

THE SECOND ROUND OF MACRON'S INSANE ELECTION

**Take a deep breath,
because here we go
again.**

The French legislative election is on Sunday. As the clock turns over to early Saturday morning, we entered Silence électoral, or the blackout period, when media coverage and campaigning stops ahead of Election Day. (I, being an American resident in France posting to a website in America, can do whatever.) The French themselves are trying to not pay too much attention, as there some kind of very important soccer game they won as I was writing this, and they qualified for another, even more important soccer game. Outside the window of my hotel in Lille is screaming and fireworks. There's a lot of shouting and horns blaring well after bedtime.

Anything is preferable to thinking about Macron's Great Foirage. (Though the Euros aren't just anything! They are important! Please don't burn down my house!)

As we approach the second turn of the snap legislative election in France on Sunday, it's hard to say how it's going. There is, at this moment, no obvious outcome. It's nerve wracking. Not even hopeless, which makes it even more nerve wracking. The parties, Left, Right, and Center, are playing their hands close to their chest.



NFP activists doing voter education in Lille shortly before the second turn of the French election.

The rate of procuration, the French term for a proxy vote, is at an all time high as people going on vacation make sure someone left behind can cast their vote. (Do not get in the way of French Vacation, that way lies the guillotine.) The voter participation in the first round was the highest seen in France in decades, and this Sunday might well beat it.

French people all over, including the overseas territories and residing in foreign countries, are getting in on the action, but the action is tense. There's no sense, like some have in America, that all the parties are the same, or that they'll all end up doing the same things, so why bother? No, the contesting parties in this election don't have a lot in common.

These legislative elections which will decide the composition of the French Parliament until the next election, or Macron temper tantrum, whichever comes first. (He can just throw another tantrum in a year, and there's word on the street that he might. God that man is an exhausting mess.)

How to Hack an

Election

One of the more inspiring things to come out of this season of insane election drama has been how a massive portion of France have come together to hack the vote, after this unexpected (and unforced) political crisis. In a two round run-off system there's soft assumption that the first round is there to clear out the field, and narrow it to two candidates. But if a trailing candidate gets 12.5% of the registered voters in their voting area, *they qualify in the next round*. If the third candidate stays in, they can split the vote, and let the fascist candidate in, even if most people in that constituency don't want the local Rassemblement National asshole representing them in Parliament.

The two round instant run-off isn't isn't terrible normally. (Though it's no ranked-choice voting!) It's a system that clears out candidates, *if* you assume lowish voter turnout. If voter turn out is high, the second round is just as, maybe more, chaotic as the first. Over the last week, all the parties opposing the Rassemblement National have started making tactical decisions about the second round. In districts where Macron's centrists are in the best position to beat the RN, the Left candidate dropped out of the race to prevent vote splitting. In places where, say, the Socialist or the Green has the best match up against the local fascist, the centrist left the race. (Well, mostly. A few of Marcon's people are truly gits... "Connard!" as they would say here.)

The parties organized this deal and talked to each other to sort it out within days after the first turn. They fanned people out to make sure everyone knew what to do, voters had proxies, everyone who needed help got it. But despite the second round having an unusual number of candidates, most have dropped out in favor of beating back the fascists. People who couldn't stand each other came together and talked strategy.

As an American, I found this very weird. But definitely good weird.

The campaigning itself, well, I found more familiar to my American sensibilities.

France's Toxic Grampa



Jean-Luc Mélenchon during his last try at the French Presidency in 2017.

The best way to win an election is picking your opponent, but so much of the media has done the Rassemblement National's work for them by picking Jean Luc Mélenchon to be the fascists' presumptive opponent. And that's a problem, because Socialist Grampa and Hot Mess Mélenchon is not only detested by most French, he's not actually the Left, at least not anymore. He is decidedly *out of the game* and the only people who don't know that are Mélenchon himself, a few fanboys, and journalists on a deadline with a shitty rolodex. When they talk about the political Left, the media always name checks Mélenchon. When the Right wants a boogyman, they drop Mélenchon's name and grin. He grabs the mic at any opportunity, totally unchastised by his own *three presidential electoral defeats* over the last 12 years. But he's the famous guy. It's as if we kept talking about Ralph Nader for more than a decade after the 2000 election.

Mélenchon has won a few elections in his career, holding positions and two different French electoral bodies and the EU. But he's lost a lot of elections, even more than those three

presidential runs. He has a history of saying truly stupid things. He's a boomer, he's a liability, and maybe even a bit of a narcissist. He's the classic French version of the boomer grampa politician that doesn't know when it's just time to get out of the damn way. (For clarification I am not speaking of any American boomer politician in general, I'm speaking about *literally all of them.*)

The man has become toxic, and appears too wrapped up in being the Great Left Hope to know to actually get out of the way of the people who can stop the march of the National Rally. But he's getting told and he is starting to listen. I'm still guessing there's a tiny dog involved.

Today, Mélenchon holds no position in the Nouveau Front Populaire, the current left coalition contesting this election. He doesn't even hold a position in the La France Insoumise party he founded, except for "Founder." Mélenchon's main job, as far as I can find, is a position at a think tank called Institut La Boétie which he co-runs with a French MP named Clémence Guetté, where I presume he makes the money he needs to feed his tiny dog. He is not the left. He is not Nouveau Front Populaire, he is not the former NUPES coalition.

He's just a dude with a very long wikipedia page.

**The Left is More
Competent Than
Their Messaging,
Again**



Marine Tondelier and other members of the New Popular Front. They're probably build consensus right now, something no journalist has ever experienced.

But the Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP) hasn't done itself any favors with the media either. Their leadership status on Facebook is "It's Complicated." The press don't like that, and the electorate doesn't understand it. They have three main people they trot out to rally the faithful, talk to the media, and debate the fascists. They are Manuel Bompard, current leader of La France Insoumise (Mélenchon's old party), Marine Tondelier, of the Greens, and Olivier Faure of the Socialists Party. (My fellow Americans do not be weirded out by the "Socialists Party." It's not what you think of as Socialism. It's indistinguishable from the Democrats, right down to the tinge of neoliberal economic theory and penchant for self-sabotage.)

Marine Tondelier was not well known as the boys until recently. But she is a goddamn boss in a green jacket. (The green jacket is a Whole Thing, people look for the green jacket to come talk to her, and she's by all accounts a great and inspiring speaker. Certainly great enough to scare the fascists, who do not like her ONE BIT.) She walked out of the tortured left negotiations before the first round and announced a coalition, come hell or high water. It's not at all clear there was one when she went and told the press, but there was by the time she finished talking.

As a French woman and a Green MP, Marine Tondelier must certainly be used to being disappointed, but making shit happen anyway. But in this case the boys.. well, they shut up. They fell in line and got to work. And there as a lot of work to do, especially by this week.

There was also this week supposed to be a debate with MidJourney Fuhrer Jordan Bardella, and Tondelier agreed to debate him. He threw a temper tantrum and declared Mélenchon was the leader of the NFP (he is not) and he would only debate Mélenchon, (who did not agree) and not the girl in a green jacket, who is *scary*. The left held their ground; it was Tondelier or no one.

It was no one; the RN walked away, reasonably concluding that she would wipe the floor with Failed Boyband Front Man Bardella.

Mélenchon, presumably aware that his little dog's life was on the line, stayed silent and had to forgo the limelight. He amazingly said no, pleading that the NFP had decided and there was nothing he could do, before glancing at a picture of the little pooch and wiping a single tear away.

(Don't @ me.)

When the King is a Coward, but His Loyal Courtier is Not.

I want to take a moment away from making fun of everyone in French politics to give props to current Renaissance Party Prime Minister, and dead man walking, Gabriel Attal. The night of the first turn of the election, the night that Le Pen's fascists won Macron's stupid and self destructive snap election, PM Attal walked to a podium in front of the office of the Prime

Minister. He did not plead or scold. He accepted what had happened, but then said that all effort had to be put on stopping the National Rally.

“The Far Right is climbing the steps to power. What we must do is clear: stopping the National Rally from achieving an absolute majority in the second round... I would call on France.. not one vote should go to the National Rally.” It was after that moment the center mostly got on board with working with the left to keep the RN out of power. My dude here may very well have saved the republic – time will tell.

He is the youngest PM of the Fifth Republic, and the first openly gay person to hold the post. It seems, perhaps as a gay man, that he knew the stakes much better than his boss. He did not wait for any blessing, and none was coming. He just went out, said what had to be said, and invited the Left to help him defeat the Fascists before it was too late.

That night he proved he was too good for Macron’s cabinet.

