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NO MAN’S LAND

A century of open borders in the Arctic

ATOSSA ARAXIA ABRAHAMIAN
Forgotten History

Although David Cole’s review of Steve Luxenberg’s book *Separate: The Story of Plessy v. Ferguson, and America’s Journey From Slavery to Segregation* [“Inherently Unequal,” July 15/22] fails to delve into an important forerunner of this historic case, one hopes Luxenberg did not. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 expanded the 14th Amendment to include public accommodations, and this expansion was tested by a black man, Bird Gee, who was denied service at a hotel. His case made it to the Supreme Court, which not only ruled against Gee but used the case to annul the Civil Rights Act, thereby setting the stage for *Plessy* and 70 more years of Jim Crow. In a nifty coincidence, however, Gee’s grandnephew Loren Miller, a prominent civil rights attorney, filed the appellate briefs in 1954’s landmark *Brown v. Board of Education*, overturning *Plessy* and redeeming his grand-uncle’s heroic efforts.

Vincent Brook
Los Angeles

Debating Biden

It’s obvious that the powers that be at *The Nation* do not like Joe Biden and have recently published snippy, myopic little articles attacking him on narrow issues like his opposition to mandatory busing 45 years ago and his friendly nature, with friendships that have included some racist Republicans [“Biden and Segregation” by Jonathan Kozol, July 1/8, and “Pal Joey” by Jeet Heer, July 15/22]. What are you going to do when Biden gets the Democratic nomination in 2020? Are you going to support him, or are you going to continue your opposition to Biden and recommend voting for Trump? You better get your act together.

We live in an imperfect world. Let’s try to make it a little better.

Lyle Swenson
Stillwater, Minn.

Re Jeet Heer’s “Pal Joey”: Joe Biden lost me when he humiliated Anita Hill. He would be a terrible president. How can anyone vote for him simply because he would be better than Trump? My Persian cat Zeke would be a better president than Trump.

Jack Ox

I don’t want Biden to be the nominee, but I’m prepared to live with this possibility. What I find lacking in takedowns like this is a sufficient sense of historical context: Why would a number of prominent Democrats, not just Southerners, have tried to ride the wave of white urban backlash in the 1970s, especially after Richard Nixon’s victories over Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern? Remember Jimmy Carter’s remarks on “ethnic purity” while campaigning in 1976? As the maverick candidate and a presumed advocate for civil rights, he caught much flak for that remark, but I’m not sure there wasn’t a certain rearguard movement already entrenched within the party. I’m not excusing Biden for his chumminess with segregationists, but who was expecting a firebrand to rise from the Senate floor and shame them back then?

William Levine

Correction

“Inherently Unequal” by David Cole [July 15/22] mistakenly states that Justice John Marshall Harlan was the Supreme Court’s only Southern justice when the court upheld segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In fact, he was one of two Southerners; Justice Edward Douglass White of Louisiana was the other.

Comments drawn from our website letters@thenation.com
A Moon Shot for the Earth

What is it about the left and the space program? Back in the summer of ’69—long before he became The Nation’s lead editorial writer—the late Andrew Kopkind pointed out the inextricable ties between American militarism on earth and our country’s higher aspirations.

“We Aim at the Stars (But Hit Quang Tri),” he wrote, decrying a system “that swells the profits of the biggest military/space corporations without changing the system of distribution of those profits one whit.” Critics might say we’re still at it, still harshing the national buzz by noticing those on whose backs that giant leap was launched—just as we did at the time, when The Nation impertinently remarked that amid all the talk about “the blackness of space,” the faces on the screen were uniformly white.

So perhaps this is an odd place to confess my lifelong love affair with space. On that July Sunday, I’d just returned exhausted from a Boy Scout camping trip yet somehow prevailed upon my parents to wake me up in time to watch Neil Armstrong going down that ladder. It was thrilling then and, despite all we’ve learned—and published—still sends a chill down my spine. As did the realization, some 30 years ago, that the auto mechanic I was interviewing in Harlem was the father of Ronald McNair, the African American astronaut who died in the 1986 Challenger disaster.

Which doesn’t mean those who pointed out the irony—and political misdirection—permeating that ’69 landing in the Sea of Tranquility while cities burned back home (and were being bombed to cinders in Vietnam) were wrong.

It has always been a question of priorities. The Cold War—and the blow to America’s collective ego struck by Sputnik—made the space race into a well-funded national obsession. Yet even those most critical of recent attempts to revive that apocalyptic antagonism might cheer a renewed rivalry aimed not at conquering new worlds but at saving this one. Why not make the Green New Deal this generation’s moon shot? Why not invite Russia—and China and India—to join us in a race to save Spaceship Earth?

NASA once estimated it took over 400,000 scientists and technicians to land human beings on the moon. That’s a huge backup team—and if applied to the basic research, applied science, and engineering that would be required to end America’s fossil fuel addiction, could also be a course correction for our economy in ways that might satisfy even NASA’s longtime critics. Like Eisenhower’s National Defense Education Act, the massive investment required to educate and train such a workforce would have consequences far beyond the Green New Deal. Likewise the millions of jobs involved in building energy-efficient public housing, a 21st century rail network, and all the other components of a truly comprehensive response to climate change. Only instead of ignoring or exacerbating racial and economic inequality, the Green New Deal would directly address those problems. (That’s the “New Deal” part.)

It’s not a new idea. In 2003 the Apollo Alliance tried to bring labor and environmental groups together around a $300 billion 10-year program to speed up the transition to clean energy. Five years later, in these pages, Van Jones argued for a green capitalism that would unite environmentalists, social justice activists, and organized labor. Yet neither was nearly ambitious enough. The Apollo lunar program cost $288 billion in today’s dollars.

The Green New Deal won’t be easy to pass—or to deliver. As President Kennedy said, “We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things not because they are easy but because they are hard.” Building the postcarbon economy we desperately need while unraveling the noose of inequality around our necks will be a gigantic undertaking. That’s the good news. The bad news is that unlike going to the moon, saving the earth isn’t an option. It’s a necessity.

D.D. Guttenplan
An Author’s Artifacts
Lessons from Philip Roth’s estate sale.

Litchfield, Connecticut

It was a curious moment in the annals of American literary fetishism: On Saturday, July 20, an auction house in Litchfield held an online sale of 134 lots from the estate of Philip Roth, who died in 2018. In the run-up to the big day, the bidding did not seem especially brisk, though there was some interest in the master’s Sandy Koufax baseball card, two IBM Selectric typewriters, a badly chipped Pat and Dick Nixon souvenir plate, and a few pieces of good furniture—the leavings of a man well known for taking to heart Flaubert’s advice that writers should live modestly if they want to be wild and original in their work. (Were the contents of Philip’s Manhattan apartment to come up for sale, they would be even less enticing.)

Why—I wondered during my visit a few days before the bidding’s close as I walked among the respectable side tables, chairs, and chests pushed together in sad disarray—should anyone bother with this stuff, especially when the only material things that really mattered to Philip, his books, were absent? But then something struck me.

Everything on offer in Litchfield came from his 18th century Connecticut house, purchased in 1972 as a retreat from New York City and the incessant attention that began with the publication of Portnoy’s Complaint in 1969. Why this corner of Connecticut, with its colonial history and colonial architecture? Why not a cool mid-century modern spread around here or in Woodstock, New York, where he had lived and made many good friends? The remoteness appealed to him, to be sure, and yet, as I considered his Seth Thomas ogee clock and the five or so pieces of mid-19th-century American furniture that recall in their modest way the great 18th century pieces that critic Robert Hughes rightly described as “the first American art to lift into real originality,” I recalled a revealing exchange I had with Philip a decade or so ago.

I told him that I’d become the editor of The Magazine Antiques. “Back to being a WASP in a respectable WASP calling,” he remarked. No, I explained, what is fascinating about this field, the American part anyway, is that it was the creation of Jews. I went on to describe the migration of preeminent furniture dealer Israel Sack from Eastern Europe (part of the massive five-decades exodus of many Eastern European Jews, including Philip’s grandparents). The Sacks, the Ginsburgs, the Levys, the Liverants, and others discovered the beauty and originality of both the severe and the exuberant furniture forms created by talented American craftsmen in the 18th century.

Nothing was lost on Philip: “And then they sold it back to the Yankees?” Yes, I said, and later to the Fords and the du Ponts, developing a field that grew and grew until it reached its tulipmania moment around the time of the US bicentennial.

After the laughter, we went on to something else, so I did not go into my usual rant about the meaning of it all, and probably I did not have to. Philip instinctively understood the litany of patriotism, belonging, and money that fueled those dealers. He was far from immune to the first two parts of that trinity, though mostly indifferent to the third.

That indifference may account for the seemingly underwhelming results at Litchfield County Auctions; his modest effects went for modest sums. There were only a handful of outliers: An undated Asian carved wood plaque featuring a pagoda scene (estimated at only $150) curiously sold for $60,000, and a French 19th century ship figurehead of a robed maiden (estimated at $6,000) for $16,000. The author’s mint green Olivetti Lettera 32 typewriter—a 1960s model, still functional, replete with a matching, slightly mildewed case—sold for $17,500.

If the American antiques in his now dispersed collection were not wildly valuable, they are nevertheless evocative of a writer who as much as anything was the hard not so much of Jewishness but of Americanness, of belonging and patriotism. Did he think of them this way? He didn’t have to. Every satire, every rant about Nixon, Reagan, Bush, or Trump, as well as his late great novels like American Pastoral, was fueled by patriotism in the face of all the reasons for dismay. From the framed replica of the Constitution he remembered hanging in his parents’ Newark hallway to his Seth Thomas clock (made not far from his corner of Connecticut), he was alive to the promise of a better America, chimerical or not.

Philip was also always alive to patriotism’s problems. He may have come quite belatedly to the particular problems that patriotism and belonging present to black people, but these problems mattered to him, and they matter to his legacy. He became fascinated by the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates; I know he wondered whether an African American like Coates or his son could or would see patrimony as Philip did in Patrimony when he realizes that “the huge job that [his father] did all his life” was immune to the first two parts of that trinity, though probably I did not have to. Philip instinctively understood the litany of patriotism, belonging, and money that fueled those dealers. He was far from immune to the first two parts of that trinity, though mostly indifferent to the third.

If nothing else, these fragments of Philip’s daily life brought me back to his long struggle with this country’s dubious but very real promise.

Elizabeth Pochoda

An occasional gathering of personal enthusiasms and observations about the passing scene, “Field Notes,” in the tradition of The Nation, draws attention to things overlooked or often misunderstood. TheNation.com/FieldNotes
Dear Liza,

I'm a 35-year-old white woman working for an arts and community nonprofit on the South Side of Chicago. Last summer, while we were painting a mural, a 12-year-old girl from the neighborhood befriended me. Later she asked me to take her to a high school open house when her parents were working and she needed a ride. Since then, I've been helping her with homework and occasionally taking her and her siblings to dance lessons. Her parents, who work a lot, say they appreciate my help.

A couple of months ago, I went to her school's talent show, and this is where race comes in. Out of 200 people in this space, I appeared to be the only white person, which brought her obvious attention. She told me after the fact that because of her light skin, people thought I might be her mom.

Her worries about this have persisted. Last week we went to get pizza, and she said she didn’t want to go inside with me “because they might think you are my mom.” She’s been asking me to go see her play sports for months, so today I went to her game, but she did not acknowledge me. (Again, I was the only white person there.) When she called me after the game, I mentioned her not speaking to me, and she again said she didn’t want people to think I was her mom.

I don’t know what to do. She is a bright, fun child and seeks me out regularly. I enjoy hanging out with her. Yet her embarrassment over my whiteness makes me feel sad, conflicted, and ashamed. Should I stop going to her events, even though I’m invited? Should I ignore the fact that she ignores me? I don’t want to be oversensitive, but I don’t know how to navigate this.

—Embarrassed Mentor

Questions?
Ask Liza at TheNation.com/article/asking-for-a-friend.

Dear Liza,

My girlfriend and I have been dating for almost two years. I just finished as an undergrad, and she works in a nursing home. I plan to go to grad school in environmental humanities and become a professor because I care about the environment and want to help address climate change in some small way. I believe that this is what I would be best at and most enjoy doing. My girlfriend is not a very politically conscious person. This doesn’t matter to me, because her actions and work speak for themselves. However, she has a difficult time understanding—and therefore respecting—what I’m doing with my life. She has told me that she doesn’t believe I share her goal of helping people and that if it were up to her, I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing now.

I want to gain my girlfriend’s respect. I appreciate where she’s coming from, and I agree that simply being an academic isn’t the most effective way to help change society. What can I do to demonstrate that

(continued on page 8)
The Distraction Distraction

Arguing whether or not Trump is diverting our attention is itself a diversion.

When Donald Trump launched his recent racist attack on four congresswomen of color, much of the punditocracy focused on the question of whether he was deliberately creating a distraction and, if so, from which of his other outrages. One Washington Post writer theorized that it was an attempt to overshadow speculation about his possible sexcapades with Jeffrey Epstein, the financier and Trump acquaintance charged with trafficking underage girls for sex. Another denied that it was a distraction from the reporting on the administration’s migrant mistreatment. New Yorker columnist Susan B. Glasser called it “a calculated political play” to preempt stories that would otherwise receive much more coverage—including the Epstein arrest, the border concentration camps, and Robert Mueller’s upcoming testimony—and credited Trump with “the extraordinary ability to get Americans to talk about what he wants them to talk about.”

But in the same magazine, John Cassidy insisted there was “nothing strategic” about the attacks, citing reporting by The Wall Street Journal’s Michael C. Bender, who cataloged Trump’s day watching Fox News and playing golf.

However, arguing about whether Trump said or did something as a distraction is pointless. The president of the United States is simultaneously a liar, a racist, an accused rapist, a con man, a tax cheat, a sadist, an egomaniac, a brownnoser of murderous dictators, quite possibly a traitor, and quite definitely a dunce who knows virtually nothing about history, politics, or economics. Because he has no filter or focus and does not listen to his advisers (except for those telling him how wonderful he is), Trump manifests all of these qualities all of the time. Every outrage or crime that he commits is, in this respect, a distraction from the previous one until the next one.

A debate over distraction is therefore itself a distraction. It doesn’t matter whether Trump meant something this way or that; whether tweeting, bloviating at rallies, or bragging to the know-nothings on Fox News, he can hardly stick to one topic for more than five minutes. What matters is why, after years of falling for his stupid shtick, the allegedly intelligent men and women of the mainstream media keep chasing after it. Glasser has no business crediting Trump with getting “Americans to talk about what he wants them to talk about.” How would she know? I sure don’t. This scribe of the Beltway beat does, however, know what her friends and colleagues are talking about, and that would be Trump. The attraction between Trump and the media is, unfortunately, mutual.

