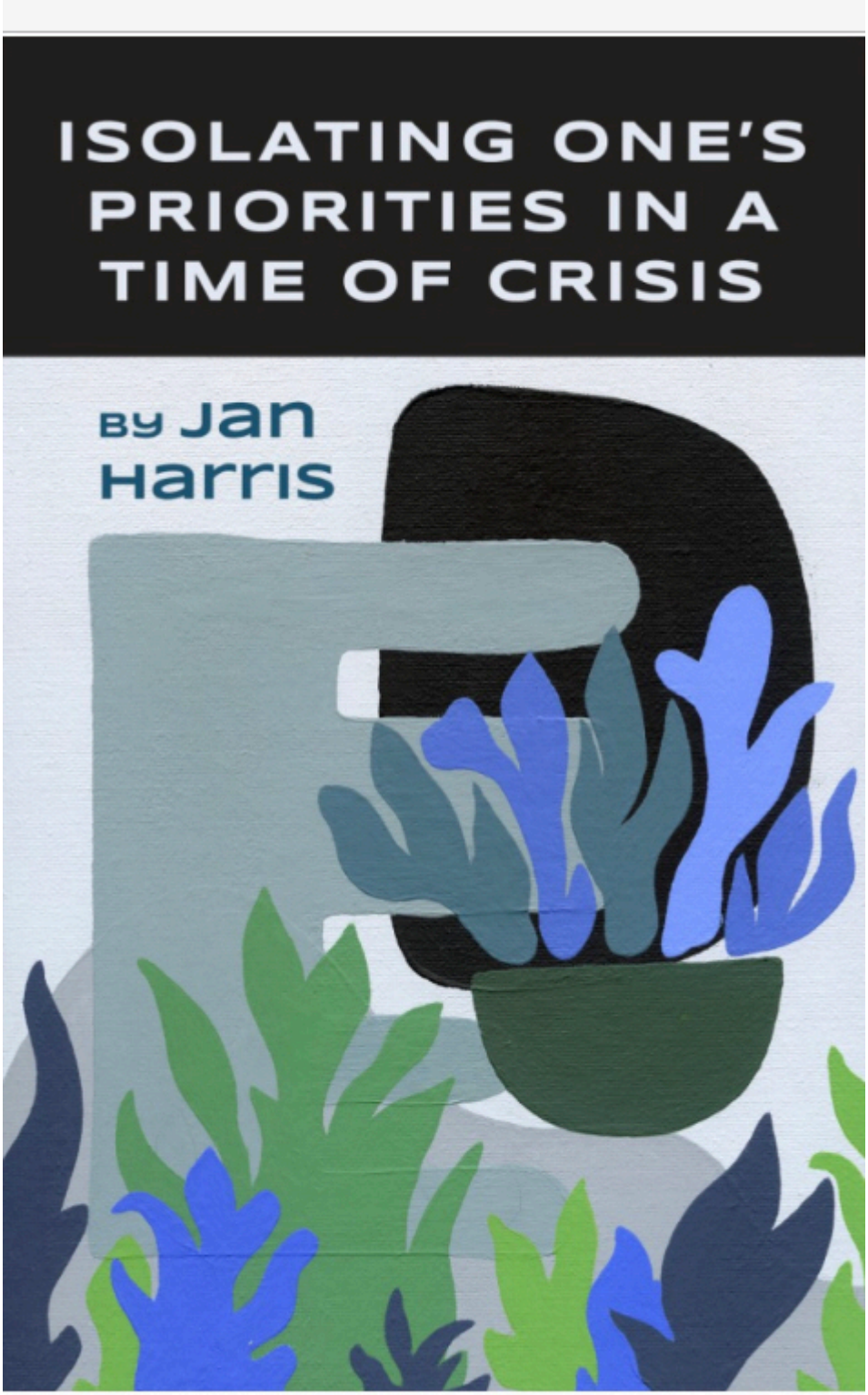
New Review from Amalie Flynn: Jan Harris' "Isolation in a Time of Crisis"



The poems in Jan Harris' *Isolating One's Priorities in a Time of Crisis* are about the apocalypse.

Or after.

What happens after.

&

After the apocalypse happens. After the world cracks like an egg.
Splits apart. The crushed eggshell membrane and how.
Covered in fluid yolk we emerge blinking –

we pass clement evenings foraging among the wreckage
of shop local boutiques and chain drugstores
(Season's Greetings)

we observe
long vacant cities teeming with rats and pigeons dark seas replete
with giant jellyfish we do not live in an elegant age
(Mass Extinction)

&

The apocalypse has already happened in Harris' poems.

Some humans survived –

in the day-glow light
our old skin cells flake
off and drape across, the zoysia grass
(Marauders All)

Born again into this.
This fallout world.
And the scale of destruction is ecological –

ours is an age of salination
desiccation an interminable heat
(Mass Extinction)

&

I am reading Harris' poems now. In this dystopic America.

A hellscape of.

Toxic religiosity. Evangelical Trumpism. Bigotry and brutal police.
Global war and fiery planet.
Pandemic plague. The lack of air. How when the virus inhabits lungs.
We flip the bodies over.
On their bellies like fish. How one woman survived but lost half her upper lip.
From the tube and pressure. Of being facedown for months.
That missing chunk of flesh now.
This fever dream wasteland nightmare America or how we find ourselves.
You and me. How we find ourselves.

Still alive.

&

I write to Harris, saying –

These poems are about COVID, right?
About Trump?

&

Because *how,* I think.
How can they not be?

&

But Harris did not write these poems about COVID or Trump.
She wrote them after the 2018 Kavanaugh hearings.
They are about surviving sexual assault.

&

Harris tells me –

I guess I've always been thinking about the end of the world. You know I had this Southern Evangelical childhood – very rapture focused. Then, when the Kavanaugh hearings were happening, I was appalled, obviously, and as a survivor myself, I kept thinking about who gets to speak.

