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A Fighter From Within

Elizabeth Warren isn’t scared of Trump—or her own party.

GEORGE ZORNICK
Laughing Through the Pain
Thank you for the good laugh you gave me with the title of John Nichols’s article, “Trump at Two” [Feb. 11/18]. I had to pause to ask myself whether the piece might be about this point in Trump’s presidency or about his level of psychological maturity. Wendy Weidman Gig Harbor, Wash.

Past as Prologue
Re Greg Grandin and Elizabeth Oglesby’s “Washington Trained Guatemala’s Killers” [Feb. 11/18]: More can be learned about the US role in Guatemala’s current problems from this four-page article than from a book. It should be read to or by anyone who wonders why people are leaving Guatemala and walking to the US border to seek a better life. What people in the United States don’t know allows the current administration to fill their minds with false information about the migrants. A close reading of this article will change minds. Tom Hardenbergh.

The Truth in Fiction
I would like to commend Laila Lalami’s essay “Fiction Trumps Chaos” [Feb. 11/18], on the uses of fiction to make “sense of the presidency, one novel at a time.” Each of the novels she cites offers a telling and compelling approach to navigating the swamp of information and disinformation we’re forced to wade through each day, most notably when it comes to the topic of immigration.

I would like to add to her suggestions one important, prophetic novel from the early 1980s that places what we are witnessing on the US-Mexican border (and in our country more broadly) in a larger historical context—both pre- and “post”-colonial—while also limning our continued, troubled search for a truly inclusive democratic model: Leslie Marmon Silko’s Almanac of the Dead. This novel predicted many of today’s events, from the waves of immigrants moving north—only to be met by the US military—to the widespread political disenfranchisement and the rise of wealthy, unscrupulous developers who wreck the environment for personal gain with the support of governmental enablers. It is a powerful call to engagement with a chilling, centuries-long story. John Purdy Deming, Wash.

Learning to Read the Web
I enjoyed David A. Bell’s review of Sophia Rosenfeld’s Democracy and Truth [Feb. 11/18], especially the several vital initiatives that he suggests to take our democracy back, such as grassroots engagement and getting big money out of politics. One additional part of the solution: teaching our children and teenagers to evaluate online information for accuracy and bias.

Training our youth in strong, unbiased critical thinking in this confusing world of technology and social media will bear fruit in the form of an informed future citizenry—one that is sorely needed if our sinking democracy is to save itself. How do I know this can work? In the 1970s, I was fortunate to have both high-school and college teachers who taught us about the burgeoning fields of advertising and marketing, and how words and images could fool consumers. Such awareness has helped me judge ads skeptically for decades and insulated me from the marketers’ intended influence. We would do well to inoculate our youth against today’s media in a similar fashion. Sherry Jeppson Zitter Maynard, Mass.

Comments drawn from our website letters@thenation.com
A Trumped-Up Emergency

Y ou can believe one of two things about Donald Trump’s national emergency. You can believe that the National Emergencies Act (NEA) confers such far-reaching powers on the president that we’ve been living within a hair’s breadth of a dictatorship since 1976, and Trump is the first man smart enough to figure it out. Reagan? Obama? Ama-
teurs! Only Trump has noticed this constitutional kryptonite buried in our own laws, and now we must kneel before him like his name is Zod.

Or you can believe that the NEA does not preempt our entire system of democratic self-government. You can conclude that Trump is not, in fact, a Machiavel-
lian genius so much as a tantruming demagogue whose quest for power is helpfully mitigated by the Constitution, common sense, and his own stupidity.

If you believe the former, then we’re done here. I, however, choose to believe the latter. The NEA is a poorly written law, but one bad law does not defeat the rest of the Constitution. Subchapter 2 of the statute says that Congress can termi-
nate a national emergency declared by the president by passing a joint resolution. Yes, the president can veto such a resolution, but Congress can then override the veto. This is what the Democrats should try to do: Schedule a vote and force Senate Republicans to do the right thing.

Admittedly, I’m not holding my breath. Republic-
cans are already spinning the intellectually dishonest argument that the NEA grants the president dicta-
torial powers and there’s nothing Congress can do about it. But this is where the courts come in. Sixteen states have already filed a lawsuit to block the national emergency. These states argue that Trump’s plan vio-
lates the separation of powers, that it doesn’t address a real national emergency, and that the president is stealing funds from them earmarked for other issues.

There will be a temptation in the media to treat all this as a bunch of “legal mumbo jumbo” with strong arguments on “both sides.” Don’t believe that narrative. Trump is caught in a legal crucible, for a number of reasons. The first is a principle called the “nondelegation doctrine,” which states that Congress cannot hand off its “essential legislative func-
tions” to another branch of government—and there’s nothing more “essential” to Congress’s duties than appropriating funds. Even if Congress wants to give up its power to spend money, the courts can respond: “That’s not how the separation of powers works.” This is the kind of “limited government” argument that conservative judges should find appealing if they apply their principles instead of their politics. Progressive jurists won’t even need to dig that deep, because they’ll quickly strike an even more basic truth: There is no national emergency.

The NEA doesn’t define the term, but it also doesn’t convey any specific emergency powers. Instead, the act allows the president to invoke emergency powers contained in other laws. Here, Trump wants to steal money for his wall using a provision that authorizes the president to move military-construction money around in the event of a “declaration of war” or a “national emergency.” But the provision doesn’t provide this power for a “war” on whatever social group a presi-
dent doesn’t like; it specifies that the war or emer-
gency is one that “requires use of the armed forces.”

There’s nothing going on at the southern border that requires the use of armed forces. In fact, using them to enforce immigration laws may itself be a violation of the Posse Comitatus Act, which makes it illegal to use the military as a domestic police force.

Everything Trump is doing here is wrong. If anything, we’re being distracted from how clearly wrong this is by the sheer tonnage of illegal actions, all working in concert. Congress or the courts must use their statutory or constitutional authority to block Trump’s illegal power grab. If nobody stops him legally, then it’s time to pour into the streets and march. Tyrants don’t just “go away” because there will be an election soon.

ELIE MYSTAL

Cover illustration by Robert Sikoryak.
Advice for Maduro

From beyond the grave, by Chile’s Salvador Allende.

Señor Presidente Nicolás Maduro:
I send you these words as you fight for your political life, vowing that you will not be deposed as I was in Chile, by a military coup carried out by Gen. Augusto Pinochet that terminated democracy in my country for 17 years.

I understand why you wish to emphasize the similarities between your situation and the one I endured. Though there are many uncomfortable differences between us, there are also alarming parallels. As in Venezuela today, revolutionary Chile was ferociously divided into two warring camps, with leaders of Congress sedulously asking the military to intervene against the constitutional government, goaded on by the more prosperous sectors of the population.

The Chilean experiment—an attempt to build socialism through peaceful means, rather than through the armed struggle of previous revolutions—was undergoing considerable economic difficulties, albeit nothing like the extraordinary humanitarian disaster plaguing Venezuela now. And just as Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger conspired against Chile in 1973, Donald Trump, Michael Pompeo, and the redoubtable Elliott Abrams are leading the effort to oust you, the constitutional president of Venezuela, through the force of arms—one more arrogant repetition of Washington’s countless interventions in the internal affairs of countries around the world.

Despite these resemblances between Chile then and Venezuela now, you do a disservice to the cause of revolutionary change by comparing yourself to me. I was willing to do to unseat me—I decided to hold a referendum that would allow the people to determine the future of our country. If I lost, I would resign and call for new elections. My plan was to call for that referendum on September 11, 1973. But—what a surprise!—the plotters of the coup advanced the day of the takeover in order to block a nonviolent solution to our impasse, proving that they wanted to destroy democracy and not defend it, which may well be the case with a number of your own antagonists.

I am not sure if you are willing to envisage a plebiscite in Venezuela today such as the one I was going to propose over 45 years ago in Chile. I did not trust my opponents, and they did not trust me. But I still believe that we could have negotiated a series of agreements that would have left democracy and the will of the people intact.

It is not only the suffering of the Venezuelan people I am hoping you can avoid, but something of significance to all Latin Americans. Although it is true that some of your troubles are due to the actions of the United States, which has boycotted and subverted your economy as it did ours and instigated a coup against your predecessor, Hugo Chávez, I am particularly concerned that the way in which you have irresponsibly misgoverned your country is doing immeasurable harm to the progressive forces in the rest of Latin America. You are being used as the bogeyman of the continent, and several right-wing movements—including those in Chile, Colombia, Argentina, and Brazil—have gained power, in part, by positing themselves as the only ones who can save their lands from becoming another Venezuela. Even Trump has, absurdly and maliciously, implied in his recent State of the Union address that only he can stop the United States from becoming “socialist” like Venezuela.

(continued on page 8)
The Nation.

March 11/18, 2019

 Asking for a Friend

Love in the Anthropocene

Dear Liza,

I’m in an unexpected situation: I’ve found myself (a man) single and infatuated with another professor (a woman) in my department. Our department is large; we don’t see each other often; and while we collaborate occasionally, it is minimal. The university’s rules wouldn’t preclude us from dating, but I fear that even letting her know I’m interested could create discomfort for her. How should I approach this situation?

—Lovesick Professor

Dear Lovesick,

If you make your feelings known, you do face some risks (aside from the usual danger of heartbreak). She may, as you fear, experience your interest as sexist, especially if you’re in a discipline where women struggle to be taken seriously. Even worse, she may feel harassed. What if she rejects your overtures? If you’re in a more senior position or, in the future, have some authority over her (as department chair, for example) and make a decision that isn’t in her favor, she may suspect retaliation.

But professors have always fallen in love, and it would be ridiculous to stop. People spend all day at work and form relationships there, some of which—we can hope—will be romantic. If you can continue to navigate this with tact and care, don’t rule her out.

You don’t seem to know whether she is attracted to you, Lovesick. To find out, you must get to know her. Suggest opportunities to spend time together outside of the department that won’t be awkward for her to decline if she chooses: Throw a party and invite her, or offer to give her a ride to the airport if she’s traveling. If she says no, then she’s not interested, and you must move on. If she accepts, perhaps you’ll become friends. If, at that point, you still don’t know how she feels, ask her. If she rejects you, pretend you have no hard feelings, and go out of your way to remain collegial ever afterward.

Dear Liza,

I am a professor who travels to international conferences once or twice a year. One of my research concerns is climate change. Long-haul flights add significantly to one’s carbon footprint. I know a few academics who have given up otherwise useful conferences to reduce their carbon footprint. Is foregoing such flying a duty?

On a more personal level, my wife, who is not a professor, has seen far less of the world than I have. She is about to retire and is looking forward to traveling more. From an impartial point of view, such recreational trips seem even less justifiable than traveling to climate-change conferences. Yet I feel like a Grinch when invoking this concern, given that I’ve enjoyed the privilege of seeing the world.

My provisional answer has been to note that the problem of reducing carbon emissions is a collective one that requires collective solutions. But this strikes me as letting oneself off the hook too easily. Shouldn’t we each try to prefigure the personal conduct we would engage in if the world were better than it is? Without significant changes in individual behavior and attitude, how will we ever generate support for the needed collective action?

—Climate Hypocrite

Dear Hypocrite,

Air travel in its current form does make a huge contribution to climate change (accounting for as much as 5 percent). And while emissions in other sectors are decreasing, the aviation industry has resisted change, and governments struggle to regulate it.

You are right: Policy solutions are needed. Senator Ed Markey and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Green New Deal recommends expanding high-speed rail so dramatically that air travel in the US becomes unnecessary. We also need to tax rich people enough so they can’t afford to fly so often, whether in first class or in private jets.

Yet we should change our behavior, too. Policy changes like plastic-bag bans or municipal compost programs come about in part because people change their habits—or try to—and then demand large-scale reforms to... (continued on page 8)
The End of News?

If you think the media are in trouble now, just wait till there’s a recession.

Professional, evidence-based journalism has been under assault for decades now, but over the past few months, fresh attacks have battered it further. These attacks arrive fast and furiously, from so many directions that one hardly has time to acknowledge them all, much less address them in a way that keeps journalism’s business model alive and protects the integrity of the original enterprise.

Just since my last column in the Jan. 28/Feb. 4 issue we have seen:

§ More than 1,000 employees laid off at Buzzfeed, Aol, Taboo News, and Huffpost. The broadcast and digital company Vice Media denuded itself of 350 people. And last year, Mic—a site aimed at and staffed by young people and once valued at $100 million—eliminated virtually its entire staff.

§ Gatehouse Media, which publishes 145 daily newspapers, 325 community publications, and 555 local websites in 37 states, laid off at least 60 employees.

§ The Forward announced the end of its print publication—after 121 years of publishing in Yiddish, English, or Russian (and, recently, all three)—and cut loose about 30 percent of its staff, including its editor in chief.

§ Twenty Lake Holdings—a subsidiary of Alden Global Capital, the New York City hedge fund that purchases newspapers and strips their assets, fires their employees, and sells off their real estate—made a play for Gannett, the nation’s largest chain of daily newspapers as measured by circulation. The offer was rejected, but this is just the first round.

§ Jill Abramson, former executive editor of The New York Times, published a 544-page book that argues that journalism should stick to old-fashioned commitments like “truth” and “facts.” The problem: Her book is riddled with passages that nearly everyone—with the exception of Abramson—considers some combination of plagiarized, sloppily reported, and insufficiently fact-checked. The inexplicable failure of so credentialed a figure to properly credit others—especially when much of the original work came from the very news sites she was seeking to critique—was a gift not only to those in digital media but to the conservative, pro-Trump world that seeks to discredit traditional journalism as “fake news.”

All of the above makes it harder for journalism to hold power to account. What makes this so worrisome is that, economically speaking, these are fat times. Many of these layoffs are happening at profitable companies, and many funders and shareholders are seeing their best returns in years. One of these days, a recession will come, and with it a carnage that will make us nostalgic for the comparatively halcyon moments of today.

On social media, toxic lies and rumors are filling the vacuum created by the disappearance of (relatively) reliable reporting.

Illegal privacy violations they engender—Donald Trump would not have been elected president in 2016. It’s not just the Russian bots or the Eastern European teenagers paid to create fake news, like the accounts of pedophile pizza parlors and phony DNC murder plots. It’s also the stories that appear in places like Breitbart (Facebook’s third-most-shared news site during the election), the National Enquirer, and, until recently, Alex Jones’s Infowars. During the presidential campaign, all three were all in for Trump, and all three enjoyed his praise and support.

