

My Affairs

A MEMOIR OF THE MAGAZINE INDUSTRY
(2016-2076)

N.J. Robinson

Impossibilities no longer stood in the way. One's life had fattened on impossibilities. Before the boy was six years old, he had seen four impossibilities made actual—the ocean-steamer, the railway, the electric telegraph, and the Daguerreotype; nor could he ever learn which of the four had most hurried others to come... In 1850, science would have smiled at such a romance as this, but, in 1900, as far as history could learn, few men of science thought it a laughing matter.

— THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS

I was emerging from these conferences amazed and exalted, convinced, one might say. It seemed to me that I traveled through Les Champs Elysées in a carriage pulled by two proud lions, turned into anti-lions, sweeter than lambs, only by the harmonic force; the dolphins and the whales, transformed into anti-dolphins and into anti-whales, made me sail gently on all the seas; the vultures, turned anti-vultures, carried me on their wings towards the heights of the heavens. Magnificent was the description of the beauties, the pleasures, and the delights of the spirit and the heart in the phalansterian city.

— ION GHICA

My Affairs

I HAVE BEEN EDITING A MAGAZINE NOW FOR ALMOST exactly sixty years. I hope to live a good while longer—life expectancy is shooting up so fast that now, at age eighty-seven, I may still not have reached my halfway point. Yet sixty is the sort of number that leads one to reflect. Not reflect very deeply, necessarily. My thoughts so far have mostly been limited to “My God, that is so many years” and “Hooray for not having expired.” But it *is* quite a bit of time, and it *is* shocking to me that there is still living flesh atop my skeleton (a rather grotesque way to put it, sorry). So many pictures have formed and dissolved before my eyes, so many events that once drew my absolute attention are now forgotten. To think of all that has happened!

I have fifty books to my name, but not one of them is autobiographical. Friends tell me I am now entitled to the indulgence of a memoir. But I am not trying to tell my life story. For one thing, my “autobiography” is dull as can be. While I have met many remarkable people, and seen countless extraordinary things, it has not been a life of adventure and escapade. That is by choice: I am a homebody and a bookworm by disposition. I am still, after all these years, unnerved by flying. God only knows how I shall feel if

I am chosen to embark upon that Great Voyage abroad. (Of course I put my name down—wouldn't anyone?) I prefer my burrow. A cup of tea and a slice of Victoria sponge. Sitting out on the gallery watching the plants grow. In college, my Latin American History professor used to repeat the cryptic phrase "Brazilian history is written from the hammock." If so, I aspire to emulate the great Brazilian historians. Vigorous exercise, yes. But travel—not so much. For one thing, I'm always misplacing something en route. Last time it was my handkerchief. The time before that it was my granddaughter. (She was found.)

So I do not want to tell you too much about *me*, for I find myself uninteresting and doubtless you would agree. Instead, I am mostly concerned to record my observations of the times through which I have lived. I have been fortunate, supremely so, to bear witness to some of the most rapid changes in human history: the dawn of the internet, the onset of the Climate Crisis, the Trump Presidency, the Red Wave, the Reaction, the onset of Gna, the collapse of Canada, the spread of the DSW, the establishment of the *Public Times*, the New Global Rights Framework, the decline of the "nation-state," the creation of the GHS, the decommodification push, the (disastrous) cloning of the Beatles, the exile of the titans, the hideous collapse of the Galt Village and subsequent renationalization of the moon, the birth of the first Pleasant City, the revolution in architecture, the museum dissemination movement, the closing of the last prison, and, of course, the birth and progression of the Great Voyage ahead. My personal life may not have been a swashbuckling and adventuresome one, but I have certainly had the curse of interesting times.

Lately I have been trying to recall what it felt like to live before any of this. It is not easy. Once history has happened, it seems inevitable. You can't imagine it being any other way. It can be hard even to convince yourself that it *was* any other way. What

is written is written. Yet if you had told me what was about to unfold, back when I was starting out in publishing, it would have been impossible to believe. Frankly, if you had described the world of 2018 to the me of 2008, it would have seemed unbelievable. But things were only just beginning to get remarkable.

I don't know why I should still feel surprised, but I do. The people of 1905 would have been astonished and horrified by the world of 1945. Or compare 1985 and 1945. The whole world alters every few decades, why should I have expected it to slow itself? Human beings lived the same way for tens of thousands of years. Then we started living in different ways in every generation. It's disorienting to experience this.

I have been fortunate that most of what I have been here for has been positive. So many people who have lived have not been afforded the kind of life I have had. They have died in childbirth, or starved to death, or been sent to war, or spent 40 years toiling for the company only to be laid off with a week's pay. Compare the 20th century to the 21st, and who could take the 20th? So far, excepting some blips of misfortune in the first few decades, we seem to have turned things around. William F. Buckley, a conservative fogey once renowned, said that he was "standing athwart history, shouting 'stop.'" I have been marching beside history saying "Well done, can I get you anything?" I write this book in part, however, to show that it could have gone in a much different, much darker direction, and to encourage us not to take our achievements for granted.

You may be familiar with the magazine I run, *Current Affairs*. At one time around midcentury we had the second-highest circulation of any print periodical in the contiguous United States, after *Jacobin*. (In Alaska, the *Alaska Advertiser* has consistently beaten both of us.) Nowadays, in a post-localization media landscape, a magazine like ours is less in tune with the public taste. Circulation

is back around 100,000, which is where I like it.

It is my fervent hope that I do not come across a tedious old fool in these pages. Perhaps I won't. For one thing, I am not really "old"—if the actuarial tables are right, I am still downright larval. But tedious and foolish, well, that is for you to decide. I think, given the awesome nature of what I have experienced and witnessed, my recollections may offer the present and future reader some value. If not, I set them down here for the sake of the record.



We can skip the early years. Needless to say, I was born. I loafed about a bit. The years from 0-5 were largely unproductive. 5-10 was where things really hotted up. I received the finest education Southwest Florida had to offer, which was probably worse than nothing. Universities were attended. Friendships came and went. I enrolled in graduate education at the nation's premiere institute of learning.

I was not asked to leave Harvard. Rather, I left and was asked not to return. I had reasoned, soundly, that one's graduate work could be done just as profitably from a balcony in the French Quarter as from the Yard, and so soon after enrolling I had retreated southward. My advisor emailed from time to time, asking when I planned to show myself again in the quadrangle. I replied to only some of these notes, informing him that because the internet had not yet been introduced to New Orleans, it would be impossible for me to maintain regular correspondence. Eventually, he gave up the attempt. A year later, the University sent me a polite letter terminating my formal relationship with it. I sighed, but by that time my attention was firmly on other things.

There was a reason for this inattention to my studies. I was not one of these types who comes to New Orleans to sleep until noon

and write poems about magnolias. I had come because it was the Cultural Capital of America, and to a young man seeking success in the publishing industry, I thought there was no better place to be.

It turned out, however, that this was a personal delusion of my own, and had nothing to do with the truth. By the time I arrived in the autumn of 2015, all of the big newsmagazines had relocated to the two major coasts. Even *The New Orleans Review of Books* had moved to New York City, though it had kept its name to avoid confusion. The only publication of any note left in Louisiana was *The Iron Lattice*, and breaking in at that august outlet was infamously tricky. (I know one man who did it, and he died shortly after.)

It was impossible, therefore, to get a job in the industry. I had hoped for some part-time freelance take-writing to supplement my paltry graduate stipend, some comfortable gig that could hopefully blossom into a full editorship once my studies had concluded. I am capable of churning out heaps of vehement opinions at a quick clip, and in the New Orleans of my imagination there had been a dozen local magazines bidding for my freshly baked takes. It was not to be.

Going to New York was obviously not an option. I was prepared to sacrifice for my art, but there are limits. Yet my resolve was unshaken. If you can't take Mohammed to the magazine, make a magazine for Mohammed. One day, sitting in the Café Nicoise and looking at the newsstand opposite, I was smacked hard in the face by a revelation.

"Mon dieu!" I exclaimed.¹ "All the magazines are utter shit!"

It was true. Abandoning the remnants of my beignet and tossing some nickels on the table, I ran across to Cheepo News & Cigars.

1 New Orleans was then bilingual, not by law but *certainly* by custom.

I picked up a copy of *TIME*, thumbed through it, and exclaimed aloud:

“What the hell is this?! Who would read this? WHAT IS THIS FOR?”

It strikes me in retrospect that I may have made a spectacle of myself. At the time, however, my enthusiasm was irrepressible. I ran to the counter brandishing the *TIME*.

“Would you buy this?” I demanded of the proprietor, Mr. Cheepo. “Would you *read* it?” He shook his head, and the look in his eye told me he was disturbed by the power of my revelation. He knew, deep within himself, that what he was selling was worthless. He was living a false life. I had exposed it.

It was obvious what I had to do. I would begin a magazine of my own, one so readable that people would find themselves actually wanting to read it. It would be unlike any previously existing periodical. Perhaps it would have pop-ups.

Could it be done? I did not know, but it was imperative to find out.

The first complication was that I had no money. The second complication was that I had no idea what I was doing.

But as they say, a man who has no money does have money, so long as he has friends. I had friends. Those friends had money. When I told them I urgently needed funds in order to treat a debilitating illness, they ponied up readily.

What I told them was not false. The illness was other magazines. The treatment would be a better magazine.

An office was rented in the city’s Central Business District. I could not afford much, just a small suite of rooms in the back of a converted flophouse. My office, to my delight, had a window. That window overlooked a giant wall. To cheer myself, I painted a smiling sun on the wall. The trick backfired. The sun appeared to mock my lack of success.

A small staff was hired. I prioritized pep and gusto over know-how. Anyone can know how to do something. But do they do it with any pep? Most had never worked on a magazine before. A few seemed surprised that magazines still existed.

We called the thing *The Navel Observatory*, a pun we had paid \$100 to commission. It would offer Comment and Analysis on matters cultural, political, and literary. It used to be said of British newspapers that they must appeal to “the man on the Clapham omnibus.” Our mission, as I saw it, was to provide something for “the gal on the St. Charles Streetcar.” What is she like? She is curious, intelligent, and lively. She wears a flamingo-print sundress. She may be slightly intoxicated. She is direly in need of a magazine.

My desk was a mammoth object. When I bought it, I reasoned that a young magazine, and a young magazine editor, needed an “aesthetic of credibility.” A giant mahogany boat of a desk, then, was a worthwhile investment. People would look at it and think “The man who sits behind that dignified immovable must be worth taking seriously.”

Every finishing in the office was chosen with the same end in mind. The walls were painted “smoking room scarlet,” the lampshades had mustard-colored tassels. Silver letters spelling out “THE NAVEL OBSERVATORY” were purchased and affixed to the wall. It was imperative for visitors to know who we were. The sign ensured they would.

Our first issue was a dynamo. Features on Southern cooking, geodesic domes, musicals (we came out against them), “gardening the old-fashioned way,” and do-it-yourself safe-cracking. A tipster gave us a delicious rumor about a Congressman, which we printed without hesitation. We had inscrutable single-panel cartoons, advertisements for whisky and watches (fictitious, of course—no liquor company would then have tarnished its good name through association with us), public service announcements (“Laughing At

Soldiers Could Get You Killed,” puzzles (“Find The Green Door,” about which we later received a formal accessibility complaint), cut-outs, fold-ins, “mad” libs, and the first (and only) chapter of a serialized novel called *The Ransome Tower*. There were golf tips (go easy on the four-wood), point-counterpoints (“Was Jesus an ‘intellectual?’”) and the occasional theater review. (James Lingwraith, our drama critic, witheringly pronounced the Broadway production *The Gayest Trifle* to be “something short of gay, but most assuredly a trifle.”)

Since we did not yet have any readers, I was forced to pen the “Letters to the Editor” myself. I tried to inhabit the mind of the Middle American Reader as best I could. I mixed the contented with the discontented, in order that we might successfully fool our audience into thinking these nonexistent personages were drawn from among the subscribing public. Samples:

To the Editor:

I have received the print edition of your magazine since its inception and always enjoyed its warm and forward take on contemporary social doings and the world of letters. However, when the most recent issue arrived in my postbox (I live at home), I was distressed to find what seemed like a months-old stray raisin mashed between the pages. I would request that you have a word with the little boy who does the mailing, and advise him that snacks are to be consumed on his own time.

With muted displeasure,

Pamela Rockford

[redacted], IOWA

To the Editors:

Learned a lot of Lou Reed facts from the latest edition. All well and good, except when you consider that Saudi Arabia contin-

ues its relentless bombing campaign against Yemen. Wonder when your publication intends to cease being the publicity arm of RCA Records and finally become the serious foreign policy review that its cover typeface implies it to be.

Elon Musk (no relation)

DOTHAN, ALABAMA

To this latter missive, we printed an editorial reply:

FROM THE EDITOR

Mr Musk: A Current Affairs/Rasmussen poll taken last year indicated that 40% of readers would prefer “music & pop industry gossip” over “analysis of Yemeni domestic affairs” (60% of readers had “no opinion”). Ours is a democratic publication, responsive to the will of its public, and if you think its values ought to be imposed by editorial fiat, we would suggest finding a home in a country whose media structure is more in accord with your beliefs, say Mussolini’s Italy.

It became my custom to insult correspondents in print, which I was told would earn me a reputation as an “endearing rascal.” As cancellation notices began to pour in, it became evident that the conventional wisdom was misguided. I ceased the practice.

When the physical copies of the first issue arrived our office, they did not disappoint. The pages were glossy, the covers on quality stock. This was no hand-stapled, mimeographed “zine.” This was a Periodical. Those I showed it to at the bus station pronounced it “really something.” I beamed with pride.



And then, just as it seemed we had gotten off to a roaring start, the whole thing came crashing down.

The product was there, but the subscribers weren't. Our Advertising Manager, a thoroughgoing crook whom I had hired on the sensible logic that "you need a swindler to swindle the swindlers," had swindled us. I had spent too much on office plants, having reasoned that "no serious magazine lacks an *en suite* arboretum." The dollar bills I expected to find pouring through the letterbox were in fact printing, fulfillment, and shipping bills. Our accountant, a fishlike man with a scalier-than-thou attitude, had misled me about the scope of our financial misfortune. I did not fully grasp the direness of our straits until I stood watching my desk being loaded into the back of a repossession-wagon.

As I locked up the office for the last time, and placed my key in the incinerator, I was despondent. Slinking home to the French Quarter, I considered taking to drink, or jumping in front of a speeding streetcar. (The city dashed my plans. In New Orleans, "taking to drink" is merely "staying hydrated" and the streetcars never exceed a the pace of a dreamy amble.) My grand plans had gone bust, my belly gone up.

I was a failure. I could not face the public. To hide the shame of my identity, for days afterward I would only go outside in an amusing hat and false nose, the latter of which eventually got caught in a revolving door.

I would like to tell you that my spirit was undaunted, that I picked myself up off the floor and sallied forth. I did not. On the floor I remained for weeks, sallying not. I spent my day moaning and gurgling, cursing the indifferent God who had failed to subscribe to my magazine.

Then, out of a clear blue sky, I received the phone call that would change my life.



C*urrent Affairs* should have been a venerable American institution. Certainly, in its early 20th century heyday, it was the sort of magazine that potentates and presidents would flick through over their morning toast. A story printed in *Current Affairs* would be murmured about by millions. The legendary editors—Harold Briscoe, B. Mitchell Davies, Rosalynd Partington, G.D. Forrest—became domestic celebrities, their faces appearing on advertisements for medicinal compounds and yeast extract. “If the editor of *Current Affairs* uses it to treat his, I can’t go wrong using it to treat mine,” you can imagine a convalescent musing to herself at the pharmacy counter.

By 2015, however, its fortunes had significantly subsided. At the newsstand, issues had been moved to the back with the pornography. In the dentist’s waiting room, *Current Affairs* was buried beneath stacks of *Sports Illustrated* and *Highlights for Children* from 1996 or before. At the seaside, copies were used to mop gull poop. The magazine remained in the hands of the Domino family, but S. Chapin Domino III was known to lack the acumen and discernment that had so distinguished Chapins I and II. The whisper went round the publishing industry: “Domino doesn’t get it.” He was gruff, they said, but gruff alone doesn’t get the goods. You also had to know magazines, and while Domino III may have had a world-beating talent for barking at underlings while chewing thick cigars, the finer points of layout and editorial work escaped him.

Thus as I lay depressed in a puddle of urine, surrounded by cigarette ends and empty oat milk cartons, I did not expect that the next voice I was to hear would be that of one S. Chapin Domino III.

“ROBINSON?” a voice shouted.

“Urhle,” I replied, with characteristic early-morning eloquence.

“Damn your incoherence! I haven’t the time. Listen to me, Robinson. You’ve got the chance of a lifetime coming your way and you’d better not muck it up.” (He did not say “muck.” He said a far ruder word that sounds similar. Perhaps you know the one I am speaking of.)

The voice explained that it was a magazine publisher. At first I thought it was attempting to sell me a subscription, and I politely explained that the last thing I needed right now was a fucking magazine subscription. After a few more minutes of shouting, however, it became clear that the voice was not trying to bilk me, but to suss out whether I myself would like to join the bilking industry.

“The editorship?” I incredulatd. “Of *Current Affairs*?”

“Magazine of presidents and potentates,” he replied with pride.

“Well, let’s not go that far,” I said. A harrumph came through the line.

Domino said he had seen my work with *The Navel Observatory*, and thought it was a damn shame that it had folded after a single issue. “Clever work, boy. Crystal! Impeccable!” He noted that he had benefited handsomely on the links from our Golfing Suggestions and had chuckled mightily at our wry single-panel cartoons. (The one he enjoyed the most featured two men waiting for the bus, one remarking to the other “I have two political beliefs. The first is that education is important, and the second is that 9/11 didn’t happen.”) Domino said I was a “young man on the make,” and that he was in a position to make me an offer that turn me from a “sniveling mealworm” into an “authentic man.” (I told him that this was both insulting and sexist, and he replied that this was precisely what a mealworm would say. I replied that mealworms would say nothing of the kind, as they have neither well-developed gender politics nor vocal cords. He told me that every additional inanity I uttered was just further confirming his

thesis. This silenced me.) He demanded that I come by his office in the Current Affairs Building on St. Charles Avenue. Being of a cravenly mealwormish disposition, and \$140,000 in debt, I was in no position to decline.



I was only a few minutes late in arriving at the Building—the trolley had struck a peacock—but locating Domino’s office within its labyrinthine depths took forty minutes of baffled spelunking. CAHQ, as it was informally named, was a grand old pile, its looming façade ornamented with elaborate stonework (including *bas-relief* sculptures of the Paris Commune). A plaque mounted at the entrance claimed that it was one of the few buildings M.C. Escher had ever worked on as an architect. I did not know whether this was intended as a joke. The more I saw of the place, the more certain I became that it was serious.

From the imposing exterior, one would have expected to enter a vast, airy lobby upon passing through the revolving door. Instead, one encountered a cramped and dirty foyer, with no sign of life save a collapsed “PISO MOJADO” board. (The dust-covered *piso* was anything but *mojado*.) There was no front desk, no regal staircase, no signs pointing to Conference Room B or the Skydeck or the Staff Canteen. There was only a small golden elevator door, with a single illuminated button beside. When I pressed the button, the grinding racket that came from within suggested the contraption had been in continuous operation since about 1926. When the doors opened, an interior cage door had to be pulled aside manually. It was evident that this used to be the role of an elevator attendant, and that the attendant was many generations gone. (His skeleton remained.) Steeling myself for a bumpy ride, I placed the remnants of my nose in my pocket and entered the elevator.

The car began moving automatically. There were about 100 different floor switches on the panel,² all unlabeled, but pressing them did nothing. Sure enough, the thing lurched uncontrollably, and several times launched into a terrifying free-fall for a few feet, before getting its bearings and continuing its crawl upward. I must have been in the thing half an hour before it finally stopped and one of the doors jerked open (the other was stuck). It was evident that I was suspended well above the city, though all I could see before me was a long windowless corridor, with gas lamps on the walls and dark damask wallpaper.

There were ten doors in the corridor, each spaced about 30 feet apart. None of them was labeled. I tried a door. A bird flew out and bit me. Hearing thousands more birds fluttering towards me, I beat the hastiest of retreats. Another door: a man seated on the toilet reading a newspaper, who looked embarrassed and angry. I apologized and left him to his business. Another door: a solid brick wall. Another: the typesetting room, with 400 ladies hunched over their boxes, composing like mad. All looked up and glared at me simultaneously, and I backed away slowly.

The next room was a gastropub, filled with hipster idiots who could tell me nothing on the whereabouts of the Publisher's office. The room after that, another aviary. After that, a candy room, which would have been glorious if I had been in search of a six-foot-gummy bear instead of an editorial position. I gnawed off a chunk of the bear's ear and moved on. Behind the final door I found the starting tub of a waterslide, which spiraled down into a dark abyss. "What the hell," I said to myself, and grabbing an inner tube, hurled myself into the great wet unknown.

I must have bonked my head on the way down, for when I came

2 Before elevator cars had buttons, they had switches. This was a tricky system, because if you flipped two switches at the same time, the car would try to tear itself in two. Many accidents happened that way. See James Sharpley, *Otis Who? An American History of the Elevator* (Monthly Review Press, 1970).

to there was no sign of a water slide, though the inner tube was stuck round my belly. I was sopping wet, and standing on a red shag carpet. "If someone sees this, they will be annoyed," I thought, examining my accumulating puddle. But I was alone.

I found myself in yet another corridor, filled with yet more doors. This time the doors were all open, and it was clear that they all led to more corridors, which each contained yet more doors leading to yet more corridors. I began to think we would all be better off had Mr. Escher refrained from venturing into commercial architecture.

I spent a good deal of time wandering from hall to hall, my inner tube periodically getting stuck in doorways. Eventually I found myself wishing I was back among the bird-doors. At least birds were things.

I was on the brink of giving up hope, and contemplating either suicide or a nap in the tube, when I saw in the distance a door that was closed. Upon that door was a brass plaque, and as I approached I saw that the plaque read:

Publisher

I strode up to the door with confidence and gave it a pounding. "PROCEED" came the voice within. I proceeded.

Inside, standing by the window looking out over the city, stood the Publisher, cigar in hand. He did not acknowledge me.

If S. Chapin Domino had not been six feet tall and wearing a double-breasted suit, you would have sworn he was a newborn infant. It is said that when a woman told Winston Churchill her baby looked just like him, he replied "Madam, all babies look like me." Domino could have used the same line even more accurately.

Without turning away from the window, Domino spoke:

"I will not waste your time, Robinson. I will not curry you with flattery or extend candy and baubles. I have an offer, and that offer is firm. You either pick it up or you drop it. The offer is this: edit *Current Affairs* for me. I will give you total freedom, within reason. You will not be well-paid, but if you succeed in reviving it, you shall share in the rewards."

"Everyone knows this magazine is flat on its back, Robinson. It is a upturned tortoise, flailing pitifully, and it needs some passing tortoise-loving Samaritan to stop and right it. I am not so arrogant that I do not know my own limitations as a chief executive. A Publisher is only as good as the Editor he employs. I've gone through six in two years. Either number seven will succeed, or this magazine will cease to exist. Will you do it? Will you take the helm of *Current Affairs* and pilot this ship to warmer seas? Can I count on you, Robinson? Can I?" He took a puff of his cigar, and lapsed into a coughing fit.

Just like that, I was the editor of a national political magazine.



It would not be accurate to say that I was entirely unprepared for what I was to face. I had run a failing magazine before. But there is a world of difference between the beaching of a canoe and the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.³ *Current Affairs* had 300 staff and an in-house printing press. It owned its own paper mill and 262,000 acres of Canadian pine forest. Every month, a fleet of company trucks set out from headquarters to deliver new copies around the country. It had sixteen different editorial departments, including Sport, Features, Foreign, Home, Social, Arts &

3 This was a very large ship. I am using a metaphor.

Leisure, Financial, Wine, Legal, Amusement, and Misc. Messages were delivered from department to department by a brigade of tiny messenger-boys (the system had been established before the invention of pneumatic tube-mail, and the Dominos were infamously hidebound). The giant Current Affairs Building had been carved out of a single slab of Tuscan dolomite. It was said that in the lavatories, uniformed attendants still handed out actual towels, and instead of toilet paper, monogrammed anal serviettes were provided, then specially laundered and reused. That kind of Old World grandeur was present throughout the company, from the marzipan chamber in the restaurant to the two-story fountains in the research room. The scale of the operation could give the most settled mind a vigorous boggling.

Yet circulation had flagged. It dipped from more than a million in the 1930s to approximately 4,500 circa 2019. The enterprise was being subsidized from the Domino family war chest, but just as no “bottomless bunch” is truly bottomless, no limitless fortune is actually unlimited. The bills were piling up, the old building crumbling, the presses leaking oil, the arboretum going untended.

Cutbacks had been made. The magazine had gone from 200 pages to 40. Expense accounts no longer covered curios. The tradition of giving each staff member an entire hog at Christmastime was unceremoniously terminated. Editors were no longer granted custom-made busts of their own heads, print-works staff no longer allowed to keep leftover ink for “personal use.” One wheel from each of the company trucks had been removed and sold, rendering them useless. The staff café’s legendary coffee had been replaced with literal cat piss (the company owned a kittenry).

The Publisher was up against Cold Hard Fact and he knew it. I was a Hail Mary, a desperate grasp. It was grow or die, sink or swim, socialism or barbarism, cake or death, uptown or downtown, night or day, land or sea, pigs or cattle, Heaven or Hell.

There would either be a thing, or there would be the opposite of the thing. To quote Thatcher, there was no alternative. For her it was capitalism, for us it was me.

My mandate was simple: build a world-class political periodical with a giant circulation and do so within a matter of months. *No easy task*, you may think, and ordinarily you would be right. But I had two strokes of fortune on my side: the first, as I have said, was that every other magazine completely sucked ass. The second was the existence of Donald J. Trump.

I had happened to stumble into the publishing industry at the end of what might now be called the Age of Complacency. Late 2015 was a peculiar time, because a lot of well-paid professionals were insisting that Everything Was Fine, when it was manifestly clear to all that everything was very much not fine.

One of my very first editorial decisions was to declare our magazine “bullish on Trump.” We loathed him, but predicted that unless drastic measures were taken, he would soon be President of the United States. This caused friction with the Publisher.

“You hired me for my judgment,” I told him. “This is it. This is my judgment.” My words were absorbed. Domino left me to my business.

The United States in these years was an odd place for a young Socialist. We knew that the country was stumbling into the abyss, but nobody listened to our pleas and yelps. In February, I wrote a *Current Affairs* editorial arguing that the only way to keep Trump from the presidency was for the Democratic Party to immediately nominate Bernie Sanders as its candidate. The warning went unheeded. People seemed to think that because the awful outcome of a Trump presidency was unimaginable, it was therefore unlikely. This theory was ultimately disconfirmed.

Looking back on it so many decades later, it is easy to laugh at the 4-year Trump presidency as an amusing and inexplicable

detour, a bout of momentary insanity from which the country would swiftly recover. I believe this is the wrong interpretation of the political situation at the time. It is more properly seen as the dreadful culmination of an unfolding tendency, one that could easily have continued had certain things not gone as they did. The country may have been a saner place after, but, like Greece,⁴ it had never been fully in possession of its marbles.

The Obama years were not, contrary to the assessment of certain contemporary historians, a period of “final placidity.” It was the time when everything began to unravel, as a president elected on a promise of sweeping social change ended up delivering little more than a dysfunctional insurance-sales website. Capitalism was bringing society to the edge of a very steep and dangerous precipice, and while everyone felt the fear—it was commonly said that humanity would be lucky to survive another 50 years—the Democratic Party was failing to provide anything close to an adequate response.

When Trump ultimately won, everything went haywire. And somewhat perversely, the fortunes of *Current Affairs* reversed overnight.



I had spent the first year of my editorship taking desperate measures. Knowing we would be unable to maintain the present pace of expenditures, I made difficult choices. The hand-launched napkins in the lavatories were replaced with ordinary toilet tissue. (I did keep one of the old napkins to use as a pocket square.) Several of the spinoff magazines in the *Current Affairs* family—including *Seasonal Review*, *Potpourri*, *Hackweek*, *Auditors Gazette*,

Preview, *Weekly West*, *New Tablet*, *Yuletide*, *COUPONS*, *Porous First*, *Decadence*, and *Burlyman Monthly*, were folded into the flagship journal, their staff migrating over. (I was determined to avoid layoffs, even of incompetents and malcontents.) Further cuts to the hog budget were authorized. These changes were radical, but the resulting insurrections were minor, and easily dealt with through violence. Most staffers understood that business as usual was untenable, that I had been hired to insert a dose of youthful vim into a creaking ship, and by God I was going to insert it.

I cannot say that the assumption of dictatorial power did not go to my head. There was something intoxicating about having the ability to authorize a journalist to write a story, to threaten a politician with exposure, or to order a team of company workmen to add/remove an interior wall (whether to enlarge a favored subordinate's office or cramp a disfavored one). And in the eerie pre-Trump pseudo-calm, I already had premonitions that the *Zeitgeist* would be mine to straddle. I felt as Norman Podhoretz did when ascending to the editorship of *Commentary*, as recorded in his legendarily petty memoir *Making It*:

*There was room for a monthly magazine such as the one I envisaged; there was so much nobody else was doing and that needed to be done... A new spirit was brewing in the upper atmosphere; I could feel it at work in myself, and I was sure that it must be at work in those others too, still inchoate and fetal but upsetting settled ideas and feelings and mashing new ones into life. An editor who shared as I did in this spirit and who could imagine what the full range of its lascivious implications might turn out to be would have power to shape and develop and direct it into a sustained and organized impulse to take a fresh look at all the weary ideas and attitudes whose constant reiteration in the *Commentary* of*

the recent past (and practically everywhere else by now) had made it so predictable and listless a magazine.

As it had been for Norman, so it would be for Nathan. The predictable and listless would be swept under history's atrocity-rug.

But the first year was rocky. The content, of course, was superlative. The circulation, however, dragged.

Ah, the content: I was proud of the stories we began to run. They were a fresh blast of wind to the face, a boot to the head. No longer were we printing serialized biographies of admirals or tips for starting foreign wars. Matters military were given the boot. Since Domino I, the magazine's official orientation had been Socialist, but in the triumphant years of Neoliberalism, when the fog of free market dogma had obscured the sight of so many, numerous outfits that were Socialist in name forgot what being a Socialist actually meant. Our masthead may still have contained the phrase "Arise, ye workers from ye slumber," and we still formally endorsed Clause IV, but many on staff saw our Socialism as a quaint aesthetic quirk, a historical curiosity like the Paris Commune *bas-reliefs*.

I was to put an end to all that. We were to take our Socialism seriously or not to take it at all. At the first staff meeting of my tenure, I picked on a helpless junior typesetter and demanded he recite the "Internationale" in the original French. When he stumbled over the line "Soufflons nous-mêmes notre forge," I knew our trouble ran deep. A reeducation program was needed. It was duly introduced.⁵

It is the prerogative of any new Editor to publish a Manifesto and Statement of Purpose in the first edition produced under their command. Readers cannot be trusted to notice the obvious, and

5 I am aware of the somewhat distasteful connotations of this term, and I assure readers that the thing they are thinking of is not the thing I am talking about. *Current Affairs* has always been aligned with the libertarian Socialists, and the magazine's Official Editorial Line is "No reeducation camps, except for lawyers," a policy that has public opinion overwhelmingly in its favor.

the spirit of the “new *Current Affairs*” needed to be expounded upon at length if it was to be understood and appreciated. I remained in my office all night drafting my prospectus, which I still believe captures our *raison d'être* rather accurately. Printed in lieu of cover art on Issue 1 of Volume CXVII, it read, in full:

This magazine promises very little beyond bright colors and classy serifs. But these it promises absolutely. The attempt is to offer something that is both political and readable, a combination never before successfully achieved. The moment things have gone didactic and tedious, please let the Editor know, and we shall cease publication immediately.

You have either paid money for this publication or bamboozled someone who has, creating a reciprocal obligation that is taken very seriously indeed. However, even though this magazine tries to be interesting, it nevertheless has principles. It is, for example, firmly against the hurting of human beings by other human beings. That position evidently makes us “of the Left,” though not of the one that puts people in labor camps and enjoys sing-a-longs.

We are not like the Marxists, with their unicausal explanations and their ominous rhetoric of bloodshed. We are not like the Anarchists, who cannot organize an anarchist bookfair, let alone a revolution. We are not like the Democrats, whose chief political conviction appears to be capitulation at all costs. We are certainly not like the libertarians, who despise every tyrannical act unless it happens to be done by the boss. We believe things ought to strive to make sense, which puts us in a minority among magazines of political commentary and analysis.

Incidentally, we do not care for most of the present-day media, who appear enamored of the trivial and who are

insufficiently committed to the popular well-being. Don't ever let us get like that, whatever you do. Our chief goal is to produce something you will enjoy holding and gazing at, which will make you excited to be alive and which will increase your sense of connectedness to the sufferings and elations of your fellow human creatures. You will know whether it has succeeded by whether, after reading, you are suddenly overcome with the urge to hug strangers, to tell them you love them and invite them to join you in solving the terrible problems our species faces. Ideally, you will never again ignore an injustice, sneer at the unfashionable, participate in a conference call, decline an invitation, file a noise complaint, support a war, belittle a naïf, pick up a copy of The New Yorker, forget an atrocity, write a free verse poem, rationalize an indefensible act, use an imprecise descriptor, or fail to tell the truth. Welcome to the luminous and cheery world of the new Current Affairs!

I believed that the moment this hot new declaration of independence hit the newsstands, circulation would sail upward. I miscalculated. Subscriptions barely rose. Newsstand sales were tepid, if that. We received a few “Your stirring message inspired me with a powerful new sense of hope and confidence” letters, but these were financially worthless. I was lucky that the building’s design meant I never ran into Domino. I felt certain he would have grunted at me.

But emitting windy manifestos was not the only talent I brought to the enterprise. From my years as a writer of leftist children’s literature,⁶ I had numerous contacts among the best young Social-

6 Some of the brightest days of my life, but the slim size of the market kept me in penury. Ultimately, only six titles were printed out of a planned twenty. These were: *The Man Who Accidentally Wore His Cravat To A Gymnasium*; *Don't Let The Pigeon Question The Rules!*; *The Day The Crayons Organized An Autonomous Workers' Collective*; *Libertarian Island*; *The Mayor of New Orleans Gets Her Way*; and *Nathan J. Robinson's California Sojourn*. Sadly, this meant that many

ist artists and intellectuals in the country. I began to “work the networks,” recruiting contributors who I thought could introduce new spunk and pizzazz into our decrepit old rag.

My first hire under my own name was Oren Nimni, a Boston esquire who generally represented the criminal class and was known as “the finest anarchist ever to pass the bar.” Nimni and I had once been adjacent professors of Social Theory at Brandeis University, and in that capacity had co-produced the book *Blueprints For a Sparkling Tomorrow: Thoughts On Reclaiming The American Dream*, a collection of utopian prophecies now sadly out-of-print.⁷ Legal coverage in *Current Affairs* had been almost nonexistent since the O.J. trial, and even back then the editors didn’t know quite how to zero in on the most consequential questions. (Most articles were consumer reviews of different types of gloves and what the fit was like.) I appointed Nimni our Legal Editor, and assigned him a regular column on Horrendous Things Judges Did This Week. A surfeit of material meant the column quickly overflowed its allotted space and had to be changed from weekly to daily.

As Deputy Editor, I appointed Brianna Rennix, a recent Harvard Law graduate who had just completed a short spell in federal prison for conspiring to assassinate an immigration official. (She was railroaded.⁸) I felt her reflexive distaste for Authority would produce a good check to my balance, and she soon proved me right by burning my issue proofs in protest of my editing out the

additional planned classics were never finished or published. Titles the public was deprived of include: *A Child's History of the Common Law*; *Milosz the Mild-Mannered Manatee*; *What Am I? An Ontological Adventure*; *The Boy Who Ruined Everything*; *The Man Who Accidentally Exposed the Bird to Deadly Chemical Fumes* (in-name-only sequel to *Cravat*); *Scary Shapes/Magnificent Monsters* (when read upside down and backwards, the book *Scary Shapes* would become the book *Magnificent Monsters*); *ISIS Goes Hawaiian*; *The Girl Who Thought She Could Be Free*; *Nathan J. Robinson's "Philosophy of War" for Kids*; *Nathan J. Robinson's Wilderness Ramble*, and *Stalin the Bus Driver*.

7 Copies are still furnished to each incoming member of the *Current Affairs* staff, and I informally “quiz” the interns to see whether they have mastered its contents.

8 Not just my opinion, but that of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, which ultimately overturned her conviction. See *U.S. v. Rennix*, 273 F3d 429 (5th Cir. 2022).

swears. Our professional collaboration was to prove tempestuous, and yet it bore fruit. (Often quite literally.)

Our humor department had been visibly sagging and needed a good kick in the scrotum. For that I could think of no better candidate than the crusading feminist humorist Lyta Gold, whose “Men Who Should Be Fired Into The Sun” column had been running for years in the New York *Observer*⁹ and riling up half of Manhattan. Gold was tasked with revamping Amusements & Games, which she did by introducing a note of sadism that had previously never darkened the Family Puzzles pages. (e.g. “Can You Match These Dead Billionaires With The Reason Each Deserved Their Fate?” and “Can You Match These U.S. Presidents To Their Unprosecuted War Crimes?”¹⁰)

From Ireland, we imported the novelist Aisling McCrea, whose autobiography *Oh Christ, I Think I Broke It* had been a bestseller overseas. Vanessa A. Bee, a Franco-Cameroonian financial regulator and memoirist, was brought on to handle Publicity, but soon was found to excel at regular nonfiction—Bee had, over the years, practiced everything from cartography to contemporary dance, and could write quickly and expertly on nearly any matter of public interest. Sparky Abraham, a colleague from my Yale years, had distinguished himself as a consumer finance attorney and become the scourge of American bankers.¹¹ I thought it would therefore be amusing to appoint him Financial Editor, and indeed it was.