&

Harris' poems are about the apocalyptic devastation of sexual assault.
And the disappointment of unrequited rapture.
About waking up in a destroyed world. How we piece it back together.
Or declare it broken. And live in it somehow.

&

She says –

I kept plugging on and thinking how do we survive, like in the sense of what do we do with our days, our shames, our broken hearts. How do we open to what's next?"

&

And yet poems are alive.
Each sentence with words like organs.
How syllables are cells.
How once written.

Poems are alive.

&
And for me. Harris’ poems are about.

The Kavanaugh hearings and the assault by a nation that did not care.
Would not believe women. Women who said *this happened.*

And these poems are about.
About what has happened since.

A presidency that assaulted truth and science and equality and the environment.
War. And a virus that has assaulted the globe. Leaving over four million dead.
So far.

&
Because what is apocalyptic can be plural.
How apocalypses are multiple and countless.
Intensely personal and collectively shared.

&
Harris’ poems are full of hydroponic lettuce, half grown, empty cul-de-sacs.
Broken call boxes and a rapture that never comes.
Because after disaster there is always aftermath.

Where what is left is left.

&

I met Harris in graduate school in Tuscaloosa.
Where I came and left as bones.
How I almost disappeared and yet.
I remained.

Graduated and moved to New York City where.
After that summer I would stand on a corner and watch a plane hit the Twin Towers.
Or how they fell.
And how people jumped and fell and died.
And how somehow. Somehow I survived.

&

How existing is this.
The same as not disappearing.

&

Harris' poems acknowledge those lost –

we saw that some us had been separated
from themselves and their reintegration
into the whole was not a possible outcome

we could not replace their inner vacancies
we could not estimate the size of their lonesomeness
or fill them with vanities of optimism and hope
(Post-Apocalyptic DSMV)

&

But Harris is focused on survivors.
The sheer magnitude of what it takes to survive –

when we look at the frontier we know we can survive
deep in us the memory of arid plains and savannahs
solacing us through our hard scrabble expansion
(Episodic Memory)

&

How survival is plagued by loss –

our sorrows are beyond counting and lie scattered around us in the radon dust covering
our planet's irradiated surface
(The Average Mean)

Loss of a world –

when the worst was over the
marauding tribes settled down we started migrating
back to where we had come from we walked through
shells of suburbs and condo communities
(Radio Silence)

Loss of how it was –

and who could have imagined this cold
there is no more joy and no time for
simple pleasures like strawberry jam and
the other ways we spend our time
(After the Sun Goes Out)

Loss of readiness.
How hard it is to move forward.
Or go on –

we are prepared for what we will encounter

so long as it resembles all we left behind
(Time and Duration)

&
But how meaning can persist.
Found in permeated rock, like radioactive isotopes –

our predicament has freed
us from the oppression of quarterly
target goals bike commutes having
three children whose monograms
match on all their school accessories
(A Handbook for Resilience)

&
In 2004 I reconnected with Harris. I called her and told her *a baby.*
How I was pregnant. Or how she said *I didn't know you wanted to do that.*

&
Motherhood is seismic. It is a series of explosions real and imagined.
The world hot lava active. How my entirety is only this.

Calculating risk and trying.

&
Now there is a pandemic.

In the morning my one son bikes to school wearing an N-95 mask.

My other son is homebound. He cannot leave the house because the world.
Is not safe.
How he is disabled by his disability but more.
The disregard of others to wear a mask or get vaccinated or.
Do whatever it takes to end this.

&
And I know Harris does not have children.
But I found motherhood in her poems.

&
There is the fear of it –

we cannot know what evolutionary biologists will call this
age we cannot know which of our offspring will survive
at night we count them and wonder which one will it be
we search their sleeping faces for resilience we are looking
for a future we will build with what we have left
(Mass Extinction)

How motherhood is a fear.
Fear of wondering if they will.
Will survive. The desperation.
Of wanting them to survive.
And how ravaged this world is.
Apocalypse world we are giving them –

the limits of our perception much like our
children's refusal to believe us when we tell them that
limes grew on trees and
how succulent limes were tree limes and all the luscious
things belong
elsewhere they are ancient remnants of a forgotten
anointing

(Chrismation)

Or how mothering in the aftermath is hard –

we are finding our way back to fellowship but it is perilous practice
to release our fear and allow our offspring to wonder in the garden
to watch their precious DNA drip away when they are pricked by thorns
(Cognitive Flexibility)

&

Harris' poems speak to a collective mothering. Parents or not. That we do. Do in this world. Especially one ravaged and torn. How we are all connected. Connected by care or our lack of it. Connected by our fear and yet love.
That overlap –

we too are motivated by the vectors of love and fear
we live in the Venn diagram between them
each of us entwined in their corresponding sway
(Cognitive Flexibility)

&

In Harris' poems there is the loss of a promised rapture –

yet despite all our
fixations on the last days we never imagined
the whistling sounds of radio-magnetic grass
on abandoned golf courses
(Eschatological Ruminations)

How –

we cannot indulge

these reckless hopes of deliverance the earth
is indeed a globe whose elliptical orbit barrels
us toward infinity and even though it rends our
hearts to confess it no rapture is coming to save us
(Eschatological Ruminations)

&

And the loss of rapture in Harris' poems feels symbolic.
Of what it means to survive.
How it can mean being left behind.
Left behind by a religion or rapture or savior.
The belief that someone or something will save you –

the
whole time we dreamt of a superhero
who was coming to save us every night
we would warm our bread by the fire and
lather it with strawberry jam as if to say
we are not afraid of the hypothetical dark
(After the Sun Goes Out)

And –

at one time we all believe like this that
our lives would tumble on and then when
no one was paying attention in a fanfare
god would intervene
(Eschatological Ruminations)

Or, how –

some flirt with believing in providence but we cannot tarry in
those illogical
assumptions
(The Average Mean)

Because.

