ian McAbre.*

He was admitted to a brand-new master’s program in literature at the University of East Anglia, where he had the option of submitting a creative-writing thesis. During his year there, he wrote most of his first book, a collection of stories called *First Love, Last Rites* (1975).

Published just after he turned 27, the stories thrust McEwan into the thick of mid-1970s literary London. Barnes recalls, “I reviewed *First Love* in the *New Statesman* with such enthusiasm that I ended up in *Private Eye*’s Pseuds Corner”—where the satirical magazine reprints pretentious, pseudo-intellectual quotations plucked from elsewhere in the media.

“Fortunately,” Barnes adds, “I hadn’t met him at that point, but I met him shortly afterwards. We were both hanging around Ian Hamilton’s *New Review*. I was writing a column, and Ian was sending in brilliant short stories that were too disgusting for other outlets to print.”

Barnes isn’t kidding about the stories being disgusting. Rape, incest, pornography, rotting corpses, bestiality, child abuse, more child abuse (the vulnerability of children is one of McEwan’s great topics), murder, murderous fantasies—this is the stuff of his first four books, two of which, *The Cement Garden* (1978) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), were novels. These sensational early works were designed to shock, and did. The biographer Hermione Lee, McEwan’s exact contemporary, recalls “a breathtaking talent leaping into the literary world. Everyone was talking about it; everyone was astounded by it.” Lee attended one or two of the Friday lunches at the Pillars of Hercules on Greek Street, the unofficial headquarters of *The New Review*, where an “affable and competitive” coterie of male writers (among them McEwan, Barnes, Hamilton, Martin Amis, Craig Raine, and Clive James) ate and talked and drank and drank some more. She remembers “the rough and tumble of Clive James holding forth and Ian Hamilton being sour and dour and brilliant, and McEwan always quietly, beautifully polite and thoughtful. It was a paradox: There was the gentle, attentive, mild-seeming person that one met, and the scalpel-like, ghoulish precision of that early work.” Wowed by the black humor, the kinkiness, the menace, the British press bestowed a nickname: Ian McAbre.

Four books in the space of six years, great reviews, respectable sales—when I mention this fast start, McEwan seems to sink deeper into the couch. “The gothic early works,” he says wearily. “They were like baby steps, a small dark patch I inhabited for a while—and then got very claustrophobic. I had to move on. It has no interest for me now.”

During an astonishing 20-year stretch from 1987 (*The Child in Time*) to 2007 (*On Chesil Beach*), he published eight novels, nearly all extravagantly praised best sellers. Little trace of the gothic remained,

in its place a new engagement with the wider world. Mature McEwan was morally aware, socially responsible, politically committed. In the 1980s, as part of the European Nuclear Disarmament movement, he visited Eastern Bloc countries with the left-wing historian E. P. Thompson and met with Russian antinuclear dissidents, a trip that informed his thinking-person's thriller, *The Innocent* (1990), set in Cold War Berlin. (Roland, too, joins the movement; he attends lectures by Thompson.) In 1998, McEwan won the Booker Prize for *Amsterdam*; a couple of years later, the Queen appointed him Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

During those same two decades, films were made of *The Comfort of Strangers*, *The Innocent*, *Enduring Love*, and *Atonement*. More recently, *On Chesil Beach* and *The Children Act* (2014) have been adapted for the screen, with McEwan himself writing the scripts.

As if to assure us that his long winning streak is significant, that McEwan will enjoy a healthy literary afterlife, the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas paid \$2 million for his papers in 2014. So far the archive consists of 71 document boxes, 12 computer discs, and a hard drive.

SOME MCEWAN NOVELS seem to me unlikely to last: the absurdly plotted *Amsterdam*; *Solar* (2010), overstuffed with heavy-handed humor; and the glib and tricky *Sweet Tooth* (2012). If McEwan has staying power, I believe it will be fueled by two novels from that golden 20-year span: *Black Dogs* (1992), a neglected gem, and *Atonement* (2001), widely hailed as his masterpiece. And now, *Lessons*.

*Black Dogs* is a novel of ideas pitting rationalism against spiritualism and encompassing the Holocaust and the fall of the Berlin Wall. It also harkens back to the author's gothic phase. At the climax of the tale, McEwan zooms in on the open jaws of the eponymous canines with signature hyperrealism: "the alien black gums, slack black lips rimmed by salt, a thread of saliva breaking, the fissures on a tongue that ran to smoothness along its curling edge." The dogs are incarnations of evil, "spirit hounds"—symbols of man's stunning capacity for merciless cruelty, and yet

they remain stubbornly real, a flesh-and-blood threat. The novel ends with a prophecy that has, alas, already been fulfilled: "They will return to haunt us, somewhere in Europe, in another time."

