New Nonfiction from Karl Meade: “Knee-Capped”

We all live in a kind of delirium: as if we have control of our lives, while we know damn well something is coming. We don’t know if it’s coming from the inside or the outside—a disease or a rogue wave. We don’t know when or where. But we know it’s coming.

For me, I always thought it would be my stomach, or water. I nearly drowned at two, and that seemed to do something to my stomach—twist it into a sinuous time bomb. My dad, who never forgave himself for my near-drowning, always thought it would his heart, or his brain. But never his knees.

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When he wakes lying on his back in the dark—he tells me later—his whole body throbbing, his mouth dry as sand, his tongue so swollen he can’t even lick his lips, he hears cockroaches scuttling, water dripping. He thinks he’s in a cave. He has to get out. He’ll never survive here.

He lifts his head slowly and looks around. A shaded window, a door rimmed with light. He tries to sit up but his arms and legs are strapped to something metal. Voices in the distance. He calls out, quietly: *Lorna?*

The door bursts open to a blinding light. *God no,* they’re back: two figures in white lab coats brandishing shiny

weapons. One grabs his leg and stabs his thigh with a knife of ice. A woman's voice says *it's okay, Ray, relax*—but it's a trick—she grabs his head and sears his eye with a laser. He thrashes wildly but they pin him down, voices barking orders, eight hands on his limbs now—where did the others come from? They strip him bare, rip off his underwear. A hand grabs his genitals.

No, he cries.

Finally they let go and slip out the door. Darkness falls. His heart pounds. Cockroaches ooze out of the walls. He counts his breath, like they taught him at boot camp: *in* two-three*, out* two-three*. Stay calm. Survive*.

*

"You see that, Karl?" Nurse Sandra leans her full weight on my dad's wrist, his massive hand curled into a fist. "He's trying to punch you in the face."

I can barely hold his other arm down as his wild blue eyes glare up at me, his face glistening, his hair a frizz of grey, like he's been zapped out of the sky. It takes two nurses to hold each leg—at seventy-eight, he's as strong as the day he enlisted.

Sandra says, loudly: "It's okay, Ray. You're at the Ottawa-Carleton Hospital. I'm one of your nurses."

"It's *Major Meade* to you," he says.

"More like Major Trouble." She smiles, but Dad doesn't react. "You had your knee replaced yesterday, Ray."

Now he laughs, derisively. "Your comrades tried that one already.'

Yesterday he was clear and calm, couldn't wait to get "back into action." I flew in from Vancouver to help him through his

physio, at home—drink a few beers, watch a few games—but now I watch, helpless, as they tear off his Velcro-ed diaper and take a urine sample.

“Hands off the bird,” he says. He starts giggling. “Stop, that tickles! You’re making me horny!”

They put on a new diaper and strap him down. I follow Sandra into the hall, my stomach a rope of fire. “What do I do?”

“Someone has to stay with him. Just go with it.”

“Go with what? What’s wrong?”

“You’ll have to ask his doctor.” An alarm sounds down the hall. She looks left and right, her forehead creased. “Betty!” she shouts down the hall. She glances at me—”The drugs should make him sleep now”—and rushes off.

In my dad’s cramped room of steel and plastic, I find him turned completely around in bed, his head at the foot, the IV cord wrapped around his torso. “Dad, how did you do that?”

“I don’t know.” He stares at his hands as if they belong to someone else—these blunt-fingered hands that taught me how to grip a golf club, how to flip an egg, even how to change a diaper. He looks at me, upside down, tears in his eyes, pleading: *“Get me out of here.”*

“They said you have to stay in bed, Dad.”

His face hardens. “It’s your country.” He reefs his arm sideways and rips out his IV. An alarm beeps and Sandra rushes in. I shrug—”sorry”—while she turns him around and tightens his straps. Someone walks by in the hall and Dad calls out: “Help! Help!”

“Shush, Ray, you’ll alarm the other patients.”

“Patients my arse! We’re prisoners!”

Sandra re-attaches his IV and injects *oxy*-something into it. Dad lies back and she smiles at me, but I see the fatigue in her eyes, the fear—unlike me, she knows what's coming.

She rushes out and I settle into the chair at the foot of his bed. It's past midnight, I'm exhausted from the long trip out here, and now *this*—whatever this is. But he keeps pulling me into his waking dreams: eyes open, swearing, laughing, crying. I'm his brother in Korea, his drunken father in Halifax, my mother Lorna before she died. Then I'm his guard and he's a POW in Germany. Every time I close my eyes, he makes a break for it—yanking the arm straps, clawing his IV—and I pop up from my chair. He freezes—caught in escape—then plays casual: "Want some advice, Sergeant Pop-up?"

"Sure," I say, to engage him.

"Stop jogging."

All night he cries for help, calls me *bloody Kraut, Sergeant Pop-up, Karl with a K. Born in Germany, eh?* He laughs, wildly, derisively. Finally, at 5 a.m. his eyes close and he weeps, quietly, for my mother: *Lorna. Help me, Lori*. Even though she's been gone for thirty years, her name on his lips grants us both the gift of sleep.

*

I wake to a weak winter sun through the window, with my dad staring at me—his youngest son—slouched in the chair in the corner, my coat over my lap. I see tears on his stubbled cheeks, fear in his glazed eyes. Or maybe it's my fear I see.

Then his eyes narrow. He picks up a crust of toast from the tray across his lap and chucks it at me. "When the hell did you get here?"

I smile, relieved—his old self, the joker. I sit up and stretch my arms overhead. "Yesterday. Don't you—?" I catch

myself.

He nods at me, stares, as if taking me in. I know this look of his. For years he's teased me that my mother said I was the daughter she never had, that I have her sensitive eyes, her slender fingers, even her mouth. I've caught him, over the years, looking comforted to see me, but also saddened, remembering Lorna.

I hear a deep, familiar voice down the hall. Ken, my oldest brother, strolls in carrying three coffees. He's the epitome of tall, dark and handsome, with a quiet confidence I've never felt in my life. I feel my shoulders drop, as if the cavalry has arrived.

"Good morning," he says, placing a coffee on Dad's tray, studying his eyes to see if he's there. "Feeling better?"

"Bright and chipper," Dad manages, hesitantly. He looks from Ken to me. "I didn't do anything bad last night, did I?"

I stand up, glad to hear him lucid. "The Major? Bad? *Never*."

Suddenly he glares at Ken. "Who are *you*? You're in one of those gangs, aren't you."

Ken and I trade glances. Adrenaline grabs my stomach. The day-nurse enters, a short Francophone woman named Genevieve, with dark hair and bright, friendly eyes. Dad gestures at her uniform. "That's nice. Did you put that on just for me?"

'Ah,' she says, wagging her finger at him. "I heard about you."

She takes his pulse, smiles at us, then at Dad. "Where did you get that nice tan, Ray?"

"Walmart," he says. "Blue Light special."

Genevieve looks at Ken and I. We both shrug, just as the

doctor walks in, clipboard in her hand, hair pulled back in a severe bun. I can see she's a hard-ass, which Dad will like. She doesn't ask how he is, just gets right to it. "What day is it, Ray?" Her voice is loud, like he's hard of hearing. I resist the urge to say he's not deaf.

He blinks and shakes his head hard, as if trying to uncross his eyes. "Sunday."

She writes on her clipboard. "It's Thursday, March 11. Do you know the year, Ray?"

"1932," he shoots back.

She nods. "That's the year you born. So that's good, but right now it's 2011." She flips to a new page and hands Dad the clipboard and a pen. "Can you draw me the face of a clock?"

Dad raises his hands in the air: it's a trick question, an accusation. "I haven't seen O'clock's face in thirty years."

She flips the page back on the clipboard. "Ok, Ray. How about this place? Where are we?"

He looks around the room, then blankly at me, then Ken. His eyes widen and he snatches at something in the air, like a fly.

"*Ray,*" the doctor says, firmly. "When did you last drink alcohol?"

