HE APPEARS

Trump is wearing the red baseball cap, or not. From this distance, he is strangely handsome, well proportioned, puts you in mind of a sea captain: Alan Hale from “Gilligan’s Island,” say, had Hale been slimmer, richer, more self-confident. We are afforded a side view of a head of silver-yellow hair and a hawklike orange-red face, the cheeks of which, if stared at steadily enough, will seem, through some optical illusion, to glow orange-redder at moments when the crowd is especially pleased. If you’ve ever, watching “The Apprentice,” entertained fantasies of how you might fare in the boardroom (the Donlad, recognizing your excellent qualities with his professional businessman acumen, does not fire you but, on the contrary, pulls you aside to assign you some important non-TV, real-world mission), you may, for a brief, embarrassing instant, as he scans the crowd, expect him to recognize you.

He is blessing us here in San Jose, California, with his celebrity, promising never to disappoint us, letting us in on the latest bit of inside—baseball campaign strategy: “Lyin’ Ted” is no longer to be Lyin’ Ted; henceforth he will be just “Ted.” Hillary, however, shall be “Lyin’ Crooked.” And, by the way, Hillary has to go to jail. The statute of limitations is five years, and if he gets elected in November, well . . . The crowd sends forth a coarse blood roar. “She’s guilty as hell,” he snarls.

He growls, rants, shouts, digresses, careers from sttick nugget to sttick nugget, rhapsodizes over past landslides, name-drops Ivanka, Melania, Mike Tyson, Newt Gingrich, Bobby Knight, Bill O’Reilly. His right shoulder thrusts out as he makes the pinched-finger mudra with downswinging arm. His trademark double-eye squint evokes that group of beanie-hatted street-tough Munchkin kids; you expect him to kick gruffly at an imaginary stone. In person, his autocratic streak is presentationally complicated by a Ralph Kramdenesque vulnerability. He’s a man who has just dropped a can opener into his wife’s freshly baked pie. He’s not about to start grovelling about it, and yet he’s sorry—but, come on, it was an accident. He’s sorry, he’s sorry, O.K., but do you expect him to say it? He’s a good guy. Anyway, he didn’t do it.

Once, Jack Benny, whose character was known for frugalism and selfishness, got a huge laugh by glancing down at the baseball he was supposed to be first-pitching, pocketing it, and walking off the field. Trump, similarly, knows how well we know him from TV. He is who he is. So sue me, O.K.? I probably shouldn’t say this, but oops—just did. (Hillary’s attack ads: “So false. Ah, some of them aren’t that false, actually.”) It’s oddly riveting, watching someone take such pleasure in going so much farther out on thin ice than anyone else as famous would dare to go. His crowds are ever hopeful for the next thrilling rude swerve. “There could be no politics which gave warmth to one’s body until the country had recovered its imagination, its pioneer lust for the unexpected and incalculable,” Norman Mailer wrote in 1960.

The speeches themselves are nearly all empty assertion. Assertion and bragging. Assertion, bragging, and defensiveness. He is always boasting about the size of this crowd or that crowd, refuting some slight from someone who has treated him “very unfairly,” underscoring his sincerity via adjectival pile-on (he’s “going to appoint beautiful, incredible, unbelievable Supreme Court Justices”). He lies, bullies, menaces, dishes it out but can’t seem to take it, exhibits such a muddy understanding of certain American principles (the press is free, torture illegal, criticism and libel two different things) that he might be a seventeenth-century Austrian prince time-transported here to mess with us. Sometimes it seems that he truly does not give a shit, and you imagine his minders cringing backstage. Other times you imagine them bored, checking their phones, convinced that nothing will ever touch him. Increasingly, his wild veering seems to occur against his will, as if he were not the great, sly strategist we have taken him for but, rather, someone compelled by an inner music that sometimes produces good dancing and sometimes causes him to bring a bookshelf crashing down on an old Mexican lady. Get more, that inner music seems to be telling him. Let, finally, enough. Refute a lifetime of criticism. Create a pile of unprecedented testimonials, attendance receipts, polling numbers, and pundit gasps that will, once and for all, prove—what?

Apply Occam’s razor: if someone brags this much, bending every ray of light back to himself, what’s the simplest explanation?

“We’re on the cover of every newspaper, every magazine,” he says in San Jose in early June. “Time magazine many times. I just learned they’re doing yet another cover on Trump—I love that. You know, Time magazine’s a good magazine. You grow up reading Time magazine—who ever thought you’d be on the cover of Time magazine? Especially so much?”

It’s considered an indication of authenticity that he doesn’t generally speak from a teleprompter but just wings it. (In fact, he brings to the podium a few pages of handwritten bullet points, to which he periodically refers as he, mostly, wings it.) He wings it because winging it serves his purpose. He is not trying to persuade, detail, or prove: he is trying to thrill, agitate, be liked, be loved, here and now. He is trying to make energy. (At one point in his San Jose speech, he endearingly fumbles with a sheaf of “statistics,” reads a few, fondly but slightly mentions the loyal, hapless statistician who compiled them, then seems unable to go on, afraid he might be boring us.)

And make energy he does. It flows
Trump’s energy flows out of him, as if channelled in thousands of micro wires, and enters the minds of his followers.

ILLUSTRATION BY SEYMOUR CHWAST
out of him, as if channelled in thousands of micro wires, enters the minds of his followers: their cheers go ragged and hoarse, chanting erupts, a look of religious zeal may flash across the face of some non–chaucer, who is finally getting, in response to a question long nursed in private, exactly the answer he’s been craving. One such person stays in my memory from a rally in Fountain Hills, Arizona, in March: a solidly built man in his mid-forties, wearing, in the crazy heat, a long-sleeved black shirt, who, as Trump spoke, worked himself into a state of riveted, silent concentration–fury, the rally equivalent of someone at church gazing fixedly down at the pew before him, nodding. Yes, yes, yes.