What holds this universe together is something else.
Or nothing. Nothing else –

we muster our resources unsure
of our end our final ablation an offering for the black holes who
hold our universe together
(Mass Extinction)

&
Ultimately Harris' poems are about us.
How disaster connects us –

Our lives ran parallel until we met in the knot of disaster
(Many Worlds Theory)

They are poems about who we are and what we do.
When we wake up in the aftermath of disaster –

Our intertwining presented two alternatives
1. *to collapse everything and begin again*
2. *to recognize the limit of universes*
(Many Worlds Theory)

&
How we survive. What we build. How we move forward.
Beats as the heart of Harris' poems.
Whereas rapture is unrequited and reckless, the answer seems to be love –

in the latter days we have embraced an enigmatic
vocation we stand in abandoned cul de sacs and
radiate love
(Exclusion Zone)

How –

although it is hard labor
we stand in cul de sacs point our chests towards
discarded mc-mansions and their derelict hedges we
begin to oscillate with the intractable surge that vibrates
between our ribs love pulsates with a ferocious
diffraction like the nuclear fallout that is still releasing
(Exclusion Zone)

Harris admits –

we cannot know if our work changes
anything
(Exclusion Zone)

And yet –

rumors persist that deer and
foxes have returned to Chernobyl's exclusion zone that
wildflowers crowd its meadows and in the shadows
green things begin to grow
(Exclusion Zone)

&
Isolating One's Priorities in a Time of Crisis ends with hope –

we know that something is there because we
feel it breathing against us reaching past twilight's
consciousness
(Modern Homesteading)

How it –

whispers that we too must
die and death will be sooner than we know
(Modern Homesteading)

How after the apocalypse.

We can find hope.
How there is light in the aftermath.
Light within us and each other.
How it radiates out in this new broken world –

yet we
will be braver than we think because the light inside
is the light outside and it's already shining around
us as we begin to inhabit a world we had known but
waited for this moment to discover waited to
catch our breath before plunging into that white
burning we call existence
(Modern Homesteading)

&
Harris' powerful collection is a testament.
To destruction and what remains.
How to rebuild the city of oneself.
How to make meaning out of the meanness of existence.

Her poems offer hope.

That maybe. Together.

We can survive.

New Poetry from Amalie Flynn: "Celebrate"

TREE / SKIN / BONE *image by Amalie Flynn*

1.

Celebrate them.

2.

Celebrate the soldier who went to war

Just to kill.

This soldier accused of shooting and

Killing civilians. How the men from

His own platoon. They say *he did it.*

He shot civilians. He shot at civilians.

Shot a girl in Iraq in a flowered hijab

In her stomach.

Blooming wound. Like a daisy eye or

Hole in her gut. How he shot an old

Unarmed man dead. His white robe

Drenched red. The stain a spreading

Blood sun.

And they say they saw him. Saw him

Kill a teenager.

An ISIS fighter. Wounded and waiting

For a medic on the dirt floor in Mosul.

How they say the soldier said

Lips into a radio

Don’t touch him.

Because *he’s mine.*

Before driving his knife deep and deep.

Hunting knife

Into the boy’s neck. Through skin and

Muscle. Tissue and ligaments an artery.

3.

Or how

There is a photograph.

The soldier squatting in the sand.

Full battle rattle next to the ISIS boy.

His dead body. Face up. Arms bare.

Calves exposed. His legs sprawled.

And the soldier. How he has the boy.

His hair. Gripped in the fist. And he is

Yanking. Yanking him. The boy’s head.

His face up. For the camera.

How in the photograph.

The boy is dead.

And the soldier is smiling.

Because the boy is not a boy.

He is *deer kill.*

3.

Celebrate him.

Celebrate that soldier and the way it felt

When he held that soft sweat tuft of

Human hair.

Between his thumb and fingers like.

Like feathers.

4.

And why. *Why stop there?*

How there are more. More soldiers

5.

Soldiers who stood over dead bodies

On a video. Standing over the dead

Bodies of Taliban fighters they killed.

Killed in war in Afghanistan.

How the soldiers exposed their penises

And urinated on the bodies. Urinating

On the dead bodies or how

They are laughing.

Celebrate them. Celebrate those soldiers.

Celebrate how they felt when that stream

Of urine. Their urine.

Hit the men. Hit the dead bodies. Hit dead

Legs and dead torsos. Dead faces. Splashing

Open dead eyes. Into dead mouths.

Celebrate how.

How it felt. When their urine

Filled the dead men’s nostrils.

6.

Celebrate Abu Ghraib.

Celebrate that it happened. Celebrate

Soldiers who stripped prisoners naked.

Raped them with truncheons. Strapped

Dog collars around their necks. Soldiers

Who dragged men on leashes like they

Were dogs. Who placed bags over heads.

Made men stand on boxes with wires

And electrodes attached to fingers and

Skin. Soldiers. Soldiers. Soldiers who

Tortured men.

Soldiers who piled men. Piled men up

And into contorted piles. These piles

Of tortured human flesh.

7.

Celebrate them.

8.

Celebrate all the soldiers who do it. Who

Do *things like this.*

Celebrate them even though. Even though

The military is filled and filled and filled

With soldiers who

Would never. Who never do these things.

9.

Just don’t say. It is because

They did nothing wrong.

Don’t say. Don’t say *they didn’t do it.*

10.

Celebrate them because you know.

You know they did.

11.

Celebrate them because you like it.

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.

New Poetry: “Layla’s first

buck” by Denise Jarrott

her father said it was his favorite thing about her, that she was a hunter, like he is.
she holds its head up for the picture. she wears an orange hat. now the deer
unfolds from itself like the fortune telling paper folded and

labeled with
possible outcomes. the deer’s eyes dark and its body flat. I was not so calm

at death as she. she is twelve now. I remember when I was twelve, when I began
to take notice of men, thought if I was pure enough they could never
touch me, that I’d float away on quiet feet if they got too close. I’d just go upward,
and utterly silent. some animals piss on themselves to deter

predators, I didn’t brush my hair, I wore ugly underwear my mother purchased
for me in plastic bulk, I focused my gaze upward with my heart hot in my throat.
Layla, it is around this time you discover the existence of horrible people,
men with gray lips with spit foaming at the edge of their mouths,

the looks on the faces of girls you know that will feel like acid, their laughter
will eat at you the same way acid does and they are casual with it. You will begin to recognize the wedge-faced boys with big teeth and a sour smell, like sweat and milk,
you will learn that everything you do feeds their hunger.

