CULTURE AND POLITICS

Liberties

~~Accept~~ the truth from
whoever utters it.

MAIMONIDES

~~***Advanced reader copy.***~~
~~***Not for resale***~~
~~***or distribution.***~~

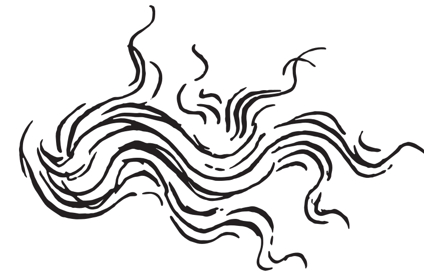

TABLE OF CONTENTS

6 **CYNTHIA OZICK**
Like Peeling Off a Glove

16 **LINDA KINSTLER**
The Olive Branch of Oblivion

39 **MICHAEL IGNATIEFF**
A History of My Privileges

57 **TIMOTHY NOAH**
A Prayer for the Administrative State

79 **SOHRAB AHMARI**
The Poverty of Catholic Intellectual Life

103 **CAMILLE RALPHS**
Wessobrunn Prayer
Job 3:11–26
Job 42:10–17
after Margaret Cropper
after St Francis of Assisi

111 **YAROSLAV HRYTSAK**
The War in Ukraine and The Fate of Liberal Nationalism

137 **DAVID RIEFF**
Liberland: Populism, Peronism, and Madness in Argentina

169 **LEN GUTKIN**
Curricular Trauma

189 **ELLIOT ACKERMAN**
Mercenaries

208 **ALFRED BRENDEL**
Observations on Mozart

224 **ARASH AZIZI**
Persecution and The Art of Filmmaking

244 **MICHAEL KIMMAGE**
The Bad and The Beautiful

272 **ALICE GRIBBIN**
Readymade
Wherever, Whenever
The Shallows
Portable Fire
Under Instinct

280 **HELEN VENDLER**
The Red Business: PTSD and The Poet

300 **CELESTE MARCUS**
Reason, Treason, and Palestine

322 **LEON WIESELTIER**
Giving and Forgiving

SPRING 2024
VOLUME 4, NUMBER 3

EDITOR
LEON WIESELTIER

MANAGING EDITOR
CELESTE MARCUS

PUBLISHER
BILL REICHBLUM

JOURNAL DESIGN
WILLIAM VAN RODEN

WEB DESIGN
BRICK FACTORY

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
DYLAN PARTNER

Liberties is a publication of the Liberties Journal Foundation, a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) organization based in Washington, D.C. devoted to educating the general public about the history, current trends, and possibilities of culture and politics. The Foundation seeks to inform today's cultural and political leaders, deepen the understanding of citizens, and inspire the next generation to participate in the democratic process and public service.

FOUNDATION BOARD
ALFRED H. MOSES, *Chair*
PETER BASS
BILL REICHBLUM

Engage
To learn more please go to libertiesjournal.com

Subscribe
To subscribe or with any questions about your subscription, please go to libertiesjournal.com

ISBN 979-8-9854302-4-0
ISSN 2692-3904

EDITORIAL OFFICES
1101 30th Street NW, Suite 310
Washington, DC 20007

DIGITAL
@READLIBERTIES
LIBERTIESJOURNAL.COM

Liberties

MICHAEL IGNATIEFF

The History of My Privileges

Is it possible to be a historian of your own life? To see yourself as a figure in the crowd, as a member of a generation who shared the same slice of time? We cannot help thinking of our own lives as uniquely our own, but if we look more closely, we begin to see how much we shared with strangers of our own age and situation. If we could forget for a moment what was singular about our lives and concentrate instead on what we experienced with everyone else, would it be possible to see ourselves in a new light, less self-dramatizing but possibly more truthful? What happens when I stop using "I" and start using "we'?

What "we" are we talking about here? Which "we" is my "we"?