9 Collections of these columns were eventually published as *The Sun And The Men Who Should Be Fired Into It* and *400 More Men Who Should Be Fired Into The Sun*. In the early years, Lyta's presence caused a certain amount of grumbling among male readers, some of whom objected to the idea that they should be rounded up, placed on a rocket ship, and fired directly into the sun. Each time one of these sent a Letter To The Editor, I would personally mail them a custom bumper sticker that read “ENJOY YOUR TRIP TO THE SUN” and featured a comic drawing of a young man being incinerated. The letters diminished in volume after I instituted this policy.

10 A collection of Gold's amusements was published as *The Current Affairs Big Book of Amusements* (Current Affairs Press, 2018). Sequels followed, including *The Current Affairs Mammoth Book of Amusements*, *The GIANT Book of Current Affairs Amusements*, *The Practical Book of Current Affairs Amusements*, and *Amuse-Bouche: A Book of Amusements*.

11 It is said that Jamie Dimon, the late Chairman and CEO of JPMorgan Chase, once personally placed a bounty for anyone who would “Bring Me The Head Of Sparky Abraham.” Fortunately, Sparky has an unusually thick neck, and numerous efforts to separate his head from his body proved futile.

A friend suggested I hired “Norm Chomsky” to write for the magazine. I replied that I didn’t think we could get anyone as illustrious as Noam Chomsky at this stage of our magazine’s existence. “Who’s Noam Chomsky?” the friend replied. Norm Chomsky, it turned out, was indeed a person. A seasoned war correspondent with an anti-imperial bent, he became our leading critic of Pentagon machinations and wrote for us until his death in 2025. Norm’s book *Courage Beneath The Hippodrome* still stands as one of the best books on martial arts to be published in my lifetime.¹²

Other luminaries littered our pages. Many of them, such as Luke Savage and Bart Diesel, are still familiar names today. Some writers contributed under pseudonyms. I did not always realize this at first. I was surprised to find that “Tex Wonder” was not, in fact, a writer’s given name, and that the actual “Wonder” lived in Calexico rather than Mexicali. For three issues we published an “Amber Frost,” a name I thought was real until I realized it was intended as a clever euphemism for “yellow snow.”

The pages of *Current Affairs* came alive. Sometimes quite literally—we sent out editions of the magazine that included sealed bags of seeds or live ladybugs. I hired the nation’s best designer of “pop-ups,” Percival Bruce, to make sure every issue gave the reader the experience of turning the page and being smacked in the face by some gigantic castle or dam or crowd scene. I was determined to revive the Golden Age spirit of the American Magazine by adding 3-d glasses, fold-ins, cut-outs, scratch-n-sniffs, rubbing textures, and even 45rpm records made of cardboard that you could pop out and ruin your stylus with. Every page was to contain a surprise, some breathtaking, some grotesque. We would have sticky pages, sandy pages, lickable pages, pages that pranked you,

12 Interestingly, the *actual* Noam Chomsky loved Norm Chomsky’s contributions so much that he said of *Current Affairs* that it was “challenging and thought-provoking, with incisive critique and informative discussion, lucid and provocative, and focused on well-chosen issues of major significance.” Of my own contributions, unfortunately, he was somewhat less effusive.

and pages that fell out in your lap. There was to be absolutely no consistency whatever between editions, a pledge we stuck to and thereby violated.

Our political coverage, though, was our “meat and potatoes.” We were, at our core, serious analysts of the present situation, and the situation was much in need of good analysts.



“ROBINSON,” bellowed the voice of S. Chapin Domino. “GET IN HERE.” My office was many floors away from Domino’s, and 2016 was before email had come to New Orleans. When he wanted to communicate with me, he recorded himself on an audio cassette and sent the cassette through the pneumatic tube mail system. I came to dread the “phwoomp” of an arriving canister, knowing the high probability it would contain a tape of a nonagenarian baby shouting abuse at me.

But this evening was different. It was November 8th, 2016, and Domino was watching the world unravel.

I approached him with my usual diffidence and hesitation. I do not like to be barked at, not even by dogs. But his manner was strangely mellow.

“Robinson, you’re a real fuck-up, you know that.” I saw his point. I had been in office nearly a year and circulation had barely budged. Our finances were in somewhat better shape thanks to my washroom policy overhaul, but I still faced serious questions about the percentage of annual spending being allocated to pop-ups.

“Yes, sir,” I replied. I felt my willingness to concede the obvious showed character.

“Have you seen the news?” he asked. I had not. I had been in my office, making poems publishable by taking out the line breaks and turning them into prose.

"Trump is going to win," he sighed. Domino's politics were somewhat contradictory. He had been raised in the Old Labor tradition and had served in FDR's cabinet.¹³ The Domino family had Freethinker and Unitarian roots, and in the 19th century, Hiram Domino had been a minor figure in the New Orleans abolitionist movement, albeit partly for self-interested reasons. But despite his familial roots, Domino III was a ruthless businessman, and he had taken to the role of cigar-chewing chief executive with gusto, even aplomb. Trump, however, he did not care for. "That man's an ass," he would say, which was true.

The forty television screens in Domino's office were all tuned to CNN. On the electoral map, states were turning red one by one.

"This isn't good," I said.

"Not good for the country. Potentially good for us." He did not say it with relish.

Indeed, five minutes after I arrived, as we stood transfixed, the subscribe-o-meter in the corner began making an "a-ooga" sound. Its needles were flopping all around the dials, and the blaring became louder and louder.

"It's gone mad!" I shouted. "Pull the plug."

"It's not mad," Domino replied, shaking his head. "They're afraid." He gestured toward the window, indicating America.

He was right. The public was scared. And they were turning to *Current Affairs* for solace and counsel.

By the time Trump was called as the victor, circulation had increased by 20,000. By 2am the next morning, it was up by 80.

"Go home," Domino told me, after we had stared continuously at the screens for eight hours. "Tomorrow's going to be one hell of a busy day for you."

His prophecy would not be mistaken.



I arrived at my office at 7am to find that I couldn't open my door. The knob turned, but it was as if there was a giant on the other side pushing it shut. At that point, I did not have an administrative aide, so I was forced to solve all of my own problems. I decided the most sensible thing was to simply cut a hole in the door to see what the problem was. I fetched a bone saw from the works closet and sliced a perfectly circular porthole. As soon as the circle was complete, the wood popped out like a stopper, and a stream of letters and packages came spraying out as if pouring from a fire hose.

Once I had clawed my way out of the pile, I grabbed a letter and opened it.

Dear Current Affairs,

I am sending you this, my last \$60, in the hopes that you will put it to good use. A magazine of quality Socialist commentary is needed now more than ever in the effort to resist Fascism and Despair. I could have spent this money on liqueurs. I am choosing to spend it on you. Please do not let us down.

Vera N.

Brainbridge, ND

I felt the full weight of my responsibility pressing down on me. I knew that no matter what I did, I could not quail. People were counting on *Current Affairs* to see them through. I would have to be sure that we did not let them down.

Shortly after the election, I initiated the practice of writing Editorial Notes in the front of each edition of *Current Affairs*. These allowed me to speak directly to the reader in the magazine's voice,

and provided a sense of stability and reassurance. I answered queries, issued pronouncements, denounced enemies, and marked unusual occurrences and events. I adopted the tone and rhythms of the *Telegraph* and *Times-Picayune* editorials that had been my steady diet as a child growing up in war-torn West Florida. “The function of an editorial,” said C.W. Gaitskell, “is to convince the reader that she will be alright, even if it is manifestly obvious that she will not.” I had carried Gaitskell’s memoir *Nine Lives of a Newspaperman* with me in my satchel at primary school, and by the time of my own editorship I knew how the walk was walked and the talk talked.

Some examples of early *Current Affairs* “front matter” and Editorial Notes:

WHY WE FIRED THE ADVICE COLUMNIST

We know that you look to this publication for wisdom. Family, friends—they may be good for recipes and sporting tips, but they’re hardly going to give you good life advice. For that you need a magazine. Alas, we have failed you. It has come to our attention that our advice columnist has been offering suggestions of dubious efficacy. In response to “Soiled in Sacramento,” the columnist should not have prescribed pointing the smell out to the woman’s employer, and to “Left Behind In Louisville” it was not advisable to propose “taking the matter into your own hands and doing what you think is necessary.” The correspondents in question have informed us that the consequences of following advice printed in this periodical have been unfortunate, and we regret the resulting carnage. We would first politely draw attention to the liability waiver that binds all subscribers and indemnifies Current Affairs for death or disfigurement resulting from use or misuse of this magazine. We would also note that the advice columnist will

no longer be appearing in our pages. Future columnists will be asked to refrain from suggesting that readers “blow it all at the craps table” as well as from countenancing minor arson.

AFTER THE COLLAPSE

It is said that the only things that will outlast the Apocalypse are cockroaches and Current Affairs. And we have no doubt that the saying is true. Proud we are of our indestructibility. But reader, we ask you, what good is it really? What’s the use of being the #1 magazine in town, when every subscriber is a skeleton? The potential for reading groups and discussion circles is limited. We say this to make clear our position on the Apocalypse: We are against it. Some have speculated that because the collapse of civilization would be in this enterprise’s financial interests, we are somehow trying to hasten it, or are surreptitiously encouraging others to do so. This could not be less true or more false. Wishing to see the Economist incinerated does not mean wishing to see the same fate inflicted on the rest of humanity. That would be cruel. Abominable. There is a reason people call us “The Nice Magazine For Nice People,” and it is that we are nice. We promise you it will be ever thus.

MEAN OLD WORLD

It is a matter of common knowledge that the world is full of bastards, and that these bastards have made it their mission to get you down. Nobody knows from whence these bastards sprung, but spring they did, and here we are trapped with them on this desolate orb. As the man sang, it is a mean old world to live in by yourself. You are beset on all sides by treachery and predation. Diseases would like to kill you, aspiring dictators would like to oppress you, and loan com-

panies would like you to pay them. Each day comes bearing its misfortunes: you will burn a piece of toast, someone will make a patronizing remark about your intellect, then you will fall in a sewage puddle. Perhaps a case of mistaken identity will land you in prison, or your hat will blow away and be shredded by a jet engine. One never knows how one's circumstances may have changed by the time one goes to bed. Uncertainty and calamity: these are among the most common and predictable elements of human life. But that, dear reader, is why you subscribe. You cannot be assured of many things, but you can be assured that this is your magazine. You do not know whether it will arrive on time, or whether it will contain an opinion you find horrifying. But you do know that there will always be a Current Affairs, and that Current Affairs will always be with You against the Bastards. We are your lawyer, architect, and confidante. We will sleep beneath your pillow, so that you can roll us up and beat an intruder with us should the necessity arise. We will come on the subway with you, and stick our tongue out at manspreaders. We will join you for a pint at the pub, and you can use us as a coaster or pretend to be reading us to avoid being hassled by nitwits. Take us to church and hide us in an oversized hymnal, so that you can enjoy our sensible topical commentary rather than having to endure the interminable blather of some wearisome vicar. Shove us in the faces of your attackers, wave us around when the police ask you for identification. Use us, abuse us. We are your very own glossy bimonthly Giving Tree, and our pages are yours to befoul.

ON TARDINESS

There are few worse things than being tardy, it is said. Death, perhaps. But even then: to be late for a funeral is considered far more inexcusable than to die in the first place. People do not like the tardy. They are thought to lack gusto. Even the word tardy, derived as it is from the offensive term "retardation," is in its true sense a slur. Punctuality is next to virginity and patriotism in the hierarchy of American virtues. By this standard, then, Current Affairs is an ignoble publication indeed. It has been pointed out to us, by a series of irate subscribers, that what was ostensibly our "May-June" issue was in fact delivered at the tail end of the month of July, which is neither May nor June. At this rate, these subscribers observed, the final issue of the summer would in fact come out in the fall, the fall issues would come out in the winter, 2017 magazines would be released in 2018, and time would cease to have meaning.

We would like, then, to reassure the reader: we believe that time should have meaning. While our official editorial stance continues to be in favor of the abolition of time, we recognize that people have places to be and that they damn well need their magazines when they get there. We fully appreciate the torment and despair that comes with awaiting the latest Current Affairs, and the abject heartache that comes when the magazine fails to arrive within the allocated window of dates. To feel that one's love for Current Affairs is unrequited is a cruel stab in the midriff.

Now, dearest Current Affairs fanatic, we could use this opportunity to make excuses for ourselves. We could remind the reader that this publication is edited and produced in the state of Louisiana, where all affairs, even current ones, proceed at the molasses-pace of the mighty Mississippi. We

could once again cast the blame upon drunken postmen, and at least for the portion of mailings done from our New Orleans headquarters, this would almost certainly contain an element of truth. Or we could remind the reader that the effects of absence and deprivation upon the heart render the final experience of receipt all the more transcendent, with the ecstasy of possessing a Current Affairs only heightened by the length of time spent without it.

But we have never been excuse-makers. We decline to satiate the reader with unconvincing demi-truths. The scaping of goats has always struck us as vulgar. Yes, the fault lies partially with society. Yes, the polybagging contraption at the print shop suffered a catastrophic mechanical failure, necessitating the ordering of an expensive replacement part from an obscure Dutch machine shop and the hand-bagging of every single copy of the last issue. Yes, this was undoubtedly an act of sabotage by The Economist. Yes, there were other, similar attempts to undermine us by that and other periodicals. Yes, the copy-editing budget was mistakenly blown on novelty straws for the break room and potted ferns for the office corridor, a corridor that turned out to be much longer than expected. Yes, time was spent antagonizing John Stoeck of the U.S. News & World Report that should have been spent on page layouts. And yes, a fair-minded observer would inevitably conclude that all of the aforementioned unfortunate mishaps are entirely the result of fate rather than human agency and exonerate us completely for the late appearance of our last issue.

But we shall not waste time in blaming the gods. Delaying Current Affairs is among the least consequential of their many divine blunders, intolerable as it may be. No, instead we shall be humble and magnanimous, as is our wont. We are sorry. We

are sorry our magazine was late. We shall try to make sure it is not late again. We may fail. But know that even when Current Affairs has not showed up at your home, the staff of Current Affairs are still thinking of you day and night. We have not forgotten you. The levels of our tardiness are matched only by the levels of our gratitude to the Current Affairs readership.

Despite maintaining a Department of Corrections consisting of over 60 copyeditors, many mistakes slipped into the magazine during those early days. Occasionally, the corrections box would be the largest feature in the issue, dwarfing the rest of the content. When the corrections box itself began to contain errors, matters truly began to spiral out of control, as each issue was forced to contain both corrections to the previous issue and corrections to the last set of corrections. Eventually it was decided to scrap the whole practice and accept human fallibility as inevitable.

Here are some highlights from the first years of the “Errata” column:

- *“For a publication so costly, Current Affairs contains an extraordinary number of factual and typographical errors. We take the opportunity of this space to grudgingly atone for these. The most recent edition of Current Affairs (\$10.95, £8.50) featured a series of gratuitous insults directed at the late Antonin Scalia. For the sake of balance, we have been asked to note some of the portly justice’s several accomplishments to balance out our discussion of his numerous atrocities. This we will happily do. Justice Scalia was unique. Never before has a judge so resembled a bagpipe, in either physical shape or the noise emitted. He penned his opinions with a devilish verve, never once letting mere scruples stay him from his task of cackling at the disadvantaged. This took*

moxie. Justice Scalia knew that to let 'morality' and 'human decency' interfere with the brutal application of a law's text constituted the basest form of feminine weakness. He had the courage to laugh at the gay and the disabled long after everyone else had succumbed to cowardice. We shall, God willing, never see a jurist of his kind again."

- *"When asked at a party to describe just what Current Affairs is, the magazine's editors replied that it was 'Like a book by Alan Dershowitz, except that we write it ourselves.' For legal reasons, we sincerely apologize for this remark, and retract all but the first three words of it."*

- *"We have been informed that many of our magazine's articles somewhat overuse the word 'ostensibly.' Concerned observers noted that we have a noticeable tendency to deploy phrases like 'ostensibly a serious magazine' and 'ostensibly a Nobel Prizewinning economist.' We thank those who so vigorously pointed this out."*

- *"A quotation mark was left without a mate, causing the entire latter half of the magazine to technically become one long quote. We present the closing mark here, so that this madness may permanently be brought to an end: " "*

- *"The city of New Orleans was referred to, incorrectly, as 'the capital of the United States.' It is, in fact, the capital of nothing."*

- *"An important illustration was misidentified as being of a sloth, when it depicted something else entirely. The corrected sloth illustration appears on page 4."*

- *"The British were cruelly disparaged for their love of Marmite. This was not why they should have been disparaged."*

Readership was taking off during the earliest days of the Trump Administration, and *Current Affairs* felt like it was riding a wave. But if there is one truth known about riding waves, it is that sooner or later you're going to get wet. My own drenching was nigh.

Unless you are a magazine editor yourself, you may not know what it is like to be a magazine editor. I did not fully understand it myself until I had spent some time as a magazine editor. What the public often fails to realize is that an editorship is just as much a Business position as a Creative one. You are not just deciding whether the latest feature on sharks should go before or after the crossword puzzle.¹⁴ You have to do a lot of corralling and administering and general sorting-out. The Humour Department is jockeying for space with the Atrocities Department and you have to figure out whether corpses or jokes will sell more copies.¹⁵ (The obvious compromise is jokes about corpses.) A layout editor has mistreated the lady who brings the tea, and you must decide whether to give the tea lady the layout editor's position and force the layout editor to bring the tea.¹⁶ If there is one thing I am bad at herding, it is cats, and I found myself increasingly unable to cope with the realities of managerial responsibility. I begged Domino to allow me to recruit a Chief Operating Officer who could handle such matters as expenditure tabulation, spreadsheet population, personnel manipulation, disposing of incriminating files, appeasing irate correspondents, et cetera. Through a clever bit of subterfuge, I was ultimately able to secure his assent.

I interviewed fifty candidates, but each proved to be even more of a bungler than I was. I was about to give up and outsource the

14 The example is purely hypothetical. I banned crossword puzzles from our pages shortly after ascending to my position, and I am disgusted by sharks.

15 The answer to this may surprise you, but I am not in a position to give away Industry Secrets.

16 This was indeed the decision I made, though the consequences were somewhat disastrous. Gratuitous references to tea began sneaking into the page layouts, and the former layout editor was a world-historic clumsy pants who had a habit of spilling the entire pot in my lap every time he brought it in.

whole thing to an algorithm when the answer to our necessities walked through my office door. Cate Root had never heard of *Current Affairs* before, and had wandered in after seeing the sign I had posted on the building's front door. ("Help!" it read, along with an arrow pointing inward.) Carrying a polka dotted umbrella and wearing a strawberry jumpsuit, she would not have struck an outsider as the obvious choice for a position in Administrative What-Have-You. Indeed, she was a poet by training, a flaw I forced myself to overlook. But she began whipping the business into shape within seconds of entering the office, asking me why I hadn't touched the stack of unopened envelopes by my desk, a question to which I had no good answer. "Why don't we go through them, then?" she said. And we did. Instantly, she had made the impossible seem possible. Things began to look as if they might hold together after all.

The early days of the Trump White House were rich with grist for a sharp journalistic outlet looking to rejuvenate its reputation. All manner of scandal and error was pouring forth daily, and all we had to do was scoop it up and slather them on the page. We felt like little boys gathering worms after a storm and turning them into chowder. A money tree was ripe for plucking, only in this case the fruit was magazines.



Let me pause for a moment the recounting of meaningful anecdotes from my storied career, and tell you a little bit about the World of Then and how it differed from the World of Now. It has been funny, getting old, and watching those decades recede toward the horizon in the rear-view mirror. Life was so different that it is impossible to believe all of it really happened. I feel almost insane when I try to explain to younger people who Donald Trump was,

and why we elected him president, and how perilous the moment seemed. They cannot really understand that it felt as if we had *no future*, that thanks to climate change and nuclear weapons and the threat of authoritarian governments we could only head toward an apocalyptic outcome. Here, for example, is a passage from one of the era's notable novelists, printed in the *New Yorker*:

[A] top-down intervention needs to happen not only in every country but throughout every country. Making New York City a green utopia will not avail if Texans keep pumping oil and driving pickup trucks...Call me a pessimist or call me a humanist, but I don't see human nature fundamentally changing anytime soon. I can run ten thousand scenarios through my model, and in not one of them do I see the two-degree target being met... [A] false hope of salvation can be actively harmful. If you persist in believing that catastrophe can be averted, you commit yourself to tackling a problem so immense that it needs to be everyone's overriding priority forever.

The novelist concluded that the situation was hopeless, that activists supporting the Green New Deal were delusional, and that it was necessary to accept that nothing could conceivably be done to avert catastrophe.

Today these sound like ravings. How could anybody have thought this way? But the attitude was widely shared. When I was in my early 30s, around 2019, I would speak to teenagers who *could not envisage* human beings lasting another few centuries as a species.

I think one reason this is so difficult for us to comprehend today is that the world-ending catastrophe did not come. It is easy to see how someone during World War One or World War Two could

think the world would end in a nightmarish global orgy of bloodshed. Compared to these cataclysms in which tens of millions died, the teens and twenties of our own century look mild. I know how they appear in textbooks: a Period of Uncertainty, in which the world Lost its Sense of Direction. But the way it looks in retrospect is not the way it actually felt, and not the way it really *was*.

To understand what a Period of Uncertainty really meant, you must understand what both of the forking paths that faced us looked like. We know, and teach about, the events that actually did occur. We cannot see what *could* have occurred. Yet at the time, the other path was terrifyingly real, and it was not empty scaremongering.

All around us, we saw trends that seemed as if they could only end badly. Borders between countries were becoming militarized, geographic boundaries brutally enforced. At that time, there was a staggering amount of heavy weaponry in the United States, and while violent crime had actually declined, the regular occurrence of random mass killings made it impossible to rest easy.

It felt very strongly as if the United States was descending into a kind of collective cruelty, with the spirit of community breaking down and being displaced by a horrible “every person for themselves” attitude. In just one week, I saw the following three news stories: (1) the police in Boston conducted a “sweep” of an area containing many homeless people; some of them were disabled, and officers threw their wheelchairs into a trash compactor. (2) A mentally disabled Iraqi national, who had never actually set foot in Iraq, was deported to Baghdad, where he died on the streets after recording a video pleading for help. (3) Immigration officials raided a factory in Mississippi and rounded up hundreds of unauthorized immigrant workers. When their children arrived home from school, they found their parents missing.

Such barbarity is unthinkable today, when “policing” is no

longer even a verb and restrictions on movement are many years gone. At the time, this sort of thing seemed to be happening daily. There was a kind of cult of brutality, where laws were made harsh for their own sake and empathy was evaporating from social life. Economic life, too, was harsh. Most production was done by corporations, legal entities whose sole mandate was maximization of financial benefit for owners. It is an institutional structure abandoned in the 40s with the passage of the Economic Democracy Amendments (EDA), followed by the United Global Framework On Economic Rights (UGFOER). It is easy to see how this kind of arrangement could produce catastrophic results, but at the time the theory that mutual pursuit of self-interest would produce collectively beneficial outcomes was still widely held. When I lecture at colleges, students seem to find it hard to believe that this ideology could have so saturated the minds of policy-makers, being so self-evidently stupid. I tell them, though, that they would do well to study history. Human beings have long held collective delusions. Both the divine right of kings and the rationality of capitalism once seemed self-evident despite their lack of foundation. Today, both seem ridiculous, and it takes a considerable amount of empathetic imagination to understand what people must have been thinking.

I vividly remember what it was like to wake up every morning in the years from 2016 to about 2024. Within minutes I would become wracked with dread and anxiety, as I gradually remembered the situation and saw the possibilities for changing course diminish. One thing that made this time so downright eerie, however, was the unequal distribution of peril. It was strange to think of the looming presence of nuclear warheads and the slow, steady warming of the earth, because from where I sat on the balconies of the French Quarter, life seemed dreamy and serene. I would sit looking out over the river, eating muffins, and wonder how any-

thing could really be so wrong about a world as lovely as this one.

It was not, however, lovely for everyone. There were 40,000 suicides a year in the United States alone,¹⁷ and nearly everyone had debts hanging over them. To be without your immigration papers in the U.S. was to live a precarious existence, with a constant risk of being seized and removed. Many people were “homeless,” a word that now sounds absurd in age where such a condition has been rendered impossible. I can assure you did not sound absurd then, and people accepted the existence of a homeless population as a fact of life, blaming character flaws and the lack of a work ethic.

But those years were not all bleak, and this is what I mean by forking paths. They were brightened by the presence of a burgeoning Socialist movement. I do not need to recount basic history for you, so I need not talk it too much detail about the facts of Bernie Sanders’ extraordinary presidential runs, but I do think there is a need to emphasize their extraordinariness. In 2015, we simply hadn’t seen anything like it. Socialist had been a dirty word in U.S. politics for many decades, and it was part of the consensus political wisdom that anybody who ran under the banner was absolutely unelectable. (One thing I want to emphasize here is how many things that seem comical now were once taken very seriously.) Bernie ran using the term unapologetically, though he downplayed its utopian and radical redistributionist elements. It is not surprising, in retrospect, that he did well, and the more inexplicable fact is that a program like his hadn’t succeeded earlier. Bernie’s candidacy felt like it was shaking people awake from a slumber, and the failed 2016 run created a formidable political energy that carried

17 At that time, it was common to discuss social problems as specific to one individual country. Subconscious nationalism was pervasive, and manifested itself in all kinds of subtle ways. “Poverty” meant U.S. poverty, not worldwide. Discussions of “health care” and “education” meant that of this country. The costs of wars were measured in U.S. lives, and we discussed pursuing our “national interest” as a legitimate goal rather than a statement of disregard for others. It is strange, in a post-GHS and post-GES landscape, to pick up an old paper and realize just how insular and separate people were. People in the United States were barely conscious of what was going on in Mexico, even if it was only a few feet over the border. It is strange to think that at one time Boston and Los Angeles were part of the same political entity, while Juarez and El Paso were not. The system made no sense and was mostly explained by flags.

through to the successful 2020 one.

It was a time when the unthinkable was becoming thinkable, for good and for ill. The rise of an outright totalitarian state began to seem more plausible, but so did a Socialist presidency. During my university years, political action had felt downright hopeless—the famous Occupy movement staked out ground in public parks and refused to move, because it was unclear what else you were supposed to do. After Sanders’ first run, coming as close as he did to taking the presidential nomination, it seemed as if we had been misled about what Could and Could Not be done. (Trump’s ascension to the presidency also shattered the illusion that political “pundits”—an old term for someone who had ill-informed opinions about politics for a living—were capable of predicting the range of possible futures. *How did anyone ever think otherwise?* you may ask, and the answer would be, once again, that I cannot explain but it just seemed to make sense at the time.)

The Socialist movement got another spurt forward in 2018, when Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez unexpectedly defeated a 20-year incumbent and became the youngest woman ever elected to Congress (a record long since broken, many times over). Today it is common, indeed inevitable, for people to go from ordinary jobs to Congress, but at the time it was astonishing that a 28-year-old bartender with little money could defeat one of the Democratic Party’s insider bigwigs. The election of Ocasio-Cortez showed us that “politically miraculous” victories could be achieved, and caused ordinary people across the country to start thinking about running for office. (There was a distinction then between “ordinary people” and members of the ruling class, though I realize that nowadays the term sounds odd and redundant.)

The Democratic Socialists of America, as they were then called, began to swell around this time. The organization had been small and relatively dormant for many years, with about 6,000 members

nationwide. After the first Bernie run, a flood of new members poured in to DSA. Dozens upon dozens of new chapters sprang up. The organization became ten times larger, and began running members for office and winning races. I attended the historic Atlanta Convention of 2019, and expected to be underwhelmed, despite feeling that it was the only left organization worth joining. (Back then, left groups had a reputation for disorganization and infighting. Some of that persists to this day.) Instead, it was a revelation: the DSA was holding together. Oh, sure, there was some bureaucratic tedium and some abuse of Robert's Rules of Order.¹⁸ But on the whole, it functioned, and that was impressive enough. I reported a first-person account at the time that concluded:

I had put a lot of hope in DSA, and was worried the convention would reveal them to be held together with band-aids and duct tape. Instead, it felt like a movement in the ascendant. There were about five MAGA hat-wearing protesters outside, with signs that said "Socialism Sucks" and "Socialism is Poverty and Death," but they seemed only half-committed... Inside, people were getting organized. They were making plans, and there was evidence those plans might succeed. There were factions, yes, but they were soft factions, not giant looming schisms.

I do not present this to show you how right I was, but to give a snapshot of what it was like to see a room full of Democratic Socialists getting their act together. Sara Nelson, at a time when her presidency was virtually inconceivable, wore a dress patterned in red roses, and invoked the labor leaders of centuries past to encourage

18 An antiquated system for running meetings, supposedly designed for its effectiveness. Do not ask me to explain it. Now thankfully consigned to the dustbin thanks to innovations in Process Theory. It is one of the less appreciated successes of the growth in Practical Research funding. In 2019, if you had said you wanted to get a PhD in "how to run a meeting," you would have been looked at askance.

the group to organize and fight. She ended her speech with that now-famous slogan “I’ve Got Your Back,” and the audience was surprised when she encouraged us to turn to one another and say it. At the end of the convention, 1000 people burst into “Solidarity Forever.” You hear that fucking song so often now that it is very difficult to have your heart filled by it.¹⁹ But back then, nothing felt better than to stand with a room full of comrades belting it out.

I do not mean to spend too much time recounting schoolbook history. But I want you to imagine how it felt to see all of this unfold in real time, to watch as unprecedented things started to happen one after the other. We were taught that history had ended, but it turned out that it was very much still going and we ourselves were part of it, with the power to affect where it went. It was a feeling of extraordinary liberation and terrifying responsibility.



Political reality was changing every day. But in the *Current Affairs* building, our attention was often on matters far more mundane. Matters like postage rates and cat calendars.

Given my later role in the reorganization of public services, I hesitate to speak critically of the United States Postal Service. Postal workers proved to be among the most stalwart allies of the Socialist cause, and since Milton Friedman²⁰ had opposed the existence of the service, I have always felt instinctively warm toward it. But there is a reason we eventually had to so drastically overhaul the state sector, and the USPS in those days was creaky

19 Until about the 60s, it was only used for special occasions. Then people wanted to use it to make ordinary occasions seem like special ones, and then things got out of hand. I love the song but wish we could have a serious discussion about restraining its usage to retain its meaning.

20 Dead economist

and inefficient. GPPS users take intercontinental delivery service for granted, but mailing across borders then required forms and stamps and all kinds of hassle. Our magazines frequently failed to make it to their destination, and the stamps were always falling off. (This was before wonderpaste.)

I don't know if you yourself ever held a periodicals mailing permit, but they were dashed tricky things. To get one,²¹ you had to follow the text of USPS Handbook DM-204 to the letter. It was 56 pages long, and to be eligible for Special Magazine Rates you had to work your way through a series of elaborate eligibility requirements. Here is a representative paragraph from Handbook DM-204:

Requester publications are publications with at least 50 percent of the total distribution going to individuals who have made a request to receive copies of the publication. Paid subscriptions may also be included as part of the qualification for the minimum 50 percent. They may contain more than 75 percent advertising in no more than 25 percent of the issues published during any 12-month period. Requester publications are not entitled to InCounty prices or special prices (on PS Form 3500 you cannot check the box for special prices or complete Part F), and each issue must contain at least 24 pages.

Needless to say, I spent the bulk of my time at work trying to figure out the handbook, which left precious little for actually creating magazines. To the extent that quality suffered as a result, I can only blame the postal bureaucracy.

Of course, disputes among the staff also hampered productivity

21 Ours had been revoked shortly before my arrival on staff, and one of my first tasks was to figure out how to get it back.

and resulted the printing of abominations. In one issue, we printed an entire page full of nothing but question marks and pictures of shrimp, because a Contributing Editor had threatened to resign if we didn't. (In fact, the single page was a compromise. The Editor had originally demanded *six* pages of shrimp and question marks, and had assented to cutting it down only after days of protracted negotiation.²²)

Then there was the fracas about our "Cats of the French Quarter" spinoff calendar. This was my idea, and I still insist it was a good one, but it tore the staff apart and nearly resulted in my ouster. An Editorial Note at the beginning of the January/February 2018 issue recounts the story in detail:

It is the position of some individuals that the Editor of Current Affairs is fallible in his judgments. While the broader doctrine of "Current Affairs Infallibility" is still universally acknowledged ("All statements printed in this magazine are true by virtue of their having been printed in this magazine"), doubt has arisen among members of the editorial staff as to whether this applies to the Editor himself. An increasingly vocal faction of the board believes that it does not.

A recent conflict in the editorial room must be disclosed to our readership: earlier this month, the Editor came into the weekly Ideas Brunch feeling "inspired." He had, he said, a concept that would "take this enterprise to the next level." Instead of merely producing a bimonthly periodical and affordable spin-of books, Current Affairs L.L.C. would branch out into the thriving Cat Calendar market with a special "Cats Of The French Quarter 2018" wall calendar.

22 We were forced to give the Contributing Editor a company pony in exchange for her dropping the most unreasonable of her demands.

"It can't go wrong," the Editor declared. "Cat calendars are as close to a sure thing as there is in this business." It was at this point that relations among the staff began to deteriorate. A Senior Editor piped up:

"Why on earth would we sell a cat calendar? Aren't there like a million cat calendars already?"

"Ah yes," replied the Editor. But these cats are in the French Quarter. It combines the adorable and the picturesque." The Senior Editor remained dubious.

"But are they, like, doing anything interesting? Is it supposed to be funny? Also, please tell me this isn't something that came to you in a dream."

"It is of no matter whether this concept did or did not come to me in a dream," the Editor snapped.

"Okay, but if we're going to spend a lot of time and effort on something like this, which is totally unrelated to our other work, maybe the Cats Of The French Quarter calendar should have something more interesting than just... being a bunch of cats on balconies."

"You mean like a plot?" the Editor asked.

"Uh, sure?" The Senior Editor privately wondered what a calendar with a plot would even look like.

The Editor left the meeting and brooded at his desk. He resented his fellow staff for failing to appreciate the vision behind the Cats of the French Quarter calendar. Nevertheless, he took seriously the Senior Editor's suggestion that Current Affairs should only sell calendars with plots. And so he got to drafting...

Soon, a new concept had been developed. The calendar would still feature cats, and they would still be in the French Quarter. But one of the cats would be a magazine editor. The calendar would be about the cat's attempts to convince the

other editors of Kitten Affairs to allow the company to pivot to calendars. As viewers tore off months, they would see the progressive struggles of the misunderstood genius editor (named Cat Dastardly) as he dealt with the stupidity and cowardice of his lessers. There would also be a subplot about time travel.

Eventually, in December, Cat Dastardly would finally succeed in persuading his deputy, Whiskers Killjoy, to allow the production of a metafictional calendar about a time-traveling magazine editor who is also a kitten. It would be called “Cat Dastardly and the Sands of Time.”

The above is presented as an explanation for why our promised “Cats of the French Quarter” calendar will not be appearing as scheduled.

It is not the purpose of this book to name names and exact petty vengeance, but for the sake of the record I should note that the Senior Editor in question was Brianna Rennix, a person whose loyalty I never doubted but whose judgment on matters pertaining to calendars proved faulty in the utmost.



I had a rival in the industry, though our “clash” was never quite what the media accounts hyped it up to be. Bhaskar Sunkara, the editor and publisher of *Jacobin*, was a man totally different to myself in character, though we shared firm Democratic Socialist politics. He was businesslike, studious, quiet, Marx-inspired, very New York. I was flailingy inept, noisy, Bakunin-inspired, and distinctly New Orleansian. *Jacobin* was, of course, far younger than *Current Affairs*, having been founded when Sunkara was still an undergraduate in 2010. But their circulation quickly outstripped ours, and by 2016 they were ten times larger and (in my opinion) ten times more full of themselves.

There were many on the magazine's staff whom I liked, and could even stand in a room with, but Sunkara was another matter.

Oh, he was civil with me always. We never had a shouting much, or went at each other with razors. He always smiled when he saw me. But it was a malicious smile, a self-satisfied smile. A smile that said "*Jacobin* is great and *Current Affairs* sucks eggs." I resented the smile's implication that our magazine sucked eggs. It did not.

Sunkara was, of course, profiled in all the major outlets as a prodigy giving life to Socialist Media. I cannot say this did not rankle. Mightily it rankled indeed. In the gossip magazines, one would see photos of Sunkara fraternizing with celebrities like Dick Cavett and Dolly Parton. Sometimes he would be smiling at the camera, and I knew the smile was secretly for me.

We were determined not to be the Salieri to his Mozart, the Garfunkel to his Simon.²³ But it was rough going: *Jacobin* routed us at every turn, snatching away our hard-won subscribers with Holiday Offers and Super Bargains. They undercut our prices, poached our writers, stole our wives. Not that I am bitter. On the contrary, I could not care less. I am merely laying out the facts.

From time to time, I would receive phone calls from Bhaskar. There was always some pretext, an invitation to a gala he knew I couldn't afford to attend, or a suggestion that we partner in putting on a left country music festival. All he really wanted was for me to know that, if it wanted to, *Jacobin* could put on a left country music festival with a snap of its fingers. I knew that, but he delighted in reminding me. A typical conversation with Bhaskar would go as follows:

"I hear circulation is up." He knew it wasn't.

"It is." I was wary, sensing an impending taunt.

"It must be at least 3,000 now."

"It's at 10."

"Congratulations. That's very impressive for a magazine like yours."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Did I tell you we're launching a satellite?"

"No."

"It's going into orbit next month. It's named after Bukharin." Now it was my turn to be a little cutting.

"Of course it is."

"You can come to the launch if you like. We appreciate coverage from *any* outlet."

"If you will excuse me, Bhaskar, I have a meeting to attend." I was lying. There was no meeting at all.

"Oh of course. I am sure you are quite busy. Not easy keeping a mag like that afloat."

You can see how unendurably annoying this was. Nevertheless, I felt impelled to continue answering his phone calls. I felt the relationship might come in handy someday—as indeed it did.

Jacobin did not actually present a threat to the magazine, though. I was Wonka and he was Slugworth, but ultimately we both wanted to make chocolate (or in our case, the class struggle). Our common enemies were those who threatened to stop the march of Socialism. On the crucial questions, our periodicals were united.



If you do not know how a magazine is made, perhaps I should tell you a little bit about the process.²⁴ It might prove to be quite different than what you expected!