I wonder if you will want to be far away, just somewhere else
on the other side of the world, or perhaps in a forest where you
wake in a tent or in a shelter of branches. I wonder if you will

want to be in a city, in an all-white apartment of your own, those
apartments that I know don’t exist that look like the netsuke one sees

now and again in museums, those little curls of bone. I wonder if you will
want to wake in your blue bedroom with a glass of water next to you, full of still

bubbles where the air got in. Layla, I will not tell you to freeze yourself as you are, to preserve time for anyone to spoon out your youth into a jar and graze against time with your feet. You will grow, you will come to know your own capabilities as some people come to know the positions of stars, or how to speak another language.

It is not for me to whisper to you across this divide.

Photo Credit: Smithsonian Society

On the Subject of Walls

While it's fallen off the news somewhat, one of Donald Trump's most conspicuous campaign-trail promises was to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico. Not only did Trump say that a wall was necessary, but he said that he would get *Mexico* to build it, conveniently ducking the question of cost to U.S. citizens. This is because the border between the U.S. and Mexico is long, and walls are expensive. Especially the kind of well-built walls that are required to stop crafty humans from getting around them.

Ukraine has a wall of its own. Or, at least, it's building a wall. Sort of. In September 2014, during the height of Russia's attempts to intervene in Ukraine, shortly after Russia occupied Crimea and during the beginning of its ongoing incursion into Ukraine's east, lawmakers developed a plan to create a wall between Russia and Ukraine.

The wall received some coverage in Western Press—not much, but some—because building a wall along thousands of kilometers of territory is a big project, and the wall had a big number attached to it: 4 billion UAH (at 8 UAH to the dollar in 2014, $500 million, now at 26 UAH to the dollar, or about $160 million). The wall was scheduled for completion in 2018, and building commenced. Since then, there have been questions over whether or not it will be completed on time, according to the printed standards. There have been allegations of corruption, as well as questions over whether the planned structure would be capable of accomplishing its military mission of stopping Russian infiltration and military intrusion.

A Wall in Name Only

Based on reporting that I have done, including visits to the wall and interviews with subject matter experts, national security personnel, veterans, villagers living within 10 km of the wall, and online research, if the wall is completed as promised and planned, it will not serve as a significant military obstacle against Russia. Without being able to find any evidence beyond official statements and visual confirmation that *something* is being built, it's impossible to decisively state anything. Has money been embezzled? Maybe. It's Ukraine, so, maybe *probably*. Is the wall being built to standard? Has every meter of the border with Russia been accounted for? There's no way to confirm that construction has succeeded or failed.

As of right now, the wall consists of two elements. The first, which looks much like what the wall was supposed to be based on initial projections, are a series of well-developed emplacements near significant border crossing points along major highways. Ukraine's State Border Service and military units staff and patrol these sections, guarding against sabateurs, infiltrators, and the possibility of a Russian

military offensive. Practically speaking, of course, a ditch, concertina wire and double-fences won't create much more than a brief tactical pause for even the smallest military unit (and no pause for airborne or air assault units)—but (apparently) according to military thinkers and the politicians who give them strategic guidance, something is better than nothing at all.

This reality has given rise to a new story: the idea that the wall will be useful for stopping criminal activity. Smugglers and illegal border crossings will be diminished by the wall, which (along with the security provided by the wall) will help make Ukraine a safer and more law-abiding place. This has some merit to it, although it's also worth stating that every person with whom I spoke living near the wall viewed it as an eyesore at best, an actual nuisance at worst, and that it seemed (paradoxically) to be increasing smuggling and illegal activity—precisely the opposite of its intended effect.

Notwithstanding the views of its residents, the border area with Russia is startlingly, astonishingly open. When I visited the area north of Kharkiv last in February, I nearly walked *into* Russia. There was no wall present, though residents were on edge, and warned me (through the Ukrainian who was interpreting) that patrols came by every few minutes looking for people who didn't have a reason for being there. I assumed that they meant Ukrainian patrols.

As of February 2017, two years after the battle of Debaltseve and three years after the invasion of Crimea, it was still possible to walk into Russia from Ukraine, more or less accidentally.

Why Should We Build a Wall?

Walls require strength and power, and wealth. They require organization and commitment, and maintenance. They are also the single most noticeable evidence of a nation's insecurity and fragility. What nation requires walls? What confident *people* would even think about erecting barriers? A weak nation, filled with anxious and neurotic people. And while this describes Ukraine to a certain extent—with all due respect to my Ukrainian friends, whom I love and respect, and with due respect for the idea of a country called Ukraine, (a) Ukraine as a country lacks significant allies, and has an overwhelmingly powerful enemy on its doorstep while (b) its people are justifiably traumatized by the repeated revolutions and various attempts by Russia and Russian agents to undermine their economy, political autonomy, military, and (writ large) their independence.

Those justifications don't travel very well when the destination is the U.S.A. Although walls require power, money, and strength to build, they aren't *for* the powerful, they're for the weak, the fragile, the exhausted. Walls exist where there is no energy left to patrol, where one believes that some powerful energy or tendency toward chaos and entropy will, left *un*walled, lead inexorably to conquest. This is what certain Americans believe: that a wall with Mexico is necessary, presumably because Mexico is more powerful, and left to its own devices, Mexico's Mexican inhabitants will swarm over the border and destroy what they find on the other side.

Of course, if U.S. citizens legitimately believed that Mexicans constituted some type of threat, the response to Mexico would be different from wall-building. What Americans fear is not Mexico—it's the loss of control, it's not being able to convince others that it is in their best interests to behave according to America's best interests. In many ways, this has been the story of the millennium, a slow-building narrative since the towers came down on 9/11.