A TINY PISSED VOICE RINGS OUT

“Wow, what a crowd this is,” he begins at Fountain Hills. “What a great honor! . . . You have some sheriff—there’s no games with your sheriff, that’s for sure . . . We have a movement going on, folks. . . . I will never let you down! Remember. And I want to tell you, you know, it’s so much about illegal immigration and so much has been mentioned about it and talked about it, and these politicians are all talk, no action. They’re never going to do anything—they only picked it up because when I went, and when I announced, that I’m running for President, I said, ‘You know, this country has a big, big problem with illegal immigration,’ and all of a sudden we started talking about it. . . . And there was crime and you had so many killings and so much crime, drugs were pouring through the border.” (“Stop it!” someone pleads from the crowd.) “People are now seeing it. And you know what? We’re going to build a wall and we are going to stop it!”

Mayhem. The Wall is their favorite. (Earlier in the afternoon, Jan Brewer, the former governor of Arizona and legislative mother of that state’s Draconian immigration policies, nearly undoed all the good right-wing work of her career by affirming that, yes, Trump is “going to build the Fence.” Like new Americans who have just been told that Hulk Hogan was the first President, the crowd rises up in happy outrage to correct her.)

“Thank you, Trump!” bellows a kid in front of me, who, later in the speech, will briefly turn his back on Trump to take a Trump–including selfie, his smile taut, braces–revealing, grimacelike yet celebratory, evoking that circa-1950 photograph of a man in a high–velocity wind tunnel.

“I only wish these cameras—because there’s nothing as dishonest as the media, that I can tell you.” (“They suck!”) “I only wish these cameramen would spin around and show the kind of people that we have, the numbers of people that we have here. I just wish they’d for once do it, because you know what?” (“Pan the cameras!”) “We have a silent majority that’s no longer so silent. It’s now the loud, noisy majority, and we’re going to be heard. . . . They’re chiming away at the Second Amendment, they’re chiming away at Christianity. . . . We’re not going to have it anymore. It comes Christmas time, we’re going to see signs up that say ‘Merry Merry Merry Christmas!’ O.K.? Remember it, remember it. We have become so politically correct that we’re totally impotent as a country—”

Somewhere in the crowd, a woman is shouting “Fuck you, Trump!” in a voice so thin it seems to be emanating from some distant neighborhood, where a girl is calling home her brother, Fuckhugh Trump.

The shouter is Esperanza Mata–moros, tiny, seventeen years old. The crowd now halts her forward progress, so she judiciously spins and, still shouting, heads toward the exit. As she passes a tall, white–haired, professorial–looking old man, he gives her a little shove. He towers over her, the top of her head falling below his armpit. She could be his daughter, his granddaughter, his favorite student. Another man steps in front of her to deliver an impromptu manners lesson; apparently, she bumped him on her way up. “Excuse me,” he says heatedly. “Around here, we say excuse me.”

An ungentleness gets into the air when Trump speaks, prompting the abandonment of certain social norms (e.g., an old man should show forbearance and physical respect for a young woman, even—especially—an angry young woman, and might even think to wonder what is making her so angry), norms that, to fired-up Trump supporters, must feel antiquated in this brave new moment of ideological foment. They have thought and thought, in projective terms, about theoretical protesters, and now here are some real ones.

This ungentleness ripples out through the crowd and into the area beyond the fence where the protesters have set up shop. One of them, Sandra Borchers, tells me that out there all was calm (she was “actually having dialogues” with Trump supporters, “back–and–forth conversations, at about this talking level”) until Trump started speaking. Then things got “violent and aggressive.” Someone threw a rock at her head. A female Trump supporter in a pink–peachy–color T–shirt attacked a protester, kicking and punching him. Rebecca LaStrap, an African–American woman, twenty years old, wearing a “fuck Trump” T–shirt, was grabbed by the breast, thrown to the ground, slapped in the face. (She was also told to “go back on the boat,” a perplexing instruction, given that she was born and raised in Mesa.) Later that day, in Tucson, two young Hispanic women, quietly watching the rally there, are thrown out of the venue, and one (as a member of Trump’s security staff bellows, “Out! Out! Out!”) is roughly shoved through a revolving door by a Trump supporter who looks to be in his seventies and who then performs a strange little quasi–karate move, as if he expects her to fly back in and counterattack. A pro–immigration protester named George Clifton, who is wearing a sign that says “Veteran: U.S.M.C. and C.I.A.,” tells me that two Trump supporters came up to him separately after the Fountain Hills rally and whispered “almost verbatim the same thing, not quite, but in a nutshell”: that they’d like to shoot him in the back of the head.

I’M HERE FOR AN ARGUMENT

In Tucson, Trump supporters flow out of the Convention Center like a red–white–and–blue river, along hostile riverbanks made of protesters, who have situated themselves so as to be maximally irritating. When a confrontation occurs, people rush toward it, to film it and stoke it, in the hope that someone on the other side will fly off the handle and do something extreme, and thereby incontrovertibly discredit his side of the argument. This river–and–shore arrangement
advantages the Trump supporters: they can walk coolly past, playing the offended party, refusing to engage.

Most do, but some don’t.

“Trump is racist, so are you!” the protesters chant, maximizing the provocation. A South Asian-looking youth of uncertain political affiliation does a crazy Borat dance in front of the line as a friend films him. An aging blond bombshell strolls by in a low-cut blouse, giving the protesters a leisurely finger, blowing them kisses, patting one of her large breasts. A matronly Hispanic protester says that the woman has a right to do what she likes with her breasts since, after all, “she paid for them.” A grandmotherly white woman tucks a strand of graying hair behind her ear, walks resolutely over, and delicately lifts a Mexican flag from where it lies shawl-like across the shoulders of a young, distractedly dancing Hispanic girl, as if the flag had fallen across the girl’s shoulders from some imaginary shelf and the grandmother were considerately removing it before it got too heavy. The girl, offended, pulls away. But wait: the woman shows her anti-Trump sign: they’re on the same side. The girl remains unconvinced; she’ll keep the flag to herself, thanks. “So sorry,” the white woman says and rejoins a friend, to commiserate over her idea: “Articulate a little more,” the guy in the floppy hat answers, in heavily accented English, that, clearly: “This is America!”