The thing is, there’s an awful lot of important policy-related news that could use some attention. Moreover, these under-the-radar political machinations help explain why only four House Republicans could bring themselves to condemn Trump’s poisonous tweets telling the four congresswomen to “go back” to the countries they came from and why the GOP continues to support him even though he’s making a mockery of almost everything the party used to say it stood for. And—surprise, surprise—the answer involves rewarding Republican donors.

For instance, while the punditocracy was playing distraction/no distraction, Joel Clement, the director of the Office of Policy Analysis at the Interior Department until his recent resignation, testified to the House Science Committee about a “culture of fear, censorship, and suppression” that is undermining scientific investigation and analysis in the government. According to ThinkProgress, he said the department canceled a study on the health and safety of offshore oil rig workers just as the White House was removing many of their labor protections. The Trump administration nixed another study, this one devoted to the health effects of surface coal mining, at the same time the White House and congressional Republicans were working to repeal regulations in that industry. A third study, on the effects of PFAS in drinking water, temporarily got the kibosh because, according to Politico, its release would have caused a “public relations nightmare.”
Have you ever said to yourself “I’d love to get a computer, if only I could figure out how to use it.” Well, you’re not alone. Computers were supposed to make our lives simpler, but they’ve gotten so complicated that they are not worth the trouble. With all of the “pointing and clicking” and “dragging and dropping” you’re lucky if you can figure out where you are. Plus, you are constantly worrying about viruses and freeze-ups. If this sounds familiar, we have great news for you. There is finally a computer that’s designed for simplicity and ease of use. It’s the WOW Computer, and it was designed with you in mind. This computer is easy-to-use, worry-free and literally puts the world at your fingertips. From the moment you open the box, you’ll realize how different the WOW Computer is. The components are all connected; all you do is plug it into an outlet and your high-speed Internet connection. Then you’ll see the screen – it’s now 22 inches. This is a completely new touch screen system, without the cluttered look of the normal computer screen. The “buttons” on the screen are easy to see and easy to understand. All you do is touch one of them, from the Web, Email, Calendar to Games— you name it… and a new screen opens up. It’s so easy to use you won’t have to ask your children or grandchildren for help. Until now, the very people who could benefit most from E-mail and the Internet are the ones that have had the hardest time accessing it. Now, thanks to the WOW Computer, countless older Americans are discovering the wonderful world of the Internet every day. Isn’t it time you took part? Call now, and you’ll find out why tens of thousands of satisfied seniors are now enjoying their WOW Computers, emailing their grandchildren, and experiencing everything the Internet has to offer. Call today!

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Dear Academic,

You didn’t ask me if this relationship has a future, but I have qualms. Having a lover who doesn’t respect your ambitions is demoralizing. It doesn’t seem fair that you value her work and she doesn’t value yours. Sure, partners should challenge each other, but at this exciting time of life, you deserve a girlfriend who supports your career explorations with enthusiasm and curiosity. I’m not convinced she can become that person.

But perhaps she’s the problem you need right now, Academic. We sometimes (mostly unconsciously) choose relationships with people who force us to face crucial issues in our lives. You—not just your girlfriend—are doubting the political value of an academic career, asking big questions: How should we understand the social contribution of intellectual work? How do we share it with others, especially working-class people?

Studying climate change seems indisputably important to me, but your effect on the world as a scholar will be slow and subtle. Consider another field in which you might feel more immediately useful, perhaps in advocacy, policy research, or environmental education. Or embrace the academic path you desire while finding other projects with more direct impact (like volunteering to help kids get outdoors, teaching your community to compost, organizing environmental direct action, and building a socialist organization). We can’t make the revolution in our jobs alone.

—Aspiring Academic

The *ThinkProgress* article also mentioned a March *New York Times* piece revealing that the recently promoted Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, a former lobbyist against the Endangered Species Act, intervened to quash a study that found pesticides threaten 1,200 endangered species. At the same time we were being distracted by Trump’s racism, the Environmental Protection Agency was refusing to ban chlorpyrifos, which the *Times* described as a widely used pesticide that government “experts have linked to serious health problems in children.” The EPA also declined, yet again, to ban the cancer-causing substance asbestos, ignoring just about every reputable scientific recommendation, including ones made by its own researchers. This kind of thing is almost certainly happening in every government agency but receives an infinitesimal amount of attention relative to Trump’s verbal vomitus. (Read Michael Lewis’s invaluable book *The Undoing Project* if you doubt this.)

Trump presents us with a conundrum. We can’t ignore a president who spews Ku Klux Klan–level rhetoric that could get people killed and maybe already has. But neither can we allow him to colonize our collective imagination. Elizabeth Warren put it well in tweet: “This president is desperate. Calling out his racism, xenophobia, and misogyny is imperative. But he’s trying to divide us and distract from his own crimes, and from his deeply unpopular agenda of letting the wealthy and well-connected rip off the country. We must do more.” She’s right. We must demand more of our media and ourselves—more clarity, more balance, and more time focused on what the Trump administration is actually doing to our country than on his latest stupid, racist tweet. Democracy is not a reality show, and our media needs to stop treating Trump as if he’s still a TV host, lest we end up, in the late critic Neil Postman’s prescient phrase, “amusing ourselves to death.”
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Conditional Citizenship

Who gets to belong in Donald Trump’s America?

Go back. If you’re a nonwhite American, chances are that you’ve heard this taunt at some point in your life. Maybe it came from bullies in the schoolyard. Go back. We don’t want you here. Or it was delivered as a joke, told by colleagues around the watercooler. Hey, if you don’t like it here, you can always go home. Or it came from one of your own relatives, in the middle of a heated argument during Thanksgiving dinner. America, love it or leave it. The locale may change, the wording may be different, but the idea remains the same. You’re not fully American.

The president gave this racist message his executive approval when he tweeted that four prospective female representatives—all of them from racial, ethnic, or religious minority communities—should “go back” to the “totally broken and crime-infested” countries “from which they came.” This was followed up by a rally in Greenville, North Carolina, where he once again dressed down the four duly elected legislators, focusing his ire on Representative Ilhan Omar (D-MN). The predominantly white crowd responded to his rant by chanting, “Send her back!”

The demand to “go back” rests on an assumption that the archetypal American is white—an idea that dates back to the early days of this nation. The first piece of legislation to delineate the boundaries of Americanness was the Naturalization Act of 1790, which limited citizenship to “free white persons.” Some of the rights that came from this status, such as the right to vote, were further restricted to propertied white men. Under this view, rich white men were to be governed by consent, and everyone else was to be governed by force.

Over the next 230 years, restrictions on citizenship—and the rights and liberties associated with it—were incrementally loosened and tightened and loosened again. For example, the 14th Amendment granted citizenship to all people born in the United States, including formerly enslaved people, but it was followed by a slew of laws in the South that made it virtually impossible for black people to vote. Other limitations on citizenship flowed from immigration laws, like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, that sought to prevent or decrease the arrival and eventual naturalization of different groups of nonwhite people.

So when the president tells his supporters that four female representatives of color should “go back,” he’s articulating this antiquated idea, rooted in settler colonialism and white supremacy, about who gets to be American. It’s a philosophy that regards whites as full citizens, who are entitled to all rights and protections under the law, and nonwhites as conditional citizens, whose rights are subject to challenge if they dare to express criticism of their country.

Donald Trump is the man who titled a book Crippled America, complained that “the American dream is dead,” and called our country “stupid.” But when Omar and Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib speak candidly about government policies and their effects on the most vulnerable among us, he tells them to “go back.” America is their home only if they are silent or in agreement with him.

This racist approach to citizenship has been central to Trump’s political career. Three years ago, for example, when Gold Star parents Khizr and Ghazala Khan appeared at the Democratic National Convention to share the story of their son and to denounce Trump’s proposed ban on Muslim immigration, the Republican nominee and his allies attacked their son’s allegiances. Capt. Humayun Khan, who died in the Iraq War in 2004, was smeared as a stealth jihadist. At the time, I wrote in this space about the conditionality of the Khans’ citizenship: Even after their son made the ultimate sacrifice for his country, they did not have the right to speak freely.

Much of what the president has done or championed since taking office—the Muslim ban, the
The border wall, the family separation policy, the metering of asylum entries at the southwestern border, the proposal to tighten immigration laws—can be explained by his desire to preserve white dominance in the United States. This is likely to be a losing fight: If demographic trends continue, whites may well be a statistical minority within a generation. The only way to maintain the political dominance of whites is to enshrine a view of citizenship that ties it to race or, failing that, to magnify the power of white voters.

Indeed, the administration spent months fighting—and ultimately failing—to add a citizenship question to the US census, which would have given an enduring electoral advantage to Republicans and non-Hispanic whites. But the Republicans won another battle when the Supreme Court ruled that federal courts could not stop partisan gerrymandering and that state legislatures were free to redraw electoral districts however they wished. As a result, permanent minority rule is now a possibility in several states.

None of this is to say that whites, particularly those who are poor or without a college education, don’t struggle. Of course they do. The loss of manufacturing jobs and the opioid crisis, to name just two issues, are urgent challenges that demand lasting solutions. But it is to say that when white Americans blast the government for not solving these problems, they are not told that they should be silent or that they should “go back.”

Americans must decide whether they want to live in a past in which the rights and privileges of citizenship are ranked depending on one’s race, ethnicity, or creed or if they want to step boldly into a future in which citizenship is enjoyed equally by all who claim this country as a home.

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**SNAPSHOT** / MUSSA QAWASMA

**Gassed!**

Journalists react to tear gas fired by Israeli forces during a July 20 protest against plans to tear down Palestinian homes in Sur Baher, a village straddling East Jerusalem and the West Bank, both occupied by Israel. Demolition began on July 22.

**GO BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM: A COINCIDENCE**

One reason the Donald is so insecure—
One reason he brags and he preens—
Is swells in Manhattan told him, in effect, “Go back where you came from—that’s Queens.”

They wouldn’t accept him, called him a clown Whose principal talent was gall. Surprised that he now says to others, “Go back”? It’s not that surprising at all.

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Calvin Trillin
Deadline Poet
When you land in Longyearbyen, the largest settlement in the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard, you can step off the plane and just walk away. There’s no passport control, no armed guard retracing your steps, no biometric machine scanning your fingers. Svalbard is as close as you can get to a place with open borders: As long as you can support yourself, you can live there visa-free.

That doesn’t make Svalbard an egalitarian place—far from it. All commercial flights currently go through Oslo or Tromsø, so travelers must obtain transit visas and wait in lines there instead. Svalbard provides minimal social services, so it won’t attract the world’s tired, poor, and weary. When in 2015 a right-wing Norwegian politician offered to send refugee families north rather than accommodate them on the mainland, it was not meant as a kindness.

Still, there is something utopian about a place where almost anyone could live. Amid scaremongering about unrestricted migration, I went to Svalbard because I wanted to see whether there were lessons we could learn from this 2,300-person community a few hundred miles south of the North Pole.
What I discovered was a historical accident, rooted in environmental determinism and shaped by economics, that is being irreversibly upended. There’s a dismal symmetry at play: As climate change renders the rest of the planet as hostile to human life as the far north, we too must make the choice between throwing up walls and letting them down. Svalbard’s geopolitics provide an imperfect but alternative vision of how places can be governed, whom they can accommodate, and how communities can form.

Formally, Svalbard—known as Spitsbergen until the 20th century—belongs to Norway, which writes the laws, enforces order, builds infrastructure, and regulates hunting, fishing, and housing. Last year, when a Russian man was caught trying to rob a bank in town, a Norwegian judge sentenced him under Norwegian law to a Norwegian jail. But Norway’s control over Svalbard comes with obligations outlined by an unusual 1920 treaty signed as part of the Versailles negotiations ending World War I.

Written in the aftermath of the war, the Svalbard Treaty is both of and ahead of its time. Its architects stipulated that the territory cannot be used for “warlike” purposes. They included one of the world’s first international conservation agreements, making Norway responsible for the preservation of the surrounding natural environment. The treaty also insists that the state must not tax its citizens more than the minimum needed to keep Svalbard running, which today typically amounts to an 8 percent income tax, well below mainland Norway’s roughly 40 percent.

Most radically, the treaty’s architects held Norway to what’s known as the nondiscrimination principle, which prevents the state from treating non-Norwegians differently from Norwegians. This applies not just to immigration but also to opening businesses, hunting, fishing, and other commercial activities. Other countries could not lay formal claims on Svalbard, but their people and companies would be at no disadvantage.

That freedom might be a function of how logistically difficult life here can be. In June Svalbard’s weather compares to January in New York City. But the winter brings three months of night, when temperatures can dip below –40 degrees—where Fahrenheit meets Celsius. In mid-February, the days start to lengthen, and by mid-April, the midnight sun makes a mockery of the body’s circadian rhythms. Come August, the sun’s transit shortens once more, and the cycle repeats.

You can tell a lot about a city by its arrivals terminal. Geneva, where I grew up, is full of ads for expensive watches and wealth management firms. New York’s John F. Kennedy Airport assaults you with opportunities for commerce and consumption—Starbucks, taxis, currency exchange. In Longyearbyen the terminal is about the size of a school gym. There are posters for the local research university, a logistics and shipping company named Pole Position, and satellite operators whose white orbs dot a nearby mountaintop. Because of its northern latitude, Svalbard is ideally located to pick up communications from polar-orbiting satellites and houses the world’s largest commercial ground station.

The terminal’s most prominent signs, however, are aimed at the growing number of tourists—walrus safaris, trips to see the Northern Lights, and shops, restaurants, and bars. In the middle of the baggage claim belt stands a taxidermied polar bear with Svalbard’s most famous by-laws displayed by its side: To leave Longyearbyen, you must respect nature, notify the government, and carry a gun. These days, travelers from around the world go to Svalbard for what has become known as last-chance tourism: The desire to see polar bears, glaciers, and icebergs before they disappear.
Svalbard never had an indigenous population, and seafaring Vikings may have spotted it around 1200. But Willem Barentsz, a Dutch explorer, is credited with the discovery in 1596 during his expedition to find the Northeast Passage to China at a time when maritime embargoes blocked Dutch ships from much of Southern Europe. A decade later, on one of his trips in search of the Northwest Passage, Henry Hudson noticed pods of whales swimming off the archipelago’s coast, helping to spur the development of a whaling industry.