He sits up straighter, tries to see out the window. "Where did the water come from? Is this a prisoner ship?"

Ken steps forward, calm and polite. "Ray stopped drinking two weeks ago, just as he was told to."

"*You*, stop talking!" Dad jabs his finger at Ken. "He wants my pension. My own son, betraying me!"

"He's not betraying you," I say.

“Now it’s both of you?”

“He’s saying you *stopped*.”

“I never took you two for squealers.”

Ken and I look at each other. Genevieve touches my arm, then escorts Ken and I into the hall.

*

“It’s more confusing to him,” Genevieve says, in the hallway, “if there’s too many of us.” Her hand moves to the pager flashing on her belt, but she doesn’t look at it. Her eyes tighten, as does her demeanor. “Let’s stay out here and let the doctor do her job.” Now her pager rings aloud and she strides off down the hall.

As I watch her and two other nurses rush into a room, I feel like I might vomit: fatigue, fear, confusion. I glance at Ken, for big-brother guidance, but he has a deep crease down his forehead, staring at the door to Dad’s room.

“Do her job?” Ken says, shaking his head. “They always go to the alcohol. Blame the fucking patient.”

The doctor emerges, and Ken cuts her off.

“Excuse me,” he says, politely. I know he’s seething, but he sounds calm and cool. “But what’s going on with Ray?”

The doctor glances down the hall, then counts off her fingers. Her voice is as cold as the pale green walls: “It could be stroke, TLA, infection, anaesthetic reaction, electrolyte imbalance, alcohol withdrawal—”

“—I told you he stopped drinking two weeks ago,” Ken says.

“Look,” she says, “he’s getting the million-dollar treatment. Blood tests, urine, EKG, we’ve even pushed through an emergency MRI to see if there’s been a stroke.” She says it

like that, as if the stroke is somewhere out there, rather than in Dad's head. "You'll have to trust me."

Genevieve sticks her head out from a door down the hall. "*Doctor."*

Ken takes the dayshift to sit with Dad, while I go to Dad's to unpack and rest. But first I stop in the lobby to call my wife on Salt Spring Island, off the coast of Vancouver. When I say *stroke,* my voice buckles. "I truly thought he was gone," I say.

Beside me, a youngish bald woman wearing a kerchief, sitting with a girl on her lap, hears my voice break and smiles at me, kindly. I glance at her daughter and my heart sinks. My mother died when I was seventeen, but this girl is more like seven. I try to smile back, but my throat squeezes into a sob. I shove it back down but I can no longer speak. My wife tells me to call her father, a retired surgeon. He'll know what to do.

I steel myself and call. He doesn't miss a beat: "I saw it all the time, Karl. It's *overhydration*. Your dad's drunk on water. Get them to turn the IV rate down."

I search out Genevieve, the day-nurse, and tell her. She shrugs, apologetically: "Doctor's orders."

I see the doctor and literally chase her down the hall. She sighs, and says, flatly: "*Drunk on water*?"

My voice seethes—not calm, not cool. I'm the youngest, the hot-head. "My father-in-law was Chair of the College of Surgeons! He's not just some quack with a theory!"

There are nurses and patients and visitors in the hall. Everyone stops. They've heard Dad's cries for help.

The doctor looks me straight in the eye. "Sir, lower your voice, please."

I manage to lower my voice. “He knows what he’s talking about.”

She does not waver. “I’m sure he was good in his time, but we have protocols now.” She looks at her watch. “I have other patients.”

I stand there for what feels like a long time. Patients and visitors walk past, trying not to stare. Finally, I shuffle out to the parking lot, sit in my rental car staring out the windshield at the hospital. I try to figure out which is Dad’s window, and what’s happening to him in that room. When my head bobs forward in sleep, I drive slowly, dreamily, to Dad’s house.

*

I should sleep, but instead I go for a long, slow jog through my childhood neighborhood, retracing the routes my dad and I used to run. After showering, I Google “overhydration,” print out my findings from McGill University Health Centre, and plan to hand a *fait accompli* diagnosis to the doctor:

“Overhydration can lead to dangerously low sodium levels in the blood, or a life-threatening condition called hyponatremia, which can result in brain swelling. Because the brain is enclosed in the skull, it leaves almost no room for expansion, which can cause headaches and brain fog, even cognitive problems and seizures.”

Then an email from my father-in-law says exactly the same: “This condition is well known and the causes were worked out in the 1960s. It is nothing new.”

I’m so angry I can hardly breathe. I try to calm down, get some rest. I spend the afternoon wandering the rooms of my childhood house studying the photos on the walls and dressers and tables. I even lovingly admire his duct-taped broom, his black-taped toaster—two of many testaments to his lifelong

Air-Force Supply-Officer modus operandi: nothing gets junked.

When I return in the evening, to my relief I find a note from Ken saying Dad was “pretty clear” for most of the day—”fingers crossed.” I collapse into the chair beside Dad’s bed. I can’t believe it’s still Thursday. I’ve only been here for twenty-four hours, but it feels like a week. He smiles at me, a bit oddly, like I’m a stranger on a train. We begin the nightshift watching TV in his room. He’s laughing at Jerry Seinfeld, and I’m so relieved to see him lucid that I need to wipe away the tears.

“God, that’s funny,” I say, pretending my tears are because of Seinfeld.

A minute later, he tries to get up. “I have to go home. I have people expecting me. My son Karl is coming.”

“I’m Karl.”

“You’re not my son. My son would let me get up.”

He starts twitching and flinching. He folds his arms to keep them still. Then he swats the air, points at the wall: “That one’s tall!”

By ten o’clock he’s gripping the bed rails like an amusement ride, his wide eyes flicking from one wall to the other.

“You okay, Dad?”

“Watch out,’ he says, ‘those spiders are jumpers!”

Nurse Sandra arrives with a trolley of meds and needles. Dad settles down, plays calm for her while she chats away, taking his vitals, reading his chart. But when she jabs the needle into his IV, he says, “No more of that, thanks.”

Sandra chuckles. “It’ll help you sleep, Ray.”

“*Please,* no.” He looks at me, desperately. “*Please*.”

She glides her trolley out of the room and I follow her. I tell her about overhydration, hand her my crumpled pages of research, but she hands them back, gives me the same answer: “Doctor’s orders.”

I turn away. I think maybe if I had more sleep, or was a better person, a better son, I could be more useful. Every time I walk down that hall back to his room, I feel like I’m walking into death. I pull my chair closer to him and read Sam Shepard’s elliptical, almost drugged-out stories, and Dad loves it.

“When you come to Ottawa, you have to come visit me.”

“On Ogilvie Road?” I say, testing him.

“Good memory,” he says.

I close the book, pull my chair to the corner, and before I know it he’s sunk into a mime of drowning: back arched, hands gripping the steel rails, his nose in the air, trying to stay above water, trying to breathe. Later he says the IV shot him off a cliff into the sea. But right now he can’t close his eyes. I’m his mother, after her heart attack at fifty: she’s here, sinking with him through all those eyes lost in the Halifax explosion. I’m squeezing his hand, as his mother, then he’s *my* mother, Lorna, saying to me: “What a good boy you are, Karl. What a good boy.”

The water streams down my face. What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to say?

Sandra appears as if from a dream, taking Dad’s vitals as he gazes up at her lovingly. “You’re being a good son to your father,” she says to me.

I can’t even say thank you.

She places her hand on my shoulder. “It’s hard to see your father like this.”

The night plays out much like the first. He takes me on his full tour of duty: Halifax, Moncton, Montreal (where he met Lorna), Germany, Manitoba, Comox BC, Ottawa, Greenwood Nova Scotia. His eyes wide open, he draws me into his Halifax childhood, his Air Force boot camp, his mother dying, Lorna dying.