An old joke comes to mind. The Lone Ranger and Tonto are surrounded by Indian warriors. The situation looks bad. The Lone Ranger turns to Tonto. "What do we do now?" Tonto replies, "What do you mean 'we', white man?" The "we" to which I refer and belong were the white middle-class of my generation, born between 1945 and 1960, and my theme is what we made of our privileges, and once we understand them as such, what we did to defend them.

We were, for a time, really something. We were the biggest birth cohort in history. We made up more than half the population and we held all the power, grabbed as much of the wealth as we could, wrote the novels that people read, made the movies that people talked about, decided the political fate of peoples. Now it's all nearly over. Every year more of us vanish. We have shrunk down to a quarter of the total population, and power is slipping from our hands, though two of us, both presidents, are squaring up for a final battle. It will be a last hurrah for them, but for us as well, a symbol of how ruthlessly we clung on, even when our time was up.

The oldest among us were born when Harry Truman was in the White House, Charles de Gaulle in the Elysee Palace, Konrad Adenauer in the Chancery in Bonn, George VI on the throne at Buckingham Palace, and Joseph Stalin in the Kremlin. We were the happy issue of a tidal wave of love and lust, hopes and dreams that swept over a ruined world after a decade of depression and war. My parents, both born during the First World War, met in London during the Second, two Canadians who had war work there, my father at the Canadian High Commission, my mother in British military intelligence. They had gone through the Blitz and the V-2's, fallen for other people, and at war's end decided to return to Canada and get married.

I once made the mistake of saying to my mother that I envied their wartime experience. It had tragedy in it, and tragedy, to a child, seems glamorous. She cut me short. It wasn't like that, she said gently, I hadn't understood. She knew what desolation and loss felt like, and she wanted to spare my brother and me as much as she could. I see now that her reticence was characteristic of a whole generation — for example, the rubble women in Berlin, Hamburg, Dresden, and other German cities, who cleared debris away with their bare hands and never talked about being raped by Russian soldiers; the survivors of the death camps who concealed the tattoo on their forearm; the women who went to the Gare de l'Est in Paris in the summer of 1945, waiting, often in vain, to greet emaciated lovers and husbands returning from deportation. My mother was one of those who waited for a man who never made it back. He was a silent presence in the house throughout my childhood, the man she would have married had he not died in Buchenwald. She kept her sorrow to herself and found someone else — my father — and they brought new life into the world.

I am the child of their hope, and I have carried their hopefulness with me all my life. Beside hope, they also gave us the houses and apartments we took our first steps in, the schools and universities that educated us, the highway systems we drive to this day, the international system — UN, NATO, and nuclear weapons — that still keeps us out of another world war, the mass air travel that shrank the world, the moon landing that made us dream of life beyond our planet, and the government investments in computing in the 1940s and 1950s that eventually led in the 1990s, to the laptop, the internet, and the digital equivalent of the Library of Alexandria on our phones. The digital pioneers of my generation — Jobs, Wozniak, Gates, Ellison, Berners-Lee, and so on — built

our digital world on the public investments made by the previous generation.

Thanks to the hospitals and the clinics that our parents built, the medical breakthroughs that converted mortal illnesses into manageable conditions, together with our fastidious diets and cult of exercise, our not smoking or drinking the way they did, we will live longer than any generation so far. I take pills that did not exist when my father was alive and would have kept him going longer if they had. Medicine may be the last place where we still truly believe in progress. Ninety, so our fitness coaches promise us, will be the new seventy. Fine and good, but that leaves me wondering, what will it be like to go on and on and on?

Our time began with the light of a thousand suns over Alamogordo, New Mexico in July 1945. It is drawing to a close in an era so violent and chaotic that our predictions about the shape of the future seem meaningless. But it would be a loss of nerve to be alarmed about this now. We have lived with disruptive change so long that for us it has become a banality.

My first summer job was in a newsroom echoing to the sound of typewriters and wire-service machines clattering away at full tilt, next door to a press room where the lead type flowed off the compositor's machine down a chute to the typesetting room, where the hands of the typesetters who put the pages together were black with carbon, grease, and ink. Sitting now in a clean room at home, all these decades later, staring into the pale light of a computer screen, it is easy to feel cranky about how much has changed.