As foreigners clamored for whales and territory, Spitsbergen’s wildlife suffered. At the end of the 17th century, the Dutch fleet alone killed 750 to 1,250 whales a year. By the 1870s, overexploitation had taken its toll. In a recent book, the legal scholar Christopher Rossi describes the remains of butchered whales lining the coasts even as the industry declined: “Denuded of its cetological economy, human interest in Spitsbergen was swept away, along with the detritus left by flensers at the water’s edge.” Those slaughtered whales are said to haunt Svalbard’s bays and beaches to this day.

In the late 19th century, Sweden and Norway—at the time one nation—tried to claim sovereignty over the archipelago. But Russia, then a monarchy, objected. Through an exchange of diplomatic notes, Russia and Sweden-Norway reached a compromise, declaring Spitsbergen terra nullius: It “could not be the object of exclusive possession by any State.” So until the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Svalbard was officially a no man’s land, arguably the world’s last.

This, unsurprisingly, led to conflict. At the turn of the 20th century, prospectors found coal buried deep below Svalbard’s ice, and coal production and export became the archipelago’s main industry. Companies competed against one another for land, resources, and labor in an essentially lawless environment. When workers went on strike, no one knew whom to appeal to. At one ill-fated mine operation named Advent City, English managers tried to petition the Royal Navy to intervene in the unrest. Later, disgruntled Norwegian miners complained to their government about how an American company was treating them, objecting in particular to the food. In neither case did the governments do much to help.

Among Svalbard’s most prominent personalities was an American businessman and coal entrepreneur named John Munro Longyear, who cofounded the Arctic Coal Company in 1906. It established a company town called Longyear City—now Longyearbyen. He fancied himself a kind of polar emperor, bragging about being the “King of Spitsbergen.” The more money he poured into his creaky mines, the more entitled he felt to political control.

Longyear was shameless. He lobbied the US State Department to expand the Guano Islands Act, which allowed US citizens to take possession of uninhabited islands caked in bird feces, to apply to coal as well. When that didn’t pan out, he tried to preempt a 1911 conference on the future of Svalbard’s governance by proposing that the region be run by a private corporation, registered in the US or Britain and capitalized with a combined $10 million from interested countries; naturally, he, his business partners, and their Arctic Coal Company would control a combined one-third of the stock.

Under his plan, the territory would remain open to all nationalities, and the corporation would oversee government functions like regulating hunting and fishing, managing prisons, administering land and real estate, and limiting the sale of booze (to deter the miners from getting drunk, which the coal boss resented). Longyear’s contact at the State Department was not impressed, pointing out that should shareholders opt to liquidate their assets, another country could seize control. Also, the company could purchase a majority of the shares, turning Svalbard into a corporate dictatorship overnight.

Norway, meanwhile, was inching closer to staking its own claim. It built the first telegraph station in Svalbard in 1911, establishing control over crucial telecommunications infrastructure; two years later, a papal decree combined the archipelago “with the Apostolic vicariate of Norway,” suggesting an entitlement of a more divine provenance.

Conferences came and went without a decision on what to do with Spitsbergen. Then war broke out across Europe. Exhausted by his efforts, Longyear sold his holdings in 1916 to a Norwegian company, Store Norske Spitsbergen, which continues to operate a mine on the archipelago.

Svalbard remained ungoverned until the Paris Peace Conference, when the Allies accepted Norway’s sovereignty, in part as a reward for its wartime support. Even the neighboring USSR agreed to the deal. The Bolsheviks were apparently so desperate to establish their own...
I remember the moment I realized I needed to visit Svalbard. A college friend and his partner were visiting from Boston, and after listening to me complain about my difficulties in applying for a US green card—the interminable paperwork, the agonizing delays, the black box of US Citizenship and Immigration Services, and most of all, the feeling of not quite belonging in the place I have called home since I turned 18—my friend asked if I’d heard of Svalbard. His partner joked that I should consider relocating. “I have a high school friend who moved there for good,” he said. “My sister went last year, and she had a great time.”

I had heard of Svalbard, but it never fully registered as a real place where people actually lived. I’d read Wikipedia, skimmed an academic paper or two, and glossed over a couple of articles about a doomsday vault that holds specimens of nearly a million seed varieties. I’d assumed it would be like Werner Herzog’s portrayal of Antarctica in Encounters at the End of the World: governed by an international treaty system but monotonous, closed off, and full of scientists.

I’d also never thought of myself as a polar kind of person. They seemed to me to be a different sort of animal—ruddy, straightforward, strong of nerve, and keen to endure physical challenges. Australian, perhaps, and on the taller side. Definitely blond.

I—small, dark, often anxious, and usually cold—have few polar qualities. But I was restless for adventure, and when my green card finally arrived, I applied for an art residency to sail around Svalbard for two weeks. We departed from Longyearbyen, which was nothing like what I expected. The town, perhaps obviously, has lots of normal towny things: roads, a veterinarian, a supermarket, and museums. Its center is a small strip of shops and colorless prefabricated buildings. Longyearbyen was unremarkable—ugly, even—save for the dramatic backdrop of mountains with names like Sukkertoppen, Gruvfilet, and Trollsteinen.

Evidence of Svalbard’s open border policy is subtle. There are people of 53 nationalities living here, including a significant Thai and Filipino population and a number of younger backpacking types (seemingly all polar) from around the world who show up mainly to work in the tourism industry. According to Svalbard’s governor, 37 percent of Longyearbyen’s population is foreign.

The leader of our traveling expedition—let’s call her Anna—was the platonic ideal of a polar person. Blond and agile, with sun-seared cheeks and eyes blue as glacier ice, she spends much of her time on ships, passing the northern summer months in the Arctic and the southern summer in Antarctica—a migratory pattern comparable to that of the Arctic tern, a bird that traverses the globe to chase the sun. Our ship was the Antigua, and it was where we slept, worked, and ate. Meal times, regular to the point of being military, kept us on a schedule in the endless daylight. We quickly learned that the experience of visiting the Arctic depends overwhelmingly on the season, the weather, and the thickness and thaw of the ice, which can immobilize waters for months at a time.

Far from a frigid monochrome, the landscape can be varied and full of life. Our first stop was Gnålodden, a landing spot in Hornsund, a fjord where we anchored after a queasy day at sea. A Zodiac took us to shore at the foot of a mossy mountain where small white gulls called kittiwakes chattered over waterfalls and crackling ice. There was no discernible smell other than an occasional whiff of loam. The ground under my hiking shoes felt damp and squishy, with snowmelt trickling its way through rocks and clusters of purple flowers.

Back at sea, we were well within Svalbard’s territorial waters and subject to the 1920 treaty. But beyond 12 nautical miles from the coasts, governments don’t all agree on how Norwegian—or not—the waters are. Maritime regulations can be complex, but disagreements, not unlike those over the US Constitution, are essentially over whether the Svalbard Treaty is a living document. The Norwegians contend that any area not explicitly mentioned in the treaty defaults to ordinary Norwegian sovereignty that they ceded the land in exchange for diplomatic recognition from Norway. The treaty went into effect in 1925, and 46 countries have signed—notably North Korea in 2016.
Svalbard has always been a place for superlatives. It was the site of the northernmost battle of World War II, after which much of its population was evacuated. Today, Svalbard boasts the world’s northernmost pub, northernmost wine cellar, northernmost alternative weekly newspaper, and northernmost jazz festival. A performance artist once traveled here to make the world’s northernmost piece of toast—a metaphor for climate change, or late capitalism, or something.

Svalbard is also home to the northernmost statue of Vladimir Lenin: a symbol of faded Soviet ambitions as well as the nondiscrimination principle at work. Norway owns all the land in Svalbard, except for the settlements belonging to a state-owned Russian coal company, Arktikugol. The treaty granted the Soviet Union (and now Russia) the right to maintain a commercial presence on the archipelago as long as it abided by Norwegian law; because the USSR could not go in as a state, it asserted itself with industry instead.

One Arktikugol company town, Barentsburg, was founded by the Dutch and sold to the USSR in 1932, then rebuilt in the 1970s. Today it has a population of roughly 450 and a sputtering mining industry. Barentsburg is just 35 miles from Longyearbyen but is accessible only by boat, snowmobile, or helicopter. In 2014, The New York Times described it as “grim,” and a decade earlier, a Norwegian court sentenced a murderer to just four years in prison, reasoning that conditions here provided “mitigating circumstances in favor of the convict.” We did not visit Barentsburg.

Pyramiden, on the other hand, has none of these problems: It has been practically a ghost town since 1998. We arrived there about 12 days into our voyage, and it was the first sign of human life we’d seen since departing on the Antigua, save for some run-down trapper cabins, one of which had been destroyed by a polar bear. When I stepped onto the decrepit pier, a rotted wood plank collapsed, nearly claiming my ankle. In the distance, coal tunnels raised above the permafrost snaked their way up the peak for which the town is named, passing by the words “Miri Mir” (Peace on Earth) painted in white Cyrillic letters on the side of the mountain.

Today, Pyramiden—or Pyrimaida, as the Russians call it—has only a half-dozen residents, but for decades it was a thriving Soviet town. Between the crumbling remnants of its mining infrastructure, the classic Soviet architecture, and some surprisingly resilient monuments (including Lenin), you can see clues as to how it prospered. Unlike other settlements on the archipelago, Pyramiden boasts grassy lawns, with soil the Soviet government shipped in from the mainland. The town has an old greenhouse where tomatoes, cucumbers, and greens grew; a barn for imported livestock; a playground; and workers’ dorms, where iceboxes still sit on windowsills.

Over the years, mismanagement and dwindling coal reserves—not to mention the fall of the USSR—caused residents to trickle out. Then a Svalbard Airport plane crash in 1996 killed more than 100 residents, pushing more to move away. Most didn’t bother to take their belongings, so it looked as if the people of Pyramiden had just evaporated, leaving their furniture, clothes, books, and tools behind. The most unsettling thing about Pyramiden today is the massive colony of kitiwakes that have taken up residence in the ruins and shriek at all hours as they build nests and feed their young.

Under their din, the town may be experiencing the beginnings of a revival. Wandering around the nearly abandoned Soviet recreation center, complete with a basketball court, a movie theater, and music rooms with untuned pianos, broken drum kits, and Russian sheet music for songs from Paul McCartney’s band Wings, I ran into four young men in skullcaps. I asked them in Russian how they got here; they replied that they were builders from Tajikistan who arrived on a charter flight from Moscow that flies every few months (thus avoiding Norwegian transit visa requirements). They were hired to restore a few of the buildings; it’s lonely, one of them said.

The builders live alongside a small group of entrepreneurial Russian hipsters who lead tours trying to capitalize on Pyramiden’s Soviet kitsch and spooky ghost town appeal. There is a hotel, Tulpan (Tulip), with a bar that serves negronis (yes, the world’s northernmost) and vodkas infused with local cowberry, ginger, and horseradish while screening black-and-white footage of the town from decades past. It’s easy to picture boatloads of tourists filling Pyramiden, or at least this bar, ready to let loose, as we were, after long days at sea. It’s hard not to resent them in advance for ruining something so perfectly ruined.

The problem of overtourism in Svalbard is hardly confined to Pyramiden: During the summer months, cruise ship passengers descend upon Longyearbyen, sometimes doubling the town’s population in a matter of hours. It seems everyone in the town—tour guides, shopkeepers, entrepreneurs, the governor—agree that the archipelago’s infrastructure cannot handle this many bodies. Longyearbyen still runs on coal, has no septic
system, and ships most of its trash back to the mainland. But regulating these arrivals is contentious and brings up bigger issues of governance, regulation, and economics.

Tourism, like whaling and coal before it, is a lucrative industry that can’t continue growing indefinitely. Only this time, instead of frontiersmen acting largely alone, decision-making happens by a great many people. Svalbard might appear to be a libertarian fantasy of open borders, self-sufficiency, and low taxes, but managing such a society requires a surprising amount of government.

The highest authority on the islands is the sysselmann, or governor, of Svalbard, who is appointed by the central government in Oslo. The job—a combination of police chief, spokesperson, and consul general—is a bit like being a sheriff in the Wild West. “I never thought I’d have to learn to use a rifle and a satellite phone for my job,” the current governor, Kjerstin Askholt, told me as we walked down the halls of her office (per local tradition dating to coal-mining days, I took off my shoes upon entering and thus conducted the interview in Hawaiian print socks).

She said her office manages search and rescue operations, arrests drunken drivers and snowmobilers, and occasionally officiates marriages. She also expels people to the mainland three or four times a year if they are homeless, ill, or broke. “This is not a cradle to grave society,” one of Askholt’s colleagues told me.

In Longyearbyen, there’s also a democratically elected mayor and community council, which oversees the school, roads, waste management, and other town affairs. Residents can vote if they’ve lived in town for at least three years, though, oddly, Nordic citizens—not just Norwegians—can vote after only a few weeks. (The Svalbard Treaty’s nondiscrimination clause does not mention democratic representation.)

Askholt said the governor’s office is working with the council as well as with tourism companies to make recommendations to Oslo on how to manage the crush of arrivals, but the final decision gets made on the mainland. Her immediate concern is that there is little regulation about who can lead tours. “A few years ago, six Saudi tourists hired a guide who took them out with a weapon but no real license,” she recalled. “They thought they saw a polar bear, but because the guide wasn’t certified, he tossed the weapon, left, and told them all to run for their lives.”

She added, “We found six very cold Saudi tourists a few hours later. This is the sort of thing that needs to stop.”

Askholt did not criticize Svalbard’s diversity, but she did note, referring to a government white paper, that making sure Norwegians aren’t outnumbered here is a national priority. Norway appears to want to avoid ruling over a community made up mostly of nonnationals. “What matters the most to us is to protect the wilderness and maintain the Norwegian community in Svalbard,” she said.

In a place with open borders, crafting incentives is complex. If you make life on Svalbard appealing—with good schools, for instance, or better housing—there’s no way to guarantee that it will be Norwegians who come. At the same time, Svalbard cannot turn away anyone on account of nationality. The result, which can be easily justified with the treaty’s mandate of low taxes, is that the Norwegian government provides as little as possible: Unlike the mainland, the islands have minimal health care, child care, and housing benefits.

And that, in turn, shapes Svalbard’s spirit—for better or for worse. “A lot of people are coming here with different kinds of dreams and visions, and it’s not always a success for them,” Askholt said. “When you can come from so many countries, to come up at all says something about the kind of person you are. You have to have something in you.”

Or maybe Svalbard is where you go to find it. On midsummer, my shipmates and I stripped down and jumped into the ocean from the side of the boat. The water is not like other cold water—not the chilly North Atlantic, not an icy shower, not even the cold pool at a Russian bathhouse. It does not register as having a temperature at all. Swimming in the Arctic is a senseless act, but it brings you to your senses. Afterward, you feel weightless, like everything is new. You feel almost polar.