At 3 a.m. his eyes finally close and I wander down the pale-green hall into the pale-green common room and stand in front of the muted television: a science documentary showing a strange ocean wave stretching along an entire coastline. My mind keeps expecting the wave to break and recede, like any wave, but it doesn't. The wave crests a sea wall, hits the shore, and rolls through a town—buildings collapse, cars bob like toys—then continues into the countryside, swallows a road, rolls up an embankment, and engulfs an entire bridge full of cars and trucks. A woman and her son clamber onto their car roof, watching, helpless, as this wave out of nowhere just sweeps them off the roof and they're gone.

A caption scrolls across the screen—LIVE: *Tsunami Strikes Coast of Japan*—and I realize, my God, it's the *news*. I return to Dad's room and sit in the chair, watching his chest rise and fall. My hands won't stop shaking. All those people—that mother and son—*gone*, just like that. And Dad—where has he gone?

Finally, my eyes close and I'm caught in a wave of bodies and cars drifting through a recurring nightmare from my childhood: my mom and dad and I, trapped underwater in abandoned warships. I've had nightmares of water, been afraid of water, since I nearly drowned at two years old. My dad always blamed himself: he turned his back for a few seconds—"*Seconds*!" he cried—then found me face down in the water.

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The next morning, Ken finds us both asleep—mouths open, faces

pale. “I thought you were both dead,” he says later.

He quietly wakes me with coffee. We let Dad sleep while we talk. I tell Ken about my father-in-law’s theory, and my confrontation with the doctor. “I think you better be the one to talk to her,” I say, sheepishly.

Dad wakes, just as the doctor comes in on her rounds. She seems pleased. Her eyes almost smile. “Good news,” she says. “The tests all came back negative. We’ve ruled out the biggies.”

Adrenaline surges through me. “Then what’s wrong with him?”

“Time will tell. Be patient.”

I feel the tears rise and it angers me. “*Time*? He’s drowning! Turn the water down!”

She goes on about protocol and treatment. How do you argue with a doctor, once you’ve raised your questions and been dismissed? It’s my one hour of Google versus her seven years of medical school. I won’t win, and usually shouldn’t. But what if I’m right? How do I know?

Ken squeezes my arm, lets the doctor finish. When she leaves, Ken hands me a sheath of his own research. He and his son Conor have discovered Postoperative Delirium (PD), and Postoperative Cognitive Dysfunction (POCD). I quickly scan what he’s printed, and the frustration rages through me. Both are well-known syndromes, “a central nervous system dysfunction that complicates the recovery of elderly patients following surgery.” I read on, sweating. PD typically occurs on postoperative days 1 to 3 and is associated with prolonged hospital stays, increased risks for morbidity and significant health care expenditures.

I want to strangle somebody. But Ken talks me down.

I drive back to Dad’s, fall asleep on his couch. *Delirium*:

Hippocrates called it *brain fever*, but all I see is fear. Fear in Dad's eyes, fear in Ken's forehead, fear in my stomach. Even in the nurses and doctors, hidden beneath their professional cool.

When I return that evening, Dad's lying flat on the bed with his arms at his sides, wide-eyed and breathing toward the ceiling, mesmerized with "all the gibberish," as he later says to me. I squeeze his hand and he squeezes back, but he won't, or can't, let go of what he's watching on the ceiling. He tells me what he sees, like a romantic poet's visionary work, his own Kubla Khan, all of his family and friends in a "great film," as he puts it.

He's crying and laughing. "I had a great life. Lorna was such an extraordinary woman."

"You were a good man, too," I say.

"I'll take that, Karl, but I could've been a greater man."

"We all could've been greater. That's what keeps us going."

"I'll give you that."

Sandra comes in, then stops dead. She sees Raymond's eyes welled up and wide, and mine brimming with tears. Squeezing each others' hands. She leaves, without speaking.

Raymond says: "Karl, thank you for that."

"For what?"

"For the great film you made. That was a mammoth production."

"I didn't make a film. It was your mind."

"They don't let you make films like that anymore."

I open my mouth to speak but he stops me with a raised hand.

“Look at that waterfall! Jesus, it’s just beautiful.” He looks from the left corner of the ceiling to the right. “I love my family so much. My boys. I never bragged about them, okay, I guess I did.” He laughs and looks at me. “So, am I going to die now, at 79?”

“No,” I say. “That’s just your birthday.”

“Who’s coming for me?”

“We all are.”

His “film” lasts fifteen minutes. I hold his hand, he squeezes mine so hard, eyes glistening, wide with horror, then glee. “There goes sister Rosie, there’s Bob in a tank. He was a great fucking hero he was!”

“And there I go, into the grave. A great fucking smash-up.”

All night he lives this monologue, sleeping, awake, narrating his visionary babel.

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The third night, the fourth night, the fifth: Dad slowly rises out of the fog. On day five, our middle brother Dave arrives from Oklahoma and takes the nightshifts. On day seven, all four of us limp out of Admitting together, the walking wounded. We sit in Dad’s living room and watch the news, stunned: twenty thousand people gone. We feel angry at the doctors, but lucky that Dad’s still here.

In the coming months, he tries to tell us what it was like: the bugs, the cave, the dreams. Lorna right there in the room with him. Little do we know that the next seven years will play out like the past seven days, only in reverse, in slow motion. Next year he’ll lose his keys, the year after that his car, then his words. Five years from now, when the diagnosis comes—Vascular Dementia—he will blame his knees: that it all started here. The fog that never quite lifted, just thickened

slowly through his brain.

But I can’t help but think of his near-drowning: what if I hadn’t turned my back on him, not for seconds, but for days? What if I’d been calmer, more skilful with the doctor? What if I hadn’t let him drown from the inside? Then, instead of checking him into a dementia floor this week, maybe we’d be walking together along the Halifax beach of his childhood, watching the waves roll in.

Election Special: To Hell With Civility by Rob Bokkon

I’m so tired of re-writing this article.

The drafts kept piling up and piling up and piling up, one after the other. I’d think I was done, and then—here comes the goddamn news again.

Shock. Anger. Horror.
And again.
And again.
And again, but way worse this time.

I’m beginning to feel like a character in a Borges story, or a Lev Grossman novel. A chronicler fated to write the same story over and over again, only to find that he has to begin it all over, once more, as soon as he reaches the end.

Because the atrocities just *will not stop.*

As of this writing, bombs are still traveling through the mail to “the enemy of the people,” the media. You know, like the headquarters of CNN. Those are words, you may recall, said by

the sitting President of the United States. You probably forgot that quote, given the torrent of appalling things he says daily. This most recent bomb came on the heels of many other potentially deadly packages sent to the leaders of the Democratic Party, including two former Presidents.

Poster found on Purdue campus this past week. Photo: Patrick Johanns.

As of this writing, two black grandparents are dead in my home state of Kentucky, shot down in the produce section of a Kroger by an avowed white supremacist who was heard telling another person of his race, “whites don’t kill whites.” The shooter was a white supremacist who had attempted to gain access to an African-American church just minutes before shooting up the grocery store.

As of this writing, a synagogue in Pittsburgh has lost eleven of its congregation. They were shot, by a Nazi, in the United States of America, in the year 2018.

The worst thing is: by now you're almost OK with it.

Stop. I don't mean you condone it. I don't even mean you accept it. But I do mean that you're becoming, more and more each day, *used to it*.

The nature of fascist violence, fascist politics, fascist ideology, is not insidious. It is not subtle. It is not clever.

Fascism is brassy. Loud. Bombastic.

Overwhelming.

Eventually, you start to tune it out. Whether from compassion fatigue or a sincere desire to protect your own mental health or just sheer exhaustion, you start to push it aside. Ignore it. Convince yourself that someone else is doing something about it, just so you can focus on the important stuff like getting dinner ready or taking out the garbage or your kid's grades.

Which is, unfortunately, exactly what fascists want.

They are counting on you to be overwhelmed. They are counting on you to change the channel. They are counting on you to see so much hateful rhetoric, so much ethnic violence, so much anti-LGBT+ legislation that you just can't anymore.