Meanwhile, Jeff Bezos’s decision to reveal the blackmail attempt by National Enquirer publisher David Pecker reminds us that his supermarket tabloid is a protection racket, not a news organization. (Though, of course, Trump disagrees: The Enquirer, he tweeted in January, “is far more accurate than the reporting in [Bezos’s] lobbyist newspaper, the Amazon Washington Post.”) And the lawsuit against Alex Jones by the parents of children murdered at Sandy Hook likewise highlights the insanity that emerges from his malevolent mouth. (“Your reputation’s amazing. I will not let you down,” Trump promised Jones on his program during the 2016 campaign.)

This situation is not only ridiculous; it’s dangerous. And even though Jones has been banned from YouTube and Facebook, and the Enquirer has long been discredited among sensible individuals, their lies continue to metastasize throughout our compromised media ecosystem. Despite the scandals that have enveloped it, Facebook enjoyed what analysts called a “stellar” end to 2018, with 2.3 billion users and $6.8 billion in profits in the fourth quarter alone. Meanwhile, the company interfered with research tools that allow reporters from outfits like ProPublica to track the way advertisers target political ads. And Apple recently circulated a plan to demand the lion’s share of profits from pushing news across its 90-million-viewer platform, using a Spotify-style model to undercut publications. (When Facebook did something similar, the company lied about the number of views that videos received, leading to a costly and counterproductive “pivot to video” that eventually resulted in the layoffs of countless reporters.)

No one is more to blame for the weakened state of journalism than the big tech companies. They captured the digital-advertising revenue, starving publications of much-needed funds. They allowed conspiracies, lies, and rumors to spread and multiply across their feeds. When healthy, the media can serve as the immune system of the body politic, swiftly identifying and stamping out disinformation. But thanks to corporations like Facebook and Twitter, our democracy—and with it, society itself—is sick and getting sicker.
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It is troubling that you give “socialism” a bad name precisely when democratic socialism has again become popular. There is, of course, no basis whatsoever to the scurrilous claims that anyone who opposes right-wing rule or savage capitalism will be the next Maduro, but such accusations have facilitated the rise of malignant strains of conservative, nationalistic populism that are openly nostalgic for Pinochet’s dictatorship. It is troubling that you give “socialism” a bad name precisely when democratic socialism has again become popular among workers and young people everywhere as a way of solving the global problems the world faces.

You may well respond by stressing that my tactic of negotiations, my belief in a revolution that valued the rights of my adversaries, led to my death and the demolition of the Chilean “road to socialism.” My quiet answer is that now, so many decades later, my example of sacrificing my life for democracy and a peaceful revolution continues to shine throughout the world, inspiring humanity to never cease its quest for social justice.

It is my hope that you will ponder my words and find a way forward that will prevent a terrible bloodbath and not inflict permanent damage to the cause of those who struggle for the right of the forgotten children of the earth to dream of an existence full of dignity and decency, free from misery and oppression.

Yours, from the other side of death and history,
Salvador Allende

ARIEL DORFMAN

Ariel Dorfman, a distinguished emeritus professor of literature at Duke University, is the author of the play Death and the Maiden, the essay collection Homeland Security Ate My Speech: Messages From the End of the World, and the novel Darwin’s Ghosts. In 1973, he was the press and cultural adviser to Salvador Allende’s chief of staff.

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make it easier. If we fly less, our own carbon footprint is lower (good). If more people do this, we all feel social pressure (better), and industry and government might have to take action (better still).

That being said, Hypocrite, I’ll quarrel with your priorities: Work need not take precedence over romance and leisure. Seeing this stunning world with your wife, expanding your horizons, and enjoying each other’s company on vacation is more important than most academic conferences.

The trend of academics forgoing meetings that require air travel is a good one. Many businesses have been switching to videoconferencing, also for climate reasons. Every so often, there might be a conference so world-changing, and your participation in it so crucial, that the flight is worth it. But most professional events aren’t like that.

By contrast, vacationing with your wife will bring joy to you both. Even if you’ve traveled enough, it’s not fair to deprive her of this pleasure. If she wants to travel, insisting on giving up aviation altogether could cause tension. It’s never good to impose one’s own moral crusade on a reluctant partner.

You’d be right to favor alternatives. Don’t fly domestically when you don’t have to, and travel a lot within the US (if that’s where you live). Although our rail system isn’t (yet) as good as those in Europe or Asia, train travel is still more relaxed than flying and allows you to see more of the landscape.

When it’s time to buy a new car, get a hybrid or an electric one and take road trips. Another idea is EcoShip, probably the world’s first sustainable cruise ship, which will offer educational, socially engaged trips beginning in 2020.

But do fly now and then. Most environmentalists suggest taking an international flight just once a year and making the most of it. Stay at least two weeks. Calculate the carbon footprint of a given trip (there are online calculators to help) and plan other changes to balance it out. Choose more efficient airlines; the International Council on Clean Transportation ranks them. If you go to Europe, take trains or rent electric cars to travel within the continent; European infrastructure makes this easy.

Bon voyage!
It’s an important time to visit Greece—and June is a beautiful time of year in that country. When Greece’s left-wing Syriza party won the January 2015 election on a radical anti-austerity platform, there were high hopes that it might change the course of European politics. But like every government before it, this one capitulated to most of the harsh demands of Greece’s creditors. Greece’s economy is looking better on paper, but its people suffer the deep damage of austerity—and will for years to come. Syriza must participate in elections by the fall of 2019; our program will explore where its experiment succeeded, and where and why it failed, as well as visiting the must-see (and lesser-known) cultural treasures of this remarkable country.

THE HIGHLIGHTS

• Visit spectacular sites such as the Acropolis and the Agora in Athens, the cities of Corinth and Epidaurus, the Acropolis of Mycenae, and more.

• Hear from Dimitris Christopoulos, professor of political science and history at Penteion University and president of the International Federation for Human Rights.

• Immerse yourself in the vibrant street-art scene of Athens on a walking tour with a local artist and learn how the city has become known as a mecca for underground street art.

• Participate in a unique culinary experience and learn how to cook traditional Greek dishes with the help of a local chef. Visit a bucolic vineyard and family-owned olive-oil producer.

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Maria Margaronis writes from The Nation’s London bureau. A former associate literary editor of the magazine, she has written for many other publications, including The Guardian, London Review of Books, The Times Literary Supplement and The New York Times. She writes and presents radio documentaries for the BBC.

100% of the proceeds from our travel programs support The Nation’s journalism.
Meet Thailand’s Trans Candidate

Thailand’s Pauline Ngarmpring is running to become the world’s first openly transgender head of state. As part of the center-left Mahachon Party, she’s unlikely to win in the March 24 general election—the country’s first since a military coup in 2014. But Ngarmpring says she’s campaigning to raise awareness of LGBTQ issues and to address the hazards faced by sex workers, whom she views as her main constituency.

Ngarmpring, a former journalist and businesswoman, wants to legalize sex work. The unregulated industry, she says, leaves workers vulnerable. When Ngarmpring campaigned recently in one of Bangkok’s red-light districts, masseuse Wassana Sorsawang shared her top concerns with the candidate: “Our welfare, mostly. Health.”

Even if she doesn’t become prime minister, Ngarmpring hopes that she and her party’s human-rights agenda will earn enough votes to put her in Parliament. And, above all, she wants to pave the way for others. “It doesn’t have to be me. It can be the next generation,” she told a reporter in February.

About 10 percent of Maha-chon’s 200 candidates for Parliament identify as LGBTQ. And the growing number of queer politicians isn’t limited to Thailand; voters across East and Southeast Asia have elected LGBTQ people, including in Japan and the Philippines. Ngarmpring said that she wants to send a message by running: “Whatever you are, you have your value. You love yourself and then you share with people.”

—Noah Flora

Blackface Returns

Racialized social boundaries are no laughing matter.

I grit my teeth as I sit down to write—yet again!—on the question of blackface. Gucci kicked off Black History Month with the debut of an $890 black balaclava with big, red, knitted lips surrounding the mouth opening. This seemed exceptionally provocative given that Dolce & Gabbana is still apologizing for last year’s “slave sandals,” and the luxury-coat manufacturer Moncler is still making nice after mass-producing a line of clothing emblazoned with loud images of black-faced “golliwogs.” Meanwhile, there’s the viral photo taken at Covington Catholic High School in Kentucky showing a crowd of students, some in full black body paint, taunting an African-American basketball player from a visiting team. “School spirit” is how some people described the scene of howling, scowling boys, but to me, they looked nothing less than feral. And let’s not forget that every public figure in the state of Virginia seems to have once played dress-up in blackface, memorialized by the yearbooks of decades past.

As Washington Post critic Robin Givhan has noted, none of these acts were performed by “elementary schoolchildren with a tenuous grasp on American history”—or European colonial history, for that matter. Rather, the perpetrators—teenagers, adults, and full-scale multinational conglomerates—should all have known better. “Whether some sleek photograph in a fashion magazine or a grainy one in an Eastern Virginia Medical School yearbook, it’s all the same,” Givhan writes. “Blackface gets to the discomfiting core of how black people are seen by the broader culture and how some white people see themselves.”

Indeed: What is it that these blackface-donning white people see in themselves? Blackface is widely dismissed by those who perform it as a “joke.” But if it’s humor, it is surely a most aggressive form thereof; there’s also a strong undercurrent of defiance, an anger whose subtext is “Piss off—just try and make me stop.”

It reminds me of a Confederate flag I saw and wrote about some time ago, waving from the back of a jacke-up monster truck. There was an image of a large black assault weapon printed across the flag, and under that the words “Come and get me.” There is a threatening undertone to the gleeful taunting, and in the persistent, insistent claim that blackface is “unintentional” racism.

“For some people,” continues Givhan, “the idea of dressing up in blackface is just another form of drag.” While drag can sometimes be subversive, ironic, liberating, and gender-bending, blackface is more often like a dare, or the defiant smirk of someone who bears you no good will.

As such, blackface operates as a policing of social boundaries. A bit like Halloween or Mardi Gras, it is a form of play that invents the self, marks the upside down, and points to whatever one is not. Moreover, it resembles certain anthropological or quasi-religious rituals that “call out” or cast curses on the objects of contempt. In other words, blackface gestures at a phenotype that may be mocked; it makes amusing theater of black defilement while passing as “jocular,” white, and mostly male bonding.

Blackface is part of an armamentarium of cultural habits that diminish black bodies as hyperbolically magical, all while signaling that they are dirty, dangerous, and untouchable. My father, who grew up under Jim Crow, used to describe white people rubbing his head for good luck. When I was 3, I remember an elderly white woman giving me a penny because giving one to a “colored child” was like throwing it in a wishing well. To be so relentlessly projected upon is a central feature of existing as a racialized entity.

For generations, soap companies have played on the riff of whether race can be washed off or is a permanent curse.

LEFT: AP PHOTO / GEMUNU AMARASINGHE; TOP RIGHT: ANDY FRIEDMAN
cautionary negative, a stigmatizing witch’s wand of potentially pulverizing intensity. Look out, we are warned, for what happens to you when you make contact with that “Negro touch”...

And cooties, like boot polish, are powerful forms of sorcery. As child psychologist Lawrence Hirschfeld has written, they have no particular form or consistent definition, yet they cast spells. They are literal curses, simple but terrifically powerful assignments of social contamination. Blackface is one of the many ways such social borders are signaled. The magical touch of the untouchable marks insiders from outsiders in political as well as personal ways, giving rise to something like what the philosopher Étienne Balibar calls an “interior border.” Unfortunately, hexing in the name of difference has become a ceaseless feature of our political life: Calling CNN or ABC “enemies of the people,” for example, makes them antagonists within. Equating asylum seekers with murderers, rapists, and drug mules is a way of rendering them contemptible. Even wearing a MAGA cap has become not merely a badge of tribal allegiance but an emblem of proud hostility toward designated “others.”

President Trump has declared his intention to institute a national state of emergency in order to implement the gated world he envisions for our future. But even before we get around to steel walls, this aggressive racial pantomiming and walling-off of worlds has terrible and irrational consequences for us all.

It lends conceptual authority to forms of segregation ranging from redlining to mass incarceration. The casting of curses settles into the bones, a coiled power ready to strike when suddenly unsettled, no longer a joke, no longer a spot of bad judgment, no longer laughable at all.

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**SNAPSHOT / NOAH BERGER**

**Out of the Ashes**

A mural—one of 12 by artist Shane Grammer—adorns the fireplace of a home leveled by the Camp Fire in Paradise, California. “Having Shane come and use his gift has been such a blessing,” Jeana Darby, who lost her home in the blaze, told *The Washington Post.*

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**BARR BECOMES ATTORNEY GENERAL AGAIN**

**Calvin Trillin**

**Deadline Poet**

Once more you’re head of Justice, William Barr. In your career you’ve surely traveled far. But now we’re going to see just who you are: If told to fold, will you say au revoir Or will you then your reputation tar By playing lackey to a would-be czar?
WHEN SENATOR ELIZABETH WARREN DECLARED THAT SHE WAS RUNNING for president in February, she described Donald Trump’s administration as “the most corrupt in living memory.” But she didn’t stop there: “Even after Trump is gone, it won’t be enough to do a better job of running a broken system,” she said.

Warren’s speech was centered around the notion that political corruption is not a uniquely Republican problem. “To protect their economic advantages, the rich and powerful have rigged our political system as well,” she continued. “They’ve bought off or bullied politicians in both parties to make sure Washington is always on their side.”

Anyone who’s followed Warren’s career knows she’s been making statements like this for years. But her position is suddenly mainstream: Almost every major contender for the Democratic presidential nomination is rejecting corporate PAC money and decrying the influence of the financial sector, albeit with varying degrees of sincerity. These are all implicit criticisms of the Democratic Party. Barack Obama, for example, collected more money from Wall Street in 2008 than any candidate in history, failed to prosecute any bankers for the financial crisis, and appointed officials with Wall Street ties to key financial regulatory positions in its wake.