When you spend enough time at sea, especially while writing, you come to a deeper understanding of many maritime clichés: to be in the same boat, make waves, and have the wind in your sails. And then there’s cabin fever. I can describe it only as a mania of the limbs, a wrestling of the spirit trying to escape its human cage. It is my idea of bodily hell, and I fought it until our landing at Sarsvangen, a sliver of a beach jutting into a glassy sound with a blurring palette of blues and whites—sea, ice, clouds, and sky—stretching out to the horizon. If it hadn’t been for the stench of a nearby walrus colony, it was how I imagined heaven. But then I looked down; the ground was covered in trash.

(continued on page 26)
GO NOT ABROAD IN SEARCH OF MONSTERS

THE QUINCY INSTITUTE, A NEW DC THINK TANK, WILL FIGHT THE BLOB AT HOME WHILE ADVOCATING RESTRAINT OVERSEAS. DAVID KLIION
John Quincy Adams doesn’t get a lot of respect. There are no monuments to the sixth president on the National Mall, his face adorns no paper currency, and history mainly remembers him for losing reelection to Andrew Jackson. But before Adams became president, he was an accomplished diplomat, representing the US government in multiple European capitals. On July 4, 1821, while serving as secretary of state, he gave a speech in which he declared that although the United States would always be sympathetic to national liberation struggles, “she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy.”

This early warning against an interventionist foreign policy has echoed into the present. Adams’s middle name has been adopted by a newly formed think tank in Washington, the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, which states that its mission is to “move US foreign policy away from endless war and toward vigorous diplomacy in the pursuit of international peace.” The group is still raising money, but with a projected second-year budget of $5 million to 6 million, enough to support 20 to 30 staffers, it aims to match the scale of more established think tanks and to disrupt the foreign policy consensus in Washington.

The Quincy Institute’s founders plan to attack that consensus on multiple fronts. That includes publishing op-eds and making TV appearances, writing white papers, hosting seminars and panels, and briefing policy-makers. Ultimately, it would mean creating a pipeline of young talent that can staff up congressional offices and in the future maybe even the White House, thus enabling advocates of noninterventionism to counter aggressive pushes for regime change in countries like Iran and Venezuela.

As first reported by Stephen Kinzer in The Boston Globe, the Quincy Institute includes the unlikely duo of Charles Koch and George Soros among its founding donors—each has committed half a million dollars—and is intended to serve as a counterweight to the Blob, as the bipartisan national security establishment dedicated to endless war has come to be known.

Trita Parsi, Quincy’s executive vice president and the founder of the National Iranian American Council, says he’s proud to have the support of both the Charles Koch Foundation and Soros’s Open Society Foundations. To explain Quincy’s ideological orientation, Parsi emphasizes “transpartisanship,” which he distinguishes from the much-derided term “bipartisanship.” Bipartisanship, he says, is when “you have two sides, they disagree, and then they come to an agreement with some sort of a compromise that neither side is really happy with.” Transpartisanship, on the other hand, means “you have two sides, they disagree on a whole bunch of issues, but they have overlapping views. Neither side compromises. They’re just collaborating on issues they already are in agreement over.” He argues that the Blob’s status quo is maintained by the mainstream policy-makers in both parties who support military intervention and that challenging it will require an alliance of politicians on the left and right who agree on the need for restraint, even if they do so for different reasons.

“What we want to see is something that is consonant with American tradition,” says Stephen Wertheim, one of the institute’s five cofounders (and, full disclosure, a friend). In other words, this is not an inherently radical project, even if it may be received as such by some in Washington. For instance, in response to Kinzer’s article, neoconservative éminence grise and Iraq War architect Bill Kristol tweeted, “75 years of a US-led liberal international order, based on a US forward presence and backed by US might, with regional and bilateral alliances and relatively free trade, has enabled remarkable peace and prosperity. But let’s go back to the 1920s and 30s!”

Eli Clifton, another cofounder, says he was encouraged by Kristol’s attack. “I welcome him being the face of the effort to criticize us. I think Bill Kristol’s track record speaks for itself,” he says. That record, which includes enthusiastic support for open-ended US military involvement in more than a dozen countries since 9/11, isn’t Kristol’s alone; the most powerful figures in the Democratic and Republican parties are just as responsible, and with a handful of exceptions, few of them have shown any inclination to change course.

Quincy’s founding mandate is centered on two regional programs, the Middle East and East Asia (where the US has its most significant military commitments), though other areas could fall under its purview if its budget expands, and two additional programs: Ending Endless War, which will be run by Wertheim, and Democratizing Foreign Policy, which will be run by Clifton.

Wertheim, a former academic historian, broadly belongs to the realist school of foreign policy, which sees sovereign powers as being motivated by rational interests and encourages stability in international relations. But his realism is not the cold-blooded realpolitik of Henry Kissinger; Wertheim identifies as progressive. “Force ends human life, displaces people, devastates communities, and damages the environment,” reads Quincy’s statement of purpose. As Wertheim puts it, advocates of humanitarian interventionism tend to overlook how “pushing these agendas can be used to create a prolonged conflict. And when that happens, we don’t see human rights advance. Quite the opposite.” This is a critique not only of neoconservatives like Kristol but also of liberal interventionists like Samantha Power, Barack Obama’s UN ambassador, who see a responsibility to protect vulnerable communities by the use of military force as a core principle of US foreign policy.

Clifton, meanwhile, is more focused on the Blob itself and on the way money is used to reinforce its pro-war consensus. His emphasis will be on domestic strategies for reducing interventionism—from reasserting Congress’s constitutional authority over the president’s ability to make war to doing outreach to communities of color that are traditionally marginalized in Washington foreign policy debates. The Quincy founders believe that the existing foreign policy elite is out of step with the American public, which is far more skeptical of military adventurism, and they plan to invite underrepresented communities to participate in the institute’s events and recruit people from nonelite backgrounds into the foreign policy profession. They are also interested in including military veterans; a recent Pew poll shows large majorities of service members who did tours in Iraq or Afghanistan said they believe neither war was worth fighting.

Clifton said his experience working for ThinkProgress,
a liberal website affiliated with the Democratic Party–aligned Center for American Progress, showed him that “the supposed institutional Democratic Party’s foreign policy space was very tightly constrained.” While CAP has always maintained that its research is independent, Clifton speculates that the funding the organization received from the government of the United Arab Emirates may have created pressure to support status quo policies in the Middle East. In 2012, when Clifton and several of his colleagues came under fire from pro-Israel and conservative groups for writing critically about Israel and in support of diplomacy with Iran, CAP tried to restrict what they could write about, prompting his voluntary departure.

When it comes to foreign policy, Clifton says, there’s little difference between CAP and Republican-aligned think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and the Hudson Institute. One way Quincy will distinguish itself from its better-established rivals will be to refuse money from foreign governments.

“There’s almost no progressive foreign policy infrastructure in Washington,” says Matt Duss, Bernie Sanders’s foreign policy adviser and a former colleague of Clifton’s at ThinkProgress who has been informally consulting with the Quincy founders. Duss says that the organization’s launch is “one of the most encouraging things to happen in the US foreign policy debate in a long time.”

He adds, “You have a number of groups—such as the Center for Economic and Policy Research, the Institute for Policy Studies, the Center for International Policy, a few others—putting out good, progressive-oriented work and a coalition of advocacy organizations like Win Without War, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, and others who punch far above their weight…but the amount of resources they’re up against is pretty staggering.”

Keane Bhatt, a communications director for Sanders and a former policy director for the Congressional Progressive Caucus, says he hopes Quincy “can lend intellectual capacity” to an alliance of progressive and conservative lawmakers who share noninterventionist principles. Besides his boss, Bhatt lists Democratic Representatives Tulsi Gabbard, Pramila Jayapal, Ro Khanna, and Mark Pocan; Republican Senators Mike Lee and Rand Paul and Representatives Ken Buck, Matt Gaetz, and Thomas Massie; and independent Representative Justin Amash.

“The Washington foreign policy consensus is badly broken and captured by a revolving door of corruption that keeps foreign policy elites in power despite the mistakes of the past and is fueled by arms dealers, special interests, and foreign governments,” says Kate Kizer, the policy director of Win Without War. “The Quincy Institute has the chance to be a welcome breath of fresh air.”

O FAR, QUINCY’S SOFT LAUNCH “HAS EXCEEDED OUR expectations,” Clifton says. “We’re getting so many e-mails as well as positive responses on social media—people saying, ‘Hey, yeah, this is filling a gap.’” Even the more critical feedback has been energizing; in response to an article in Foreign Policy by James Traub, “Billionaires Can’t Buy World Peace,” that labels the new organization a threat to American exceptionalism, Wertheim boasts, “People are having to defend endless war. We have switched the terms of debate.”

At the same time, potential allies likely have a few initial concerns. The most obvious is the group’s support from the Charles Koch Foundation, the mere mention of which is a red flag for progressives. Brothers Charles and David Koch, after all, are the leading bankrollers of conservative intellectual infrastructure in the US and have underwritten the Republican Party’s dominance of Washington, the judiciary, and statehouses across the country.

Parsi notes that the Kochs also fund groups like the Cato Institute that have advocated for diplomacy by, for instance, supporting the Obama administration’s nuclear deal with Iran, which was strenuously opposed by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the powerful pro-Israel lobbying group, and by major figures in both parties. He argues that the Kochs have been better allies to the anti-war movement than many prominent Democratic institutions and donors. In some ways, the bigger surprise is that Soros, who has traditionally supported the Blob’s hegemonic liberal world order, is also funding Quincy. “There clearly is a recognition among folks in Open Society that many of the past interventions have been unsuccessful, if not disastrous,” says Parsi, whereas the Kochs are “a little more decided on what they think is the right foreign policy and are only funding institutions geared to less military involvement.” (This isn’t quite true; the Kochs have also donated to the pro-war American Enterprise Institute as well as many Republican politicians who have hawkish foreign policy positions.)

This isn’t the first time the Kochs have worked with progressives to effect change. In recent years the aggressive carceral policies supported by both parties since the 1990s have been challenged by a coalition that includes left-leaning racial justice activists and libertarians supported by the Kochs. “If restraint in foreign policy can become like criminal justice reform, I think that would be a major step,” says Wert- heim. “Even during an administration that ran on racist law and order tropes, we see criminal justice reform moving forward.”

Still, it’s important to recognize what Quincy is not: It is not a left-wing foreign policy institution, something that will remain scarce in Washington. Some of the boldest proposals coming from progressive candidates like Sanders and Elizabeth Warren—for addressing climate change, reducing global poverty and inequality, and combating transnational corruption and money laundering—are not Quincy’s top priorities, even if some of the founders are sympathetic to such an agenda.

“Once we significantly reduce the military budget, we can argue about how to use the money,” says Wertheim—that is, whether the savings from a slashed Pentagon budget should be invested in social programs or used to pay for tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans.

“I would be concerned if there are strings attached to any funding,” he adds. While Quincy’s founders expect to hire an ideologically diverse staff, that isn’t a condition imposed on it by the Kochs; rather, it’s intended to make a transpartisan political strategy more effective. Wertheim acknowledges Quincy’s narrow focus on the use of military force, but he attributes this to a desire to
avoid overextension at the outset, suggesting that if the organization grows big enough, it can eventually expand its mandate to issues like climate change and human rights.

Wertheim and the other founders do take the climate crisis seriously. “Militarism in US foreign policy contributes to climate change,” he says, “and impedes the international cooperation that will be needed to address it. Very few institutions confront this issue. The Quincy Institute will.” He notes that the US military is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases of all institutions in the world—more than entire countries—and points to his recent New York Times op-ed in which he argues that a US-China cold war would be a climate disaster.

In a field that has been traditionally dominated by men, Quincy is searching for a woman to serve as its president. Suzanne DiMaggio, the only woman among the founders, will serve as chair of Quincy’s board of directors. A senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and an expert on the Middle East and East Asia, she grew up in a half-Japanese, half-Italian family in New Jersey. “I remember going on a field trip to the United Nations as a girl and feeling very at home there,” she says, and she ended up working there during John Bolton’s tenure as George W. Bush’s UN ambassador. “I don’t think there’s anyone in the field of international relations that I disagree with more than John Bolton,” she adds, a week after it appeared that the Trump administration, following Bolton’s advice, might start a war with Iran.

The interim president of Quincy is Andrew Bacevich, a Massachusetts-based retired academic and regular Nation contributor who identifies as conservative. “The Quincy Institute is premised on the notion that there is a potential for forging a coalition between people on the right who don’t like the direction of US policy and people on the left,” he says. “We don’t have to agree with one another on issues not related to America’s role in the world, but there’s plenty of room for agreement with regard to America’s role in the world.”

Acevich, a former army colonel who served in Vietnam, admits he was slow to recognize the alignment between parts of the left and the right on foreign policy. “I had a bias against progressives with regard to foreign policy that I hadn’t really bothered to examine,” he says. “It was only after the Cold War went away and after this pattern of ill-advised behavior on our part began to take shape that I began to realize that the critique that came from the left had far greater merit than I had been willing to concede.”

He is referring, above all, to the post-9/11 wars: the catastrophic 2003 invasion of Iraq and the nearly 18-year quagmire in Afghanistan, as well as the smaller, more clandestine operations everywhere from Niger to Yemen. Quincy’s founding members say again and again that 9/11 and the Iraq War were turning points in their careers.

Parsi, who was born in Iran and raised in Sweden, moved to Washington in September 2001 to pursue a PhD in international affairs, intending to write a dissertation about Afghanistan. But then, he says, “the week after school started, 9/11 happened and Washington, overnight, was saturated with Afghan experts.” So instead, he turned his attention to the regional struggle between Israel and Iran. He says he founded the National Iranian American Council to give Iranian Americans a voice in Washington and eventually used it to support Obama’s Iran deal, which he and other founders cite as a model for diplomacy that avoids war.

Clifton, a college freshman at the time of the attacks, became a protégé of Jim Lobe, the Washington bureau chief of Inter Press Service, whose long-running, progressive realist foreign policy website LobeLog will soon be renamed and absorbed into Quincy. Under Lobe’s tutelage, Clifton came to understand the rush to war as a product of deeply entrenched moneyed interests. And Wertheim, who was in high school in the suburbs of Washington during 9/11, says the Iraq War run-up spurred his academic interest in US foreign policy. This eventually led to a dissertation on the debates over internationalism during World War II that were resolved in favor of the US-led global order that he now wants to see rolled back.