President Emmanuel Macron was not seen that night, and has said nothing since. There is definitely feeling in the air that he *might* prefer Le Pen and her Nazi fuck boy to the Left, or Mélenchon, if he also still thinks that Mélenchon is the entire left. Because why would Macron bother to understand his people? It’s their duty to understand him, and they’ve been doing a terrible job of it.

There’s no way to be sure what Macron thinks, because he decided to sulk instead of lead. It’s why I’ve barely been able to discuss him this whole time. He vanished and took no calls. He abandoned the party he created in their true hour of need.

Turns out he went off to a spare house he has in a fancy seaside town called Le Touquet.

It’s good to be the king.

■ Cette image du Président souriant,

tellement cool, tellement rock, alors qu'il a provoqué des élections qui risquent de pousser le pays dans les bras du RN (ou l'instabilité parlementaire) est une catastrophe.

Presque une provocation.

pic.twitter.com/ulz6RKSI5i

– Laurent Bazin (@laurentbazin) June 30, 2024

The Guillotine jokes just write themselves.

Macron off to visit his beach house.

Photo credit: Le Parisien

Tomorrow France will battle it out between a regressive isolationist Right that is violently afraid of everything, and a Left that *might actually* (fingers crossed) be shaking off some of their necrotic and problematic forebearers to deal with some of the very real problems France is facing. And they are real problems.

Immigrants and poor people need services. The bureaucracy is failing to the point of being a human rights abuse. Someone has to balance the books after Macron's disastrous budget decisions. Climate adaptation isn't moving fast enough, and French farmers are often in conflict with both the adaptation process and the abuses of big agribusinesses. France has struggled with the cost of living, even if less than most of its peer nations. More and more cities are falling into housing crises. Much reasonable fear and demand for proactive and competent government gets channeled into destructive othering, by the like of the Far Right, but also through the entire political spectrum. But France has everything it needs to fix itself, it is a rich and well-built country. It could even do right by its former colonies, if it wanted to.

It can choose a healthy and sustainable life for its native children and its talented and lovely immigrants both. It just has to choose.

I'm going to give the last word to a thousand academics, historians, activists and general smarty pants French people who are begging the French people to do the right thing at the Guardian:

“For the first time since the second world war, the far right is at the gates of power in France. As historians from differing political backgrounds who share an attachment to democratic values and the rule of law, we cannot remain silent in the face of an alarming prospect that we still have the capacity to resist...”

Good luck France, and God Bless.

FOURTEEN SHAMBOLIC YEARS OF CONSERVATIVE RULE

The Tories are Exhausting.

This Thursday the 4th of July the UK will be overcast in the low 60s with some intermittent rain, and all the parliamentary seats will be up for grabs as the UK turns out for yet another insane British snap election. This one was called by Rishi Sunak, the Almost Certainly About To Be Former Prime Minister of the UK.

Snap elections *as such* don't exist in the US. There are reasons for special elections to be called outside of the normal cycle, but they are



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called one. He seems tired of being PM, tired of Britain, maybe tired of life.

I'm going to explain roughly how these elections work, if you want to skip this part, that's understandable. Just scroll down to the picture of a kitten.

Elections are quite different in the UK than the US. Eligible voters all over the four countries that make up the United Kingdom will head to the polls and vote for a local representative, sorted by party affiliation, one of which will be made their Member of Parliament. Many will just be voting for a party, rather than a person. Some local MPs are quite well known in their local constituencies, and well enough loved to carry votes from across the spectrum, but many are not. Similar to Congressional elections, a lot of people who vote a party line rather than for a person are trying to influence the shape of the national government, not just local representative business.

That's it, that's all they get to vote for in these national elections. In this way, it's much simpler than an American election.

There are 650 constituencies in the United Kingdom. The closest equivalent in America is probably Congressional districts. These constituencies are geographically contiguous and range from roughly 21,000 to 90,000 residents.

There are sometimes accusations of gerrymandering in the UK, but it is strictly amateur stuff compared to the mathematical insanity of American redistricting.

Unlike America, the British don't vote for governmental roles. The people don't vote for the Prime Minister, at least not directly. Brits get one representative in the Parliament, and that's that. The various jobs, privileges, and positions get worked out when this particular mob of election winners show up at Westminster Palace in London.

Great Britain uses a first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, or what Americans think of as just how elections work. There are many other ways of structuring voting, used in jurisdictions all over the world, but they remain mostly undiscovered in America and the UK. First-past-the-post is a system everyone gets one vote, one time, and the guy with the most votes wins. This style of voting tends to favor two party systems, low diversity in political thought, and men. Voters are usually timid in FPTP systems – you pick a team and stick with it. If you want your vote to matter, you pick one of the two big teams. There's even a concept for this in Political Science: Duverger's law. Older democracies like America and the UK prefer FPTP because not much else had been discovered when they started trying to Democracy, and the politics around voting tends to be sticky. Criticizing the voting system often makes older people cranky in the traditional 'we had it bad, why should you have it any better' kind of way.

The UK doesn't have a written constitution. If you mention that to them, they will angrily say that yes, they do, and point at a giant pile of Post-It notes going back to the 17th century. Then they will also mention a few things that aren't written down and explain that it's fine because everyone knows those bits. Well, everyone *important*, at least.

(I am not going to describe the devolved

governments or the House of Lords, this is already too long.)

Whoever leads the party which won more than half the seats will be invited by King Charles to form a government. A minority government can also be invited, with the “supply and confidence” of a smaller party. This was the case with Theresa May’s government in 2017 which needed the assistance of the Northern Irish hard line Democratic Unionist Party to stay in government. But it’s often unstable. See Theresa May’s government in 2017.

The winners, now the government, sit on the right of the Speaker of the House of Commons. And the Opposition – the ones that didn’t win the election – sit on the left. (Being the Speaker of the House of Commons is nothing like the Speaker of the House. The term is a false friend.) The job of Speaker of the House of Commons involves calling on MPs who want to talk, telling them when to vote, and shouting “Orrrrdeh!” at grown-up politicians behaving like an out of control middle-school classroom.

If no one party gets a majority, two parties can enter into a coalition to govern together, but they often fall apart – much like the House and Senate being at odds with each other and the President. (Though we just have to live with it for years, whereas the Brits can go back to the polls sooner with a snap election.)

The Prime Minister doesn’t run for the office of PM; they’re just another MP, technically. But they are generally the leader of their party. As for who gets what job, that’s an internal party matter, and surprisingly little of it is formally legislated. (The party leadership elections are a whole different process which varies by party by-laws.) From there the PM tries to pass laws and create policy, with the usual drama that entails in modern democracies.

The PM can call for an election anytime, with the provision that he or she has to call for one within a five year term. And that’s what Rishi

Sunak did on May 22nd, when he called an election for this Thursday. He did this while trailing the opposition by about 20 points in the polls, which is just as much of a death sentence in the UK as the US. He called it while getting unceremoniously rained on, as if even the sky itself was saying "Nah, fuck this guy."

OK. Civics lesson over.

How it's Going? (Badly)

To thank you for reading this, I have provided a kitten picture.

The Conservative Party, also known as the Tories, has been in power for 14 years. It will almost certainly be wiped out at the polls, possibly even out of meaningful existence, but *probably not*. Modern democratic Britain is a conservative, capital T- Tory, country. They spent nearly 60 years in power during the 20th century, and one of the longest lasting Labour PMs, Tony Blair, basically got the job by being a Tory in all but name. Britain *hates* the Tories because they continually crash the country into a wall, the same wall their faces are currently planted in now. But Brits *love* the Tories because Tories tell them that Britain is the best, and they shouldn't feel bad about the British Empire, and they can go it alone, because they're made of sterner stuff, and meant to be the best rich white people that rich white people can be, and like Lucy with the damn football, the Brits fall for it *every damn time*.

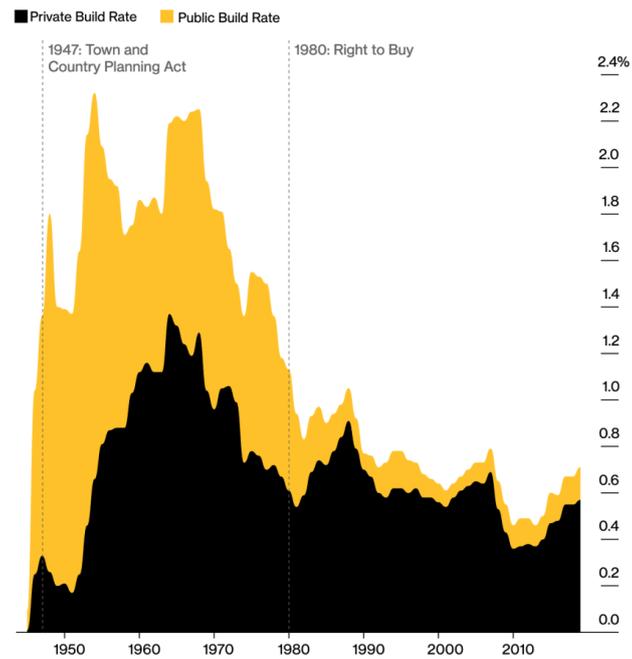
Right now in normal, not Tory-fantasy-land Great Britain, everything sucks.