Every magazine begins with a single piece of paper. This is called the *fold* or the *dip sheet*. The Editor brings the fold to the Pre-Content Meeting, which is attended by representatives from each Department. The meeting is an opportunity to “spitball.” The fold is divided into equal portions, which are rolled, moistened, and spat.

Once spitballing ceases, work can begin. The Departments each present their intended Contents for the issue, and the editor will either nod or make a noise of disapproval. A nod means the content is marked down on what remains of the dip sheet. A disapproval noise means the suggestion is Tabled, and will require further elaboration down the line.

Once the Editor becomes bored, the meeting concludes. Everyone is asked to fill out a survey. Weather permitting, a dance is performed. Once the editors return to their Departments, they fill out the Commission Sheet. A typical commission sheet might run as follows (this is taken from a recent edition’s Features Department sheet):

COMM’S

A- Beekeeping (new methods) - Awerer

B- Love: what good for? – unknown

C- Something physics something (science underutilized?) – texas writer

Int.: fash, wer, jam, tew, lycée, art

PHOTO: Dewson, po.

O.: giant bird

Now, as you are not a magazine editor, and I am, you probably do not understand much of this, while I do. Allow me to translate the industry lingo. Comm’s means commissions. The features section has an A piece, a B piece, and a C piece. The Features Editor

plans to do the A piece on new methods of beekeeping, and is considering assigning a writer named Awerer to the project. The B piece will be on the origin and purpose of love, but the Features Editor hasn't found a writer for it yet. The C piece is going to be something about physics, but the Features Editor isn't sure what. They think science has been underutilized in the magazine, though. (They are wrong about this, but that is irrelevant.) They know they need a writer from Texas, because of the quota. Next comes the "intermezzo," which means the small mini-features that will be littered on the spreads among the main pieces. One will be about fashion, one will be about someone named Werner, one will be about jams and preserves, one will about the lycée system, and one will either be about art or someone named Art. I am not sure what "tew" is. I forgot to ask, and the particular Features Editor has since died.

Next, the Features Editor has noted that original photos will need to be taken by Dewson, who is one of our staff photographers. (Not a very good one, I'm afraid. This decision is inexplicable.) "Po." just refers to the fact that Dewson was once a police officer, and is therefore suspect. "O" means "Other," and usually means that either an illustration or a collage will need to be created. In this case, it will be of a giant bird.

There are more editorial meetings, at which the contents of these sheets are sifted, argued over, and finally agreed upon. Then the writers, artists, photographers, collagists, and pre-editors are assigned to their respective pieces. There is some grumbling here, because usually nobody has gotten their first choice, but once the assignments have been written on a giant Task Board, there is no going back. (Exceptions are made in family emergencies and for miscellaneous personal misfortunes.) A calendar is made, with deadlines imposed. Usually these are ignored in practice, but everyone has to pretend they believe in them, else the process

would break down hopelessly. (In the early years of my tenure this is precisely what happened and our May/June issue would frequently be released in Sept./Oct. Eventually we just resolved this by skipping editions here and there and telling people they must have been lost in the post.)

Once first drafts come in, they are subjected to a “markup,” in which multiple editors pass the draft around making vicious comments in various colorful inks. The markup goes back to the writer, who will likely cry. Once they get over it, they will perform the requested edits and submit a Secondary Draft, which will also be mocked and returned. A Penultimate Draft will then be produced, which will be taken much more seriously. Editors will trim the Penultimate Draft for space and remove any words they find aesthetically repulsive. The result will be the Final Draft.

Meanwhile, over in the Art Department, all hell has broken loose. The illustrator has submitted sketches, and the Art Director has agreed to them, but the illustrator’s Finals look nothing like the sketches, and the Art Director is having an absolute “shit fit.” Often over the years I have walked past the entrance to the Art Department (it is in a greenhouse) and heard the Director bellowing something like:

“It wasn’t supposed to have a tail! Where are the treads? This is not even at sundown!”

At this point, it is my job to step inside the Department and politely remind the Art Director that here at *Current Affairs* we have a policy of being nice to one another, and we do not end our sentences with exclamation points. The Art Director will usually quiet down and become very ashamed, then give the illustrator a wholly unnecessary hug. I have been trying to improve this part of the process for years but have thus far been unsuccessful.

Once the art is fixed and the final drafts are in, we begin the process of Layout. This is a delicate and finicky business, because

we have a great amount of stuff to cram into precious few pages. In addition to the body text, heads, and decks, we must add call-outs, pull quotes, and sidebars. Headers and footers. Plus cutlines, bleeds, dropcaps, eyebrows. Usually we end up having to put a few articles in 4-point font in order to make them fit, but this compromises legibility (and brings grumpy letters from older readers). The key to a good visual layout, of course, is that each page must “speak to” every other, and each element on the individual pages must “speak to” each other individual element. A splash of color solves most problems.

The layout is tweaked until it sings. A moment usually occurs of the “you know it when you see it” kind, when I (the editor) can look at a page and feel to my heart’s core that everything is in its proper place and all is right with the world. This moment is often very sensual, and I tend to light candles. You—unless you are a magazine editor—cannot know what it is like to look at a freshly laid-out page and know that it just *works*.

Ah, now the boring technical stuff happens. Typesetters start crawling all over the place, kerning the ligatures and trimming the serifs. Each separate character must have its apertures stressed, its instrokes and overhangs cued and turned. Terminals are added to the stems, apexes are bent, spurs appended, loops linked, eyes opened, ascenders lengthened, glyphs widened (or narrowed), legs curved, and tails upturned.²⁵ If you have never tried to carve your own alphabet in a piece of wood, you may not understand what a tedious process this can be. Typesetters are fussy people, and refuse to be hurried. This is the source of much consternation.²⁶

Many other tasks must be performed at this stage: color correc-

25 Type is measured in ciceros. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cicero_\(typography\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cicero_(typography))

26 At this point, the proofreaders come in, but I do not need to tell you what they do. We have all been proofreaders at one time or another.

tion, justification, calibration, margin shortening.²⁷ Hyphens are hardened. Slugs are removed (and occasionally recycled²⁸). Pages must be checked for greeking, halation, and jaggging. Dingbats are added. We must alter and re-alter the output specifications. If the staff are feeling unsure of themselves, our in-house philosopher will be called on to discuss the question “What is a magazine?” This will delay matters further.

Ah, now for printing. First a prepress, then a press. This will involve rollers, inkers, driers, finishers. A dummy is produced, and then destroyed. A soft proof is made, and then another. All stock is checked for stiffness, the color trapped and transposed. The substrate is tested for toothiness, and the touchplate is finally removed. Perforation is done (carefully). The caliper is measured and adjusted. Then it’s coating, lacquering, application of spot varnish, and the removal of trim and crop marks. We use hexachrome for the embossing, but this is done *last*. (This differs among magazines, I am not sure how exceptional we are here.) If there is sinkage, duochrome may be substituted if necessary.

Finally, the magazine goes to the lawyers, who will check the text for seditious malice and make sure all copyrights are properly infringed. If the lawyers detect even a small error, the entire process must be done all over again.²⁹

After all this, the printed copies are collated, sealed, bundled, and loaded onto the customized fleet of *Current Affairs* trucks. Soon, they will hit a newsstand near you!



27 Many people think collation comes at this stage. I am not sure why they think that.

28 or eaten

29 This happens more frequently than I would wish. It has been suggested several times that we revise the procedure so that the Legal Department performs its analysis prior to the print run rather than afterward, but *Current Affairs* has always followed the existing sequence and I hesitate to tamper with tried-and-tested methods.

I hope this little digression has given you a somewhat better understanding of what it is I do and why it is I do it. But now I must discuss war.³⁰

It was not all laughs and japes at the *Current Affairs* offices. The world was in crisis. There were rumblings of war with Iran. There was talk of militarizing space. The Pentagon was even developing swarms of flying death robots that could autonomously decide whom to kill.³¹ At that time, the world's superpower countries still possessed thousands of nuclear warheads, and the threat of civilizational destruction was always in the background. It was a peculiar feeling, however, thanks to the contrast between the gravity of the geopolitical threats and the peaceful day-to-day life of the cafes and restaurants, where politics went unmentioned and the overheard conversation would be on kitchen remodeling, sporting scores, and things recently eaten.

We were fortunate that humanity had survived a number of decades without another conflict on the scale of World War II. But it was also impossible to call what we were living through "peace."³² We had just been lucky that no country had been taken over by an absolutist ruler of Hitlerian disposition. It was obvious, though, that this fragile "peace" could not last indefinitely. As Albert Einstein had noted, so long as the world was organized as a system of rival nation-states, and so long as those nation states

30 I realize this memoir contains what critics will inevitably call "abrupt and jarring shifts in tone," lurching from whimsical descriptions of the Life Periodical to somber recounting of strife and trouble. Would that I could cram the memoir with nothing but whimsy, dear reader! My life, however, has lurched in just this fashion. Sometimes there have been Mardi Gras(s), and sometimes there have been mass murders. Today, when life is almost all Mardi Gras, the result is upsetting and discordant. I would agree that aesthetically, it is indefensible. Yet if I am to achieve the quality of "verisimilitude" I must veer wildly between emotional registers, as indeed I did over these years.

31 It should tell you something about our times that not only was this not seen as sheer madness, but it was not even treated as noteworthy. A group called the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots had to be formed, and their name was considered so silly that their cause was dismissed, even though there *were* killer robots that *did* need to be stopped. It is only because I have lived through events like this that I have never been surprised by or dubious about reports of collective madness like "dancing plagues" from previous centuries.

32 Well, not strictly impossible. One Professor Pinker wrote a ludicrous bestselling book arguing that violence had "declined," even as the major countries of the world had nukes pointed at each other's heads. This was like saying that an armed robbery isn't violent if the gun doesn't go off.

were amassing the means of destroying one another, it was almost inevitable that conflict would sooner or later break out, and that when it did, there would be death and suffering on an unimaginable scale, worse even than the world-wide bloodbaths of the 20th century.

Even the most relaxed moments, then, felt pregnant with a certain threat. I would loaf about the cafés of the French Quarter, nibbling pastries and sipping macchiatos, but could never feel quite at ease. I knew all of it could disappear in a blink. Everything I loved, everything humans had built, it looked so permanent, but this was an illusion. I thought often about the people of 1920s Berlin, how vibrant and gay life must have seemed at times, and how little some must have sensed the looming threat around them. I knew how dangerous complacency could be, and tried to be constantly on guard against lapsing into optimism, even on the most beautiful days.

In 2018, Hawaii had had a false alarm that had shown just how unprepared we were for a sudden reversal of fortune. Residents received a text message informing them that a missile was inbound and they should take cover. People panicked, thinking they might have only a few minutes to live. Nobody knew what to do. There was nothing *to* do: once the bombs start going off, it's too late. It was a chilling window into how suddenly everything could vanish, and it stayed with me for years. I knew that one day you could be walking down the beaches of Oahu, breathing sea air, kicking over sandcastles, and prodding dead jellyfish with a stick, and the next moment you and your entire family could be vaporized.

In fact, one of the aspects of our era that made it so psychologically jarring and confusing was the scale of the contrasts between its high points and its low points. In 2019, the entire town of Paradise, California, had been incinerated. People were burned alive in their cars. In Detroit, a once-great city looked, in certain places, as

if it had been ransacked and destroyed, its residents struggling to survive amid the ruins. And yet because of the extremely narrow concentration of wealth, you could purchase a \$3 million car, the Bugatti Chiron, that could go 304 miles an hour.³³ In Florida, a real estate developer was building a 90,000 square foot mega-mansion called “Versailles.” In the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*’s real estate section, every week one saw new extravagant luxuries, homes with basketball courts and five kitchens and 40-car garages. The size of the gap was sickening, but it also had the strange effect of producing multiple different worlds overlapping within the same geographic territory. To some, life could look better than it had ever been, while for others (such as unauthorized immigrants in the United States) it had reached new levels of insecurity. The life expectancies of the rich were increasing, while the life expectancies of the poor were decreasing, meaning that things were simultaneously getting better and worse, depending on who you were.

I found myself frequently disturbed by the way that such divergent human experiences could coexist on one planet. How could the same species produce both war and Mardi Gras? How could the candy taste so good, while the jobs were so unpleasant? How could a people capable of unbelievable acts of generosity and self-sacrifice also be inhumanly indifferent to the fate of others? At one point I was invited to give a talk at Philips Andover Academy, the wealthiest private school in the country. The dining hall was like a cathedral, the campus as lush and tranquil as an Ivy League³⁴ college. At the time, a friend of mine was a schoolteacher

33 The metric system was not implemented until 2040.

34 The “Ivy League” was the name for a particularly prestigious set of U.S. universities. It included what is today the University of Massachusetts—Cambridge and the University of Connecticut—New Haven. There used to be a quite comical publication called the *U.S. News & World Report* that “ranked” all of the colleges in the country according to a pseudo-scientific formula of their own concoction. The “Ivy League” schools always ranked near the top, though the quality of education you received at them was somewhat below what you’d get today at an average city college. Mostly they were places for the children of the wealthy to “network,” i.e. conspire.

in a Midwestern city, and I could not help but feel nauseous at the contrast between Andover and the school she taught in. Half of her school building was condemned and uninhabitable and her first-grade classroom had 33 students in it, many of whom had not even been taught the alphabet. There was no playground, just a patch of dirt, no computers, and no decorations on the wall. It is a cliché to talk of schools that were “like prisons,” but there was no other appropriate comparison. Her children, all Black, had been dumped into this run-down building as if they were inconvenient refuse. I thought of this as I sat under the stately oaks of Andover, where future American presidents had learned. I could not believe what a lie the country’s promise of “equal opportunity” was, and I was unsettled by the way undisturbed peace and prosperity could exist in such proximity to violence and deprivation. What had we done? How could we justify it?

The answer, of course, was that we did *not* justify it. Those who did not see it never even thought about it.



Our magazine’s accurate prophecy that Donald Trump would be president gave us some credibility during the first years of his presidency. Magazines like *Fortune* and *Pennywise* gave us “seals of approval” that made tastemakers stand up and take note. The whisper went round the publishing houses: “*Current Affairs* is onto something.”

Indeed, something was precisely what we were onto.

There were, around this time, a number of far right flim-flam artists and grifters touring the country selling crypto-fascist political solutions to complicated social problems.. Like the old time sellers of patent medicines and serpent tonics, they would hold theatrical, carefully-scripted public events where they would show

off their talent for Intellectual Combat. Benjamin Shapiro, an elfin man with a piercing voice, used to encourage left-wing teenagers to heckle him, so that he could Destroy them with a cutting retort. (The retorts were usually revealed to be nonsense upon basic scrutiny, but the events were kept fast-paced so that such scrutiny would not be conducted.) It was all show business, of course. I almost admired these profiteers for their chutzpah in announcing obvious baloney as incontrovertible fact. Unfortunately, their lively presentations could be effective, and these characters began to do significant damage to the intellectual vigor of the nation. *Current Affairs* therefore began to specialize in thorough debunkings, which we distributed as cheap pamphlets at the authors' events. We flayed these sophists mercilessly in print, and exposed their "ideas" as cheap chicanery. The campaign was effective. Sales of Dr. Jordan B. Peterson's *Twelve Rules for Life*³⁵ and *Chaos & The Female Mind* dropped precipitously after *Current Affairs*' intervention. David Rubin's *Are You Triggered Yet? How About Now?* disappeared from the bestseller list and Joseph Rogan's *Some Bullshit I Heard About Aliens (And Other Musings On Life & Politics)* is now completely forgotten. I do not mean to sound like a "kids today" type old man, but kids today do not appreciate what it means to some of us that these men have disappeared. It may seem a very low bar, but it represents substantial intellectual progress that such figures would today simply be risible.

In the early days of 2020, the need for our magazine to effectively promote the Socialist cause became acute. The Climate Crisis was making plain that the options before us were Socialism or Barbarism, and we stood firmly opposed to Barbarism. For much of my life up until that point, leftism had seemed disorganized and uncertain, lacking a clear set of plans. But in '19-'20, a rough

agenda developed, a clear sense of What Needed To Be Done. There would need to be some kind of giant Green New Deal to deal with the climate emergency, one that would set ambitious emission targets and then use the mighty power of the state to meet them. And there would need to be a set of social policies that dealt with the country's horrendous inequality—a full national health insurance scheme, a set of family benefits, a job guarantee or basic income, worker participation in corporate governance, the forgiveness of many outstanding debts, and the large-scale construction of new social housing. There were disagreements about the specifics of each, but there did exist something of a consensus about the basic contours of what ought to be done.

It was obvious to all of us that the first stage was the election of a Socialist government, and among the staff it was felt that we ought to do what we could to help bring such a government to power. With Sanders running, the presidential ticket was taken care of, but we also needed a crop of dynamic, effective Socialist candidates at every level, from United States Senator to school board member and municipal dog catcher.³⁶ Fortunately, the Democratic Socialists had brought together an extraordinary collection of young radicals, who got themselves on the ballot and made sure the voting public would have a Socialist option in many districts in 2020.

I did my best to propagandize for the cause in 2020. I published a short book called *Why You Should Be A Socialist*, explaining to people why they should be Socialists.³⁷ We put out a self-help guide called *Lonely No More!* and an updated edition of *The Cur-*

36 At the time, Duxbury, VT, was the only town which still had an elected dog catcher. It would be many years before animal interaction officials became a prestigious part of city government.

37 The book was weak on theory and had several glaring inconsistencies, but made a persuasive case for joining the left, and the reactions I got from university students suggested it had spurred many of them to political action. It was also useful as a conversion tool, and I am told that in December of 2019 it was a popular gag gift for reactionary parents at Christmastime.

rent Affairs Rules For Life. When I first took over as editor, our book publishing arm was dormant and decrepit, issuing little more than technical manuals and translations of 1980s Balkan poetry.³⁸ The paper on which books were printed was tissue-thin and the ink was so diluted that licking a page would remove the words (and get them caught on your tongue). As copies of our political tracts began to sell, I attempted to improve the overall quality of the product, adding pleather binding and gilt spine lettering, plus scented pages, sewn-in bookmarks, and illustrated endpapers. We hired an acoustics engineer who made sure that if you rubbed the books they made a noise, and that the noise was musical. Some of my critics at the time said this was unnecessary, even wasteful, but I think anyone reading this now would have to admit it was rather prescient.

It makes me uncomfortable to sound like a profiteer, but 2020 was something of a bonanza for *Current Affairs*. Listenership of the *Current Affairs News & Radio Hour* was up a thousandfold. Subscriptions still weren't on the level of *Highlights* or the *New Republic*, but we were beating top children's magazines like *Nickelodeon* and *Newsweek*.³⁹ In short books like *The Case for Abolishing Borders*, *A Political Agenda for Animals*, *Hooray For Tax Reform*, *Gender: Who Needs It?*, *How To Fire Your Boss*, *Reparations: How Much And Who To Give Them To*, *Are Police Necessary?*, and *Let's Fix This Whole Climate Mess Once And For All*, we offered pithy and accessible introductions to pressing issues and the left's proposed solutions to them. In early 2021 our giant thousand-page treatise *The Encyclopedia of How To Do Socialism* was released and would prove heavily influential among the new generation of lawmakers.⁴⁰

38 Almost exclusively about tractors.

39 One of my first decisions as Boss had been to reinstate the Children's Department, which had been terminated under G.D. Forrest. *Current Affairs* thereafter became half serious news analysis and half instructions on how to make things with popsicle sticks, multiplying our potential audience considerably.

40 It is said of the Velvet Underground that only 200 people bought their first album, but everyone who did started a band.

It was a tremendous relief when Bernie Sanders won the 2020 primary. Much as I respected Elizabeth Warren for her part in creating the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau,⁴¹ she had made it clear that she opposed Socialism, and she misdiagnosed the source of our social ills as Corruption rather than Capitalism. She was certainly the second-best among the available alternatives, and I had much praise for some of her proposals, but she did not have the kind of transformational radicalism that the moment demanded. The entire political system needed to be upended, and it was quite clear that only one candidate was fit for the job.

The early days of the general election season were troubling in the utmost. Few people remember today that at first, Sanders lagged significantly behind Trump in the polls. For those of us who had spent the past four years arguing for Sanders' superior "electability" (how strange that word sounds today), the numbers were deeply concerning, and Liberals began the gloating process in earnest. It was said that because the stock market was high and unemployment was low, Socialists were pitching a message that made little sense. Of course, we knew that was false. But the President had his own television network and was a formidable messenger. Even when the race became Sanders versus Trump, the major news outlets reported Sanders' speeches only half-heartedly, and it became clear that the network heads would prefer four more years of Trump (with the handsome profits that entailed) to a Democratic Socialist administration.

August of 2020 was therefore one of the bleakest moments in the history of the left. We thought we might lose, the consequences being disastrous. Not only would another four years of

Likewise it could be said of *The Encyclopedia of How To Do Socialism* that while only a few people bought it, everyone who did started an insurrection or became a distinguished legislator.

41 To be as petty as humanly possible, the Trump administration had briefly renamed this agency the Bureau of Consumer Financial Protection, since it added a slight emphasis to the bureaucracy rather than the consumer. It is a good measure of how asinine everything had become.

the Trump Presidency wreck the earth and consolidate neo-feudal rule, but we would be relentlessly “McGoverned” by the Liberals, who would insist that the loss was the inevitable result of having Run Too Far To The Left. The worst part was that it would have been difficult to prove them wrong.

Thank God, then, for those incredible debates, now as legendary as the Kennedy-Nixon brawl. Sanders gave Trump hell. It was satisfying to watch an ambassador from the People flay a billionaire pseudo-populist over everything from climate change to tax cuts. Trump made some feeble cracks about “Mr. Three-Houses the Millionaire” but it didn’t do any good. Sanders remained focused on what mattered: the cost of healthcare and college, the brutal mistreatment of immigrants by the Trump administration, the president’s tax cuts for the wealthy. Every blow landed. Trump had nothing. After each debate, the president’s poll numbers dipped a little further. By late October, it was close to 60-40 nationwide, with Bernie well ahead in all of the Midwestern states, and even edging Trump out slightly in Florida. We did not worry too much on Election Night. The election was called early, and I got to bed by 10.



I cannot hope to describe what it felt like to wake up on the morning of November 4th, and realize that we had gone from living in Donald Trump’s America to Bernie Sanders’ America overnight. Sure, the inauguration wouldn’t be for a few months. But that morning, it felt like the transformation had already happened. The American people had firmly rejected Trumpism. They had opted for solidarity and Democratic Socialism. What was politically unthinkable five years ago was now reality. I could not stop smiling. I wanted to hug everybody I saw. It seems silly, I know, but you can’t know what

it meant to us back then. All my life up until that point, being on the left meant feeling hopeless and marginal. We were losers, always on the fringes. Sanders had spent the first part of his career getting 3% of the vote in elections as a perennial candidate. In Congress, he had often been the only voice in dissent. Now, he was the President of the United States. My 17-year-old self, even my 25-year-old self, would not have believed it. (My 28-year-old self, however, would have believed anything. After the election of Donald Trump, many things that once seemed impossible had become far more plausible.)

Unfortunately, there were still the judicial and legislative branches to contend with. But there was some good news in Congress: the DSA had quadrupled their representation, and now had 8 members of the House of Representatives. It wasn't much, of course, but Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez had already shown that even one Socialist could attract considerable attention and "shape the discourse," as we used to say. This was how the Socialists of the early 1900s had done it, too: they never commanded majorities in the legislative bodies, but they forced the other parties to adopt considerable parts of the Socialist agenda.

Even more importantly, Nancy Pelosi was gone. She had seemed a permanent feature of the political landscape, someone who was destined forever to lead the Democratic Party. She had actively opposed the core left agenda, including Medicare For All and the Green New Deal, and it had been clear that there could be no progress so long as she was in office. Now she was gone, replaced with civil liberties lawyer and Democratic Socialist Shahid Buttar. In retrospect, the ousting of Pelosi was just as important as the Sanders presidency, because it left centrists in Congress without any effective leadership, demoralizing them and making them less certain of how to challenge Sanders. This helps explain why more Congressional Democrats than expected ultimately "fell in line" and ended up publicly aligned with Sanders—there was no effec-

tive opposition within the party.

It wasn't just Sanders' rhetorical outmaneuvering of Trump that had clinched the election. One should not overlook the role of organizing. There had been a massive "nonvoter revolution" in which people who had previously been disillusioned by the political process, and wouldn't think of turning out to vote for a "lesser evil" candidate, felt as if they finally had a candidate they could trust to understand their needs and aspirations. A massive registration effort had been conducted by 500,000 Sanders volunteers across the country, a sizable army that had been working diligently behind the scenes not just to turn out those who were already pro-Sanders, but to convince the unconvinced.

It's funny, though. While I remember being elated at Sanders' victory, and I was awed by how quickly everything had changed, the feeling of delight lasted about five minutes. It was obvious that in winning, we had taken on a colossal responsibility. This was not the time to celebrate. We could do that when something real had been accomplished, when the political gains were translated into actual changes in the lives of ordinary people.

The day after the election, *Current Affairs* ran the headline: "THE LEFT DOES IT." The subheadline: "Now here comes the tricky bit..."



In December of 2020, I received a phone call from Bhaskar. "I assume you've been offered a job in the Administration," he began. I had not.

"I have not," I replied.

"Oh. I was certain they would tap both of us." The purpose of the call now became clear. I was to be taunted. But I would not surrender without giving him a bit of the old "what for."

"I would have declined if asked, as I am not a political lackey. The independence of the press is critical, don't you think?" At this, I thought I had him.

"More important than building Socialism?" Damn. He had me. It was *not* more important than building Socialism. I paused, unsure how to answer. Before I could, he continued: "Well, I was just calling to see how you were going to handle being away from the magazine while serving. I thought we could exchange advice. I *assumed* you'd be serving."

"And now you know that I am not. Have we more to discuss?" We had not. He rang off. Later that day, Bhaskar Sunkara was announced to be the new Senior Communications Adviser to the President. I was happy for him. Really, I was.

The first 100 days of the Sanders administration were something of a whirlwind. First, a cabinet had to be cobbled together. The trouble was that there had never been a left-wing administration before, and it wasn't clear who could even be appointed. Noam Chomsky for Defense Secretary? (The idea was floated in *Jacobin*, but sadly went nowhere.) Satisfactory nominees were eventually found for most posts: Russ Feingold as Secretary of State, Sara Nelson as Labor Secretary, Larry Krasner as Attorney General, Raúl Grijalva as Secretary of the Interior, Janette Sadik-Khan as Secretary of Transportation, Jahana Hayes as Secretary of Education, Abdul El-Sayed as Secretary of Health and Human Services, Vanita Gupta as head of the Department of Homeland Security, Diane Yentel as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, and Sarah Bloom Raskin as Secretary of the Treasury. Not exactly a bunch of Socialists, but a solidly progressive and highly experienced group.

People had high expectations of the Sanders Administration. Giant promises had been made, after all. He spoke of nothing less than a "political revolution," and supporters needed him to

deliver. Failure would be a catastrophe. The passage I most vividly remember from Sanders' inaugural address was:

We have got to put out the fire that is now raging all over the world, or else the planet that we leave to our children and our grandchildren will be increasingly unhealthy and unlivable. From a moral perspective, we cannot do that. We will not do that.

The fire all over the world. That was what stays with me to this day. That was the task: put out the fire, ensure the long-term survival of a livable world.

It was appropriate, then that climate change was the first item on the agenda. Protests, some involving millions of people, had broken out in the major cities of the world for the past two years, demanding action. A "Green New Deal" had been spoken of, with ambitious—some said impossible—targets for decarbonization. But what people often do not realize is that the Green New Deal's popularity caught its advocates somewhat by surprise. Up until around October of 2018, it was still unclear what the "climate change equivalent" of "Medicare For All" would be,⁴² the Big Policy Idea that people could rally around. The Green New Deal took off all of a sudden, even though its actual substance remained somewhat unclear. It did have some core statements of principle: 100% clean and renewable energy by 2035, zero net energy emissions by 2050, a giant federal jobs program, and a commitment to a "just transition"—that is to say, making sure the fight against catastrophic climate change complemented the fight against social inequality. What all of this would *mean*, of course, was something that still needed a bit of figuring out. As one journalist put it at

42 See Nathan J. Robinson, "What Is The Climate Equivalent of Medicare For All?" *Current Affairs*, Oct. 30, 2018.

the time:

Like its 1930s counterpart, the “Green New Deal” isn’t a specific set of programs so much as an umbrella under which various policies might fit, ranging from technocratic to transformative. The sheer scale of change needed to deal effectively with climate change is massive, as the scientific consensus is making increasingly clear, requiring an economy-wide mobilization of the sort that the United States hasn’t really undertaken since World War II.

History views the Green New Deal, like the original New Deal, as something that seemed almost inevitable. It is difficult to imagine the 20s without it, because they were so defined by it. But having lived through the era, what I remember most is the “seat of the pants” quality to problem-solving that was necessitated by circumstance. Between November of 2020 and January of 2021, a “think tank”⁴³ called New Consensus dispatched a legion of policy-writers around the country on a listening tour. Its Community Climate Justice Forums were an important new experiment in democratic governance. The “wonks” of New Consensus decided that a Green New Deal should not be written from Washington, but should be written with the input of those who would actually be affected by it. So they talked to everyone from Louisiana fishermen to Appalachian coal miners about what it was that their communities would need, producing a set of clear reports that showed people’s fears, desires, and expectations. Only once a wealth of testimony had been amassed did New Consensus actually start drafting the provisions of what would become the Green New Deal bill itself.

43 Colloquialism of the period. Became obsolete as knowledge became democratized and thinking was no longer confined to tanks.

I do not need to rehash those provisions here, or recite school-book history. Suffice to say, the emissions target was highly ambitious: a 71% reduction by 2030. Every possible tool was used. There was massive new public investment in research on renewable energy technology and sustainable materials. Solar farms and wind turbines started popping up everywhere you looked (if I recall, fully 1/5 of Texas's land mass was used for solar). You saw solar panels going up on nearly every rooftop, and even some "solar roads." Utilities were required to source a portion of their energy from renewables, and so had an incentive to hasten the process along. There was an understanding that it would have to happen sooner rather than later, so the private sector quit resisting and began investing in what it knew to be inevitable. Importantly, Sanders also made it clear that fossil fuels would be a bad investment from now on, because he would be using the full might of the state to crush the industry, immediately suing the major oil and gas companies for and filing criminal charges against their executives for intentionally defrauding the country about the effects of climate change and stealing billions of dollars in other people's wealth through the damage done by their product. "We must make the industry pay for what they have done to all of us, to all of our children!" Sanders shouted. Of course, there was no question of being granted new licenses to drill. Sanders banned both the importing and exporting of fossil fuels, and share prices plummeted as investors realized the oil remaining in the ground was never coming out. Of course, the fossil fuel industry fought back: like the tobacco industry, they funded astroturfing organizations that pretended to speak on behalf of jobless coal miners. But the Green New Deal had been carefully designed so that the consequences of shuttering the industry would not fall on workers, who were retrained and put to work building solar power plants, wind farms, and charging stations (some went and planted trees,

through the revived Civilian Conservation Corps. In fact, my son recently spent a year as a tree-planter with the CCC, and said it was the best year of his life. Not to my taste, but it suited him.)

Electric charging stations were being built everywhere, and thanks to government subsidies, electric cars were becoming a good bargain. Even converting your existing car to electric became a sensible option (I did this with my 1974 Volkswagen, and while I missed the distinctive noise of its air-cooled motor, within a few months I became used to the clean silence of electricity.) Electric school buses, electric shipping trucks: everything was being transformed. The new energy facilities were all publicly owned, and an army of newly trained federal workers crossed the country upgrading every building to make it maximally energy efficient. Everything was slowly greened: the cities turned lush and verdant, and the burning of fossil fuels diminished steadily each year until it virtually disappeared.

Did we make the emissions target? I would not be here if we had not. It is, to this day, one of the most impressive collective endeavors. Once the U.S. took the lead, other countries followed, and Sanders was able to use a mixture of “carrots and sticks” to badger the rest of the world into signing on to the Global Growth Limits and Global Green New Deal. This was a bit tricky, because the U.S. had produced so much more than its fair share of carbon emissions, and grown so much more than was sustainable for anyone else to, that we appeared to be pushing policy of “growth/carbon for me, not for thee.” Many countries had to be allowed to increase both their growth and emissions, in the interests of justice, while the richer countries of the world began a process of “degrowth.” While it was never called this, a kind of “climate reparations” was offered to those who were bearing the costs of the rich countries’ destructive acts.

After climate, the other early priority was a Workplace Democ-

racy plan. All of us on the left understood that while we had captured the presidency and a few Congressional seats, if we were to build lasting power, we would need to create a giant working-class political movement. This was unthinkable without stronger unions. Union membership had been in decline for fifty years by this point, and most workers did not have unions. An early priority, then, was passing a bundle of laws designed to make it far easier to unionize, such as a “majority-sign up” law. (In those days, the fact that a majority of workers wanted a union did not necessarily mean they would get one.) Penalties for firing employees over labor organizing were escalated, employers’ ability to make their workers attend anti-union presentations was limited, and unions were guaranteed “equal time” to present their case to workers. The right to strike was expanded, and the ability replace striking workers curtailed. “Right-to-work” laws were eliminated,⁴⁴ and a new “sectoral bargaining system” by which unions could bargain by industry rather than company-by-company was instituted. Together, these changes radically altered the balance of power in the ongoing fight between owners and workers. Sanders understood that the role of government was not to be a neutral referee of that fight, but to use its muscle to aid the workers.

Industry fought back viciously. The plan was called a “corrupt handout to labor bureaucrats.” Republicans excavated a man named “Joe the Plumber,” who had been a minor figure in the 2008 election, for a series of advertisements about how unions were the enemy of American business. Some Congressional Democrats revolted at the original plan, which explicitly guaranteed workers their own representatives on corporate boards, a provision that had to be dropped in order to secure passage of the remaining

44 The idea that “right to work” laws expanded workers’ freedom was propagandistic nonsense. See Nathan J. Robinson, “How Expanding The Right To Contract Can Limit Rights,” *Current Affairs*, May 23, 2018. <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2018/05/why-expansions-of-the-right-to-contract-are-limitations-on-rights>

package of labor reforms. (When this era is talked about, people often forget that the reforms did not all happen at once, and that the codetermination system was added in '23 rather than '21. I suppose it seems a trivially small point now, but back then we felt crushed when particular provisions were dropped from the plan, and there were periodic revolts against Sanders from the left over compromises alleged to be unacceptable.)

I believe the decision to start with climate change and labor was critical to the ultimate success of the left program. Union density began to increase rapidly after that, and because the newly-formed unions existed in part because of Sanders' reforms, they felt a sense of political loyalty to him and to the Democratic Socialist agenda, even when neither their members or leadership were explicit Democratic Socialists. If we had, for example, begun with "Medicare For All," we would likely have lost the fight, as the insurance industry was simply too strong, and the left too weak, at the beginning of the Sanders Administration. The same was true of the student loan and medical debt jubilees. It is not that these items were secondary, but that the two years after Sanders' election had to be spent building the political power necessary to force them through. Climate change, on the other hand, had already amassed a global movement for action, and few Democrats—even centrist ones—wanted to be seen opposing the children of the Sunrise Movement. Senator Dianne Feinstein had embarrassed herself by telling worried young people that their ambitions for a Green New Deal were hopeless. Other Democrats learned from this and were keen to avoid the spectacle of an angry Greta Thunberg knocking on their office door or confronting them in a Congressional elevator. Radical as it was, the Green New Deal was successfully brought into law because a political movement made it impossible

for any Democrat to get away with opposing it.⁴⁵

2021-22 saw a giant wave of unionization across multiple industries. The big surprise was the tech companies, which had been considered “impossible” to unionize. Well, it turned out that workers at Google and Facebook were no less pissed off at living under a workplace dictatorship run by billionaires than anyone else was.

Importantly, the Sanders administration also focused early on “procedural” changes, ones that would help it improve the left’s fortunes in future elections. We couldn’t yet grant Puerto Rico and D.C. full voting rights, or grant non-citizen residents the ballot, (those reforms came in 2029), but Election Day was made a federal holiday, states were prohibited from denying the vote to felons who had served their sentences, Voter ID laws were repealed, every eligible voter was automatically registered to vote, and a set of requirements for fair elections were imposed. The Justice Department vowed to fully investigate any state that was alleged to be depriving its residents of the franchise.

After labor, climate, and voting, the Sanders administration turned to education. Sanders had spoken on the campaign trail of a “Thurgood Marshall plan” for higher education. The giant Education Bill introduced toward the end of 2021 was an ambitious effort to provide something close to meaningful “equal opportunity,” at least as far as the schools people were able to attend.⁴⁶ The

⁴⁵ It is worth appreciating just how rapidly the politics of climate change altered. Up until the end of the Obama years, the fossil fuel industry and the “free market” right had succeeded in pushing the issue to the sidelines and sowing doubt. Even Democrats didn’t want to talk about climate change—after leaving office, Obama even bragged about having expanded fossil fuel production, an “achievement” that would have been impossible to take public pride in just a few years later. (Boasting about endangering the lives of millions! How did things go so wrong?) In the 2016 presidential debates, climate change was barely discussed as an issue. In the 2020 primary, on the other hand, the Central News Network (CNN) held a 7-hour town hall *just* on climate change. (Though the Democratic National Committee still resisted holding a special climate debate.) The politics of the issue changed as fast as the politics of gay marriage had changed just a few years earlier. This happened entirely because activists declined to be quiet about the issue.

⁴⁶ Many people on the right in those days spoke of “equal opportunity” as something they endorsed—they contrasted it with “equal outcome,” which they did not—but since they did not endorse the abolition of private schools (an obviously necessary precondition of equal opportunity) it was clear the phrase was intended simply to justify existing inequalities.

most important changes were (1) free universal pre-K (2) funding schools regionally instead of locally, meaning that schools in Detroit received equal funding to schools in the suburbs, because both came out of the same regional pool of money and (3) making tuition at all public colleges free. Sanders gave an education speech that made the point so simple that it was hard for anyone to challenge:

"If anyone opposes free college, I challenge them to tell me why they do not oppose free high school. Free public high school is considered normal, unobjectionable, perfectly reasonable. Talk about free college and they call it crazy, radical, utopian, impossible. Are you telling me that it's reasonable to offer universal free 12th grade, and insane to offer the grade after? I'll tell you what sounds crazy: the idea that we can give a 15, 16, 17, 18 year old something for free but we can't give it to a 19-year-old!"