On a psychological level, it seems almost certain that to Americans, the wall with Mexico is a replacement for the Twin Towers. We want to rebuild the towers and protect them from being blown up. We will call the product of this constructive but paranoiac impulse "The Wall with Mexico." It's a sad and quixotic impulse, if impossible due to constraints built into the space-time continuum.

But Why Build a Wall at All?

There are good points to be made against the building of walls. They restrict commerce, dampen the flow of accurate firsthand experience between citizens of different countries, reduce the ability of people to communicate, and lead to factionalism, nationalism, and the dangerous kind of international competition.

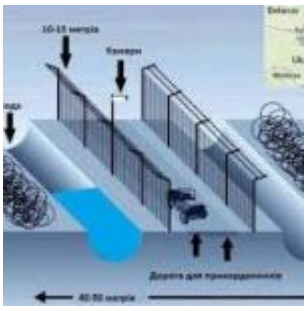
Walls are a last resort, when one must defend oneself against some foe that cannot be deterred by any other means. They are fixed positions that generate no revenue and require great sums for their upkeep. They can be avoided with the use of airplanes, rockets, and boats. They are as useful and

necessary as fixed fortifications (which is to say, not very).

Ukraine’s excuse for building a wall is that it’s hard up for emotionally satisfying ways to thwart Russia. A wall is something that is seen, and can be measured, and will make it more difficult to enter Ukraine from Russia. There are many downsides, but from the perspective of Ukraine, a much smaller country than Russia, and isolated from meaningful alliances, building a wall is *something* (given that it actually gets built, rather than partially funded while the remainder of the funds designated to build it are pillaged by oligarchs).

Ukraine’s planned wall with Russia—the word impregnable quickly springs to mind

Where the wall is supposed to be and what it’s supposed to look like



No attacker could ever possibly breach this conceptual wall, it is perfect

For Americans, the question is different. To begin with, it is a more powerful country than Mexico—the most powerful nation in the world, in fact. Its southern border with Mexico is patrolled by drones, security personnel, helicopters, dogs, radar, and automatic detection systems. There is already a fence separating the two. *Inside* the U.S., it's very difficult to exist off the grid without eventually running into some electronic or procedural requirement that will establish that one is in the country illegally (whether the people monitoring those systems do anything about it or not is a different question).

Normally, one builds walls under desperate circumstances when no other possibilities are available to solve some critical international question or another. Mexico's turmoil stems from the illegal drug trade. The drug trade is profitable in part because it is so unpleasant to live in a capitalist society that objectifies its citizens that many U.S. citizens will pay excellent money for drugs that are easily fabricated and refined in Mexico, and in part because the U.S. (despite creating and abetting the conditions by which citizens would want to use drugs in the first place) has criminalized non-prescription drug use, artificially inflating the market to the point where Mexican citizens involved in the trade can afford to build private armies large enough to contend with the government's military (or simply buy government units wholesale). Rather than build a wall with Mexico, it'd be cheaper and ethically more humane to do something about the drug trade—legalizing and taxing drugs would be an excellent first step.

Ukraine cannot "settle" with a Russia intent on its partition and destruction—Ukraine is left with the unpleasant choice of having to just grit its teeth and do what it can to prevent

Russian intrusion. A wall isn't the best way to do that, and especially when details of the wall's construction are kept secret. Still, it's *understandable* in a way that the U.S. wall with Mexico is not.

The Dictator Novel in the Age of Trump

"Storytellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control, they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit." Chinua Achebe

Of the thousand and one reactions of horror and shock following the illegitimate victory and first months of the Trump administration, one of the most interesting variations I have heard is: "at least there will be good art." The hypothesis is that dangerous political years inspire greater art than do times of relative safety. That this is an unverifiable consolation distracts from the obvious point: Why can't we have good art and good politics?

The Dictator in Context

The installation of Trump as president has prompted endless historical comparisons to various dictators and fascists. As I previously argued here, I firmly believe that Trump hews closely to many of the methods, if not always the ideology (it is apparent that Trump has no agenda beyond his self-aggrandizement), of what Umberto Eco labeled "*ur*-Fascism. Even before the emergence of Trump I wrote of how the Republican Party's rejection of democratic principles was ultimately a

road to fascism. The difficulty in such definitions is that, like unhappy families, dictators, tyrants, and fascists are all infelicitous in their own unique ways. I would still argue that Trump shares certain characteristics and methods with Mussolini, Idi Amin, and yes, Hitler (this is a serious and relevant historical parallel rather than an *ad hominem* attack, thus Godwin's Law does not apply). On the other hand, Trump is also different from every other past dictator since, to give one example, he rose from outside the military or political ranks and was merely a failed businessman and con man who played the reality TV character of a successful businessman. Trump's peculiar brand of power politics is *sui generis*, but our understanding of the Trump phenomenon is very clearly rooted in our reading of history and literature.

While it is necessary to explore the parallels to Trump in American history (the closest are Andrew Jackson, whose portrait Trump placed in the Oval Office, and of course Nixon) and European history (there are many; regarding Italian politics, to give but one example, a mixture of Mussolini and Silvio Berlusconi seems apt), I think the most appropriate family resemblance to Trump is found in the Latin American *caudillo*, or charismatic strongman. The reasons for this include: 1) personal enrichment as the only constant and coherent ideology, 2) the need for constant praise and adulation, 3) the exaggerated chauvinism, misogyny and virility, 4) the carefully controlled image, 5) the promotion of family members and cronies to key political positions, 6) the claims of a singular ability to interpret the "people's will", 7) the appropriation of kitsch over culture, 8)the use of the epithet "enemies of the state" for anyone who criticizes or opposes his will, 9) the total disregard of all existing democratic values and institutions, as well as 10) disdain for writers and intellectuals of every stripe (who are always among the first to be persecuted). Many of these traits overlap with more overt right-wing or left-wing ideological positions held by dictators in modern history, but all depend