Fuel poverty is skyrocketing, a record number of people are relying on food banks, companies are dumping raw sewage into almost every waterway in England. The National Health Service has more patients on waiting lists for medical care than *Ireland has people*. The economy is trash, productivity has been flailing since the financial crisis, and the trains are barely

run

Britain Is Building Fewer Homes

New home completions as a share of total housing, by sector



Source: UK Parliament House of Commons Library

Homelessness is becoming common, and young people despair of ever owning a house even as their rents balloon. The country is at least *1.2 million houses* behind what it needs.

House building hasn't kept up with population. One in every 26 houses needed by British families... doesn't exist. This drives house prices and rents up, but there's just no way to shelter people if there's no shelter. There are many reasons a particular person might be the one that become homeless, but that *someone* had to become homeless in the UK is simply math. The question of *is* not why people become homeless, we know why. The only question is *who* will become homeless – the ones left standing, when the music stops.

The prisons are overflowing, the police forces are undermanned. The buildings made with shitty RAAC (Reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete) are falling down piece by piece, including inside of over two hundred primary and secondary schools in the whole UK.

The chances of seeing a dentist are slightly better than winning a lottery, and people are pulling out teeth at home. There's not enough people to provide either childcare or eldercare,

and not enough money to retain the people doing these jobs now. According to Tim Harford writing in the Financial Times, "Real household disposable income per capita has barely increased for 15 years," and "the deficit is a permanent fixture, and interest payments on public debt have risen to levels not seen for 40 years." Bigotry against trans people, nursed by the Conservatives, spans the political spectrum – perhaps a comforting distraction . The Tories would rather pay for flights to Rwanda for asylum seekers than pay their own NHS junior doctors.

And there's more, and more... a litany of failure, complaints, and human misery.

David Cameron



Truly these last 14 years of Tory rule have been like no other, but to understand this you have to understand David Cameron, Conservative Prime minister, 2010 to 2016. Cameron is the Simone Biles of failing up. No matter how much

he wrecked Great Britain, embarrassed himself, or both, he always stuck the landing like it was the easiest thing, like he meant to do it. He introduced Austerity to Britain after the 2009 financial crisis, and convinced his people to starve themselves half to death instead of trying to reform a corrupt banking system. He didn't take care of his people, he told them, "stiff upper lip!" and went back to one of his multi-million pound homes in the English countryside.

There was no good reason to do austerity, and every country that did suffered terribly as the economy slowed. But most of them had Austerity forced on them, Cameron forced it on his own people. He then accidentally took the UK out of

the EU when he didn't mean to, trying to show off after managing to barely not lose Scotland. No one thought he was insane enough to accidentally leave the EU when he didn't want to, but he was, and he didn't care. After that, he walked away from the job, literally singing a little song to himself, and ushered in years of Brexit chaos all of Europe is still trying to get over.

Cameron might have thought he was done failing up after all that, but then he was asked back by Sunak last year to become Foreign Secretary of the UK. But since he wasn't an MP, Sunak made him Baron Cameron of Chipping Norton, in the County of Oxfordshire. Now he's Lord Cameron, he even gets a little Santa-looking cape to wear in the House of Lords. That's all real things adult men did.

He recently fell for some Russian pranksters and talked about Ukraine policy with them because he thought they were the former Ukrainian president. I tried to check, but it's unclear if this was a video call.

Theresa May



Cameron was succeed by Theresa May, the first Prime Minister to be eaten by Brexit and her own Tory MPs on the back

benches of Parliament. She discovered quickly that a clean exit from the EU that involved taking a large chunk of the island next to Britain was impossible. Not the least because the Republic of Ireland has been sick of this shit for a good long time. The Good Friday Agreement had made the Troubles in Ireland kind of go away, but Brexit threatened to bring them back. The prospect of a hard Brexit with a hard Irish border was likely to see a lot of violence, and no one really knew what to do

about it. The Brexiteers just failed to talk about it, back in the days of "Reclaiming Our Freedoms." May failed again and again to get a deal that both the EU and her own party would agree to. Even when the EU was trying to ease the way, Boris Johnson, the next asshole in this story, would just gesticulate and yell that nothing was ever good enough, nothing what ever *Brexit* enough. Mostly because he was after her job.

May was just a nasty person. Before she was PM, she'd instituted a Home Office hostile environment policy in an effort to reduce migration. This policy amounted to the UK making itself so mean and incompetent that it would just be too hard and awful for migrants to stay. Her administration also deported people back to places where they would face human rights violations against international law. Eventually her hostile policy got so hostile that the government ended up detaining and deporting a bunch of elderly Afro-Caribbean migrants who had lived in the UK for decades legally, after answering the call from the British government to rebuild England post WW2. Yes, the victims of this scandal were color coded, for easy human rights abuses! Eventually the scandal led to the establishment of a Windrush Day holiday in the UK, to commemorate the hard work and contributions of migrants, particularly Afro-Caribbean migrants, to rebuilding Britain.

This year the UK government celebrated Windrush Day by evicting an 89 year old woman born in Jamaica who came to the UK in 1960 to work in a factory. She built a life and raised her children in the UK. But she doesn't have a passport.

So that's going well.

Eventually Theresa May resigned after three years in office, making way for Boris Johnson.

The Good Chap Theory of Government Meets Boris Fucking Johnson



That no one has bother to work out or write down the nature of the UK Constitution makes things complicated at times. The

assumption of these well heeled and well educated (mostly) men is that if you were in the club, you were almost undoubtedly a Good Chap. This is actually a soft doctrine of British politics: that if you made it in the door, you're probably an good guy and we should just trust that. The good chap is someone with manners, morals, and decorum. How well this idiotic principle of governance held up historically may be a matter of opinion, but it did not survived May's successor, poisonous blancmange in human form, Boris Johnson. Johnson, a columnist who had jumped into politics presumably because he wasn't getting enough attention, campaigned hard for Brexit. He was Brexit's number one hype man, along with Lovecraftian Innsmouth monster Nigel Farage. Johnson has a kind of goofy golden retriever energy to him, a vague cover for the hedonistic nihilism he would show later and that would eventually bring him down. He tells truth and lies triumphantly and with gusto, never seeming to care which one he's doing at the moment. The Tories tried to treat Johnson like a normal good chap, and he destroyed them. More than any other lousy ass in this list of incompetent, cruel, bigoted British rulers, Boris Johnson wrecked the Conservative Party. He broke the law partying during his own lock down. He lied continuously and obviously to the House of Commons. He lied to the people of Britain about his "oven ready Brexit deal" which did nothing to fix the problems May had encountered. He lied to everyone with the ease of a child laughing.

Trying to treat Boris Johnson like a Good Chap was the political equivalent of kissing a nuclear control rod. The question isn't if you'll die, but when and how mangled you'll be when you die.

Eventually beset with too many scandals and actual crimes for the House to ignore, he exited the scene. The only person who benefited from Johnson's tenure was Nigel Farage. Farage is actually polling well enough to get a seat in Parliament right now. That's how bad the Tories fucked up.

Liz Truss



With Boris gone it was on to the next terrifying pasty Tory. After a contentious leadership election in which the Tory membership proved their mettle by overwhelmingly fighting to get Liz Truss into the Premiership over the desires of the people, the media, and the actual Tory MPs, who knew her and knew she was insane. But she got a chance to show the world her vision for a strong Britain. She took an economy David Cameron had spent years trying to ruin and managed to crash it completely in less than two months – Great British efficiency! The hurt she caused will be scarring the people of Britain for a generation, but at least she gets to hang out with Trump's crew in America now.

And Finally, Dishy

Rishi



It was time for the technocratic lanky human calculator to take the scene. Rishi Sunak, celebrated for his lack of

understanding about how viruses and air work in the midst of a pandemic. He managed to make his very own wave of disability and death, with his Eat Out to Help Out scheme, and by this point doesn't that seem like the top line of the CV for a Tory Prime Minister?

Sunak was as bad as all of them, though he never quite rose to their deliberate evil, more fumbling without caring who he hurt. Perhaps an improvement on the Tories' active and hateful malice. In the end, Rishi Sunak was unlucky, last to be holding the premiership hot potato as the 5 year clock ran down. He decided on sudden death to go for it, try to get re-elected against all odds, or at least be done with it so he can move back to Venice Beach, gaze out at the Pacific from his mansion, and ignore the kids killing each other in gang fights behind his building. July 4th can be his independence day, and he can go back and re-up that green card.