But what did not change in our time, what remained stubbornly the same, may be just as important as what did. *The New York Times* recently reported that in America our age-group, now feeling the first intimations of mortality, is in the process of transferring trillions of dollars of real estate, stocks, bonds, beach houses, furniture, pictures, jewels, you name it, to our children and grandchildren — "the greatest wealth transfer in history", the paper called it. We are drafting wills to transfer the bourgeois stability that we enjoyed to the next generation. This is a theme as old as the novels of Thackeray and Balzac. The fact that we can transfer such a staggering sum — eighty-four trillion dollars! — tells us that the real history of our generation may be the story of our property. It is the deep unseen continuity of our lives.

Our cardinal privilege was our wealth, and our tenacious defense of it may be the true story of white people in my generation. I say tenacious because it would be facile to assume that it was effortless or universal. From our childhood into our early twenties, we were wafted along by the greatest economic boom in the history of the world. We grew up, as Thomas Piketty has shown, in a period when income disparities, due to the Depression and wartime taxation, were sharply compressed. We had blithe, unguarded childhoods that we find hard to explain to our children: suburban afternoons when we ran in and out of our friend's houses, and all the houses felt the same, and nobody locked their doors. When we hit adulthood, we thought we had it made, and then suddenly the climb became steeper. The post-war boom ground to a halt with the oil shock in the early 1970s, leaving us struggling against a backdrop of rising inflation and stagnant real wages. Only a small number of us — Bezos, Gates, and the others — did astonishingly well from the new technologies just then coming on stream.

Many of the rest of us who didn't become billionaires dug ourselves into salaried professions: law, medicine, journalism, media, academe, and government. We invested in real estate.

Those houses and apartments that we bought when we were starting out ended up delivering impressive returns. The modest three-bedroom house that my parents bought in a leafy street in Toronto in the 1980s, which my brother and I sold in the early 2000s, had multiplied in value by a factor of three. He lived on the proceeds until he died, and what's left will go to my children.

Real estate helped us keep up appearances, but so, strangely enough, did feminism. When women flooded into the labor market, they helped their families to ride out the great stagflation that set in during the 1970s. Thanks to them, there were now two incomes flowing into our households. We also had fewer children than our parents and we had them later. Birth control and feminism together with hard work kept us afloat. None of this was easy. Tears were shed. Our marriages collapsed more frequently than our parents' marriages, and so we had to invent a whole new set of arrangements — single parenting, gay families, partnering and cohabitating without marriage — whose effect on our happiness may have been ambiguous, but most of the time helped us to maintain a middle-class standard of living.

Of course, there was a darker side — failure, debt, spousal abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, and suicide. The great novelists of our era — Updike, Didion, Ford, Bellow, and Cheever— all made art out of our episodes of disarray and disillusion. What was distinctive was how we understood our own failure. When we were young, in the 1960s, many of us drew up a bill of indictment against "the system," though most of us were its beneficiaries. As we got older, we let go of abstract and ideological excuses. Those who failed, who fell off the ladder and slid downwards, took the blame for it, while those of us lucky enough to be successful thought we had earned it.

So, as our great novelists understood, the true history of our generation can be told as the history of our property, our self-congratulation at its acquisition, our self-castigation when we lost it, the family saga that played out in all our dwellings, from urban walk-ups to suburban ranch houses, the cars in our driveways, the tchotchkes that we lined up on our shelves and the pictures that we hung on our walls, the luxuriant variety of erotic lives that we lived inside those dwellings, and the wealth that we hope to transmit to our children.