Parsi, Clifton, and Wertheim are all representative of a generation of experts who have built their careers in the long aftermath of 9/11 and for whom witnessing the subsequent failure of bipartisan national security policy has been formative. Clifton says he has spoken with academics who have watched their anti-interventionist dissertations advisees move to Washington and embrace the Blob’s logic or stay in academia and maintain their skepticism, “as if there wasn’t a home for those views in Washington.” Quincy, he hopes, will be that home.

But no one involved has been more affected by the post-9/11 wars than Bacevich, whose son, First Lt. Andrew J. Bacevich, was killed by a bomb while serving in Iraq in 2007. He was 27 years old. Knowing this, I asked Bacevich if and how his personal tragedy has influenced his views on foreign policy. At first he declined to comment, but then without further prompting, he changed his mind.

“In a small way, I’m trying to honor his sacrifice,” he told me. “I personally think the thousands of lives we’ve lost have been wasted. But if an effort can be made to learn from our mistakes so that we don’t repeat them, then perhaps we can say that there was some value to the sacrifices made by our soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. I’ll just leave it at that.”

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Marie Newman vs. The Democratic Machine

The Illinois congressional candidate is challenging her party’s conservative tendencies—and incumbent Dan Lipinski’s betrayals.

by Rebecca Grant
The banner that read “Marie Newman: Democrat for Congress” was sandwiched between a trailer for a beauty salon and a dashing troupe of small horses in Homer Township’s annual Independence Day parade. It was noon on a clear day, and the parade meandered past tidy homes, farmland, and a cemetery shimmering in the heat. Behind the banner, a group of about 20 campaign staffers, supporters, and volunteers waved signs and nodded along to Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way,” which blared from a speaker pulled in a red Radio Flyer wagon.

The parade moved slowly, and Marie Newman jogged ahead wearing a blue campaign T-shirt and white jeans. Zigzagging across the shadeless road to shake hands with the spectators lined up on either side, she hoped she could secure their vote in next year’s primary election for the Third Congressional District of Illinois.

The story of how she decided to run for Congress has practically become a standard Democratic Party narrative. On November 9, 2016, Newman, who said she rarely cries, stayed home from work, racked with sadness and fear. Then she began researching how to run for office. She found an organization called the Illinois Women’s Institute for Leadership and spent the day powering through its application for an upcoming training program with a deadline two days later. When her husband got home from work that evening, she was still in her pajamas, but her application was just about done.

She planned to run against Dan Lipinski, a then six-term incumbent Democrat who took over the seat from his father, Bill Lipinski, who spent 12 years in the Third. Dan Lipinski is known as one of the most conservative Democrats who has taken over the seat from his father, who was known as one of the most liberal Democrats in Congress. The story of how she decided to run for Congress has practically become a standard Democratic Party narrative. On November 9, 2016, Newman, who said she rarely cries, stayed home from work, racked with sadness and fear. Then she began researching how to run for office. She found an organization called the Illinois Women’s Institute for Leadership and spent the day powering through its application for an upcoming training program with a deadline two days later. When her husband got home from work that evening, she was still in her pajamas, but her application was just about done.

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Newman saw an opportunity to challenge a candidate who felt was out of step with her values, the Democratic Party’s ethos, and most important, with the district’s views. IL-03 covers areas to the west and southwest of Chicago, encompassing urban, suburban, and exurban communities. It is solidly blue, with pockets of conservatism. With Donald Trump in office, her kids growing up, and Lipinski secure in his seat, Newman said, she felt it was time to make a leap into politics.

“I knew it would be really hard for me to raise money, and it was,” she said. “I knew it would be really hard on my family, and it was. But no one else would stand up to this bully. No one would stand up to the Chicago machine, and that’s not OK.”

In the March 2018 primary election, Newman came within 2.4 percentage points, or 2,124 votes, of beating Lipinski with a campaign that was “put together with gum and sticks.” She was pretty sure she would run against him again in the next cycle and announced her candidacy on April 16 of this year. This time she has an existing supporter and donor network and better name recognition than when she started out. She’s optimistic that voters in a presidential election year will swing in her favor: she’s registered some 7,000 progressive voters since the midterms, she won the under-50 set by 21 points, and her district typically sees a 10 percent voter turnout bump during a presidential election year. However, her campaign has a new and daunting obstacle to face: the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

This past March the DCCC issued new standards that stop vendors of political services—such as strategic consulting, research, and marketing—from working with primary candidates who challenge incumbents. It essentially created a blacklist: If vendors help a primary challenger, the DCCC will not hire them or recommend them to any of its campaigns. The organization justifies this by referring to its goal of supporting incumbents, maintaining or expanding its House majority, and dedicating resources to endangered or flippable districts. But the effect has been to protect the party’s straight white men. That has made it predictably unpopular among rising new stars in the party, like Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Ayanna Pressley (D-MA), who won their seats by primarying incumbents. But it has teeth. Three vendors have dropped Newman’s campaign, and a handful of others dropped out during the vetting process. “It’s ridiculously expensive to run a campaign,” she said. “Now we have to throw out a good bit of work...and I have to figure out how to cobble together volunteers to help me out with this, which takes my time and my campaign manager’s time. It’s stressful.”

Newman’s run highlights urgent and unavoidable questions about the future of the Democratic Party: Can it encourage new blood, promote diversity, and increase its number of seats while supporting middle-of-the-road incumbents? Should the party embrace a big tent, or is there a place for ideological litmus tests? Will the party be more successful by embracing its progressive wing or hewing more closely to the center? Should being a member of Congress be a job for life? And if the DCCC is truly interested in change, will it be willing to alter its institutional approach to running and funding campaigns?

I asked Newman these questions a few days after the parade, at her home and temporary campaign headquarters in the suburb of La Grange. We sat in a cozy home office, surrounded by stacks of paper, family photos, and a map of the district pinned on the wall. Ziggie, her beagle, sat behind her on the desk chair and snored lightly as we talked. Her campaign has attracted national attention because she has been vocal about the impact of the DCCC vendor rule and because “Pro-Choice Candidate Takes On Anti-Abortion Incumbent” makes for a nice headline in a moment when reproductive rights are under attack.

She said she recognizes the larger forces at play but is focused on what's going on in IL-03. “Dan is out of alignment with the district and the party,” she said in between fund-raising calls, a purple fleece blanket wrapped around her legs. “You shouldn’t run to run. You should run because you want to do something, not be something. Dan wants to be someone. I want to do the work.”

Rebecca Grant is a freelance journalist based in Brooklyn covering women’s health and reproductive justice.
Newman is petite with layered brown hair, expressive eyebrows, and the pinched vowels of someone raised in the Midwest. She talks with an intensity moderated by terms like “scooches,” “darn,” and “horse hockey” and often tosses out idioms that are ever so slightly off. She’ll rail against a Lipinski position one minute and break into an impression of a local octogenarian reporter with a pack-a-day habit the next. Her supporters and staffers characterize her as someone who works hard—too hard, perhaps: During the parade and at a gun violence event she attended afterward, she was running a 101 degree fever. She’s the type of person who makes campaign calls while walking the dog and gets bored on vacation. “Weirdly, I have a freakish amount of energy,” she said. “When I was younger, my mom would say I literally made her exhausted looking at me, but it makes campaigning easier. I know I can outwork [Lipinski] every day of the week and twice on Sunday.”

Newman grew up in IL-03 in “the middle of the middle class.” Her father was an actuary, and her mother stayed at home with the kids. Newman is the youngest of four, which, she said, is why her voice can project without a microphone. She put herself through the University of Wisconsin with a combination of student loans and jobs in food service and retail.

After graduation, she went into marketing and advertising, where she eventually became an executive. She was also involved in advocacy work that was deeply personal. She and her husband, Jim Newman, got married in 1996 and have two children, Quinn, 21, and Evie, 18. When Quinn was in middle school, he was viciously bullied. Marie Newman said she did everything she could to support her son but nothing helped. So she started talking openly about what Quinn was experiencing and was flooded with phone calls from parents whose kids were enduring the same thing.

“I remember distinctly the onus was on me to solve this,” she said. “No one else is going to be able to do this. I’m not necessarily the most qualified, but I’m going to do this because I’m willing, so I put together a task force.”

In 2011 she founded the national nonprofit Team Up to Stop Bullying and cowrote a guide called “When Your Child Is Being Bullied: Real Solutions for Parents, Educators & Other Professionals.” A few years later she became her state’s spokesperson for Moms Demand Action, an advocacy group that lobbies for gun law reform, and she has been an outspoken advocate for trans rights, largely because of her daughter. Evie was born Tyler, and when she was a preteen, she became deeply depressed. The Newmans were worried she would self-harm and found a nearby therapeutic program she could attend as an inpatient, which helped her come out as transgender.

Newman said that was the happiest day of her life because it meant her daughter could be her authentic self. “My daughter is trans, and over my dead body will anything happen to roll back her rights,” Newman said. “She knows what a force I can be and what a loud mouth I have.”

She frequently talks about how Lipinski was “gifted” his seat from his father. In 2004, Bill Lipinski withdrew from a reelection campaign after winning the primary election and urged party leaders to put his son, who lived in Tennessee at the time, on the ballot. Ben Hardin, Newman’s campaign manager, said this exemplifies Chicago politics; she, in contrast, is trying to position herself as an outsider and is not taking corporate, PAC, or lobbying money.

“We are running against a Chicago machine candidate, and the machine is actively working against us,” Hardin said. “He’s trying to actively attack her as part of the radical left.”

This year Newman has been to 118 meet-and-greets. I went with her to the 97th, hosted by a constituent named Nicole Gregus at her home in Lyons. Ten people sat around a coffee table with cheese and crackers and glasses of water. Gregus, who has dyed reddish hair and an armful of tattoos, said she was born and raised in the Chicago suburbs and taught at a school right after college but was let go because of budget cuts just a year later. She struggled to find a full-time teaching job with health benefits and switched to working as an administrative assistant. That experience, she said, informed her support for Newman.

“Marie’s positions on health care as a human right, LGBTQ+ equality, and easy access to reproductive health care…are largely why she has my vote,” Gregus said. “Lipinski [aims] to essentially disenfranchise a large portion of his own constituents while using his religion as an excuse.”

Newman’s support for reproductive rights and abortion access has earned her endorsements from organizations like NARAL, Emily’s List, and the Planned Parenthood Action Fund. NARAL president Ilyse Hogue said Lipinski’s opposition to abortion is “dragging the Democratic Party down.”

“It’s a price too high to pay for the party,” Hogue said. “We know the anti-choice movement will fight until they have the opportunity to ban abortion and criminalize women.… [We] simply can’t afford to have someone who will vote for control over freedom when that moment arrives.”

Newman is vocally committed to abortion rights. But she’s also wary of having it define her campaign; she only lightly touched on so-called social issues during the meet-and-greet, focusing more on the economy, health care, immigration and the district’s environmental concerns, such as lead water lines in neighborhoods like Crest Hill. Income inequality is her top priority: She talks often about the “patchwork” of jobs that constituents cobble together to get by. She supports raising the federal minimum wage to $15 an hour, universal child care, and expanding access to public transportation to help bridge the economic and racial divide.

I had many questions relating to abortion—the role Illinois may play as an access oasis in the Midwest, for instance, and whether there’s still room in the party for anti-choice Democrats in a moment when states are passing extreme abortion bans. But before I could ask, she stopped me short. “I am very clear with reporters. You get one question about reproductive rights. It is very clear where I stand. We don’t have to talk about this too much anymore.”

She continued, “I will not let Dan Lipinski or national reporters hijack this campaign. This campaign is about the income divide, paid leave, Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, transportation, and infrastructure jobs, period.”
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Because of Lipinski’s views on abortion, he has enjoyed support from groups that don’t generally support Democrats. Sometimes, their tactics are downright Trumpian.

Before the 2018 primary, the conservative Susan B. Anthony List sent canvassers to knock on doors and disseminated Facebook ads and direct mailers calling Newman a pro-abortion extremist. Constituents received text messages from an unknown source that claimed that she was running an abortion clinic. (All I saw in her living room were overstuffed couches and campaign interns on laptops.) ”There’s something FISHY about Marie Newman,” said onemailer funded by the ostensibly non-partisan group No Labels, featuring an image of a dead fish lying atop a garbage can. “We know Lipinski is going straight-up lies,” Newman said, rolling her eyes. “He will say, ‘She is from Mars and has horns in her head and kills puppies.’ ”

Newman sees herself as “ridiculously thick-skinned,” yet it’s tough to fight Lipinski and the groups that support him and the Chicago machine—and on top of that, the DCCC. The vendor policy has set back her campaign; finding, vetting, and registering vendors is time-consuming and expensive. The DCCC rejects the description of its policy as a blacklist, but Newman said vendors have received threatening phone calls for even considering work with her. The organization has even gone after primary challengers directly: In 2018 it published opposition research against Laura Moser, a Democrat running for Congress in Texas.

This practice of prioritizing incumbents over candidates from a diversity of racial, ethnic, gender, and ideological backgrounds frustrates many Democrats—and, of course, Newman. Because even if the IL-03 seat is safely in Democratic hands, what’s the point if someone with Lipinski’s views is wielding that power?

Newman said there should be consequences if incumbents can’t hold up their end of the political deal. “I wouldn’t put my money on a losing horse,” she said. “I wouldn’t put my money on an unethical horse that behaves badly at every turn. And I wouldn’t put my money on a horse that doesn’t belong in the corral.”

The refuse of humanity came in all shapes, colors, and textures—yellow fishing nets, rusted tin cans, pink candy wrappers, a black TV.

We picked up as much as we could, filling white bags that we dragged back across the sand to our Jaguars so we could drop them off in Longyearbyen. It was so distracting that we couldn’t look up.

Even without the spectacle of Arctic garbage, we encountered human damage at every stop—glaciers calving as though they were losing their teeth, their shorelines receding like sickly gums. It put the idea of sovereignty into perspective in a different, cosmic way: Who are any of us to be here at all?

In the modern world, the concept of state sovereignty governs how we govern. Its legitimacy is rarely questioned, even though it is a human invention—the setting of borders, the wielding of power, the deciding of who belongs. But in the Arctic, as in any remote place, it’s obvious that we’re not actually in charge.

We carry no special privileges or diplomatic immunities in spaces where nature makes the rules. It is absurd to impose the construct of the nation-state, what with its laws and regulations, on something so wild, so unruly. Svalbard’s landscape disregards any concept of national borders, of industrial time, or of politics as we know it. We aren’t its citizens, residents, or denizens; we are its guests.