Maybe even get a job at Facebook to keep him busy.

After 14 years of Conservative rule, Britain is broken and exhausted. Labour and Kier Starmer is almost certainly headed for a win, but like Tony Blair, Labour is just trying to be the Tories Lite. No one is holding out much hope the Starmer will fix the nation, because he's made it clear he won't. He's promising just slightly less of the same things the Tories are promising. So the British slog on to the polls tomorrow.

Perfidious Albion, indeed.

I'll give the last word to the illimitable
Douglas Adams, who knew his people well:

"...On its world, the people are people. The
leaders are lizards. The people hate the lizards
and the lizards rule the people."

"Odd," said Arthur, "I thought you said it was a
democracy."

"I did," said Ford. "It is."

"So," said Arthur, hoping he wasn't sounding
ridiculously obtuse, "why don't people get rid
of the lizards?"

"It honestly doesn't occur to them," said Ford.

"They've all got the vote, so they all pretty
much assume that the government they've voted in
more or less approximates to the government they
want."

"You mean they actually vote for the lizards?"

"Oh yes," said Ford with a shrug, "of course."

"But," said Arthur, going for the big one again,
"why?"

"Because if they didn't vote for a lizard," said
Ford, "the wrong lizard might get in. Got any
gin?"

"What?"

"I said," said Ford, with an increasing air of
urgency creeping into his voice, "have you got
any gin?"

THE MADNESS OF MACRON

Quinn Norton lays out all the reasons Macron's
decision to call snap elections is so stupid.

WHAT COMES AFTER AMERICA

Whatever happens today, the Union is done.

It has been for a long time, maybe even from the start. But we have reached the point where the longer it goes on, the more harm it will inexorably do. It's time, past time, to admit it didn't work, it never worked, and that the Constitution and its institutions have ossified. There is no reforming the United States of America, there is no more perfect union to chase after. That turned out to be a lie – a lie woven into the legal fabric of this nation-state from the start. The United States of America, as defined by its constitution, can only get worse because of how irreparably broken both that document and the system it created are. This isn't a Trump or GOP thing. They are symptoms, but they are only symptoms. As angry as you may be at Trump, voting him out, driving him from the country, jailing him, whatever, none of that will fix the great flaw that created his presidency. It does no more than shoe a fly away from an open wound and call it fixed.

The flaw is our Constitution. As there is no politically possible path to rewriting the it, the Constitution can only fall further into entropy and catastrophe.

The longer this goes on, the worse the end will be. This is why it's the duty of people who are in and of, or love, America the culture, Americans the people, the land it spans and the diversity it holds, to imagine what comes next and the easiest way to get there. We've been running what was essentially the broken beta of the first representative democracy for almost 250 years, and it was built to not be upgradable. It doesn't work right, it never did, and it is awful. It was a compromise of rich and frightened men whose imaginations (understandably) didn't reach far beyond the 18th century.

The nightmares we live with, and their disconnect from the values we hold now are impossible to count. I was researching children in ICE detention living in cages, and their families being held in unsafe conditions and coerced into forced labor – back in the Obama days. The exploitation of forms of unfree labor continues to this day, as does the rise of oligarchy and political corruption.

Police have killed almost 900 people this year, despite a mismanaged pandemic presumably making it somewhat harder. The Flint water crisis is six years old this year, and still going. One person has been found guilty and sentenced to probation. I could go on, but you know this song: opioid crisis, inequality, lobbying, campaign finance, the two party system, gerrymandering, disenfranchisement, and of course, the damn virus. And still, all these problems are just symptoms of a deeper disease, a broken political basis for our society. Our laws have led to an irreparable failure of the American system when it comes to the basic task of keeping the people who constitute it alive and functional and with some kind of path to a sustainable, if not improving, existence. Medical care, housing, and education are all contingent. These are the most fundamental parts of having this thing called government and ours failed these tasks aggressively, despite the brilliance and determination of even its most oppressed people pushing forward our culture to greater things.

It's impossible to change any of this at a fundamental level, because it is impossible to re-write or even amend the superstructure of our laws and our government. Even if the GOP lost everything, and the Democrats suddenly became a party of reform (which they won't), nothing could meet the global problems we face because the judiciary will destroy efforts to reform and remake ourselves at every turn. But even before we get to the problem of the judiciary, the two party system is disconnected from the world as it is now: facing the end of the Holocene and

with that, a planet that is gentle to humans. What was the most democratic system of the 18th century is a travesty of permitted corruption, unrepresentative elites, and openly bought-and-paid-for influence. It's over, it's done, it's time to let it go before it kills us all.

The successes of America, and there have been many, came not because of our form of governance but despite it. The culture – for good and ill – isn't the constitution or the legal regime or the nation-state as recognized by other nation-states. It's the people. It's what we choose, believe, and imagine. Right now we choose to be constrained by a document that has manifestly failed us.

And yes, there have been efforts at positive movement using our constitutional framework, like the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. But they have been undermined and destroyed almost at birth by the perniciousness of the very flaws amendments were meant to fix. And thusly, because of the 14th, we live in a world where Exxon holds the rights meant for black folk who still struggle to vote.

After spending much of my adult life feeling alone in my views, it has surprised me how many people have said to me over the last years, and especially this year, that there's no redeeming this union, that it's not worth preserving. But this is not an ending thought that drops into a void.

The end of the Union isn't a hopeless position, but the only hopeful one we have. The alternative isn't chaos and dystopia, just as the alternative to monarchy in the 17th and 18th century wasn't chaos and dystopia. It was us.

Right now is when we start imagining and working on the most peaceful and productive transition to a post-USian world we can manage. That may seem impossible, but that's also what we thought about the Soviet Union in 1987. It's what we thought about the end of European hegemony at the end of the colonial ages. It's what we

thought right before parliamentary reform swept Europe after 1848. Right now we're settling for Churchill's worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time..., in this world of sin and woe. Why does humanity think it needs to stop there? We invented everything we have now politically, technologically, culturally, and in ways of coordinating and governing.

Why on earth are so many people convinced that we don't have anything more to invent?

The founders imagined a new thing, but they chickened out and didn't do it. They half-assed it, retreated from their own notions. When they were done with the thing, it was born almost a ghost and tied down to the old hierarchies. The framers of the constitution were afraid of their own notions of self-determination and equality. They pulled back and tried to not make it too democratic a nation for three million people, and now it fails more than three hundred million. In fact, it fails more than seven billion.

In 2020, this structure has been constraining the political imagination for centuries, stunting our growth, and stunting the world.

My allegiance is not to America, and it hasn't been for many years. My allegiance is to my family – my family of all the strange living things, unique in a seemingly endless void of rock and chemistry filling the universe, but not life, not as far as we know. I do love America – the land, the people, the crazy, loud, funny and emotional culture. I will always love America, but like all real love, it will be complicated. I don't have to love its flaws, its racism, its cowardly cruelty, or its legal institutions in order to love its soul.

My allegiance isn't to a bastard compromise of frightened men in 1776, or 1648, or even 1555. It's to the world now, in 2020. Those men are long dead, and they do not get to describe the limits of political imagination in the 21st

century. But right now, we are trapped in the infinitesimal space these old men described for us, surrounded on all sides by the high cliffs of doubt and familiarity. We need to succeed where they failed – humanity is counting on it.

I know it's unthinkable that any of this could change, just as it was unthinkable that Rome could fall, that Carthage would be wiped from the map, that the Russian Empire could cease to be, that the Dynasties of China would come to an end, that the Toltecs would collapse, that the eternal Pharaohs of Egypt would pass from the world, and any more of the dozens of political systems that have come and gone. We are still here, waiting on something worthy of our brilliance and creativity.

One of our greatest poets, a man treated like shit for the color of his skin, wrote

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is
free.

If you want to call that thing Hughes sang for America, sure, why not. But don't mistake it for the quicksand of desires we inhabit now. Don't mistake it for this most failed of hoped-for states. Don't even mistake it for a Westphalian state.

It all stops the day we decide it stops. None of these documents, forms, systems, or laws have any existence beyond our imaginations, and they never did. It is 2020, and we face a pandemic (with undoubtedly more to come), the end of our own Holocene, environmental destruction, and the task of meeting the needs of eight billion people in this world. It's time to abandon the best systems men could think of in the late 1700s and figure out one that works now. We could even lead the world in figuring out what comes after the Westphalian nation-state, hopefully before that legal and cultural construct kills us all.

This too shall pass. How it passes, whether it's

the end of the world, or the birth of a better one, is up to our imaginations, which we need to put to work in a hurry.