I am aware that such an account of my generation leaves out a great deal, outrageously so. There was a lot more history between 1945 and now, but for the rest of it — the epochal decolonization of Africa and Asia, the formation of new states, the bloody battles for self-determination, the collapse of the European empires, the astonishing rise of China — the true imperial privilege of those lucky enough to be born in North America and Western Europe was that we could remain spectators of the whole grand and violent spectacle. Out there in the big wide world, the storm of History was swirling up the dust, raising and dashing human hopes, sweeping away borders, toppling tyrants, installing new ones, and destroying millions of innocents, but none of it touched us. We must not confuse ourselves with the people whose misfortune provoked our sympathies. For us, history was a spectator sport we could watch on the nightly news and later on our smartphones. The history out there gave us plenty of opportunity to have opinions, offer analyses, sell our deep thoughts for a living, but none of it threatened us or absolutely forced us to commit or make a stand. For we were safe.

Safety made some of us restless and we longed to get closer to the action. I was one of those who ventured out to witness History, in the Balkans, in Afghanistan, in Darfur. We made films, wrote articles and books, sought to rouse consciences back home and change policies in world capitals. We prided ourselves on getting close to the action. Hadn't Robert Capa, the great photographer who was killed when he stepped on a landmine in Vietnam, famously remarked that if your photographs aren't any good, it's because you aren't close enough? So we got close. We even got ourselves shot at.

In the 1990s, I went out and made six films for the BBC about the new nationalism then redrawing the maps of the world in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. I can report that nothing was more exciting. A Serb paramilitary, whom I had interviewed in the ruins of Vukovar in eastern Croatia in February 1992, took a random couple of shots at the crew van as we were driving away, and later another group of drunken combatants grabbed the keys out of the van and brought us to a juddering halt and an uneasy hour of interrogation, broken up by the arrival of UN soldiers well enough armed to brook no argument. I had other adventures in Rwanda and Afghanistan, but the Balkans were as close as I ever came to experiencing History as the vast majority of human beings experience it — vulnerably. These episodes of peril were brief. We all had round trip tickets out of the danger zone. If History got too close for comfort, we could climb into our Toyota Land Cruisers and get the hell out. I can't feel guilty about my impunity. It was built into the nature of our generation's relation to History.

Anybody who ventured out into the zones of danger in the 1990s knew there was something wrong with Francis Fukuyama's fairy tale that history had ended in the final victory of liberal democracy. It certainly didn't look that way in Srebrenica or Sarajevo. History was not over. It never stopped. *It never does.* In fact, it took us to the edge of the abyss several times: in the Cuban missile crisis; when King and the Kennedys were shot; in those early hours after September 11; and most recently during the insurrection of January 6, 2021, when wild violence put the American republic in danger. Those were moments when we experienced History as vertigo.

The rest of the time, we thought we were safe inside "the liberal rules-based international order." After 1989, you could believe that we were building such a thing: with human rights NGO's, international criminal tribunals, and transitions to democracies in so many places, South Africa most hopefully of all. Actually, in most of the world, there were precious few rules and little order, but this didn't stop those of us in the liberal democratic West from believing that we could spread the impunity that we enjoyed to others. We were invested in this supposed order, enforced by American power, because it had granted us a lifetime's dispensation from history's cruelty and chaos, and because it was morally and politically more attractive than the alternatives. Now my generation beholds the collapse of this illusion, and we entertain a guilty thought: it will be good to be gone.

Smoke haze from forest fires in Canada is drifting over our cities. Whole regions of the world — the olive groves of southern Spain, the American southwest, the Australian outback, the Sahel regions of Africa — are becoming too hot to sustain life. The coral reefs of Australia, once an underwater wonder of color, are now dead grey. There is a floating mass of plastic bottles out in the Pacific as big as the wide Sargasso Sea. My generation cannot do much about this anymore, but we

know that we owe the wealth that we are handing over to our children to high life in the high noon of fossil fuels.

At least, we like to say, our generation woke up before it was too late. We read *Silent Spring* and banned DDT. We created Earth Day in 1970 and took as our talisman that incredible photo of the green-blue earth, taken by the astronaut William Anders floating in space. We discovered the hole in the ozone layer and passed the Montreal protocol that banned the chemicals causing it. We began the recycling industry and passed legislation that reduced pollution from our stacks and tailpipes; we pioneered green energy and new battery technologies. Our generation changed the vocabulary of politics and mainstreamed the environment as a political concern. Concepts such as the ecosphere and the greenhouse gas effect were unknown when we were our kids' age. Almost the entirety of modern climate science came into being on our watch. With knowledge came some action, including those vast lumbering UN climate conferences.