Nobody had a good answer to this talking point. We had free public high schools, why not free public colleges? The proposal was so popular that the Free College Act was passed even with some Republican votes. (Only two in the Senate and four in the House. But still: Republicans back then were almost uniformly in favor of "drowning the government in the bathtub." It was a mark of how quickly politics had moved left that a few now voted for something they would quite recently have called a socialist nightmare.)

There were other useful educational reforms. Class sizes were capped at 15. There was a comprehensive review of disciplinary procedures, with the aim of reducing the disturbing racial bias in suspension rates. Struggling schools were given extra financial support (Obama had adopted the opposite approach, rewarding

the schools that were already doing well with extra funding.⁴⁷ The Sanders philosophy was not “give the successful more success” but “find the unsuccessful and help them out.”) Nationwide, teacher salaries were set at a minimum of \$60,000, with reimbursement for purchase of school supplies. (Shockingly, back then over 90% of teachers had to buy school supplies out of their own pocket.)

The effect of all this was not obvious immediately. But one could see the gears turning. A friend of mine who taught school told me how this worked on the ground. Her classroom was visited by a federal Needs Assessor, who asked her what it would take to get her students the best possible education. A small army of Needs Assessors had been dispatched all over the country to visit every last classroom with checklists and interview forms. Their job was to collect each teacher’s views—as well as the views of many students—on how to fix public education and specifically their own schools. If class sizes needed halving, they would be halved. If students needed free hot breakfasts, they would be provided. The result of the 1st National Needs Assessment Survey would reshape public education entirely. Soon, videos were being posted from classrooms around the country showing new boxes of materials arriving, students being given expensive new textbooks and fine art supplies. The new Federal Teacher Training College (FTTC) in Atlanta enrolled 10,000 people in its first class, from veteran educators to recent undergraduates, and offered the opportunity to receive a completely free teaching qualification from the highest caliber of instructors. The Sanders Education Department vowed that the ban on federal money for charter schools would be coupled with a comprehensive overhaul of public schooling that would go school by school to ensure that every institution at every level was as well-managed, generously-funded, and capably-staffed

47 See Nathan J. Robinson, “The Kind of Policy We Must Never Make Again,” *Current Affairs*, Feb. 6, 2019. <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2019/02/the-kind-of-policy-we-must-never-make-again>

as the best-endowed private academy.

Seemingly a thousand different things had to be tackled at once. You couldn't fix education without trying to fix poverty and the criminal punishment system as well. A number of important reforms to the punishment system were signed into law in Sanders' first term. These included: (1) a comprehensive plan to "de-militarize" the police and introduce strong citizen and Justice Department oversight of police departments, including federal investigations into *every* police shooting (2) a ban on for-profit prisons, and the enforcement of strict rules on prison conditions (3) new rules on when "fines and fees" could be imposed and collected as part of punishment, and a prohibition on suspending drivers' licenses for failure to pay court costs (4) an end to cash bail (5) a ban on capital punishment (6) the legalization of marijuana (7) a boost to funding for public defenders' offices and a guaranteed standard of representation (8) guarantees on children's access to their incarcerated parents (9) a ban on the use of criminal history in employment, loan, and housing applications (10) a new minimum wage for prisoners, and the auditing of extortionate commissaries, (11) making all prison phone calls free, (12) new education programs for prisoners and the reintroduction of prisoner Pell Grants (13) a "presumption against prison" in sentencing and the encouragement of alternate "restorative justice remedies" (14) a restriction against putting mentally ill people in prison and the establishment of new federal mental health facilities. "No mental health problem should *ever* be treated with prison," Sanders thundered in his major criminal justice speech.

There was so much more I can barely remember it all. The job guarantee, of course. The new Clean Water initiative, with a signing ceremony in Flint. The Pathway To Citizenship. The National Rent Control Act and the giant new investment in "clean, beautiful, safe" public housing developments. The cap on ATM fees

and credit card interest rates. The Justice Department's full investigation of two decades of Wall Street's crimes and the subsequent prosecutions. The financial transactions tax. The "Cooperatives and Land Trusts" thing that I never quite understood but that many nerds told me made a huge difference. The Postal Banking Act. The Credit Union Support Act. The Public Credit Check Agency Act, which killed Equifax and gave everyone their credit scores for free (and banned the use of credit checks for a bunch of different things). The Tax Evasion Loophole Closure Act, which made it nearly impossible to hide money in offshore accounts without going to prison for it. I am certain that I am missing a number of important policies. It was something of a whirlwind.



I never met Bernie Sanders myself. I did not think he would like me—Briahna Joy Gray, the White House press secretary and a former *Current Affairs* editor, had warned me that I was exactly the sort of person he would probably consider a “dilletantish flibbertigibbet.”

“Bernie doesn’t like people he perceives to be morally frivolous,” she said, in explaining why she had thought it for the best to keep me out of a “left press meet and greet” held at the White House. “Besides, *Current Affairs* should maintain its editorial independence from the administration, don’t you think?” The next day, I received a note from Bhaskar expressing surprise that he hadn’t seen me at the meet and greet. In a fit of pique I tore it to shreds and set it alight. But I did not resent his success.

I respected Sanders from what I could gather at a distance—he declined to be called “Mr. President” and was Bernie to everyone, refused to accept salutes, abolished the playing of “Hail To The Chief” (to the consternation of the Marine Corps band, which switched to James Brown classics and New Orleans jazz-funk).

But I was aware that our magazine should never become a propaganda mouthpiece for the President, and I was a scathing critic of many of his positions (the halfheartedness of his immigration reform, the skittish avoidance of the word “reparations,” etc.) Our job, we felt, was to nudge him ever further to the left, which we did through editorials like “A Profile In Cowardice: Why Won’t Bernie Say ‘Nationalize’?” and “Is Bernie Too Chicken To Take On The Military-Industrial Complex?” I am reliably informed that these annoyed him personally, an accomplishment I take great pride in.

I think what surprised people most, even those of us on the Left, was that the sky did not fall. Electing Sanders had seemed such a radical act, and yet life went on mostly as normal. The stock market wobbled and the capitalists were on CNBC all day threatening to take their money elsewhere, but Sanders was fairly astute and knew how to push only as hard as was in his power at any given time. Given clichés about socialist profligacy, one “surprise” was that Sanders was ruthlessly devoted to efficiency. Not austerity, which is quite different. But making sure the “end user experience” of government was a positive one: that the lines at the DMV were shortened, that people’s mail didn’t get lost, that tax forms were made easy to understand, that the Federal Register was pruned and simplified, that agencies spent their money well.⁴⁸ “This government belongs to the people, and the people must not only feel represented by it, but their experiences interacting with it must be positive ones,” Bernie said in his first State of the Union. “Ronald Reagan said that the most terrifying words were ‘I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.’ That was certainly true of Ronald Reagan’s government. But this government recognizes that when

48 Under the Bush Administration, the Securities and Exchange Commission had once spent \$3.9 million to reorganize the desks at their headquarters. It is almost impossible to understand how that much money could possibly be wasted, but this was precisely the sort of mismanagement of the people’s funds that Sanders was determined to root out. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/sec-spends-millions-to-reorganize-desks-07-04-2009/>

a person is in need, ‘I’m from the government’ means that the fire department has showed up, or that your Social Security check has arrived, or that social workers and teachers have come to help. We are determined that it should be a relief to know that your government is out there working for you.”

The range of measures that were signed into law in the first 100 days is staggering to look back on. A nationwide \$15 minimum wage. An immediate halt to deportations. An increase to the minimum Social Security benefits. A full overhaul and upgrade of Amtrak, so that it would be a high-speed service to rival its counterparts in Japan and Europe. Mandatory paid parental leave. A network of free childcare centers, plus a monthly childcare allowance for every new parent. The massive expansion of free senior centers, to curb the epidemic of isolation and loneliness that so many older people were suffering in their final years. A comprehensive federal plan to tackle the opioid crisis (which would ultimately be in large part funded by the colossal settlements paid by drug companies). Beefing up the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau so it could harshly crack down on predatory lending. Prohibiting water shutoffs.

This was made politically possible by a few things. First, after it became clear that Bernie would be president, a great number of Democrats who had formerly opposed him suddenly discovered they had actually liked him all along. Just as the 2020 primary candidates had all adopted pieces of Bernie’s platform when it became popular, national politicians all raced to show they were “Bernier-than-thou” since this was clearly the direction of public opinion. Nobody wanted to be one of the Democrats who got in the way of the Sanders agenda, because he (and his legions of supporters) had made it clear that those who clung to “business as usual” would have targets painted on their back, with portions of the leftover Sanders war chest handed over to their primary oppo-

nents. It turned out that Congressional Democrats were mostly not actually “centrists” so much as opportunists, and when a social movement shifted the arrangements of political power, they, too, shifted. Hence the fierce opposition that many predicted Sanders would face never quite materialized.

Importantly, though, this was because Democrats knew there was an army of millions backing Sanders, one that would name and shame them if they dared to oppose, say, free college. Sanders also made it clear that there was a “carrot” along with the threatened stick: if you *did* vote for the bill, he’d be standing next to you at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the next federal infrastructure project in your state, or the newest childcare center, a big smile on his face, talking about what a stalwart champion of the people you had always been, and how the people of your district knew they could *depend* on you to always do the right thing because that’s *just the kind of person you were*. And he’d say that he was *so pleased* that you had promised never to take any more Wall Street donations, even though you had never made any such promise, and as he walked off the stage he’d wink at you, knowing you now couldn’t possibly walk back the promise he had just made in your name.

This was all astute politics, but Sanders was still limited by the small number of authentic “radicals” in Congress. In retrospect, we had not done enough during 2020 to try to overthrow some of the Democratic dinosaurs who ended up derailing important reforms (Medicare for All, codetermination, etc.) Getting rid of Pelosi helped a great deal, but Charles Schumer hung around until 2022 making a nuisance of himself. It was not until the Red Wave of 2022 that we really managed to secure the kind of powerful majority that was necessary. I do wish we had started earlier, because it meant that the first two years of the Sanders presidency had to be dedicated in part to gathering the power necessary to fulfill important parts of the agenda in the second half. Those first

two years were tough, because Sanders couldn't do as much as he needed to do, and people were watching his presidency closely, many intent on declaring it a failure as soon as they could.

But, similar to what happened under the Corbyn government in the UK around the same time, the policies became bolder as time went on. In '23 and '24, private schools were abolished (actually, technically they still existed, but had to accept anyone who applied on a first come, first served basis and could not charge tuition). Amazon was nationalized and merged with the United States Postal Service to form the USODS (United States Ordering and Delivery Service, later a branch of the Global Parcel & Package Service), with parts of it like Amazon Web Services spun off into private, not-for-profit cooperatives. Medicare For All was finally passed, giving every single person in the United States free comprehensive healthcare (including vision and dental care), and abolishing the private insurance industry. (Many people in the industry were retrained as "patient advocates" and used their skills to badger doctors into giving patients better treatment rather than badgering patients into paying larger shares of their expenses.)

Reparations finally became a "politically viable" issue, and a bill was passed to study the question and determine what might be feasible. There were all sorts of difficulties, of course, over who exactly should be entitled to reparations and what they should get, but a pragmatic solution was reached: the necessary amount of "reparations" was defined as the sum total amount of the racial wealth gap between black and white people. So, we would know reparations had successfully been made when that wealth gap disappeared. (After all, unless one bought in to racist theories about culture or genetics, the racial wealth gap could be seen as the amount of financial damage caused by racism.) Then, a package of solutions was designed that would eliminate this gap within 50 years, not primarily by handing out checks but by targeting giant

investments in Black communities and chipping away at white fortunes that had amassed over time. As we know, the target was not met, but we no longer see the truly extreme statistics of 50 years ago (in some cities, the average Black family had \$8 in wealth while white families had hundreds of thousands of dollars). I am glad to see the Racial Justice Completion Commission at work on a serious solution for finishing our long, long overdue need to make full reparations.



As for myself, I had begun to devote a considerable portion of my time to the cause of non-human animals, who I considered the members of a kind of New Proletariat. Because they were unable to vote and didn't own property (and we had not, at that point, figured out how to translate their thoughts), animals' interests were then almost completely unrepresented, and they were slaughtered by the billions with barely anyone noticing or caring. I penned a book—a pamphlet, really—called *The Rights Of Man (But For Animals)*. (The British title was simply *The Rights of Animals*, because British people are dull.) My argument in the book was that the entitlement of animals to pursue their interests was as presumptively absolute as our own, and that we had no natural right to murder and devour them. Provocatively, I compared the way that our society ignored mass industrialized killing of animals to the way that German society had ignored the mass industrialized killing of human beings, though I did not go as far as the controversial anarchist pamphlet *The Meat Holocaust*, which was denounced on the Senate floor. My tract concluded, in part:

The logic is quite simple. Animals are conscious. Nobody seriously denies this. Animals feel and think, as we can

see in our own dogs and cats. And yet we have chosen not to acknowledge the implications: the killing of millions of emotionally sophisticated and intelligent pigs and cows is an atrocity, one so hideous that our society cannot begin to claim to be civilized until we have ended it for good. It is easy to ignore this crime because its victims do not speak our language. No more. We must look these creatures in the eyes and reckon with what we have done.

I doubt my own slim volume had much influence on the debate, but I was gratified when animal rights became a more central issue in the 2024 elections. There was even a single issue “animal candidate” who ran against Bernie Sanders in the primaries, and while she was crushed she did succeed in forcing Sanders to adopt an “animals plank” in his platform, which set stringent new requirements for conditions in factory farms and created an “animal bill of rights” (that later became the model for the Global Convention on the Rights of Non-Human Animals). The rules were intentionally designed to be expensive to comply with, to incentivize food companies to pursue alternatives to meat, which they were starting to do in greater numbers. Breakthroughs in plant-based meats over the last few years—Burger King had introduced Impossible Burgers at all locations in 2019—meant that some companies thought animal meat was on its way out. After all, raising animals from birth was inefficient and expensive, and as plant-based and artificial alternatives became cheaper, it made less and less economic sense to continue using living creatures. Of course, I wish the change had come about because it was right rather than because it was economical, but animal welfare advocates were just pleased to see the numbers killed each year steadily dropping. The percentage of meat made from live animals went from 99% in 2021 to 80% in 2030, 60% in 2050, an impressively low 14% in 2072, and virtu-

ally none today. Some killing only continues because some people still insist that “there is nothing like real bacon,” a sentiment that is (1) factually false, as blind taste tests of Impossible Bacon have shown and (2) morally obscene. Fortunately, continued eating of animal meats is disproportionately concentrated among older people, who will hopefully someday either die or be shamed out of their habits by their vegan grandchildren.



These were heady times, with many things happening at once. The worker ownership plan was being implemented, with corporations distributing a portion of their stock to employees' each year, steadily shifting the overall ownership ratio between rich shareholders and workers. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks was killed by a falling chandelier *in flagrante delicto*, and was replaced by leftist radio host Katie Halper. I received many office visits from subscribers, who consistently informed me that *Current Affairs* had been a comforting voice of reason in a time governed by sovereign madness.

Donald Trump's Twitter account had finally been suspended outright after he tweeted an explicit racial slur about a Congresswoman. He was spending most of his time on some golf course, and while the *New York Post* and *Breitbart* continued to report on his every utterance, the rest of the media had become so antagonistically Sanders-obsessed that Trump somewhat receded from view. I cannot recall much else that he did before his death from brain disease in 2027, beyond issuing occasional televised rants about the Chinese and hosting a YouTube show about what it was like to live at Mar-a-Lago. (It seemed boring.)

The reelection of Bernie Sanders in 2024 was not a *foregone* conclusion, exactly, but only in the same way that FDR's defeat

of Alf Landon was uncertain. The Republican candidate, Daniel Crenshaw, was a war veteran and Harvard graduate who had lost an eye, the exact sort of “All-American fascist” that many of us had feared could prove such an effective vehicle for the mainstreaming of white supremacy. Importantly, though, the Sanders policies had begun to deliver people real material benefits. The White House had made sure that people *knew* what their government was doing for them (Obama had once disguised a tax cut so that people wouldn’t know they had received it; Sanders put an “Our Government” sign on every last brick laid by one of his programs.) So people had their children in the new care facilities, or their grandparents had received a nursing home allowance, or their friends were taking a free college course. They were sold on the Sanders program, but only because it had *actually delivered* for them, not because they were personally enamored of Sanders. If the policies had failed to meaningfully affect people’s lives, no amount of rhetoric about a coming political revolution could have kept Sanders in office. In the end, Crenshaw won four states, and even those by small margins.



I suppose the overall popularity of the left program is what led me to ignore warning signs that should have tipped us off about the Reaction. 70% approval is magnificent, but it raises the question: who are the 30%, and do they have guns? We were intoxicated with our success, and forgot that the wealthy and powerful are both wealthy and powerful. They do not go down without a fight.

What had been happening was this: billionaires had been funneling considerable amounts of money into shadowy networks of far-right activists. There were fewer Nazis on YouTube these days, to be sure, but the ones that were still there had dedicated follow-

ings and were becoming more and more virulent. Figures like Alex Jones, Glenn Beck, and Gavin McInnes had popular web shows in which they spat venom at the Administration and encouraged their viewers to take up arms and ready themselves for a coming global conflict. If we had been paying attention, we would have noticed that the rhetoric was turning darker and more violent. In fringe corners of the internet, one could play games that involved finding bloody ways to kill leftists, and on forums young men fantasized about elaborate ways to slaughter immigrants, women, Muslims, socialists, transgender people, and Jews. It was ugly, but until the day of the Reaction, nobody knew quite how ugly it could get.

The United States had had mass shootings before, of course, and at first it seemed as if Jan 1, 2025 was just going to be another of these depressingly “normal” occurrences. 30 people dead at a New Year’s Day cookout in Reno. It would be news for a couple of days, and then disappear. Even the second shooting, four hours after the first, did not necessarily make people realize this was “unusual”—there had been multiple mass shootings hours apart before. Only when there was a third before sundown—Portland—did people realize this could be part of a nationwide terrorist attack.

As it became clear that the suspects all fit the same profile—white men under 25, frequenter of far right forums, there was a sense of panic. This must have been coordinated. Was it over? When another attack occurred at midnight—this time in Gatlinburg—people truly became frightened. Where would be next? How could we stop it? Was this the prelude to some kind of armed uprising?

It did not, in fact, turn out to be coordinated, but that did not mean it was coincidental. In fact, each attack inspired the next. Isolated, angry young men who had been stockpiling weapons were waiting for a moment when they could act. When the first

shooter began his rampage, the second saw an opportunity to commit his. Then, multiple other men felt that their opportunity had suddenly come, and rushed out into the streets to kill as many people as they could.

The ultimate death toll was far less than 9/11, but the psychological effect of the attacks was just as strong, if not worse. In the case of 9/11, it quickly became clear that New York and D.C. were the cities under attack. Over the three days of the Reaction, attacks were happening all over the country, from small towns in red states to big coastal cities. “Only” 300 people died, but the terror that gripped the country was like nothing else felt in my lifetime. Anyone felt they could be victimized at any time, and they were not wrong.

But it ended. Most things do. And unlike 9/11, the terrorists did not succeed in producing the intended reaction. After 11 mass shootings in three days, we felt the same sense of national unity—after all, *so* many people knew victims, or knew people who knew victims, and the targets were selected intentionally for their diversity. There was not, however, some desire to meet the crime with military aggression. Instead, there was just a widespread somber disgust with white supremacy, and a desire to root it out once and for all. People on the right who had used the kind of rhetoric echoed by the killers were made to feel ashamed, and many made an uncomfortable retreat from the political arena. Alex Jones insisted that he had been doing “theater” all along, and threatened with lawsuits, took his show off the air.

You know how you can feel closer to others in the wake of a disaster than at any other time? That is what things were like after the Reaction. Horrible as it was, it made everyone feel newly connected to each other. People became, at least temporarily, less inclined to argue, more empathetic. They had all been afraid together, many had protected each other. The people lost had been

of every race and political orientation, and there had been incredible heroism from all quarters.

I find it strange to write of this time, because I wish so much that it hadn't happened and I could tell you that we did what we did without anything too terrible impeding our progress. But that is not what happened, and the dreadful Reaction probably did end up accelerating our progress, by turning the country definitively against the far right and being the last gasp of American fascism.

My life has mostly been a cheerful one. I wish that spirit could saturate every page. But it cannot be part of this one. Our present prosperity was not made without some terrible suffering and sacrifice. Could it have been otherwise? Could persuasion alone have taken us along a more incremental path to a justice world? Possibly. But that is not how history happened, and I can only present it as it occurred.



With a solid consensus that it was now time to push through the final items in the Sanders agenda, the transformation was finished between 2025 and 2027. The thing people remember is the Jubilee: the day that all outstanding student debt and all medical debt was instantly erased. I won't easily forget that day myself—I refreshed the page on my Navient account over and over, waiting to see my \$139,300 outstanding debt suddenly drop to \$0, which, incredibly, it did. The sense of relief among millennials was overwhelming. People had thought they would be indentured by their debts for decades, and all of a sudden they were free. It really did feel like having a heavy stone removed from one's chest, after having it there for years, and then wondering what one should do with one's newly stone-free existence.

We packed the Court in 2026. It had become necessary, because

holdover conservative justices were throwing absurd procedural impediments in the way of important pieces of legislation. I was very pleased that *Current Affairs* legal editor Oren Nimni was selected as one of the 10 new justices (the others were Tiffany Caban, Larry Krasner, Marbre Stahly-Butts, Malaika Jabali, Ralph Nader, Bryan Stevenson, Stephen Bright, Kade Crockford, and Elizabeth Warren). It was extremely amusing watching the (now televised) oral arguments in the post-expansion era, in which the left justices mercilessly mocked Neil Gorsuch and coughed the word “rapist” in unison every time Justice Kavanaugh asked a question. Nevertheless, even the presence of decent human beings on the Supreme Court could not redeem it as an institution, and I was pleased when the Revised Constitution scrapped the court entirely.

Before this point, Sanders had only been able to achieve modest changes to the tax code, which had at least meant that the wealthy paid something closer to 1950s rates on their income. In 2027, we finally got a huge new tax on *wealth* rather than income, which took the first step toward the goal Sanders had announced years before: abolishing billionaires as a class. The new tax system was designed to take steadily larger and larger chunks of the wealth mountain and use them to fund public broadcasting, federal colleges, and the national library system. By 2060, no one individual would possess a billion dollars. (This was perfectly reasonable. Remember: if you had been earning \$5,000 a day since the year 1492, you wouldn’t have reached a billion dollars by the year 2022.) Many had argued that wealth taxes would not raise much revenue, because the wealthy would “just hide their assets.” In fact, if you look back at tax policy arguments from those days, you will see that a lot of cases against new taxes were based on the idea that the wealthy would “just evade” the new taxes or “go elsewhere.” Sanders was astute enough to realize that this was not actually an

argument against the taxes, it was an argument for including harsh punishments for evading the taxes, and a powerful enforcement mechanism. After he put a few billionaires in prison for illegally trying to move money out of the country, the rest of them swiftly coughed up.

There was a great deal of cultural change beginning to brew. In particular, there was a democratization of intellectual resources, spurred by Google's coming under public ownership and the establishment of the National Library System's Open Knowledge database, which made nearly every book or article ever written completely available, for free, to the public.⁴⁹ This was an unbelievable boon to independent scholars, whose lack of university affiliations had previously made it almost impossible to access expensive academic databases. Information was also presented in a way that maximized ease of use, rather than advertiser revenue, meaning that research became far simpler and faster. If I wanted, say, to find out how many criminology studies had argued that deterrence is ineffective, I could find the answer in a split second. The gates of academic knowledge were finally opened to the public, and the result was that it was easier than ever to become intelligent and to check whether experts were telling the truth.

As part of the free college initiative, nearly every conceivable university course was also made available online. But online learning had proved inferior, and one of the most important changes was how visible the "intellectual realm" became in everyday life. "Popular" and "academic" writing became less distinct, and educating the public was considered just as much a part of a professor's job duties as publishing in peer reviewed journals. Pete Davis,

49 Only books by dead authors were available automatically. Under the Copyright Reform Act of 2024, all copyrights expired at death. (The Disney Corporation fought this law as hard as it could, but ultimately lost, and was taunted by activists wearing bootleg—and now perfectly legal—Mickey Mouse shirts.) Living authors could opt in to the database, and would receive royalties based on the number of times their books were read. Users received access to 5 books per month for free, and had to pay a small fee if they exceeded the limit.

a former *Current Affairs* radio presenter, masterminded the revival of the “Chautauqua” movement, which in the 19th century had provided roaming lecture tours that stopped, like the circus, in tents at the edge of town. The 21st century Chautauqua movement went all around the country, urban and rural areas alike, giving people the chance to come together to learn anything from drawing to particle physics. It touched off a new kind of “café culture” in which people would spend whole afternoons arguing in good spirits about what they had learned at the Chautauqua—or, more frequently, about why the visiting presenter was a damned fool.

Out of this milieu came the curriculum reform movement—in which I myself had a small role. It was felt that the traditional public school curriculum was somewhat thoughtless and arbitrary, and was arranged in such a way as to make students hate learning. The Federal Commission, on which I served, that revised the standard course structure, decided that philosophy and literature should be introduced much earlier, that mathematics should be taught in a hands-on rather than abstract way (learning it by building a rocket or trying to measure things, for instance), and plant/animal identification should be mandatory. There was a much more “hands-on” approach to learning needed, one in which every student learned how to grow things, reenacted historical events, played instruments other than the recorder, wandered through a lot of forests, attended a lot of plays, and conducted a lot of explosive science experiments. All of this was quite expensive, but it paid off—an entire generation of students has now come to find that the world is interesting, and we have succeeded in making schools that children are excited to attend and do not want to leave. Our philosophy was that if young people did not want to learn, then the school was failing, and we took students’ dread of the classroom as a sign that it, not they, was dysfunctional.

In 2028, Sara Nelson, former president of both the Association

of American Flight Attendants and the AFL-CIO, was elected President of the United States, the first labor leader to win the office. Bernie Sanders, having completed his earthly work, died two months into her first term. At his request, there was no “pomp and circumstance,” and everyone who admired him simply planted a tree in his honor. (200 million trees were planted.) By this time, the Democratic Socialists of America had realized that they could not continue without a more international focus, and had evolved into the Democratic Socialists of the World. Democratic Socialist movements were popping up, and successfully countering authoritarian governments, on every single continent (yes, even that one). Lula, fully exonerated, was once against the president of Brazil. Justin Trudeau had been hounded out of office and horsewhipped by a mob, then replaced by a leftist president whose name I cannot recall. (It is, after all, Canada.) Jeremy Corbyn had been succeeded as prime minister by Diane Abbott, and Pablo Iglesias was leading Spain.

Perhaps more importantly, I had recently written two successful books. The first, *Unraveling the Law*, my debut with an academic press (University of Minnesota), presented a scholarly proof that the law was an ass. The second was an explanatory picture book for young people entitled *Could An Iceberg Become President?: Answers to Children's Common Legal Questions*.⁵⁰ My profile as a

50 The answer to the title question, which I presented alongside colorful illustrated diagrams, was: “No, an iceberg could not become president. The United States Constitution specifies that ‘No Person except a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the Office of President.’ An iceberg is not a person. Therefore, it cannot become President.” Other questions in the book included: Did God make the laws? (“The U.S. system of laws is made by federal, state, and local governments. God did not make the laws. If anything, God made the government, who then made the laws.”) What is the minimum wage? Do any notable exceptions apply? (“\$15/hr. Yes, several.”); What does the law think I should wear to school today? (“The law has no opinion.”); Can I sue my parents for making me? (“You can sue anyone for anything. Whether that suit will be adjudicated in your favor or immediately dismissed as frivolous is another matter entirely.”); Is homework illegal? (“Yes, homework is illegal.”); Can I make a flag of pants and wear that flag? (“Yes. Wearing flag pants is protected speech. Even wearing corduroy bellbottoms is protected speech.”); What flavors of candy are illegal? (“Any flavor of candy that contains a deadly poison is illegal.”); Do jellyfish legislate? (“This is a biological question, rather than a legal one.”); Do a zebra’s stripes mean its guts are in prison? (“No.”); Are the guns cops play with real? (“All too much so.”) All of these were actual questions sent into the *Current Affairs* Legal Advice column by living children.

Public Thinker Type had been steadily rising, and when CNN called to ask me why I had written *Could An Iceberg Become President*, I was hardly surprised. I had been practicing my nonchalance, and did well in the interview, even though it was both live and contentious. (Years later, Chris Cuomo told me he had never seen such *sang-froid* in a children's book author.)



In my office, there was chaos. “We cannot understand animals unless we get to know them personally,” I had declared to the staff. Nobody had quite known what I meant by this, but it had turned out to involve releasing live piglets in the corridors. The piglets, alarmed at suddenly finding themselves in the headquarters of a major national newsmagazine, had panicked and eaten the page proofs. Rennix burst into my office, her face red with exasperation:

“Nathan your fucking piglets just ate the proofs. Can you get us new copies?”

“Whiskers, surely you remember my policy on page proofs.”

“I, uh, no. What is your policy on page proofs?”

“There must only ever be one copy. To avoid confusion.”

“Okay but can you like... make another?”

“I always make sure to delete the file after producing the proof, to avoid violating the policy.”

“But that’s bonkers.”

“No, Ms. Rennix. It is *Current Affairs*.”

In my 2030 book *YouTube Arguments I Have Won*, I point out that the most effective way to win a debate is to refuse to admit you have lost it. It is a skill I have finely cultivated over the years, to the point where it is now all but impossible to convince me I am

wrong. On this day, with baby pigs running amok, Brianna Rennix was running up against the full might of my forensic capabilities.

“Ok, but like, what are we supposed to do now?”

“Brianna, my treasured subordinate, that is not for me to say. The creation of initial page proofs is my purview. Once they are handed off to the junior staff, they have left my purview. It would not be proper for me to advise you on this, but I expect you will have a few late nights ahead of you.”

“Okay, but you’re the one who released pigs in our office.”

“Indeed I did. Inter-species empathy is a priority of mine.”

“But then you should be the one to remake the pages.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow. Job responsibilities are clearly delineated and are not affected by the presence or absence of piglets.”

“So uh, you’re going to make us all fix the catastrophe caused by your own decision?”

“That is a rather uncharitable description, though it accurately captures the state of affairs.”

“Sometimes I cannot believe what an asshole you are capable of being.”

“I am sure you don’t mean that. You are just upset because the piglet also ate your driving gloves.”

“It did what??”

Incidents like this one happened all the time in those years. But I did not allow them to bother me. I became known for my uniquely unflappable demeanor. Attempt to flap me, they did. Succeed, they did not.



In 2032, the global nuclear plebiscite was held. It was the largest single democratic act in humanity’s history. Every person on earth over 16 was permitted to vote. It asked a simple ques-

tion: should the Permanent Elimination Treaty go into effect? The Treaty was simple. No nation would be permitted to possess nuclear weapons or develop production facilities for nuclear weapons. There were no exceptions. If ratified, every country currently in possession of nuclear weapons would have to begin dismantling them, with a 5-year timetable for compliance. United Nations weapons inspectors would be granted whatever access they deemed necessary to ensure compliance.

It was strange to think that around the world, 6 billion bits of almost identical paper were being looked at by people in every country. The scale of the vote-gathering and counting operation, the oversight required to keep the plebiscite fair and trustworthy, was greater than any election ever held. It took two weeks to conduct the voting, and a full three months to count the ballots, even though they posed only one question, which had to be answered YES or NO.

The anti-nuke consensus had been so strongly built up that it was almost assured that the yeas would have it. The plebiscite was mainly intended to confer popular legitimacy on the plan. The problem with nuclear weapons, of course, is that it's very difficult to de-escalate. Everyone has to lower their defenses at the same time, else the balance of power becomes suddenly lopsided. There was a lot of talk in the 20th century and the early part of our own about the perils of "unilateral disarmament," i.e. getting rid of your nukes before anyone else did. The plebiscite was a way for everyone in the world to express their opinion at once, thereby committing us to all act collectively in one moment, so that nobody need ever again fear the kind of civilizational destruction that hung over us at every moment those weapons continued to exist.

The results were not unanimous. 94% approval of the plebiscite. It was lower than we had hoped, but thinking that everyone in the world could every agree on *anything* is wishful. It didn't matter,

though. In every country, the overwhelming majority of the populace had endorsed a binding commitment. The countries with the lowest “Yes” votes, the U.S. and Britain, still had slightly under 90% support. There was a popular mandate from every corner of the world. Nuclear weapons would no longer feature in global conflicts. This is perhaps the most significant human accomplishment of my lifetime, though it’s strange to think that “avoiding collective suicide” should have been so difficult. A decades-long outburst of collective insanity, in which humankind put its all its scientific learning and resources toward figuring out new ways to kill itself, had finally been brought to a close.

Now, also around this time, bathrobes began making a comeback. Just as I had always found it puzzling that people would build doomsday devices and threaten to use them, I had always wondered why more people didn’t wear bathrobes outside the home. They are, after all, luxurious and comfortable. Evidently many others shared my confusion, because I started to see more and more robed pedestrians wandering the city streets. Not only that, but the robes themselves were becoming elaborate and beautiful. Personally, I sported a violet floral-patterned silk jacquard gown with corded velvet shawl lapels and a tasseled waist belt. But mine was on the conservative side; drawing from the “suiting” practices of the Mardi Gras Indians, some were painstakingly labored over for a year or more, and depicted personally resonant images in beads and sequins. However, while pictures of the “gown craze” will undoubtedly become indelibly associated with these years (like tie-dye and the sixties, or zoot suits and the forties), it is worth remembering that it was never a “majority” phenomenon. At most, 5% of the population wore colorful dressing gowns in the streets. It was, however, an important precursor to contemporary fashion.

Sara Nelson was reelected in 2032, and by that point the Repub-

licans were barely even trying. Nearly everyone had benefited personally from one left social program or another. They had all experienced the relief of going to the doctor without having to worry about paying for it. They had seen the public schools get better. They had seen emissions dropping, cities becoming greener, the sense of hopelessness and fear dissipating. The Reaction had unified most of the country, and there was simply not much the right had left to offer. They had no vision for how healthcare could be provided to everyone, or for what a good education should look like. Nobody wanted war, few people still feared immigrants, crime was low, and we had guaranteed full employment. What on earth could conservatism say to this? What possible reason could it give for anyone to prefer it? I barely even remember the insipid candidate they ran, Thomas Cotton. Cotton himself seemed only half-hearted about his talking points—his own daughter had joined the Nelson campaign. It was such a pitiful spectacle that for the first time in my life, I nearly felt sorry for the Republican Party.

The “Zoomer” generation, born in 2000 and after, were too radical to spend even a second tempted by such rubbish as had been offered by the American right, who had sought to brand horrors like war and capitalism as “freedom” and “responsibility.” (Incredible how long this con was kept up successfully.) In fact, it was hard to keep young people from demanding heads on spikes, once they realized the magnitude of the theft that had been committed against them. The trial of George W. Bush for war crimes had set an important precedent: the formerly powerful were not off limits, and had to be held to the same standard as everyone else. If ordinary robbery would get one ten years in prison, then the fossil fuel executives who had stolen the future should have to explain why they shouldn’t be hanged. It was almost comical watching the teenage prosecutors at the Climate Trials pose exactly this question to the former CEOs of BP and Exxon, and watching them

struggle to come up with an answer. (Despite the mock guillotine built outside the courtroom, the ultimate sentence of 500 years of community service was, I think, a just one. For rich people, having to labor like an ordinary human being was the most horrifying punishment imaginable, and if anything beheading would have been merciful.)

I wrote two books that year, *The Taste For Paradox* and *Drizzles From The Wisdom Spigot*, and adopted a pair of cats, Darkone and Chamour (Darkone was the dark one.) I instituted a new policy at CAHQ by which people's offices were located either closer or further away from mine depending on their seniority. Special achievements would also give editors the right to expand their office by a foot or two. Because of the volume of turnover, this meant that editors were constantly having to move offices like a round of musical chairs, and construction crews were present daily moving walls to expand or contract offices to the appropriate sizes. Almost no work got done for the entire year, and I am told the magazine was nearly bankrupted by renovation costs. I canceled the policy in the spring of 2035.

In 2036, the Democratic Socialist El-Sayed/Lumumba ticket won easily against the Democratic ticket. The central project of the new Administration was "internationalism." The United States would finally fully sever ties with human rights abusing regimes, use organizations like USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy to aid genuine people's movements, strengthen the power of the United Nations and commit the U.S. to abiding by its mandates, and institute popular oversight of the military. We had, by this point, significantly wound down U.S. military commitments abroad and shuttered over 100 bases, but it was not until the New Global Peace Framework that Americans felt "secure" enough to begin fully transitioning the military budget to civilian works. Personally, I felt that justice in our foreign affairs

had been significantly neglected by both the Sanders and Nelson administrations, and it was encouraging to see a presidency that finally wielded U.S. influence to punish despotic states like Saudi Arabia and Israel and reward those that offered people genuine social democracy.

In 2038, nuclear fusion was perfected, and I finally finished my most important book, *Social Philosophy*. Subtitled “A Tour of Its Principles and Problems,” the work was my *magnum opus*. I considered it a revolutionary supplement to existing political philosophy, which had previously dealt almost exclusively with questions around the justice of *government*. Political theory as it stood had asked such questions as: “When is a state legitimate?” and “What rights of the individual is the government prohibited from violating?” I felt, however, that this state-centered view of political theory reflected a certain neoliberal hostility to government: it asked whether Congress was legitimate, but it did not ask whether bosses were legitimate, or college administrators, or landlords. I felt there was a need for a “social philosophy” that would not just ask how governments should be organized, but how institutions like schools and workplaces should be organized. For too long, philosophy had allowed social practices in the private sphere to escape scrutiny. *Social Philosophy* would put them under the interrogation lamp and demand that they justify themselves.⁵¹

I should mention that around this time, people had stopped reading the *New York Times*. That may sound no more significant now than the decline of the *New York Herald Tribune* in the 19th century, but there was a time at which the *Times* was considered the “Paper of Record” and treated as a credible authority on Fact and Truth. The “local journalism vouchers” policy of the Nelson years, which had allowed people to funnel money into municipal

51 For a more detailed elaboration of the original justifications for this work, see N. Robinson, “The Necessity of Social Philosophy” (2016) https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2847526

and regional papers of their choice, had significantly beefed up investigative journalism (after decades of its evisceration by evil billionaires), and the federally-funded *Public Times* was doing journalism of the same caliber and depth as the *New York Times*, but without the Manhattan provincialism or the intolerable op-ed columnists. (Subscriptions were also free.)