solely on authoritarianism for the sake of power itself rather than any particular ideology. Of course, there are ways that Trump differs from the typical *caudillo*, such as lack of a popular nickname (the Chief, the Supreme, Generalissimo, etc.) and a glaring lack of exquisitely adorned military uniforms (give him time, though—he might come around). The cult of personality that is another universal trait of *caudillismo* easily lends itself to each individual dictator giving his name to the political system, *i.e.* Peronism, Trujillism, Trumpism, Chavism, etc, and requiring personal loyalty to the dictator himself over any other abstract value like the constitution, the laws, or the welfare of the people. The various labels of dictator, tyrant, despot, strongman, autocrat, autarch, president for life, and the corresponding adjectives for the type of government (authoritarian, totalitarian, kleptocratic, oligarchic, etc.) are all, in my opinion, synonyms differing only in context and nuance. The phenomenon of the *caudillo* is always located in an American (in the general sense of the Western hemisphere) context, and has a history in almost every Latin American country going back 200 years to when Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín threw off the Spanish yoke.

The Myth of the Benevolent Dictator

Are there any upsides to being ruled by a dictator? There is an old chestnut that says "at least Mussolini got the trains to run on time". This is probably more propaganda than historical fact, even though he certainly did drain the swamps around Rome (finishing a plan drawn up by the Emperor Claudius). Hitler is sometimes given credit for the Autobahn. Stalin gets credit for…(let me get back to you on that one). In fact, it is inevitable that the apologists of any dictatorship will cite the improvement of public infrastructure and massive building projects, as well as the order, stability, and national sovereignty such regimes bring. There is a lot of truth to these claims. After all, even a

budding dictator of below average intelligence (like Trump) would quickly figure out that he (because always men) needs to supplement constant state-run propaganda with big visual signs of progress to pacify and distract the little people under his thumb. Likewise with order and stability—if these are the highest ideals of a regime, they are relatively easy to enact by empowering the secret police and suppressing all individual freedoms.

Another occasional positive side effect of dictators is the unilateral protection of the environment, seen for example in the Dominican Republic under the arch-*caudillo* Rafael Trujillo and his authoritarian-leaning successor, Joaquín Balaguer (Jared Diamond discussed the latter in depth in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*). Is stopping deforestation and pollution and aggressively protecting natural areas worth tolerating autocratic rule? I think not, especially since we can achieve those goals democratically (as the countries of northern Europe and Costa Rica demonstrate). However practical or progressive a dictator may be in one particular facet of governance, there are always mountains of horrors piled up on the opposite side, clearly disproving the notion that it is ever beneficial for the host country to be under the dictator's heel. Have there ever been any historical instances of a mostly benevolent dictator?

In the original practice of the Roman Republic, a dictator was summoned only during the most urgent national crises and given complete control of the military and government, but only for six months. This temporal limitation seems like the best way to ward off the universal corruption of power. Kemal Ataturk was the father of the modern Turkish state, liberating it from European militaries after World War One and ushering in centuries worth of reforms in a couple decades. I ranked him here as an overall beneficial dictator, doing the best for his country, with few downsides (one-party rule, authoritarianism) that could not be avoided in that context. Even more exemplary

is Giuseppe Garibaldi, the superhumanly heroic leader of Italian Unification. He led from the front in hundreds of battles and dozens of wars over 50 years, always in the name of freedom and what we would today call "human rights". In his most famous and important campaign, he singlehandedly conquered the southern half of Italy with 1000 men and a few rusty carbines, ruled as a dictator (when the word was still used in the Roman sense) for six months instituting many reforms, before voluntarily handing power to the new king of Italy in the name of national unity, and retiring to farm on his private island. The hardest thing to get right in any transition from dictatorship to democracy is the peaceful transfer of power. That is why early Roman dictators like Cincinnatus, who gave up power and returned to his *latifundia*, or George Washington, who chose to finish his life as a civilian farmer instead of serving as president-king for life, are so celebrated by later generations (even though Cincinnatus was also violently opposed to the plebian reforms, and Washington was also a slave-owner). It is rare in the annals of history to find leaders uncorrupted by power, or who give up absolute power willingly. That is why the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution, limiting the president to two terms, is so important, and why, at a minimum, there should be term limits for every executive office in every country. Only when a precedent for this has been set in a country can it begin to dream of a time without dictators.

Trump the Would-be Dictator

Trump's open disdain and flagrant assault on hallowed democratic principles like the rule of law, separation of powers, an independent judiciary, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press is a deeply disturbing spectacle which clearly demonstrates his authoritarianism. Most dictators have their own particular brand, and Trump uses a strange mix of hyper-partisan, hyper-individualistic, privatized pseudo-fascism that prizes winning (though not necessarily violence)

as the highest good, and total humiliation for those who are not “winners”. Not exactly Nazi rhetoric, but there is a family resemblance. Dictatorships do not happen overnight. There is a strong case to be made that America has been creeping towards authoritarianism for 40 years, and thus the reasons for the installation of Trump are many and varied (and have little to do with his skills as a politician). Kitsch, another universal trait of totalitarian regimes, is a powerful tool to control and subvert real independent thinking with sentimentality. Milan Kundera famously discussed the role of kitsch in the Communist bloc in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, saying: “When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object. In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme.” Mike Carson has argued on this website how ubiquitous kitsch is in American society. Maximillian Alvarez has written that even my identification of Trump as a fascist can be seen as a type of counterproductive cathartic use of kitsch.

Trump “the Winner”

No matter the underlying causes of the illegitimate Trump election, even an openly authoritarian president backed by a cowardly Congress cannot unilaterally dismantle 240 years of republican government. Therefore, there are still reasons to be hopeful about the outcome of this constitutional crisis.