No wonder it’s a place that, for a hundred years, has quietly challenged what countries can do.
The life of the Polish Jewish author Bruno Schulz was, by pedestrian measures, a small one. It ended prematurely in 1942, when he was murdered in the street at the age of 50 by a Gestapo officer, and it was almost entirely confined to his provincial hometown of Drohobycz. Schulz drew compulsively, and in his brooding sketches crammed big-headed figures into cramped frames and rooms with low, clutching ceilings. Schulz himself was short and hunched. In photographs, he glowers. “He was small, strange, chimerical, focused, intense, almost feverish,” a friend, the Polish novelist Witold Gombrowicz, recalled in a diary entry. His fiction, too, was small and strange. Schulz’s surviving output consists of just two collections of short fiction, some letters, a few essays, and a handful of stray stories. His longest work spans about 150 pages.

But these slim volumes have earned Schulz a soaring stature. In death, he has been enlarged beyond the bounds of his claustrophobic biography. He was beloved by John Updike, V.S. Pritchett, I.B. Singer, and Czesław Milosz. He has been the subject of novelistic homages by Cynthia Ozick (The Messiah of Stockholm), Philip Roth (The Prague Orgy), and David Grossman (See Under: Love).

Long before his acolytes brought him back to life, however, Schulz was busy resurrecting himself. His two loosely autobiographical collections, Cinnamon Shops (1934) and The Sanatorium Under the Hourglass (1937)—newly and capably
translated by Madeline G. Levine and published by Northwestern University Press in a single volume, Collected Stories—are full of reincarnations. Both books twitch against the strictures of possibility. The same events do and do not take place. Across the collection, the narrator’s father expires like a heap of dust, then returns as a bird, a fly, a cockroach, and a scorpion. In another, the narrator awaits the onset of an enigmatic “age of genius.” “So, did the age of genius happen, or not?” he finally asks. The answer: “Yes and no.”

It is fitting that Schulz survives in the world of books, which license the kind of paradoxes that riddle his writing. It’s only in fiction, after all, that the pressures and limits of the material world can be transcended—that a life as short as Schulz’s can also last forever.

Born in 1892 to assimilated Jews who owned a prosperous dry-goods shop, Schulz lived both longer and better in his books: His banal biography does not live up to the shimmering embellishments of his writing. His stories are set in the uncertain territory of dreams, but in real life he rarely made it out of Drohobycz, an industrial backwater that he hated and yet never managed to escape. In 1910 he went to Lwów to study architecture, but in 1911 his poor health forced him to return home. A few years later, he attempted another sojourn, venturing to Vienna to attend lectures and visit galleries for a couple of months. But by his mid-30s, he was settled as an art teacher at a Drohobycz gymnasium. Cinnamon Shops was conceived in a series of fanciful letters to the poet Deborah Vogel—letters that no doubt doubled as conduits to the foreign countries that Schulz would never have the chance to see in person.

It is standard to compare Schulz to his near contemporary Kafka. And the parallels between the two are striking and abundant. Like Kafka, Schulz wrote oneiric, misfit stories that defied literary precedent. Like Kafka, Schulz was sickly. And like Kafka, Schulz was engaged but never ultimately married: His fiancée, fed up with his failure to take practical measures to leave the town he loathed, broke off all communication with him in 1937.

Both Mittel europa writers resented the day jobs that consumed the better part of their creative energies, and both alleviated their crippling loneliness by cultivating vibrant epistolary relationships. In 1932, Schulz wrote to a friend, “I may be wrong, but I feel we must have been on close neighborly terms somewhere, as if we had once knocked against the same wall from opposite sides.” All of his letters convey a similar sense of thwarted intimacy. For his part, Schulz practically acknowledged his affinity with Kafka: He reviewed The Trial favorably, and he and his erstwhile fiancée produced the first Polish translation of the novel, which ultimately appeared (unjustly) under his name alone.

But there are also important differences between the two. Unlike Kafka, who died before his most important writings gained much recognition, Schulz did achieve modest acclaim during his lifetime. He was friends and rivals with Gombrowicz and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, two giants of Polish letters, and he was awarded the Golden Laurel of the Polish Academy of Literature in 1938. Perhaps the most important difference between Schulz and his Czech counterpart is stylistic: While Kafka’s mode is ascetic, Schulz’s is lushly ecstatic. He trades not in allegory, sheared and schematic, but in delighted density. “Dazed by the light, we browsed the great book of vacation, whose every page was on fire from the radius and which contained in its depths the languorous sweet flesh of golden pears” is how he describes the onset of summer in Cinnamon Shops.

In the afterword that he wrote for The Trial, Schulz claims that “Jozef K’s mistake lies in clinging to his human reason instead of surrendering unconditionally.” Schulz did not make the same mistake. In his drawings, collected in a volume called The Booke of Idolatry, there are recurring images of men groveling at the feet of regal, naked women. When Schulz submitted in his own life, it was not to the dominatrices who populate his sketches but to the demands of his craft. His relationship with literature was violently worshipful. As Gombrowicz observed, “Bruno was not so much a disbeliever in God as he was uninterested in Him.... So only art remained.” Schulz, he continued, “approached art like a lake, with the intention of drowning in it.”

And drown he did—and so did the characters he subjected to the kind of unsettling, absurdist transformations that Kafka also favored. In one story in The Sanatorium Under the Hourglass, the narrator remembers his father becoming so angry that he “wafted towards us as a monstrous, buzzing, hairy, steel-blue fly”—but “despite all appearances what little significance such episodes have stems from the fact that in the evening of that very day my father was sitting over his papers as he usually did in the evening.” In “The Comet,” one of the four orphaned tales that appear at the end of Collected Stories, the narrator’s father launches an amateur scientific experiment that transforms a beloved uncle into an electric bell. His family is “delighted” by his new “career.”

The uncle-turned-doorbell can live on because nothing, in Schulz’s stories, is strictly inanimate. The wallpaper in one night-marish room is “full of whispers, hisses, and lisps.” The balconies in a deserted square “confessed their emptiness to the sky.” In Cinnamon Shops, the narrator’s father proclaims, “There is no dead matter; lifelessness is only an external appearance behind which unknown forms of life are hiding.” There is no death in such a world, only alteration. “Every organization of matter is impermanent and unfixed, easily reversed and dissolved,” the father lectures. For this reason, “There is no evil in the reduction of life to new and different forms. Murder is not a sin. Often, it is a necessary act of violence against unyielding, ossified forms of being that are no longer satisfying.”

Schulz’s writing delivers just such a jolt to the “ossified forms” of recognizable genre. He writes not traditional, plotted stories but what he once called “spiritual genealogy.” The results have the gauzy quality of childhood memory, with its jumbled chronologies. Scenes blur, and time bulges, like distortions bloating panes of glass. In “The Night of the Great Season,” a year sprouts a 13th month “like a sixth little finger on a hand.” Space, too, is structured not by physics but by longings and anxieties. In the titular “Cinnamon Shops,”

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a child tasked with running home from the theater to retrieve his father's wallet loses his way when "duplicate streets, doppelgänger streets, lying and deceptive streets, so to speak, reveal themselves in the depths of the city."

But there are also emotional fixtures in Schulz's slippery fiction—landmarks that come in the form of the seasons. In the winter, "days hardened from cold and boredom like last year's loaves of bread." In the summer, a hill heeps up "as if the garden had turned onto its other side in its sleep," drawing the earth up over it like a sheet. Schulz's best pastoral scenes rival Thomas Hardy's. Of one abandoned garden, he writes, "There were the ordinary blades of meadow grasses with feathery tassels of grain; there were delicate filigrees of wild parsley and carrots; the wrinkled, coarse little leaves of ground ivy and of blind nettles, which smelled like mint; fibrous, glistening ribwort plantain, spotted with rust, shooting out tufts of thick red buckwheat."

And then there's the comfort of the relatively stable cast of characters: antiseptically practical Mother, the nagging yet seductive servant girl Adela, and Father, superficially a shopkeeper but more fundamentally a visionary or philosopher or prophet. In one story in Cinnamon Shops, he falls ill. Despite pleading to God for his life, he begins to disintegrate, "shrinking from one day to the next, like a nut shriveling inside its shell." Then he dies—only to return in the very next chapter with an obsessive interest in the exotic birds he raises in the attic. His manegerie is dismantled when Adela drives out the "peacocks, pheasants, capercaillies, and condors" that he has assembled, leaving Father to flap his arms in a desperate attempt to fly.

So Schulz must have felt in Drohobycz as his fantasies whirled out into the world, leaving him defenseless in the wake of the German occupation. For a time, he survived. The Nazis deemed him a "necessary Jew" because his artistic talents enabled him to paint competent propaganda on the walls of an art-loving (or at least image-loving) Gestapo officer's residence. Meanwhile, in a burst of fateful foresight, Schulz distributed his writings among his non-Jewish friends for safekeeping. Lost, probably forever, is the incomplete manuscript of a novel, The Messiah.

As if mourning in advance, Schulz wrote to an old classmate in 1934, "You ask 'What the hell is depressing you?' I don't know how to answer that. The sadness of life, fear of the future, some dark conviction that everything is headed for a tragic end." And it was. In November 1942, Schulz was shot dead on his way home with a loaf of bread.

What would The Messiah have been like if it had ever arrived? In a sense, this is the question that Schulz is always asking. Of course, he never had the opportunity to craft a complete answer. But his stories suggest that it is only in books that the Messiah even partially arrives, for it is only in fiction that we can trace even the faintest outlines of alternative worlds. In "The Book," the first and best story in The Sanatorium Under the Hourglass, Schulz writes of a book that exceeds all others—a book that is itself a sort of messiah:

I am calling it simply The Book, without any attributes or epithets, and in this abstinence and limitation there is a helpless sigh, a silent capitulation before the immensity of the transcendent, since no word, no allusion can manage to shine, smell, flow with that shudder of terror, that premonition of the thing without a name, the first taste of which on the tip of the tongue exceeds the capacity of our rapture.

The Book, of course, is no real book, not even The Messiah. It is the ideal book, a book that honors our sense of what books can and should be. By the standard set by The Book, all concrete books are failures. "Fundamentally," Father cautions the narrator of "The Book," "there exist only books. The Book is a myth that we believe in our youth, but with the passing of years one stops treating it seriously." Despite his father's warning, the narrator (and Schulz himself) continues to believe in The Book. "I knew that The Book is a postulate, that it is a task," he reports.

Even Schulz could not complete this task, for many reasons. Magical imaginings can never withstand the ordeals of their realization. Schulz conceded that our dreams “try the ground of reality to see if it will bear them. And soon they retreat, fearful of losing their integrity in the imperfection of realization.” The end of Cinnamon Shops enacts the disappointments that any actual book, by dint of failing to live up to The Book’s enormous promise, occasions. After the townspeople have raided Father’s fabric store, after all the cloth has been transmogrified into a landscape, the narrator notes:

The artificial day was already slowly taking on the colors of an ordinary morning. In the devastated shop the highest shelves were suffused with the colors of the morning sky. Among the fragments of the fading landscape, among the demolished coolresses of the nighttime stage set, Father saw the salesclerks getting up from sleep. They were standing up among the bales of cloth and yawning at the sun. In the kitchen, on the second floor, Adela, warm from sleep, her hair tousled, was grinding coffee in a mill, pressing it to her white breast from which the beans took on a radiance and heat. The cat was licking itself clean in the sunlight.

Finishing Cinnamon Shops is like waking up from a fever dream. The spell of the story is undone. The world, it seems, remains unchanged.

But sometimes something changes. The impossible does happen. Father comes back to life. Though ordinary books pale in comparison to The Book, even they are, Schulz writes, “like meteors”: “Each of them has a single moment, one moment when with a cry it soars like a phoenix, blazing with all its pages. For the sake of that single instant, that one moment, we love it afterward even though by then it is only ashes.” In the face of even those faint intimations of The Book to be found in its lesser iterations, we experience what Schulz describes as “that contraction of the heart, that blessed anxiety, that holy nervous trembling that precedes ultimate things.”

In Schulz’s books, we catch more than one glimpse of the mysterious exigencies he understood so well. “Perhaps, with diminishing fervor, terrorized by the uncontainable nature of the transcendent,” we sometimes question the existence of The Book. But “despite all reservations,” Schulz insists, “it did exist.” All too briefly—but it did.
Things looked good for the Democrats in 2009. Not only had Barack Obama been elected president, but for the first time in 14 years, their party controlled both houses of Congress as well as the White House. Then came the 2010 midterms: In what Obama called a “shellacking,” the Republicans picked up 63 seats in the House and six in the Senate. While the headlines focused on the Republican takeover of Congress and what it meant for the rest of Obama’s presidency, the most painful losses occurred in the state races down ballot. Before 2010, the Republicans controlled 14 statehouses, and the Democrats held sway in 27. After 2010, the Republicans controlled 25 statehouses and had scored a trifecta—the governorship as well as both chambers of the legislature—in 11 states.

In many of these states, what followed was a three-pronged attack—the introduction of model legislation, the deployment of publicity campaigns to promote it, and the use of faux-grassroots actions and demonstrations to rally support for it—that had been decades in the making and helped realize a battery of conservative policy priorities, many aimed at preventing the Democrats from winning back power.

In Wisconsin, for example, one of the first things the newly installed Republican governor, Scott Walker, did was introduce Act 10—which was supposedly intended to address the state’s budget gap but essentially ended collective bargaining rights for public employees and limited their unions’ ability to collect fees. The move sparked massive protests, attended by both public-sector workers and regular citizens. But he had a powerful coalition at his back ready to push the act through, including the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), whose model bills provided him with many of the legislation’s provisions; the State Policy Network (SPN), which backed think tanks like the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute and the MacIver Institute that spread the word in the media; and Americans for Prosperity (AFP), a group founded by right-wing megadonors Charles and David Koch that bused in hundreds of counterprotesters and bought at least half a million dollars’ worth of ads.

“Between ALEC, SPN, and AFP, then, Walker was buttressed by a ‘longstanding conservative alliance against unions,’ in the words of two New York Times reporters,” writes Alexander Hertel-Fernandez in his new book, State Capture: How Conservative Activists, Big Businesses, and Wealthy Donors Reshaped the American States—and the Nation. As with similar laws passed in other states, Act 10 was not just an ideological victory for conservatives; it was also a significant political win. With the power of public-sector unions diminished, one of the main forces resisting Republican rule had been eroded. “Do we have less boots on the ground? Yeah,” admitted one public-sector union leader in the state. “Do we give the same amounts of money to the candidates? No.” In the triumphant words of AFP president Tim Phillips, “That’s how you change a state.”