Look, we say hopefully, the energy transition is underway. Look at all those windmills, those solar farms. Look at all the electric cars. They're something, aren't they? But we are like defendants entering a plea in mitigation. The climate crisis is more than a reproach to our generation's history of property and consumption. It is also an accusation directed at our penchant for radical virtue-signaling followed by nothing more than timid incrementalism. The environmental activists sticking themselves to the roads to stop traffic and smearing art treasures with ketchup are as tired of our excuses as we are of their gestural politics.

Our children blame us for the damaged world that we will leave them, and they reproach us for the privileges that they will inherit. My daughter tells me that in her twelve years of working life as a theater producer in London, she has interviewed for jobs so many times she has lost count. In fifty years of a working life, I interviewed only a handful of times. The competitive slog that her generation takes for granted is foreign to me. The entitlement, dumb luck, and patronage I took for granted is a world away from the grind that her cohort accepts as normal. She said to me recently: you left us your expectations, but not your opportunities.

Like many of her generation, she grew up between parents who split when she was little. Like other fathers of my generation, I believed that divorce was a choice between harms: either stay in a marriage that had become hollow and loveless or find happiness in new love and try, as best you could, to share it with the kids. My children even say that it was for the best, but I cannot forget their frightened and tearful faces when I told them I was leaving. These personal matters that should otherwise stay private belong in the history of a generation that experienced the sexual revolution of the 1960s and took from that episode a good deal of self-justifying rhetoric about the need to be authentic, to follow your true feelings, and above all to be free.

Our children are reckoning with us, just as we reckoned with our parents. Back then, we demanded that our parents explain how they had allowed the military-industrial complex to drag us into Vietnam. We marched against the war because we thought it betrayed American ideals, and even a Canadian felt that those ideals were his, too. Those further to the left ridiculed our innocence. Didn't we understand that "Amerika" never had any ideals to lose? There were times, especially after the shooting of students at Kent State, when I almost agreed with them.

I was a graduate student at Harvard when we bussed down to Washington in January 1973 for a demonstration against

Nixon's second inauguration. It was a huge demonstration and it changed nothing. Afterwards some of us took shelter at the Lincoln Monument. Righteous anger collapsed into tired disillusion. I can still remember the hopelessness that we felt as we sat at Lincoln's feet. Two and half years later, though, the helicopters were lifting the last stragglers off the roof of the American embassy in Saigon, so we did achieve something.

Vietnam veterans came home damaged in soul and body, while radicals I marched with ended up with good jobs in the Ivy League. Does that make Vietnam the moment when the empire began to crack apart? The idea that Vietnam began the end of "the American century" remains a narrative that our generation uses to understand our place in history. Behold what we accomplished! It is a convention of sage commentary to this day, but really, who knows?

The colossus still bestrides the world. The leading digital technologies of our time are still owned by Americans; Silicon Valley retains its commanding position on the frontiers of innovation. The United States spends eight hundred-billion dollars on defense, two and half times its European allies and China. America's allies still will not take a significant step on their own until they have cleared it with Washington. Nobody out there loves America the way they did in the heyday of Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Walt Disney, and Elvis Presley; the universal domination of American popular music, mainly in the form of rap and hip hop, no longer makes America many friends. Yet the United States still has the power to attract allies and to deter enemies. It is no longer the world's sole hegemon, and it cannot get its way the way it used to, but that may be no bad thing. The stories of American decline give us the illusion that we know which way time will unfold, and encourage us in a certain acquiescence. Fatalism is relaxing. The truth is that we have no idea at all. The truth is that we still have choices to make.