And so this, gentle reader, is where we are. We have actual Nazis marching the streets. We have a government that refuses to do anything about it, that is known to cultivate them for votes and political support, that only makes the most terse and backhanded of statements "condemning" them.

We have a Supreme Court likely to deliver the death knell to the last vestiges of a woman's right to choose, in the United States of America.

We have an executive branch making determined and deliberate

assaults on LGBT+ rights on a scale literally never before seen. The rabble-rousing polemics of the George W. Bush administration, the casual hatred of Reagan: these are nothing compared to the systemic offenses committed by Trump, Pence and their evangelical cronies. The transgender military ban, the attacks on title IX, the effort to ban the same-sex spouses of diplomats from entering the USA—all a product of Trump's America.

See? You're tired already. You've heard it all, or if you haven't, you're not surprised.

There are worse things than being tired, though.

Actively encouraging this stuff, for example. Those people, though—the ones who still support Trump, the ones who think his plan to end birthright citizenship (and with it the Fourteenth Amendment) is a great idea, the ones who believed the Democrats actually mailed bombs to themselves—those people are lost to any rational appeal. We can't count on them anymore. They've been given the opportunity to regret their decision, to show some basic decency, and they're not going to do it.

And yet, we have among us those who are, to my mind, even worse than the Trumpites. That would be the legions of people standing around wringing their hands and wondering aloud why we can't all get along. The people yelling about "the discourse." The people who inevitably seem to lecture the left on something called "civility" while utterly ignoring the actual fascists marching in the streets.

These would be that lofty political class known as "the moderates." I say "lofty" because every single last one of them will tell you, at some length, about their moral superiority to "extremists." They "don't vote party, they vote for candidates." They "refuse to condemn someone over something as trivial as politics." They "remember when there

was a spirit of bipartisanship in this country." And what's more, they will tell you in no uncertain terms why you're what's wrong with this nation, and how it doesn't help to call Nazis what they are, and…I'm making myself sick writing this.

I just don't understand. Twenty or thirty years ago, maybe, I could see that sort of thinking. Back when the GOP wasn't entirely composed of homophobes and plutocrats. Back when the Democratic Party still nurtured a few nasty Dixiecrat types. Back when neither party much cared about LGBT rights. Back when the GOP still believed in the social safety net. But now?

Now, in this day and age, you're telling me "you vote candidate over party" when the party platform of the GOP is explicitly anti-LGBT? You're telling me that you're sometimes OK with taking away a woman's right to choose? You're telling me that you're sometimes OK with dismantling the entirety of the New Deal and the Great Society? You're telling me that you're sometimes OK with a brutal and xenophobic, to say nothing of racist, immigration policy?

You're *sometimes* OK with the guy who was endorsed by Nazis?

Fuck that. And fuck the calls for "civility" from these very same, amoral people. These people will tie themselves in knots over Mitch McConnell getting his dinner interrupted, but then blithely ignore the fact that he is actively seeking to remove health care from millions upon millions of aged and poor people. They get upset when people shout at Sarah Sanders, but ignore the fact that she lies for, and repeats the lies of, a man who is actively placing children in cages because their parents had the audacity to seek asylum in the United States of America.

When they say "civility" they don't even know what they mean by it. They think they're calling for politeness. They think they're calling for decorum. But you cannot be polite to someone who is actively seeking to disenfranchise, dehumanize

or otherwise harm you through the apparatus of the state. You cannot afford common social graces to people who, through their hateful rhetoric, inspire acts of terror against marginalized groups. You cannot extend greater consideration for those who would oppress you than they would extend to you.

Because to do so is to cede power. To do so is to say, “You are deserving of better treatment than I am.” To do so is to prop up the very power structures that are currently aimed at us like weapons, to be complicit in our own ruin.

Martin Luther King did not sit down with the leaders of the KKK. Gandhi did not concede that the British Raj “had some ideas worth considering”. And Marsha P. Johnson was not worried about respect, or civility, or decorum when she threw the first brick at the NYPD during the Stonewall riots. She was worried about her survival. Her right to exist. Her right to be a fully recognized human being.

So no, I won’t be civil to these fascists. Not now. Not ever. And you shouldn’t either.

Blood Money: C.E. Morgan’s ‘The Sport of Kings’

On May 17, 1875, under blue skies and wearing the flapping green-and-orange silks of his legendary employer J.P. McGrath, a diminutive, tough, whip-thin African-American jockey named Oliver Lewis, weighing little more than a hundred pounds, careened to the first Kentucky Derby victory on a chestnut Thoroughbred with a white blaze and two white socks named

Aristides. Thirteen of the fifteen jockeys surrounding him as they thundered down the home stretch were also African-American. In fact, black jockeys would dominate the sport in the south for another thirty years, winning 15 of the first 28 Derbies.

Aristides' trainer, Ansel Williamson, had been born a slave in rural Virginia. Purchased by a wealthy horse breeder, he learned the art and science of groomsmanship, and was eventually hired by J.P. McGrath, of the famed green-and-orange silks, who'd been born dirt-poor but, after winning $105,000 in a single night in a New York gambling house, started a Thoroughbred farm that went on to become one of the most famous of its time.

1887. Eadweard Muybridge. Wellcome Gallery, London.

That a former-slave-turned-Hall-of-Famer trained Aristides—whose statue now stands at Churchill Downs—and an

African-American jockey the size of a young girl rode the pounding horse to victory, hints at the intrigue, breathtaking chance, and monumental toil involved in the sport of horse racing. It also, for novelist C.E. Morgan—with her sharp comprehension of history and a penchant for literary gambles of her own—sparked the genesis of a brilliant, winding epic novel of a racially and economically fraught America: *The Sport of Kings*.

Spanning over 200 years as it moves back and forth through time, *The Sport of Kings* opens in the mid-1950s. Henry Forge, a restless, ambitious teenager schooled from birth in the racial politics of the south, sets in motion a shocking crime against his father's black groom, Filip. The event is one of several sharp seismic blips in the bedrock inequity of Forge Run Farm, initially founded by Henry's great-great-great-great-grandfather, Samuel Forge, who came on foot from Virginia to Paris, Kentucky in 1783, accompanied by one slave. On such an act of claim and hubris the farm was built; and, as author Morgan levels her steady eye at the parallels of human history, a nation.

Young Henry Forge turns the family's tobacco farm into a Thoroughbred empire where the green grass is "the color of money." His frustrated cosmopolitan wife, Judith, leaves him before too long and, in a deeply un-maternal move, also leaves their sole child, Henrietta, for him to raise. (One can't help but wonder if Henry and his daughter, or at least their naming scheme, are a nod to legendary horse trainer Leo O'Brien and his daughter, Leona; or if, given Morgan's divinity school background and this father-daughter pair's ruthless streak, it's more of a Herod/Herodias sort of thing.) Henrietta is bright, offbeat, and enthusiastic in youth, qualities that become warped into a strange, intellectual coldness by her father's intense, even immoral, over-involvement in her life. When Henrietta blurts a racial slur at school and is penalized, her father, irate, decides to homeschool her on a strange curriculum of evolutionary biology, manifest destiny, and horsemanship.

Henry Forge is, to put it mildly, obsessed with genetics. He's especially intrigued by the strategy of linebreeding: the idea that doubling down on a certain lineage can perfect and purify it, yielding—if the circumstances are just right—the ideal specimen. (Even today, the odd, invisible world of dominance, alleles, and zygotes is a hallmark preoccupation of the sport, so much so that even the casual gambler can combine mares and stallions on fantasy web sites such as TrueNicks.com to produce virtual "nicks," foals with an edge on wins. The site's slogan could have come from Henry Forge himself: "Do

more than just hope for the best.")

The cloistered universe of Forge Run Farm is rendered in such careful and specific detail by Morgan that its sheer particularity could become claustrophobic—even her other characters realize how deeply weird the Forges are and try to get away from them, like the salt-of-the-earth veterinarian, Lou, who skitters to her truck to escape "these crazy people"—if it's not for the sea change the author delivers halfway through the book, when Allmon Shaughnessy arrives on the farm.