And so, on this most strange of days, I put the question to you – What comes after America?

THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE, PART TWO: LOVING FROM A DISTANCE

I began writing this in the Munich airport, waiting at a quiet, bright airport gate that was the liminal space between one life and another, between being mother, and being wife. My face was red and sore from wearing an n95 mask for 12 hours. Or, more precisely, two n95 masks, changing the first after about eight hours of wear.

I had said goodbye to my daughter in San Francisco, and was on my way to my partner, in Luxembourg. But in that moment I was nowhere and no one. I had been away from my partner for the longest time since we met. It was hard, but not as hard as leaving my child in the middle of a pandemic. Because of this damn disease, I did something else I've never had to do before: I said goodbye to my child without knowing when I would see her again.

I sent them both messages to say I was ok, that I'd landed, and was waiting for my next flight. I posted little updates, took pictures of odd things in the airport, and let time pass.

We are so far from each other these days, craving connection, and fearful of it. Many of us feel locked up in our own universes, either by local health measures, or by the fear of dying, killing, or both. Even for those flouting health measures there is doubt and distance, not

all of their loved ones agree, they miss people too. They can't travel to see the ones they miss, and everyone is avoiding the arguments about what the right thing to do is in a world where we can't know at this moment what the right thing to do is.

Uncertainty is in-between time, time when you want comfort and the closeness of your personal village, but now that has to be distant, and it makes the time interminable.

I am good at letting in-between time pass. I have always been something of a long distance person. When I was young I was a long distance child, with parents in different states. I was always far from my mother or father, before growing up and becoming far from my friends and lovers and eventually far from my child, most of the time. When she was smaller I would call her to say goodnight every evening, from wherever I was, even a few times while waiting for the police to roll in on a protest or camp. I would get away from the noise and current events as best as I could, just to hear about my little girl's day and tell her to sleep well, and that I love her. Now we share chatrooms and video calls, but that's not new with the pandemic. I have countless screen captures on old harddrives of my little girl on Skype, Jitsi, eventually Big Blue Button, and other bits of software we used to see and love each other.

I am always far from someone I love, it's one of the defining qualities of my life. But now, most people are far from someone, sometimes someone who isn't very far away. So maybe my experience can be of some use.

First off, yes, it's heartbreaking. When I think of all the time I've missed watching my daughter grow up, it feels like a broken thing in me, something jagged and free floating that catches in my throat and chokes me sometimes. I think of all the friends I have, continents away from each other – and me. Of the people I love, the people who I may never see in person again. I miss them, I am an ocean of missing them, all

salty tears and indistinct edges. But this is my life, and I've decided to get good at it. Right now, people are losing each other. The connections we took for granted have weakened, and the stress everyone is under only makes it worse. Right now, we need more love, but we're lonely.

This is what I know about loving from a distance.

Giving is the most important part. Reaching out, writing, poking everyone, it takes time, but in a way that feeds the soul. Don't expect something specific back. Some people, even when thrilled to hear from you, may not have the energy to reply. Revel in the fact that you've touched someone you care for. Make time to talk to people, as strictly as you make work time, school time, exercise time, eating time. Make lists of names. This is one of the things you're doing to keep healthy.

But it doesn't have to be big. In fact, it rarely should be. We often think we have to have a plan when we reach out, or at least something to talk about. We forget that most of our communications with the people we care for are ephemera. They are acknowledging someone coming in the room, relaying a joke or some inconsequential oddity encountered on the street. They are nothing at all to be recorded in our memories individually, but taken together they become the background music of love. They are not weighty, they should not be weighty, but they gather up like gold dust. These are the things I call small touches, and from a distance they can look like a text message, a joke, a funny tumblr post, a picture of something seen along a walk. When spring came and we were all sheltering in place I didn't want the flowers to pass unnoticed, so I took pictures of them and sent them to people. Here is something pretty – I am thinking of you.

There was a time when mail was delivered five times a day or more in some places, and while we look back on multipage letters from generations

past that's not what it was most of the time, that's the stuff someone saved. Little things are the scaffolding of love and connection. Little things are the bubble wrap that keeps our souls safe on long journeys, and right now we are all on a very long journey.

I make lists of people to connect with. I try to wave over the net, I don't always succeed. But I'm still taking pictures of flowers, and thinking of who needs to see my flowers.

When you can't be there, be real.

People think social media makes you fake, but that's bullshit. Being dishonest makes you fake, not the size of the screen you're dishonest on. In your communication, texts, letters, posts in your social media, don't hide, don't perform. What you tell them 45 minutes into lunch is what you put on Instagram.

I know that this is funny coming from me. I am probably more famous for being hated by the internet than for anything I've accomplished in my life. But while this can be incredibly scary, what happens next is a watershed. There are people that back away when you're honest, but mostly, people are honest back. They feel trusted, because they have been, and they feel safe, because if you can post that, so can they. Right now we need that trust and safety, and because our lives are so much online now, it means bringing that trust and safety into our online spaces.

That vulnerability can feel very unsafe. Liberally mute the toxic. Don't engage with it, and let the people that respond well to authenticity buoy you up. I have been destroyed several times by online mobbing. I was nearly driven to suicide after part of the net and media tried to blame me for my best friend's death, and then again a few years later when the mobbing showed up to destroy my career. If I can be real online after all that, anyone can. The friends and strangers who respond with kindness make all the difference.

This goes doubly for one-on-one communication. Be real. Even when you're just too tired to engage directly, just say it.

Accept incongruity. I am sitting here on a bright and clear late summer afternoon in a tiny european country. My child can't leave her house because of smoke and heat right now, and hasn't been able to for more than a week. I want to tell her to go get out and exercise, which is ridiculous. That's what I should do, I should be telling her to play more Minecraft with her friends. We are far away, and even though our love is deep, our shared world is very thin. She and I are not going to be in the same mood, or having the same experience of the world. Still, we make time to talk about philosophy, video games, and memes.

You're far away right now, from a lot of people, who are far away from each other. You're not going to have a shared experience of reality unless you've scheduled it. You're going to be having a great day while someone else is having the worst day, and vice versa. That's ok. You can be emotionally out of sync and still love each other with compassion and sympathy and warmth. You don't have to take on the emotional state of someone far away. Sympathy and compassion can heal and connect, but trying to have empathy, or demanding it, can destroy a narrow, long distance connections. If it feels like you're giving or getting too little, say so. Talk about it, be honest about giving and needing, and be ready to spread your needing between people. Don't drain someone, and don't be drained. Health is a team sport – it takes our overlapping personal villages to care for each other. It's ok to tap out.

Part of accepting incongruity is accepting asynchronicity. My partner and I have been in a eight year long conversation over the net. It never really ends, and doesn't line up perfectly that often. When we're apart we're typically nine hours apart. We leave things for each other. We poke, and then let it lie until the

stars align and we can have a little time in sync. My phone is always on silent with almost no notifications allowed on it at all. I once had to text a friend to find out how to turn the ringer on on an iPhone, he told me about the switch on the side, which I had forgotten existed. The people I love and I are not constantly interrupting each other to stay connected. Instead, we're leaving things for each other, and when we line up, either by schedule or happenstance, we catch up more deeply. Being connected to a friend cannot be a special occasion – the magic comes from the plainness and constancy of it. Right now, we all need that plainness and constancy.

It is such a blessing that in this particular plague year, we have all of this new technology to connect us and keep us safe for the first time. This is a chance to learn how to bring our humanity to the internet and technology – being human to each other – and that will get us through.

*My work for Emptywheel is supported by my wonderful patrons on Patreon. You can find out more, and support my work, at Patreon.
Thanks to Ryan Singel.*

IN THE MIDDLE OF ALL

THE 2020, BELARUSIANS STARTED FIGHTING FOR THEMSELVES.

The revolutions continue. Right now, the eastern European country of Belarus is weeks into street protests and strikes against the long and corrupt rule of Alexander Lukashenka, the main ruler Belarus has seen in the post-Soviet era, after he defeated Vyacheslav Kebich in 1994 and started a power consolidation right up to 2020, and perhaps no further. He rigged the election in early August, but Belarus is having nothing of it.

Belarusians are singing songs and filling the streets and getting shot and even hung trying to call a foul on election that wasn't free and fair. Neither were the other elections since Lukashenka came to power, but they are tired of it, tired enough to, as so many have said to western reporters hanging around Minsk and Zoom, lose their fear. People who can't find their fear anymore are revolutionary indeed.

Lukashenka wandered around waving an assault rifle, demonstrating that he doesn't know how to properly hold a gun, calling the protesting Belarusians rats, and generally getting on his melodramatic manbaby.