*Atonement*, McEwan's finest, most complex novel, is about love, war, and storytelling. A triptych followed by a coda, it begins on a crushingly hot summer's day in 1935 on the grounds of an English country house. Then suddenly we're in Northern France, witnessing the British Expeditionary Force's shambolic military retreat to Dunkirk in May 1940. Our last stop is a London hospital ward filled with grievously wounded Allied soldiers. The

Lessons  
acknowledges  
what McEwan  
calls "the colossal  
degree of the  
accidental." A  
hard pinch on  
his thigh and  
he might have  
been Roland, his  
protagonist.

three panels, all gorgeous, are radically different from one another, though the writing is uniformly rich, elegant, and precise.

The wizardry of *Atonement* is only fully revealed in the coda, where we discover that all of the marvelous writing that precedes it is the lifework of Briony Tallis, whom we first met as a precocious 13-year-old on that summer's day in 1935. Although just a child at the time, Briony committed a terrible crime: She bore false witness. Her lifelong project, the book we've just read, is an attempt at atonement requiring bold, imaginative engagement, a fearless leap into bighearted empathy.

Or, as she puts it in describing the project of the realist novel, "Like policemen in a search team, we go on hands and knees and crawl our way towards the truth." With the coda, McEwan transforms the triptych into one sumptuous tapestry and reaffirms the author's moral imperative, as he sees it: the duty to write well, in good faith, and to bear truthful witness.

*Lessons* bears witness to another crime and its consequences. If Miriam Cornell hadn't slipped her hand up under Roland's shorts, he might have had a career as a concert pianist. Instead he plays "munch music" in the tearoom of a Mayfair hotel, "old favorites discreetly rendered so as not to disturb tranquil chat over Earl Grey tea and crustless sandwiches." When Alissa absconds, he's trying to establish himself as a poet; instead, he writes for in-flight magazines. Later he works for a start-up greeting-card company, "pouring out wised-up doggerel—on behalf of birthdays, anniversaries, newly-weds, retirees, recovering drug addicts and alcoholics, ingoing hospital patients, outgoing neonates."

A worse fate awaits. Three and a half years after she disappears, in an alleyway in East Berlin, as the Wall is falling, Alissa hands him the English proof of her first novel. A few hours later, back in his hotel room, he reads the first paragraph. "He paused, read it again, and groaned. He read five pages and stopped, went back and read them again—and groaned." The book is excellent. "How much easier it would have been if she had deserted her son and husband to write a mediocre novel." He sees at once that she will achieve a kind of greatness. "The prose was beautiful, crisp, artful, the tone from the first lines had authority and intelligence. The eye was exact, unforgiving, compassionate." That description points to a further irony: The wife who abandoned poor Roland writes like the author who consigned him to a career cranking out wised-up doggerel. I ask McEwan whether he had in mind a model for Alissa and her "rich and warm-blooded rationality." He confirms my suspicion, a faint smile playing on his lips: "I would love to have the reader of *Lessons* have Roland's response to reading Alissa."

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*McEwan and Martin Amis at a book party in 1991*

Despite the envious groans, despite the thwarted ambition, despite yet another tragic twist in the tale of his protracted sentimental education, Roland's life is not a misery. Uncomplaining, he endures the common fate: aging parents, dying parents, his own aging body betraying him, aching knees, a cardiac scare. With a light touch, McEwan captures the condition of late middle age: "These grown-up children were at that hinge of life when parents must begin to shrink and fold." The source of Roland's greatest satisfaction is his loose-knit family, his son and his son's children, late-acquired stepchildren and their children—he's a paterfamilias, loved and loving. As McEwan points out, "I gave Roland my schizoid sense of private happiness and public foreboding." Here's Roland in his 70s having supper with his son and daughter-in-law, the children already tucked in bed:

The windows were open to the warm night air. The three spoke and listened

easily, intimately. It often happened like this, Roland thought, the world was wobbling badly on its axis ... Parts of the world were burning or drowning. Simultaneously, in the old-fashioned glow of close family ... he experienced happiness that could not be dispelled, even by rehearsing every looming disaster ... It made no sense.

McEwan, too, basks in the old-fashioned glow of family. Both of his sons are fathers now, and he remains close—his troubles with Allen notwithstanding—to his two stepdaughters. Unlike the reclusive Alissa, he has never had to suffer for his ambition. He's had his cake and eaten it. *Lessons* reckons with his great good luck—not smugly, but with the same forensic detachment he displayed as Ian McAbre. Back then he was dissecting depravity; now it's our capacity for contentment and our stubborn urge to create.

Ray Dolan, McEwan's close friend, a neuroscientist at University College London, says *Lessons* has a "valedictory" air. Barnes agrees: "It's a summing up of Ian's life"—a startling claim, given the gulf between Roland and Ian. Barnes wrote a running commentary as he read, emailing McEwan four times with updates. In his final email he wrote, "I won't say *Lessons* feels like a Last Novel, but it wouldn't be the worst thing if it were. Not that I wish death or ideas failure upon you, of course."