Warren was Obama’s biggest critic on the left. She opposed major pieces of legislation that benefited Wall Street or pharmaceutical interests; tore into some of Obama’s cabinet members in public hearings; and even blocked an Obama nominee to a high-ranking Treasury position. The question now is whether these battles against a man whom 95 percent of Democrats view favorably will harm Warren, or whether the party’s leftward turn on economic issues in particular will ultimately carry her to the White House.

E LIZABETH WARREN WAS TEACHING AT Harvard Law School when, in 2008, then–Senate majority leader Harry Reid selected her for the Congressional Oversight Panel for the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), which had written America’s biggest banks a $700 billion check with precious few strings attached. Warren, a bankruptcy expert, was then elected as the panel’s chair. “The role of congressional oversight is to ask the tough questions, to push back on the decisions, to request additional information, and to recheck the numbers,” Warren said in an interview at the time. “It’s our job to be cranky.” And cranky she was. She pushed Treasury officials under both Bush and Obama for more transparency over where the TARP money was going and asked loudly why homeowners weren’t receiving enough of it. Warren did more than simply oversee what TARP authorized; she raised larger questions about how the economy was structured and whom it was designed to benefit.

One of the reports she presided over argued for government reorganization of the banks or even full-on nationalization. It highlighted international examples of past financial crises and said that ousting management and selling bank assets was the way to go.

Not surprisingly, Warren’s agitating didn’t endear her to many Democrats in Congress. Nor did it please Obama’s Treasury Department. “Some Democrats complain that Warren’s role as a constant Cassandra could undermine already tenuous public support for the bank, auto industry and other financial rescue programs,” Politico reported, paraphrasing anonymous officials. Neil Barofsky, TARP’s inspector general, later wrote in his book Bailout that an Obama Treasury official tried to create a split between him and Warren by falsely telling him “how much Elizabeth Warren hated me, was jealous of me, and was plotting my demise.”

Warren acknowledged in her own book, A Fighting Chance, that she wasn’t exactly popular
A Fighter From Within

Elizabeth Warren isn’t scared of Trump—or her own party.

GEORGE ZORNICK
inside the Beltway. “I started hearing that many Washington insiders were surprised (and some were aggravated) that we were going just as hard on the Democratic administration as we had on the Republicans,” she wrote, “but I wasn’t going to stop and worry about that.”

What’s more, her haters hadn’t seen the half of it. The pivotal moment of Warren’s tenure on the Congressional Oversight Panel came in June 2010, when then-Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner testified at a hearing. At the time, the Obama administration was preparing to get the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau off the ground. It was a bureau that Warren had designed to police financial-services companies offering consumer products (no single government agency was doing that at the time), and progressive activists were pressuring Obama to put Warren in charge.

Before the hearing, “I had thought [Warren] might go lightly on [Geithner] with the [CFPB] job still up in the air,” Barofsky wrote. “After all, she was making no secret of her desire for the job, and the White House had to be watching her every move.”

Warren did not go lightly on Geithner. In response to a question about the Home Affordable Modification Program, Geithner was dismissive of criticism “from people who had hoped that the program would be designed to keep a much larger fraction of Americans in their homes.” Warren laid into him, pointing out that HAMP didn’t make payments to homeowners directly, but instead sent the money to mortgage servicers, who make profits from interest payments and have no incentive to bail people out. They wouldn’t even lose money on most foreclosures.

“I had not intended to ask you about this, but I want to go back,” Warren told Geithner. “The early modification programs actually got people into more trouble, raised their overall payments, had them owing more principal than they had started out with.... You set aside $50 billion, and what do you have to show for it?”

The exchange went viral on YouTube, and Warren was ultimately vindicated: Servicers simply delayed seizing clients’ homes and collected some extra payments and late fees before foreclosing on them anyway. In fact, according to the TARP inspector general, a full 70 percent of borrowers who applied for the program were ultimately denied a permanent modification. At the time of the hearing, as Warren pointed out, only 347,000 homeowners out of a projected 3 to 4 million had received a permanent modification to help avoid foreclosure. Overall, only about a million ended up getting help.

“I thought it was a remarkably principled act,” Barofsky later wrote, “the exact opposite of what any other person in Washington angling for a high-profile job would have done.”

Though this public altercation raised Warren’s profile, she wasn’t banished from the CFPB. Still, the nascent bureau would have no real enforcement power until Obama and the Senate agreed on a permanent director. Progressives rallied in her favor—they even made a music video rapping, “Sheriff Warren, she’s what we need,” —and White House advisers Valerie Jarrett and David Axelrod were reportedly backing her too. But Geithner and his allies were dead set against giving her the job. Facing heavy opposition from congressional Republicans as well, Obama ultimately chose not to nominate her.

Warren wrote in her book that she was “disappointed, but not surprised…. It was pretty clear from the beginning that [Obama] wasn’t itching to give me the post.” But there seems to be no animosity in their relationship. Warren spoke warmly of the president and posted a smiling selfie with him on his last day in office; Obama even encouraged Warren to run for her Senate seat in 2012.

This is all despite the fact that Warren kept coming at Obama from his left and rode a wave of progressive anger over the disproportionate wealth and power of Wall Street after the collapse. An early flare-up on this front involved the year-end omnibus spending bill in 2014. One provision of the Dodd-Frank financial-reform legislation withheld government insurance for banks that traded derivative swaps, complicated financial products that often disguise and disperse serious liabilities. The goal was to discourage the risky behavior that had so recently led to calamity, but the GOP-controlled House had repealed that provision. Few Senate Democrats approved of the repeal, but said they’d still vote for the Republican spending bill to avoid a government shutdown. The Obama White House signaled that it, too, would support the bill, repeal and all.

Warren was left leading a lonely charge to kill it. She didn’t spare her Democratic colleagues. “Who does Congress work for? she asked in a speech on the Senate floor. “Does it work for the millionaires, the billionaires, the giant companies with their armies of lobby-
ists and lawyers?” A bill passed the Senate three days later. But Warren wasn’t done.

Earlier that year, Obama had nominated Antonio Weiss—a veteran investment banker and Obama bundler who enjoyed broad support from most of the party—to serve as under secretary for domestic finance at the Treasury. But Warren wasn’t a fan: She saw Weiss as a poor fit for a high-ranking regulatory job, not least because he’d recently helped Burger King complete a complicated tax-inversion deal to lessen its US tax burden. After losing the spending-bill fight, Warren took to the Senate floor to denounce his nomination. “Enough is enough with Wall Street insiders getting key position after key position and the kind of cronynism that we have seen in the executive branch,” she declared.

The scene, captured in another video, also went viral—apparently, taking on Obama over Wall Street struck a nerve—and Warren became the icon for a successful activist push to stop Weiss’s nomination. The pressure kept the Senate from acting before the end of the 115th Congress, and Weiss wrote to Obama and asked not to be renominated.

Wall Street financier Steven Rattner, a former colleague of Weiss’s, lamented to The Washington Post that “poor Antonio” had “become a pawn in the struggle for the heart of the Democratic Party.” Meanwhile, a Warren source told the paper that it was indeed a struggle—one that Warren was winning. “I think there’s a finite amount they’re willing to bleed,” the adviser said. “Every time we attack them, they bleed.”

For Warren, no fight was bloodier than the battle over the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, which began when Congress passed fast-track trade authority in 2015. Warren was an early opponent of the bill, and she focused her criticism on provisions that opened a back door for international conglomerates to repeal important US regulations, including many enacted under Dodd-Frank. Obama’s advisers, meanwhile, were pushing the TPP as a legacy-building achievement.

That’s when Warren’s advocacy provoked a direct rebuke from the president. In an interview with Yahoo News, an “unusually irritated” Obama said that “the truth of the matter is that Elizabeth is, you know, a politician like everybody else…and you know, she’s got a voice that she wants to get out there. And I understand that.”

In trying to drop a bomb on Warren’s persona as an incorruptible crusader for the little guy, the president of the United States leveled probably the most damaging insult he could: She’s just a politician.

Fast-track trade authority narrowly got through Congress, but Warren still won the war: Hillary Clinton would oppose the doomed TPP in the Democratic primary. And a quick scan of the 2020 candidates—not to mention Warren’s prominent place among them—shows how quickly party leaders have adopted her position.

Warren kept up her fight through the final days of the Obama administration. In December 2016, only weeks before he left office, Obama, his staff, and many cabinet officials gathered in the Rose Garden to celebrate the passage of the 21st Century Cures Act, which aimed to accelerate medical research. The gathering was a chance for Obama to mark one last major accomplishment before leaving office—but Warren didn’t think it deserved the time of day. She’d already shredded the bill on the Senate floor days prior for its “huge giveaways” to the pharmaceutical industry, explaining that “when American voters say Congress is owned by big companies, this bill is exactly what they are talking about.”

As Warren now campaigns for the nomination on her increasingly popular yet decades-old positions, her opponents on Wall Street—and their friends in the Democratic Party—aren’t changing their tune either.

Steven Rattner said recently on MSNBC that Warren was too “anti-capitalist” and “anti-rich” to beat Trump (never mind that Warren, who is not a socialist by any stretch, has critics to her left who complain that she isn’t anti-capitalist enough). After Warren took a DNA test last October to “prove” her Native American heritage, Jim Messina, Obama’s former campaign manager, rushed onto MSNBC to call her “cynical” and bad for the Democrats. (After leaving the Obama orbit, Messina went on to work for the UK’s Conservative Party.)

Warren’s fellow presidential contenders may also use her departures from party orthodoxy against her, just as Clinton used Sanders’s critiques of Obama to score points during a 2016 debate in Milwaukee, saying: “The kind of criticism that we’ve heard from Senator Sanders about our president, I expect from Republicans.” (Sanders called Clinton’s remark a “low blow” and said, “Last I heard, a United States senator had the right to disagree with the president.”)

What Elizabeth Warren has going for her is the fact that Democratic voters have never particularly liked Wall Street bailouts or big international “free-trade” deals. She, for one, won’t have to renounce her record to appeal to their beliefs. Her presidential campaign is a bet that someone who has been a strong critic of the political system and the Democratic Party can become the leader of both by being consistent, credible, and right. This is the bet that Obama made in 2008, when his strong opposition to the Iraq War was shared by a majority of voters but far from a majority of elected Democrats. It worked for him, and it may just work for her.
Oscar crouches in a small shack near a muddy embankment in the Kensington “badlands” of Philadelphia. Decorating the roof of his makeshift home are nearly a half-dozen plastic syringes, their needles embedded at sharp angles in the wood. Now 47, Oscar was born and raised in this neighborhood. He became addicted to heroin and “started this sad lifestyle,” he says, when he was 24.

Philadelphia has been walloped by the opioid epidemic, and Kensington—an impoverished neighborhood of low-slung row houses and deeply pitted streets—is its epicenter. When I ask how many people that he personally knew have died from an overdose, Oscar replies, “I lost count,” then clarifies: “I don’t say that figuratively—I did. And the sad story is that they get younger and younger.” He thinks it’s been dozens, at the least.

Kensington’s miseries, like Oscar’s, aren’t altogether new. The neighborhood has been the scene of an open-air drug market for decades, one of the more brutal legacies of the multipronged devastation of deindustrialization, wage stagnation, and racism. Yet no one here can recall anything like the current crisis. Just a few months back, *The New York Times* breathlessly labeled Kensington, which has some of the region’s cheapest and strongest opioids, the “Walmart of Heroin.”

In 2017, 236 people here died from overdoses, nearly one-fifth of all the overdose deaths in Philadelphia that year. The crisis is so acute that librarians at the local public library have received training in administering the overdose drug naloxone—a skill they use regularly. And while there were signs of a slight decline in 2018, the neighborhood remains a lethal outpost of the opioid crisis.
crisis—which is the reason, on a chilly day last spring, that I came to find myself wandering its sidewalks and underpasses, talking to Oscar and other locals.

I’d been invited by Chris Moraff, an independent researcher and journalist, and Jeff Deeney, a social worker and writer. Both are white and in their 40s, with a history of using opioids on these streets; both have since dedicated their lives to fighting for the better understanding and care of people with addictions. They are among a number of volunteers and groups who regularly visit Kensington to help the largely homeless people who take drugs here.

Dressed in a dark-blue hoodie and a matching Phillies baseball cap, Moraff has friendly brown eyes that also hint at skepticism. In his backpack, he carries test strips that can detect the presence of fentanyl and its derivatives, which he shares with those who want to know what’s in the stuff they’ve bought and take precautions if the test is positive.

Deeney, broad-shouldered and nearly bald, has a warm smile and an open demeanor. He provides supplies like clean needles and also helps those who want shelter, addiction treatment, or other services to find their way through the system. He says he returns to these streets again and again out of a sense of obligation, as an act of karmic payback for the kindness shown to him during his own years of addiction. “I found older users who took care of me… African-American men who, for really no reason, just looked out for me,” he says. “I felt like there was some sort of cosmic debt that I owed to this community, because I had contributed to the chaos down there and I just wanted to set it right.”

Moraff has similar motivations. “The simplest answer is obviously [that] my own personal history of problematic drug use in the past makes it an issue that I have a special affinity and compassion for,” he says.

In recent months, this shared compassion has come to include a new focus: the push to help Philly become the first city in the United States to open a safe-injection facility, or SIF. SIFs, which are also called “supervised consumption” or “overdose prevention” sites, are essentially syringe exchanges that allow people to inject on-site, under the supervision of a nurse or a trained naloxone administrator. Some of these places are immaculate, medical-style facilities complete with on-site services and referrals to treatment programs; others are little more than tents. But in each case, the mission is the same: to save lives by reducing needle sharing and other unsafe practices—and by reversing overdose if it occurs.

“As the opioid epidemic rages on, our best shot at saving lives will be to employ proven harm-reduction methods like safe-injection sites.”

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Harm-reduction methods like safe-injection sites.

MAIA SZALAVITZ

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Sign of the times: Needles used for injecting heroin and other drugs litter the ground in a park in the Kensington section of Philadelphia.

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It’s a counterintuitive approach—how can it be healthy to help people shoot drugs?—but it takes on a devastating clarity as we set off into the squalor and unpredictability of Kensington, with its sidewalks dotted with crack vials and syringe caps. As we enter the area, the first thing we see is a line of police cars; the cops have blocked off the street, we learn, in order to arrest a suspected drug dealer armed with a gun. They’ve likely scared off the other dealers and customers, because we don’t see many people for a few more blocks, until we reach a series of underpasses. There, beneath the roar of unseen traffic, we find a collection of tents, with some residents peering out or walking nearby.