Allmon is a 24-year-old fresh off a seven-year prison sentence, schooled in the Groom Program at Blackburn, and an undeniable talent with horses. He's the only child of a wandering, handsome, alcoholic father, Mike Shaughnessy ("known in high school as that Irish fucking fuck") and a caring but overburdened African-American mother, Marie. At fifteen, Allmon is noticed for his athletic promise and brought into a pre-NFL program, the Academy for Physical Education, where the coaches' focus on phenotype is not so different from the horse breeders' whom Allmon will encounter later ("'How big was your dad?" "Six-two." "Good….I want you big, fast, and I want you mean").

But Marie's chronic health problems, revealed to be lupus, are sinking the household. As with Erica Garner—the daughter of Eric Garner who was killed by police violence in 2014 for selling cigarettes without tax stamps, herself dead at 27 from a heart attack after childbirth—a legacy of racism and poverty live in Marie's body, the "gendered necropolitics" of anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence, the sequelae. "Make me an animal," Marie begs, in a heartbreaking prayer, "so I won't know anything. Make me a man, so I won't give a damn about anyone."

Her son Allmon does give a damn, but he is orphaned too young to know what to do with his anger and his aching heart. He is

led into crime by older boys on the street; tried as an adult for possession of narcotics, an illegal firearm and a stolen car, he is sentenced to seven years, some of which is described in horrifying detail as he learns to defend himself.

The introduction of Allmon to the farm—their first ever black groom, hired by Henrietta without the blessing or even knowledge of her father—will change the course of the Forge family forever. Most likely not in the way you, avid reader, are thinking, because Morgan will not give the reader what he or she expects. But—and there's that wink at history again—change is coming, and change is, as Lyell and Darwin would agree, nature—and therefore man's—most unstoppable force.

—

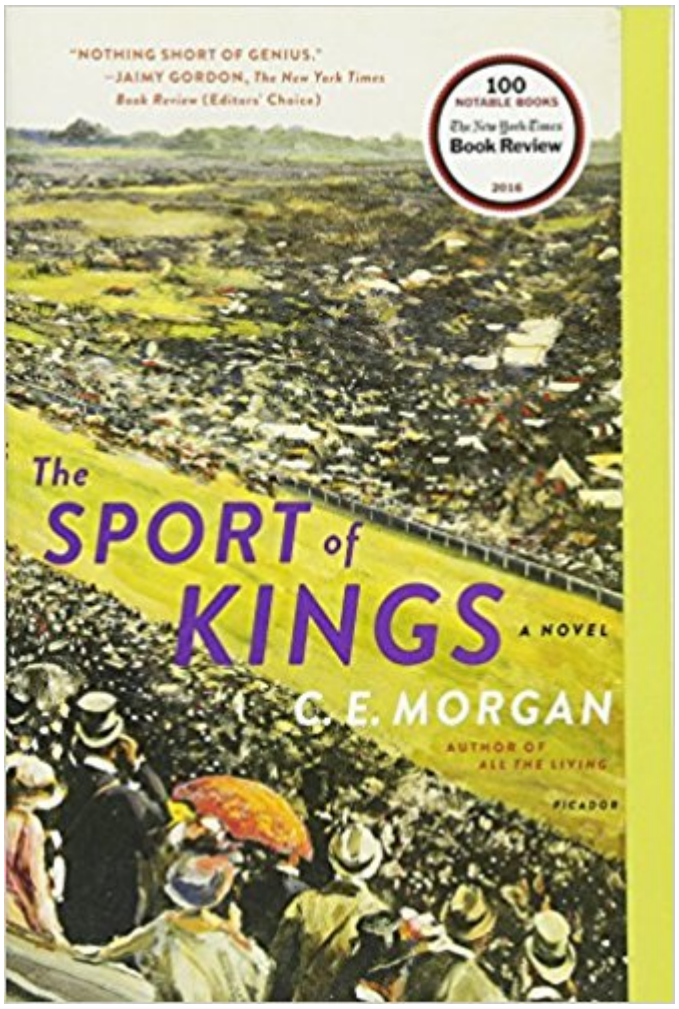
C.E. Morgan was born and raised in rural Kentucky. She

attended Berea College, a tuition-free institution founded as an abolitionist school in 1855, and later, Harvard Divinity School. And like Allmon's mother, Marie, she is no stranger to chronic pain, as indicated by this interview with *Commonweal Magazine*:

> *Anyone who lives with poor health or chronic pain, or who has endured poverty—real poverty—knows what it is to live with lack and a resulting fear so incessant that it becomes thoroughly normalized, invisible in its ubiquity. If you're lucky enough to have that fear begin to ease, which it has for me only in the past year, it's an odd experience. A stranglehold eases off your entire body.*

An essay Morgan wrote for the Oxford American, "My Friend, Nothing is in Vain," suggests that her own brand of chronic pain may, like Marie's, be auto-immune in nature, like lupus.

But it's important to keep in mind that a novelist need not have experienced firsthand that which they write into their work, and Morgan's first preoccupation is with the way she renders her subjects. "Evil's breeding ground is a lack of empathy," she explains. "Evil acts reduce the other to an object, a being to its component parts, and obliterate subjectivity….So I locate moral beauty in an other-regarding ethic."



She's also concerned with the notion of "attunement": "Humans struggle to remain attuned to one another—they want to turn away because of fear, or ambition, or boredom, or some lure of the ego. It's difficult. It requires radical vulnerability, radical risk."

Writing so boldly outside one's historical period, race, and gender also puts the novelist in a position of "radical vulnerability," and the whole thing can only work if it is a radical risk: the author wholly invested, putting her emotions and reputation on the line, tapping into voices that are not her own. It's a gamble with a nearly paralyzing moral and ethical obligation, and that's before you even get to the whole issue of "craft." But if the stakes were not so high, how else could Morgan have propelled herself to create a character as stunning in thought, action, and voice as "The Reverend," Allmon's restless, glittering-eyed, charismatic

preacher of a grandfather? (Morgan is excellent at writing convincing, multi-dimensional characters of faith, and their sermons; her first novel, *All the Living*, a quietly gorgeous, small-scope book taking place over only three months and focusing on just three characters, features pastor Bell Johnson, whose words read much like Morgan's prescription for novel writing itself, her "other-regarding ethic": "My heart was like a shirt wore wrong side out, brothers and sisters, that's how it was when God turned me, so that my innermost heart was all exposed.") But The Reverend is a different kind of preacher. An urgent, assertive, slightly wild and dogmatic man with an Old Testament streak, he has chosen a life of urban poverty and service. He harshly judges his own daughter, Marie, for her decisions, and is easier on his flock than his own family, much like John Ames's grandfather in *Gilead.* He also speaks many of my favorite lines in the book:

> *"Y'all act like Jesus is dead! Well, let me ask you this: Is Jesus dead in the ground? 'Cause I heard a rumor Jesus done rose up from the grave!"*
>
> *A woman cried out, "He rose!"*
>
> *"And how come he rose up out of that dark and nasty grave?"*
>
> *"Tell me!"*
>
> *"How come he said, 'Eat my body and remember me?'….Because my Jesus, my Jesus is the original Negro, and he said, only I can pay the bill…"*
>
> *…Now the Reverend stopped suddenly, plucked a pink handkerchief out of his suit pocket, and mopped his streaming face, and when he spoke again his voice was conversational: "Now eventually somebody's gonna tell you Jesus ain't had no brown skin. And you know what you're gonna say when they tell you that? You're gonna say: If Jesus wasn't born no Negro, he died a Negro. What part the cross you don't understand?"*