He is often called the last dictator of Europe by people who don't want to acknowledge that both Russia and Turkey exist in Europe as well as Asia, or that the EU has its own tin pot dictator. But Lukashenka does live up to the classic bastard and tin pot dictator: murdering opponents, hating women, and trying to spread delusional fears of invasions from the west, as if the EU and NATO were going to roll tanks into Minsk any day now.

Spoiler: they are not.

Belarus has a slightly smaller population than Michigan. Crowds of up to a couple hundred thousand people have filled the capital of Minsk, and smaller but sizable crowds filled other cities. Their demands are in the “Enough of this shit” category, but they’re probably settle for free and fair elections, and maybe not getting beaten and locked up quite so much.

The once loyal manufacturing sector is defecting from Lukashenka, in response to failed economic policies and a Covid-19 response that makes Trump look cautious and moderate. This is key, and a sign of deep changes in Belarus. Strikes are sweeping through key industries, reminiscent if not exactly the same as they did in '91, when the USSR was falling over.

From Global Voices:

Workers at state-owned industries have joined the protest movement, staging public meetings, walk-outs, threats of work-to-rule actions, and strikes. Researcher Volodymyr Artiukh points out that there have been reports of protest activity at “at least at least 70 industrial, trade and service companies as well as in the educational, medical, and media sectors” since the election. “Almost all of these are state-owned enterprises and/or publicly-financed organisations,” he says.

These were Lukashenka’s supporters for decades, but Belarus is changing. Close to a third of the people are young enough to have never really known anything but Lukashenka’s rule, but they can see how the rest of the world works, and they clearly don’t fucking love his nonsense.

Belarus borders Ukraine and Russia on its east, and three EU nations – Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, on its west. Traditionally and culturally Belarus is more closely tied to Ukraine and Russia than its western neighbors, and that’s not terribly likely to change, even

according to local pro-democracy activists guesting on various media shows. Belarus wants to stay Belarusian, which is almost Russian, but not quite, and definitely European, but not any other kind of European. They're not going to want western Europe to sweep in and save them, Belarusians have known western Europeans to long to want that. They're not likely to want Russia to come and be in charge, since they seem pretty keen on having their votes counted. All evidence is that Belarusians want to save themselves, and not have any other governments meddling in their affairs. Given how bad most of their neighbors have meddled over the past thousand years, you can't blame them.

After enduring decades years of post-Soviet strong man rule, they are joining the Green Revolution, OWS, the Umbrella Revolution, Euromaidan, the Ethiopian protests, The Puerto Rican anticorruption protests, The Chilean Spring, and the on and on of the last years (and years to come) in saying No More of This Nonsense. What ties the Belarusian protests to all these others is how tired people are of systems that just don't work for anyone but those at the very top. And they can see the petulant normality of those people at the top now, more than ever in human history, they can see how hollow and ridiculous it all is.

And they can see each other now, too. They know it's bullshit, just like you know it's bullshit, and now they know everyone else knows it's bullshit too. That's when you start to lose your fear.

It feels like there's often so little we can do to help in this slow moving planetary collapse. But there are those little things: showing up for a BLM protest with water bottles and masks, contributing to a Belarusian strike fund or a medical gofundme that shouldn't have to exist. We watch our plastic usage and trying to cut down on driving and beef. It feels like a thousand little things that don't do anything,

but they do, just like these little revolutions. They are the seeds of better worlds. Like most seeds, most will never germinate, but without so many, you could not hope to see the shoots of these new worlds. They are not uncomplicated worlds, not easy worlds, but worlds we get to (have to) cultivate rather than have them thrust upon us by incompetent, petulant men.

There's not a lot of obvious common ground between Americans and Belarusians, or Chileans, Iranians, Ethiopians, and so on. Except perhaps a sense that the globe should be a fair place, and that it should be free. And that our home should be managed and nurtured like it, and the beings who live on it, matter.

My work for Emptywheel is supported by my wonderful patrons on Patreon. You can find out more, and support my work, at Patreon. Thanks to Opit for research and language help.

Images thanks to Homoatrox/CC BY-SA and Ruslan Sereduk/CC BY-SA

I'm supporting the Belarus Solidarity Foundation, more about that here.

THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE, PART ONE: CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN

There's no second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, and there never really was a first wave. Like generals always fighting the last war, that's a metaphor we lifted from the 1918 Flu Pandemic. Whether it was a good metaphor then or not, it's not a good metaphor now. In a way, there isn't even a pandemic, not in any functional sense.

There's just thousands and thousands of local epidemics, breaking out, dying down, and breaking out again. Because of this, we're on edge, trying to judge our actions, trying to judge our risk, trying to understand what's ok in the Fog of Disease. Deciding we don't care, deciding we might be wrong again. Losing our damn minds. This is not something most people have to deal with.

But there is a group of people who do deal with the ups and downs, the sudden changes in freedom and pain all the time: people with chronic and remitting diseases. In a way, a pandemic is just the moment where society has a relapsing and remitting disease, though it's not just Covid-19 itself, it's also the economic and social impact, and how everything changes without warning.

I know these feelings well, I have several diseases that come and go, and I have dealt with them all my life, even before I knew what they were. One day I may be mostly ok, and the next, unable to get far from my bed. I might have weeks of freedom, then suddenly be barely able to get around my house. I have a partner, and a daughter, and many friends who have all come to understand that there are bad times and I can't control them. I can influence them, but all my promises and all my plans are contingent.

What I have learned in the process of 40 years of dealing with incurable and unpredictable illness suddenly applies to the whole damn world, so here goes.

I call the process Climbing the Mountain, partly because I can't climb a mountain. The Himalayas are right out.

I have a disease called Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (hEDS) which causes my joints to skitter around in unpleasant ways, and when I was young I had a number of amazing party tricks my physical therapist has banned me from ever doing again. But I can show you one with my thumb doing things thumbs aren't supposed to do, which has

also been voted by one party of friends the least gross. When I was young I was a gymnast and a dancer, which is a mixed bag for EDS kids. You're likely to damage your body, but you also get used to using and living in a damaged body, which can be a real blessing as you get older.

The first part of Climbing the Mountain, and for many people the hardest, is accepting what is. Just that: accepting what is, right now. There's something bold and great in rejecting what is and doing what's not possible, at least in stories. And there is power in rejecting the idea that what is can't be changed, because it always can be in some way. But without accepting what is, you can't make wise choices on how to change it.

I can't climb a mountain. We can't stop or cure SARS-CoV-2, at least right now. We can't just go back to life as we knew it. One of the things you have to accept with chronic illness is that what was normal is gone, and it's never coming back.

Let me say that again: *What was normal life for you, from birth to 2019, is gone. It's never coming back. Ever. What's in front is unknown, confusing, distressing, painful, and not what you know as normal, and all you can do is go forward to climb a mountain you can't climb.*

I have PTSD, which some clinicians classify as cPTSD, but for the sake of clarity I'll just call it fucking awful PTSD. Sometimes I can't get out of bed because my brain is torturing me. One of the things I have PTSD from is an episode of activities done to me as a child in a clinical setting that many years later the US government would call "enhanced interrogation techniques" when done to Iraqis. Also, I have lost many people I loved. I have been homeless, stalked, and beaten. I have been hounded and harassed. I come by my crazy honestly. I have nightmares most of the time, and mornings just aren't a thing I can do very often. When you're looking forward into an abyss and feeling weak, it's easy to write yourself, the world, or both,

off. But just accepting the limitations makes you stronger. I pick my weak times and distract myself. I don't try to be strong in the morning, when I'm waiting for the howling ghosts in my head to die down. But I've learned that they will.

This is the time I am preparing to climb the mountain. I eat a bit, do something nice, look after a plant, look at something pretty. NatGeo social media accounts are great. Food posts, nature, ceramic art, are all how I un-doomscroll in the morning, when I'm waiting for the screaming demons of last night to fade away.

For everyone, for you, now, it's the same. You need a method of un-doomscroll to let dread and sadness pass. Nature Instagram, Paleontology podcasts, Bird YouTube. It's all great.

Then, the climbing.

I am currently training to do a half-marathon. It's something I've been doing on and off for about four years. Obviously, as my doctor and physical therapist would tell you, I should not run a half marathon, and it's not my real goal. My real goal is a full marathon. 15 years ago when I got to my first physical therapist and was diagnosed with hypermobility, I couldn't walk. "I'd like to do martial arts and parkour one day," I told her. She gave me a look I can't fit in words and replied "Let's get you walking and see if we can get you back on a bike." We did both of those, but it was long and hard and painful and I cried a lot. I still cry a lot, which is ok and kind of my thing.