This is a community that is broken and wounded. “You can just see the pain—it’s all over every face down...”
WHILE ALL DRUG CRISIS HAVE THEIR TRADEMARK HORRORS—THE
turf-driven gunfights of the crack years, the drawn-out agony
of AIDS pre-1995—these differences mask an important truth:
Addiction is always with us, and it always hits hardest among
those made vulnerable by poverty, racism, downward mobility,
dislocation, trauma, and mental illness. The drugs and
their associated harms may change, but the vulnerabilities
remain mostly the same.

At the same time, today’s opioid crisis is unique in
its lethality, killing people at a pace that was previously
unimaginable. Thanks to the rise of fentanyl and similar
synthetic opioids, overdose is now the leading cause
of death for adults under 50 in the United States—a reality
that has driven down American life expectancy in recent
years. In 2017 alone, more than 28,000 people died from
drugs laced with fentanyl or similar synthetics, a ninefold
jump from the roughly 3,000 who died in 2013. In Phila-
delphia, that number surpassed 1,000 people in 2017.

“For comparison,” says Philadelphia Health Commis-
sioner Tom Farley, “at the peak of the AIDS epidemic in
1994, we had 935 deaths from AIDS.”

The analogy is an apt one. In the 1990s, the rising death
toll from HIV/AIDS—which was spread increasingly
through intravenous drug use—pushed advocates to take
matters into their own hands. Tired of waiting while the
government did nothing, activists like Jon Parker, founder
of the National AIDS Brigade, and members of ACT UP
began distributing clean needles and deliberately getting
arrested to challenge and ultimately eliminate most of
the state laws prohibiting needles as “drug paraphernalia.”

These activists, many of whom were current or for-
mer drug users, called themselves “harm reductionists”
because their emphasis was, and still is, on saving lives
and protecting health, rather than on trying to stop peo-
ple from getting high. As they set about trying to keep
people safe, they were shocked by the callous disregard
among policy-makers and the public toward the people
who take illegal drugs, and disturbed by a clear hypocrisy:
If people seek pleasure or relief from approved drugs like
alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco, they have human rights—
and their drugs are regulated for purity and dosage and
aren’t even seen as drugs. But if people take anything else,
they are criminalized—and if they die from using black-
market drugs, they, unlike almost all other consumers,
are thought to have deserved it.

Harm reductionists also recognized that the basis of
the system that makes legal distinctions between drugs
has little to do with their comparative dangers: There’s no
risk-based or scientific way, for example, to justify illegal
marijuana in the context of legal alcohol and cigarettes.
Indeed, anti-drug laws—including alcohol prohibition in
the 1920s—have almost always been powered as much
by racist and anti-immigrant panic as by genuine public-
health considerations.

So these activists began to fight for their lives. They
provided clean needles to reduce the spread of HIV; they
argued for policies based on preserving life rather than
trying to “send the right message”—a message, moreover,
that certainly didn’t seem to be having the intended effect.

Nearly three decades later, the seemingly ineluctable
death toll from a different epidemic has galvanized a new
generation of harm reductionists like Deeney and Moraff,
whose work rest on the foundation of their forerunners.
Their current focus is on securing safe places for people
to inject drugs under medical supervision as a means of
minimizing the overdose risk. Such places exist in nearly
100 sites across 10 countries, including Australia, Cana-
da, Denmark, France, Germany, and Switzerland. There
are none, however, in the United States.

The absence of US-based safe-injection facilities isn’t
surprising, given this country’s long, puritanical, “just say
no” approach to drug use and addiction. But it goes
against decades of evidence supporting not only the safety
of these sites but also their health and treatment benefits.
Over the course of several decades, millions of injections
by thousands of people have taken place in SIFs—the
first, in Bern, Switzerland, was founded in 1986—but
there has never been a single death. Indeed, a literature
review of 75 published papers shows that these facilities
reduce overdose-death rates, the spread of disease, public
injecting, and needle litter, as well as decrease neighbor-
hood disorder and improve health. Moreover, SIFs have
been found to make people more likely to reduce drug
use, cease injecting, get treatment, and recover.

In recent years, the promise of all this evidence has
begun to filter up to elected officials in some of the cities
hardest hit by the opioid epidemic. Now, a race is on be-
 tween Philadelphia, Seattle, San Francisco, Denver, New
York City, and Ithaca, New York, to become the first to
open a legal SIF in the United States. (Underground pro-
grams are already operating in some cities.) Their most
immediate model: a collection of safe-injection sites that
have popped up in dozens of places across our neighbor
to the north, Canada.
But these cities face profound obstacles in a country that still isn't quite sure whether it sees addiction as a sin or a disease. Last summer, shortly before Jeff Sessions lost his perch as US attorney general, the Justice Department threatened to arrest and prosecute anyone who opened such a site. And on February 5, the Justice Department sued Safehouse, the Philadelphia nonprofit that was founded last year to set up and operate the city's SIF. The suit asks the court to preemptively declare the facility illegal, based on a section of the Controlled Substances Act commonly referred to as the “crack house” statute. Passed in 1986, the statute makes it a felony for an organization to “knowingly and intentionally…make available for use, with or without compensation, [premises] for the purpose of unlawfully…using a controlled substance.”

Still, Safehouse isn’t giving up, and if the history of litigation over syringe exchange is anything to go by, it might have a decent chance at prevailing. “We respectfully disagree with the Department of Justice’s view of the ‘crack house’ statute,” Ilana Eisenstein, a lawyer for Safehouse, told The Washington Post. “We are committed to defending Safehouse’s effort to provide lifesaving care to those at risk of overdose through the creation of safe injection facilities.”

A few months after my visit to Philadelphia, I walked down Hastings Street, the bustling main drag—or mainline, really—of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. With its streets buzzing with people who are either hustling to get high or trying to sustain their intoxication, it could almost be mistaken for a corner of Kensington, but for the luxury condos and hip restaurants that sprout from the asphalt.

There is another essential difference between here and Kensington: Vancouver, unlike Philadelphia, is home to more than half a dozen safe-injection sites, most of which have set up shop in this neighborhood. These include Insite, the first SIF opened in North America, and seven pop-up SIFs—in some instances, little more than tents where people with naloxone can monitor people who are using—which have been authorized by the government to deal with the current overdose crisis.

Insite (a contraction of the words “injection site”) is one of my first stops on this rainy fall morning. Set inside a scuffed three-story building, it announces its presence with the cheerful words “Welcome to Insite” etched on the door, its logo—a white hypodermic needle—engraved below them.

Inside, the injecting room has a sterile, medical feel, with its clean metal surfaces, needles, wipes, and yellow plastic containers for used syringes. Nurses will soon monitor people unobtrusively as they inject in mirrored booths that could almost be mistaken for stylist stations at a beauty salon—which they were designed to resemble. “The hair-salon aesthetic was meant to push back against what services for drug users can look like,” says Darwin Fisher, Insite’s program coordinator. Around the world, he explains, most such facilities are either shabby or carceral, or both. They look like institutions of control, not welcome.

This morning, the facility looks more clinical than comforting, but Fisher and people who have used the site say that’s only because journalists aren’t allowed to visit when people are injecting, to protect their privacy. It would feel very different, Fisher adds, “if you were here while we were open, and these booths are filled, and people have their dogs in the room and there are bikes in here, and there’s music playing and there’s cross talk.”

On average, 1,000 people a month inject at Insite, taking as long as they need and then retiring to the “chill-out” room, which is more homey and has cushioned seating and a large purple mural by a member of the community. Upstairs, a sister outfit, playfully labeled “Onsite,” provides immediate access to short-term, inpatient care to treat withdrawal as well as connections to longer-term programs for those who want them—as many do.

In 2017, the last year for which full numbers are available, there were 175,464 visits to the site by 7,301 individuals, and 2,151 overdoses treated. More than 400 people stayed at Onsite, and many others were referred to outside treatment services last year. Since Insite opened in 2003, more than 3 million injections have taken place at the facility, but there hasn’t been a single death.

None of this materialized out of the ether. Insite and its offshoot injection sites are the hard-won handiwork of Vancouver’s justly famous harm-reduction activists—notably the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users. VANDU was founded in 1997 by people who use drugs, and it’s still led by drug users today.

In the 1990s, HIV/AIDS was devastating their community. By 1997, around half of all local injection-drug users...
his position from “being adamantly against [the sites], to having an open mind”—albeit with some concerns. A study commissioned by the mayor found that just one SIF could save 25 to 75 lives per year as well as millions of dollars in hospital and ambulance costs. In Philadelphia, the sites will be given yet another name: comprehensive user-engagement sites, or CUES.

With the election of a progressive district attorney, Larry Krasner, in 2017, the city has all the key elements in place to move forward. But some community leaders remain fiercely opposed. They fear that providing more services for drug users in an area already coping with people openly selling and injecting just adds insult to injury for those who are trying to work or raise a family in the area. These critics don’t want to support the people they see as destroying their neighborhood—many of whom come from the rich, white suburbs to buy their drugs—and they certainly don’t want to attract more of them.

Solomon Jones, an African-American columnist for The Philadelphia Inquirer who is in recovery himself, is a leading critic of CUES, which he calls “bad policy.” In a 2018 column, he wrote: “People of color must not support safe injection sites, especially if those sites are not accompanied by a comprehensive plan to right the wrongs of the crack era. Blacks were criminalized for the same thing that our city now proposes supporting for mostly white heroin addicts. And if others are to be treated with compassion, we want our prisoners released, we want our records expunged, we want our property returned, and we want our communities made whole.”

At a community meeting organized by Jones at the Mount Tabor AME Church, Devin Reaves, a bespectacled, black harm-reduction leader who is also in recovery, and Deeney, I asked Oscar what he thought when I visited Kensington with Moraff and Deeney, I asked Oscar what he thought about the idea of safe-injection sites. His answer was unequivocal: “It’ll save lives,” he said. “It’ll help the onslaught and stop the spread of [hepatitis] C and HIV.”

We stopped at an encampment, since cleared, under a bridge. This was not the kind of place that anyone would choose as home. The tents were surrounded by discarded needles, a half-eaten roast turkey, and other debris.

I spoke with one couple who lived in a tent there: Ashley, 32, a white woman with hair dyed a deliberately unnatural shade of red, is from an exclusive suburb, and she was buzzing with the uneven energy that sometimes comes from an opioid high. Her boyfriend, Salvador, who has warm brown eyes, is Latino and from this neigh-

had become infected, a total as bad as the epidemic had likely seen in North America. VANDU’s hundreds of active members demonstrated, blocked traffic, shouted in the streets—at one point, they installed 1,000 wooden crosses in a park to represent the death toll—and stormed meetings at City Hall until they eventually persuaded local politicians to allow and support a safe-injection site.

Still, the battle wasn’t over when Insite debuted: VANDU and its supporters had to fight all the way to Canada’s Supreme Court for the right to keep it open, which it won in 2011.

In the years since, HIV-infection rates have plummeted. Every injection taken at any one SIF is a chance to avoid a round of Russian roulette with street drugs—and Insite and the pop-up sites nearby have reported hundreds of overdose reversals. But that doesn’t mean SIFs have solved every problem of the opioid epidemic. Although overdose-death rates stabilized after Insite opened, once fentanyl hit the streets, its lethal force far outstripped the ability of a handful of SIFs to shift the broader dynamic in Vancouver.

Still, their success in the desperate game of saving lives is beyond dispute—so much so that there’s now a terrible irony. The risk from using street opioids unsupervised has become so great that in the Downtown Eastside, being homeless has become a protective factor: Since homeless people either inject in SIFs or in public, in a neighborhood where virtually everyone carries naloxone, they are much more likely to be revived than someone using the same drugs by themselves at home.

Until some 18 months ago, Philadelphia didn’t seem a likely contender for a Vancouver-style SIF. But in late 2017, as the city’s overdose rate soared so high that four times as many people were dying from opioid use as homicide, Mayor Jim Kenney assembled a task force co-chaired by Health Commissioner Tom Farley, who had previously served as the health commissioner of New York—a city with a long tradition of harm reduction.

Task-force members and others, including Police Chief Richard Ross, visited Vancouver. Afterward, Ross told The Philadelphia Inquirer that the trip had changed
Ashley had been homeless for two months, following a relapse after more than four years of abstinence. They had been living together in a tent under the bridge for a week. Ashley had lost at least 15 friends in the past year alone to overdose, she told me, so she recently got trained in administering naloxone, which she now carries.

She thinks that CUES would make a real difference. “A lot less people would be dying,” she says. “Ninety percent of people out here have no clue what they’re doing when someone ODs, because for so many years an OD meant jail time [just] for being there. Now it’s not that way, [but] people aren’t trained, so people are still fucking dying.”

“People are going to shoot regardless,” Salvador adds. “But if they want there to be less ODs and less disease, [CUES] is a great idea.”

As we’re talking, a police car drives up and an officer from the Special Victims Unit rolls down her window. First, she emphasizes that she’s not there to arrest anyone for drugs or open warrants. She displays pictures of two young women, who look significantly healthier than anyone around here. They are missing and believed to have been kidnapped. (The body of one has since been found, an apparent murder victim.)

In these areas rendered lawless by the criminalization of drugs, predators thrive. Most of the people here are harmless—prey made vulnerable by the trauma that leads to a large percentage of addictions, the mental illness that is often caused or exacerbated by that trauma, and the resulting drug use. Still, some come to take advantage of those who can’t defend themselves.

“This is what happens when you take a whole class of people and place them outside the boundaries of the law,” Deeney says. “They will go to these places where there essentially is no law, and that is just incredibly risky for people who can be exploited—women in particular.”

The same arguments now made against SIFs were heard more than three decades ago against needle-exchange programs. Critics argued that they would set a poor example for children and would increase drug use, community disorder, and general lawlessness, all while reducing the chances that addicted people would recover.

None of those fears proved valid. Instead, research found the opposite: that people who participate in needle-exchange programs are more likely to get into treatment than those who don’t. Nor do these programs increase the rate of drug use among young people. And they clearly fight the spread of AIDS: New York State labeled needle exchange the “gold standard” for HIV prevention in a 2014 report, which included statistics showing that, as access to clean needles increased dramatically over the last 30 years, the HIV-infection rate among New Yorkers who injected drugs plummeted, from 54 percent in 1990 to just 3 percent in 2012.