A Trump supporter rages desperately into the line of protesters, after one of them forces his phone camera down. “I’m American! I’m Mexican-American! Are you a marine?” he demands of an elderly protester in a floppy fatigue hat. “I’m a veteran. I’m a veteran. You’re idiots. You’re idiots. I’m a Navy corpsman! I saved marines’ asses. Mexican, white, and black. We’re red, white, and blue!” The guy in the floppy hat answers, in heavily accented English, that, yes, he was a marine. This conflict rapidly devolves into a bitter veteran-off: two old guys, who’ve presumably seen some things in their time, barking hatefully at each other. I know (or feel I know) that, on another day, these two guys might

The four of us stand in a tight little circle, Trumpie A shouting insults at Green Shirt while filming Green Shirt’s reaction, me filming Trumpie A filming Green Shirt. The bulk and intensity of the Trumpies, plus the fact that Green Shirt seems to be serving as designated spokesperson for a group of protesters now gathering around, appears to be making Green Shirt nervous.

“Obama’s teaching you what fascism is?” he sputters. “Obama’s a fascist? The left is the fascists? This is so rich! So, like, the people who are being oppressed are the oppressors?”

“Do you know what’s going on in the world, man?” Trumpie A says. “You’re not fucking educated.”

This stings.

“I am very educated,” Green Shirt says.

“You have no idea what’s going on,” Trumpie B says.

“I am very educated,” Green Shirt says.

“You’ve got no idea, bro,” Trumpie A says sadly.

“Ask me a question, ask me a question,” Green Shirt says.

The Tall Trumpies, bored, wander away.

Green Shirt turns to one of his friends. “Am I educated?”

“You’re fucking educated,” the friend says.

Green Shirt shouts at the Tall Trumpies (who, fortunately for him, are now safely out of earshot), “And I’ll stomp the fucking shit out of you!”

Spotting a round-faced, brown-skinned youth in a “Make America Great Again” T-shirt, who’s been quietly listening nearby, Green Shirt snarls, “And you can get your fat fucking Chinese face out of here.”

The kid seems more quizzical than hurt.

I ask Green Shirt for clarification: did he just tell that guy to get his Chinese face out of here?

“No, I was calling his shirt Chinese,” he clarifies. “I told him to get his Chinese shirt out of here. The Trump campaign gets those shirts from China.”

I’m relieved. My liberal comrade did not commit a racial slur.

“I did call him fat, though,” he admits, then dashes back over to the kid, hisses, “Why don’t you make your waistline great again?,” and slips away into the crowd.

“This is America!”

The four of us stand in a tight little circle, Trumpie A shouting insults at Green Shirt while filming Green Shirt’s reaction, me filming Trumpie A filming Green Shirt. The bulk and intensity of the Trumpies, plus the fact that Green Shirt seems to be serving as designated spokesperson for a group of protesters now gathering around, appears to be making Green Shirt nervous.

“I feel like bad guys aren’t as scared of me in the summer.”
have grabbed a beer together, jump-started each other’s cars, whatever—but they’re not doing that today.

“What are you doing here?” a girl shouts at the Trump-supporting Mexican-American former corpsman. “You should be ashamed!”

“What am I doing?” he shouts back. “I’m supporting a man who’s going to clean up Mexico, build a wall, fix the economy!”

“Puto!” a protester snaps, as the corpsman storms off, to go home and, I’m guessing, feel like crap the rest of the day.

If you are, as I am, a sentimental middle-aged person who cherishes certain Coplandian notions about the essential goodness of the nation, seeing this kind of thing in person—adults shouting wrathfully at one another with no intention of persuasion, invested only in escalating spite—will inject a palpable sadness into your thinning, under-exercised legs, and you may find yourself collapsing, post-rally, against a tree in a public park, feeling hopeless. Craving something positive (no more fighting, no more inductive, please, please), forcing yourself to your feet, you may cross a busy avenue and find, in a mini-mall themed like Old Mexico, a wedding about to begin. Up will walk the bridesmaids, each leading, surprisingly, a dog on a leash, and each dog is wearing a tutu, and one, a puppy too small to be trusted in a procession, is being carried, in its tutu, in the arms of its bridesmaid.

And this will somehow come as an unbelievable relief.

LET’S CALL THE WHOLE THING OFF

WHERE IS ALL THIS ANGER COMING FROM? It’s viral, and Trump is Typhoid Mary. Intellectually and emotionally weakened by years of steadily degraded public discourse, we are now two separate ideological countries, LeftLand and RightLand, speaking different languages, the lines between us down. Not only do our two subcountries reason differently; they draw upon non-intersecting data sets and access entirely different mythological systems. You and I approach a castle. One of us has watched only “Monty Python and the Holy Grail,” the other only “Game of Thrones.” What is the meaning, to the collective “we,” of your castle? We have no common basis from which to discuss it. You, the other knight, strike me as bafflingly ignorant, a little unmoored. In the old days, a liberal and a conservative (a “dove” and a “hawk,” say) got their data from one of three nightly news programs, a local paper, and a handful of national magazines, and were thus starting with the same basic facts (even if those facts were questionable, limited, or erroneous). Now each of us constructs a custom informational universe, wittingly (we choose to go to the sources that uphold our existing beliefs and thus flatter us) or unwittingly (our app algorithms do the driving for us). The data we get this way, pre-imprinted with spin and mythos, are intensely one-dimensional. (As a proud knight of LeftLand, I was interested to find that, in RightLand, Vince Foster has still been murdered, Dick Morris is a reliable source, kids are brainwashed “way to the left” by going to college, and Obama may yet be Muslim. I expect that my interviewees found some of my core beliefs equally jaw-dropping.)

A Trump supporter in Fountain Hills asks me, “If you’re a liberal, do you believe in the government controlling everything? Because that’s what Barry wants to do, and what he’s pretty much accomplished.” She then makes the (to me, irrational and irritating) claim that more people are on welfare under Obama than ever were under Bush.

“Almost fifty million people,” her husband says, “Up thirty per cent.”

I make a certain sound I make when I disagree with something but have no facts at my disposal.

Back at the hotel, I Google it.

Damn it, they’re right. Rightish.

What I find over the next hour or so, from a collection of Web sites, left, right, and fact-based:

Yes, true: there are approximately seven million more Americans in poverty now than when Obama was elected. On the other hand, the economy under Obama has gained about seven times as many jobs as it did under Bush; even given the financial meltdown, the unemployment rate has dropped to just below the historical average. But, yes: the poverty rate is up by 1.6 percentage points since 2008. Then again the number of Americans in poverty fell by nearly 1.2 million between 2012 and 2013. However, true: the proportion of people who depend on welfare for the majority of their income has increased (although it was also increasing under Bush). And under Obama unemployment has dropped, G.D.P. growth has been “robust,” and there have been
close to seventy straight months of job growth. But, O.K.: there has indeed been a "skyrocketing" in the number of Americans needing some form of means-tested federal aid, although Obama's initiatives kept some six million people out of poverty in 2009, including more than two million children.