American hegemony endures, but the domestic crisis of race, class, gender, and region that first came to a head when we were in our twenties polarizes our politics to this day. As the 1960s turned into the 1970s, there were times, in the States but in Europe too, when the left hoped that revolution was imminent and the right dug in to defend its vanishing verities. The assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, followed by the police violence at the Chicago Democratic Convention in August 1968, led some of my generation — Kathy Boudin, Bernadine Dohrn, Bill Ayers, the names may not mean much anymore — to transition from liberal civil rights and anti-Vietnam protest to full-time revolutionary politics. What followed was a downward spiral of bombings, armed robberies, shoot-outs that killed policemen, and long jail-time for the perpetrators. Decades later I met Bernadine Dohrn at Northwestern Law School, still radical, still trailing behind her the lurid allure of a revolutionary past, but now an elegant law professor. Her itinerary, from revolution to tenure, was a journey taken by many, and not just in America. In Germany, the generation that confronted their parents about their Nazi past spawned a revolutionary cadre — the Baader-Meinhof gang and the Red Army Faction— who ended dead or in jail or in academe. In Italy, my generation's confrontation with their parents ended with "the decade of lead," bombings, political assassination, jail, and once again, post-revolutionary life in academe.

Those of us who lived through these violent times got ourselves a job and a family and settled down to bourgeois life, and now we resemble the characters at the end of Flaubert's *Sentimental Education,* wondering what a failed revolution did

to us. For some, the 1960s gave us the values that we espouse to this day, while for others it was the moment when America lost its way. We are still arguing, but both sides carry on the shouting match within secure professions and full-time jobs. Nobody, at least until the Proud Boys came around, wants an upheaval anymore. What changed us, fundamentally, is that in the 1970s we scared ourselves.

And so we settled for stability instead of revolution, though we should give ourselves some credit for ending an unjustified war and wrenching the political system out of the collusive consensus of the 1950s. My generation of liberal whites also likes to take credit for civil rights, but the truth is that most of us watched the drama on television, while black people did most of the fighting and the dying. All the same, we take pride that in our time, in 1965, America took a long-resisted step towards becoming a democracy for all Americans. Our pride is vicarious, and that may mean it isn't quite sincere. Our other mistake was in taking yes for an answer too soon. We believed that the civil rights revolution in our time was the end of the story of racial justice in America, when in fact it was just the beginning.

The reckoning with race became the leitmotiv of the rest of our lives. I grew up in a Toronto that was overwhelmingly white. What we thought of as diversity were neighborhoods inhabited by Portuguese, Italian, Greek, or Ukrainian immigrants. The demographers now say that, if I live long enough, I will soon be in a minority in my city of birth. Fine by me, but it's made me realize that I never grasped how much of my privilege depended on my race. My teenage friends and I never thought of ourselves as white, since whiteness was all we knew. Now, fifty years later, we are hyper-sensitively aware of our whiteness, but we still live in a mostly white world. At the same time, the authority of that world has been placed in question as never before, defended as a last redoubt of security by frightened conservatives, and apologized for, without end, by liberals and progressives.

Some white people, faced with these challenges to our authority, are apt to speak up for empathy, to claim that race is not the limit of our capacity for solidarity, while other white people say to hell with empathy and vote instead to make America great again. Liberals are correct to insist that racial identity must not be a prison, but claims to empathy are also a way to hold on to our privileges while pretending we can still understand lives that race has made different from our own. While I do not regard the color of my skin as the limit of my world, or as the most significant of my traits, I can see why some other people might.

Nor has whiteness been my only privilege, or even the source of all the others. An inventory of my advantages, some earned, most inherited, would include being male, heterosexual, educated, and well housed, pensioned and provided for, with a wife who cares about me, children who still want to see me, parents who loved me and left me in a secure position. I am the citizen of a prosperous and stable country, I am a native speaker of the lingua franca of the world, and I am in good health.

I used to think that these facts made me special. Privileges do that to you. Now I see how much of my privilege was shared with those of my class and my race. I am not so special after all. I also see now that, while privileges conferred advantages, some of them unjust, they also came with liabilities. They blinded me to other people's experience, to the facts of their shame and suffering. My generation's privileges also make it difficult for me to see where History may be moving.