Thanks to the hard, patient work of harm-reduction activists, policy-makers in a growing number of cities understand this. Indeed, the battle over where to put safe-injection facilities may initially be solved simply by locating them inside existing needle exchanges, which have already won the NIMBY fight and which, in many cases, are eager to offer supervised-consumption rooms. To avoid stirring up opposition, many program officials didn’t want to speak on the record, but every needle-exchange worker I met with was eager to provide such spaces as soon as legally possible. Some are already doing so informally by not policing their bathrooms.

Should SIFs come aboveground, it would be a victory for harm-reduction advocates and the thousands at risk for overdose in New York, Philadelphia, Denver, and the other cities looking to open safe-injection sites. It would mean fewer deaths and an easier path to treatment. “You take somebody who’s injecting under a bridge in the rain with a dirty needle, versus somebody who can go into a clean, dry environment with some health-care workers—it’s pretty obvious what’s a better scenario,” says Mark Tyndall, who until recently was executive director of the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control.

Still, there’s a long battle ahead. And even if the SIF advocates prevail, it will be only the beginning of what needs to be a much broader, stronger push for harm reduction in the United States. Indeed, while the ferocity of the fentanyl crisis has convinced a handful of US cities of the need for safe injection, other cities in other countries have responded by experimenting with even more radical action. Vancouver, for instance, has decided to expand a program that provides pharmaceutical-grade heroin to a hard core of people addicted to the drug. The idea follows vintage harm-reduction strategies and has produced significant outcomes, according to many peer-reviewed publications, including reduced crime and drug use and increased health and employment.

It’s hard to imagine the idea catching on in Trump’s America, but it’s instructive to consider the history of harm reduction. Needle-exchange programs were considered anathema in the early 1990s; however, as the data rolled in, they were ultimately accepted and then championed by the public-health establishment, including the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control. Before 1986, needle exchange wasn’t considered a viable possibility in the United States; now, thanks to harm-reduction activists, there are more than 300 such programs. And the story is much the same for marijuana legalization and the shift away, in fits and starts, from a punitive approach to addiction.

The momentum is on the side of harm reduction. Says Jeff Deeney: “It’s just a matter of getting from point A to point B.”
The failure of our post-9/11 foreign adventures has fueled nativist fanaticism and border vigilantism.

Greg Grandin
HAD THE OCCUPATIONS OF AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ NOT GONE SO wrong, perhaps George W. Bush might have been able to contain the growing racism within his party’s rank and file by channeling it into his Middle East crusade, the way Ronald Reagan broke up the most militant nativist vigilantes in the 1980s by focusing their attention on Central America. For nearly two centuries, from Andrew Jackson forward, the country’s political leaders enjoyed the benefit of being able to throw its restless and angry citizens—of the kind who had begun mustering on the border in the year before 9/11—outward, into campaigns against Mexicans, Native Americans, Filipinos, and Nicaraguans, among other enemies.

But the occupations did go wrong. Bush and his neoconservative advisers had launched what has now become the most costly war in the nation’s history, on the heels of pushing through one of the largest tax cuts in the nation’s history. They were following the precedent set by Reagan, who in the 1980s slashed taxes even as he increased the military budget until deficits went sky-high. Yet the news coming in from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere began to suggest that Bush had created an epic disaster. Politicians and policy intellectuals began to debate what is and isn’t torture and to insist that, whatever “enhanced interrogation” was, the United States had a right to do it. Photographs from Abu Ghraib prison showing US personnel cheerfully taunting and torturing Iraqis circulated widely, followed by reports of other forms of cruelty inflicted on prisoners by US troops. Many people were coming to realize that the war was not just illegal in its conception but deceptive in its justification, immoral in its execution, and corrupt in its administration.

Every president from Reagan onward has raised the ethical stakes, insisting that what they called “internationalism”—be it murderous wars in impoverished Third World countries or corporate trade treaties—was a moral necessity. But the disillusionment generated by Bush’s war on terrorism, the velocity with which events revealed the whole operation to be a sham, was extraordinary—as was the dissonance. The war, especially that portion of it allegedly intended to bring democracy to Iraq, was said to mark a new era of national purpose. And yet a coordinated campaign of deceit, carried out with the complicity of reporters working for the country’s most respected news sources, had to be waged to ensure public support. The toppling of Saddam Hussein was predicted to be a “cakewalk,” and US soldiers, according to Vice President Dick Cheney, would “be greeted as liberators.” But Cheney still insisted that he needed to put in place a global network of secret torture sites in order to win the War on Terror.

As thousands died and billions went missing, the vanities behind not just the war but the entire post–Cold War expansionist project came to a crashing end. And as the frontier closed, some turned back to the border. Sporadic violence gave way to organized paramilitary extremism.

War revanchism usually takes place after conflicts end—the Ku Klux Klan after World War I, for example, or the radicalization of white supremacists after Vietnam. Now, though, it took shape while the war was still going on. And border paramilitarism began to pull in not only soldiers who had returned from the war but the veterans of older conflicts. The Minuteman Project, which began patrolling the desert looking for undocumented migrants shortly after the Abu Ghraib story broke, was founded by a Vietnam vet. The project grew rapidly over the next three years, even as it splintered into different groups, with vigilante franchises starting to harass day laborers gathered on city street corners far from the border, in places like Long Island’s East End, or targeting Latino families in Kansas City parks. By the end of 2006, according to one count, 140 Minuteman branches had been established in 34 states, claiming 12,000 members.

As Bush lost control of his occupations, he lost control of his party. Having gotten their tax cuts and their war, Republicans were struggling with the fallout from both. Many at the time thought that modern conservatism was on the wane, done in by its own ideological excess, a contradictory commitment to a militarized national-security state and libertarian economics, to its fetishizing of individual freedom and its stoking of the culture war, including racial grievances.

Bush won reelection in 2004, but the lesson that many party leaders took from the victory—as they looked at the changing demographics of states like Arizona, Texas, and Florida—was that Republicans, to stay viable on a national level, would have to win over Latino voters. To that end, the Bush White House hoped to replicate Reagan’s immigration gambit. It put forth legislation that would further militarize the border but also allow, for those undocumented residents who qualified, a one-time path to citizenship.

But the proposed reform electrified vigilantes, who mobilized successfully to kill the legislation. This mobilization, in turn, revived the flagging conservative movement. A blast of nativist fanaticism helped to stay the unraveling caused by the movement’s already existing fanaticism, providing new coherence, vitality, and a way forward that didn’t include citizenship for millions of undocumented residents.

In the last months of the Bush presidency, with the grassroots rage that had assembled on the border spread-
ing through the nation, and with the country bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq, the housing and credit markets began to collapse. Banks failed. Mortgage foreclosures and evictions spiked. Inequality and personal debt deepened as social services were stretched thin. And still, no matter how many patrollers the government put at the border, no matter how many deportations Bush carried out, Mexicans and Central Americans kept arriving.

And then the country elected a black man to the presidency. Under Bush, the various border-vigilante groups expanded nationally and helped set federal policy. Under Barack Obama, they merged with other right-wing organizations into what became known as the Tea Party. Cross-fertilization occurred at every level, as anti-immigrant Republicans rebranded themselves as libertarians and anti-Latino organizations mobilized around fiscal “responsibility.” In places like Cochise County, Arizona, long a preserve of right-wing rancher vigilantism, the Minutemen and the Tea Party merged. “Build a wall and start shooting,” said one featured speaker at a 2010 rally in Phoenix. “Line ’em up. I’ll torture them myself.” Cruelty, by this point, was a way of establishing symbolic dominance over foreigners. But it was also a badge of contempt for the political establishment and all its leaders and institutions.

Obama’s election “packed an emotional wallop,” as the historian Daniel Rodgers put it, but his administration produced “only a policy whimper,” seeking to address the multiple calamities inherited from his predecessor not with radical solutions but on familiar terms. Even if the Republican Party had agreed to implement in full the agenda Obama laid out in any one of his eight State of the Union addresses, it would only have marginally improved the precarious conditions for the many millions who lived in poverty. Obama kept reaching for a center that no longer existed, a center that he seemed to think he would be able to reconstitute by the power of his rhetoric and the infiniteness of his patience. In the meantime, the nativist right continued to coalesce.

The wars went on, and the military, with its outsized budget, still served as the country’s most effective instrument of social mobility and provider of health care and education. But whereas Bush had framed militarism as an ideological struggle, Obama presented it as a matter of utility and competence. As he did so, the country lost its ability to channel extremism outward, and the kind of chaos the United States had released in the Persian Gulf was increasingly mirrored at home, in an escalating spiral of mass school shootings and white-supremacist and masculinist rampages.

With the country unable to imagine a future moving outward, fights over the people trying to move inward grew even more intense. Here, too, Obama tried to meet his opponents halfway. He signed an executive order, known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which provided protection to some undocumented residents who had entered the country as minors. But he also increased the funding and staffing of the nation’s various border, customs, and immigration agencies.

The Obama White House made the same mistake that Bush’s did, getting caught in the same “enforcement-first” trap that insists the border has to be “sealed”—an impossible proposition—before reforms can be passed. Obama hoped that stepping up border security would open a space for compromise. But the situation got away from him. A surge of Central American children—tens of thousands every year between 2009 and 2014—began arriving at the border, mostly from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. In response, the White House diverted more resources to try to secure the border and stepped up deportations. By 2012, the United States was spending more on immigration enforcement than on all other federal criminal-law-enforcement agencies combined.

Still, as it had under Bush, immigration reform failed, even as the impunity of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Border Patrol—along with the budget for border militarization—grew. As Obama reached the end of his second term, right-wing grievances continued to spin in a circle: from migrants to health care; from taxes, war, and guns to Confederate flags, ISIS, Mexican cartels, and environmental regulations; from sharia law, energy policy, and gender pronouns to Central American gangs and Black Lives Matter—and finally back to migrants, to DACA recipients and Central American children.

The backlashes to decades of disastrous policies piled up, one after the other, until the backlash of all backlashes came: Donald Trump. The nativism that had rallied at the border under George W. Bush, and that for eight years was expressed in an almost psychotropic hatred of Barack Obama, crystallized into what some have described as “race realism”: a rejection of the legitimizing premises of the liberal multilateral order—especially the idea that all could sit at the table and enjoy the world’s abundance, that the global economy should be organized around lines as open as possible, and that diversity rather than, say, Anglo-Saxonism could serve as the foundation of political communities.

In the past, politicians—even during moments of acute crisis—could look beyond the settlement line and point to the possibilities. Now, one politician in particular said there was nothing out there but peril.

As a worldview, race realism is often expressed as instinct rather than a worked-out philosophy and has taken many forms in the United States, including a reflexive sympathy for law-enforcement agencies and racial resentment. But over the past few decades, the border has provided increasing coherence to the sentiment. In July 2014, for instance, residents of Murrieta, California, just north of San Diego, took to the streets for days, waving US and Gadsden flags and hurling racist slurs, trying to stop buses carrying Central American families to a nearby federal facility. “We can’t start taking care of others if we can’t take care of our own,” one protester said, offering a concise précis of what would soon be called “Trumpism.”

The buses were turned back—the families shunted to some other federal detention center—and two years later, Murrieta residents, by a large margin, voted for Donald Trump.

Greg Grandin is a professor of history at New York University and a Nation editorial-board member. This article is adapted from The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America, published in March by Metropolitan Books, an imprint of Henry Holt and Company. Copyright © 2019 by Greg Grandin. All rights reserved.
School-shooting survivors become activists not because they want to, but because they have to.

AT 10 AM ON MARCH 14, 2018, SOME 200 students at Great Mills High School in Great Mills, Maryland, walked out of our classrooms in the 30-degree cold. We were among the roughly 3,000 schools to participate in the nation’s first-ever National School Walkout observing the one-month anniversary of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. I passed out stickers to my classmates that said “Enough Is Enough” and “#NEVERAGAIN School = A Safe Space,” along with instruction cards on how to register to vote.

At around the 11-minute mark—the amount of time it took law-enforcement officers to enter the high school in Parkland after the first reports of the shooting—a circle formed around my classmate Mikayla, who spoke through a megaphone. “We’re here to commemorate the kids who lost their lives because of a school shooter who came up into a school just like ours and killed their classmates,” she said. It was so cold that the skin on my knuckles began to crack, but I was filled with a happiness difficult to explain.

I was confident that we were doing something significant.

The following Tuesday, a 17-year-old boy in my graduating class walked into our own school with a gun, which he used to fatally shoot his ex-girlfriend, 16-year-old Jaelynn Willey. The bullet that went through Jaelynn’s head also struck and wounded a 14-year-old student in the leg. Afterward, the shooter continued down the hallway, only to take his own life when confronted by our school resource officer.

Less than a week earlier, I had been thrilled that our little high school in a predominantly Republican town was taking a stand against gun violence. Suddenly, I was sitting in math class with the sound of my peers’ screams as they tried to flee the school ringing in my ears.

I became interested in pushing for gun reform after the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012, when I was 12, and even more so after Parkland. I wasn’t alone: In the wake of the 2018 massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High, the country saw the birth of the biggest student-led protest movement since the Vietnam War era.
have never known a life without active-shooter drills, took a stand against the gun culture they had been raised to view as normal. This movement made change in important ways: States passed 50 new gun-control laws, and young people showed up to vote in historic numbers. Yet gun violence continues to be an ever-growing problem—and my classmates and I experienced firsthand the result of our country’s resistance to change.

That day—March 20, 2018—lit a spark in me that will never fade away: not in 2019, not ever. The battle to end gun violence and the toxic gun culture that supports it is going to be a long one, but it’s one worth fighting. It’s my hope that we will create monumental change in time for our children’s generation to avoid living in fear the way we have.

I was heartsick and filled with dread as I refreshed my phone that day, waiting for friends to check in. I sent out a tweet asking people to pray for us and gave out what little information I had in the moment. When my Twitter page began to get traffic, so did the video I had posted from the day of our school’s walkout. I couldn’t bring myself to watch it again, but just reading the sadness that people expressed over the horrible irony made me furious. It’s not an experience that I want to pass down to the next generation.