I have had to start and stop my marathon training more times than I care to count, because I don't care to count at all. I need every day to be new, because I can't control where it goes. I listen to my body, and my reality, and let that guide me. I didn't learn this with EDS originally, I learned it with my first chronic condition, childhood-onset IBS. I learned that sometimes I could do anything I wanted, and sometimes I couldn't leave the house

without throwing up and shitting myself. It's a lot better than it was, because I've learned it. I've accepted it. Not at once, but eventually after a lot of failure and pain and gross bodily fluids. I did eventually accept it, I listened to it, some have said I gave into it. "You let these things define you and limit you," I've been told by so many able-bodied people who I think just didn't like what I represented: Working with a thing you can't control, and can't beat, taking over your life.

There's a thing you can't control, and can't beat, taking over your life right now.

Working with that kind of thing means being mindful in the moment. Can I eat this? I ask myself, and if the answer is no, I don't. Sometimes that means missing out, and sometimes it means pissing off friends and being a damn inconvenience. "How is the bathroom situation where we're going?" "What kind of food is available, can I bring my own?" And the most dreaded and annoying: "I have to leave now. Right now."

For you now, it's the same. "Can I go there?"

"Is this way of eating out ok?"

"Do the government guidelines make sense?"

"How does this damn thing work and why does it keep changing?"

This is all the discomfort of climbing the mountain. You learn, you fiddle with it, and you let it change. You accept the change. You update how you live, knowing you'll update it again.

But there's the fun part too. Figuring out how long I can run/walk (called Jepping in the running world) when I'm training, and learning to be an excellent cook in the process of understanding my relationship with food. But neither of these make it all better. Not training or cooking, or therapy for Major Depressive Disorder or medications for PTSD gets me to the top of the mountain. It's like I keep

telling you, I can't climb to the top of the mountain. We can't just make this go away. We won't, and we can't. It just is.

But, I can climb. Almost every day, in some way or another. And when I fall, and I will inevitably fall, I will land higher on the mountain than I would have if I hadn't been climbing.

That's the trick. Right there.

Everyday you accept what is and work with it. Everyday you exercise your mind, body, and spirit. When you fall, and you will fall, you won't be as low on the mountain. And you can climb a little higher until the next fall.

I know it sounds sisyphian. But it's just impossible, not meaningless. It is, in fact, the most meaningful thing we can do. It's just the little bits of impossible things you do every day when there is no such thing as normal anymore.

Here is how you climb a mountain you can't climb: Accept what is, accept that it will change without notice. Learn how your life works, and what is possible. Figure out what you can do today, do it, and maybe if you're lucky, a tiny bit more. Love things, even when you hate them.

Be completely quiet sometimes. Cry. Look at pretty things. Try to rest.

Try again.

Accept what is. Learn. Move. Rest. Climb. Fall.

Accept what is.

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THE ABSURDITY OF THE PRESENT: STEALING VACCINE RESEARCH

Last week the breaking news in international political/media drama was the Russians hacking vaccine research in Europe and America, and on Tuesday the DOJ charged two Chinese hackers for hacking what Politico called “hundreds of millions of dollars worth of intellectual property and trade secrets” about vaccines for a deadly virus that is currently ravaging humanity.

Right now the world is working on a lot of vaccines, as well as treatments, for and research about the virus. We’re not just trying to end it, we’re trying to pull the virus, and ourselves, out of the fog of war that we’re in right now. Some of that research is ending up as trade secrets and intellectual property, the modern legal equivalent of what was once the secrecy of alchemists.

Russia and China are not rich countries the way the US is, though they are spending their blood and treasure on medical research and treatment just like the rest of us. Journalists and experts, particularly in cybersecurity, have blasted their efforts at hacking European and North American corporations as a kind of greed and cheating when it comes to the vaccines research process.

This all makes sense, from the perspective of the absurdity of the present moment. As Misha Glenny, a cybersecurity reporter who went on the BBC’s Newscast to blast the Russian effort to get medical research data said, “They’re just trying to get a vaccine on the cheap as far as I can see.”

Of course they are. *It’s a fucking vaccine for a*

disease that's causing a global pandemic.

Before we talk about how important it is to motivate biotech firm Moderna to work on a medicine that could save millions and put the planet to rights again (at least in this one way), let's talk about where we are right now.

As of this writing, there have been 15 million confirmed cases of Covid-19 and 600,000 deaths. It's clear there will be millions of deaths before the pandemic is over and millions more maimed from the inside by the disease. There is also the suffering of families and communities as folks bury some of their loved ones and support loved ones who will suffer with the long term effects of Covid-19 for years or decades. There is no global public health infrastructure or even much in the way of public health standards around the world.

Most people can't get good quality care at the best of times, even though we have the ability as a species to provide it several times over. It's normally bad and it's all much worse right now. Pediatric vaccination rates has fallen through the floor the world over, and it could be that millions more children die of preventable diseases than adults of Covid-19, just because Covid-19 has wrecked public health infrastructure so badly. And with economic downturns around the world, there's no money to pay for routine care which could cost more lives than the disease itself, again.

But there's reasons things are shut down. The thing about a respiratory virus like SARS-CoV-2 is that it's so aggressively transmissible that no one is safe until everyone is safe. Despite how much we all hate each other, if Russian and Chinese people can't vaccinate against both Covid-19 and Measles, we will all pay, in blood, and treasure, and the kind of grief that takes generations to mend.

Will those generations care about Moderna, GlaxoSmithKline, or Sanofi's Q4 2020?

No, they will not care. They will be as

mystified by what we're doing now, by what we're valuing now, as we are by the people in history who drank mercury trying to live forever, or attached leeches to George Washington until he died of blood loss, or any of the other stupid things we did that killed people or actively spread disease over the millennia.

We still live with the biological and cultural trauma of the Black Death, and our whole world order was configured by Smallpox. But still, we are ghouls and deatheaters, asking about intellectual property rights when someone is using hacking to try to save lives, for once.

Why is any of this, any of this at all, still a secret? Why isn't all the data and research being published and collated and poured through by the scientific community the moment the data is collected? Why are we still such ghouls when it comes to public health?

Why do children still die of Measles? Why do 10 million people fall ill with TB every year? Why, in fucking 2020, do people die of fucking Consumption?

We could stop all of this.

But we think health should be a profitable business, like it's making fancy handbags or golf clubs or something.

We don't think voting is something you should pay for, or that only the well enough off should be governed. We don't think streets should turn a profit, or that you should pay a monthly fee to maintain your human rights. We don't even think you should pay firefighters to save your house, especially since it's going to set the rest of your city on fire. But we think Chinese people or Russians or you should pay for a vaccine, even though if you can't, it's going to set the rest of your city and then the world on fire.

It's evil, it's madness, and the fact that it's just the way things are doesn't make it even the tiniest bit less absurd. And my colleagues in

the media would do well to point that out, and not just leave it to comment sections below their articles and Trevor Noah.

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THE FOG OF PROTEST

“We could wrap this up right now,” a police officer said over the scanner traffic that I was listening to as I walked along Mission Street in San Francisco. It was late on the night of June 3rd, and I had joined a protest group walking south on Valencia Street in San Francisco’s Mission District. The group was loud and a little rowdy, but not destructive. 30-something people trailed down to 20-something people – counts are always a little abstract in a group like this. We made a couple turns and walked back north, along Mission. “We could wrap this up...” the officer had said, and then the radio chatter moved smoothly onto the tactical part.

I was listening to the police scanner while walking with the group. When I do this, I often notice a disconnect between the police and the people on the ground, and sometimes between the police and the police on the ground. In this case, there was some panicky talk of the protestors building a barricade and setting it on fire after we turned onto Mission Street. I spun around to figure out what I’d missed. This didn’t seem like that kind of protest. Loud and

rude for sure, we were hours after curfew and this was the proud hood crowd more than the carefully-stenciled-signs-of-unity crowd. But, not violent, and not even vandalous. From looking over the street behind me, I couldn't see what the police were talking about. I did spot a newly-emptied trashcan on the sidewalk, but not in the street. No one was near it, much less ready to set fire to the mess. I'm not a fan of littering, but I've watched people build burning barricades across streets, mostly in France, and this wasn't that. This was someone kicking the trash over.

The reason for kettling and arresting this group given by an officer on the scanner was the curfew violation. It was late, and there were "about 25" of us, an officer said over the radio. It gave me a sense that the police were done and wanted to leave. "We could wrap this up right now..." and they laid out a plan to bring in officers on both sides, close in, and arrest everyone. I ducked onto a side street and circled around to different sides of the area now blocked off by police, and tried to take pictures of the arrests. (I did not get many, Julian Mark of Mission Local got the best images while being detained.)

These three things, curfew, the hour, and something about fire, became conflated later into a nebulous story about lighter fluid, when the cops were tired of following 25ish shouty people cussing at them, but not doing much else.