McEwan is certain he will write another novel—maybe several more—before death or ideas failure silences him. He's not yet done naming the world—taking stock, as Roland so often does, of life trajectories and the blind rush of history. *A*

*Adam Begley is the author of Updike, The Great Nadar: The Man Behind the Camera, and Houdini: The Elusive American.*

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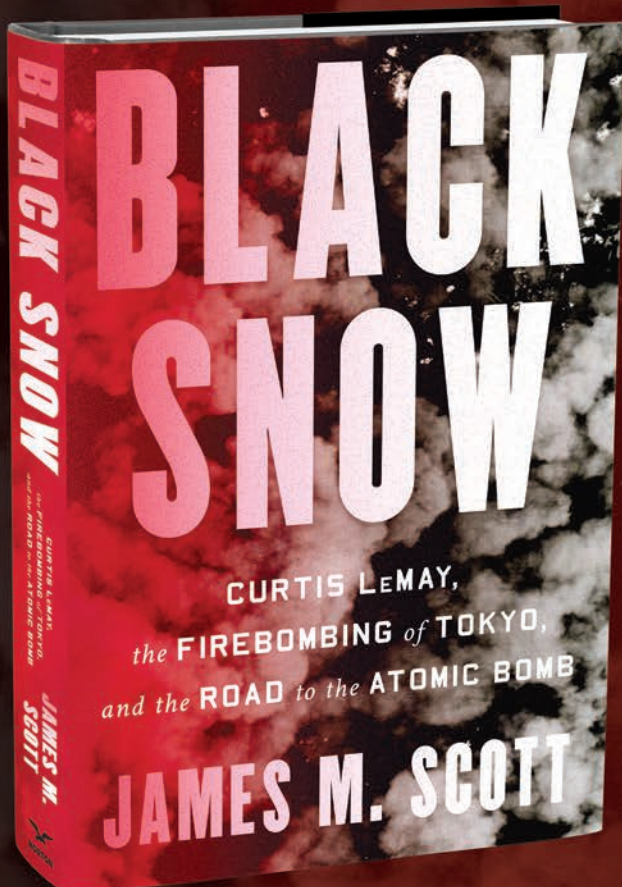
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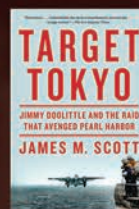
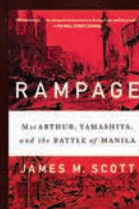
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Seriously. I was a terrible non-sleeper, once upon a time. In the small hours, in the little pointy hours, wife asleep, son asleep, dog asleep, when the whole apartment seemed to creak and bulge like a vessel rigged for oblivion, I would creep onto the couch and torture myself with last-man-in-the-worldness. But then I discovered it. I synthesized it: Jameson, headphones. The antidote. The warming, blurring-the-edges whiskey—a shot or two, no more—and the human voice.

First it was John le Carré novels. English voices murmuring about espionage—to a boarding-school boy like me, a cracked product of the Establishment, intensely soothing. Then it was Linda Hamilton (yes, Linda Hamilton of *Terminator*) reading Martin Amis's *Night Train*; Michael Cochrane reading Evelyn Waugh's *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (a performance of extraordinary Pinfoldian energy—when Cochrane enunciates the word *parliamentary* it has six syllables); and John Moffatt reading Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Believe me, nothing lays

you out like *The Faerie Queene*. I don't think I've ever made it to the second canto.

It's very late-stage capitalism, of course, to sit there or lie there in your envelope of sound, your private entertainment capsule, technologically sealed and cerebrally catered to, fiddling with the volume. But being read to is ancient. I love a podcast—the chitchat, the colloquy—but this is deeper: the reading voice, the singular storytelling voice, thrums in the memory tunnels of the species. When I'm listening to an audiobook, I'm being entertained like a tired ploughman. I'm being lulled, bardically lulled, like a drunken baron at a long feast table, pork grease shining on my chin. I'm being quieted like a child. I'm being spellbound like a face caught in firelight.

And, groggy as I might be, I'm very picky about my readers. The voice I'm listening to should be elevated, but not theatrical. Not too close to the mic: no fizzing sibilants or sticky plosives. Not too fast—I need every word to land. But not too slow, either—I'll get agitated.

Another thing: no super-fancy prose. No Nabokov. As a reader/writer I'm all for the high style—the trick, as I like to say, is to go too far without going too far. But being read to is not like reading. It engages a denser, more passive, and dimly wondering part of the brain. Epics work well: *The Lord of the Rings*, Seamus Heaney reading his *Beowulf*. You're close to the origins of experience here, the all-mothering darkness. And if you're prone, and comfortable, and perhaps a little buzzed, you'll sleep. *A*

*James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

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