So the couple's assertion was true but not completely true. It was a nice hammer with which to pop the enemy; i.e., me. Its intent: discredit Obama and the liberal mind-set. What was my intent as I Googled? Get a hammer of my own, discredit Bush and the conservative mind-set.

Meanwhile, there sat reality: huge, ambiguous, too complicated to be usefully assessed by our prevailing mutual ambition—to fight and win, via delivery of the partisan zinger.

LeftLand and RightLand are housemates who are no longer on speaking terms. And then the house is set on fire. By Donald Trump. Good people from both subnations gape at one another through the smoke.

WHO ARE THEY? (PART I)

It's clear enough to those of us who don't like Trump why we don't like him. What isn't clear is why it isn't clear to those who like him. The Trump supporter is your brother who has just brought home a wildly inappropriate fiancée. Well, inappropriate to you. Trump support, nationwide, stands at around forty per cent. If you had ten siblings and four of them brought home wildly inappropriate fiancées, you might feel inclined to ask yourself what was going on in your family to make your judgment and that of your siblings so divergent.

It seems futile to try to generalize about a group as large and disparate as "Trump supporters"—like generalizing, say, "people who own riding lawnmowers," who, of course, tend to be, but are not exclusively limited to, people with large or largish lawns, but can also include people with small yards, who, for whatever reason, can't manage a push mower, and/or people (both large- and small-yarded) who may have received a riding mower from a father-in-law or an uncle and don't want to rock the boat. But sometimes, standing at a rally among several thousand madly cheering Trump supporters, I'd think, All these people have something in common. What is it?

I didn't meet many people who were unreservedly for Trump. There is, in the quiver containing his ideas, something for nearly everyone to dislike. But there is also something for nearly everyone to like. What allows a person not crazy about Trump to vote for him is a certain prioritization: a person might, for example, like Trump's ideas about trade, or his immigration policies, or the fact that Trump is, as one supporter told me, "a successful businessman," who has "actually done something," unlike Obama, who has "never done anything his entire life."

The Trump supporters I spoke with were friendly, generous with their time, flattered to be asked their opinion, willing to give it, even when they knew I was a liberal writer likely to throw them under the bus. They loved their country, seemed genuinely panicked at its perceived demise, felt urgently that we were, right now, in the process of losing something precious. They were, generally, in favor of order and had a propensity toward the broadly normative, a certain squareness. They leaned toward skepticism (they'd believe it when they saw it, "it" being anything feelings-based, gauzy, liberal, or European; i.e., "socialist"). Some (far from all) had been touched by financial hardship—a layoff was common in many stories—and (paradoxically, given their feelings about socialism) felt that, while in that vulnerable state, they'd been let down by their government. They were anti-regulation, pro small business, pro Second Amendment, suspicious of people on welfare, sensitive (in a "Don't tread on me" way) about any infringement whatsoever on their freedom. Alert to charges of racism, they would pre-counter these by pointing out that they had friends of all colors. They were adamantly for law enforcement and veterans' rights, in a manner that presupposed that the rest of us were adamantly against these things. It seemed self-evident to them that a businessman could and should lead the country: "You run your family like a business, don't you?" I was asked more than once, although, of course, I don't, and none of us do.

The Trump supporter comes out of the conservative tradition but is not a traditional conservative. He is less patient: something is bothering him and he wants it stopped now, by any means necessary. He seems less influenced by Goldwater and Reagan than by Fox News and reality TV, his understanding of history recent and selective; he is less religiously grounded and more willing, in his acceptance of Trump's racist and misogynist excesses, to (let's say) fogo the niceties.

As for Trump's uncivil speech—the insults, the petty meanness, the crudeness, the talk about hand size, the assurance, on national TV, that his would-be Presidential dick is up to the job, his mastery of the jaw-droppingly untrue personal smear (Obama is Kenyan, Ted Cruz's dad was in cahoots with Lee Harvey Oswald, U.S. Muslims knew what was "going on" pre-Orlando), which he often dishonorably eases into the world by attaching some form of the phrase "many people have said this" (The world is flat; many people have said this. People are saying that birds can play the cello: we need to look into that)—his supporters seem constitutionally reluctant to object, as if the act of objecting would mark them as fatally delicate. Objecting to this sort of thing is for the coddled, the liberal, the elite. "Yeah, he can really improve, in the way he says things," one woman in Fountain Hills tells me. "But who gives a shit? Because if he's going to get the job done? I'm just saying. You can't let your feelings get hurt. It's kind of like, get over it, you know what I mean? What's the big picture here? The big picture is we've got to get America back on track."

The ability to shrug off the mean crack, the sexist joke, the gratuitous jab at the weak is, in some quarters, seen as a form of strength, of "being flexible," of "not taking shit serious." A woman who wils at a sexist joke won't last long in certain workplaces. A guy who prioritizes the sensitive side of his nature will, trust me, not thrive in the slaughterhouse. This willingness to gloss over crudeness becomes, then, an encoded sign of competence, strength, and reliability.

Above all, Trump supporters are "not
politically correct,” which, as far as I can tell, means that they have a particular aversion to that psychological moment when, having thought something, you decide that it is not a good thought, and might pointlessly hurt someone’s feelings, and therefore decline to say it.

**WHO ARE THEY? (PART II)**

I observed, in Trump supporters’ storytelling, a tendency to conflate things that, to a non-Trump supporter, might seem unrelated. For example, in 2014, Mary Ann Mendoza’s son, Brandon, an openly gay policeman in Mesa, who volunteered at the local Boys and Girls Club, was killed in a car accident caused by an intoxicated, undocumented Mexican man who had spent at least twenty years drifting in and out of the U.S. and had been charged with a number of crimes, including assaulting a police officer, and was convicted of criminal conspiracy, but was free at the time of the crash, having been shown leniency by a Colorado court.