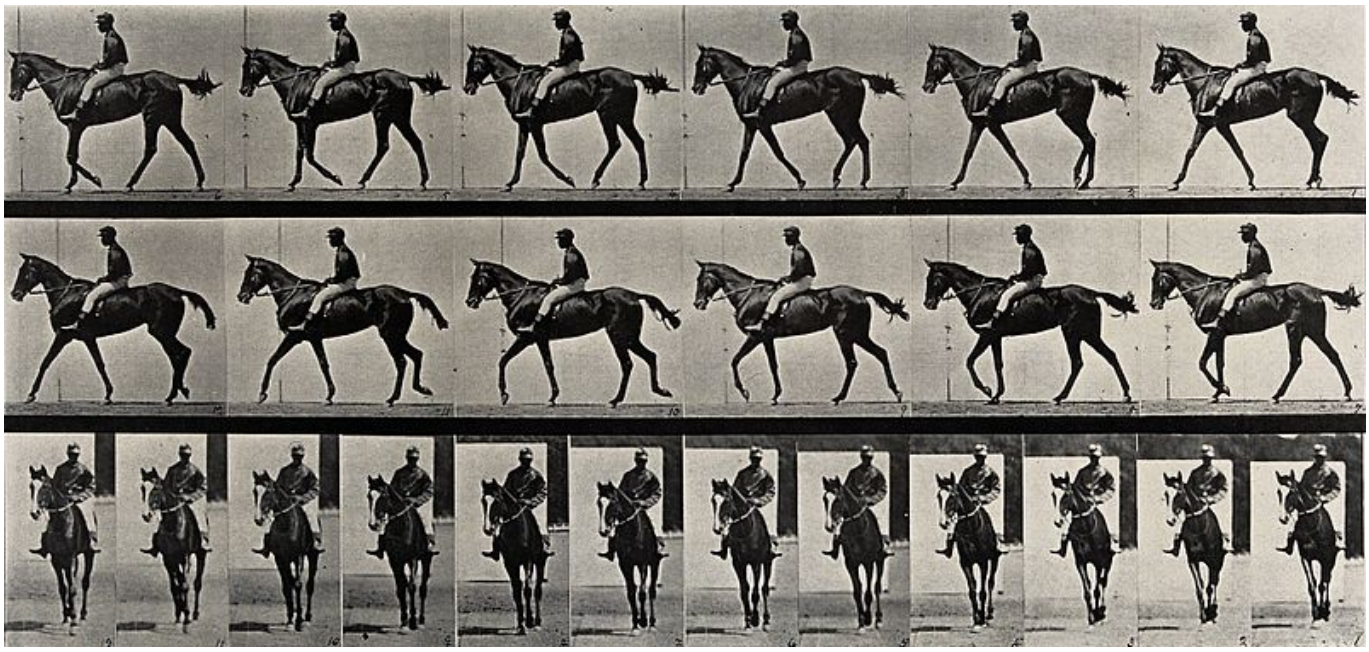
—

The Sport of Kings is by no means a “perfect” book: its arc treads a little too close to Philipp Meyer’s *The Son* to feel wholly new, and at one key section, delving back into the early days of slavery on Forge Run Farm, the novel takes a sudden dive so immoderately Faulknerian—all dark and lushly incestuous and overwrought—that it threatens, like kudzu, to choke up the whole book.

But *The Sport of Kings* possesses a certain perfection of spirit, a reckless authorial gamble. Something special happens when a novelist combines that gamble with a terrific intellect and a heart for human suffering. We end up with a book that’s one in a million, a Secretariat, a Hellsmouth, pounding for the finish.

—

And what of those African-American jockeys who dominated the sport of horse racing in its early decades? The athletes like Isaac Burns Murphy, whose 44% win rate has never been surpassed, and whose earnings would have made him a millionaire if he lived today; or Jimmy Winkfield, who won 220 races in 1901 alone, every one of them a threat to life and limb?



Sadly, Jim Crow racism, and sometimes direct sabotage, thinned their ranks. The Irish jockeys of the northern states were not, on the whole, kind. Isaac Burns Murphy was once discovered, apparently drunk, on the back of a horse prior to a race; it was later proven he'd been drugged by an opponent. Winkfield escaped segregation in the United States with a successful second career in Russia, winning the Russian Oaks five times and the Russian Derby four; but when he was invited back to the States for a *Sports Illustrated* gala in 1961, he was told he could not enter through the front door.

No African-American jockey has won the Kentucky Derby since 1902, though Winkfield placed second the following year.

The sport is now dominated by riders from Latin American countries, immigrants from Venezuela, Mexico, Panama, rural gauchos of small stature and true grit. (Leona O'Brien, that daughter of famous horse trainer Leo O'Brien, whom I mentioned earlier? She went on to marry her father's jockey, the Puerto Rican-born John Velazquez, now the highest-paid in his sport; they have two children). Morgan gives these newer jockeys a brief nod in *The Sport of Kings*, and a reader can't help but think that fifty years from now, there will be a novel in their story, too.

Such Modest Proposals, And So Many

Most schoolchildren in the English-speaking West read Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* in high school or college. Since its publication in 1729, *A Modest Proposal* has become a staple of English literature, the most recognizable satirical example of hyperbole. *A Modest Proposal* is often read by students of history, politics, and economics for similar reasons. It is a genre unto itself—the "modest proposal" essay—and is treated as such in many online media publications (Salon, Slate, Jezebel, TNR, The National Review, and… well, all of them, irrespective of political alignment).

Jonathan Swift, proposer of modest proposals (Wikipedia Commons)

For those people who missed Swift's original satire, here's a quick summary. In the early 18th century (really from the 17th-20th century), the Irish, colonized and exploited by England, suffered from extreme poverty. Meanwhile, a growing

overseas empire and industrialization helped expand the British middle class, and drove appetite for consumer goods. Swift offers a solution to both issues—the middle class should cultivate an appetite for the flesh of Irish babies, which will alleviate the suffering of poor Irish families.

A Modest Proposal is not modest, nor is it sincere. Swift does not expect people reading it to take his argument at face value, though it is likely that he earnestly hoped his writing would help raise awareness and empathy for poor Irish civilians. The type of person (a person like Swift's fictional narrator) who would suggest developing a market for baby flesh—breaking humanity's taboo on cannibalism for sustenance, satisfaction, or profit—would be an immoral monster. But Swift's ambition isn't simply to shock with *A Modest Proposal*, he designs the essay to deliver horror logically, to examine a particular way of thinking about problem solving. The essay derives much of its power through fusing "thinkable" (the expansion of markets and generation of wealth as a way of alleviating human suffering) with "unthinkable" (that market expansion, in *A Modest Proposal*, is Irish babies).

Because *A Modest Proposal* communicates its point so effectively, it is widely emulated. A favorite of New York Times Op-Ed columnists and contributors, (as well as bloggers) and many other media publications (as described ealier), the "Modest Proposal" of today is (unlike its inspiration), often quite modest in terms of its ambitions, and respect for the sensibilities of English-language readers. These not-immodest contemporary proposals have lost almost all connection to the original sense of Swift's intentionally outrageous essay, and function simply as a way of grabbing readers' attention. They're a kind of bait-and-switch, where naming the essay in a way sure to draw parallels to Swift's essay serves as the "bait," and a justification for maintaining the status quo is the "switch."

Writers propose modestly, today, when writing modest proposals

A Modest Proposal: Should Concerts Start Earlier?
A Journal of Musical Things (blog) - Apr 1, 2017
Toronto's NOW magazine has this **modest proposal**. Instead of pushing last call further and further back, start gigs earlier. A motion by the city's ...

A Modest Proposal to Save the Chemical Safety Board
EHS Today - Mar 28, 2017
A Modest Proposal to Save the Chemical Safety Board ... President Donald Trump's recent 2018 budget proposal calls for defunding the ...

A Modest Proposal for Togetherness
Wyalusing Rocket Courier (subscription) - Mar 29, 2017
The world is changing so rapidly that we sometimes forget how different our lives are from those of our grandparents and even parents.

Opinion: The Trump White House: **A Modest Proposal**
Roll Call - Mar 21, 2017
It sounds like the entire title of Jonathan Swift's 1729 essay, "**A Modest Proposal** For preventing the Children of Poor People From being a ...