Packed with wonky and original data analysis, State Capture tells the grim story of how ALEC, SPN, and AFP became a well-honed “right-wing troika” that amassed conservative power, providing valuable insight into the operations of three shadowy groups that have profoundly shaped every American’s life—and have done so not from the White House but via state governments.

ack in the 1960s and ’70s, it was the left, not the right, that focused on state power. With the exception of two years, Democrats controlled the majority of state legislatures from 1960 to 1973. Public-sector unions like the National Education Association were their wingmen, functioning much as ALEC does today, albeit with very different political concerns. Teachers’ unions drafted model legislation that they spread across states—and not just on education-related issues but on broader ones concerning state budgets, union rights, and even equal pay.

Beginning in the 1970s, however, the right decided to develop a countervailing movement. ALEC, founded in 1973 by Paul Weyrich and a group of conservative activists and officials with funding from longtime conservative donor Richard Scaife’s foundation, was one of the first to begin this work. “Conservatism is weakest at the local level,” warned a onetime executive director of ALEC. “Government at the state and local level is still overwhelmingly controlled by liberals, in large part because conservatives have concentrated too much of their attention and energy on Washington.”

A 1994 ALEC pamphlet for potential corporate members noted that “many businesses focus their government affairs efforts on Washington, DC, believing that the only important government action takes place at the national level. This is a flawed strategy.” Gridlock and budget issues had caused Congress to stagnate, the pamphlet read. “In contrast, state legislatures have become increasingly activist on a wide range of issues.”

ALEC’s early leaders—including familiar names like former governors Terry Branstad of Iowa, John Kasich of Ohio, and Tommy Thompson of Wisconsin—were particularly concerned about the power that public-sector unions wielded in state governments and how it allowed them to hinder not only specific conservative policies but also Republican Party organizing. So ALEC began to develop model legislation that didn’t simply advance particular policy objectives but also helped weaken the left’s and organized labor’s power.

Republicans at the federal level quickly realized the potency of what ALEC was doing. After Ronald Reagan won the White House in 1980, many people in his administration with close ties to the organization integrated the council’s focus on states into their work in the federal government. “Far from abandoning the states after gaining control of the White House, conservatives in the Reagan administration used the formal authority—and also the trappings of their office—to encourage cross-state organizing through ALEC,” Hertel-Fernandez notes. Indeed, “Republican White Houses...worked closely with ALEC to build the group’s membership and coordinate on policy initiatives.”

The SPN followed, founded in 1986 by a network of state-level think tanks. By the early 2000s, the Koch brothers also wanted to jump into state policy lobbying and founded Americans for Prosperity. These groups made only modest gains at first, but by the early 21st century they had mastered their three-pronged approach for taking advantage of a key weakness of state legislatures: The representatives in these bodies often work as legislators part-time and with scant, underresourced staffs, so they readily turn to outside experts and operatives to fill in the gaps. ALEC does most of the policy-drafting work, but its model bills benefit from the research and publicity provided by the SPN’s think tanks, while AFP supplies the boots on the ground to stage rallies, contact elected officials, and talk to the media in support of particular legislation.

These efforts have paid off handsomely. Though ALEC struggled in the 1970s and ’80s, by 2002 its membership included nearly a third of all state legislators, and it has seen hundreds of its model bills introduced and passed—at a higher rate than is typical for state legislation.

Thus, when Republicans swept the legislatures in 2010, the troika was ready to act. Its agenda included not just an attack on public-sector union rights but also cuts to unemployment insurance, food stamps, and Medicaid. It also sought to undermine the recently passed Affordable Care Act, restrict women’s reproductive rights, expand access to guns, and lower taxes on corporations and the rich. “What made the 2010 state legislative transition so striking was the speed with which states began introducing and enacting a near-identical set of very conservative policy priorities,” Hertel-Fernandez writes.

State Capture focuses on the powerful conservative groups that have emerged since the 1970s, but it also discusses the progressive organizations that have attempted to counter them. However, most of these arrived on the scene too late and never developed enough strength to mount an effective opposition. Out of the 10 state-level liberal groups created to push back against ALEC, only five exist today. “The history of progressive state networks... might best be characterized by repeated cycles of panic,” Hertel-Fernandez writes. These networks turned their attention to the states after suffering losses during George W. Bush’s presidency but abandoned much of those efforts once Obama won the White House. It wasn’t until the midterm losses of 2010 that a sense of urgency was reignited, but it may have been too late. In 2014 and 2016, the Republicans continued to flip state seats while the Democrats lagged. By 2017, the GOP had won control of the legislature and governorship in states that it had long been unable to wrest from Democrats—for example, Iowa, where Branstad and a statehouse stacked with longtime ALEC members immediately got to work challenging public-sector union rights.

The hobbling of public-sector unions is one reason that it has become difficult for the left to fight back—which was always the intention. By going after these unions, Republicans have sought to deprive “the Left from access to millions of dollars in dues,” as a recent SPN report noted, while clearing “pathways toward passage of so many other pro-freedom initiatives in the states.”

Wisconsin is a model for this dual ideological and practical focus on dismantling public-sector unions. In the wake of Act 10’s passage, membership fell by more than 50 percent, desiccating the unions’ budgets and leading to a steep decline in their political spending and ability to resist the other legislation that Walker and other state Republicans sought to pass. But Wisconsin is hardly an isolated example. After the 2010 red wave, 13 legislatures passed laws attacking public-sector unions, including in historically moderate states like Illinois and Pennsylvania, and particularly in states with a more entrenched troika presence. As in Wisconsin, these laws had the intended twofold effect of notching an ideological victory and decimating a powerful opponent. Before such legislation passed, employees of state and local
governments reported “engaging in nearly twice as many civic acts compared to private-sector workers,” Hertel-Fernandez writes; after it was enacted, participation fell by nearly a third. This hurt the Democratic Party at the voting booth, enabling the GOP to further consolidate its hold on power.

So what is to be done? Professionalizing state legislatures—turning them into full-time governmental bodies filled with well-compensated lawmakers and adequate staffs—could reduce the need for the troika’s offerings. Democrats also need to go back to basics. Conservatives haven’t just been smart about building a state-level policy infrastructure; they’ve also concentrated on winning elections and flipping legislatures, which has paid off for them, given that legislatures under full Republican control are more than twice as likely to enact ALEC’s model legislation.

But the key, Hertel-Fernandez writes, is “investing in the creation of cross-state networks that can counter the troika on its own terrain.” Just as ALEC was founded in the 1970s in response to the National Education Association’s success, progressives need to mount their own coordinated, sustained counterattack. Hertel-Fernandez argues that the left already has more resources available than the right; the problem is that it so rarely directs them to state-level campaigns. “Between large center-left foundations, unions, and wealthy individual donors,” he writes, “all the liberal groups had a pool of resources just under $4 billion” in 2014, compared with $2 billion total for conservative groups. More of that $4 billion needs to be put to work at the state level.

With the 2020 elections looming, State Capture serves as a powerful warning that Democrats will have to do more than just win the White House again. The party did make some progress in the 2018 midterms—seizing control of seven state legislative chambers, flipping seven governorships, and winning the trifecta in 14 states versus its earlier eight—but there is much more work to be done.

“If progressives are going to build sustained cross-state power, then they need to pay attention to the states even when they have control of the federal government,” Hertel-Fernandez argues. “Otherwise, they will be forced to start all over again the next time that they inevitably lose a chamber of Congress or the White House.”

A few months back, I sat with my mother in a hotel room and asked her to tell me about how her family had left Vietnam. I knew only the barest outlines of their passage—the airlift out of the country, the refugee camps in the Philippines, their move to Arkansas and then Washington. I knew small details, taken out of context—the beautiful silk jacket with the broken zipper that turned out to be a discarded polyester lining, the first time she and her sisters ate soft pretzels.

But I didn’t know the larger story of how they’d come here or what they’d left behind. I knew the distances she had traveled but had no map for my own mother’s emotional experience—settled and assimilated in America, we hardly ever spoke of what had brought her here in the first place.

These gaps in a family story are the secrets that one is initiated into only when much older. The Unpassing, Chia-Chia Lin’s debut novel, is concerned with those empty spaces. Narrated by Gaven, a slight, nervous 10-year-old, the second-eldest child in a Taiwanese immigrant family living in rural Alaska, The Unpassing illuminates these unspoken, shadowy moments of childhood. Tiny, dreamlike events, like conversations...
within The Unpassing's first few pages, Gavin gets sick—a splitting headache and dizzying brightness overwhelm him—and falls into a deep sleep. When he wakes up, he learns that he and his sister Ruby contracted meningitis. He survives the infection, but Ruby, the baby of the family, does not. Lin sets this scene against the backdrop of the January 1986 Challenger disaster, during which Gavin was unconscious. It's Pei-Pei, his teenage sister, who lets him know what happened:

“We have to go,” I said. “They're showing the launch. Did we miss it already?”

She nodded. “Yeah, it was last week.”

“Last week?”

“It exploded.”

“What?”

“Everyone died.” She sat up and stared at me, evaluating something in my face.

It is also Pei-Pei’s responsibility to tell Gavin that Ruby died, a fact that no one in the family can fully process yet. In their small house, the children—once four, now three—sleep in the same room, their beds arranged along the walls: Pei-Pei, in high school; Gavin, in elementary school; and Natty, their 5-year-old brother. Their cramped bedroom is a metonym for the family's strained circumstances and cloistered nature; it is also the setting for the siblings' secretive nighttime conversations. In the hours after Gavin finally wakes, his mother launders the sheets on Ruby's empty bed, and in the middle of the night, his father sleeps on it, his body heavy in his work clothes. But by the next day, the bed is gone, with just four dents in the carpet to mark it. Gavin's period of illness, a bubble of lost time he will never quite recover, is the first of many absences and silences in the book—a testament not only to his limited perspective as a child but also to his parents' desire to elide, in varying ways, their own grief.

At times, The Unpassing can feel unbearable to read. The starkness of human feelings on display, set against the otherworldly landscape of Alaska, with its endless summers and sunless winters, feels almost too raw and exposed. Gavin's family lives in relative isolation outside Anchorage, their house separated from others by woods and winding roads, on a lot that his father envisions as the beginning of a cul-de-sac like ones in regular neighborhoods, but a neighborhood never develops around it. Their community is small and largely white—though Gavin's mother can drive 40 minutes, if she's willing, to shop at a Korean market—with a tight-knit spirit that manifests itself in seasonal cookouts and a regional lottery with a modest cash prize, determined by betting on the exact time of the year's first snowfall. Despite the seeming closeness of the surrounding community, Gavin's family isn't part of it in any meaningful way. His parents don't seem to have any friends in town. Gavin mostly connects with the natural landscape instead: the woods behind his house; the mudflats by the water; the clearing where, in the spring, flowers bloom.

The stark and bare world is reinforced by Lin's prose. Every moment that Gavin recalls is loaded with blunt significance—every petulant gesture of his father, every abortive attempt at connection with his mother. One night, after being punished by their mother for wearing nail polish, Pei-Pei cuts Gavin's nails. Still upset by their mother's callousness, Pei-Pei gets careless and cuts them too short, and the next day, Gavin's fingers throb painfully—another failed attempt at familial bonding. The tempo at which Lin renders the doings of the family and the obstacles they face is slow but inexorable. The novel is emotionally bare, but it's an austere, quiet kind of exposure.

Soon after Ruby's death, Gavin and his mother make a routine trip to the grocery store, then abruptly detour to the mudflats, where a beluga whale has beached. It's a moment of softness, a place where the characters can breathe. The two walk barefoot on the cool silt of the beach, and Gavin's mother shows a remarkable tenderness toward the beached whale: "She dipped a loafer into the puddle and dribbled water onto the whale's back, spreading the liquid with her hands."

At the mudflats, they also meet a stranger, a man who speaks only English. When Gavin's feet get cold, he offers to warm them with his hands, in one of the novel's few displays of physical affection between characters—a moment that the boy cherishes. When the man asks if Gavin has a father, Gavin says yes.

“And do you live with him?”

My mother moved her hand very slightly and dug her fingernail into my arm. She said to me in a low voice, in Taiwanese, “Say no.”

I looked at the notch her fingernail had left on me. “Yes,” I said.

Silence followed, and then my mother said in the same tone, “Couldn't you just have pretended… That you don't have one.”

Gavin's mother is an unpredictable, sometimes inscrutable figure. The family just barely scrapes by, and she holds it together while dreaming of being in another place, of being “someone else.” She constantly argues with her husband about money and his chronic joblessness, frequently punishes her children, and embarrasses Pei-Pei by buying her ugly clothes—partly because of the family's poverty, partly as a means of control. Yet her harshness, her filial demands, emerge from a particular kind of deep, impossible love, in a depiction that will feel familiar to any child of immigrant parents. Lin renders this complicated motherhood unsparingly. The novel opens with a test that Gavin's mother gives to her children by faking a sudden fall. She's angry when Gavin and Pei-Pei respond by doing nothing. “What kind of children have I raised?” she asks. Yet Lin also depicts her rare, fierce longing—a woman who desires more from this life than she has been allowed.

By contrast, Gavin's father is a weaker figure. He wants to raise his children to be strong—insisting that Gavin finish every bit of his meager meals and assigning him a jumping exercise in order to help him grow taller—but he himself seems lacking, both as a moral
authority and as a provider. This aspect of his character is alluded to in overheard conversations and offhand comments from Gavin’s mother, gesturing at a larger story that has been kept from the children.

One night, as he and his father are looking at Natty’s drawings, Gavin suddenly finds himself swept into this secret story: “My father grabbed the sleeve of my long johns, pinching my skin near my elbow. ‘What did she say about me?... It’s not true,’ he said. ‘Or not the way she tells it.’” Here, Lin gestures at the absence while painting details around it, the things Gavin notices, even though he doesn’t yet know the truth about his father. “The room seemed off-kilter,” Gavin recalls, “with all its shadows thrown upward, at a slant.”

Pei-Pei, for her part, acts as eldest daughters in so many immigrant families do: She is an intermediary with the outside world. However ambivalently, she serves as a bridge, as a secret-keeper, translator, bearer of bad news, and guardian. When their parents fail to provide affection, Pei-Pei reluctantly steps in here too, taking care of little Natty: “In the rare, puny circle of Pei-Pei’s tenderness, Natty had cried. Whispery wails that ended in open-mouthed silence, his face contorted with the need for air.” Later, when their father builds a faulty well and its contaminated water causes a young boy to get sick, Pei-Pei is the only one who can help her father navigate an impending lawsuit from the aggrieved family. She stays up late into the night, poring over a dictionary to help him research legal terms.