At the rally in Fountain Hills, Ms. Mendoza gave a moving speech about her son, which she concluded this way: “This was the kind of man my son was. . . . Was. Not is. Was. Because of the lack of concern that this Administration has for American citizens. . . . Brandon’s. Life.

Matters.” The crowd roared. Something key lay in that juxtaposition and that roar. What was the connection between her son’s death and the Black Lives Matter movement? Couldn’t a person be against the killing of innocent black men and against illegal immigration (or drunk driving, or the lax enforcement of existing laws, etc.):

A man comes to Arizona from Vermont and finds that “the illegals” are getting all the kitchen jobs for which he’s qualified. “So once Trump started talking about the Wall,” he says, “I was like, all right, now I think I’ve got to start paying attention to this.” How does he know those workers were undocumented? He doesn’t; there’s no way, situationally, that he could. Stephanie, an executive administrator for a finance group in Minnesota, gets laid off, and the only benefit she qualifies for is “a measly little unemployment check.” Standing next to her at the government office are “these people, that are from other countries, non-speaking—I’m not biased, I have no reason to be—but . . . I’m seeing them getting cash, getting their bills paid, and, as a taxpaying citizen, I don’t get anything. And so the border thing really resonated with me.” Does she know for a fact that these were illegal immigrants? “That’s a good question, and I don’t know the answer,” she says. “I’m not a hundred per cent on it.”

Bill Davis, a funny, genial sales rep in the packaging industry, has nothing against legal immigration but feels that illegal immigration is “killing” the area in Southern California where he lives. How, specifically, is it doing this? He mentions a neighbor of his who speaks no English, has two hundred chickens running around his yard, goats everywhere, doesn’t “play by the rules”—and hence Bill’s property values are going down. Is his neighbor undocumented? It doesn’t matter, he says. He’s “not assimilated.” Growing up, Davis says, he had a lot of first-generation Hispanic friends. These people took pride in assimilating. “Those days are over,” he explains. “So Trump is onto something about that. We don’t want you guys throwing your fast-food wrappers out your windows when you’re driving down the freeway. Take some pride in what you do. And learn to work in this country by the rules and regulations that we’ve developed over two hundred and fifty years. I’m not opposed to immigration, by any means. Come here, but when you leave Mexico—when you leave Germany, when you leave Russia, wherever—you’ve left that culture for a reason. It’s America now. So you can have your parties and your stuff at your house, but don’t expect us to cater to your culture.”

“Thousands of Cubans coming in,” Kathryn Kobor, a Trump supporter and animal-rights activist in her seventies, tells me in Phoenix, as she sits in protest of the Hillary Clinton rally across the street, beneath an umbrella provided by a Clinton supporter. “Three hundred sixty thousand Guatemalan kids and mothers standing at the border, they have to be taken in. We’re going to be taking in thousands of Syrians, whom we cannot vet.” I tell her that the thought of deporting and dividing families breaks my heart. “Of course it does—you’re a human, you care about people. That’s not the question. The question is, Do you want to live like India? Sewage running in the streets? . . . The infrastructure is crumbling. . . . I’m not speaking for tomorrow. I’m not speaking for a year, two years from now. I’ll be gone. I’m speaking for my descendants. I have a granddaughter. I have a son. I want them to live a decent, clean life. . . . Trump just
wants the laws enforced. . . . He's not a mean-spirited person.”

A former marine in line for a Trump rally in Rothschild, Wisconsin, tells me that, returning to the U.S. from a deployment overseas, he found himself wondering, “Where did my country go?”

To clarify, he tells me that he was in Qatar on the day that Obama was first elected. ‘I was actually sitting in the chow hall when they announced the results and he gave his speech,” he says. “I saw such a division at that time. Every black member of the military was cheering. Everyone else was sitting there mute. Like stunned.”

What unites these stories is what I came to think of as usurpation anxiety syndrome—the feeling that one is, or is about to be, scooped, overrun, or taken advantage of by some Other with questionable intentions. In some cases, this has a racial basis, and usurpation anxiety grades into racial nostalgia, which can grade into outright racism, albeit cloaked in disclaimer.

In the broadest sense, the Trump supporter might be best understood as a guy who wakes up one day in a lively, crowded house full of people, from a dream in which he was the only one living there, and then mistakes the dream for the past: a better time, manageable and orderly, during which privilege and respect came to him naturally, and he had the whole place to himself.

**HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE NOEMI?**

Talking to a Trump supporter about Trump’s deportation policy, I’d sometimes bring up Noemi Romero, a sweet, soft-spoken young woman I met in Phoenix. Noemi was brought to the U.S. when she was three, by undocumented parents. A few years ago, she had the idea of applying for legal status through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (daca) program. But the application costs four hundred and sixty-five dollars, money her family didn’t have. Hearing that a local Vietnamese grocery was hiring, she borrowed her mother’s Social Security card and got the job. A few months later, the store was raided. Noemi was arrested, charged with aggravated identity theft and forgery, and taken to jail and held there, within the general prison population, for two months. She was given spoiled milk, and food that, she said, had tiny worms in it. Her lawyer arranged a plea bargain; the charges were reduced to criminal impersonation. This was a good deal, he told her, the best she could hope for. She accepted, not realizing that, as a convicted felon, she would be permanently ineligible for daca. Puente, a local grassroots organization, intervened and saved her from deportation, but she is essentially doomed to a kind of frozen life: can’t work and can’t go to college, although she has lived virtually her whole life in the U.S. and has no reason to go back to Mexico and nowhere to live if she’s sent there.

I’d ask the Trump supporter, “What do we do about Noemi?” I always found the next moment in our exchange hopeful.

Is she a good person? the Trump supporter might ask. I couldn’t feel more sorry for her, he might say. That kid is no better or worse than I am and deserves the best God can give her. Or he might say that deportation would have to be done on a case-by-case basis. Or propose some sort of registry—Noemi, having registered, would go back to Mexico and, if all checked out, come right back in. There had to be some kind of rule of law, didn’t there? Tellingly, the Trump supporter might confess that she didn’t think Trump really intended to do this mass-deportation thing anyway—it was all just campaign talk. The most extreme supporter might say that, yes, Noemi had to go—he didn’t like it, but ultimately the fault lay with her parents.