That summer, I attended a gun-control event in Washington, DC, where I introduced myself to a volunteer by telling her that I was from Great Mills, and that I’d been in the school shooting in my senior year of high school. That day—March 20, 2018—lit a spark in me that will never fade away: not in 2019, not ever. The battle to end gun violence and the toxic gun culture that supports it is going to be a long one, but it’s one worth fighting. It’s my hope that we will create monumental change in time for our children’s generation to avoid living in fear the way we have.

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That summer, I attended a gun-control event in Washington, DC, where I introduced myself to a volunteer by telling her that I was from Great Mills, and that I’d been in the school shooting there in March. She responded, “Oh, that’s wonderful!” I knew she meant well, but it stung nonetheless. When I was no longer standing in front of her, I started to cry. Nothing about what we do is “wonderful.” I would much rather have been at home watching TV, not going up to DC for what seemed like the 100th time since March trying to convince people to care about gun violence.

We’re not doing this because we want to; we’re doing it because we have to. I had my first lockdown drill in kindergarten, and I was in a school shooting in my senior year of high school.

With the leaders of this country seeming to take us more backward than forward, it can be hard to remain hopeful—but it’s important that we never give up. Change doesn’t happen overnight, no matter how much we want it to. I couldn’t prevent the shooting at my school with urgent stickers and cards telling people how to register to vote. But that doesn’t mean my efforts were for nothing. Change happens whenever we change one person’s perspective, one person’s outlook on the state of the country, and one person’s vote.

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Toby Hennessy, the narrator of Tana French’s extraordinary new crime novel, *The Witch Elm*, tells us in its first line that he’s always regarded himself as “a lucky person.” He’s got a fine job directing public relations for an art gallery, and he lives in a bright apartment in a quiet neighborhood of Dublin—though he’s been talking with his girlfriend, Melissa, about getting a place together. Melissa is another manifestation of Toby’s luck; she’s as kind, sweet, and understanding as they come. Even when he stays out late, drinking himself into insensibility with his friends and casually exchanging glances across the bar with an “extremely pretty brunette,” Melissa still texts him smileys and kisses and tells him to “Say hi to the guys from me.” She’s just that kind of girl.

Toby’s luck extends to his family—they’re well-off, stable, and in possession of a grand old ancestral manse, Ivy House, that stands in a hidden, woodsy pocket of the city. They meet there on Sundays for raucous lunches with Uncle Hugo, the house’s present owner and caretaker. Ivy House figures heavily in...
Toby’s memories and, in time, will provide The Witch Elm with its main plot.

Ivy House is a wonderful creation; French provides just enough detail to goose the reader’s brain into filling in the rest. Like a previous noteworthy house from French’s oeuvre, the grandiosely ramshackle Whitethorn House in The Likeness, with its “worn stone steps,” “great brass knocker,” and “big rusted key,” Ivy House serves as a repository for all the reader’s sentimental notions of a life that once was, or could have been. “All it takes,” Toby tells us, “is one whiff of the right smell—jasmine, lapsang souchong, a specific old-fashioned soap that I’ve never been able to identify—or one sideways shaft of afternoon light” to bring him back to those halcyon days when everyone got along and, as far as he can remember, nothing bad ever happened. The Witch Elm, in other words, hastens to let you know that something bad definitely happened at Ivy House, and that it’s come back to haunt poor Toby. What that event actually was, on the other hand, the book takes its own sweet time to reveal—160 pages, more or less.

If you’re inclined to worry that this is too long to wait for a story to begin, you needn’t. The first third of The Witch Elm is veritably packed with plots, most immediately the one that’s on Toby’s mind during his inebriated night out with the boys. It seems that the head of exhibitions at the gallery, a frustrated artist and “long-chinned hipster” named Tiernan, has decided to mount a show that features representations of urban life made by marginalized Dublin kids—“scuzzy youths with low-grade criminal records,” as Toby characterizes them.

The idea is met with enthusiasm by the gallery’s benefactors and, as opening night draws near, garners massive media attention, particularly because the exhibition will show the exuberant work of a mysterious artist named Gouger. It appears that Gouger refuses to reveal his true identity to anyone but Tiernan; he has to remain incognito, lest his many enemies in the city’s criminal underworld manage to track him down.

Yet Gouger turns out to be a fiction: Toby catches Tiernan touching up one of the elusive artist’s alleged paintings. Toby thinks the whole thing is hilarious and agrees to keep the secret—but then the boss finds out, fires Tiernan, finds a preset tense to pull the Gouger pieces from the show, and lets Toby off with a reprimand after the latter promises to smooth it all over in the press.

The plan works. Still, the whole situation bothers Toby; he worries that there might be unforeseen consequences. At the pub that fateful night, Toby boasts of the deception to his friends, easygoing Sean and working-class Dec, who think he’s a fool for having risked his job to keep Tiernan’s secret. “You’re a lucky little prick,” Dec tells him angrily before they all become too drunk to argue, and Toby heads off for home on foot.

“After that,” he tells us, “my memory of the evening gets patchy for a while. Of course in its aftermath I went over it a million times.” Toby remembers that he picked up some takeout along the way; he thinks he may have watched Netflix or played some Xbox before he went to bed. Then, in the middle of the night, he awakes to the sound of intruders in the apartment. He grabs a candlestick, turns on the lights, and finds two track-suited men going through his drawers and unplugging his TV. Confidently and foolishly, Toby attacks, and before long is beaten nearly to death. He manages to stagger into the hallway, where he blacks out; the next thing he knows, he’s lying in a hospital bed, being told by detectives that his home has been ransacked and his car stolen, and by the doctors that he is faced with years of experiencing seizures and undergoing physical therapy.

Poor Toby can’t seem to take it all in: “Only some tiny peripheral part of me began to understand, with a sickening drop, that this was in fact my real life now.” In the weeks that follow, Toby can’t help but wonder, “Did I should someone at the bar?… Was the brunette’s roid-rat ex snarling in some unnoticed corner?” Or was the break-in connected to the fraud at the gallery? In a fog of drugs and pain, Toby briefly convinces himself that the imaginary Gouger has become real and exacted revenge on him for being ousted from the exhibition.

Despite several rounds of questioning by a pair of police detectives—interrogations that fill Toby with feelings of anxiety and persecution—the hunt for the thieves peter out. The detectives tell him that they’ll be in touch, and Toby returns home, where he rejects Melissa’s repeated offers to come stay with him, and lies awake at night in a fugue of post-traumatic stress.

Neither Toby nor we have long to wait, however, until the book’s next plot twist arrives, in the form of a call from his cousin Susanna: Uncle Hugo has just been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. He’s dying and needs somebody to stay with him at Ivy House. Does Toby want to do it? He is, after all, taking a recuperative leave from work.

Toby rejects the offer at first, but eventually comes around and brings Melissa with him. The three of them form something of an ad hoc family and fall into an unexpected idyll: Uncle Hugo is cordial and welcoming, Toby sees his physical and mental health slowly improve, and Melissa begins to seem less like an unresolved problem to him and more like a permanent companion.

Uncle Hugo also puts Toby to work. A genealogist, Hugo’s been attempting to solve a knotty problem: One of his clients, Mrs. Wozniak, has discovered, through an online DNA-analysis service, that she’s related to a family she shouldn’t be. This genealogical search inaugurates yet another subplot as Hugo and an increasingly absorbed Toby try to get to the bottom of the puzzle.

It isn’t long before Toby finds it hard to imagine leaving Ivy House or Uncle Hugo actually dying. The big family Sunday lunches come to seem more like an imposition or an invasion, what with Susanna, her mild-mannered husband, and their rowdy, uncontrollable children; sneaky cousin Leon, on indefinite leave from his boyfriend in Germany; and all the various uncles and aunts. But there’s one positive effect from these visits: The cousins convince Toby to broach the topic of the house with Hugo. They don’t want their childhood memories sold off; they want Ivy House to stay in the family. Toby agrees, and Hugo, confronted with the need to make a decision, calls a family meeting.

Up until this point, a third of the way through the novel, it’s reasonable for any reader familiar with French’s inventive Dublin Murder Squad series of police procedurals to wonder what the hell is going on. The Witch Elm has given us a cascading series of dramatic story lines, each intriguing in its own way, but apparently unrelated. Yet aren’t these all supposed to be pieces of the same puzzle? How will the art fraud connect to the break-in, or to the fate of Ivy House, or to Mrs. Wozniak’s rogue DNA?
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(SOUND FAMILIAR?)

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Historically, I’ve tended to prefer crime fiction written in a minimal style, fiction that has Raymond Chandler as its ancestral avatar. This doesn’t represent some overarching personal bias against writerly elaboration; rather, there’s something about the genre that lures its practitioners into unnecessarily discursive explorations of mood and theme. I’m thinking here of the lugubrious excesses of Henning Mankell’s Wallander novels, or the comically lavish violence of Stieg Larsson’s Girl series, which go awfully far to prove the ultimately shallow thesis that people are sad and bad. And even otherwise restrained crime writers can’t seem to resist providing a dark and brooding musical playlist for their detectives to listen to, as though they’re already scoring, in their heads, the HBO miniseries they hope the book will eventually become.

But French is the rare maximalist crime writer who seems unsusceptible to these clichés. Her narrators are loquacious, yet they never bore; she’s a master of setting scene and filling in backstory in a way that makes these contextual necessities feel not workmanlike or utilitarian, but like vital elements of the story in and of themselves. A surprising amount of The Witch Elm’s bulk comes from long blocks of expository dialogue—a technique I find insufferable in almost every writer but French. And when her protagonists indulge in pages of chin-scratching about their own nature, or baldly telegraph impending catastrophe—both hallmarks of Toby’s bewildered first-person narration—I find it electrifying rather than stultifying.

In other words, maybe there’s nothing wrong with baroque artifice, as long as Tana French is doing it. The Likeness is an undeniable masterpiece of its genre, and one of my favorite novels of all time; and its premise—a victim who is the exact doppelgänger of the detective tasked with solving her murder—is perhaps the most preposterously implausible of any story I’ve read. It isn’t that French is ignoring the essential fakeness of crime fiction; she embraces it and delights in it. Her narratives foreground their artificiality, refine and deepen it, so that it’s ultimately revealed as a profounder kind of truth: the truth that we are all fronting, all the time, especially to ourselves. We see this in French’s earlier novels, too—the excellent The Secret Place springs to mind, with its private school full of teenage suspects, divided into cliques and trying desperately to be something other than what they think they are.

Toby, then, is right in the pocket for French: He’s so deep into his own artifice that he doesn’t recognize that’s what it is.

He thinks he’s a pretty terrific guy and ignores any evidence to the contrary; whatever happens is pretty much OK with him, and everything will work out in the end. In the aftermath of his brutal attack—his first major misfortune, and the first of many to come—the thing that frightens him most is the possibility that some essential part of this great shining self is gone: He can’t remember parts of his life, can’t seem to finish a thought. He is facing, for the first time, the possibility that he is, in some fundamental way, incomplete.

When the book’s main plot arrives at last, Toby’s unease is transformed into a full-blown crisis. That’s because, during the family meeting at which the fate of Ivy House will be decided, Susanna’s mischievous young son climbs up the ancient wych-elm tree in the garden (I’ll blame marketing for the pointless and misleading misspelling in the book’s title), reaches into the giant hole in the trunk, and pulls a human skull out by the hair. Chaos ensues; the police are called; the garden’s upended and the tree felled. Turns out there’s a whole decade-old skeleton in there, and it belongs to Dominic Ganly, a teenage acquaintance of Toby’s previously thought to have drowned at sea.

Everybody knew Dominic, though Toby remembers him as little more than a decent enough guy who was, you know, around. He’d come to the parties they threw at Ivy House, parties all the kids were at—Susanna and Leon, Toby’s mates Sean and Dec. It seems that Dominic was last seen at one of these parties, in fact. So how did he get into the tree?

The police question everybody, and soon Toby is being asked to rely on his own spotty memory to prove his innocence. To deflect them, he pretends that his amnesia is more consequential than it is, dissembles and blathers like a guilty man, and half-convinces himself of his own line of bull, until he’s not entirely sure that he didn’t kill Dominic—who has emerged, through the police questioning, as having been something of an asshole. Toby comes to think that his cousins are plotting against him and hatches his own plot to deceive them, in defiance of Melissa’s increasingly desperate pleas.

The rest of the book gives us a dazzling series of twists and turns, betrayals and reconciliations, revelations and conflicts; French drops the pieces into place with masterful skill. Just when you think you’re a step ahead of her, she dashes your hopes with a stray observation or a devastating scrap of dialogue. Ultimately, you get all the answers you think you wanted, and—unluckily for him—does Toby.

I read The Witch Elm against the backdrop of Brett Kavanaugh’s Supreme Court confirmation hearings, in which Christine Blasey Ford, once an acquaintance of the nominee’s, alleged that he’d sexually assaulted her at a party in the 1980s. The truth of the allegation aside—most people found Blasey Ford’s account highly convincing—Kavanaugh’s reaction to it was telling: not necessarily as an indication of his guilt, about which Americans seem hopelessly divided, but of his level of privilege and entitlement. This moneyed white man, groomed to rise through the ranks of elite institutions and assume the reins of power, reacted to the senators’ questions with bouts of defensive rage and tears, as though even to suspect someone with his credentials represented a miscarriage of justice. He lied casually about small details—his drinking habits, sexual proclivities, and social schedule—like a man who has never once been called on a lie in his life. Blasey Ford, on the other hand, spoke like a person accustomed to being endangered and doubted—a state that will likely feel familiar to most women.

The privileged don’t get it, the hearings taught us, because they don’t have to. For most of them, there never is a reckoning. The Witch Elm offers us a brilliant take on this dreary truth, with the added bonus that justice is actually realized in the end—if only obliquely, unexpectedly, and not through the established channels. Perhaps that makes The Witch Elm less of a crime novel and more of a fantasy. Either way, it’s one of Tana French’s best books, which makes it one of the best of its kind, period.
As long as there has been a US government, white Southerners have done their best to dominate it. They shoehorned the three-fifths clause into the Constitution, expanded slavery beyond the banks of the Mississippi River, started an armed rebellion to preserve that evil institution, created terrorist outfits like the Ku Klux Klan to sabotage Reconstruction, installed an American version of apartheid, and then fought the modern civil-rights movement with bombast, filibusters, and violence. In the 1960s, when a Democratic president and Congress finally passed laws that nullified the most blatantly racist statutes in the South, resentful whites below the Mason-Dixon Line began migrating to the Republican Party, which betrayed its Lincolnian roots in return for a sizable new constituency. The Mississippi voters who elected Cindy Hyde-Smith, a latter-day admirer of the Confederacy, to the US Senate last fall were merely extending a long, benighted tradition.