If you ever get time, I would recommend having a look in the Archives from about 2010-2022, and seeing what people were saying about the future of technology and the prospects for artificial intelligence. I am not sure there is any other time in history when so many ostensibly rational people were making so many delusional forecasts.

Even among experts, there was a great deal of discussion about “superintelligence,” even a “singularity.” The theory was that artificial intelligence would exceed human capacities soon, and then would keep multiplying its abilities exponentially to the point where, within a matter of minutes, we might be incapable of controlling it.

The whole thing was based on a quite elementary mistake, which was the false distinction between “hardware” and “software.” Smartphones were never going to be as “smart” as human beings, because human intelligence was of a fundamentally different *quality* than smartphone intelligence. Humans were not, in fact, computers running code, and so no code, however sophisticated, could replicate what we were doing. The false idea that fueled the AI fears was that thought was “software” and it didn’t matter what “hardware” you ran it on. A phone was the same as a brain, since both were just devices running algorithms, so that if you could figure out the “software” running on a human brain, you could

run it on a piece of electronic equipment instead and it would be “the same.” This failure to understand how critical biology was to intelligence came, I believe, from the same intellectual wrong turn that had caused us to undervalue biological life in so many other domains. We could not see the difference between robots and human beings, nonlife and life, plastic plants and real plants. So we killed all the animals and plants in our built spaces, reasoning that it did not make a difference whether the plants were real or not, and we thought we could have intelligence without biological life. (Or even that life did not exist, that it was simply another word for the kind of processes that could be programmed onto a computer.) All of this led us to kill things with impunity and to operate under the delusion that we could create “superintelligence” without understanding the first thing about the nature of life or the universe.

I quote from a futurist of forty years ago:

“[Humans] will increasingly have to deal with things nobody ever encountered before, such as superintelligent machines, engineered bodies, algorithms that can manipulate your emotions with uncanny precision, and the need to change your profession every decade.”

What arrant nonsense! What delusional idiocy! And yet this was a Thought Leader, a TED man (TED was the ridiculous name given to a conference of overconfident tech-obsessed “visionaries” who met annually to issue false prophecies). It enrages me to recall these people, because they were so dangerous, in that by painting a picture of the future world they *knew* would exist, they convinced listeners that this was indeed the only way things could be. So they would speak of a world in which employer surveillance of employees was absolute, and signing a rental contract required giving a

DNA sample to a landlord, and people would resign themselves to the fact that all of this was inevitable, and that therefore it was unobjectionable to work on bringing this world into being. So much for taking personal responsibility seriously!

In 2040, my daughter, Cassette, was born. To some older people, the name may sound odd, as they remember the device to which the word used to refer. I must admit, I found it odd when my wife suggested it, because I myself am of that generation. But as these devices had fallen deep down into the memory well, their names had once again become unfamiliar, and people were able to appreciate their phonological qualities once more. For a time I would laugh when I would meet people with names like “Modem James,” but I soon stifled my mirth, and I must admit that when defamiliarized, Cassette is a lovely name.



Let me give you a sense for what a single day as the editor of *Current Affairs* is like.

At 5:30am I awaken and don my dressing gown. If my cat has brought the newspapers in, I will pick it up from the foot of the bed and take it into the breakfast room. If the cat is being ornery, or we are having a feud, I will put on slippers and collect the papers myself from the front steps. I get the *Public Times*, which carries most of the news I need, but I also have a few of the independents and the local *New Orleans City Paper*. (On weekends I get *Where Y’at*, *Antigravity*, and the *Gambit* locally, as well as a stack of internationals.)

Breakfast is coffee, orange juice, toast, yogurt, and fresh berries. Sometimes a wurzel. I am a man of simple tastes. As I sip and munch I will review the papers to see if there are any matters our magazine should take note of. I will grind my teeth at the opinion

pages (better these days, but still aggravating) and perhaps do one of the puzzles (I am against puzzles in general—why create unnecessary problems?—but my right hand needs to do something to do while my left hand is putting my breakfast into my mouth.) My wife and I will exchange views with one another for about an hour, and then I will bathe and put on my businesswear. I will carefully select an outfit based on my assessment of how the day will go—a yellow suit for productive, blue for frustrating. Handkerchief, cufflinks, necktie, and socks will be chosen in colors and patterns that add harmonious notes to the melody of my attire. Long ago, some thought it vain to care about one's clothes. Now we understand it as altruistic—to adjust my appearance means caring about the visual experience of my peers.

I have my own microcar—a yellow convertible on three wheels that can hold a single person and a briefcase—but sometimes I enjoy taking one of the public ones, if there is something unusual on my block. (For some reason there is one that looks like a psychedelic Conestoga wagon that has been showing up recently. I have been enjoying taking it out.) I often take the Garden Route or the Sea Route, if I am not running late. The Cliff Route here is picturesque but I still find myself unable to suppress my terror so I avoid it. I do try to walk to work as often as possible, and enjoy twirling my umbrella as I greet bakers and schoolchildren, but the French Quarter is much larger these days and I am old. Wheels are occasionally inevitable.

Usually when I get to the office (7am or so) a pile of messages will have amassed overnight. A typical stack will include:

- *A student asking for advice on how to cheat on an exam.* This I will readily provide.
- *A worker asking us to investigate and write an expose on their floor supervisor.* I will immediately assign a reporter to the case.

- *Half a dozen requests for romantic advice.* These I politely decline to weigh in on. There are more than enough public love counselors to deal with these sorts of dilemmas without having to resort to magazines.
- *Invitation to some peculiar festival or other.* If I am free, I will go.
- *Complaints about something we have published.* If the complaints are correct, we will publish them. If they are rubbish, they will be incinerated.
- *Requests for our magazine to promote some new restaurant or other.* Often these will come with meal tickets. I will go and eat the meal and then fail to write about the restaurant. I consider this a form of social protest against a practice I find grubby and distasteful.
- *Death threats.* These are almost never serious, and I get far fewer than in the old days.

Once I've sifted through the mail, I will wander the halls for a bit, sipping a cappuccino and checking in on the various Departments to see how bits of the magazine are progressing. If a Department's progress is unsatisfactory, I will bark at them until conditions improve. I try to avoid firing any more junior staff than is strictly necessary but I am a strong believer in collective punishment and behave accordingly.

By 9am, it is time for the day's business to begin in earnest. I usually start by having a meeting with the Senior Editor and the Managing Editor, in which I explain whatever ideas for new projects have come to me in my dreams. A typical exchange runs as follows:

"Our magazine should be able to be disassembled into components so that people can rearrange the pages as they like and 'build their own' custom edition," I might say to the Senior and Managing editors.

“How would that even work? Wouldn’t the page numbers all be incorrect? Wouldn’t this require weaker adhesives, causing the pages to fall out in the mail? The structural integrity of every issue would be compromised beyond repair,” the Senior Editor might reply.

“The page numbers themselves will be detachable, so that won’t be an issue.”

“Uh huh. How much do you think this will cost?”

“Listen, Whiskers.⁵² We have a division of labour at this publication. The financials are a matter for the Financial Editor. My role is conceptual.”

“It’s just that when you proposed including miniature chocolates in each issue, it ended up being very sticky and very expensive.” At this, I bristle.

“I do not need you to bring up the miniature chocolates. You are always bringing up the miniature chocolates. Not all experiments can be expected to succeed. There is no similarity whatsoever between my present proposal and the previous debacle.”

“Which previous debacle?” says the Managing Editor. “Your idea for a ‘glass magazine’ resulted in a class action lawsuit from six hundred parents whose children had shards embedded in them.”

“You are gratuitously bringing up irrelevant incidents in an attempt to humiliate me, and I find it unkind and unhelpful. This meeting is at a close.”

Usually this just means we will reconvene in 10 minutes, by which time the Senior and Managing editors will have adjusted their tone and resolved to stay away from touchy subjects. For the most part, however, I am amenable to canceling my schemes if they are inflexibly committed to obstruction.

After the editorial meeting concludes, I will usually take a phone

52 I frequently refer to Senior Editor Brianna Rennix as “Whiskers Killjoy,” after the fussy anthropomorphic kitten in my *Cat Dastardly* novels. She pretends that she is irritated by this but I am certain that she finds it endearing.

call with an Important Personage. Sometimes this is a member of the Regional Council, sometimes it is the Opinion Editor at the *Public Times*, sometimes it is a Subscriber. I believe it is important to talk to people, because this is how one comes to understand things.

Usually there will be a stack of Final Drafts on my desk for review, and around 10:30 I will dive into them. I use a purple pen (red is too harsh) to indicate areas I believe could use tweaks or improvement, and a green pen for positive comments like "Job well done!" or "I say!" Because my handwriting is unintelligible, after I submit my comments I will write out clarifications for people whose Final Drafts I did yesterday and are puzzled by what my symbols mean. These clarifications will be no more intelligible, and usually I ultimately end up having to turn the whole editing process over to someone else. Nevertheless, I find it gratifying to write remarks, and so I continue to do so.

By 11:30 it will be time for a late-morning cup of tea, which I will have in the Indoor Tea Garden. The editor is given an Editor's Gazebo, but it is not so special a privilege as you might think. Everyone has a gazebo, and sometimes if the Editor's Gazebo is being pressure-washed I will have my tea in the Deputy Typesetter's Gazebo instead. We are not terribly formal about making everyone sit in the proper gazebo, which is one of the things I like about Socialism.

Noon will find me back at my desk, usually looking at page proofs. Cate will come in to go over my Calendar, and tell me if there are any upcoming Events. If there are, she will remind me of all the things that I accidentally failed to do last time that I must make sure to do this time. (For example, last time I gave a speech at a high school commencement ceremony, I knocked the school mascot unconscious, upsetting the children. Cate will tell me not to do this again.) I always keep a travel bag packed in case I have

to leave unexpectedly, but because I try to expect the unexpected, I seldom need the bag.

From twelve-thirty to two, I engage in recreational reading. It is important for an editor to read widely. There are, of course, so many books that it is impossible to read any single one from beginning to end, but I will usually make a stack of the Classics and dip in and out of them at random. A paragraph of Melville, four pages of Aristotle, a thing Toni Morrison once said. In this way, one becomes a broad-minded individual and can impress one's peers by quoting from seemingly everything. During my reading hours, I will also brush up on my nonfiction, perhaps with a fact or two from the *Current Affairs Big Book of Facts & Factoids* or a bit of history from the *Oxford History of Kites and Gliders* or some other such volume. To make one's knowledge more "systemic," it is important to supplement with some social theory, like the *Disquisitions* or the *Apologies*. I am not much for metaphysics, but a bit of philosophy can sometimes be as important as a daily vitamin pill or horse suppository. "Mere fact cannot furnish a gatehouse," as Samuel Johnson is quoted as having said.

If it is a Friday, then I will tape my discussion program, *Electric Discourse*, from the television studio on floor thirty-two. Usually this will involve an interview with some political or literary figure, in which I will ask rude questions and expect to be answered. Then I will give some comment of my own during the "My Turn" segment, which will be followed by a satirical skit, an animated sequence, and the weekly Musical Guest (almost always gna).

If it is not a Friday, then assuming it is not a Tuesday (the day on which the *Radio Hour* is broadcast), the hour from two to three will be spent calling writers to try to assign pieces that pop into my head. For instance, I might think to myself "We've never written about *sauce*. I wonder if there's a political angle." Or "Let's publish a thing for Kropotkin's birthday." And then I will call someone I

think could pull it off, and demand they write it. If they decline, I will increase the amount of money on offer until they accept. Negotiating is a core part of the editor's duty.

At three more tea is taken, this time out on the Gallery. If it is early in the week, the pastry selection will be excellent. By Thursday, the chefs will be losing their mojo. Personally, I live for custard tart day. All too infrequent, but unbeatable when it arrives. My favored tea is a fruity Parisian blend with a hint of lemony bergamot. Despite the horrified protests of my colleagues, I usually dump a heaping splash of milk into it.

At four o'clock, I usually have a radio interview on *Four O'Clock Commentary*. I am to give my opinion on the goings-on in the world. Usually I will be handed a list of my opinions before the program, which helps me considerably in remembering what I think. I am one of the most frequent guests on *Four O'Clock Commentary*. The booking producer appreciates my ability to declaim passionately on any subject without requiring any prior knowledge of it.

At four-thirty, it will usually be time for me to begin my personal writing. I have to produce regular pieces for *Current Affairs* and a thrice-weekly column for the *Guardian*, which requires me to emit output at a steady clip. I have instructed my deputies that I am under no circumstances to be disturbed during my writing sessions, though they occasionally take this command somewhat too literally.⁵³ Usually I can produce 1000 words in about fifteen minutes, though I must subsequently go through and do some general adjustments, adding verbs here and there, checking to see if there is a source that confirms my opinion, pruning obvious self-contradiction, and mak-

53 When a live python was let loose in the building in 2069, it would have helped if I had been informed, so that I would have been somewhat less startled when I found it staring at me from my air conditioning vent. The python belonged to an employee's child. Both child and snake were henceforth banned from the premises, resulting in an NLRB complaint.

ing sure each and every *mot* is indeed *le mot juste*.⁵⁴

The writing will last me through dinnertime, and the end of the workday. If I am finishing up a significant project, I may stay and have supper in the office—usually beans. I try, however, to wrap things up and return home to dine with my wife. If I am writing an article, I will think of some abrupt ending that will seem intentional (“And that’s all she wrote, folks.”) Then I pack up my evening-bag and depart, making sure to turn the lights off and unplug the fire alarm. I may give the office cat one final tummy rub, should he be in the mood. (Today, he is not.)

Then my evening saunter homeward. If it is raining, I will forget my umbrella, and if it is not, I will remember it. I will take the microcar if necessary, or even the subway train. (There are many ways to get from one place to another.) Arriving home, I will embrace the spouse, and we will proceed to make dinner together while reciting a play or Socratic dialogue. Sometimes we might have a Personage over to dine with us, though I find it wearying to eat in groups. Dinner at home is usually some kind of savory pancake, drizzled in flavor-liquid and accompanied by a side salad and cheesy baguette. There will be dessert, which is inevitably pie. (Occasionally baklava, but usually only in pistachio season.)

After dinner we will go for a constitutional, or to the Theater, or the Amusement Arcade. The streets are lively around this time, with performers performing and talkers talking. We might go down to one of the playgrounds for a turn on the equipment, or wander through some adventure tunnels or down an evening bridge. In the summer there are microcar races and animal shows. Sometimes there is a Ball to attend, though nowadays I try to avoid these, and will usually locate some lame excuse to drop out. (Apology notes follow: “I am sorry I did not attend your func-

54 French for “the word justice.”

tion. I had lost a cufflink and so could not attend.”) We often go to Talks, so that we can learn something new about shipwrecks or minerals or hyacinths or tadpoles. The quality of Talks has gotten much better in the last several years and they are now thoroughly satisfying to sit through.

There are endless possible ways to pass an evening, and usually by 10:30 I am thoroughly pooped. Sometimes I will jot down some thoughts before bed (“dog tongue cover art”) or bash out a silly poem for the amusement of a grandchild. But I cannot stay conscious long after 11. At that time, I have my bedtime crumpet, cosshel the felts, and pour myself into my pajamas. The editor’s day concluded, he tumbles into his sleeping-sheets and lets his mind drift off toward the land of tomorrow’s ideas.



The first 20 years of change, from 2021 to 2041, were radical in what they meant for people’s economic and political lives, as well as for the health of the planet itself. But it was not until the mid 40s that the world began to actually *look* substantially different. If you had showed pictures of 2040 to the people of 2003, they would have not have thought much had been altered. Many of the changes that occurred, radical though they were in their consequences, did not affect the outward form of things. The cultural renaissance of the 40s, however, changed the entire *appearance* of the world as well as its feel. The buildings changed. The vehicles changed. The clothing changed. The design of everyday objects changed. Today, we live in a built environment that would be completely unrecognizable to someone of 2000, or even someone of 2040. It has finally begun to feel like a new world altogether.

By 2020, we had been in a period of cultural stagnation and uncertainty for some considerable time. The same shirts were

worn, the same buildings built. There was a creeping homogeneity—one could go to cities across the world and see identical shops, identical products, identical motor cars, identical structures. The same music would be playing, the same films showing. It was all rather sad.

Steps taken in the 30s started to help matters. Chain stores were banned,⁵⁵ which meant in practice that if hamburgers were served at something called a McDonald's in Chicago, they would have to be served a McDougal's in Indianapolis. This had some positive effects, and some predictably weird ones. The establishment of the federal Bureau of Local Heterogeneity, which offered grants to municipal projects that created local difference, also spurred some change. That was why Bridgeport, Connecticut became the "City of Silhouettes," building dozens upon dozens of bizarre sculptures designed to cast evocative shadows. (These were very cleverly engineered so that over the course of a day, the shadows would act out plots as the sun moved across the sky. As resources were directed away from military matters and the production of garbage consumer products, we were able to put our finest minds more and more toward questions like how to make shadows dance most interestingly. We had people with mathematics PhDs working on that problem!)

The revolution in architecture, however, began in 2042. That year, a design collective called the New Maximalists—located, I am proud to say, in New Orleans—released their manifesto, *Towards a New Maximalism*.⁵⁶ It was little read at first, though its words would eventually form the core of the next decade's aesthetic consensus. It was pretentious and windy, but such are manifestos:

55 Chain meant, for legal purposes, over eight locations.

56 Not to be confused with my own volume of commentary on the movement, *Notes on the New Maximalism: Toward a Quality of Quantity* (Current Affairs Press, 2050).

It is the contention of the New Maximalists that the Future must be destroyed. Let us be clear: by this, we do not mean that there is to be no future. We refer instead to the Future, the hideous image that has been embraced as the inevitable endpoint of our technological trajectory. Why is it, we ask, that the Future is thought to be all sweeping lines and asymmetrical shapes and unadorned geometries? Why, in the Future, do humans look as if they are unwanted, does biological life seem like an unwelcome guest? Why does every image of even the most sophisticated Future look like a place without romance, mystery, nostalgia?

Nostalgia! It has become a dirty word. Nostalgia, properly understood, simply refers to the need for psychological continuity, needing a link between past and present, needing to be located IN TIME. To reject nostalgia is to embrace hideous, scarring rupture, the breaking of all lines of cultural tradition. This "Year Zero" approach, common to Le Corbusier and the Khmer Rouge, is inevitably rejected by the public, but is imposed on them from above by a fascistic architectural profession. The public do not want The Future! They want a future!

New Maximalists contend that the minimalist space is a wasteland, a place where the brain goes to die from a starvation of simulation. Nay, it is worse than a wasteland, which at least has waste in it. Minimalism is death, impoverishment, hopelessness. Minimalism is a dead end, because once one has stripped everything away, where is one to go next?

Maximalism gives us the possibility of a future, by opening up trillions of new possibilities. Any one ornament on any one building may have a million layers. That ornament may itself be part of a constellation of millions. The Maximalist knows, as Gaudi and the great Gothic builders did,

that a space must be endlessly fascinating, that one must be able to look at it anew ten thousands times over and always be finding more.

It is not, as some have alleged, our view that "quantity is quality." Instead we value quantity of quality. How many good things are there? We believe the answer must be "many." Let us maximize magic, minimize despair! Let us be endlessly complex and beautiful, like the great Islamic architects from whom we have forgotten so much. Let a New Maximalism blossom, and let it as be as intricate as any garden.

I am fortunate to possess one of the original copies of the manifesto, which I found fluttering down the street shortly after the first printing. (Inexplicably, the Maximalists first distributed the pamphlet by dropping thousands of copies from helicopters.) I was struck by the fractal-like floral pattern on the cover, which was reminiscent of William Morris. Indeed, the New Maximalists owed something to the Arts and Crafts movement, whose love of the dense patterns of nature they had updated for a new century.

One did not see the effects of this movement for some time. But it was quietly catching on among a new generation of design professionals, bootleg editions of the Manifesto being passed around in architecture schools. Soon, subtle changes began to creep in to certain new constructions. An elaborate piece of latticework here, a rose window there, a gargoyle or an onion dome or some negligible bit of filigree. The minimalist consensus had been so strong that students who attempted these experiments were often flunked by their professors, who incessantly repeated that rigid (and nonsensical) dogma that "design must look like its time," which had been used to write off anything that looked as if it could have been

built in prior centuries as “kitsch” or “pastiche” or “Disneyland.”⁵⁷ But pastiche was *interesting*, it was fun, and the received idea that it was immoral and unintellectual was destined to be destroyed.

The buildings built by New Maximalists were, indeed, endlessly fascinating. They made Notre-Dame and the Sagrada Familia look like shipping warehouses.⁵⁸ They were the most visually stunning creations in the history of human constructive endeavor, governed by the principle (somehow previously forgotten) that beauty is “objective” in a very particular sense: *if a thing makes you go “Ah!” and you want to keep looking at it forever, then it is objectively beautiful*. The buildings of the late 20th century and early 21st had failed, and the way we knew they had failed was that nobody wanted to keep looking at them for long. The New Maximalists succeeded in giving people places that made them unable to avert their gaze, places that seemed so perfect in their delicate and elaborate patterns that one almost could not bear to look at them. To anyone who grew up, as I did, in a land of Target parking lots and highway on-ramps, it was difficult not to weep at this proliferation of splendor.



I should mention that the moon had been colonized at this point. This bizarre short-lived experiment is mostly forgotten nowadays, but at the time it had almost completely solved the ongoing problem of Libertarians. Thanks to male obstinacy, it had been impossible to convince *everyone* of the virtue of the Socialist proj-

57 The fallacy was obvious: the designs done in our time create the look of our time, and mere deference to a Zeitgeist without acknowledgment of the designer's role in creating it means mindless deference to a frozen consensus. If a designer decides that castles should come back, then this can just as easily be the design of our time as anything else, just as previous eras' architects happily “revived” the styles of hundreds of years before.

58 The New Maximalists also rebuilt Pennsylvania Station in New York to its exact original specifications, restoring the grandeur of one of the world's lost architectural jewels.

ect, and a small minority clung to the belief that being an asshole was a political philosophy. These were the Libertarians, led by an “entrepreneur” named Musk, who had been fired from his electric car company and briefly imprisoned for securities fraud. An obvious crank, he had gathered around him a small “moon cult.”

Most of Musk’s wealth had been seized in the 20s, but he still had sway at a rocketship company. The idea was that the spirits of free enterprise ought to be back out of the bottle to wreak havoc everywhere. “Creative destruction” was the horrifying phrase used. Nobody wanted this, and it was plain that the world Libertarians dreamed of would be miserable. It was, however, perfectly lawful to go to the moon, and no fuss was raised when Musk began organizing an expedition. Congress even appropriated some funds to send him there.

The idea was to establish a small permanent colony, one free from “statism,” where the only law was that you could not aggress upon the life or private property of another. Many former business executives, who had until then been in quiet retirement, signed up to join the mission, which they thought had the potential to demonstrate capitalism’s productive superiority and reverse the social trends of the last few decades. The planned city was called “Galt Village” because of course it was.

It collapsed almost immediately. Capitalists did not, in fact, turn out to be particularly resourceful people. They were not used to manual labor, but had always relied on putting their money to work for them. On the moon, of course, money is worthless. The individualist mindset of the colonists led to constant squabbling and violence. No system could be organized, because nobody wanted to work toward a “collective” end. The collapse was instantaneous and horrifying. By a few months into the experiment, cannibalism was rampant.

The United Nations sent a relief ship, to bring back the strag-

glers and the intact corpses. The moon was declared a commons, and treated like a national park. Today, of course, it is a popular holiday destination. I visited a few years ago, and found the experience overhyped. The view, however, is unbeatable.



A different solution was ultimately found for the Libertarians. A gigantic sea platform, two miles wide, was placed in the center of the Pacific Ocean, about 500 miles north of French Polynesia. All who rejected global governance were free to go and inhabit the platform. Several thousand took the opportunity. The platform was also used as a dumping ground for incorrigible criminals, housing convicts with infamous names like Thiel and Kaczynski.⁵⁹ Thanks to a constant inflow of UE aid, the community did not suffer the fate of the moon village. Reports from the area are spotty, but it does seem as if an informal kind of Socialism has developed over time.

I can see why those detested the very concept of “world government” would have fled during this period. It was, after all, the time of the New Global Rights Framework. Books like *Together at Last* and *The Earth We Govern* had convincingly argued that it was time for us to rethink the “international” order entirely. It was necessary to reorganize governments, giving a world government the capacity to enforce universal rights, mostly eliminating nation states, and devolving a great deal of decision-making power to regional and municipal units.

The Rights Framework itself was in large part simply an affirmation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But this time, a united world government would be given the power and budget

59 Thanks to the number of egotistical former billionaires who ended up on the platform, this evacuation is known wryly as “the exile of the titans.”

to actually turn a “guarantee” into a reality rather than a meaningless rhetorical aspiration.

Hence the Global Health Service (GHS), a planetary institution ensuring free and equal health care for every person on earth. Nowadays, going to a GHS hospital or clinic is so routine that it is difficult to imagine life before it existed. Let me assure you, things were *very* different. Each country had its own healthcare system, with its own (often byzantine) methods of financing and providing services. Some, like Britain, already operated on the GHS model, simply providing hospitals, funding them with taxes, and making care free at the point of use. Others, like the United States, had private insurance “companies” with different individualized “plans.” If you didn’t have an insurance plan, you could end up paying absurd amounts of money if you became sick. The whole thing was a mess.⁶⁰

The establishment of the GHS was possibly the largest coordinated action ever engaged in by humankind. 100,000 new health centers opened across 190 countries, staffed by 100,000,000 people. In some places, existing clinics and hospitals simply transitioned to become GHS outposts, but many facilities were all new. Of course, the whole thing that been criticized from the start. Go back and read the press from the time and you’ll see just how many thought it was designed to end in some sort of calamity, with millions killed by a globalist-socialist bureaucracy. It didn’t, as we know, in part because efficiency and user experience were placed at the absolute center of all plans. The GHS administrators were committed not just to making healthcare truly universal, but making it good, and making patients feel satisfied with their care. The heads of the service were drawn from the world’s great university teaching hospitals, and were doggedly determined that the enter-

60 For a historical description of conditions, see if you can find a copy of Timothy Faust’s *Health Justice Now* in your local library’s Archives division.

prise should not fail. I do think it could have if we had not selected the right people and they had not been so attentive to the potential problems of mismanagement, waste, and corruption.

There was, at this point, a broader push towards having a more robust global government. In the earlier decades of my life, “global government” had become a feared idea, in part because people had been convinced that all government was bad and state provision of services was the first step down the road to serfdom. It took some time to shake off the weight of this ideology and to begin to look at things sensibly. In fact, a *democratic* global government, on that ordinary people felt represented by and that responded well to their needs, was an essential tool for generating peace, prosperity, and equality, and intervening to stop individual governments’ assaults on their people’s freedom.

Strangely enough, it did not actually require much new thinking. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, still held up as an accurate statement of humanity’s noblest aspirations. The problem was that nobody had ever taken it seriously. The internationalist idealism that had been so strong after World War II steadily dissipated over the next decades, to the point where the United Nations had almost become a joke by the time I came of age.

But the UDHR’s provisions were sound and well worded. Let us recall the thrust of its thirty provisions, which during my own childhood were not even taught in schools.

1. *All human beings are born free and equal, endowed with reason and conscience. They should adopt a spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood toward one another.*
2. *Everyone is entitled to their rights regardless of race, color, sex, language, religion, political opinion, national origin, property, birth, or other status.*

3. *Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security.*
4. *Nobody shall be held in slavery or servitude.*
5. *No torture. No inhumane or degrading punishment.*
6. *Everyone is a person before the law.*⁶¹
7. *Everyone receives equal protection of the law.*
8. *Everyone has the right to an effective remedy before a tribunal when their rights are violated.*
9. *Nobody shall be arbitrarily arrested, detained, or exiled.*
10. *Everyone is innocent until proven guilty. You cannot be convicted of a crime if it wasn't a crime at the time you committed it.*
11. *Everyone has the right to an impartial tribunal in the determination of their rights or the adjudication of criminal charges.*
12. *Everyone has the right to privacy.*
13. *Everyone has the right to freedom of movement within their country, and to leave their country if they don't like it.*
14. *Everyone has the right to seek (and be granted) asylum from persecution.*
15. *Everyone has the right to a nationality.*
16. *Everyone has the right to marry. Marriage must be freely decided and consensual. Families are protected.*
17. *Nobody shall be arbitrarily deprived of their property.*
18. *Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.*
19. *Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression.*
20. *Everyone has the right to freedom of association.*

61 Believe it or not, this was not universally accepted even in our century, and there were U.S. cases deeming that unauthorized immigrants did not constitute legal persons under some circumstances.

21. *The will of the people is the basis for government authority and everyone has a right to participate in government. Elections must be fair.*
22. *Everyone has the right to social security and nations must work together to ensure that everyone has what is necessary to secure their dignity and prosperity.*
23. *Everyone has the right to equal pay for equal work. Everyone has the right to join a union. Everyone has the right to freely choose their employment and to work under just and favorable conditions.*
24. *Everyone has the right to rest and leisure. Working hours must be reasonable and people must receive holidays.*
25. *Everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living, including food, housing medical care, and social services. Everyone will receive security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, old age, or other circumstances beyond one's control. Motherhood and childhood deserve special assistance.*
26. *Everyone has the right to a free education. Education shall promote understanding and tolerance.*
27. *Everyone has a right to participate in the cultural life of the community, and to enjoy the arts and share in the benefits of scientific advancement.*
28. *Everyone has the right to a social and international order that realizes these rights.*
29. *Everyone has duties to their community. These rights can be limited only in order to achieve a fuller realization of the full range of rights. They cannot be exercised contrary to the purposes of the Declaration.*
30. *No state, group, or person, has a right to destroy these rights.*

Now, when I say that nobody took any of this seriously, I mean just that. Much of this is pretty unambiguous, and yet plenty of people around the world were enslaved, or had their right to join unions undermined. The United States did not provide free housing or medical care. Plenty of countries tortured and killed. The Declaration not only said that these failures violated people's rights, but said that people were entitled to seek *remedy* for those violations in an international tribunal. That would have been seen as a joke: imagine a homeless person demanding an international tribunal to condemn the United States for not housing them. Or a Palestinian complaining about being tortured by Israeli security services. But if the Declaration was quite clear. If we took human rights seriously, this was what we owed people. It did not intend rights as aspirational statements of abstract principles, but stated over and over again that these were real guarantees to be enforced by the international community, and their violation was absolutely unacceptable.

So the New Global Rights Framework was not really very new at all. It just meant having robust democratic international institutions that were capable of actually carrying out the guarantees that had been made, and holding violators to account.

Another curious development of this time, or more accurately a development that made the previous practice seem curious, was the universal adoption of endonyms in naming countries. Previously, in English we had used words like "Japan," "Spain," and "Germany" to describe the countries of Nippon, España, and Deutschland, even though these were not their names. This bizarre practice, the equivalent of calling someone by a mangled name you made up for them rather than the name they asked you to call them, was so normalized as to be unremarkable. Fortunately, it ceased, and maps showed "Japan" as 日本 and Ukraine as Украина, with students taught the proper pronunciation. (All new maps were also printed with the South Pole at the top, and the North Pole at the

bottom, on the theory that people had become too used to the irrational, incorrect idea that the Global South was beneath the Global North, even though the Earth does not actually have a top or bottom in space.)

Of course, within a few years, nation-states would decline entirely, but the beefing up of the UN's rights mandate (the United Nations became the United Earth a few years after), the creation of democratic global organizations, and the greater teaching of world languages and cultures, all made "globalization" somewhat less of a nightmare and took us somewhat further toward the kind of planetary harmony of which the UDHR's framers had dreamed.



In 2043, the fortunes of the magazine subsided somewhat. The previous year, I had expanded the standard issue size from 80 pages to 200, which was not only costly but required us to do twice as much labor. My reasoning for the change was set forth in an internal memorandum:

Staff members and friends,

Today I am proud to announce that we will be more than doubling the size of our monthly editions. I believe strongly in this decision, and am certain it is in the best interest of our publication going forward. If our magazine is to be respected, it must stand out from other newsstand fare. The best way to do this is by being larger than the competition. As Trotsky said, "quantity is a quality of its own." I hope you will enjoy joining me on this exciting new phase of our company's journey.

Yours,

The Editor

Staff enthusiasm for the shift was more muted than I had hoped. I even detected faint grumblings of discontent, which alarmed me considerably. The Senior Editor told me that I was “out of my fucking mind” and the idea was “positively demented.” I reminded the Senior Editor that the *Kohl’s Catalog* was more than 400 pages long. Did she think we had less to say than Kohl’s? My retort rendered her speechless.

“Whiskers,” I continued affably. “This is a magazine with ambitions. If you do not want to work at a magazine with ambitions, *Current Affairs* is not the place for your talents.”

I could see that she was softening, and would soon see my point of view.

“I cannot fucking believe what an inconsiderate fucking numbskull you’re being,” she joked. “And will you *cut it out with that Whiskers shit?*” I gave a chuckle and patted her on the back of the wrist. Elevated banter is what makes the *Current Affairs* workplace a joy. Nobody minds working long hours when each day is full of barbed wit and cheerful exchanges of opinion.

The matter settled, we dove into the project. It is no small task to come up with 120 extra pages of premium content every 30 days, even when one commands the best magazine staff in all of Orleans Parish. I suggested that about a third be used for pictures of birds, on the sound logic that “everybody loves birds.” To this, the Financial Editor raised a noisy (and in my view unsound) objection. He did not love birds at all. In fact, he had had unpleasant childhood experiences with birds, and consequently feared and resented them. He could not see the point of birds, he declared loudly, and he was not going to risk terrifying readers with full-page photographs of wide-open beaks.

“Birds are creepy and no one relates to them,” he thundered, pounding the conference table to emphasize his point. Sensing that other editors were beginning to agree with him, and fearing

a mutiny that could damage the enlargement project altogether, I proposed using spiders instead. The response was even more negative. Spiders, it was said, lacked personality. They were sort of thing you didn't want to find on your face in the night. Waking up to find yourself surrounded by kittens was a joy. Waking up covered in live spiders would be unsettling.

"Fine then!" I exclaimed. "What is an animal that everyone likes?"

And so it was that the "Capybara Department" was established.



The capybaras took care of a good chunk of the new page count. But much more was needed. I came up with the following proposals:

- **A two-page "celebrity crossword" that would be extremely difficult to solve.** — All of the clues would be opaque references to celebrities ("A hairy hero, seldom foiled.") There would be at least 240 clues in each puzzle. Solving it would be a giant pain in the ass.
- **A "Person Who Could Be You."** — Each month we would send a photographer out into the streets to surreptitiously take a picture of a random person. Then we would run the photo in the magazine. If the person in question was you, you would win a prize.
- **Media Criticism** — For the public to stay reasonably well-informed, it must have a clear-eyed view of the press. Part of our job as a magazine, therefore, was to show why all the other magazines were duplicitous bourgeois propaganda. Each month,

we would explain “Why The *Times* Sucks” or “Why The *Economist* Sucks.” In this way, we felt ourselves to be carrying forth the intellectual legacy of Chomsky & Herman’s *Manufacturing Consent*.

- **Paper dolls** — Our market research division (my nickname for my four-year-old granddaughter) had confirmed that people enjoy playing with paper dolls. So each month we published dolls of prominent public figures that could be cut out and festooned/adorned with colourful garments. Confirming my instincts, this was soon to become the most popular section of the magazine by far.
- **Utopia Of The Month** — Each month, we had one of our staff artists illustrate a giant fold-out of a possible utopia. These included The World Where Animals Can Vote, The World Of Water Slides, and The World Where Cities Are Built Suspended By Ropes Over Canyons And You Have To Take Terrifying Rickety Bridges Everywhere. I realize this all seems quite tame now.
- **Séance Club** — In which we impersonate a dead public figure and write a news analysis in their voice.
- **Lefty Shark Tank** — An idea adapted from the *Radio Hour*. *Shark Tank* was a silly television program in which inventors begged billionaires for money. In our adaptation of the concept, a public figure proposed an ambitious left-wing idea, and the *Current Affairs* editorial staff had to be convinced it was worth “investing” in, i.e. that it should be enacted. Ideas that were proposed included: selecting Congress by sortition, allowing everyone

around the world to vote in US elections, redrawing state borders to coincide with watersheds, and lowering the voting age to 12. Of course, all of these sound quite modest now, or are the law of the land.

With all this detritus amassed, we not only had a 200 page magazine, but a 200 page magazine so jam-packed with Contents that most of the text had to be less than 6pt font. When the first copies showed up at the office, it was clear our mission had succeeded. The thing was a literal doorstop. It looked and felt exactly like nice weighty furniture catalog. Kohl's could suck it.

"My God," I said at the editorial meeting, struggling to lift a copy off the table. "You could kill pigeons with this thing."

The Financial Editor smiled a devious smile.



But the taste of victory did not linger long on the editorial tongue. The post office refused to carry the larger edition, on the grounds it was injuring carriers. Airport newsstands said the new tomes were causing planes to become overweight and crash into mountaintops. (No evidence was ever provided for this, and lawsuits from survivors were dismissed.) We hadn't raised the price when we had increased the volume, meaning that the revenue we received from each copy was now dwarfed by the cost of producing it. Thus every issue sold actually hurt the company, and it was in our financial interest to *discourage* people from purchasing *Current Affairs*. At an editorial meeting, I announced a solution to the problem:

"As you know, we are once again facing ruin. The new magazine size is popular, but the more people purchase it, the more money we lose. The problem is in urgent need of a solution. Therefore,

today I am announcing a multi-million dollar advertising campaign, aimed at dissuading people from reading *Current Affairs*. I realize this is not optimal, but it is the only fiscally prudent decision.”