Sometimes I’d mention a Central American family I met in Texas, while reporting another story. In that case, the father and son were documented, the mother and daughters weren’t. Would you, I’d ask, split that family up? Send those girls to a country in which they’d never spent a single day? Well, my Trump-supporting friend might answer, it was complicated, wasn’t it? Were they good people? Yes, I’d say. The father, in spare moments between his three jobs, built a four-bedroom house out of cinder blocks he acquired two or three at a time from Home Depot, working sometimes late into the night. The Trump supporter might, at this point, fall silent, and so might I.

In the face of specificity, my interviewees began trying, really trying, to think of what would be fairest and most humane for this real person we had imaginatively conjured up. It wasn’t that we suddenly agreed, but the tone changed. We popped briefly out of zinger mode and began to have some faith in one another, a shared confidence that if we talked long enough, respectfully enough, a solution could be found that might satisfy our respective best notions of who we were.

Well, let’s not get too dreamy about it. We’d stay in that mode for a minute or two, then be off again to some new topic, rewrapped in our respective Left and Right national flags. Once, after what felt like a transcendent and wide-ranging conversation with a Trump supporter named Danny (a former railroad worker, now on disability), I said a fond goodbye and went to interview some Hillary supporters across the street. A few minutes later, I looked over to find Danny shouting at us that Hillary was going to prison, not the White House. I waved to him, but he didn’t seem to see me, hidden there in the crowd of his adversaries.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

The average Trump supporter is not the rally pugilist, the white supremacist, the bitter conspiracy theorist, though these exist and are drawn to Trump (see: the Internet)—and, at times, the first flowerings of these tendencies were present among some of the rank-and-file supporters I met. A certain barely suppressed rage, for example, is evident in the guy in Phoenix who wears his gun to a protest against Hillary (“I’m out here with two friends, Smith and Wesson”). One of his fellow-protesters tells me that Hillary has had oral sex with many female world leaders (“She’s munched with a lot of our enemies, man”).

After a rally in Eau Claire, a handful of Trump protesters stand silently in the Wisconsin cold as the Trump supporters file out—a spontaneous little lab experiment investigating the Trumpies’ response to silent rebuke. “I guess you guys don’t read too much,”
someone shouts at the protesters. “Or watch the news. Fox News! Watch that once in a while!” Other Trump supporters yell over incredulously, “Fifteen bucks an hour?” And “Go to socialist Europe! Save your checks and move to a socialist country!”

But the line I won’t forget comes from a guy leaving the rally, alone, who shouts—mutter—afterward. “Hey, I’m not paying for your shit, I’m not paying for your college, so you go to Hell, go to work, go to Hell, suck a dick.”

Not far away, a group of enterprising Girl Scouts is out late, selling cookies under a winter-leafless tree. “Cookies for sale, last time this season,” they seem to sing. “Girl Scout cookies, last weekend to get them.”

So, yes, there are bigots in the Trump movement, and wackos, and dummies, and sometimes I had to remind myself that the important constituency is the persuadable middle segment of his supporters, who are not finding in Trump a suitable vessel for their hate but are misunderstanding him or overestimating him, and moving in his direction out of a misplaced form of hope.

WHO ARE THEY? (PART III)

Sometimes it seemed that they were, like me, just slightly spoiled Americans, imbued with unreasonable boomer expectations for autonomy, glory, and ascension, and that their grievances were more theoretical than actual, more media-induced than experience-related.

Before the rally in San Jose on June 2nd, I talk to a group of construction workers, each of whom is in some state of layoff: current, recent, chronic. One, who’s hoping to get a job working construction on the Wall, rails against millennials, the unions, a minimum-wage hike for fast-food workers, and “these people” who get fired, then turn around and sue. I ask for examples. He says he isn’t going to give me any names. I say forget the names, just tell me a par

all these people coming in, that are taking our—

“We have our own people to take care of, I’m sorry,” interjects a seventeen-year-old girl who is standing nearby, holding up a sign that says “MARRY ME DON.”

WHO ARE THEY? (PART IV)

American presidential campaigns are not about ideas; they are about the selection of a hero to embody the prevailing national ethos. “Only a hero,” Mailer wrote, “can capture the secret imagination of a people, and so be good for the vitality of his nation; a hero embodies the fantasy and so allows each private mind the liberty to consider its fantasy and find a way to grow. Each mind can become more conscious of its desire and waste less strength in hiding from itself.” What fantasy is Trump giving his supporters the liberty to consider? What secret have they been hiding from themselves?

Trump seems to awaken something in them that they feel they have, until now, needed to suppress. What is that thing? It is not just (as I’m getting a bit tired of hearing) that they’ve been left behind economically. (Many haven’t, and au contraire.) They’ve been left behind in other ways, too, or feel that they have. To them, this is attributable to a country that has moved away from them, has been taken away from them—by Obama, the Clintons, the “lamestream” media, the “élites,” the business-as-usual politicians. They are stricken by a sense that things are not as they should be and that, finally, someone sees it their way. They have a case of Grievance Mind, and Trump is their head kvetcher.

In college, I was a budding Republican, an Ayn Rand acolyte. I voted for Reagan. I’d been a bad student in high school and now, in engineering school, felt (and was) academically outgunned, way behind the curve. In that state, I constructed a world view in which I was not behind the curve but ahead of it. I conjured up a set of hazy villains, who were, I can see now, externalized manifestations, imaginary versions of those who were leaving me behind; i.e., my better-prepared, more sophisticated fellow-students. They were, yes, smarter and sharper than I was (as indicated by the tests on which they were always creaming me), but I was...what was I? Uh, tougher, more resilient, more able to get down and dirty as needed. I distinctly remember the feeling of casting about for some world view in which my shortfalls somehow constituted a hidden noble advantage.

While reporting this story, I drove from New York to California. During all those days on the highway, with lots of time on my hands for theorizing, generalizing, and speaking my generalized theories into my iPhone while swerving off into the spacious landscape, I thought
about this idea of grievance, of feeling left behind. All along the fertile interstate-highway corridor, our corporations, those new and powerful nation-states, had set up shop parasitically, so as to skim off the drive-past money, and what those outposts had to offer was a blur of sugar, bright color, and crassness that seemed causally related to more serious addictions. Standing in line at the pharmacy in an Amarillo Walmart superstore, I imagined some kid who had moved only, or mostly, through such bland, bright spaces, spaces constructed to suit the purposes of distant profit, and it occurred to me how easy it would be, in that life, to feel powerless, to feel that the local was lame, the abstract extraneous, to feel that the only valid words were those of materialism (“get” and “rise”)—words that are perfectly embodied by the candidate of the moment.