Yet in that same region often lurked another set of impulses that today’s progressives might cheer. In 1877, during a nationwide railroad strike, a Memphis newspaper asserted that the federal government should be “wrested from the hands of those who manipulate it to their own aggrandizement and to the oppression of the masses.” It was only one of many newspapers to champion the cause of organized labor. Three decades later, every major piece of legislation that President Woodrow Wilson signed to regulate big business—from a major anti-trust act to an eight-hour day for railroad workers—was crafted by a Democrat from one of the states that barred most African Americans from voting. Later, when Franklin Roosevelt sat in the White House, such landmark New Deal achievements as Social Security, the minimum wage, and protections for labor organizers would not have become law without the backing of explicitly racist lawmakers from Dixie.
The authors of two new books—David Bateman, Ira Katznelson, and John Lapinski in *Southern Nation: Congress and White Supremacy After Reconstruction* and Devin Caughey in *The Unsolid South: Mass Politics and National Representation in a One-Party Enclave*—take up this apparent contradiction and show how it helps to explain why the region switched from being the stronghold of one party to the base of its adversary.

Both books also come to a similar conclusion: that most white voters in the South, as well as the politicians they elected, were fine with egalitarian economic policies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries so long as they didn’t threaten to disrupt the Jim Crow order. Some endorsed these policies for purely instrumental reasons—as the price of sustaining an alliance with Democrats from the urban North who needed to win the votes of industrial workers. But others believed, with ample justification, that industrialists and Wall Street financiers ran the economy solely to benefit themselves, at the expense of small farmers and wage earners. Of course, the only exploitation these voters cared about was that suffered by white people, and this “egalitarian whiteness”—the concise term used by Bateman, Katznelson, and Lapinski to describe this combination of racial supremacy and working-class egalitarianism—helped keep the South solidly Democratic through the first half of the 20th century.

It is fitting that these historically minded works of political science bear the imprint of Princeton University Press. After all, the university’s most famous president was a distinguished political scientist who grew up in Dixie and, as the nation’s 28th president, instituted some notable reforms while also overseeing the segregation of a large part of the federal bureaucracy.

**Southern Nation**

*Congress and White Supremacy After Reconstruction*

By David A. Bateman, Ira Katznelson, and John S. Lapinski

Princeton University Press. 488 pp. $35

**The Unsolid South**

*Mass Politics and National Representation in a One-Party Enclave*

By Devin Caughey

Princeton University Press. 240 pp. $35

And Southern politicians kept winning on Capitol Hill even when their party didn’t control the White House or either chamber of Congress. By the early 20th century, most Republicans had essentially given up the battle to secure the right to vote that the 15th Amendment had guaranteed to black men—a right that the Democrats, who ruled every Southern state, had gradually stripped away from them. Moreover, some GOP leaders were quite willing to endorse that effort: In his 1909 inaugural address, President William Howard Taft confidently proclaimed, “The danger of the control of an ignorant electorate has…passed. With this change, the interest which many of the Southern white citizens take in the welfare of the negroes has increased.” It is hard to overestimate the power of a bloc of lawmakers united by the aim of preserving a racial order and able to use their mastery of the rules to wear down, if not convert, the opposition.

The authors of *Southern Nation* make their argument through a rigorous analysis of scores of legislative conflicts and outcomes. In less skillful hands, this could make for a long slog through a series of arcane disputes among politicians whom even most historians of the period ignore. But Bateman, Katznelson, and Lapinski know how to tell a good story, which on occasion also turns out to be a rather dramatic one. In 1922, for example, Congress had a sizable Republican majority, and the party, which still retained traces of its abolitionist heritage, seemed poised to pass an anti-lending bill that black activists and journalists like Ida B. Wells had long advocated. It would have been the first significant blow against legal racism since the end of Reconstruction, in 1877. The bill’s sponsors even persuaded one border-state Democrat, as well as seven of his Northern colleagues, to support it. But Southerners in the Senate found ways to slow down the process and threatened to filibuster the measure if it came up for debate on the floor. By the end of the year, the GOP’s leaders had surrendered and moved on. As the authors note, “The belief that the South could unilaterally, and relatively easily, defeat civil rights legislation would endure for decades.”

Dixie lawmakers also kept regulations placed on a critical part of the economy from undercutting the Jim Crow order. In 1906, Congress—then under GOP control—passed the Hepburn Act, a landmark measure that set an upper limit on railroad rates and required the transport firms to file annual reports with the Interstate Commerce Commission. Southern lawmakers made clear that they hoped to vote for the measure but would filibuster it to death if it included language that did away with segregated passenger cars. Progressive Republicans acquiesced to their Democratic colleagues. “After the deed was done,” the authors write, “a black paper from Indianapolis mocked the sight of the ‘old parties join[ing] hands on the color line.’”

*Southern Nation*’s single-minded emphasis on the grim achievements of a determined group of Dixiecrats neglects the influence that Democrats from other regions had on the party’s increasing commitment to anti-corporate and pro-labor causes. During the early 20th century, the bosses of New York’s Tammany Hall called for the municipal ownership of utilities and the inspection of factories and groomed progressives like Alfred E. Smith and Robert Wagner to become leaders, first in New York State and then on a national scale. In his three runs for the presidency, William Jennings Bryan, who hailed from Nebraska, courted unions and argued for passing a strongly progressive income tax and clamping the violators of antitrust laws in jail. During his 1908 campaign, Bryan won the endorsement of the American Federation of Labor—the start of a long, if often troubled, marriage between the Democrats and organized labor.

Even so, the authors of *Southern Nation* are right to emphasize the considerable sway of segregationists over the party in the first half of the 20th century. No leading Democrat from the North or West was willing to risk dividing his party by standing up for the rights of black people. “Egalitarian whiteness” even wormed its way into some of the landmark bills of the New Deal. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935, written by Wagner, excluded workers who toiled in agriculture or other people’s homes—the only occupations available to most black people in the South at the time. When first enacted,
Social Security also left those same groups out in the cold.

But even as Northern Democrats wrote such racist exclusions into law, their Dixie brethren were beginning to doubt that Roosevelt and the coalition he built really had their best interests at heart. As the mass suffering of the Depression faded, a growing number of Southern politicians voiced alarm that the interracial unions of the CIO, which undergirded the Democrats in the industrial North, might shatter the Jim Crow order if they organized successfully in the South as well. When, in 1947, a bipartisan majority passed the Taft-Hartley Act, which restricted strikes and boycotts and allowed states to pass “right-to-work” laws, only four Southern Democratic senators voted to uphold President Harry Truman’s veto.

Though most Democrats did not yet realize it, this vote marked a momentous disruption in the strong transregional coalition that had governed the nation since the early 1930s. The gap widened in 1948, when Hubert Humphrey and other liberal Democrats succeeded in getting a strong civil-rights plank added to the platform on which Truman would run that fall. Furious at this break with the party’s fidelity to Jim Crow, a group of segregationists bolted from the Democratic convention and nominated a States’ Rights ticket headed by South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond. From the end of Reconstruction until the 1950s, Democrats had won every single Senate election and nearly every House seat in the South. But by the time George W. Bush was elected president in 2000, conservative Republicans held a majority of those offices. The consequences of this rightward turn produced a sea change in American politics.

In The Unsolid South, Devin Caughey uncovers the roots of this transformation in the many combative primaries fought among Southern Democrats in the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s. Party officials either prohibited blacks from voting in these contests or made it difficult or even dangerous for them to do so. But the primaries, in which only a white “selectorate” (as Caughey calls it) took part, still turned into pitched battles between those who defended the New Deal and hoped to expand it and those who warned that a party led by FDR and his liberal successors was beholden to powerful unions that could not be trusted to uphold white supremacy.

One of the starkest examples in Caughey’s book comes from a rural district in South Carolina. In 1948, Hugo Sims, a World War II veteran in his late 20s, took on John J. Riley, the incumbent congressman, who often voted with right-wing Republicans. Although Sims had the backing of the local CIO textile union, he ran on banal slogans like “The man who gets elected will be the one who knows and is liked by the most people” and swept the primary. Once he got to Washington, Sims supported every significant measure that the Truman administration proposed. The young pol insisted that he could “work out a liberal program a Southerner can run on and get elected.” But he neglected the growing hostility of his white constituents to Truman’s Fair Deal, which included presidential statements of support for civil rights and the desegregation of the armed forces. “We call it the Raw Deal down here,” snapped one white farmer. In the 1950 primary, Riley took on Sims again; this time, he crushed his young rival by 20 percentage points.

A decade before this, another young Southern congressman, one Lyndon Baines Johnson from Texas, had already learned the dangers of poking at the vitals of the racist order. In 1938, Johnson watched Maury Maverick, a liberal firebrand from San Antonio, lose his bid for renomination after he became the only Southern member of Congress to endorse a federal law against lynching. “I can go [only] so far in Texas… my people won’t take it,” Johnson complained to a fellow New Dealer. “Maury forgot that and he is not here…. There’s nothing more useless than a dead liberal.” Yet in the late ’50s, Johnson risked angering his own constituents and broke with his Southern colleagues to help pass a civil-rights act, the first since Reconstruction. By then, however, he had become the shrewd majority leader of the Democratic Caucus and wanted desperately to be president.

While Caughey’s study is empirically impressive, it lacks the popular touch that makes Southern Nation a pleasing, if lengthy, read. Those unfamiliar with social-science methods who come across such chapter subtitles as “Details of the Group-Level IRT Models” and “Variation Across Issue Domains” may decide that The Unsolid South is not for them. But Caughey’s granular text explains as well as any previous history why white Southerners were primed to vote for a conservative Republican like Barry Goldwater years before he ran for president in 1964. Except for just two occasions—when segregationist George Wallace ran as an independent in 1968, and when Jimmy Carter ran as a Democrat in 1976—a majority of white Southerners have cast their ballots for the Republican candidate in every presidential election since then.
branches of the Farmers’ Alliance and in the People’s Party to battle the harm that “the money power” was doing to the livelihood of small farmers. In the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s, the Highlander Folk Center in rural Tennessee nurtured interracial movements for labor and black freedom that eventually helped shake up the entire region in the 1960s. And last fall, Stacey Abrams in Georgia, Andrew Gillum in Florida, and Beto O’Rourke in Texas all came close to writing a far more hopeful chapter in Dixie’s electoral history.

For now, however, most white Southerners continue to embody the same paradox that their ancestors did: They’re happy to benefit from the federal programs enacted by Democrats over the past century, while scorning the idea that the federal government should help black folks in equal ways. Ernest “Fritz” Hollings, the last Democratic senator from South Carolina (he retired in 2005), was fond of telling an anecdote about one of his white constituents who embodied this view. It is worth repeating in full:

A veteran returning from Korea went to college on the GI Bill, bought his house with an FHA loan, saw his kids born in a VA hospital, started a business with an SBA loan, got electricity from TVA and, later, water from an EPA project. His parents, living on Social Security, retired to a farm, got electricity from REA, and had their soil tested by the USDA. When his father became ill, the family was saved from financial ruin by Medicare, and a life was saved with a drug developed through NIH. His kids participated in the school lunch program, learned physics from teachers trained in an NSF program, and went to college with guaranteed student loans. He drove to work on the Interstate and moored his boat in a channel dredged by Army engineers. When floods hit, he took Amtrak to Washington to apply for disaster relief and spent some time in the Smithsonian museums. Then one day, he got mad. He wrote his senator an angry letter. “Get the government off my back,” he wrote. “I’m tired of paying taxes for all those programs created for ungrateful people!”

Only Democrats, of any race, who can speak truth to such Southerners and make them like it will finally put the long, painful dilemma of Dixie politics behind us.

Grey Wolf, Grizzly Bear, White-Tailed Deer

What I took to be desert bighorns running straight up the ridge making a sound like breaking plates didn’t turn out to be either of those things, & what I took to be fog shoplifting the top half of the mountain was really something more like the problem with trying to remember your childhood from pictures of your childhood. It was the blackened stump with arms fooling me on the hillside again, telling me to go buy a curtain I didn’t need at all, & it was the fire you must sometimes light on purpose & the swallow that repeated all powerful to them was the sun, & it was that sun still marching up the cliff like an army that made me wonder why the apples were smaller this year, and so quick. We used to take pictures of people taking pictures & call it memory. We used to call nostalgia an illness caused by swelling of the brain. The painter has been trying for days to get the color of the mountain just right, the yellowed skirts the agave wear in late July, other patches almost ashen against that face. One good cloud changes everything. The bighorn haven’t lived here for ninety years. I was thinking this might be a way to say someone once tried hard to water Bone Canyon & that there are worse things than the only pictures from your childhood having been taking while opening gifts.

JENNY BROWNE
middle sister runs in the park. She runs along its reservoirs, trying to ignore the surveillance-camera shutters clicking in the bushes. In a city split by sectarian violence, it’s the only route available. Traveling through some of its neighborhoods can be fatal.

Anna Burns’s *Milkman* is the story of this young woman growing up in an unnamed place that looks and sounds like Northern Ireland in the 1970s, a place of surreal cruelty and denial so steadfast it amounts to magical thinking. The book dissects what the alloy of nationalism, survivalism, and vengeance does to a society, and how it can mold the psyches of its members. The narrator is known alternately as “middle sister,” “maybe-girlfriend,” “the girl who walks,” and “longest friend.” The other characters are also identified by epithet—“third-brother-in-law,” “nuclear boy,” “Somebody McSomebody”—like a Greek epic poem or a code-named dossier.

One day, while middle sister is out walking and reading *Ivanhoe*, a menacing figure known as “the milkman”—“one of our high-ranking, prestigious dissidents,” a middle-aged (and married) member of the paramilitary—offers her a ride. She does not accept. “I didn’t know whose milkman he was,” she explains. “He wasn’t our milkman. I don’t think he was anybody’s. He didn’t take milk orders. There was no milk about him. He didn’t ever deliver milk. Also, he didn’t drive a milk lorry. Instead he drove cars, different cars, often flash cars, though he himself was not flashy.... Then there was that van—small, white, nondescript, shapeshifting.”