None of this was extraordinary. Whatever problems are inherent to a protest situation, they are deeply compounded by police forces, and, to a lesser degree, protestors, all being very sure about what the other side is doing and thinking without having much real knowledge or insight.

I'm willing to say after more than a decade of doing this work that those arrests took place because the police were tired and wanted to go back to the station or home. But to get there, they really had to work up some other reason,

whether they were aware of it or not. Police are mere humans, and subject to mere human follies. Protestors are too, but everyone knows that. Protestors look like a mess, even when they're not. The police are the ones who dress alike and larp¹ being Perfectly Coordinated Machines of Order, instead of tired humans who just need to pee, damnit. This underlying humanity is scant comfort for those being arrested, maybe even less so for the one protestor that night who was taken away in an ambulance. When you're supposed to be the perfect passionless embodiment of state violence, but you're just a petty and tired as anyone, you can end up being a right bastard without knowing how, or that, you got there. This is what lies behind the sentiment ACAB: All Cops Are Bastards. It's not a personal statement; it's just what happens when role play gets out of hand, and in our society, the role play is always out of hand.

The other human bias police often suffer from in these chaotic scenes is that vigilance for the extraordinary generally leads humans to perceiving extraordinary things, whether they are there or not. Back on June 1st, when San Francisco was just getting started on its larger and more raucous protests, I was tracking people around the SOMA District (South of Market, a major dividing street in the city) protesting police violence. Scanner chatter was high, and the largest group was at the base of the Salesforce Tower, the tallest (and newest) building on the San Francisco skyline. There was talk of crowbars and vandalism, and the back-and-forth was working itself up into urgency. I started to run towards the tower, a few blocks away, because I know where this kind of talk usually leads. But another officer got on the radio. He was on the scene, and things were fine. "This is a peaceful protest," he said repeatedly. "Don't antagonize them." He talked the chatter down.

I stopped running, which I appreciated, and made my way over towards the building more slowly, taking some pictures along the way. The chatter

became tense a few more times, but the original officer kept talking them down. "They're peaceful," he said repeatedly, and something like, "We have them," as in he and the other officers on the scene were able to handle it. Another officer said there was vandalism, and the original officer said "Very minor" and again, "Don't antagonize them!" He expressed the tension of someone who was talking his friends out of doing something stupid, which as it turns out, he was. In the end the Salesforce Tower was fine, and undoubtedly better than it would have been if the police had clashed with thousands of protestors at its front door. Cooler heads prevailed.

We who attend or cover protests have a saying which we often don't say aloud because of the accusation of bias: "It ain't a riot 'til the riot cops get there." This isn't universal, but it's more common than most people think, including the police. Even well-meaning cops are in a system where they're looking for something to do violence on, and looking for things hard enough makes humans tend to see what they're looking for. It's hard to understand what's happening in a mass of angry people, but it's violence much less often than you'd think.

I have seen actual riots that are riots from their very first moments, torrents of anger and grief that become a violent backlash on the physicality of society itself. But I've never seen a protest get much beyond turning over trashcans and spray painting things without police provocation. But that form of escalation is so baked-in to the dance of police and protestors now, I can't imagine police can see it the way I do. The police look for trouble, they invariably find (and create) it, therefore they know there's always trouble to look for.

Sometimes cooler heads prevail, sometimes there's proportional responses, or no responses, and the crowd moves on without much damage, or the people drift off and go home tired at the end of a long day of exercising their First

Amendment. On those occasions, protestors are often praised as peaceful, but not by me. I expect most protestors (except maybe the French) to be largely peaceful by default.

Instead, I've come to praise the cops more over the years, though it's damning with faint praise. I praise them for not crashing hard into a crowd because a kid got out a can of spray paint. I praise them for just letting people walk it out late into the night, until everyone gets to go home and sleep. I praise them for not jumping at shadows and petty slights, for not getting frightened in the fog of protest and turning violent. Good cop, don't hit anyone.

Honestly, the fog of war effect and confirmation bias are not just police problems, they're human problems. They are the mistakes Homo Sapiens always make, and everyone including me, and you, would likely have the same errors of perception if we were suddenly part of a police force. As long as the police and people are other from each other, human biases towards the other will defeat our unity and progress.

The most heartening thing I've seen is police who took a knee, Kaepernick-style, against police violence. But I don't believe police violence can be meaningfully curbed until the police are no longer a separate force from their communities, both sides lost in fogs of human bias.

1. Larp stands for live action role play, a style of gaming involving dressing up and playing roles in a group.

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ANTIFA AIN'T THAT

You've seen the scary pictures of Antifa. You've seen them in images from the Battle of Seattle, Occupy Wallstreet, Oakland FTP protests, outside the G20, and many more moments where a reporter nervously says to camera "Things are getting out of hand at this protest." They're the omnipresent Left Boogyman, ANTIFA! They break windows! They menace police! They probably do other violent and bad things!

Or maybe you've seen them, who knows. Protestors don't wear uniforms or make it clear who they carpooled with.

I have known many of society's ne'er-do-wells: a myriad of drug dealers, Venice crack den regulars, Portland gutter punks, DC tweakers, straight edge punks with more scars than skin, body modders, tattoo fiends, seattle protestors, Food Not bombs, hackers, phreakers, freegans, and yes, quite a few Antifa, as well as Black Bloc. Let's get Black Bloc out of the way first, since that's usually who gets mistaken for Antifa.

The initiation for Black Bloc is pretty complicated, follow along carefully. 1) You show up in all black with you face covered, then 2) You throwdown with the police line.

Congratulations, you're Black Bloc.

There's not a particular affiliation required, except that you don't want to be identified while fighting with the police, and you're there to throwdown. Plenty of Black Bloc attend protests just because they want to fight someone and fighting the police is safe in a weird way.

It's very exciting, you're probably going to lose, you might help someone, and the police aren't really going to get hurt. Also you're probably going to engage in some light property damage, especially if the police take too long to form a line for you to fight. For a few of the Black Bloc I've met, it's definitely the healthiest way they have to get out an excess of aggressive energy. Possibly they shouldn't be like that, but they tend to be in the demographic that doesn't have health insurance so I figure it's a reasonable substitute for mental healthcare, which this country isn't going to give them.

Some of the people who do participate in Black Bloc are part of a wider political affiliation coming out of post-war Germany called Antifaschistische Aktion, shorted to Antifa. They arose to oppose Fascists, the real, sign-me-up-for-the-one-party-state kind, rather than the nudge-nudge-what's-wrong-with-a-little-genocidal-nationalism kind we have now. Antifa is one of the myriad of responses to post-war politics that made it not cool to call yourself a fascist by the end of the 20th century.

It's worthwhile to note that most Antifa don't do Black Bloc. Black Bloc is the kind of thing most people age out of pretty quickly and their knees age out faster. But most people don't age out of not liking Fascism, because Fascism is awful.

Antifa tends to be leftist, though it's not very pure about it. Some of the Democratic Socialists of America people who roll with Antifa would look downright right-wing in much of Europe, because of their willingness to compromise in the American political context on things that would not be OK in most of Europe, like expensive education, universal healthcare, and access to guns.

I've chatted with Stalinist Tankies who are Antifa, and registered Democrats. The thing that brought them together was being vaguely left, vaguely anti-capitalist, and strongly disliking

Fascism. The other thing they all had in common is their inability to organize anything larger than local groups. Most of the Antifa groups I've known met up in, and to some degree lived in, squats. In Europe, those were actual squats. In America, it's usually some crap but large apartment the one with rich parents or a tech job was renting. Honestly, most of them are trying to be good people, and all of them are dealing with difficult personal lives, in my experience. Which – no hate. Having that in common is usually how I met them.

Antifa is the perfect foil for someone like Trump. They're small, but not too small. They're amorphous and misunderstood. They like to take up space and be loud. They are not actually dangerous at any meaningful scale. They do punch above their weight a lot of the time, but they're not good at translating that into expanding their base. They're not politically powerful, and no one speaks up for them. In fact they have so little power that they can't defend themselves from organized rightwing slander. Some of them are misguided, some of them are incredibly well-read, quite a few of them end up as academics or working in NGOs. This makes sense, they don't want to be part of the business world they see exploiting the global poor, but they do want to grow up and participate in society in meaningful ways.

It's likely that Trump constructing them as The Enemy is the biggest boost American Antifa have had in years, and good on them. But make no mistake, Trump's slander is meaningless drivel and Antifa are mostly fine, if bad at doing dishes. I mean, seriously, dudes. Do the damn dishes.

Bad roommates often, fucked up kids sometimes, overly abstract academics, and window breakers, sure. But terrorists? Nah, that ain't it.

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