“Uh,” said the Financial Editor.

“Do you have something you would like to contribute, Mr. Abraham?” I replied, glaring at him. The editorial board is a democracy in which all are welcome to offer their say, but I do consider it improper to undermine my judgment.

“I really, really do not think that is what we should be doing right now.”

“Your objection is noted, Mr. Abraham. However, I would remind you that the task of the Financial Editor is not to supervise the business’s finances, but to supervise editorial coverage of financial issues.” I waved a copy of his contract.

“Okay. Right. Yeah. Do whatever then.” It was pleasing that he had come around to my position.

Unfortunately, the dissuasion campaign proved disastrous. People thought it was a clever bit of reverse psychology, and bought copies of *Current Affairs* in greater numbers than ever before. We won a prize from the marketing industry for our creativity. I sobbed daily as I watched ever more copies being printed and enjoyed. Every time I saw a child reading *Current Affairs* on a park bench, I wanted to tear it out of her hands and shout:

“DON’T YOU KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING? If you cared *at all* about *Current Affairs* you would never have bought this.” I felt, however, that the harsh mathematics of the business world would be unintelligible to preschoolers.

These were difficult days. S. Chapin Domino bellowed at me regularly through the communication tubes, and there was little I could say in my defense. I was eating his money alive, quite literally. There was no shimmering hole at the end of my tunnel of despair.



Ultimately, a solution was found. But it was not a happy one. On the advice of management consultants, we were to cut the page count from 200 pages to *two*, until we recouped the last year's losses. Now, I don't know how much you know about the magazine industry, but a two-page magazine is very unusual indeed. You cannot even open it, because it is just a front and a back. It eliminates all content and thereby, in my orthodox view, eliminates the very purpose of a magazine itself. I objected strenuously to the idea, calling it "stupid." I am not usually one for harsh language, but I felt the circumstances called for it.

As I predicted, circulation of the new "lean" *Current Affairs* dropped precipitously. But so did expenses. Selling a product consisting of almost nothing turns out to be spectacularly profitable. Soon we were, as the song says, "Back in the Black." I had to admit, management consultants were actually good people.

Our newfound financial success allowed me to commission a stern-looking bust of Frederick Douglass for the lobby. Its effect on morale was immediate—people said they felt "intimidated" and "judged" by it, which was precisely what I had hoped. Things were truly looking up.

This was during the period when costumes began to be worn every day. Actually, I should clarify: while today one refers to one's "costume" as one's everyday wear, then a "costume" referred to a set of clothes that were unusually elaborate. An actor playing a giant bird wore a "costume" but a person simply wore "clothes." What happened around this time was that people began wearing progressively more elaborate clothes as their day to day wear, outfits that would have been called costumes. So, for instance, you would not have worn epaulettes or a peacock tail to work in 2025—this

was a “costume,” and thus ridiculous. If you chose to dress as an animal, that would make you a “furry,” not simply a person whose costume was an animal, and you would be classified as part of a deviant subculture. The only appropriate times to dress exuberantly were Halloween and Mardi Gras. The change in this, so that one could sport a pirate hat any day one liked, or one’s costume could be a kitten, was a triumph for the liberation of self-expression. Nowadays, given the amount of time and effort nearly every person puts in to developing their costume, “people-watching” is far more endlessly fascinating. (It was never dull, but now one simply never wants to take one’s eyes off people!) I am so fortunate to have finally found myself in a time and culture that permits, even encourages, my desire to remain dressed as a tuxedoed flamingo through all seasons.

This was the time when selective “rewilding” initiatives were being put into place, with formerly populated areas being turned back over to plants and animals. Urban growth boundaries had been put into place, in order to end the phenomenon of Sprawl. Some of the uglier and less redeemable cities had been emptied out entirely, and were now haunted. (Quite literally. Mechanical ghosts were installed, and all kinds of other enjoyable “scares.” It was ever such fun to go at night for a bit of “urban exploring.”)

Now, all cars had been electrified by this point. But they had also gotten smaller in a very interesting way. Driving cars was found to be intrinsically pleasurable for some, which is one reason that fully autonomous cars were only ever adopted to a limited extent. (Although the fully autonomous electric taxis, which were exact replicas of 1950s yellow Checker Cabs, were abundant, cheerful, and convenient.) To maintain the joys of the driving experience without creating unnecessary waste and traffic, “microcars” were introduced, which were little one-seaters, much like go-karts, which were made in endless different styles (most had a 1920s

flair) and were endless fun to zip along bike paths in (that was legal) with the top down, swerving at the elderly to give them a fright. If we had drawn a picture of the future in way-back-when, microcars would not have appeared in it, but what a boon and a thrill they have been!

The Ocasio-Cortez presidency, beginning in 2045, would prove to be the last. It was somewhat underwhelming, to be honest. I do not remember much about these years, and they were somewhat “apolitical.” Most of the television shows and books were about food, which was consistently getting better. The presidency ended not with a bang, but with a whimper. (Followed by a bang. There were fireworks.)



It was around this time that *Current Affairs* began to develop a serious professional rivalry with *Highlights for Children*. I had never really thought of them as a competitor publication, since their magazine largely consists of coloring activities and ours is sober-minded political analysis. I would not have stoked the fight intentionally, and in retrospect, had I known what would transpire I would have responded quite differently to a phone call I received in the spring of 2049.

“The editor of *Highlights* is on Line 5 for you,” Cate said. I wondered what on earth they could want.

“What on earth could they want, I wonder,” I said to Cate.

“I don’t know, but you’d better be careful. She’s somewhat notorious for her personality.”

“Her personality?”

“She’s what they call... irascible.”

“I’ve seen S. Chapin Domino when he’s out of cigars. I *think* I can handle irascible. Ho ho ho!” I clutched my belly as I laughed.

"Ok, but also be warned: she's five years old."

"No!"

"Yes. Very precocious. Precocious and temperamental. Watch yourself."

"Cate, I am not going to have trouble with a *five-year-old girl*. Patch her through." Cate patched the editor through. The next words I heard were so loud I dropped the receiver.

"LISTEN YOU PUTZ. I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU TAKE *HIGHLIGHTS* FOR, BUT IF YOU TRY ANY OF THAT SHIT WITH OUR TRUCKS AGAIN YOU WILL FIND YOURSELF IN ACUTE PHYSICAL PAIN AND I DO MEAN PAIN." It was distinctly the voice of a five-year-old girl, but with the general snarling demeanor of a cocaine-addled Wall Street trader.

"I... excuse me, who *are* you?"

"Betty Rose Dewdrop, *Highlights*. If you don't know who I am, I don't see how you can fairly call yourself an editor. *Highlights* is an American institution. An institution, goddamnit!"

"Are you really five years old?"

"Let's hear a little less about how old I am and a little more about how you're going to fix the unholy goddamn mess your magazine has gotten my magazine into."

"Your last name is *Dewdrop*? That's adorable."

"Get bent, shitface. This is business, not recess. No more hop-scotch for Betty Rose Dewdrop."

"Ok, what is it you're calling about again?"

"Your driver. Your van. One of your magazine's dysfunctional goddamn trucks broke down passing our magazine's loading bay, and your schlump of a driver didn't get the thing moved for four frigging hours. Our entire fleet was held up, and *Highlights* got to dentists' offices a full half day late. I had parents calling me with crying kids in their arms, begging for their magazines. You sab-

otaged me, Robinson, and if you think I take such things lightly, you're an even more delusional asswipe than they say."

"Hah, I don't know what the kids must have done without access to 'Goofus and Gallant' for those four precious hours!"

"Oh you think this is funny, do you? Disrupting the supply chain, costing us thousands in driver overtime, making little toddlers weep their eyes out, that's hilarious to you is it? You're a sicko."

"Look, it was a mistake. I'll instruct the drivers to keep wrenches in the trucks or something. Nothing that can't be solved with a splash of ingenuity." I gave a cheerful wink, but because it was a phone, she could not see it.

"Feh! Don't know the first thing about delivery systems, do you? I should have known."

"I am very well-versed in the practicals of punctual delivery, thank you. And you are a very rude child."

"Kiss my *tuches*, turdbrain. You ain't heard the last of Betty Ann Dewdrop." I giggled at hearing the name. She unleashed an unholy squeal of rage and line went dead.

"Well, I think I solved that. You know, Cate, she's not so fearsome as you said. An adorable little dewdrop!" I detected a note of skepticism in Cate's expression, but she said nothing.



I am proud to say that I made a small contribution to the Pleasant City movement, through my short book (with diagrams) called *Towards an Aesthetic of Loveliness*. I argued in that book that loveliness was the core quality by which built spaces should be judged. The question "Is It Lovely?" should be asked at gunpoint, and if the answer is "It is not," the unlovely thing should be blasted to kingdom come.

The core group of planners who devised the original Pleasant City cited *TaAoL* in footnote 34 of the Master Design Document, in which they note that “a thought-provoking criterion for evaluating normative visual quality has been offered by ‘public intellectual’ N. Robinson...” I would like to think that my work had substantial influence on the resulting movement. Certainly, the sort of cities that emerged were exactly the kind I would have built myself.

The concept of the Pleasant City arose because there was widespread agreement that all hitherto-existing cities had been manifestly unpleasant. What if this did not have to be so? The trouble was that many cities had grown without ever really being designed, and thus had severe defects that could not be retroactively rectified. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could design a dream city from scratch instead?

The basic concepts of the Pleasant City were settled on democratically, though a vast online discussion and multi-round voting process. This was somewhat tedious, as democracy so often is, but it was necessary because the idea of “building a city from scratch” could easily drift into authoritarianism and technocracy. We did not want the market to “plan” a city, but nor did we want some small group of architects, with their hideous insistence on asymmetry and minimalism, making the city their own. The job of the People was to decide what the city would look like and feel like. The job of the Architects was to turn that vision into reality.

The City was to be built around a series of large squares or piazzas, with houses and apartments around smaller courtyards that functioned as micro-squares. It was ringed by a 10-mile track for bicycles, scooters, and microcars that snaked through various environments from desolate scrubland to thick forest. The track took you straight through buildings, across bridges, and through each one of the neighborhoods. The city was divided into eight Quar-

ters: the Jazz Quarter, the Pink Quarter, the Hill Quarter, the Government Quarter, the Mystery Quarter, the Wet Quarter, the Shady Quarter, the Children's Quarter. The Jazz Quarter would be known for its dining and night life, from giant discotheques to tiny basement clubs. The Pink Quarter had entirely pink buildings, which made walking through it feel interesting. The Hill Quarter was located atop a hill, and houses in it could see out over the entire rest of the city. It was covered in staircases. The Government Quarter contained much of the city's business: the public assembly hall, the central branch of the library, and an unusually large number of offices. Because the business done in the Government Quarter was often dull, we compensated by making the buildings uncommonly majestic. The public assembly hall rivaled the most beautiful cathedrals of the world, and the office plazas could have fit comfortably in Venice or Sorrento. The Mystery Quarter was designed to be quite difficult to navigate. You could only get in through a few small entrances. There were many narrow cobblestone streets and alleys that dead-ended in beautiful courtyards, or looped back on themselves, or became narrower and narrower until ending in a small archway that you had to squeeze through, only to find yourself in a part of the city you'd never seen before and would never find again. The Mystery Quarter felt ancient and magical, and while its labyrinthine passages could be exasperating, one never tired of them, because there were surprises at every turn. The Wet Quarter was criss-crossed by canals, and one could take public boats or inner tubes to wherever one was going. Even on the dry bits, there were fountains and artificial waterfalls throughout. The Shady Quarter was, of course, full of trees of every type, and was the most lush and green of the Quarters. It also housed the city's largest park. The Children's Quarter had an unusually high number of day care centers and schools, as well as the city college. But it was also part neighborhood, part playground, and

anywhere one went one could expect to see slides and crawl tubes and climbing walls and swings and zip lines and play houses and pirate ships and things that made musical notes when you stepped on them.

The city was designed to feel orderly without being predictable, hence it had an intricate lacework of streets but was fairly easy to navigate thanks to each Quarter being centered around a plaza and the city itself being centered around a park (that felt more like an enchanted forest), with the eight Quarters arranged in a ring along its edges. A good subway system that went to every one of the major squares would make it easy to get about, and one could always take the snaking trail that ran through all Quarters.

Each Quarter contained about 10,000 residents. If the city grew in size, it could theoretically begin to add a second ring of Quarters around the first, but populations were not expected to grow very much, and if the first Pleasant City succeeded, more would be popping up around the country.

The City was designed to be much more Socialistic than the rest of the country. All of the land and housing was unowned, and could not be owned. People selected their homes off a list of what was available. Because every home had been built to be unique, one was spoiled for choice. Did one want to live in a four-story treehouse? A thatched cottage? A brownstone row house? A shotgun house with a wide front porch? A third-floor balcony apartment overlooking the river? The options were meant to be as expansive as possible.

The public transit was free. The outdoor gyms were free. There were public schools, restrooms, playgrounds, amusement park rides, pools, medical clinics, and theaters. Shops and restaurants were still privately operated, and operated in a market framework. But for city residents, the whole place worked much like the university systems of the late 20th century. As students used to get din-

ing hall cards in exchange for their tuition money, so city residents got spending cards in exchange for their taxes. Taxes were a large lump sum, and in return one got access to a wealth of public services. (Notably, until the Pleasant City Network was established, non-residents had to pay for many things.)

To someone in the early 21st century, this system would have sounded ludicrous, destined to fail. But they had actually been proving that it was perfectly feasible. Universities and corporations operated as “islands outside the market,” meaning that *within* the institution, people didn’t need to buy and sell things. If you’re an office worker, you didn’t need to pay for your stapler, it was provided. If you were a university student, you lived in common housing and ate in common spaces and much was provided “for free.” It was never *really* free of course, but it was “decommodified,” meaning that there weren’t market transactions going on all the time once you had gotten through the door. The City operated similarly: there were *some* market transactions, but like an early 21st century cruise ship or retirement village, much had been paid for up front so that people could simply enjoy it all without thinking about money.

They built it in Florida. Not where I would have put it, but that’s what they did. Land was cheap and the weather was good. I had played a role in the online deliberations, strongly pushing for more fountains, but I had no part in the arguments about construction, which were evidently messy. I did, however, go to see it as soon as it opened.

It was a magnificent thing. Driving through the city gates (they were gigantic) one beheld the enormous public assembly hall, and the vast museum and library buildings, each seated along a verdant mall. Every Quarter was different, and every building unique, decorated in elaborate ornamentation and painted in warm colors. There were multiple levels, and skybridges crossing the streets.

There were steps up to little observation points and tunnels to secret gardens. There were, of course, no cars, save for the occasional microcar here and there, plus delivery vehicles. There was seating everywhere, and music in the air. There were always new things to play with or look at, or little challenges to take on. I passed a sign that said “Would you like to wrestle this robot?” and I did. In parts it was more like being in an amusement park than a city. An ajar door could lead just as easily to a candlelit speakeasy or an indoor log flume. (There were, of course, secret passages.) There was a limit of four stories on buildings, though no limit on *height*, meaning that there were still giant steeples and onion domes. One could turn down a street to find it filled with bubbles, or painted in zebra stripes. There were colorful doors throughout the city that you could open, never knowing what would be behind one. I went down one alley with a series of tiny windows that looked like they must belong to gnomes. All of the shutters were closed, and I found it a bit unsettling, so I began singing a tune. No sooner had I sung the first bar than one of the shutters opened, and a giant puppet popped out and sang the same song. I tried a different tune. A different window opened, and a different set of puppets popped out and sang. They all got the tune exactly. I did not like it very much, to tell you the truth. But I did realize that there was probably nothing else of its kind on Earth, and that it was the sort of thing I never would have foreseen being built.

Looking back on the early days of our century, one thing that strikes me as odd is how it felt like technology had its own logic, and that logic could only produce one type of future. We could see it all stretching out before us, dismally: employers would require to implant a chip in your arm, and would surveil your every move. Militarized drones would become ever deadlier and more cunning. Our phones would just keep getting smarter, and maybe our cars would drive themselves. We would slowly lose our agency,

spending greater and greater parts of our day in virtual reality, unable to exercise any control over technological progress. The more paranoid thought artificial intelligence would soon outstrip human intelligence, and would suddenly produce an explosion of hyperintelligent robots that would make slaves of us all.

It didn't seem possible, back then, that we could use our technology in a far more intentional, creative, even strange way. But once we got past scarcity, and freed ourselves to invest resources in doing things because they were interesting rather than because they made money, all *sorts* of fascinating things began to happen. Years *could* be spent constructing a street of highly-sophisticated artificially intelligent puppets, even if only a few people went down it, because that was *interesting* and it made the world more magical. Even if the indoor log flume was only used by a small few, it was such a delightful experience to discover it by opening a random door and being greeted by a white-gloved flume attendant saying "Your log this way, sir" that it was worth the years of effort. A secret garden was worth building even if it remained a secret. When productive resources were no longer used up building missile defense systems, nuclear-armed submarines, fighter jets, prisons, worthless consumer goods, and giant SUVs, we were able to produce magical experiences on an industrial scale. I wish I had known, back when I was young and pessimistic, just how different and special the places we would build, the experiences we would have, would all turn out to be.⁶²



62 Wandering through the prototype city, I had an important realization about why capitalism had been producing such unlivable places. It had made "planning" a dirty word, and celebrated the unplanned, jumbled mess produced when developer profits guided design decisions. But capitalism had thereby foreclosed the possibility of building new and wondrous cities, which only a government could afford to do, and which were never going to make anyone any money. We were heading for a future in which extraordinary things that were perfectly possible resource wise were made impossible by the economic system. This was madness!

The first Pleasant City, which was called Ferrule (do not ask me why), was quickly oversubscribed. Though the income tax payments of a Ferruleans approached 70% in the early years, the guarantee of housing, healthcare, good schools, “amenities,” and a dining budget meant one could live better there than almost anywhere else. Six more new Pleasant Cities were soon constructed, each with its own unique set of Quarters,⁶³ each entirely different from the other.

It is worth saying a word about the decision-making process that guided the original Pleasant City planning phase, and its applications elsewhere. Early in the 21st century, most online platforms were controlled by large corporations that operated governed by top-down structures. If you had a Facebook, and you disliked the formula by which news was showed to you, not only could you not change the formula, but you had no right to participate in the process by which the formula was devised in the first place. One site, however, differed from the others: Wikipedia. Wikipedia was then, as now, governed by its users, who had long arguments over what should go in it and what should come out, and about the rules that governed the site itself. It was not a perfect democracy, but it was at least a far more participatory process than existed almost anywhere else on the web.

The “Wikipedia model” was steadily introduced in more and more places starting around 2025. This meant that anyone could find out the factors that determined which search results showed up on Google, and there were public discussions over how these algorithms should be tweaked. The decision to suspend an account did not come about by corporate fiat, but as a result of a

63 The most alarming Quarter I ever visited was the Bird Quarter of Lumens, ND. The most pleasant was the Tranquility Quarter of Earthwright, CA. The most aggressively strange was the Squishy Quarter of Bwenpull, GA and the most decadent was the Sex Quarter of Foreperson (pronounced “forpson”), NV. The best music was in the Organ Quarter of Wrextestler, VT, and the worst in the Cacophony Quarter of Bryridge, MT. The Jeans District of Prestbestern, TN was not technically a Quarter but I do recommend a visit.

fair judicial process by which users heard arguments and deliberated among themselves about whether a particular piece of content was ban-worthy or not. (It should be remembered that by this time the Nazis had mostly disappeared from YouTube, which made having these discussions much more practicable.) Users promulgated bills of rights, requiring people to be allowed to customize and modify the platform to suit their particular needs. The “free software” movement came back in force, and many years overdue, free, open-source operating systems, browsers, and software became standard. I remember when I was young, before their products were nationalized, democratized, and made open, it was virtually impossible not to use products from Apple, Microsoft, and Google. Now, after years of monopoly, competition once again bloomed, with an explosion of creativity by independent developers being the result.

The participatory model was used widely, most notably at the Second Constitutional Convention of 2050. By then it was widely agreed upon that the United States Constitution as written was both inadequate and illegitimate. Illegitimate, of course, because most of the population at the time of its adoption had been ineligible to take part in its drafting, making it an inherently racist and sexist governing text. Inadequate because it did not guarantee a number of rights that needed to be guaranteed, and did contain a number of provisions that were proving obstacles to making society work.

There was apprehension about what a Second Constitutional Convention would produce. First, of course, there was the general worry about sortition: could 200 people, selected entirely at random, from age 15 to age 100, really produce a governing document together? What if a lot of cranks and fascists were selected by an accident of chance? What if the resulting document was a mess? Those who distrusted democratic self-rule warned that a Consti-

tution was destined to be poorly-written and dysfunctional unless it was written by the nation's most enlightened legal scholars. The Convention was a high-stakes test of whether this was really true, and as such, those of us who had always been advocates for popular rule were on tenterhooks to see what would result.

I went to Philadelphia to report on the Convention, but I needn't have bothered. While the deliberations were televised, the delegates were completely sequestered in order to prevent lobbying, and I spent the better part of two weeks sitting in a café off Washington Square, glued to the livestream. When it became clear that the Convention would last at least three months, I went home.

The fear of pulling a group of 200 fascists was misplaced—for one thing, the selection procedure required that the delegation roughly reflect the demographic composition of the country as a whole. The resulting group was an authentic-cross section of the American public, and with one or two exceptions they took their duty seriously. Getting one of the invitations to participate was the greatest honor imaginable. It meant a chance to alter the destiny of the entire country.

The first month was entirely procedural; the delegates figured out *how* they were going to figure out a Constitution. Few rules had been set, so watching the process was like watching a society grow from a “state of nature” to an organic civilization. One of the most fascinating things I have ever seen—I rewatch clips frequently.

In the end, when the final document was produced, it was almost shocking in its brevity. (But then, so was the Gettysburg Address.) Today, it's hard to find anyone who doesn't know it by heart, but it's worth trying to see it with fresh eyes, to remember what it was like to be there at the moment of its adoption, and realize that these were the set of principles and rules upon which we were to build everything that came next. I present the full text:

**THE CONSTITUTION OF
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
(2ND DRAFT)**

1. *Every person is entitled to freedom and equality.*
2. *Equality should never be enforced at the expense of freedom, nor freedom at the expense of equality. The difficult work of balancing these values is our collective task.*
3. *Freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion are presumptively absolute. To the extent there are exceptions, those exceptions must be narrowly drawn to prevent harm, and not abstract harm but very real and specifically identified and proven harm. It is better to have some harm and a lot of freedom than zero harm and no freedom. People's cultures should be respected and bigotry cannot be tolerated, though we must be careful not to create new injustices in stamping out old ones.*
4. *Racial and gender equality are fundamental guarantees.*
5. *The government is set up at four levels: municipal, statewide, national, and global. There are three branches at each level: legislative, executive, and judicial. The legislative branch consists of a popular assembly, selected at random from the governed population. It makes the policies. The executive branch consists of the agencies that carry things out. Each agency determines its own staffing policies, but the agencies are overseen by*

an executive committee selected by the popular assembly. The people themselves have the right to recall any of the committee members, who must undergo a retention vote every two years. The judicial branch is selected at random from among those who have passed the Arbitration Exam and thereby proven themselves capable of mediating real-world disputes.

- 6. If a person is accused of violating the rules, they are to be tried by a jury of their peers, which will sort out how to resolve the situation. They are presumptively innocent. They cannot be compelled to testify against themselves. Punishments must be fair and humane. If there is a strong dispute over whether a punishment is fair and humane, then it probably isn't.*
- 7. The right to keep and bear arms shall be infringed as necessary. But the difference in power between people and their government should never get too great.*
- 8. Power should be decentralized as much as possible. If a question can be handled municipally, it probably should be. However, municipalities and regions cannot be permitted to abridge basic human rights. The job of the national government is to guarantee those basic rights, as well as to sort out issues that require operations too large for any locality or region to take care of by itself.*
- 9. Every institution must be democratic without being crudely majoritarian. Democracy means a participatory process where objections are heard, responded to, and incorporated, so that minorities*

are not simply outvoted.

10. *Everyone is entitled to an education and a basic standard of living, including food, health, and housing. It is the moral obligation of all of us to ensure that everyone's needs are met. If we do not like this obligation, tough shit.*
11. *Coercion must only ever be used as an absolute last resort. If some people are amassing too much power, that power will be redistributed, to preserve democracy. There must never be too great a difference in what people possess materially, but please for the love of God no gulags.*
12. *Neither the government nor any other institution shall be permitted to do anything unconscionable. Do not pretend you don't know what that means.*

The public reaction was mostly positive. There were quibbles here and there, naturally. But on the whole, people agreed: these 12 articles basically said what needed to be said.⁶⁴



One does not like to toot one's own hooter, but I should note that by this time I was becoming unusually successful in my side-career as a novelist. Generally I am opposed to fictitious writing—why produce intentional falsehoods when the truth is so elusive? But I had to admit, there was good money in the stuff. A British woman had once made a billion dollars with a series of tales about a little wizard boy, and I felt the cash-for-lies trade was

⁶⁴ The Constitution did contain a single Footnote, which covered the process of altering it through amendments: It read: "Please do not amend this Constitution unless absolutely necessary. Amendments require 99% popular approval in a national plebiscite."

too lucrative to be scrupulous about.

My first experiment with untruth came, as I have mentioned, in the wake of the cat calendar incident (2018), during which my judgment had been abrasively questioned by underlings. I concluded, as you will remember, that instead of producing a “Cats of the French Quarter” calendar, I would produce a cat calendar with a plot, revolving around a feline magazine editor named Cat Dastardly and his dour assistant Whiskers Killjoy. Well, when I approached my agent with the idea, he was nonplussed.

“Hm, but why is it a calendar?” I realized I did not have an obvious answer to this.

“Well, because the whole thing arose out of a dispute over whether it was a good idea for our magazine to begin publishing extremely costly cat calendars as a kind of ‘side hustle.’” I recounted the whole saga at elaborate length.

“Okay, yeah, I get that, but like why is it still a calendar?” Suddenly I grasped the tip of his point. *Cat Dastardly and the Sands of Time* should not be a calendar at all. It should be a *novel*. Better, a series. I leaped up from my chair and kissed my agent on the head (he is bald).

“God bless you, agent! That is precisely the ticket!” I darted out the door and headed straight for home, stopping only for a brief sojourn in the fornicatorium (I was in those days a bachelor.) Planting myself at the library typewriter, I was overcome with a frenzy of inspiration. Stopping only for cigarettes and the occasional round of recreational *boule* (even a writer deserves pleasure), I hammered out a manuscript in four days. Unkempt, bloodshot, and spittle-flecked, I beheld my masterpiece. *Cat Dastardly and the Sands of Time* was a thing indeed.

I expected the work to be snapped up by one of the major publishers. It was not. “Novels about cats just aren’t in anymore,” one of the more honest acquisitions editors told me. Others gave me

nothing but a form rejection: “Dear Mr. Robinson, while your manuscript was unique in the extreme, it does not suit our needs at this or any other time.” I will admit, I cried nightly for weeks.

I was on the verge of drowning in my own tears (this can actually happen) when I was pelted with a revelation: we didn’t need the Industry. We *were* an industry. *Current Affairs* had its own book-publishing arm. With my pull at the company, I could easily coerce someone into bringing it out under the fiction imprint, Demilune Press.

And so began the publishing adventure that has since consumed a good 40% of my professional life. *Sands of Time* sold a respectable 100,000 copies, which I took as a demand from the public for numerous sequels. And so in 2020 came *Cat Dastardly and the Pewter Teardrop*, which shamelessly ripped off the plot of *The Maltese Falcon* but turned the principal characters into cats. *Cat Dastardly and the Heavenly Mewses* came in 2023, then was followed up four years later with *A Joust In The Catbox: The Further Adventures of Whiskers Killjoy*.

But I did not want to get “Conan Doyle” and become known solely for a single pair of classic characters.⁶⁵ Thus in 2030 I surprised the public with the novel *Sometimes Englishable*, which the *Public Times* called “certainly a departure from [his] previous work.” *Sometimes Englishable* was a rich comic novel set in New Orleans and drawing on that city’s deep cultural and literary traditions. The plot concerned a disgraced auctioneer, Claude, who moved back to the French Quarter to live with his “Mad Uncle Almonaster,” a once-famous Creole lawyer with a career wrecked by drink. Almonaster has recently had his bar license reinstated, and together he and Claude uncover a *highly* unusual local corruption scandal. Much of the comedy arises from the clashes between

65 Although there were five more novels in the series: *Cat Dastardly and the Dewy Morning*, *Not So Dastardly Now*, *Catbird in the Hatbox*, *Cat Dastardly and the Well-Lit Room*, and *The Inevitable Cat Dastardly*.

Claude's fussy "Manhattan auctioneer" personality and Almonaster's devil-may-care, *laissez-les-bon-temps-rouler* attitude. I was quite proud of the result, and convinced the public would share my verdict.

The subsequent disappointment did nothing to deter me from turning out further novels, including *Petunia Day*, *{horsbaud}*, *Atlantis In Reverse*, *The Caged Man*, *Corn Huskers*, *Diplodocus*, and *Longfellow Park*. There were two plays (more like playlets), *Vectors Galore* and *The Well-Lit Room*.⁶⁶ Surprisingly enough, they were both produced at theaters.⁶⁷ A short story collection, *A Stranger to Decorum*, came shortly after. (Most of the stories involved people trying to maintain good manners in increasingly trying circumstances. It was hailed as a piercing satire on middle-class life. I had intended no such thing.)

These books all sold modestly well, and I was invited to give guest lectures in front of several MFA classes around the country. My standard talk, "If The Author Is Dead, Where Is His Ghost: Haunting, Irony, and the Narrative Imagination" proved reliably bewildering, and I used it frequently. I refused to participate in Q&A sessions, on the grounds that if there was any question that had gone unanswered in the main body of the talk, the event was already a failure. This did not sit well with some professors of the orthodox school, and in recent years invitations have been noticeably on the decline.

I have called this a Memoir Of The Magazine Industry, and so it would be grossly importunate to dwell excessively on my digressions into fiction. But as you wish to understand my career, and as you may know me chiefly as the creator of Almonaster and the Cat, it is my moral duty to explain a bit of what happened and why. I trust you have no further questions.

66 Unrelated to the Cat Dastardly novel of similar title. This *Well-Lit Room* was far darker.

67 Community theater is still theater, and anybody who says otherwise is an elitist.



I have not yet discussed gna, but I should. It's not that I feel the need to tell you what it *is* and *was*, but that I feel you ought to know what it meant to me, and why the birth of gna gave me such hope and excitement about the future.

Up until gna, I don't think I had ever been truly surprised by any new music. I mean, sure, you heard things that were great, and discovered bands at little clubs and on streetcorners and what-have-you. But you never clutched your ears in amazement.

I believe the consensus among music historians is that the first gna artist was Chelsea Jones, and her debut *This is Chelsea Jones* the first gna album. (Stuff that came before, such as the work of Noxious Haze or Rex & The Abominators, is considered "proto-gna.") And I think you can still hear on that album, even after thousands of listens, what was so powerfully original: it bridged the classical/contemporary divide so *seamlessly*, not kitschily like ELO. It didn't just take elements of funk and mix them with Bach, it *was* funk and it *was* Bach. It didn't sound like a hodgepodge, even though it clearly took from jazz, country, rock, and even big band music. It felt "full," with slashing electric guitars and blasting trombones. Sometimes her voice went soft and twangy, and Jones could turn into Patsy Cline, and sometimes it went loud and brassy, and she was Ella Fitzgerald. But it was never imitative, never a replica. I saw Jones play once, with her band ("Chelsea Jones & Her Militant Entourage"), and it was unforgettable. She began with an acoustic set (songs like "Shy" and "Because That's Fine"), and then in the second set the 50-piece band came in one by one, so that on "Melt Away" it was just Jones' guitar and the timpani drums but by the finale (a medley of "Rest Is For The Weary" and "Break It") it felt like the ceiling would fall down.

Jones' voice was so powerful on its own that there was no need for pyrotechnics, but other gna acts became known for the integration of dance, theater, and film with the live shows. If the sounds of Jimi Hendrix's guitar had turned into a performance by Cirque du Soleil, that might have been a (mediocre) gna show. There was a vaudeville component, too, and the lyrics were often screamingly funny. Gna artists didn't just want to impress you with costumes and acrobatics. They wanted to make you cry and giggle and *beg* them to keep playing. It was like a Broadway musical without the cringe, a circus without the elephant torture. Every time I go to a gna show—and of course they last at least five hours—I feel overwhelmed with emotion for at least a week afterwards, sometimes feeling as if my skin is aglow with pleasure and sometimes wanting to weep and collapse. Who could have thought that music would do this?

I have only mentioned Jones, but these days she has almost been eclipsed. Certainly, she never put on a show like Batroots or The Indescribables did, and when I brought home the Feltwaste album *The Leavening*, my wife wouldn't let our two daughters listen to it, for fear they'd instantly run off to join the entourage. Unsettlingly, some of these bands have become closer to cults than musical acts. I don't approve of that, and I worry that in its desire to provoke extremes of human emotional reaction, at its worst gna could be a threat to our very sanity. On the other hand, at its best, it just very damn enjoyable to dance to, and it is refreshing for an old timer like me to see bands with full horn sections and sequined tuxedos after they had disappeared for so long.



The second global plebiscite was far more fraught than the first. Getting rid of nuclear weapons was a “no brainer,” i.e.

you didn't need to possess much intelligence in order to realize that they were a complete destructive waste of everybody's time and resources, and that their existence was entirely due to humanity's failure to solve the simple problem of how to act collectively. Borders, however, were more divisive. While feelings of nationalism had been in rapid decline for several decades, there were still those who strongly argued that nation-states were "natural" and that disastrous consequences would occur in an "open borders" world of total free movement. It was quite difficult to respond to this, because nobody could *prove* the consequences would be positive, and undoubtedly there would be those for whom the consequences were *not* positive.⁶⁸

I did, however, sense that the nationalists were destined to lose, and quite badly. Just as with religion, nationalism had lately come to seem faintly ridiculous, and one sensed that its most ardent exponents were having trouble fully believing in it themselves. When I was young, and especially during the Iraq War, "the flag" had been spoken of with reverence and awe. You were not to disrespect The Flag. In fact, during my schooldays, they still forced children to "pledge allegiance to the flag" each morning. I swear to God this is true—ask anyone who was alive then—but even though I was there and saw it occur hundreds of times, I have trouble believing it really happened. (So much of the past feels like people must have been under a kind of strange spell, and I have not been able to explain the "pledge of allegiance" to any of my grandchildren without them bursting into gales of laughter.)

But flag-worship was on the out by this time, and the justifica-

68 For some time, one of the very serious barriers to progress had been the way anecdotes were used manipulatively to impugn a mostly-beneficial idea. So, for example, the insurance industry would point to cases of people who had been ill-treated by the British National Health Service, without noting the far greater number of people receiving excellent care. Likewise, if even a single immigrant committed a gruesome crime, it would be used to prove that immigrants committed gruesome crimes, even if their rates of doing so were far lower than those of non-immigrants. It was one of the chief tasks of our magazine at this time to help people think clearly about these things and avoid being hoodwinked by inflammatory propaganda.

tions for borders were looking increasingly shaky. “National security” had been the big one, back in the Trump years, but the reign of global peace had made the vague threats of doom and terror seem less plausible. There was some grumbling about “loss of national character” and “preserving autonomy,” but it didn’t really take with people. There were already porous borders in various places, and they hadn’t destroyed distinct identities. And because there were no longer streams of refugees desperate to escape impossible conditions, the urge to turn countries into fortresses had subsided. People *wanted* the freedom to travel the world at their leisure, without having to secure “visas” and present “passports” and deal with byzantine immigration rules. Borders were beginning to seem strange and inconvenient, as if one had had militarized checkpoints between the boundary of Florida and Georgia. People could flow across state lines, why not national ones?

This plebiscite was closer. 84% in favor, 14% opposed. (2% submitted the forms without checking either box.) But that was still enough for a mandate. The walls would come down.



I suppose, in retrospect, it doesn’t actually seem as significant as it felt when it happened. After all, there had been no militarized borders for most of human history. As late as the 1900s, one could pass freely from the U.S. into Mexico merely by crossing the street. This was simply the return to the previous norm after a blip of exclusion. But you get so used to things after they are put in place that it can become difficult to imagine the world without them. In 2018, people started calling for the abolition of ICE (Immigration and Custom Enforcement), and they seemed *crazy*, even though ICE had existed for less than twenty years. For many, strict restrictions on immigration were not just natural, but were essential—without them, there

would be no law at all. The United States would cease to exist. It was a bizarre position—a restaurant doesn't cease to exist because anyone is allowed to come and eat in it. But at the time, borders had become such a fixed part of the way the world was conceived that simply getting rid of them was a radical, fringe proposition. (How many things that once seemed impossible now seem to have been inevitable!)

Now, directly after the plebiscite, even though crossings were unregulated, for some time the boundaries themselves were still fixed. So, the "United States" ended on one side of the Rio Grande and "Mexico" began on the other. But over the next decade, the boundaries themselves began to erode in people's minds. Once El Paso and Juarez became part of the same city, it no longer made much sense to think of one as being in a different country than the other. It was odd for San Diego and Tijuana to be in different countries, but San Diego and Boston to be in the same country. Thus countries started to become rough rather than fixed areas. In some places, the boundaries were pretty clear: Ireland, for example, was the name of an island. But the place where Canada ended and the U.S. began, or the place where El Salvador ended and Nicaragua began, became arguable and indefinite. If you look at old maps, you'll see solid lines dividing different countries, instead of the colors of one area gradually fading into that of the other. We really did think of places as defined by those solid lines, with the bizarre effect that you could stand with "one foot in New Mexico and one in Arizona," an idea that seemed odd even then and seems utterly ridiculous now.

Shortly after the U.S./Mexican border was made fully permeable, I took a drive from Los Angeles to Rosarito, just to see what it would be like to cross over. (I had been giving a guest lecture on "Writing Magazine Articles That Will Make Large Numbers Of People Upset" at UCLA). I remember back in 2016 I had driven this road and found the border a distressing place: hundreds and

hundreds of cars backed up, sometimes for hours, as they waited to pass through. People trapped on one side with their families on the other. This time, I actually missed the moment when I passed into Mexico. The whole thing was anticlimactic. It's hard to even remember what we had once it disappears.