The milkman’s offer marks the beginning of two campaigns: He begins stalking middle sister, and the community begins to nurture a false rumor that they are involved in an affair, for which they blame the young woman. Middle sister’s coping strategy is avoidance. To refute the rumor would be to implicate herself, so she feigns ignorance with her mother, sisters, and neighbors. “I minimalised, withheld, subverted thinking, dropped all interaction surplus to requirement which meant they got no public content, no symbolic content, no full-bodiedness, no bloodedness, no passion of the moment, no turn of plot, no sad shade, no angry shade, no panicked shade, no location of anything.... Just me, devoid.”

The milkman continues to appear, like a wraith, portended by his white van. He never looks into middle sister’s eyes; he never touches her. But he does threaten her, even suggesting he will car-bomb her “maybe-boyfriend.” Under such threats, middle sister begins to fall apart, emotionally at first but then also physically, when she’s poisoned by “tablets girl,” the neighborhood’s compulsive poisoner. She goes to maybe-boyfriend’s house to break up, only to discover he and his best friend are in love.

That night, when the milkman’s white van appears, she gets in. “There was no choice. It was that there was no more alternative,” she tells us. “Ill-equipped I’d been to take in what everybody else from the outset easily had taken in: I was Milkman’s fait accompli all along.” Driving her to her home, the milkman leaves her at the door with instructions to meet him the following evening and to wear “not trousers. Something lovely. Some feminine, womanly, elegant, nice dress.” The meeting never happens: A day later, he’s killed by the state outside the park.

Burns’s novel has been described as “experimental,” “baffling,” and “challenging,” none of which quite describe this singular, hypnotic novel. It tugs you like an undertow into the rhythms of its narrator’s mind. No bit of outside language punctures her idiom: an adamant, stilted version of the colonizer’s tongue, an English so ridiculously formal and oblique that encountering it feels like staring at a Cubist painting.

The result is an uncanny narrative, one that is dreamlike and claustrophobic, hovering just above history. You see the Troubles through the eyes of someone who would rather not see themselves. “Although it is recognisable as this skewed form of Belfast, it’s not really Belfast in the [1970s],” Burns told The Guardian. “I would like to think it could be seen as any sort of totalitarian, closed society existing in similarly oppressive conditions. I see it as a fiction about an entire society living under extreme pressure, with long-term violence seen as the norm.”

The violence is, by middle sister’s dictum, ignored, but it can’t be entirely blocked out; it echoes in the story like an animal yowling far away. Burns achieves this through the horrifying, darkly funny asides her narrator rattles off like stones from a slingshot: “the ground here consisting of bombed-up concrete”; “lots of cats, then, years ago, dead”; “you could buy a balaclava anywhere”; “black-eyed, multi-bruised people walking about with missing digits who most certainly had those digits only the day before.”

When they finally break through, memories of violence are cataclysmic. A cat’s decapitated head reminds middle sister of the night nine years ago when British soldiers killed nearly all the neighborhood dogs and left them piled in a “giant heap,” an “enormity of corpses,” a “slimy, pelty mass,” and the memory floods back in sickening detail: “The throats were cut so deeply towards the bone that it looked to our eyes as if the heads were missing. This explanation seemed easier on the mind…that the heads should still be there than that they should be missing, than that the soldiers had taken them to make fun of them, to kick them, to prolong the dishonouring of them.”

Middle sister, however, rarely notices the soldiers; the community’s self-policing occupies her attention far more. She is urged to give up her habit of reading while walking, first by the milkman, then by her family and her oldest friend. “It’s creepy, perverse, obstinately determined…. Not public-spirited. Not self-preservation,” the friend says. “Calls attention to itself and why—with enemies at the door, with the community under siege, with us all having to pull together—would anyone want to call attention to themselves here?” Middle sister doesn’t explain. Earlier, she ponders that “always my thinking was at its best, its most flowering, whenever I was walking,” but flowering thoughts seem laughably inessential during a siege.

In this sense, Milkman is a book about what happens when something—a person, a cause, or a community—demands your entire soul, and demands it not from a position of power but from the desperate edge of survival.

The Troubles have been going on for most of middle sister’s life; the fear and violence and paranoia, the sorting of people into enemies and informants and allies, hang over her like a haze. Two of her brothers were “renouncers-of-the-state”; one has died, and the other is on the run. Middle sister is being stalked and harassed by a man that the community, she is told, can’t do without; implicit is the idea that the community could survive without her. Middle sister’s anguish comes, in part, from wanting her community to treat her as someone worthy of protection when, by its rules, this requires surrendering a part of herself.

At its core, this is a feeling that those who have experienced sexual violence or the threat of it know well: the awareness that some people—apparently good people—won’t choose to protect you because the circumstances aren’t right. There are ways to move forward, but they require either losing faith in others or destroying a part of yourself that had, in more favorable times, seemed essential.

When middle sister reflects on everyday harassment by soldiers—in a third-person-subjunctive reverie that reads as a confession—she muses that a rational person might want their harasser dead. They might think: “[If] a renouncer-sniper from some upstairs window takes your head off with a rifle-shot, soldier, not only would your passing not chasten me, I think it would be a pleasant, mentally relieving, charming, karmic thing.” She also knows she’s not the only who feels such rage: She remembers seeing a “very ordinary” person from the other side of town on TV, calling for the death of every person in her neighborhood and then observing: “It’s amazing the feelings that are in you.”

Violence, Burns tells us, doesn’t transport the soul past the point of no return; the horror and wonder is that you have to return, again and again. Life goes on. When the state kills the milkman—after shooting a garbage man, two bus drivers, a road sweeper, the real milkman, and another man, all of whom were mistaken for the paramilitary leader—middle sister rejoices, but silently. “My body was proclaiming, ‘Hallelujah! He’s dead. Thank fuck hallelujah!’” Horrifying, transcendent feelings. Amazing, to see what they cost.
Blek Honesty
Earl Sweatshirt’s relentless introspection
by Stephen Kearse

Earl Sweatshirt raps with finality. His songs don’t just evoke life; they expel it, dreading death yet savoring the rush of confronting it. This bleak honesty along with his lyricism have enchanted rap fans since his 2010 debut mixtape, and on his new album, Some Rap Songs, Earl, born Thebe Kgositsile, operates at full strength. Scarred by the recent death of his estranged father, the South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile, and exhausted from ongoing battles with depression, anaemia, and addiction, the Earl of Some Rap Songs is a weary marvel. Gut-wrenching and dazzling in equal measure, the album is rap as relentless introspection. Every word cuts, and every cut is artful.

At the beginning of his career, Earl was candid for the sake of shock. As a member of the Los Angeles hip-hop collective Odd Future, he played a ghoulish knave, sharing twisted fantasies of cannibalism and rape. His music was vile and brilliant and winking, tailor to troll and awe. These early songs were obliquely personal, sprinkling in references to twisted fantasies of cannibalism and rape. His family is a constant presence across the album—lifting him up, weighing him down, and flowing through him. His tendency to use blood to symbolize these relationships imbues them with an unsettling intimacy. “Blood of my father, I forgot another dream,” Earl raps on “Red Water,” his voice cutting through an instrumental that loops a muffled wail. “Ontheway!” frames self-examination as an act of self-destruction: “I revisit the past / Port wine and pages of pads / Mama say don’t play with them scabs / It’s safe to say I see the reason I’m bleeding out.” His inquiries only further his suffering, excavating deeper pains.

What’s striking is how Earl leans into this discomfort, posing harder questions. Is he the dream that his father forgot? (His parents split when he was a child.) Is his mother, UCLA law professor Cheryl Harris, protecting him or herself when she tells him to leave the past alone? Earl frames these queries as unknowable, yet vital. They propel him as much as they confound him. “Lotta blood to let,” he summarizes on “The Mint,” embracing the pain. It’s a clever setup: Bloodletting can be soothing or belligerent, depending on whose blood is being drawn. (It’s also a pseudoscience and thus has connotations of futility.) Earl’s anaemia further complicates this symbolism. “Help me, it’s been a minute since I seen a decent count,” he comments in “Ontheway!,” alluding to dwindling healthy blood cells. His inquests come with steep costs.

That heightened sense of mortality permeates the record, but doesn’t sink it. Like a muscle inundated with blood, Earl finds strength in all this deluge. His rapping is precise and robust, delivered with a grace that buoy the gravity of his subject matter. “Lost footing, there was sugar in my gas tank / My cushion was a bosom on bad days / There’s not a black woman I can’t thank,” he raps on “Azuca,” swishing the rhymes around like mouthwash. The steadiness and resonance of his voice are a constant and thrilling source of contrast as he peels apart his inner world. When he states, “Earl is not my name / The world is my domain, kid,” on “Veins,” a palpable vigor undergirds the claim. His career is secondary to his lineage: He performs as Earl Sweatshirt, but he lives as Thebe Kgositsile. We get some rap songs; he gets catharsis.

The greatest reliefs on the album are often unspoken. Composed in the beatsmith tradition of producers like J Dilla, Madlib, and Prince Paul, the album’s production is claustrophobic and dense. The producers, Earl among them, sample widely, clipping sounds into gravelly loops that hiss and fizz and scrape, creating rhythm from friction. Emphasizing texture, these beats prize grit over gloss; they come across as fragmented and decayed rather than polished. The looped shrieks and droning strings of “The Bends” are an eerie counterpoint to Earl’s calm voice. The twinkly chords of “Eclipse” acquire a dull glimmer as they are minced into a soupy haze. These splintered compositions mirror Earl’s nonlinear storytelling, blurring process and narrative. At times, like when he raps in loops on “Red Water” and “Eclipse,” it feels like Earl is sampling himself.

This queasy approach peaks on “Playing Possum,” the album’s emotional core. Pairing his father’s recitation of a poem about the violence of borders with a recording of his mother delivering a speech, Earl stages a haunting and touching reconciliation. There’s no nostalgia or wish fulfillment to this juxtaposition, just clarity. Placed toward the end of the album, the song lacks the turbulence and murkiness of the ones that precede it. It’s just spare and beautiful. When it ends with crisp, ecstatic clapping, it’s hard not to think of a choice line from “Veins”: “It’s been a minute since I heard applause.” By reuniting his parents, he’s finally done something he can be proud of.

The kicker is that he follows this Kodak moment with the blistering “Peanut,” the most forthright song of his career. Dropping all pretense of being OK, he wheezes out a grim vignette: “Depression, this is not a phase.” Picking out his grave / Couldn’t help but feel out of place.” It’s a disturbing and stunning sequence: Restoring his broken family emboldens him to accept that he, too, is fractured. As a sepulchral dirge quakes around his splayed psyche, he sounds stronger than ever.
Puzzle No. 3490
JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS
1. One who opposes a country of dateless men? (10)
8. Hide second tattoo (4)
9. Wilder, Virginia to retaliate (6)
11. Deacon traditionally provides cover for liturgical singer (6)
12. Less than two times one hundred plus one (4)
13. Laurel embracing the author's religious icon (5)
15. Take back automobile, returning within a certain distance (7)
17. Turned around and became mellow in essay (7)
22. Warning is withdrawn about unfinished conversation (5)
23. Towheaded urchin licks adults on their faces (4)
24. Eliminating error, duplicates a revolutionary political ideology (6)

DOWN
1. Scarf taking the place of a bed (5)
2. Can Connecticut be red or blue? (5)
3. Insect beginning to eat chips, perhaps (4)
4. A medical professional goes in to pick up a stone (6)
5. New England friend is a neighbor to 6 (5)
6. The Nation is independent, I admit up front (5)
7. Examine candidate’s tooth filling (4)
10. General that is a granter of wishes (5)
14. Backers of Jesus may curl up with slender woman (5)
16. Give a hearing to the people who plant trees (6)
18. Gather outside front of courthouse for summary (5)
19. A flower came up (5)
20. Young Glaswegian I placed in animal shelter (5)
21. Native of Mexico hosted by Stockholm eccentric (5)
22. Curves and matrices, subtracting the odd elements (4)
23. Burns leaving New Jersey city as a vagrant (4)

Each Across clue leads to two different words that are anagrams of each other; the wordplay is for one, and the definition is for the other (in either order). For example, in the clue “Near true object (5),” the wordplay “Near true” indicates NIGHT, while the definition “object” indicates THING. Use the Down entries, which are normal, to determine which word should go in the grid.

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3489

ACROSS
1. SUPERM ODE[L] [6 anag.]
2. GODPAREN T [10 rev.] [6 anag.]
4. POLKA [6] [AN] [6]
8. S CANNER [6]
9. GODPARENTS [6 anag.]
10. MEDEA [6]
11. SALV E [4 anag.]
12. CAME [6]
13. COR [6]
14. DEA [6]
15. TIDE [4]
16. SCOOP + FLAW [8]
17. BARCELONA [6]
18. COVERED [6 anag.]
19. BARS [6]
20. CANTER [6]
22. CAMERAMEN [6]
23. DACIE [6]
24. PAL [6]
25. SKYE [6]
26. NIGEL [6]
27. WA TERN Y [6]

DOWN
1. SIGN (anag.) + SUP [2 PE + DAL (rev.)]
2. PE + DAL [6]
3. READ DEMAND + WEEIP [6]
4. OVER [anag.] + O + OK [6]
6. MARG + O + (FON + TYNN [6 rev.])
7. LITE + RALLY [6]
8. OXILIP + PEPPERONI [6]
10. INK [6]
11. BACK [6]
12. SHAKE [6]
13. SCOF + FLAW [6]
14. BARCELONA [6]
15. BODIES [6]
16. EYEBALL [6]
18. WEST [6]
20. EAST [6]
21. BARCELONA [6]
22. HUNGRY [6]
23. BURAL [6]
24. ORANGE [6]
25. TURKISH [6]
26. LILY [6]
27. OXILIP [6]

The Nation (ISSN 0027-8378) is published 34 times a year (four issues in March, April, and October; three issues in January, February, July, and November; and two issues in May, June, August, September, and December) by The Nation Company, LLC © 2019 in the USA by The Nation Company, LLC, 520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018; (212) 209-5400. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices.

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The Nation is available on microfilm from: University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Member, Alliance for Audited Media. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Nation, PO Box 8505, Big Sandy, TX 75755. Printed in the USA.
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