My frame of relevant experience omits most of the planet outside the North Atlantic at precisely the moment when History may be moving its capital to East Asia forever, leaving behind a culture, in Europe where I live, of museums, recrimination, and decline. There is plenty here that I cherish, but I cannot escape a feeling of twilight, and I wonder whether the great caravan may be moving on, beyond my sight, into the distance.

Everybody comes to self-consciousness too late. This new awareness of privilege, however late it may be, is perhaps the most important of all the changes that History has worked upon my generation. What we took for granted, as ours by inheritance or by right, is now a set of circumstances that we must understand, apologize for, or defend. And defend it we do. We moralized our institutions—universities, hospitals, law firms—as meritocracies, when they were too often only reserves for people like us. When challenged, we opened up our professions to make them more diverse and inclusive, and this makes us feel better about our privileges, because we extended them to others. "Inclusion" is fine, as long as it is not an alibi for all the exclusions that remain.

As white persons like me edge reluctantly into retirement, our privileges remain intact. Our portion of that money — the eighty-four trillion dollars — that we are going to hand over to the next generation tells us that we have preserved the privilege that matters most of all: transmitting power to our kith and kin. Closing time is nigh and raging against the dying of the light is a waste of time. What matters now is a graceful exit combined with prudent estate planning.

Not all privileges are captured by the categories of wealth, race, class, or citizenship. I have been saving the most important of my privileges for last.

This one is hidden deep in my earliest memory. I am three years old, in shorts and a T-shirt, on P Street in Georgetown, in Washington, D.C. P Street was where my parents rented a house when my father worked as a young diplomat at the Canadian Embassy. It is a spring day, with magnolias in bloom, bright sunshine, and a breeze causing the new leaves to flutter. I walk up a brick sidewalk towards a white house set back from the street and shaded by trees. I walk through the open door into the house, with my mother at my side. We are standing just inside the door, looking out across a vast room, or so it seems from a child's-eye view, with high ceilings, white walls, and another door open on the other side to a shaded garden.

The large light-filled room is empty. I don't know why we are here, but now I think it was because my mother was pregnant with my little brother, and she was looking the place over as a possible rental for a family about to grow from three to four. We stand for an instant in silence, surveying the scene. Suddenly the front door slams violently behind us. Before our astonished eyes, the whole ceiling collapses onto the floor, in a cloud of dust and plaster. I look up, the raw woodwork slats that held the ceiling plaster are all exposed, like the ribs on the carcass of some decayed animal. The dust settles. We stand there amazed, picking debris out of our hair.

I don't know what happened next, except that we didn't rent the house.

It is a good place to end, on a Washington street in 1950, at the height of the Korean War, in the middle of Senator McCarthy's persecutions, that bullying populism which is never absent from democracy for long and which had all

my father's and mother's American friends indignant, but also afraid of Senate hearings, loss of security clearances, and dismissal. I knew nothing of this context, of course. This memory, if it is one at all—it could be a story I was told later — is about a child's first encounter with disaster. I begin in safety, walking up a brick path, in dappled sunlight. I open a door and the roof falls in. Disaster strikes, but I am safe.

At the very center of this memory is this certainty: I am holding my mother's hand. I can feel its warmth this very minute. Nothing can harm me. I am secure. I am immune. I have clung to this privilege ever since. It makes me a spectator to the sorrows that happen to others. Of all my privileges, in a century where history has inflicted so much fear, terror, and loss on so many fellow human beings, this sense of immunity, conferred by the love of my parents, her hand in mine, is the privilege which, in order to understand what happens to others, I had to work hardest to overcome.

But overcome it I did. I was well into a fine middle age before life itself snapped me awake. When, thirty-seven years after that scene in Washington, I brought my infant son to meet my mother, in a country place that she had loved, and she turned to me and whispered, who is this child? recognizing neither me nor her first grandchild, nor where she was, I understood then, in that moment, as one must, that all the privileges I enjoyed, including a mother's unstinting love, cannot protect any of us from what life — cruel and beautiful life — has in store, when the light begins to fade on the road ahead.