One is the incompetence and corruption of Trump and his administration. Their conspicuous weaknesses will prevent them from accomplishing some policy goals, and could sooner or later lead to impeachment. Another is the unprecedented unpopularity of Trump (almost every dictator had authentic claims to mass popular support at least in the early years, something Trump certainly lacks) and the highly energized resistance movement by the majority of Americans that will in turn greatly reduce this aspiring tyrant's capacity to subvert the U.S. Constitution. This counts not only for the big-ticket marches, protests, and lawsuits, but even for a more profound reawakening to the values of civic participation in civil society, and widespread grassroots involvement in things like discussion circles, teach-ins, and reading groups. Indeed, the burgeoning interest and sales of classic dystopian novels like *1984*, *The Plot Against America*, *It Can't Happen Here*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, to name four of the most famous, is a sign of these troubled times. As important and relevant as these English language novels are, I would argue that there is a less well-known but even more relevant genre: the Dictator Novel.

The Dictator Novel

The *novela de dictadore* is a sub-genre with wholly Latin American roots, and drawing on the long history of *caudillismo* in the former Spanish American Empire. Most of these countries have spent many more years as dictatorships than democracies, and by my rough count there are at least 50 examples in Latin American history of strongmen (yes, all men, though Eva Peron comes the closest to being a strongwoman; it is actually unsurprising that I cannot find any examples of female dictators in world history). The development of the Dictator Novel was a reaction by the writers of Latin America to the endless parade of *caudillos* preying on their people like wolves guarding flocks of sheep. The first example is the 1845 novel *Facundo* by Domingo Sarmiento, which is a criticism of

Juan Manuel de Rosas of Argentina, the first major *caudillo* and a model for many subsequent ones. The sub-genre became especially popular since the Latin American Literary Boom of the 1960's and 70's.

Mario Vargas Llosa's 2000 novel *The Feast of the Goat* recounts the horrific totalitarian regime of Rafael "el Jefe" Trujillo, who made the Dominic Republic into his personal fiefdom from 1930-1961. Vargas Llosa, a master storyteller who won the 2010 Nobel Prize for Literature, was also a political activist who ran for president of Peru in 1990. He is therefore well-placed to write about politics and dictators in Latin America. I first encountered the horrors of the Trujillo regime via Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which I would consider a semi-dictator novel, about how the protagonist is the recipient of a multi-generational curse caused by the rapaciousness (literal and figurative) of Generalissimo Trujillo.

Vice President Nixon and Rafael "the Chief" Trujillo in 1958.

The Feast of the Goat is concurrently told from three perspectives each revolving around Trujillo's last day before being assassinated. One part is told by Urania Cabral, the daughter of a disgraced official of Trujillo who visits the Dominican Republic for the first time in 35 years. One part recounts the harrowing tale of the conspirators who kill Trujillo and seek to evade capture and torture. The final part

enters in the mind of Trujillo himself as he goes through every minute of his final day, interrogating and humiliating ministers, while also revealing his own most humiliating secrets to the reader.

The main character, Urania Cabral, tells her family the story of why she never returned to the Dominican Republic, ending in a harrowing climax at the long-dead dictator's country mansion: "I don't think the word 'kitsch' existed yet…Years later, whenever I heard it or read it, and knew what extremes of bad taste and pretension it expressed, Mahogany House always came to mind. A kitsch monument." The tyrant's horrors reach deep, and continue to haunt long after death.

Trujillo was certainly one of the most prototypical of the caudillos, both by his beliefs and his actions. At one point Vargas Llosa's version of Trujillo says: "I don't have time to read the bullshit intellectuals write. All those poems and novels. Matters of state are too demanding." Then later, echoing every dictator ever, he says to Balaguer, his puppet president and unbeknownst successor: "I've always had a low opinion of intellectuals and writers. On the scale of merit, the military occupy first place… Then the campesinos…Then the bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, businessmen. Writers and intellectuals come last. Even below the priests. You're an exception, Dr. Balaguer. But the rest of them! A pack of dogs." That these words were put into the Generalissimo's mouth by a notable writer and intellectual is part of the irony. One can easily imagine Trump expressing the same sentiment, if much less coherently and eloquently.

One of the most nightmarish aspects of living under a dictator is the vague idea that his reign will never end, or will swallow up entire generations like Saturn devouring his children, rendering the future well-nigh hopeless. This is the central theme of the 1975 dictator novel *The Autumn of the Patriarch* by Gabriel García Márquez, winner of the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature and the most esteemed Latin American

writer. In an unnamed country, the unnamed Patriarch has been the sole ruler for nearly 200 years. The novel is a poetic meditation on the dangers and solitude of absolute power. At the beginning, the superannuated tyrant's corpse in found in the presidential palace, but his allies, the people, and finally the reader, are led to wonder if this is really the unimaginable death of the eternal leader, or merely one more of his ruses to root out enemies and tighten his stranglehold on power. Absolute power is absolutely corrupting, and frightening to imagine. The lengths to which the dictator must go in order to gain and hold power for decades always leads inexorably to a regime of terror and torture. The Patriarch reminisces about past actions he has taken to defeat one of his foes or increase the awe of the people, but the narrative is not explicit about the details of this dark-side regime. Vargas Llosa's novel is a much more straightforward prose account of such a regime, while García Márquez's deals more obliquely and poetically with the nightmare of a never-ending totalitarian ruler.

There are a great many dictator novels, just a few more of which I will mention. The Paraguayan writer Augusto Roa Bastos wrote *I, the Supreme* (1974) about the first dictator of Paraguay, Dr. Francia (whom Adrian Bonenberger has written about on this website here). Dr. Francia was a populist despot who isolated his country from the outside world, both for trade and immigration, and cracked down on all political opposition and criticism (sound familiar?). Bastos' novel is widely considered an attack on the Paraguayan dictator Alfredo Stroessner, who ruled for 35 years over a repressive regime and forbid the Bastos to return to Paraguay after the novel's publication.

Simon Bolivar, "the

iLberator"

García Márquez wrote a second dictator novel, *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989), about the last month of Simón Bolivar, the Liberator of South America whose rule once extended to Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. Bolívar has most often been treated as a universal and mythical hero, a portrayal that García Márquez does away with. He shows the Liberator with all his defects, dying prematurely, scheming for a return to power, howling about betrayals by his enemies. It is a powerful meditation on power and death. Likewise, Vargas Llosa wrote another dictator novel, the monumental *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969), which describes life in Peru during the dictatorship of Manuel Odría.