Something is wrong, the common person feels, correctly: she works too hard and gets too little; a dulling disconnect exists between her actual day-to-day interests and (1) the way her leaders act and speak, and (2) the way our mass media mistell or fail entirely to tell her story. What does she want? Someone to notice her over here, having her troubles.

**BUT, THEN AGAIN, COME ON**

A bully shows up, is hateful, says things so crude we liberals are taken aback. We respond moderately. We keep waiting for his supporters, helped along by how compassionately and measuredly we are responding, to be persuaded. For the bully, this is perfect. Every fresh outrage pulls the camera back to him, and meanwhile those of us moderately decrying his immoderation are a little boring and tepid, and he keeps getting out ahead of us. He has Trumpmunity: his notions are so low and have been so many ahead of us. He has Trumpmunity; his supporters.

I have been mentally gathering all those nice, friendly Trump supporters I met and asking them, Still? Even after the Curiel fiasco and the post-Orlando self-congrat fest, and Trump’s insinuation that President Obama was in cahoots with the terrorists? Guys, still, really? The tragedy of the Trump movement is that one set of struggling people has been pitted against other groups of struggling people by someone who has known little struggle, at least in the material sense, and hence seems to have little empathy for anyone struggling, and even to consider struggling a symptom of weakness. “I will never let you down,” he has told his supporters, again and again, but he will, and in fact already has, by indulging the fearful, xenophobic, Other-averse parts of their psychology and reinforcing the notion that their sense of being left behind has no source in themselves.

**ALL THAT BAD ENERGY COMES HOME TO ROOST**

AH, HOW FONDLY I now recall those idyllic rally days in Fountain Hills, Tucson, Rothschild, and Eau Claire, back in March and early April, when the punching was being done by Trump supporters.

After the San Jose rally in early June, protesters bullied and spat on struggling Trump supporters. Sucker punchers lurched up, punched hard, darted away, hands raised in victory. A strange little protester, mask around his neck, mumbled, as he scuttled past a female reporter conducting an interview, “Fuck you in the pussy.” Some sick genie, it seemed, had been let out of the bottle. I had to pull an older white woman out of a moblet of slapping young women of color, after she’d been driven down to one knee and had her glasses knocked off. When I told the young African-American woman who’d given the first slap that this was exactly the kind of thing the Trump movement loved to see and would be happy to use, she seemed to suddenly come back to herself and nearly burst into tears. The slapped woman was around sixty, tall, lean, sun-reddened, scrappy, a rancher, maybe, and we stood there a few minutes, recovering ourselves. Seeing something unsteady behind her eyes, I suggested that she be sure to take a few deep breaths before driving home. She said she would, but a few minutes later I saw her again, at the edge of the crowd, watching the protesters in fascination, as if what had just happened to her made it impossible for her to leave.

The order to disperse was given, first from a helicopter circling above, then barked out repeatedly on the ground, through megaphones. Police, in riot gear, stepped forward, shoulder to shoulder, chanting, “MOVE MOVE MOVE!” and the kids played at revolution, chanting back, “HANDS UP! DON’T SHOOT!” and “FUCK TRUMP!” and “FUCK THE SYSTEM!” and “FUCK THE PO-LICE!” occasionally dashing ahead of the advancing line to gain a few minutes to call home on their cells to reassure their worried parents. The
police line formed a human wiper blade that, over the next couple of hours, drove the protesters around and around the downtown area. It was like some large-board game: the longer the blue wiper blade pushed forward, the more protesters fell off the game board and went home, until, finally, only a handful remained, regrouping in the dark under the freeway.

Up on grassless viaduct slopes, whippet-thin young men of color gathered stones, carried them down furtively in clenched fists. When asked not to throw them, they averted their eyes guiltily, the way a busted third grader might. Some dropped their rocks; others just slipped away into the crowd. I saw two friends hurl their rocks at once, high, weak, arcing throws that burst up through street-light-yellow, low-hanging branches. I told an African-American kid wearing an elaborate Darth Vaderish multi-mask arrangement that this made him look like he was up to no good and aggravated the ambient white-privileged notion of the protesters as thugs out to make trouble. He sweetly agreed, but then (dashing off) said that, still, the protesters “have to do what we have to do.”

They were so young, mostly peaceful, but angered by the hateful rhetoric addressed at their communities, and their disdain for Trump morphed too easily into disrespect for the police, a group of whom, when all was over, huddled in a bank doorway, bathed in sweat, a couple of them taking a knee, football style, and when their helmets came off it was clear that they’d been scared, too, and I imagined them later that night, in darkened living rooms, reviewing the night, assessing how they’d done.

Early in the evening, a protester about my age asked me, “Where’s your sheet?” Seeing my confusion, he re-grouped. “If you’re a Trump supporter, I mean.” Later, I saw him again, shouting to the police that they were all “pigs.” Still smarting over his Klan crack, I asked how he could hold a sign claiming that hate doesn’t work while calling a group of people he didn’t know “pigs.” “They are pigs,” he said. “Every one of them.” His wife was murdered a few years ago, he added, and they did nothing about it.

So there you go. Welcome to America.

The night was sad. The center failed to hold. Did I blame the rioting kids? I did. Did I blame Trump? I did. This, Mr. Trump, I thought, is why we practice civility. This is why, before we say exactly what is on our minds, we run it past ourselves, to see if it makes sense, is true, is fair, has a flavor of kindness, and won’t hurt someone or make someone’s difficult life more difficult. Because there are, among us, in every political camp, limited, angry, violent, and/or damaged people, waiting for any excuse to throw off the tethers of restraint and get after it. After which it falls to the rest of us, right and left, to clean up the mess.