CONTRIBUTORS

CYNTHIA OZICK is the author most recently of *Antiquities and Other Stories*.

LINDA KINSTLER is the author of *Come to This Court and Cry: How The Holocaust Ends*. She was recently elected to the Society of Fellows at Harvard University.

MICHAEL IGNATIEFF is, the author, among many books, of *On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times*.

TIMOTHY NOAH writes a column for *The New Republic* and is the author of *The Great Divergence: America's Growing Inequality Criss and What We Can Do About It*.

SOHRAB AHMARI is a founding editor of *Compact* and the author most recently of *Tyranny, Inc: How Private Power Crushed American Liberty — and What to do About It*.

CAMILLE RALPHS is the poetry editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*.

YAROSLAV HRYTSAK is a professor of history at Ukrainian Catholic University and the author of *Ukraine: The Forging of a Nation*.

DAVID RIEFF's *Desire and Fate*, a collection of his essays, will appear this year.

LEN GUTKIN is an editor at the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

ELLIOT ACKERMAN is the author of *Halcyon*, a novel, and *2054*, written with Admiral James Stavridis, which will be published this year.

ALFRED BRENDEL, the pianist, is the author most recently of *The Lady from Arezzo: My Musical Life and Other Matters*.

ARASH AZIZI's book *What Iranians Want: Women, Life, Freedom* has recently appeared.

MICHAEL KIMMAGE's new book, *Collision: The Origins of the War in Ukraine and The New Global Instability*, has just been published.

ALICE GRIBBIN is completing her first book of poems.

HELEN VENDLER is the A. Kingsley Porter University Professor Emerita at Harvard University.

CELESTE MARCUS is the managing editor of *Liberties*.

LEON WIESELTIER is the editor of *Liberties*.

Liberties — A Journal of Culture and Politics is available by annual subscription and by individual purchase from bookstores and online booksellers.

Annual subscriptions provide a discount from the individual cover price and include complete digital access to current and previous issues along with the printed version. Subscriptions can be ordered from libertiesjournal.com. Professional discounts for active military; faculty, students, and education administrators; government employees; those working in the not-for-profit sector. Gift subscriptions are also available at libertiesjournal.com.

Liberties Journal supports copyright. Copyright is a necessary engine of creativity, free speech, and culture. In honoring copyrights and buying this book, you support our writers and poets and allow us to continue to publish in print and online.

As a matter of principle, *Liberties Journal* does not accept advertising or other funding sources that might influence our independence.

We look to our readers and those individuals and institutions that believe in our mission for contributions — large and small — to support this not-for-profit publication.

If you are interested in making a donation to *Liberties*, please contact Bill Reichblum, publisher, by email at bill@libertiesjournal.com or by phone: 202-891-7159.

Liberties — A Journal of Culture and Politics is distributed to booksellers in the United States by Publishers Group West; in Canada by Publishers Group Canada; and internationally by Ingram Publisher Services International.

LIBERTIES, LIBERTIES: A JOURNAL OF CULTURE AND POLITICS, is published quarterly in Fall, Winter, Spring, and Summer by Liberties Journal Foundation.

ISBN ISBN 979-8-9854302-4-0
ISSN 2692-3904

Copyright 2024 by Liberties Journal Foundation

No part of this journal may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior written consent of Liberties Journal Foundation.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

LIBERTIES, LIBERTIES: A JOURNAL OF CULTURE AND POLITICS and our Logo are trademarks and service marks of Liberties Journal Foundation.

Printed in Canada.

The insignia that appears throughout *Liberties* is derived from details in Botticelli's drawings for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which were executed between 1480 and 1495.

There is no white world; there is no white ethic — any more than there is a white intelligence. There are from one end of the world to the other men who are searching.

FRANTZ FANON

Liberties Journal Foundation
Copyright 2024
ISBN 979-8-9854302-4-0
ISSN 2692-3904
libertiesjournal.com