While the Dictator Novel has its roots in Latin American history, its impact has spread to other continents. Two examples from Africa are Chinua Achebe's 1987 *Anthills of the Savannah*, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's 2006 *Wizard of the Crow*. Both of these novels are excellent works of fiction from two of the most eminent African writers, showing both the horror and black humor that can paradoxically be found in the dictator's regime. Like the *caudillo*, the typical African strongman also has a love for buffoonish uniforms, which is possibly the only thing separating Trump from their ranks.

One final aspect of the dictator novel is the constant

presence and impact of United States imperialism, whether implicit or explicit. Insofar as the U.S. does intervene in Latin American politics, it is virtually always by means of the C.I.A. and its bag of dirty tricks. For example, the precariousness of the last two years of Trujillo's regime before his assassination can be directly attributed to loss of American patronage, C.I.A. agitation and material support for the assassins, and threat of invasion by the Marines. Trujillo, originally trained by the Marines himself, always considered himself the United States' strongest supporter in the Western Hemisphere, and was long treated by the Americans as an important and reliable bulwark against Communism. It is either ironic or just sad that the same organization that is responsible for propping up so many dictators and overthrowing or assassinating so many others in the name of "American interests", is now one of the principle means of stopping the new would-be American dictator. If Trump had read any dictator novels (even though he is functionally illiterate), he might have been able to understand that waging a war on the entire press as well as the many powerful intelligence communities is the wrong way to consolidate power. It is a war that he will lose decisively, we can be sure, but Trump's bungling experiment in tyranny have exposed the flaws in the American political system, possibly paving the way for future exploitation by a younger and much more competent aspiring dictator. From now one, we must always be on guard, never taking for granted the inevitable survival of our democratic principles, and never forgetting the lessons of historical and literary cautionary tales.

Conclusion

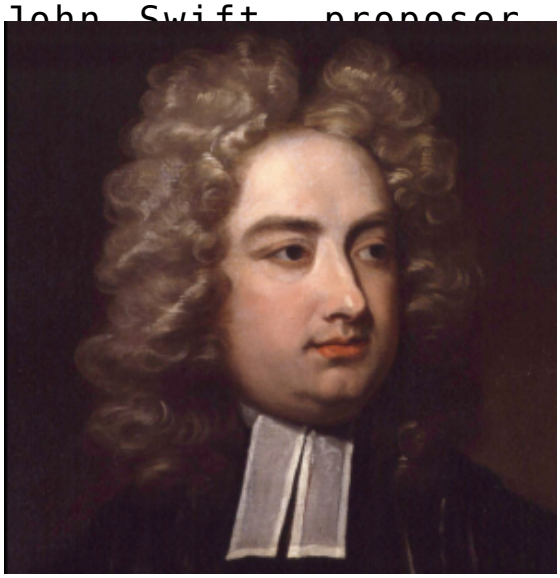
There is something very disturbing, for me and millions of others, in the fact that we are veering towards an outcome we have been warned against by our literary prophets (not to mention our reading of history), and it is a message people are taking seriously. Two plus two is four, the emperor has no

clothes, and the dictator is neither omnipotent nor immortal. For all the comparisons to the Nazi rise to power, one advantage we have as historical latecomers is our awareness of the past, our vigilance against a Reichstag fire-type event, and our will to resist the encroachment of the totalitarian dystopias we have read about. The power of the pen is real—satire and mockery of dictators are some of the best ways for writers to fight for freedom, as is the relentless reportage of the truth for journalists. I do not believe that all art is or should always be political. The artist is free to transcend or vie with the bounds of politics and history in her own search for beauty and meaning. However, there are times when, as Hannah Arendt said about 1933, it is no longer possible to be indifferent. We are living in one of those times when no one, including the artist, can afford to be indifferent.

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).

John Swift, proposer of cannibalism 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.

Last Week This Week: 6-26-16 (Brexit and Michael Herr)

Since the last time we conducted a wrapup, the following has occurred: NATO finished the largest joint exercises in over a decade, England voted to leave the EU, personal hero to all WBTers (and creative non-fiction pioneer) Michael Herr passed away, and Bernie Sanders pledged to vote for Hillary Clinton, which some had feared would not be the case. For your reading edification:

Michael Carson's essay about Michael Herr, published first in

2014: https://www.wrath-bearingtree.com/2014/02/michael-herrs-teenage-wasteland/

Adrian Bonenberger's final dispatch from Dragoon Ride and Anaconda, the US military's slice of the joint NATO exercises—sadly pro-EU and pro-NATO (given England's decision to exit the agreement): http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/21/dragoon-ride-6-what-eastern-europeans-say-as-they-watch-the-u-s-and-german-militaries-head-toward-russia/

Brexit: a tragic split that undermines decades of progress in erasing the national rivalries between European powers, nearly culminating in the end of the world during World War II (which was concluded with the detonation of atomic weapons). Persepective from The Economist, a magazine that has spent years vilifying the EU and deriding the Euro as a viable currancy and now, now that it's really happened, seems to be feeling slightly differently about things http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21701265-how-minimise-damage-britains-senseless-self-inflicted-blow-tragic-split

Is a simple majority a high enough bar for important decisions in democracies, such as the Brexit vote? This article argues not, especially considering that low voter turnout means that only a third or so of voters generally decide things for the whole country. https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/brexit-democratic-failure-for-uk-by-kenneth-rogoff-2016-06

As if the Brexit vote wasn't bad enough for political reasons, it also empowers the type of "leader" who think protecting the environment and addressing climate change is a waste of time. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/damian-carrington-blog/2016/jun/24/uks-out-vote-is-a-red-alert-for-the-

environment

Is the Brexit victory a good sign for Trump? Probably not. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2016/06/embattled_whiteness_gave_us_brexit_it_won_t_give_us_president_trump.html