**THE SOMewhat Better Angels of Our Nature**

Well, it wasn’t all doom and gloom. Who could fail to be cheered by the sight of a self-described “street preacher” named Dean, whose massive laminated sign read “MUHAMMAD IS A LIAR, FALSE PROPHET, CHILD RAPING PERVERT! (see history for details)” and, on the flip side, “HOMO SEX IS SIN—Romans 1,” being verbally taken down by an inspiring consortium consisting of a gay white agnostic for Trump, a straight Christian girl for Trump, a lesbian Latina agnostic for Bernie? Who could resist the raw wonder in the voice of a rangy young Trump supporter who reminded me of a gentler version of Sid Phillips, the bad neighbor boy in “Toy Story,” as he said, rather dreamily, “I love that everything in Trump’s house is gold. That’s like real-life Batman. That’s some real Bruce Wayne shit.” A group of anti-Trump college students in Eau Claire concocted the perfect Zen protest: singing and dancing en masse to Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody.” If there’s anything common across the left-right divide, it’s the desire not to come off as tight-assed or anti-rock and roll, and what could the passing Trump supporters do but dance and sing along, a few holdouts scowling at the unfairness of the method?

Outside a Clinton rally in Phoenix, a Native American-looking man in an Aztec-patterned shirt joined the line of Trump supporters, with his megaphone, through which he slowly said, one word at a time, “Make. America. White. Again.” Once the Trump supporters caught on to the joke, they

“Well, if your allies said that about you then they’re not your allies.”
moved away, but he was a good sport and scooted down to join them.

“Make America White. Again,” he said, in the calmest voice.

“We don’t want you,” one of the Trumpies said. “We don’t want your racism!”

And civility is still alive and well, if you know where to look for it. Outside a Lutheran church meeting hall in Mesa that is being used as a polling place on primary day, for example, where an eighty-eight-year-old woman sits, beautifully dressed for the occasion. “Oh, my goodness,” she says. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Hundreds of voters are waiting in a line that runs around the parking lot and down the street. She came earlier, she says, and thought she might just forget it. “But then,” she says, “I thought, I’m getting up there in years—not going to have that many more chances to vote. I don’t want to skip it. Because I always vote.”

The voters move slowly, under crossed palm fronds, up for Palm Sunday, past a grapefruit tree in a gravelled breezeway: its three trunks have been whitewashed, and it looks like a three-legged creature in white pants, standing on its head.

For the next five hours, America passes by, wearing work badges, fanny packs, surgical scrubs, sparkly dance-bottes, head scarves, dreadlocks; pushing walkie-talkie canes and a Burger King crown; carrying walkie-talkies, books, a manpurse shaped like a gigantic tennis shoe, squirming babies, portable fold-up seats that never get used.

Someone says that in twenty-nine years she’s never seen this level of excitement. Someone says that it takes all kinds. Someone says that this is what makes the U.S. great: so much difference, and everyone gets a chance. Someone says that there are so many extremes at play in this election, people are coming out just to resist the extreme they’re most against.

A man says, “I’m a good guy, I hope,” and his wife nods.

A hipster dad picks up a bit of cookie his kid has dropped on the sidewalk and eats it.

A college-age kid in a “Captain America” shirt demonstrates that there is a certain portion of one’s elbow flesh that will never hurt, no matter how hard one pinches it.

At seven, the polls are supposed to close, but the line is the longest it’s been all day.

No one seems angry. There isn’t much political talk, and what there is is restrained, chatty. They are here to vote, and that is a privilege and a private matter.

How fragile this mindset is, I think. It could be lost in a single generation.

By 8:18 p.m., per the Internet, with only one per cent of precincts reporting, it’s over: Trump wins, Clinton wins.

Even though their votes now seem technically meaningless, there is no mass exodus. The people just keep coming. They’ve raced over from work, weary kids trudging along beside them. They are fantastically old people; people in terrible health, in wheelchairs or hobbled along on walkers, or joining me on my bench to stretch out a stiff leg or adjust a bad back. What makes them do it? Keep standing in line, after dark, at the end of a long day, to vote in an election that is already over?

A young woman says, cheerfully, to her toddler, “Don’t hit yourself. You only have one face, one head. That carries your brain. Which is very important.”

“After all these many years, in the back of my head,” a man says thoughtfully, “I still hear this voice: ‘Wait until your father gets home.’ And that’s my mom’s voice.”

At 9:50 p.m., the last person in line disappears inside.

I am joined by a trans woman about my age. People get afraid, she tells me, and nobody wants to feel afraid. But if you get angry, you feel empowered. Trump is playing on people’s fears, to get them angry, which in turn makes us, on the other side, feel fearful. It’s a domino effect. And, she says, it will continue even if Trump is out of the equation.

Another trans woman, apparently a stranger to the first, comes out of the church, holding a journal.

“All I have to write in here,” she says, “is: I voted from Hell.”

The last fifty or so voters are still visible inside: patient, calm, plodding forward a few steps at a time.

Mailer described what he called democracy’s “terrifying premise” this way: “Let the passions and cupidities and dreams and kinks and ideals and greed and hopes and foul corruptions of all men and women have their day and the world will still be better off, for there is more good than bad in the sum of us and our workings.”

Well, we’ll see.

From the beginning, America has been of two minds about the Other. One mind says, Be suspicious of it, dominate it, deport it, exploit it, enslave it, kill it as needed. The other mind denies that there can be any such thing as the Other, in the face of the claim that all are created equal.

The first mind has always held violence nearby, to use as needed, and that violence has infused everything we do—our entertainments, our sex, our schools, our ads, our jokes, our view of the earth itself, somehow even our food. It sends our young people abroad in heavy armor, fills public spaces with gunshots, drives people quietly insane in their homes.

And here it comes again, that brittle frontier spirit, that lone lean guy in our heads, with a gun and a fear of encroachment. But he’s picked up a few tricks along the way, has learned to come at us in a form we know and have forgotten to be suspicious of, from TV: famous, likably cranky, a fan of winning by any means necessary, exploiting our recent dullness and our aversion to calling stupidity stupidity, lest we seem too precious.

“DONALD J TRUMP A GUARDIAN ANGEL FROM HEAVEN,” reads a poster I retrieved from the floor of the Rothschild rally. “HIS SPIRIT AND HARD WORK AS PRESIDENT WILL MAKE THE PEOPLE AND AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!!”

Although, to me, Trump seems the very opposite of a guardian angel, I thank him for this: I’ve never before imagined America as fragile, as an experiment that could, within my very lifetime, fail.

But I imagine it that way now.