The Case for Cambodian Gratitude: **A Modest Proposal**
Paste Magazine - Mar 17, 2017
I have recently read that Cambodia is furious at America for demanding repayment of a loan we made to them many years ago, $500 million ...

WSJ Wealth Adviser Briefing: **A Modest Proposal** for Advisers, JP ...
Wall Street Journal (subscription) (blog) - Mar 14, 2017
Ash Toumayants, founder and president of Strong Tower Associates in State College, Pa., is proud of his **modest** approach to practice ...

A Modest Proposal to Catholic Conservatives: Fight Poverty
Huffington Post - Mar 27, 2017
As a fellow practicing Catholic, I was riveted by a recent account in the Washington Post about your hosting other well-heeled Catholic ...

One (out of countless) example of a failed "modest proposal" directly inspired by Swift is this Obama-era 2010 think piece that whimsically offered to improve U.S. intelligence-gathering efforts by firing everyone in the CIA and replacing them with out-of-work investigative journalists. Elements shared with Swift's *Modest Proposal*: (1) offers to solve two social problems in one stroke, (2) is an unethical and bad idea, (3) clearly forwarded for rhetorical impact rather than as a serious suggestion. Elements it lacks: (1) offers some truly transgressive idea for the sake of exaggeration,

amusement, and illustration [journalists *are* intelligence gatherers, and better at intelligence gathering than the CIA].

Even unconventional proposals (like Noam Chomsky's 2002 "modest" proposal that the U.S. arm Iran and let them attack Iraq) fall short of actually breaking taboo. In the case of Chomsky's satirical essay, a much worse thing happened than the invasion of Iraq by a U.S. supplied Iran—the U.S. invaded Iraq itself, destabilizing the area so completely that open warfare in Iraq is ongoing. In fact, Iran has contributed mightily in the struggle against ISIS, in terms of soldiers and material. Chomsky's vision for possible horror was totally insufficient for the satirical form, and is now a reality in Iraq.

The best or purest recent "modest proposal" to be found is tagged and searchable as a "modest proposal," but not explicitly titled as such. It is a Clinton-era essay from 1999 by David Plotz that proposes to end school shootings by arming all schoolchildren. Plotz doesn't spend the time exploring the idea—how useful this would be for the gun industry, and (presumably) would assist the U.S. economy in ways that would create more prosperity, thereby reducing the type of family conditions that often lead to dissatisfaction, mental illness, and murder—but it's similar in tone and feel to Swift's satire. It's also pretty close to a stance actually supported by the NRA in the wake of Sandy Hook. Still, a decent attempt.

What's stopping writers and thinkers from going beyond Swift's rhetorical form? It's not as though the world is essentially more just or equitable than in Swift's time—on the contrary, knowing what we do about history, a compelling argument can be made that things are worse now then when Jonathan Swift was writing. Sure, there have been advances in technology and science. There have also been catastrophes on an almost-unimaginable scale, such that if one does not learn about them at school, one is inclined to believe that they are hoaxes. The Great Leap Forward, the Holocaust, Holodomor, the genocide

of Native American populations in the Americas, the invention and deployment of nuclear weapons, and many other horrific tragedies of the industrial age required the invention of new legal and ethical categories for which Swift and his contemporaries did not have words.

Granted, Not Everyone is a Satirist

One possible reason so many authors and thinkers invoke *A Modest Proposal* without using the most powerful component of its energy (taboo-busting hyperbole) is that most writers don't consider themselves satirists. They don't write to satirize, they write (a column, for example) to advance a serious policy with serious people. In this case, serious writers could be interested in referencing *A Modest Proposal* to show that they're well-read. They could also hope to use a portion of *A Modest Proposal*'s energy to highlight the desirability of their position (which is not eating babies) while affiliating the competing argument with calamity.

Here's another factor to consider. Pundits and the political/media commentary class tend to come from the ranks of the wealthy, influential and powerful. This offers an incentive for employees of the wealthy and powerful (those working for Jeff Bezos at *The Washington Post* or the Sulzberger family at *The New York Times*, for example) to be careful with what they write, and how they write it. One will find criticism of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* within their own pages, because those media institutions practice journalism (and do so well). Nevertheless, that criticism rarely takes on a *disrespectful* tone, or one that is strident or moralistic. There are limits.

The Sulzbergers are great patrons of the Democratic Party, and (an assessment based on regular readership of *The New York*

Times) tend to pull for mainstream icons of the Democratic Party including the Clintons and the Kennedys—political families accustomed to chummy relationships with large media organizations. This is just one prominent example from an industry rife with patronage and nepotism, on both sides of the political spectrum. Nepotism and favor happens to be visible to many people who keep track of politics or consume journalism in a way that it isn't visible in physics or rocket science. Nepotism and favor are also differently useful in politics and journalism. When a political or authorial brand passes from one generation to the next, having a prominent father or mother who can parlay influence into access can make or break a young career in either. Is it any wonder that within two groups who depend on each other for power there tends to be little incentive to write hard-hitting satire that might undermine the position of either?

Social media also makes bold satire difficult by particularizing audiences, and opening satirists up to personal attacks (as well as the potential consequences of those attacks). Although satire is not supposed to care about being criticized, certain topics cannot be satirized without being criticized as offensive. There is a higher standard for satire today, that takes more into account than an essay's subject (for example, the author's personal connection to the topic at hand). Besides, media institutions can be destroyed by the wealthy and powerful.

The final criticism of *A Modest Proposal* and similar satires could be that hyperbole as a rhetorical device has been overcome by the horrors of the 20th century. Satire, no matter how well-intentioned and effectively written has yet to prevent the worst human impulses. From this perspective, if satire isn't effective, maybe it's better not to write it.

But I'd tend to disagree with that idea. Here's an example I wrote of a satirical piece that emulates the intent behind

Swift's argument in *A Modest Proposal* without imitating the structure. In this case, a man seeks to assuage his fears about terrorism, and in so doing, becomes a terrorist. As a matter of course, the piece (built as a how-to) describes terrorist activity. It's not great satire, but neither is it awful—and certainly on par with, say, most of what passes for satire in mainstream media today outside Clickhole and The Onion. If it were to go viral and be read by everyone in the U.S., would fewer people become terrorists? Maybe!

Or, to put that better—if it were good enough to go viral, it would almost certainly have a deterrent effect against domestic terrorism, because that's what great satire does, it makes bad but appealing ideas clichéd, it exposes the ephemerally attractive as flawed and stupid. Anecdotal evidence suggests that clever mockery can do more to make an argument against a given issue or idea stickier and more effective than earnest straightforward appeals. Common sense suggests the same.

Ultimately, what does it matter if satire is ineffective or inefficient? Who said efficiency was the standard of value? Probably a British capitalist eating Irish babies.

Writers Invoking *A Modest Proposal* Should Be Less Modest

Without innovative, bold, confrontational writing, satire ends up excusing unethical or hypocritical behavior. It is satire's job to attack the status quo in those ways that the status quo has grown oppressive to humans—regardless of whether or not that attack is successful. Selectively, yes, and constructively, satirists and writers hoping to improve society must do so sometimes through offensive and/or

provocative literature.

Absent real satire, the landscape for substantive discussion shrinks until it has been reduced to two agreeable gentlefolk bowing before one another, respectfully begging one anther's pardon for being so bold as to ask whether the other might be willing to favor them by proceeding through yonder open door.

A Modest Proposal is not extreme, save in comparison with almost all of its recent published descendants. That there are fewer sincere satirical calls for evaluation in political, social, or economic terms at the same time that there are many essays pretending to do so is a commentary on the general comfort many well-educated people feel with the status quo. It's also a comment on how effective publishing has become at supporting writing that most people find satisfying. That's almost as bad as a President Trump. And not quite as bad as raising Irish babies to feed the aesthetic tastes of the affluent.