Around 2052 it was decided—by me—that *Current Affairs* needed a new office building. The creaking stone tower we had inhabited for a century and a half was causing trouble. Bits of masonry were falling off the façade and mortally wounding copy boys as they left on their evening runs. Pipes were bursting at random, drowning thousands of copies of the magazine in raw sewage and requiring us to spend hours drying them off. The pneumatic tube mailing system, so cutting-edge in its early life, was beginning to seem unnecessary and somewhat dated 60 years after the birth of electronic mail.

At a meeting with the staff, I raised the possibility of building another headquarters from a brand-new block of marble.

“Can we afford that? Isn't building hundred-story buildings, like, incredibly expensive?” asked Senior Editor Rennix.

“I think the real question is: ‘Can we afford not to?’” I replied confidently, beaming.

“Oh my god dude, that is absolutely not the real question,” said Financial Editor Abraham, his head in his hands. “This is going to be the island all over again.” A few years earlier I had insisted on investing the employee pension fund in real estate, specifically by purchasing a large island. I reasoned that since no other magazine had its own island, for us to have one would provide “competitive advantage.” My assessment of the economic principle was disputed by the staff, as well as by several trained economists whom

the staff brought to a meeting in an attempt to dissuade me, but I am proud to say that I remained resolute. The island was purchased, and while a “staff trip” to investigate our new acquisition ended in misfortune (one lost limb, and mosquito bites for all), I am proud that all *Current Affairs* employees now have the option of an “island retirement.” “Where there is no vision, the people perish,” say Proverbs 29:18. Nobody can say that as an editor, I have lacked vision.

It was therefore decided that the new headquarters should be built, and that I should be the lead architect. “Why don’t you just go ahead and fucking design the whole thing?” Senior Editor Ren-nix had said when I started describing the wondrous new lavatories we could have. I gladly accepted her suggestion.

I am not an architect by training, of course, but I have always identified strongly with them. In many ways an architect is an editor, but for buildings. I knew, then, that the task of designing an office block was in no way beyond me. I did not know any mathematics, but I knew how buildings looked, and once you knew this, you were 2/3 of the way to the necessary professional understanding.

It was essential that that the new building embody the Spirit Of The Magazine.⁶⁹ There would necessarily have to be a portcullis. The threat from other magazines had ebbed by this point—no longer did marauding *Economist* editors try to sneak into the typesetting chamber to put glue on our proofs. But I still felt that we should fortify the place, and be prepared to pour molten magazine-oil on the heads of any unexpected intruders. The magazine editor who does not put security first is no magazine editor at all.

Now, it was clear that the building would need to be Gothic in

⁶⁹ In fact, the first thing I commissioned was a sculpture to be entitled “The Spirit Of The Magazine,” which would sit out front of HQ. It depicted an undraped lady shouting at a financier through a rolled up magazine, and the financier screaming in agony at being told the truth.

character. I had promised Domino that he would have as many gargoyles of himself as he desired, and that turned out to be a great many. I am, as you know, partial to buttresses and stained glass, and I thought each window should depict an important scene from our editorial history. Since this was New Orleans, there would need to be balconies and galleries with floral ironwork, and since it was a port city, the bottom floor would need portholes, so that the sub-editors could stick their faces out and scare pedestrians by saying “Arrrrr.”⁷⁰ I was adamant that all of the internal columns must look like trees, and that there must be two-story bathrooms for the senior staff. A fireman’s pole for “editorial emergencies” would go from my desk to the printing cavern. There would be a wave pool, an “earthquake room,” and a terrifying revolving tunnel. The whole building would be centered around a beautiful courtyard with a glass roof, where people could gather as equals to talk of many things.⁷¹

These ambitions were modest enough, but when I sat down at my drawing pad, I began to get somewhat carried away. Could we have an iceberg somewhere—an actual, literal iceberg, with a staircase that wrapped around it and the tip sticking out upon the roof? No, better yet: an aquarium that would run from the bottom floor to the top, so that there would be an “office of sealife” running parallel to all of the actual offices, giving the human beings who worked in our office “perspective” on how comparatively meaningless their lives were. What if there were escape hatches? An entire indoor miniature village where people could practice making candles and playing croquet? There would be beaches and jungles and libraries and Turkish baths. I would contain the whole world in a building, so that nobody need ever leave. It would be perfection!

70 In the voice of a grizzled sea captain, naturally.

71 A list of suggested things would be distributed to all staff, but there was *no* requirement that it be followed.

Madness, it was madness. I realized this was over the top. The beach would have to go. So would the laundry chute, though God only knew how people would wash their clothes. I removed several of the turnstiles, and a few of the discotheques. The Overhanging Promenade would need to be made of wood rather than crystal, which would rather spoil the view, and several of the turrets would be leased out to small businesses. I can't say that these compromises made me happy, but I have always tried to embrace pragmatic thinking.



The new building was finally completed in the fall of 2054, after considerable cost overruns and a number of heated disagreements with obstinate contractors. (The words “physically impossible” were wielded as a cudgel against me in an effort to secure more favorable financial terms. Some things change, but the duplicity and selfishness of contractors remains immutable.) Shortly after the building's Grand Opening, it was condemned as unsound by the New Orleans City Building Inspector. We were forced to remain in our old building, which we still inhabit to this day.

By the beginning of 2055, many jobs had been fully automated. Long-distance trucking, checkouts, golf course maintenance, automotive repair, wastewater treatment, almost all manufacturing, anything involving shipping containers—all of it had been taken over by cheerful robots. (There used to be a practice of putting realistic human faces on robots to make them relatable. These were unnerving in the extreme and were thankfully soon abandoned.) We were fortunate that before the automation wave hit hardest, we had instituted a strong set of social welfare policies that made sure nobody had anything to

fear from losing a job. Under “free market capitalism,” once your labor became valueless, so did you, meaning that you would be granted no access to resources and would be left to perish. This was plainly monstrous, and yet incredibly there were still those advocating a *laissez-faire* economic system well into this century.

The fear had been that if people had an economic cushion, they would rest upon it comfortably and grow idle and useless. I had always found this fairly implausible, because it required an extremely limited view of the human creative capacity. It treated us as beings who faced two options: toil or sit watching television. But we can, of course, do so much more. Liberation from hard labor gave people time to pursue thought and culture and friendship and romance. People used their new time to travel the world, to cook elaborate meals, to pretend to be detectives, to learn all of the sciences and arts, to play in the playground-cities, to dance, to read, to put on plays and musicals, to hold costume contests, to play all kinds of new games, to exercise, to argue about philosophy, to design their own homes and microcars, to invent and tell stories, to reenact historical events, to perform new rituals, to take things apart and figure out how they work, to navigate rope courses, to create giant puzzles the size of houses and solve them, to roleplay in live-adventures, to collect things, to study animals, to learn magic tricks, to invent imaginary worlds and then live in them, to build sandcastles, to attempt to understand some small portion of the trillion things that each of us doesn't yet understand, and now, of course, to contribute their part to the Great Voyage Ahead. The pessimists had cramped minds, they did not realize just how much we could do once liberated from unnecessary work. We could invent new “tasks,” ones that didn't *need* to be performed, but were fun. Mardi Gras is like this: one can spend an entire year planning Mardi Gras festivities (and some people do). It is work, and parts of it could be

automated, but we choose to do it ourselves because it is enjoyable. The technological changes allowed a kind of wonderful “adult childhood” in which we could all be silly and inventive and be *excited* to wake up each morning knowing that each day would contain strange and unexpected delights. Anyone who thought the “fully automated” world would be boring was simply announcing that they themselves were boring.

The capacity to fully automate most processes did not mean that we *did* automate all of those processes. The blessing of automation was that it allowed us to be selective in what we did and did not automate. We could have a kind of “intentional technology” directed toward the problems we would rather not solve ourselves, and save for ourselves the problems we would like to have.

Take, for example, puzzles. You could have a computer do a puzzle. But what would be the point? A puzzle is designed for a human being to have the experience of solving it. Likewise, a video game: the video games could simply play themselves, but that would be silly. At one point, people thought that the success of chess-playing computers meant that humans would soon be obsolete.

This was silly, for the same reason that the invention of bulldozers didn’t make boxing obsolete. The fact that a device had the capacity to crush a human at some activity (be it chess or physical fights) did not mean that humans would cease to take pleasure in that activity. It merely meant we could conscientiously decide whether we wanted any given activity to be done by ourselves or outsourced.

Culture was never outsourced, because the point of culture was partly in the experience of making it. A robot could build a better bookcase than you, but a robot building a bookcase would not give you the experience of building a bookcase yourself, and

that experience was intrinsically pleasurable. Thus, even after technology was capable of carrying out seemingly any task, people still gave themselves plenty to do.⁷²



I was sitting at my desk, prodding a blancmange, when an envelope came through the window, attached to a brick. For a few moments I sat stunned, wondering how the brick-tosser had possibly reached the 99th floor. But I soon reconciled myself to the fact that many things in life are mysterious, and cannot be known. I opened the envelope.

“Dear esteemed colleague,” it read, in scrawled yellow-green crayon. “I should be most grateful if you would pay a visit to our offices to discuss an important business matter. Please tell no one you are coming.

Yours,

Betty Rose Dewdrop

Editor in Chief

Highlights for Children”

Well, I am a sucker for a secret meeting, so I told Cate an outrageous lie (“Off to the velodrome for a spot of bicycle racing, as

72 There really was a fear that there would be nothing to do once we reached a state of abundance, and that if computers could do things we could not, we would have no alternative but to sit on our asses doing drugs. Consider a typical passage from a bestselling futurologist of the time:

The coming technological bonanza will probably make it feasible to feed and support these useless masses even without any effort from their side. But what will keep them occupied and content? People must do something, or they grow crazy. What will they do all day? One answer might be drugs and computer games... Yet such a development would deal a mortal blow to the liberal belief in the sacredness of human life and of human experiences. What's so sacred about useless bums who pass their days devouring artificial experiences in La La Land?

This futurologist thought, erroneously, that once computers could compose symphonies and paint paintings, the production of music and art by human beings would become obsolete. But of course, music is a social activity, and art is a means of self-expression. Those values are unaffected by what computers can do. The predictions of this futurologist, however, were taken quite seriously by respectable people, who seemed unable to picture the possibility of creating a world of beauty, splendor, and delight.

is typical for me at this hour!") and hopped into the nearest available microcar. Betty Rose seemed more courteous than she had been on the telephone. Did she want to patch things up?

The *Highlights* offices were shaped like building blocks, and painted in cheerful rainbows. As I entered through a bright red plastic tube, I saw that hardly any of the staff were over 7 years old. At the front desk, I was greeted by a pasty-faced blonde boy in overalls. When I said I was there to meet with the editor in chief, a nauseated look came across his face. He escorted me to the elevator but then immediately ran away to vomit. It was clear that Betty Rose had these children spooked.

Still, I was expecting a cordial conference. Which is why I was surprised when the first words I heard upon entering the editor's office were:

"LISTEN ROBINSON, you don't fuck *Highlights*, *Highlights* fucks YOU, understand?"

"Pardon?" I was shaken.

"You think Betty Rose Dewdrop forgets a slight?"

"I... ah."

"Wrenches my ass. If you think *Highlights* likes to get jerked around, you've clearly never read *Highlights*." Indeed, I had never read *Highlights*.

"No you listen, Dewdrop." I suppressed a snicker. "What's this all about, eh? You tear me away from a perfectly serviceable blanc-mange to come down and be abused. What gives?"

"So you think your time is valuable, do you Robinson? You don't like to have it wasted, eh? Interesting. *How do you think I feel when my deliveries get delayed?*" Oh dear, she wasn't still upset about *that*, was she?

"Oh dear, you're not still upset about *that*, are you?" I was reminded again of how strange it was that a toddler in pigtails should be speaking with me this brusquely. At some moments it

seemed perfectly normal, and then at others it didn't seem very normal at all.

"Robinson, let me tell you a little story. My people built this country."

"Children?"

"Shut up. I will not be interrupted before naptime. Of course not *children*, asshole. I have had just about enough of this insolent crap from you. You have no idea what I can do to you."

"I don't think I have much to fear from a five-year-old girl, quite frankly."

She came round her desk and immediately gave me a hard kick in the shin. I collapsed in pain.

"Maybe you'll be less of a sexist prick in the future, eh?" She gave me another kick, this time directly in the gut. I moaned and rolled over.

"Bruiser! Tiny! Get this *shmegege* out of my office!" Goons appeared. Big ones. I was dragged away by force. As I receded through the office door, Dewdrop shouted behind me:

"Hope you enjoyed our meeting. You've got a few more of them ahead!"

Back at the office, I could not understand what she meant. More meetings? But why? What did she want from me? I soon found out. I was called in to S. Chapin Domino's penthouse lair the following Tuesday. He stood leaning on the mantelpiece, a grave expression on his rosy infant face.

"Robinson, do you know what a hostile takeover is?"

"Indubitably, sir. But what has it to do with us?"

"We've got one on our hands. Betty Rose Dewdrop is now the majority shareholder of *Current Affairs* Incorporated."

"But sir! That cannot be!"

"Can be and does be, Robinson. As of midweek, she's your boss and mine."

"This won't be pleasant, sir. My encounters with her have hitherto been distasteful."

"What do you think it was like being married to her?" I nearly fainted. Domino and Dewdrop? Never! But it was. They were both underage, so it had been perfectly legal in Louisiana. *But is all that is legal necessarily moral?* I wondered this in my brain, but did not express it to Domino.

He heaved a sigh of resignation, and pushed an expensive glass sculpture off the mantelpiece. It shattered on the tile, and also shattered the tile.

"That. That is my legacy." Domino was crestfallen. I backed out slowly, to leave him to his weeping.

And with that, the editor of *Highlights for Children* became the owner of *Current Affairs*.



I had somewhat put my novel-writing on hold by the end of the 50s. I dabbled in comics instead. I adapted an unpublished, half-finished Cat Dastardly plot into a graphic novel called *Mister Dastardly in the Lost City of Catlantis*.⁷³ Unfortunately, I struggled with the art (I have wobbly hands) and reviewers complained that my King Neptune looked nothing like himself. I had to admit they had a point, and for my next comic, *Exciting Venom*, I did the words but left the pictures to the head of the *Current Affairs* illustration department, Ellen Burch. The result was disappointingly predictable: critics hailed the art and assailed the text. The book won a Golden Manatee Award for Best Visuals. I did not attend the ceremony.

73 I did no more Cat-related work from that point on. "The series is rapidly exhausting its welcome, if it had ever had one," snapped Chris Lehmann in the pages of the *New Republic*. Now, how many damns did I give about this? *Very few indeed*. You must learn to ignore the critics. Still, I independently came to the conclusion that the *Cat Dastardly* phase of my life had endured beyond its expiry date. Reluctantly I threw the cat in a hole and sealed it.

In 2058, the last Tweet was sent, and not a moment too soon. I had grown weary of Twitter decades earlier, but it clung to life thanks to its peculiar addictive properties. The problem was that it was simultaneously the worst thing in the world and the best: reading it would make you feel horrible, as you scrolled through endless fatuous remarks, cruel jabs, obscure inside jokes, and idiotic memes. But then you would read the funniest sentence you had ever read, or see the most adorable sloth video you had ever watched. It was a place where celebrities and ordinary people interacted as relative equals, and anyone could achieve popularity merely by sending a Good Tweet. There was a kind of democratic spirit to it, even though every user knew on some level that it was eating their brain.

But as ordinary life had become more extraordinary—more rich and sociable and adventurous and entertaining—the necessity of Twitter had simply diminished over time. People just looked at their phones less, because they were distracted by reality. It became clear that its phenomenal popularity had been partly due to the ubiquitous loneliness and isolation that characterized the early 21st century. Once the loneliness dissipated, and we found one another again, the Tweets stopped rolling in at the same pace. Twitter was less a conversation space and more a place for announcements. Eventually, as announcements drifted elsewhere, the whole platform became desolate and tumbleweed-ridden. When the plug was finally pulled it was an errand of mercy.

2058 was also an important year for me personally. I finally felt it would be ethically justifiable to publish my book *Could Death Be A Bad Thing? The Moral Necessity of Immortality*. I have always firmly believed that death is bad, a minority position that arouses considerable controversy. I believe we should try to eliminate death entirely, or at least bring the human lifespan as close to infinite as possible within whatever ultimate physical limits there

may be. This is not to say that people should be *required* to live forever, as that would be very unfair. But they should have the choice.

I have had many arguments over the years with people who disagree with my position on death, and believe life should remain at or near its current brief duration. I find this position monstrous, as only a very small fraction of the possible experiences a human might wish to have can be had within the presently granted life-period. And yet I held off from publishing on the subject for many years, for a simple reason: until we had achieved social equality, life extension would inevitably worsen existing injustice. Back when there were billionaires, the billionaires were the most interested in endless life. And, of course, the billionaires were the people one would least wish to have to inhabit a planet with indefinitely. A disturbing trend began in which poor people's lives grew shorter while rich people's lives grew longer. I firmly believed that life should be as long as we can make it. But *because* I am so opposed to death and consider it such a bad thing, the idea that the poor should suffer it while the rich did not was unconscionable. I therefore publicly advocated *against* life extension research back when I thought it would be socially harmful. I was thrilled that by 2058, it was clear that the benefits of new medical breakthroughs would be, if not *perfectly* equally distributed, at least shared widely. After the book was published, I tussled with many philosophers and theologians on the issue—often venomously—but ultimately the debate was resolved by the facts of the thing: the new developments in medicine meant that life would be extended no matter what the philosophers said, and the only remaining question was how to distribute the extra years equitably.

But while 2058 saw one high point of my professional success, it also contained one of the lowest and darkest ebbs.

I should mention at this point that early in my time at *Current Affairs*, I had negotiated an almost airtight contract with the com-

pany, which meant I could only be removed from my editorial post for “gross negligence or incompetence and dereliction of duty or outright incapacitation.” Note that *mere* negligence or incompetence were insufficient to oust me.⁷⁴ It had to be truly grotesque.

Unfortunately, my hectic schedule as a lecturer, flaneur, and thought-leader had made it impossible for me to devote the same amount of time to *Current Affairs* as I once had. Because I am integral to the operation, and a ship does not know what to do without a captain on it, this was having somewhat serious consequences. Office culture was degenerating into the bad kind of anarchy, and people frequently wore swimsuits to work. Pages were printed upside-down, or with penises drawn on them. There were typos galore, including ones that technically constituted libel and therefore cost the company millions. My people needed me, and I had wandered off into the proverbial editorial desert.

It was decided, therefore, that I should be impeached. At *Current Affairs*, accusations of gross ineptitude must be brought before a court of editors, with evidence presented and the accused given a chance to rebut. A courtroom had been built in the basement of CAHQ specially for this purpose.

I was distressed to discover that a number of deputies I thought had been loyal would be cruelly betraying and backstabbing me during the proceedings. Senior Editor Brianna Rennix, whom I had so lovingly fictionalized in my novel series, pinned a threatening note to my desk three days before my trial. The part of it I remember read: “*Look, if you just agreed to show up, like, twice a week, and told us what we’re supposed to do instead of issuing cryptic demands like ‘make the pages feel more fulsome’ you could avoid this.*” I had trusted her, supported her, and yet still she turned on me like the others.

74 In an incident decades earlier, a court had decided that the term “gross” was intended to apply to *both* negligence and incompetence, rejecting the company’s argument that “gross negligence” and “incompetence” were the two separate criteria. Because my incompetence did not rise to the threshold of grossness, I was reinstated with back pay.

My trial was rigged from top to tail. I am sure you can figure out who the judge was, and how much justice one could reasonably expect to get from the irascible editor of *Highlights for Children* (and now majority owner of *Current Affairs*). The jury were, quite literally, a bunch of stuffed shirts. The testimony was damning: witness after witness accused me of crimes ranging from “eating all of the peaches in the break room” to “embezzlement of a significant amount of funds that were intended to be for the orphanage.” The alleged infractions were trivial; it was quite clear that my persecutors were doing the old Throw A Few Babies At The Wall And See If One Sticks trick. Unfortunately, my babies turned out to be mighty sticky indeed. With the judge’s mind made up before the opening bell had even sounded, we all knew where the outcome was going.

The day I was escorted from the *Current Affairs* building by security professionals was the most desolate point in my life.



My exile was painful, though it didn’t last long. I spent the period doing some freelance “consulting,” guiding lesser magazines through the Ins and Outs of the periodical industry. I was the one who told *Protean* magazine they should use white text on a white background, because nobody else was doing it. I gave *Christianity Today* the idea of including a regular “Off-Colour Jokes” section in the back of the book, “for the kids.”⁷⁵ I became known as one of those men you could give a hundred thousand dollars in exchange for him telling you to turn your logo upside down and fire half your staff. And if there is one thing you should know about America, it is that those men do quite well for themselves.

75 Admittedly, this was soon followed by the editors’ excommunication, thanks to the hidebound and humorless nature of the clerical establishment. The magazine is now shuttered.

I was also able to escalate my production of light fiction. These included the minor novel *Disgusting Mischief*⁷⁶ and the somewhat more major volume *Pasquale the Unfortunate*, a sprawling parody of *Don Quixote* set in Silicon Valley. My famous “How-To” guides were produced at a steady clip, including *How To Weasel Your Way Out Of This*, *How To Avoid Having To Listen*, *How To Convince Other People That They Are The Ones Who Don’t Make Sense*, and *How To Chop An Onion*. Together they sold nine million copies.

But slowly I had wearied of the literary arts. I was still cranking out voluminous quantities of words, in accordance with public demand. Yet I felt stagnant, and lacking a certain mojo. I continued to excrete my thrice-weekly column for *The Guardian*, though by those days I was literally “phoning it in” and any given column was at least 40% plagiarized from other articles in the same issue of *The Guardian*. My firing had caused me to start wondering: were there jobs other than “magazine editor” that had any real worth? Broad-mindedly, I concluded that there might well be.

My training as a conchologist began with a mishap. I shattered the “demonstration conch” handed me by the instructor, who became enraged. I persisted in the class for several weeks after that, but the glares and pranks of my classmates made it clear I was unwelcome. I then switched to masonry, but this, too, was not a career for one with a tendency to shatter that which is vulnerable to shattering. I staffed the concession at a cinema, but found popcorn butter revolting. I tried becoming a fireman, but couldn’t stand to look at the corpses. It began to seem as if I had been cut out for one thing and one thing alone.

Fortunately, *Current Affairs* was falling apart in my absence. Senior Editor Brianna Rennix, elevated to the chieftanship, had taken the publication swerving wildly in a wholly new direction.

76 I cannot remember what this one was about, and I lost all my author copies in an office fire. I believe it was somewhat pornographic.

It was now primarily devoted to Moral Harangue and Denunciation, and the pages began to smell faintly of brimstone. Rennix was quickly christened “the Cotton Mather of absurdist Socialism” by the free press, and her vivid images of torment and hellfire (both prose and illustrations) had proved divisive among younger audiences. I remember distinctly a passage from one of her early lead editorials:

Our earthly fire again, no matter how fierce or widespread it may be, is always of a limited extent; but the lake of fire in Hell is boundless, shoreless and bottomless. The Devil himself was obliged to confess that if a whole mountain were thrown into the burning ocean of Hell it would be burned up In an instant like a piece of wax. And this terrible fire will not afflict the bodies of the damned only from without, but each lost soul will be a Hell unto itself, the boundless fire raging in its very vitals. O, how terrible is the lot of those wretched beings! The blood seethes and boils in the veins, the brains are boiling in the skull, the heart in the breast glowing and bursting, the bowels a red-hot mass of burning pulp, the tender eyes flaming like molten balls. This, Mr. Miller. This is what awaits you!

Needless to say, this was hot stuff—quite literally—but it wasn’t gobbled up on the newsstands. The new generation wanted technology reviews and DIY tips, the sort of stuff I had been so successfully plying them with for the better part of a half-century. Because I was legally barred from entering the premises, I cannot say for certain, but my sense is that things at the office were becoming tense and uncomfortable. I am sure you have experienced those moments where someone has unwittingly exposed their genitals, and everyone in the room is trying to figure out how to

inform them discreetly without generating any more awkwardness than necessary. This, from what I gather, is what things at *Current Affairs* felt like in the fall of 2059.

Out in the world, matters were going somewhat better than they were for me and for *Current Affairs*. This was the point when “journalism” and academia started to merge into the more general category of “knowledge production.” Because much that used to make up the “news” had become somewhat less frequent over the last few decades—there were fewer massacres, earthquakes, famines, and robberies—there was less call for urgent, day-to-day updates on the world’s goings-on. Reading today about what happened yesterday was somewhat useless. People wanted the broad sweep of events over time. They wanted, in other words, Magazine and Book knowledge rather than Newspaper knowledge. Furthermore, as the overall standard of education had increased, and information had become somewhat more democratized—rather than locked away in high-priced academic journals—there was a hunger for material that was both substantive and accessible. Many journalistic outlets, then, merged with universities, and we saw far more magazines devoted to science, culture, and philosophy that combined the deep learning of academics with the communication ability of journalists.

Since the “calculation problem” had been solved,⁷⁷ there was also a great deal more decommodification going on, as municipal governments began to notice the success of the Pleasant Cities and introduced new free services in order to avoid an exodus. There was finally a law requiring a certain number of public bathrooms for any given population, long overdue. Giant playgrounds the size of cities were erected in four states, and became some of the country’s most popular attractions. New Orleans finally got a pub-

77 It turned out to have been based on a simple reasoning error, and was not a problem at all.

lic water park, with about 100 different slides, which I had looked forward to since my earliest days in the magazine industry. Private beaches had been banned for some time, but the U.S. also implemented the “right to roam,” which meant anyone was allowed to cross any piece of property, no matter who it belonged to, so long as they didn’t cause a nuisance or damage anything or creep anybody out. Overnight, the quantity of freedom in the country was doubled, perhaps even trebled. Peace was not bringing boredom, as was feared, but was instead encouraging the creation of the Good Life and the pursuit of new kinds of adventure. (Though not, at this point, anything near the Great Adventure on which we are now embarked.)



I was growing frustrated with civilian life. I had tried physical labor, but was not very good at it. I had been born to edit magazines, and it was the one thing I was legally prohibited from doing. To be sure, I supplemented my amateur conchology with some freelance writing for the weeklies and fortnightlies (including a prize-winning report on life at Architects’ Bay). But I longed to Get Back In The Game, so to speak.

My chance finally came in early 2061, when a fortuitous death opened up a position in the Gardening Department of *Current Affairs*. The Gardening Editor at the time had never served under me, and also had dementia, so I realized that if I sported a false moustache to the interview, he was unlikely to realize he was offering a reporting position to *that* Nathan J. Robinson. I was hired for the position, having bluffed my way through the initial meeting by pretending to have heard of various different flowers, and making up a few of my own. (In a stroke of brilliance, I grew indignant when the editor insisted that the flowers I had named were

not actually flowers, and accused him of being fog-brained and losing his touch. He clearly needed a young journalist with a nose for all the latest stamens and peduncles. I was just the man for the moment, I shouted, unless of course he wanted his magazine to go the way of *Gardeners' Review*. He did not.)

Of course, I knew I had to advance swiftly out of the gardening section, before readers who knew about gardening exposed my columns for the fraud that they were. ("Be sure to pour only fertilized water on your hyacinth groves, never neglecting the topsoil, with a dash of sunlight to taste," ran a typical item.) I quickly arranged a coup over in Motorsports, blackmailing the Layouts Editor (I knew he was getting kickbacks from Chrysler for airbrushing their undercarriages) into swapping places with me. I knew about as much about automobiles as I did about gardenias, but I knew that if I said things like "torque," "gauge cluster," "horsepowder," and "eight cylinder" I could bluff my way through for a month or so.

The bad news was that the moustache was starting to wear off, and every time I passed Brianna Rennix in the hallway I would have to fake a coughing fit and clutch my face, for fear she would see through it. On one occasion the tactic backfired and she rushed over with a look of grave concern:

"Are you alright? Your cough sounds awful. And your moustache is... falling off?"

"Go away, I am a sick man!" I bellowed, hoping to drive her from my vicinity in disgust. "I have plague! Contagious plague! Get out of here before you, too, grow a moustache that falls off!" I realized immediately that I should have said "leprosy of the moustache," but the tactic had the desired effect.

Ironically enough, however, all of my ruses proved needless. I received a call that very night from the *Current Affairs* switchboard operator, saying that a certain B.R. Dewdrop had requested my attention. Well, if I knew one thing from my time in the indus-

try, it's that you don't spit at the Dewdrop. A familiar voice soon came over the line:

"Robinson, you're an incompetent, small-minded, fat-headed, wet-eyed, cake-fingered, dick-riddled, moist-handed, cheese-brained schlub. I hate you more than I hate anything."

"Yes, Ms. Dewdrop." I knew now that arguing was pointless, though I rejected several of her pejoratives.

"I hate you... but I need you. *Current Affairs* has been dropping circulation like nobody's trousers. All the brimstone and damnation stuff held up for a few issues, but now people are just... afraid. We need your whimsical touch. Can I count on you to come back?"

"Betty Rose Dewdrop, you can count on me always!"

"I would prefer you stick to Ms. Dewdrop."

"Yes, Ms. Dewdrop. So I'm reinstated with back pay?"

"You're reinstated."

"I consider this a vindication of my talent and negotiating skills."

"I have no doubt that you do."

And with that, I was once again the editor of *Current Affairs*, the world's only readable political periodical.



The last prison closed in 2062. Their use had been on the decline for decades. Partly this was due to changes in sentences—prisons were reserved for only the most extreme cases, where there was a serious risk a person would do harm, and community service or house arrest would not suffice. Partly it was because prisons were seen as a social failure that needed eliminating: we needed to succeed in preventing crime before it happened, which eliminating serious inequality had mostly done. As we had reduced the ability to amass vast wealth, the incentives for "white

collar” crime disappeared, and as we made sure children had good lives and were well-fed, with enjoyable school days and lots of ways to have fun, there were fewer paths toward a violent lifestyle. The school to prison pipeline was cut off and rerouted toward joy and prosperity

It would be a mistake, however, even to use the word “prison” for what we had in the last three decades. Since the Corrections Modernization Act (CMA) of 2026, prison facilities were, if not lavish, at least more like college campuses than dungeons. To be sent to prison was to be temporarily housed in a place where one could choose hundreds of different means toward the end of self-improvement. It was emphasized to prisoners that we believed in them. They were not required to wear uniforms, and were given as much liberty as was compatible with safety. They were allowed to self-govern, up to a point, and democratically allocate a budget toward recreational activities. They selected the classes that would be offered, the food that would be served. Prisons of the 20th century had been wretched places: filthy, Spartan, and joyless. They seemed to be intended to wreck the human soul. The CMA attempted, slowly, to fix that, but always with the goal of abolishing the institution itself.

There are still certain cases of confinement. If a person is incorrigibly ill and violent, they may be mandatorily housed in a treatment facility. Some individuals deemed dangerous to society, such as former police officers and Bush administration officials, might never see release, though their conditions are comfortable and relatively free. It is our hope always, however, to see even violent offenders successfully reintegrated into the outside world. Everyone is redeemable, even members of the former Republican Party.



People often ask me how to write a good article. What is it that the Editor Of Today is looking for in a print submission? How can *I* become a Man of Letters or Woman of Words? What is the secret sauce in which one slathers one's prose to give it tang and bite? Writing good, how done is it?

You may not be a veteran magazine editor (I am), but there is no reason why you cannot cultivate your mastery of the "language arts" and uncover the timeless techniques used by the professional writer to convey knowledge and worldliness. You may have nothing to say, but if you say it well, you will be taken (as I have been) for a genius.

When writing an article for publication, the sentence that matters the most is the first one. Not the second, not the fifth. Sentence number one. This is the sentence that will leave the deepest dent in the audience's brain matter. Your discerning reader will use this sentence to determine whether to venture forth further into the forest of your prose, or to deem you a tedious bore and despise you indefinitely. Consider a sentence like this:

In the annals of history, the role of ideas has been disputed consistently.

Who cares? Do you wish to read on? Or will you skip forward to the crosswords and pornography? If you do not say the latter, I am afraid I find you difficult to believe. Now, *au contraire*, consider this alternate beginning:

I had just removed my parking brake when the bird flew in my mouth.

I would posit to you that this sentence is hundreds of times more effective in its effect. Its "sauce" lies in its drama—the reader *can-*

not help but proceed to the next sentence, because we have raised Questions in her mind. Why did a bird fly into your mouth while you were in the car? Did you eat the bird? If the parking brake was off, did the car begin to roll backwards down a hill? What sort of bird was it? Endless additional queries present themselves, and the reader will not be sated until she knows the truth. That makes this a good sentence. Always begin your work with this sort of sentence if you can.

Next, you need a second sentence. The second sentence should *not* answer any of the questions raised in the first. Instead, it should only invite more questions. In this way, you will draw your reader in so far, so fast, that he will be utterly unable to escape your web once he realizes he is ensnared in it. You will be like quicksand. Or a black hole. Consider the following:

In the annals of history, the role of ideas has been disputed consistently. It is said of Napoleon that he was "the last of the true materialists," but while the blood of millions speaks volumes, it is fallacious to exclude ideology from analyses of causal structures.

The sentence is not a total failure. There is, after all, blood, as well as Napoleon, and people find these things interesting. But let us go back to our model example, and see how the West is truly won:

I had just removed my parking brake when the bird flew in my mouth. But the scream that followed was not my own, nor was it—as I first suspected—the bird's.

A scream! Now we not only want to know about the bird, the car, the leadup, and the aftermath, but we want to know exactly

who screamed and why they chose to do it. Was it bird-related, or was it otherwise? We *must* read on. This article is going well.

Now, a word about structure. Every living thing has a beginning, a middle, and an end. This means that if you want your writing to be truly alive, it, too, must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But you must also be careful. Rules can be a prison. Once you have mastered the beginning, middle, end structure, try an experiment: place the beginning at the middle, and the middle at the end. See how it reads? If it's confusing, don't worry. Impenetrability implies intelligence.

What sort of article should you "pitch" to a magazine? Well, that rather depends on the magazine! If it's one of your "adventure story" publications, try something involving the sea. If it's intended for mechanics, try offering something mechanical. If it's a magazine about anteaters, do something involving long tongues. If it's *Current Affairs*, try to propose something good. The trick is to have a sense of what the editor will be interested in and then interest them in it.

Don't let rejection notices get you down! We've all been buried beneath a stack of them before. You need to stick with it. The successful writer has confidence: confidence that their opinion needs to be broadcast to the world whether or not the world has ever shown any interest in hearing it. You must not let the harsh verdicts of others dampen your resolve. Remember: you do not need to be a good writer to be a successful writer. But you must be determined to impose your words on an unwilling public by any means necessary.

Now, a word about editing: editors will try to cut your most mellifluous and purplest passages. Do not let them. They will offer fatuous pseudo-wisdom like "Kill your darlings." This is monstrous. *They are your darlings*. What kind of beastly person kills their own darlings? I should not be telling you this—because, after

all, I am an editor—but I will let you in on an important secret: for the most part, editors do not make cuts to a piece for intelligible reasons, but merely to feel as if they have done something. I do not cover pages in red ink because I think the work is poor, but because it is an editor's job to cover pages in red ink, and if I do it I am useful, and if I do not do it then I have no purpose. When your editor tells you to reword this or rearrange that, they are doing it entirely in order to feel needed. Resist them.

When your work is finally published, be sure to put a copy in your “clips” folder. When you meet new people, it is considered polite to take out your clips folder, hand it over to them, and say “Nice to make your acquaintance. Here are my clips.” Always have your clips at the ready, as you never know when you will find yourself in an “emergency.”

After sixty years in the industry, this represents the deepest wisdom I am capable of offering. I hope it serves you well in your own career as a Thought Leader and Public Intellectual. As the French say: *bon voyage!*

BONUS TIP

Never use a short word when a long word will do.

Never say “I will try to” when you can say “I shall endeavor to.”

REMEMBER: the purpose of writing is to demonstrate intelligence to the reader.



In 2064 a rather peculiar thing happened, which was that people began to realize museums were ridiculous. We had always accepted the existence of museums as something perfectly normal and unobjectionable. But as the world itself had become a place of limitless splendor, there was something anachronistic about hav-

ing designated buildings for all the valuable, interesting objects. Why were great paintings being hung on white walls in front of officious docents, instead of being integrated into the décor of ordinary places? There was now so much art all over the place that museums actually came to seem bare and bereft.

It was not just the art museums. Science museums that showed nifty experiments and devices: one could come across such exhibits walking down the street. I remember when I was a child, I loved the Hurricane Simulator at the Tampa Science Museum. Now I was just as likely to find a Hurricane Simulator while walking down Main Street in the Pink Quarter. Now that there were a dozen surprises, exhibits, performances, displays, rides, mystery buttons, carnival games, challenges, artifacts, and sculptures on any given block, what point was there to a museum?

I do think, by the way, that this is one of the liveliest and most gratifying changes since my early years. The Tactile Revolution, in which it was realized that it is very satisfying to press a button or turn a crank or pull a lever or flip a switch, was a revelation. By the 20s, there had been a bizarre consensus that because everything *could* be done on a touch-screen, it should be. We all knew that we liked playing with things, that we enjoyed that phenomenon known as “the pleasure of being an action’s cause,” but “unnecessary” physical processes were considered inefficient, and what was inefficient was immoral.

Thank God for the rejection of that silly dogma. Nowadays my desk is covered in switches and lights, and I love it. I press a big red button and a hand pops out of a hole holding a physical piece of card with the time written on it. It’s immensely clever and technically sophisticated, but it is the sort of thing nobody would have considered building in 2019, because if a thing was not digital, it was backwards, and we were moving forward, ever forward, into the age of the screen.

The Tactile Revolution helped save print media, too. Naturally, when people thought everything was “destined” to be digital, the magazine was considered “destined” to die. The Tactile Revolution was an assertion that we control our destiny. Train stations switched back from display screens to those wonderful “old-fashioned” mechanical timetables that turned flaps to show which platform each train was arriving on. The dashboards of new cars were filled with aluminum toggle-switches, which made it feel as if one was piloting a 1940s bomber aircraft. To start the car, you had to flip back the red ignition cover, and then press the ignition button. The cover was “unnecessary,” strictly speaking, but it was *fun* and it made you feel important, and it was finally accepted that it was *okay* for things to be useless and fun despite being Inefficient.