Observed from Gavin’s point of view, Pei-Pei’s rapid coming of age is mystifying. She is on a path to assimilation—at school and to their white neighbors the Dolans, she goes by Paige—that Gavin can’t yet comprehend wanting. At 10 years old, he’s still thoroughly rooted in his parents’ world. He’s at the age a boy wants to be loved; he can’t imagine finding it anywhere else. He still loves his family, especially his mother, even though he attempts to express that love in a way she doesn’t understand. From their trip to the beach:

When she stopped to catch her breath, I stared into her wind-raked face and said, in a voice that came out scratchy, “I love you.”

She narrowed her eyes to consider me. “Where did you learn that?” she asked.

Meanwhile, the 14-year-old Pei-Pei turns away from the family almost completely. She has friends at school; later, she gets a part-time job, which takes her out of the house and gives her money to spend on her own things. And she becomes romantically—or at least physically—involved with the elder Dolan child, Collin, who goes to school with her. Ada, Collin’s little sister, shows Gavin their siblings’ secret place, a trailer in the Dolans’ backyard, which fills him with longing: “My throat clotted. They had a hideaway, where loneliness couldn’t nab them. They could rest. They could just rest.”

Like Gavin, the reader comes to crave these small glimpses of joy. Scarcity is a motif throughout Lin’s novel—certainly economic scarcity, as demonstrated by the family’s financial woes, but also, more pressing, emotional scarcity. Though fluently written and acutely observed, Lin’s characters seem locked inside themselves, trapped by an inability to communicate what lies in their hearts. The novel perfectly conveys the loneliness of being in a family: the paradox of the family’s ties that inextricably bind us together despite our never truly understanding the people we call kin.

Of the family’s five devastated members, Natty’s and Gavin’s loneliness is the most obvious. As the two youngest, without external outlets like Pei-Pei’s or wishful dreams like their mother’s, they’re keenly aware of how grief has changed their family, and the bonds they seek elude them. Natty experiences and becomes aware of this lack through almost spiritual means. At just 5 years old, he’s small and haunted, with a kind of openness that renders him seemingly psychic: He calls certain thoughts “dreams” and claims to know the whereabouts of their dead sister. His porousness, similar to Gavin’s, makes him sensitive to the subtle dynamics of their grieving family, though neither of the children has the vocabulary or maturity to identify exactly what’s happening. One night, Natty and Gavin peer into their parents’ bedroom as they sleep. Natty is nearly hysterical, “the edge of a sob bending his voice,” as he insists to Gavin that their parents have disappeared, have been replaced by other people. In the bedroom, their mother’s expression is “strange—melting… her skin looked detachable from the flesh, something that could be shed.” “Those people are not Mama and Daddy,” Natty insists. “In the dark,” Gavin reflects, “it was not hard to believe what he was saying, that no one was left in our family but the two of us. Everyone had changed—we didn’t know them, and they didn’t know us.”

Later that summer, Gavin and his mother reluctantly attend a solstice cook-out hosted by the town, hoarding free hamburgers, reindeer sausages, and cans of soda. Unexpectedly, Lin presents her novel, Pei-Pei has signed up for the talent show, and she performs a song she used to sing to Ruby. “She looked unafraid as she held the mic with both hands…. It was obvious, to everyone but me, that I was related to this keeper of strange, lush melodies,” Gavin says. He is moved by his sister’s soulful performance, but back with his mother, the two are silent, the emotional space between them a gulf uncrossed. “I looked back at my mother, who sat alone with paper plates and soda cans lodged in the grass around her,” Gavin recalls. The description is brief but unbearably poignant—a physical rendition of his mother’s isolation in a country she doesn’t think of as home, surrounded by the evidence of her thrift and standoffsishness amid her neighbors’ easy closeness. After Pei-Pei’s performance, whatever desire Gavin has of connecting with his mother goes unmet: “We didn’t speak of what had happened, or of any memories we shared.”

The Dolans, whom Gavin, Natty, and Pei-Pei visit often, act as a foil for their own tumultuous family life. Though the Dolans have known tragedy as well—Ada and Collin’s mother died some years before—they have an economic stability that Gavin cannot imagine, let alone accept benefiting from. When Mr. Dolan invites Gavin and Natty to dinner, he notices how thin the brothers are and packs them a bag of groceries to take home. Yet Gavin can’t bring himself to accept it: “He wanted to give the bag to me, and I wanted to take it. But there was some kind of block.” Gavin is acutely aware of the difference between his family and the other families in town, and even his smallest observations become heartwrenching. Upon seeing several ladders—“ten or fifteen”—in the backyard of the Dolan house, Gavin wonders, “I didn’t know why someone would need so many ladders. It wasn’t as though you could
string them together and climb somewhere far away.”

Amid this backdrop of scarcity, the only thing that feels lush and full is the woods. Outside the strictures of family, school, and responsibility, within which Gavin’s family fails to measure up, the children can play there; they can become themselves. “Where the woods began, there was only a stripe of darkness, with a pale glow at the opening of the trail,” Gavin notes. “When you stood at that entry point, I knew, you sensed something waiting for you in there. Some days it was a foreboding, and some days it was a kind of comfort, a promise of company.” It’s in these woods that Natty disappears, at the book’s climax, in a moment that forces all the characters to come together and the family’s dark secret to come to the surface at last.

The Unpassing ends decades later, with a slim last chapter told from the adult Gavin’s point of view. His mother, now aged and alone, in the last year of her life, asks him to cut her hair. Hesitantly, Gavin snips off just a tiny length:

“That’s not going to do it. I want it off my neck.”

“Get someone else to do it,” I muttered as I made the next cut. But I knew she didn’t have anyone else. Her friends had not lasted, and her children had scattered.

Our perspective now is wide-angle, fleshed out. We have more knowledge of what has transpired and what has shaped Gavin’s childhood. We not only are aware of the existence of those gaps in the family history but also, knowing more about the characters, understand how they came to be. As an adult, Gavin still doesn’t have the relationship with his mother that he coveted as a child—he never will, not in the ways that he imagined—or that we might crave for him. Lin withholds that easy ending from us; instead, we must sit with what family is, not what we long for it to be.

The novel’s triumph is in Lin’s depiction of the relationship between parents and children and their shifting responsibilities to one another, developing over time. Its narrative also poses a difficult and poignant set of questions: How, in a family, can we love those who have wronged us? What secrets lie buried in our closest kin and why? Lin’s novel doesn’t offer any conclusive answer, because she is interested in something between knowing and not knowing. Narrating from that gap, she gives us a haunting story all its own.

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o much art is about the experience of growing older. Young artists create as though they’ll never age and feel that if they do, it won’t be like their elders; the older ones sometimes wrestle with more pressing, material concerns, like the view outside one’s window. The best material, in both cases, turns inward—moving the small things that make up a life into the realm of the immortal. For musicians, whose art provides the soundtrack to our lives, aging seems to deliver a real clarity to their work. David Bowie’s Blackstar and Leonard Cohen’s You Want It Darker, the last albums they released before their deaths, are masterpieces that reckon, devastatingly, with the end. And every year there’s a new crop of musicians who start on their journeys to the finish line.

In the early 2000s, the power of the establishment music press began to wane, and blogs stepped into the breach as kingmakers in their own right; a feature on, say, Gorilla vs. Bear or Said the Gramophone could propel unknowns to stardom as hype sloshed from blog to blog to record label. I mention this because the music-blog days are over, and anyway, most of them are dead. Some of the people the blogs championed flamed out, but others managed to make it. Perhaps the most successful of those groups is Vampire Weekend, the Columbia-grad ex-prepsters who created a trio of records that most critics agree are unimpeachable. As the story goes, a leaked CD-R demo made its way online, and then the quartet signed to XL and began showing up everywhere. (To give you an idea of the times: This was the first band to be interviewed for a Spin cover story before releasing a debut album.)
Vampire Weekend's fourth record, *Father of the Bride*, comes a full six years after the band's Grammy-winning third effort, *Modern Vampires of the City*, and it's a document of not only how much the group's music has matured in that furlough but also how the members have all grown up. Rostam Batmanglij—the main producer on *Vampire Weekend* and *Contra*, the group's first two records—has left the band to strike out solo (although he appears on *FOTB* as a producer). Frontman Ezra Koenig took some time off to create an anime-inspired television show and became a father. The passage of time is clear in his lyrics; the songs deal more directly with loss, pain, and how inevitable they are in the course of one's life. You could see the early stuff now as a bildungsroman, a coherent narrative that Vampire Weekend has grown out of.

It's evident from the first track how much the band's sound has changed as well: "Hold You Now" mostly abandons the group's traditional African-inflected prester pop for something more countrified, shimmering with pedal steel and plucked acoustic guitar. If not for Koenig's sweet warble and the slightly distorted backing choir, it would be easy to mistake the song as an offering from an up-and-coming country star trying on a new sound. It's unusually mournful, too, as an account of the last night two former lovers spend together before one becomes a bride. "Leaving on your wedding day / All calm and dressed in white / All I'll keep's the memory of one last crooked night / The pews are getting filled up / The organ's playing loud / I can't carry you forever, but I can hold you now," Koenig sings. And then Danielle Haim, of the Los Angeles pop-rock trio Haim, answers him, "I know the reason why you think I oughta stay / Funny how you're telling me on my wedding day / Crying in those rumpled sheets / Like someone's 'bout to die / You just watch your mouth when talking 'bout the father of the bride."

Next up is "Harmony Hall," the lead single released from *FOTB*. It sounds more classically Vampire Weekend, if not in its instrumentation—acoustic guitar, piano, relatively minimalist percussion—then in its bright vibe. It's like a college campus in the spring or summer, except that the lyrics are much, much darker. (It's worth noting that Harmony Hall is the name of a dorm on the Columbia University campus, where Koenig and the rest of the band went to school, although he has said it's not about that building at all.) In the chorus, he seems to lay out the facts of life. What he's saying is true, though not necessarily pretty: "Anger wants a voice / Voices wanna sing / Singers harmonize / Till they can't hear anything / I thought that I was free / From all that questionin' / But every time a problem ends / Another one begins." It's a joyful lamentation, one that sounds as if it came from a jam band like the Grateful Dead or Rusted Root, as *The Atlantic*'s Spencer Kornhaber deftly pointed out. That mostly comes from the instrumentation and the genre's trademark sunny slouchiness. It sounds like your dad's music. "This Life," the record's fourth song, pulls off the same trick, juxtaposing a couple of jaunty guitars with lyrics about the end of a bad relationship and the larger existential question of how to live. The chorus is, "This life / And all its suffering / Oh, Christ / Am I good for nothing?" Aren't the existential questions supposed to be the hardest to answer?

Other songs make similar stylistic leaps. "Married in a Gold Rush" is a sonically minimalist elegy for a marriage, relying mostly as it does on a duet between Haim and Koenig. "My Mistake" is essentially a piano-driven waltz. "Spring Snow" finds Koenig experimenting with the aesthetics of Auto-Tune, doing his best impression of Kanye West on *808s & Heartbreak*. *FOTB*’s 18 well-sequenced tracks are more eclectic than anything the band has done before. It helps that the old genius—the old musical virtuosity—is there still. The group is wiser and more interested in collaboration as well, making this the first Vampire Weekend album with features; along with Haim, Steve Lacy of the R&B group the Internet shows up. The group's sound is decidedly more omnivorous than on previous albums, and it is far more assured. It has grown. And it has grown on me as well.

For a certain group of young and youngish people, Vampire Weekend was the soundtrack to college classes, first jobs, first loves, first heartbreaks. The band soundtracked what it was like to come of age, massively indebted, during the Great Recession. This was music for the first generation of Americans who'd earn less than their parents; it was the sound of something horribly new. For me, someone who's part of that crowd, each new Vampire Weekend album became a kind of emotional barometer: If the album was OK, maybe I would be, too. The first album came out in 2008, the second in 2010, the third in 2013, and now, 11 years after Vampire Weekend's debut, we have *Father of the Bride*. We've all changed in that time. I have, at least.

It's not a particularly astute observation to say things are very different today from a decade ago. But it bears repeating anyway because it feels as though the gulf between then and now is widening faster than ever. Political climates around the world are destabilizing, the Internet has become inescapable and increasingly hungry for personal data, and climate change is forcing us to reckon with what we've done to the planet.

Koenig and his band haven't really had anything to do with those changes. (Though it's absolutely worth noting here that he's a progressive and a supporter of Bernie Sanders.) But *Father of the Bride* can be read as a response to a changed world. The relationships it details are atomized and oblique, its lyrical tone is bleak and introspective, and the guitars are still cheerful. I don't know if there's a better way to define the sound of 2019; it's the sonic equivalent of gallows humor. Even so, Koenig is hopeful at the end of it all. "So let them win the battle / But don't let them restart / That genocidal feeling / That beats in every heart," he sings in "Jerusalem, New York, Berlin." *FOTB*’s closing song. Hope, he thinks, is a moral imperative. And that's the grown-up answer.
Puzzle No. 3505
JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS
1 Noticed a tool melting (4)
4 Put in other words: political center managed group of candidates (9)
10 Our dean mangled a poem (7)
11 Article in the Süddeutsche Zeitung chases star’s split with loud rumbling (7)
12 ’60s activists surround university with beer and heavy sounds (5)
13 Demonstrate switching the internal components of salt from the south of France (9)
14 It wreaks havoc with recreational equipment (5,3)
17 Boy with grand air in a skimpy bathing suit (5)
19 Peg only listening to Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, et al. (5)
21 Like some grapes, after replacing sulfur with nitrogen once for no reason (8)
23 Lofty perch with snow drifting through top (5,4)
25 Spot unfinished chicken part with expression of relief (5)
28 Less obese evildoer sabotaged Niners (7)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3504

29 Progress with popular bars stocking bit of alcohol (7)
30 Russian writer’s father getting back to Alaska (9)
31 Nine three-part clues and their corresponding entries are explained by this unfortunate slip (4)

DOWN
2 Believer behind universal connection (5)
3 Alas! Stooge is tiny, according to Spooner (3,2,2)
4 Beat state’s top official in pit (5)
5 Allow to turn into a novelist? (9)
6 Undergrad’s trick: capturing central idea (7)
7 Daring American supports a tragic ending in sound (9)
8 Lawman schlep noise reducers (8)
9 Runs into prosperous home for Greeks (4)
15 Regrets a loose pig on a rampage (9)
16 Where a religious judge could be found to be essentially partisan, he drinks (9)
18 Financial advice from a cow’s nose? (5,3)
20 Perfume from German city on the outskirts of Cologne (7)
22 Football pass is, after all, incomplete (7)
24 “Dense and ailing” written thus on back of book (5)
26 Using their heads, independent pharmacists all dispense sleeping tablets (5)
27 Chop dope (4)

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