Against NATO: The Other Side of the Argument

Since 1989-1991 when every country in the USSR or the Warsaw Pact (save Russia) jumped ship at the earliest opportunity, reasonable people have asked the question: why does the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) still exist? This essay represents an attempt to understand basic criticisms that exist across the Western and non-Western political spectrum—to take them at face value, and examine them in good faith. The author of this essay believes in the necessity of NATO—its

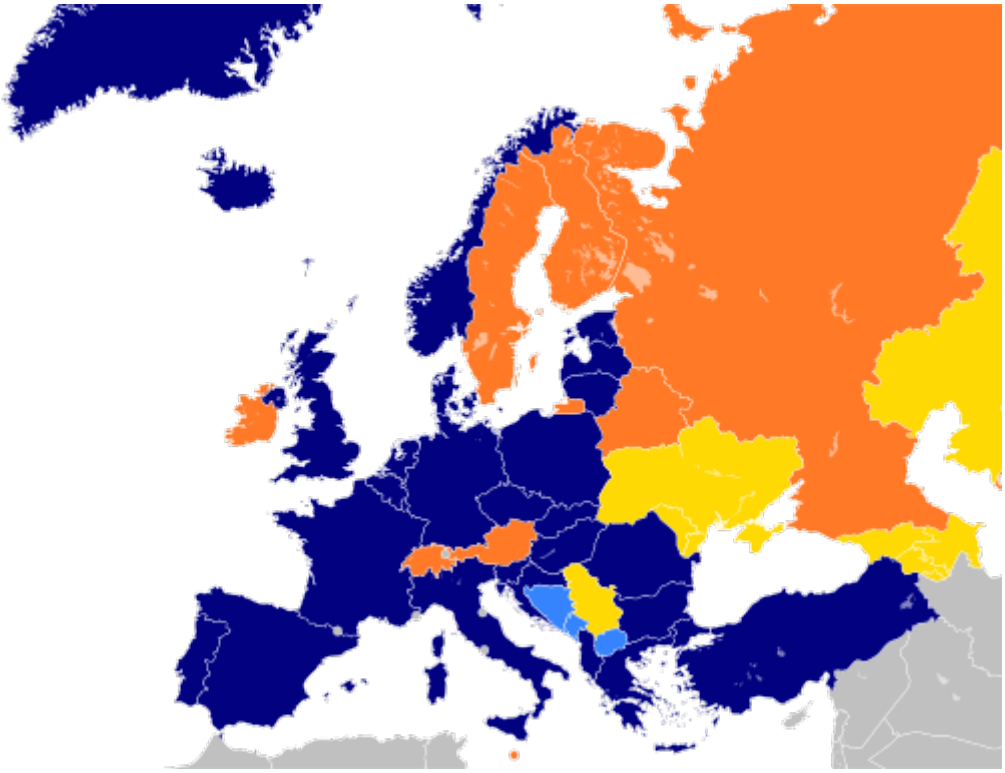
goodness, in fact—so it is an attempt to see things from another perspective.

Speaking with people on the right and left who argue against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, one encounters two different critical methodologies that arrive at the same conclusion. This is how Americans who support former candidate for US President Bernie Sanders or current presidential candidate Dr. Jill Stein could find common ground with Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson, Republican candidate Donald Trump (and former Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates). It's also how Americans can find common ground with Russian nationalists, Chinese nationalists, and far-right groups across Europe.

Jumping into a comparision between the two groups' methodologies requires some minor simplification. I don't think this veers into oversimplification, but then, as I view both arguments against NATO as insufficient, that shouldn't be surprising. The motives of the left and the right are very different. As such, their criticisms have different moral weight, and require different types of justification to make sense. The left and right are not "the same" for reaching similar conclusions about why one should not support a European Cold War alliance, but their conclusions do happen to agree. That's important.

Conservative NATO skeptics tend to bring two types of criticism against the organization. The first draws on skepticism over globalization and alliance, and is not unlike the "States Rights" argument one often encounters among this type of thinker. These people view NATO membership as a concession of US sovereignty and agency. Taking part in a

mutual defense pact means the US having to defend *other countries* in ways that run contrary to its own interests. The US loses more than it gains from a military alliance with Europe. The second describes the problem in financial terms: the US cannot afford to spend the money it does on NATO, that money would be better spent almost anywhere else. This second source of concern is similar to the first in that it assumes that the US is somehow being cheated by participating in the alliance—out of sovereignty, agency, or money.



NATO as of this article's writing, from Wikipedia (NATO countries in blue)

NATO skeptics on the American left are less concerned about advancing "US" interests, and more interested in expanding a world where people can live free from war. To this type of thinking, the US is itself a source of much or the dominant piece of aggression in the world, and as NATO is subservient to US influence, it should be diminished. The hypothesis here is that a smaller or non-existent NATO would inevitably lead to a more peaceful world. People tend to live harmoniously with one another, much moreso than nations, and reducing any

nation-state agency is to the good. This type of thinking also leads people to advocate for the reduction or outright destruction of all nuclear weapons. From this point of view—the humanist or humanitarian—the stronger and larger NATO is, the more likely war becomes.

Leftist criticism of NATO spending resembles conservative criticisms, with both claiming that the money spent on defense could go elsewhere. Whereas conservatives tend to prefer that money spent on alliance flow instead to grow US military capability, liberals or progressives would prefer that money to be invested in education, infrastructure, and science, both domestically and overseas. This leftist tends to believe that lack of education or transportation leads to misunderstanding and violence, and that were everyone to have the same basis of understanding and knowledge, wars could be prevented.

Another possible anti-NATO stance comes from countries hostile to Europe. Countries that would prosper from NATO's wane (China, Russia, etc.), which correctly assess that a militarily unified Europe checks their own territorial or economic ambitions, are natural enemies of NATO. These countries view any alliance of which they are not a part as something to be diminished or destroyed. In a few cases, like that of Serbia, whose territorial ambition NATO buried in the 1990s, hostility could also represent lingering resentment toward having suffered military defeat. It is worth pointing out that people who refer to Serbia as "Yugoslavia" are, as a rule, almost always anti-NATO along these lines.

The final perspective hostile to NATO comes from within the US military establishment. This criticism tends toward the conservative: defense industry spending is a zero-sum game. A

country only accumulates so much capital, and conservatives believe that investing in alliance or partnership wastes that capital. While the motivation in this case is financial, the criticism manifests itself as political: these skeptics focus on the possibility of fighting war at the tactical level, independent of strategic considerations, or the diplomatic minutia of whether Russia was somehow tricked or deceived by NATO's expansion. In all cases, the argument by people like Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (R-48) ends up being reduced support for NATO. This amounts to tacit or explicit acceptance of non-Western agendas.

Across the spectrum, people who have criticisms of NATO should not be viewed as necessarily hostile to American, European, or Western interests. While that is certainly the case in a few circumstances, for the most part, criticisms of NATO end up being reflections of the West's failure to translate its prosperity into a model that is sustainable in the rest of the world. As few places outside the US and Europe have experienced lasting prosperity under Western models, it's difficult for the West to dismiss criticisms out of hand.

In the US and in Europe, hostility toward NATO should be viewed as a failure on the part of NATO to communicate its purpose effectively. If NATO and the US were able to describe how and why, specifically, Europeans and North American participants benefit from the security arrangement, it seems unlikely that any morally and logically humanistic citizens of Western countries would see meaningful opposition to NATO, save on the absolute fringe. On the fringe left, people wish to weaken the US and Europe following the hypothesis that strengthening all non-European countries would lead to an increase in global justice. On the fringe right, people wish for there to be absolute US or European power, and see

alliances between the two as contrary to the interests of each.

If you believe that peace and prosperity for all humans require a weaker Europe and USA, you see NATO as a problem. If, on the other hand, you believe the USA or Europe should be absolutely powerful, NATO appears wasteful at best, and a threat to your sovereignty at worst. I think you're wrong—but I understand your position.