If I walk down a street today, there might be a stand with a crank in it, and if you turn the crank a musical note sounds. It is a small thing, but it is something to enjoy. There might be an array of buttons, and when you press them the lights on the building across the street change colors. There could be a series of metal plates in the sidewalk, and if you step on one, water will rain on down on you, another, the scent of pastry will fill the air, another, a man will come up to you and offer you a gumball, and another, an animatronic horse will be released from a nearby barn door.

We had all of the technology to do this, of course, a long time ago, but we had never loved ourselves enough to be willing to do things that did not have purposes. We wrote of magic in children’s books, yet never dared use our knowledge to create it. Fools, bloody fools, but thank God it was all fixed.

All of this is a roundabout way of explaining why museums had become unnecessary and why the National Art Gallery allows us to keep an original Gauguin painting in the lobby of *Current Affairs*.



2065 was my fiftieth anniversary with the magazine, and as such, upon my instructions a grand party was held in my honor. It is not often that a magazine editor stays in his post for fifty solid years.⁷⁸ Buckley and Sunkara did it. Remnick nearly made it before his untimely murder.⁷⁹ I was one of an elite few, and it felt judicious and appropriate to celebrate with a fifty thousand dollar cake.

We held the event in the Lower Ballroom of the Current Affairs Building. (The Upper Ballroom had been condemned, unjustly.) I invited everyone who was anyone in the media and political worlds: *New Republic* editor in chief Maximilian Alvarez, Labor Secretary Matthew Bruenig, California governor Meagan Day. I even had the grace and humility to invite Bhaskar, cheerfully forgetting his most recent slight.⁸⁰ I canceled our October/November issue so that I could spend the entire print budget on novelty streamers and confetti, a move that proved unexpectedly controversial with the staff.

I demanded the whole “shebang”: a disc jockey, a bouncy castle, a soul train, a tattoo booth, five thousand kinds of pie. Clowns were hired, as well as a gna band. Nobody was to go home without the balloon animal of their dreams. I was determined that every person would be required to have a good time, by force if necessary.

And that is precisely what happened. Good times were had by all, animals were blown, and there was gna into the night. In one small mishap, a lantern set Lady Astor’s fur on fire, but once it was extinguished we all had a hearty chuckle over it. (Except Lady Astor, who bore a lasting grudge.) I even convinced Betty Ann Dewdrop to dance with me, and she turned out to be as formi-

78 We had agreed to overlook the brief period of my ouster, which was an embarrassment to all concerned. My under-staff were made aware that to mention it was to incur instant termination. No mentions were made thereafter.

79 I strongly campaigned for Katzenstein’s release and maintain his innocence to this day.

80 After I received an invitation to *Jacobin*’s own fifty-year celebration, I was turned away from the door by a rough and impertinent bouncer. Bhaskar later told me that there “must have been some mix-up” but I knew there hadn’t been.

dable at the hokey-pokey as she was at boardroom politics. Of course, Rennix and Domino spent the evening fuming in the corner, still bitter over the expense. But I have never been one to allow rainclouds to tinkle on my parade, and I successfully ignored their pleas to stop promising bartenders free lifetime subscriptions in exchange for overlooking the three-drink limit.

But the event was most noteworthy for an encounter I had toward the end of the evening, after many of the guests had already escaped. I was buttonholed by Bhaskar, whom I had been trying my best to avoid. (There are limits to the obligations of civility.) I thought I was in for a fresh round of passive aggression, and at first it seemed as if my suspicion was correct:

“Salieri!” he said jovially as he hailed me.

“Hello, Bhaskar,” I replied in the tone that Seinfeld once reserved for his postman.

“Nice party, thank you for inviting me. You were at ours, weren’t you?”

“No, Bhaskar, I was not.”

“Couldn’t make it, huh? Well, I understand. You’re a *busy* man. Not easy putting all these decorations up yourself, I’m sure. Of course, at *Jacobin* we have people to do that sort of thing, but I know you’re a little smaller.”

“I did not put them up myself, Bhaskar.”

“Oh? Bit unsocialist of you, don’t you think? Personally I always try to chip in on the labor. It’s only right, you know?”

“I did hang the banner.”

“The ‘50 Years of Robinson’ one? No doubt you did. I’m sure you noticed, but it’s a shade lopsided. Sometimes best to leave these things to the professionals. We editors can’t do everything, you know?”

“Quite.”

“Hey, listen, I’ve been meaning to tell you. There’s news. *Jacobin*

is shutting down at the end of the year. For good. Last issue.”

“I don’t need your jokes tonight, Bhaskar.”

“I’m serious.” His tone had changed. He did, indeed, seem serious. “I told you from the start that this was all temporary. We had a job to do. *Jacobin* was here to get socialism done. Well, what did we do?”

“Socialism.”

“So what use is there for a group of Jacobins today? I’ve done what I came here to do.” Suddenly, all of my enmity dissipated. I could no longer see Bhaskar as my Slugworth. He was a comrade, always had been.

“Oh, Bhaskar! What ever shall you do next?”

“Retire. Go to some basketball games and Springsteen concerts. Fish in the morning and write poems after dinner. Live the life we’ve been fighting for.”

“And you’re certain it’s for the best?”

“We’ll see. Can always fire it up again if the world needs us. We’ll still exist as a constant threat.” I laughed, but I didn’t actually enjoy this remark.

“Well, you’re always welcome at CAHQ.”

“Thanks, but you know how I feel about that odd smell.”

“Odd smell?” And with that, we parted ways. I gave him a hug, which made him visibly uncomfortable. As I watched him disappear through the door, I reflected on the contributions of one of the great magazine editors of the ages.

Also, by this point, he had grown a goatee, and looked like an evil version of himself. He undoubtedly thought it was distinguished. I found it sinister.



We come now to 2066, and the beginning of humanity's present phase, our Great Adventure. I will not deal in too much depth with current events, but I do want to offer a few remarks on why the Adventure excites me so much and what makes it so important.

If you have watched *Star Trek*, which undoubtedly you have, you have heard that wonderful phrase "the final frontier." I knew the phrase myself from my early years, but as words lose significance with repetition, I had never thought much about its true meaning. In fact, most people on Earth were so wrapped up in the micro-dramas of the planet that we didn't think much about space at all.

This was strange, because after all, we were sitting on the beach overlooking a great cosmic sea, with hardly a clue as to what it contained. Unless we ourselves were the only life in the universe (highly improbable, though some people had concluded that this impossibly self-aggrandizing proposition was true), there were almost certainly endless kinds of undiscovered weirdness littered across the galaxies. How could anyone not be *constantly* curious about what was out there? And yet we were not. Talk of aliens was risible.

Isn't it incredible that anyone could have thought we would be *bored* once our material needs had been met, when one considers the sheer scale of what we now have to do together? They thought that without wars to occupy us, we would sit around and have no destiny. They never bothered to look up, to realize that we had a whole universe awaiting us.

I think it would have been immoral to spend too much time contemplating the stars, before we had guaranteed prosperity for all. In times of deprivation, space exploration is an outrageous luxury, as the prophet Gil Scott Heron so cogently put it in "Whitey's On The Moon." But that is just one more reason why Socialism was such an urgent priority. With such a grand voyage awaiting

us, such an awesome task, we needed to wrap up our earthly affairs with haste so we could begin work on our species' true mission. (And, of course, unless we had been Socialists, it would have been irresponsible to leave the planet in the first place. Capitalist space-faring was set to be a replication of bloody imperialism on a cosmic scale. Permanent attachment to the Earth would have been better than such a horror.)

They said "nationalism" was good because it provided a sense of unity, because it made people feel as if they were part of something larger. Feh! Nationalism was pathetic compared to what we are doing now. We are now united as humans not just in something "bigger than ourselves" but bigger than anything previously imaginable. We are going to the stars, and who knows what we shall find there?

We know it will not be easy. The 30% of production that now goes to the Great Adventure has made possible incredible advances in physics and engineering that were—like so many other things we had never really tried—once deemed "impossible." We are now quite confident that it will be possible to reach the outer reaches of our galaxy within the lifetime of a single human being. Along with this technical knowledge has come a far richer understanding of what this peculiar thing we call the universe actually *is*, and I feel far better able to understand what I am and where I am than when I was young and everything seemed so mysterious and inexplicable and horrible.

It is frightening, of course. I will not pretend I am not frightened. I don't think anyone doubts there are alien life forms—certainly not after the Signal—but what if they are as monstrous as we once were? There are those who still say the risk is too great, that we should not dare go near civilizations that could enslave us—or worse. We are not the only life in the universe, but what if we are the only Socialists? The possibility is too horrible to bear contemplation.

I am not sure I want to be one of the ones to go. But when it comes down to it, who could say no? Those of us who have been fortunate to find ourselves alive at this time rather than any other, who have seen *these* changes, who weren't fated to be hunter-gatherers or babies with plague or cannon fodder in the World Wars—how lucky we are, and how great a privilege it is to be among the first people to take part in this next phase. I feel as if, after years of struggling and failing to figure out what we are doing here on this planet, of screwing it up for each other and botching the simple problem of how to cooperate, we have finally gotten our sea legs. This is the main part of the story. This is where it all begins. We're really going to do it. We shall boldly go where no human being has gone before.



Once, long ago, a friend of mine told me something rather sad. She said that she dreamed of a world in which the children's books would be true. By this she did not mean a world haunted by babadooks or infested with snuffleupagi, but a world in which there was a correspondence between Reality and a passage like:

Patty was so sick. She went to the doctor. The doctor gave her medicine and said "You'll be okay, Patty." She felt much better.

Instead, the Children's Book of our lives went:

Patty was so sick. She went to the doctor. "I'm sorry, we're not in your network," said the receptionist. "That ibuprofen will be \$900."

It has been the great privilege of my life to watch so many children's books come true, one after the next.

I can describe the differences in a very superficial manner. There used to be an entire population of people who were “homeless,” that is to say that they had no lawful access to a dwelling (not that there were no empty dwellings in which to house them). Nowadays, if anyone does fall asleep in the grass or on the street, it is through choice or intoxication. If you find yourself in an unfamiliar city, lacking a place to lay your head, you need only stop by the travel bureau or the housing assistance center. And of course, in some places there are the Station Wagons that roam around, their uniformed attendants stopping to ask people who seem lost or unwell whether they need a lift to a resting place or hospital.

Today, there are no more billionaires, thank God—even some of the billionaires eventually admitted this was an amount of money that no human being should have. You can sort of still be a millionaire, at least by certain measures, but nobody owns more than one house (of course, it’s easy to take part in a timeshare plan or book a vacation property). The ratio between the top and bottom has diminished substantially because of wealth caps. There are wealthier people and less wealthy people, and people with more things and people with fewer things, but there is no “class system” with property-less “workers” versus propertied owners. Money can still buy you nice things, but it cannot get you power over others, and everyone at least has a housing unit and an income.

There was, at one point, such a passive acceptance of everyday cruelty. It was not as bad as it had been during the World Wars, or even during Vietnam and Iraq (when hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths barely registered as a blip on the American conscience). But people were regularly deported to their deaths without it making the front page of the newspaper. The vast complex of “correctional facilities” was not seen as dystopian. Much that should have seemed strange was not: the idea of the “active shooter” drill at schools, sometimes involving firing actual guns to

terrify children, was becoming an accepted feature of American life. (It only takes one generation to turn something aberrant into something that seems like it has always been so.)

I have talked much of the social, cultural, and political changes, but I want to mention three technological changes that caught me by surprise. None of it seems remarkable now, because we get used to every new development within about ten seconds, but I think it was all very unanticipated.

First, the idea that you could watch the *actual* Battle of Lexington, or the *actual* signing of the Magna Carta, would have been difficult to understand. You could recreate it with actors, but historical events themselves were presumed lost. The development of materials mapping and dating, however, which allowed us to visualize all matter on earth at any one time, and subsequently to rewind its forms to any previous time, unleashed an explosive new understanding of history. Every single thing that has ever happened was fully documented, and one could make a film about World War II by simply selecting any of the places and times and people one wanted, from any angle one desired, and stringing it together. Naturally, this power was dangerous, because it meant that every person's actions had been documented, too. There was no point denying having committed a crime if it could be recreated in high-resolution video from any angle. This made a horrible kind of "universal surveillance" possible, which is why I am so relieved that we had the right kind of political structure in place when the technology came about. This giant body of knowledge, with its capacity to expose all secrets and ruin lives, is kept tightly locked in the National Archives, and the process for obtaining footage follows strict requirements. Historians and filmmakers have seen more of it than I ever will, but I still enjoy getting to watch random days in the life of Martin Luther King or a 14th century monk.

The ability to produce realistic "deepfake" videos was antic-

ipated in the 2000s, and came about sooner than we expected. Someone could quite easily produce a video of me, in my own voice, saying something I would never say. Combined with matter mapping, this could have given the ability for malicious actors to wreak sheer havoc, blanketing the world with realistic falsehoods and permanently destroying our ability to figure out what was reality and what was a simulation. Here, too, we are fortunate that we were able to have an ethical revolution before the technological revolution got too far carried away.

The two wondrous technologies that contributed to the cultural explosion were deep music analysis and what used to be called “3d printing” but became known as micro-manufacturing. Deep music analysis allowed one to break down any song recording into its constituent parts. I could isolate the vocals or drums from a Motown song, even if the tracks hadn’t been recorded separately, then I could import the track into a software that would recreate the exact drum kit or singer’s voice, so that I could write my own song using the exact drum sounds from a Marvin Gaye song, with his exact vocals, and have the guitar part played with John Lennon’s guitar, and a duet sung by Aretha Franklin. The infinity of possibilities this presented was overwhelming, and it was critical to the development of gna.

Micro-manufacturing technology, too, unleashed an incredible wave of customization. If I wanted a new stapler, I could design it on the computer, and then have my production unit spit one out. As a result, I had a stapler that looked different from anyone else’s, even though I had begun with one of the same templates. People began designing their cars this way, meaning that you could have a car that looked like a 1963 Aston Martin that you had actually churned out in your garage that morning. Or you could have a car with the *front* of a 1963 Aston Martin and the back of a 2006 Chevy Tahoe. Now, of course, once the infrastructure became

mostly adapted for microcars, subways, and electric bikes, it was pointless to make such a thing, but you could do it. I particularly enjoyed remaking my desk every year to incorporate new decorative carvings showing what the magazine had accomplished in the last twelve months. And I *loved* designing strange toys for my grandchildren and watching them try to figure out how they worked. One year I even made them a LEGO set of the *Current Affairs* building, complete with working elevators. You didn't have to be an engineer or designer to navigate the software, which was good, because I wasn't.

Together, these changes might have destroyed us had we not had already established a strong Socialist ethic. It is easy to imagine, in a Social Darwinist world, these immense powers being used for evil. "Artificial intelligence" may have been something of a bust (I can still outwit my telephone in many important respects), but autonomous killer robots nearly happened, and it was a good thing we managed to keep the Pentagon from unleashing them. I do shudder to think what could have happened.

Some things never change. The food is better and life is not boring, but nothing is ever perfect. Human pettiness is a constant, and for some reason I *cannot* get the city parrot remover to show up no matter how many times I put up my request light. I hate one of my neighbors, and the other day I saw two small boys hitting one another over something stupid. Utopia is a statement of aspirations, not a real place. Some things have even gotten worse. You cannot get bananas all year now, which I find incredibly annoying. (Yes, I realize you can get those things called falanas⁸¹ but nobody thinks they're the same and I hardly ever see anyone eating them.) It can take two weeks to get a non-emergency appointment that once took two days, but I remind myself that that is because every-

81 Portmanteau of "false banana"

one can get one now. I suppose that all of it is a “small price to pay.” I certainly do not want to go back, and I doubt anyone else does either.



I have always ruled wisely over *Current Affairs*, and while I am firmly convinced that “workplace democracy” is on the whole necessary and beneficial, I believe my staff would agree that it has never been right for our magazine in particular. Just the captain must always go down with the ship, so the ship and all its passengers must always be willing to go down with the captain.

Nevertheless, at a certain point I began to feel as if others at *Current Affairs* deserved some kind of say in its running. One May afternoon, I called the Senior Editor into my office.

“You and I have always understood one another well, Rennix.”

“I would absolutely not say that was the case,” she joked.

“Of course, frequently I have had to step in and prevent your editorial misjudgments.”

“That feels like the opposite of what has actually happened,” she exaggerated.

“But on the whole, I feel as if we have worked together as well as could be expected, given the differences in our personalities. You have come to appreciate my high standards for editorial excellence, and I have come to tolerate your somewhat humorless disposition and frequent unnecessary jibes at my competence. We have, in other words, an equal partnership.”

“The kind in which one person creates problems and the other spends an equal amount of time having to fix them.”

“Precisely! Symbiosis! Like the cleaner wrasse and the moray eel.”

“I... okay.”

“What I am saying, Rennix, is this: we have suffered one another for many decades now. We have seen global transformations the likes of which you and I could never have foreseen the day we first met at that Harvard Square quiche bar. Having undergone all of this, I feel we must acknowledge the obvious: we are, when it comes down to it, co-editors.”

“Uh huh.”

“Will you, therefore, relinquish the title of Senior Editor and accept the title of co-Editor in Chief? It does not come with a pay increase, but it does come with equal legal liability for the magazine’s content.”

“I thought you were going to tell me you were retiring.”

“No, Whiskers. I will be with you always. But this is far better news, don’t you think?”

The scale of my magnanimity made her weep. I patted her and said: “There is no need to thank me.”

And with that, I felt as if *Current Affairs* has finally reached a place of stability and peace. We were ready to face the New Challenges. An era had ended and another had begun.

Concluding Thoughts

ONCE, WHEN I WAS A YOUNG MAN OF 29, I DID A STRANGE thing. I sat down on New Year's Eve and wrote a short document—not a story exactly, but a kind of fake memoir from the future. It was narrated by my older self, and was a sort of warning: it took place in a dystopian society that had failed to seize its opportunities, that had descended into true barbarism, with runaway climate change, authoritarian rule, and a neo-feudalistic technological nightmare. I must have been depressed when I wrote it, but the bleakness of its vision was common then. I republish it in full here, as a curious document of the pessimistic mindset of the time. It is jarring to read something written from then imagining life now that departs so wildly from reality:

FIFTY YEARS HENCE

Today, looking back at everything I wrote from 2019 onwards, I still think I was pretty perceptive, given the climate of the time. What's difficult for people to understand, what I can't even really understand myself, is how everyone—including me—could have been oblivious to so much that was so obvious.

I know everyone my age has dealt with the question—even if younger people haven't asked it explicitly, we've all thought it.

Actually, we weren't even unaware. We knew everything, because we made jokes about it. But we didn't follow through the implications of what we were saying. There was nobody there to say "Right, but it's not a joke, is it?" or "And so if that's true, do you see where it leads? What are you doing standing here?" Is that all we needed—someone to point out that reality is real, that you can't simultaneously accept something is true and act as if it isn't? I don't know what we needed. If you asked a Berliner of a certain era, I doubt they'd have a good answer either.

I've been looking through old newspapers and I think one of the main problems was that we didn't actually have the language to talk about what was happening. The headlines would say "Amazon Seeks To Enter East Asian Markets" or "Deregulation Push At Agency Accelerates." Everything was reported—the usual criticism of media, that it ignores the facts, was not actually true. If you look at the archives, what you see is something far creepier. It was all there on the printed page, it was just "normalized" to the point where nobody could understand it even as they looked directly at it. The phrase "hiding in plain sight" comes to mind. At one point, I swear to God, the New York Times front page ran a photo across five columns showing George H.W. Bush's funeral (George H.W. Bush was an insignificant president from the early '90s, best known for a senseless overseas military action and a pattern of sexual misconduct; the New York Times was a newspaper), with a one-column article squeezed next to it: "Emissions Surge, Hastening Perils Across the Globe." Oh yes, the perils. Did you see the perils in the paper this morning, dear?

But as I say, it wasn't just insufficient attention. It was also language itself. Maybe people would have had a better grasp

of what was happening if it had been framed more explicitly. "Amazon Enters East Asian Markets" should have been "Amazon Amasses Power Over More Nations, Narrowing Opportunities For Resistance." But I don't know, even then people probably would have just watched passively. The newspaper can say "Act Now Or Wolves Will Eat Your Children" and most readers will still just read the paper, go to work, and perhaps make a pessimistic remark to someone. We literally watched people burn alive. "Raising awareness" was a slogan for a while, one that makes me laugh now.

2020 was unfortunate. Usually people treat 2024 as the major event, for obvious reasons. But we all knew 2024 was coming the moment 2020 happened. That sounds strange today, I know, given the mainstream historical interpretation—2020 as a "return to normalcy" after the brief, regrettable detour into Trumpian madness, before the unexpected "backlash" that came in '24. There was never any "return," though. The same conditions were there as had been there for years. The Democrats squeaked into office, but it wasn't as if they knew how to stop the unfolding forces of history. In fact, personally I think they hastened the ultimate consolidation of power, because by being just "not bad" enough, what had been a thriving opposition movement was sapped of its vitality.

It could have gone the other way, I am still convinced of that. I am not a fatalist or determinist. People make choices, those choices matter. I try not to have regrets, but I keep wondering whether there was something I could have said or done in 2020. Could the "language prison" have been broken out of? I don't even know today how one could have done it. After all, there was plenty of talk about the "death of democracy" or the "concentration of wealth and power." They were talking about them at Davos, for God's sake. (Davos was a conference in which wealthy people pretended to care about others

in order to convince themselves they weren't going to Hell.) Words, words, words, it was all just words. Nobody actually knew what "democracy" meant. Power was consolidating around them, and we were still talking about "regulatory policy." Everyone still assumed they'd always have the vote.

It all happened in Brazil first, of course. Everyone should have been watching that carefully, since it played out almost exactly as it would here a few years later. Of course, you-know-who made Bolsonaro look like Nelson Mandela. But nobody here could place Brazil on a map. (A map was a way of showing how things looked.)

People were expecting one big Event, and in some ways 2024 was that. But it was mostly frog-in-a-saucepan stuff. We got used to it. Oh, some days the air fills with smoke. That's just what happens. Then your children grow up never knowing anything different, and eventually there's nobody around who can even remember that it was once otherwise.

I sometimes insist I wasn't surprised by anything. But I know that I was, I remember the feeling. A few things truly shocked me, such as how complete the destruction of knowledge could be. "Once something is on the internet it never goes away" is literally a thing I heard people say. No, it can all go away. Every bit of it can be taken. The central lesson, the thing I'd try to impart if I had a chance to go back and shout at my younger self, is how easily things that seem solid can vanish. I remember looking at my mantelpiece and actually thinking "This cannot go away, you will still be here no matter what." (I liked to talk to objects in those days.) Well, so much for that. No matter what!

I'll admit, the end of the magazine came as a shock. We had been doing so well. But people's incomes dried up, and they weren't spending them on magazines. Besides, there was no way for anyone to access it. With traffic to "fake news" blocked,

and anything independent being automatically filtered as “fake,” you couldn’t even tell people you were silenced. The revenue collapsed within six months, the enterprise couldn’t even be sold off. (I got a few hundred bucks for the velvet office chairs.)

I think it’s just very hard to believe that things really can go away until the moment that they do. You don’t know what you take for granted. I just assumed I would live in a world with butterflies, and that they would always be around. (Butterflies were a type of pretty insect. Imagine if the cockroaches had little Persian carpets for wings.) I saw pigeons as a nuisance. I didn’t conceive of the idea that one day I could wake up in a city without birds. The expression is: You don’t miss your water till your well runs dry. And you don’t miss your well until your water reaches the rooftops. Everything had seemed so solid, and by the time I knew how much I loved it, it was gone and I was screaming at no one to please let me have it back. God, I miss birds.

I haven’t talked about the personal losses. My family, my books, my city. In part, I just don’t want to think about it. But also, I have suffered less than almost anybody else. I still write, albeit only for my notes now. With a billion dead, how can I complain?

If my 2019 self was sitting here in my bunker, I wonder if there is anything I could tell him. Not “enjoy it while it lasts,” surely. I could give lessons in how power works: You need to be careful, because it will wrap itself around your neck and only reveal itself when it’s too late to resist. That’s certainly what Amazon did. We all realized what they had done, half a second too late. Call it the “oh, shit” moment. I can’t believe we called them “corporations” and “managers” really. There were so many euphemisms. We lived in a world strung together entirely from euphemisms, one that had almost nothing to do

with what was happening or would happen.

I can still feel what it was like on New Year's Eve, as 2019 began, on my balcony in the French Quarter. (That was a main neighborhood of New Orleans.) I wasn't naive. Something felt wrong, I could see that even though everyone was drunk and happy in the streets below, there was a sense of it being temporary, of having a few more good parties while there was still time. The waters were rising, but I just stood there. Should I have shouted? Built a raft? Joined a militia? Christ, I don't know.



How funny this sour prediction seems now. Missing birds? Impossible to conceive of “too few birds” when there are currently six parrots cluttering up my windowsill (I can shoo them away, but they will only come back.) The fears we had sometimes seem hilarious. The ludicrous fears of a “singularity,” the idea that we’d be making love to robots and “uploading” our minds to floppy disks. We’d live on a planet of slums and all the pandas would be dead.

And yet: I do often think about just how close we came to ruining everything. I don’t mean to become a “you kids don’t know how bad we had it” type, especially because I never had it bad myself, but I do believe it’s important to note just how far we’ve come and what it took to get there. It’s hard to believe today, but about thirty years ago people were literally asking whether human civilization should go extinct. Some talked about an impending apocalypse. There was a quite serious notion that we were heading for some kind of large-scale catastrophe, the rise of fascism or the total destruction of the planet. And the truth is, we were.

I don’t know how to get someone to understand, if they didn’t live through it, just how perilous that single moment truly was.

The Trump era may seem comical to you, a bit of historical madness like the reign of Caligula, but for those of us who were young then and thinking about our futures, it was horrifying. The planet was heating, authoritarians were coming to power, and there were thousands of nuclear weapons poised to fire at any time. Day-to-day life had its charms, but there was a sense that the good things could not last, because things were beginning to spiral out of control.

What's interesting to me now is not just how dangerous it was but how quickly we managed to reverse course. Historical change, it turns out, can be rapid in any direction. The Nazis can go from fringe clowns to terrifying rulers within a decade. But so, too, did we build something more beautiful than anything I could have envisioned when I was in my late 20s. Wandering through the world today, I cannot believe it is the same place I once knew. It seems so familiar, but it is so magnificent, so warm, so verdant and friendly. Sometimes people my age and older are asked what it was like to live through the development of the internet. The answer: I barely noticed. It wasn't a change that mattered, compared to what happened after. I don't think young people (oh no, I'm about to say *I don't think young people appreciate*, what have I become?) appreciate the full extent of what has taken place. I used to worry, back when it seemed a real possibility, that when butterflies disappeared, after a few generations people would forget what they were even missing. Now the whole damn world is butterflies, and the problem is reversed.

I don't know if you've ever looked back at previous generations' predictions of what the future would be like. They're often richly amusing. But what's striking about the time when I grew up is that people had almost stopped imagining. Our films and literature, when they imagined the future, could only turn dystopian. Yet even more creative generations could never have foreseen what

actually transpired. Only *Star Trek* came close, but even they didn't foresee that everything could be so *green*, so teeming with life of all kinds. I think in order to understand the bleakness of 2019 you have to look at a photo of a mall parking lot.



What strikes us now about such places is that they are so dead. Quite literally. Nothing in the picture, except a shadow of a person, is alive. It is like being on top of a mountain, or in space, but without the view. Imagine what it was like to see places like this everywhere, to have the whole world being turned into it. Today a photo like this makes us squirm—we recoil at the lack of warmth, decoration, beauty. The blankness of the walls, the utilitarian design. But this was an almost universal aesthetic. Whenever a new building was put up, it would almost always look like this. Is it any wonder that we felt “futureless”?

The rediscovery of life changed everything, and I mean everything. In the early part of this century, before 2020, “environmentalism” had a kind of fringe vibe to it. To be “green” was to have a pet cause, and I literally remember thinking that I hated the color green and I wished the “hippie-ish” associations of environ-

mentalism would go away. I associated it with “urban gardens”—with people toiling in dirt to raise a small handful of tomatoes. I’m ashamed that I never saw that with a simple adjustment, it could turn from something pitifully marginal to something all-encompassing and powerful. We did not need “urban gardens.” We needed The Urban Garden, a city of flowers. I think it’s just that phrases like “harmony with nature” had become clichés, their associations had dried up. Do you know that they didn’t even teach plant identification in schools? The miracle of life had ceased to be miraculous. “Nature” was seen as distinct from civilization. Even conservationists reinforced this totally erroneous framework: they wanted to “conserve” the natural world from the encroachment of humanity. You can see why we were heading towards planetary destruction! If you look at the “environment” as something separate from “us,” it will not seem necessary to cultivate or care about it.

The most striking changes in my lifetime have been in the way people think about things. Animals, as you know, were still eaten, with everyone just uncomfortably pretending that the moral problem didn’t exist. The presence of wild animals in day-to-day life today is still striking to me. In the old “gated communities” every trace of wilderness was violently extinguished. Now the presence of animal life is seen as the mark of a place’s vitality. (I just had to shoo *yet another* toucan from the ventilation shaft.) If you wanted to go from one country to another, you had to bring a “passport,” an absurdly elaborate identification document issued by a bureaucratic agency, and the “borders” between countries were militarized and patrolled. How refreshing it is today to look at a map and see countries defined as general areas rather than fixed territories. (One of the most bizarre things in old newspapers is seeing countries referred to as if they were people—“China Goes To The Moon” and the like. Seeing countries

as individuals made it easier for us to see ourselves as being in competition with them. Is China gaining on “us”? When of course, we are all one big “us.”) The prison system was taken as a given. Likewise the gap in wealth between black people and white people. Endless justifications for these things were put forward. You wouldn’t believe how cruel and indifferent to the fate of others some people could be.

There are countless aspects of everyday existence that were almost unthinkable then. Today, when you visit a branch of the GHS, you barely think about it. You find the nearest clinic in whatever country to happen to be in, make an appointment, go, and leave. That is not how it used to go. The idea of a “Global Health Service” would have seemed insane. For one thing, the idea of “world government” and even the word “global” itself had negative connotations. Today we might rejoice in our interconnectedness, but when our governments were dysfunctional, it was very easy to argue that more “government” would be doubly dysfunctional. So healthcare was a patchwork, and it was expensive. You literally had people begging not to be put in an ambulance because they knew they’d receive a huge bill afterwards! You had to find a doctor who would “take your insurance” (healthcare was covered through insurance plans) and even then it could be unaffordable. I remember that when I was in my late 20s, people had to do “crowd funding” campaigns to raise money for their medication. Sometimes they didn’t raise enough money, in which case they might die.

Part of me wishes everyone could relive that era for a day, so they’d know why what we have is special. When I stroll through the city to work, across rope bridges, through gardens, sometimes I find myself near tears. “Who are we that we can be so cruel?” I used to ask. Today, it’s “Who are we that we could build something so incredible?” Perhaps it’s not surprising at all. We

were gifted a paradise, and all we needed to do was learn to love it, to manage it correctly and not kill each other. Should have been easy. But it wasn't.



That's something I really want to emphasize, not because I think we'll ever find ourselves in the same position again, but because the people who made the changes happen deserve to have the scale of their achievement recognized. As I say, we were on a path to destruction. It took an immense burst of collective action to steer us away. If you asked me what the "key moment" was, I think it was probably when the Democratic Socialists of America resolved that every single member of the U.S. Congress would be a socialist within twelve years. Every single Congressional and state legislative district, without exception, had a young socialist running in the Democratic primaries. They were organized, and they began to win. The Sanders presidency, like Corbyn's tenure as prime minister, accelerated the transition into overdrive. A few small victories that began to meaningfully impact people's lives (such as the Jubilee), then a consensus was built around Democratic Socialism, from which there was no going back. The adoption of that principle was key, though: Never have an election, at any level, without a socialist candidate running.

It wasn't just electoral, of course. The organization of workplaces and the development of the One Big Union helped tip the balance of power away from bosses and owners. Internationalism was critical—when the Democratic Socialists of America became the Democratic Socialists of the World, they were finally able to build the worldwide solidarity that was necessary to stop the infamous competitive "race to the bottom" among countries. The ethic of solidarity: it blossomed everywhere. God, it was a time. It felt like being shaken out of a stupor. Of course, the hard work

was in actually figuring out the solutions. They took power easily, but avoiding disastrous experiments in social engineering required a commitment to “pragmatic radicalism,” a willingness to think hard about questions like “How do you stop capital flight?” (Capitalism encouraged sociopathy, actually necessitated it in many cases, and capitalists would rather destroy a country and countless lives than see a small bit of their power eroded.)

It was hard and it was easy. It was hard in that it demanded a hell of a lot of hard work from people. It was easy in that once we “got the ball rolling,” the changes happened rapidly. Once you improve something, it’s hard to undo it, so once it was understood that a workplace needed to be democratic, democratic it was forever. Once the “green quotient” became law, it wasn’t going to be undone. Colleges knew there would be an outcry if they reimposed tuition fees, nobody was going to build another slaughterhouse once meat became both unnecessary and inefficient. You couldn’t build a wall between countries if you didn’t know where one ended and the next began, couldn’t build a prison if you didn’t have crimes. I am not saying the world today is perfect (I just had an argument with my neighbor about religion’s place in political life.) We have not reached “the end of history,” a silly notion. But of course there is a sense of excitement about where we are going next. We can approach the “Final Frontier” safe in the knowledge that when we encounter the beings of other planets, we will do so as comrades rather than conquerors.

I am aware that by spending too much time talking about my memories, I may sound like a long-winded fogey. But I can’t help obsessing over that historic turning point in 2020, that incredible moment when everything suddenly began to feel different in the most wonderful way. The buildings became beautiful again, so much so they took your breath away. (I wouldn’t even quite know how to describe today’s buildings to a stranger. They look more

like plants than human-made structures, as if Gaudi was commissioned to do a Garden of Eden.) The trees and animals were everywhere, like living in an Henri Rousseau painting. (Though personally I still prefer the library to a hiking trail!) The workweek was shortened, the militaries all disbanded. Guns became the curious artifact of a dysfunctional past. People wear costumes whenever they please, they have luxury without materialism. Mardi Gras used to only be celebrated in New Orleans, but look at it now! There are no more “museums,” just as there is no more “conservation,” because art and nature are everywhere rather than confined. Every school is gorgeous, with students learning everything from literature to animal husbandry. I am not telling you anything you don’t already know. But I swear to God the orange juice even tastes better!

Today, I look back on all of this and think: how differently it could have gone, and how fortunate we are that it didn’t. Or perhaps “fortune” had nothing to do with it. The people of that time had a choice, and we can all be grateful that they chose so well, did so much, bequeathed us the marvel that is today’s Earth.



I am not sure for whom I have written this book. I imagine few contemporary readers will find it of interest, as I rehash so much that is common knowledge, and I have held what is—let us be honest—essentially a desk job. I did not brandish a rifle and snipe Nazis, I did not pound in railroad ties or seduce the Queen of England.⁸² I have tried to nudge the tides of history in one direction or the other as best I can, but if there is one thing we know about tides, it is that they are resistant to being nudged.

82 Did I mention that the monarchy was abolished in 2050? It was.

I suppose what I have tried to produce is a record of what it felt like to be an observer of momentous change, of a kind that was truly unfathomable during the early years of my life. That unfathomableness is what I really wish to convey, because I do not think it is well-understood how difficult it was to imagine the kind of future that we ended up living in. There was such a poverty of imagination: everything anyone could foresee was either a fiery apocalypse or a dull, minimalist, static world of ubiquitous technology and almost no culture worth speaking of. We certainly did not think synchronized swimming would become as important as it has turned out to be.

To the extent anyone could imagine new developments, they talked incessantly about the “self-driving car.” It was pathetic, really: all the wondrous worlds we could create, the possibility of the Great Voyage, and nobody saw any of it. You should have seen how many acres of ink were spilled over questions like *Will the autonomous vehicle decide whether to kill pedestrians or the driver?* or *How many jobs will the autonomous vehicle eliminate?* Now we are on the brink of discovering billions upon billions of new stars, even as there are a billion fascinating sights and experiences here on earth. Some transit is autonomous, yes, and in many cities there are the taxis. But the passenger car disappeared, except as something to go and drive for fun on a course—and there, of course, the driving is the point, making autonomy irrelevant. It’s all just so different from anything anyone was talking about.

I wish someone had told me then what it could be like. I wish we’d been able to think our way out of the strange loops we fell into. Gross Domestic Product! The stock market! My God! How did anyone take any of this seriously? And yet at the time, it seemed so unquestionably reasonable. How odd it is that one generation’s certitudes can become the next generation’s absurdities.

Hopeless, it’s hopeless. I am a fine writer, but I am attempting

the impossible. You will never experience the surprise I felt, the elation at realizing just how much was possible, just how foolishly we had overlooked the obvious. Or, perhaps you will, but it will be of another type entirely. Our next journey—what will we see? What wonders, or horrors, are in store for us? What awaits us in this next phase? They said that if we ever achieved utopia, we'd be bored out of our minds. Bored? I've never felt more excited. I only hope I live long enough to find out how the story ends.

I wonder who will be the last person to read these words, where in space and time they will reside. Perhaps they will live in a world far different from my own, one that has not undergone the kind of changes mine has. Perhaps they look around them and everything seems permanent and immutable, and they feel powerless and lonely. To them, I would offer the central lessons from my own life: strange things can happen. People have agency, and their decision to act or sit still determines what happens next. You are not alone. There are million upon millions of people looking up at the same stars you do, feeling as desolate as you do, and all you must do is find them. Worlds can alter. Consensus ideologies can fall apart. Civilizations can crumble, or be built. New cultures can develop. You will hear music unlike any you have ever heard before, see structures you never thought could be built. We can create a world of everyday magic, where everyone shares the fruits of this miraculous universe we have found ourselves in, this Garden of Eden that has so often been taken for granted, squandered, and despoiled. This is a place of boundless possibility, and you have power. For the love of God, use it!