

Elizabeth Alexander

## Praises and Comeuppances

To hear President Johnson tell it, you'd have thought that a voting rights bill was his personal dream come true. It was not. Johnson came late<sup>1</sup> to the table, and he cultivated two personas: one a recovering racist who said, "It is not just Negroes but *all of us* who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry;"<sup>2</sup> the other an inveterate racist, who routinely used the n-word in conversation with black Americans and white Southerners.

*My parents had little truck with LBJ as Senator—much less as President. They thought he was crooked. (Just about everyone else in Texas knew he was crooked but didn't care.) Also, they had a penchant for Nixon.*

In March 1965—after mounted state troopers bludgeoned and tear gassed hundreds of Negroes marching to the capital of Alabama for the right to vote (and after Governor George

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<sup>1</sup> In the mid-1950s

<sup>2</sup> See Adam Serwer, "Lyndon Johnson Was a Civil Rights Hero. But Also a Racist." *MSNBC*, April 11, 2014 (<http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/lyndon-johnson-civil-rights-racism>).

Wallace deeply pissed him off)—Johnson trained his ambition away from Operation Rolling Thunder<sup>3</sup> and onto something grand:

“I do not want to be the President who built empires, or sought grandeur, or extended dominion. I want to be the President who educated young children to the wonders of their world. I want to be the President who helped to feed the hungry and to prepare them to be taxpayers instead of tax eaters. I want to be the President who helped the poor to find their own way and who protected the right of every citizen to vote in every election. I want to be the President who helped to end hatred among his fellow men and who promoted love among the people of all races, all regions and all parties. I want to be the President who helped to end war among the brothers of this earth.”<sup>4</sup>

Note the encoded racist reference in “tax eaters.” Johnson wasn’t a saint, not anywhere close. Yet, unlike the current President, he was unbedazzled by himself.

ME ME ME

I’ve been thinking about self absorption, as it plays out in public and private realms. Personally, I can be pretty damned self-absorbed. I am utterly intransigent regarding what I eat; when and if I talk on the phone; how and with whom I spend time; and what points of view I embrace, contemplate, or dismiss out of hand.

You could say I’m impossible. So is President Trump. He is also ignorant and mean.

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<sup>3</sup> Sustained bombing raids of North Vietnam that commenced in February 1965.

<sup>4</sup> President Lyndon Johnson, addressing the full Congress and an estimated 70 million television viewers on March 15, 1965

“And if you look at black and African American youth, to a point where they’ve never done more poorly. There’s no spirit. There’s killings on an hourly basis virtually in places like Baltimore and Chicago and many other places.”<sup>5</sup>

“I hate taking these people [refugees]. I guarantee you they are bad. That is why they are in prison right now. They are not going to be wonderful people who go on to work for the local milk people.”<sup>6</sup>

## TWO WONDERFUL PEOPLE

Dylan Foushee Patterson

He was born lucky: with intellectual, athletic, entrepreneurial, and personal gifts, all of which he developed and almost all of which were evident to everyone except him.

He was born unlucky, with a fatal susceptibility to taking risks.

He didn’t diss anyone. He looked for, and brought out, the good.

He was raised in the suburbs and university–educated in a large town. He worked in the inner city.

His immediate supervisor’s children, *her* supervisor’s children, and scores of other children called him “Uncle Dylan.”

He wrestled mightily with a demon, but he lost.

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<sup>5</sup> Donald Trump addressing an annual dinner of the Maryland Republican Party, six days after the June 26, 2015, church massacre in Charlestown, South Carolina.

<sup>6</sup> Trump, in conversation with Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull, 1/28/2017.

He died of a drug overdose. He was 28 years old.

Sara Alexander Clark

My sister is kind, even to *earthworms*, whom she dampens so they don't dry out in the Texas heat. She is generous. She would spend her last dollar to buy groceries for her friend in Waxahachie who has fallen on hard times and can't get up.

What most distinguishes Sara, though, is how valiantly she strives to enter worlds that are downright antipathetic to her own. Nine months after the 2016 election, when I would sooner have flown to Mars than Dallas, she came to Seattle for the launch of my first book.

She was the only Republican at the after-party, and it's not like she's apolitical. (Far from it) But Sara has a way of upending particularities that divide.

She connects.

BAD MAN

Trump disconnects.

- He has refused his assent to guidelines and regulations, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

- He has deliberately failed to staff, manage, and provide resources for federal agencies in order to dismantle them.<sup>7</sup>
- He has threatened judges.
- He has sent swarms of ICE agents to harass American people.
- He has rescinded a Department of Justice directive curtailing the use of private prisons, in order to complete the works of death and desolation already begun with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy of a civilized nation.
- He has excited domestic insurrection among us.

## GOD DON'T LIKE UGLY

Remember Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*?<sup>8</sup> The novel limns an ocean, containable in a bucket yet “running beneath the whole universe, like the dark seawater that laps beneath the wooden boards of an old pier.”<sup>9</sup> Primeval and cantankerous, the ocean cauterizes the wound of a 7 year–old boy who becomes a portal for a malevolence that, “like a flea, all puffed up with pride and power and lust, like a flea bloated with blood,”<sup>10</sup> preys on fear.

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<sup>7</sup> See [Slate](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2017/02/while_we_re_watching_the_scandals_trump_is_dismantling_the_federal_government.html)

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<sup>8</sup> Neil Gaiman, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Gaiman, 144.

<sup>10</sup> Gaiman, 121.

*Remind you of anyone?*

As in a fairy tale, the malevolence gets its just rewards. It comes to no good end—to a sad end, actually.

Trump, too, shall pass, perhaps in the manner of Johnson, who voluntarily exited the national stage in 1968, his goose having been cooked when McCarthy entered the race<sup>11</sup> with a promise to move forward on civil rights *and* end the Vietnam War.

Or perhaps like Nixon, who (after much hemming and hawing) finally resigned when Senator Barry Goldwater convinced him that the game was up.

Or perhaps Trump will be ejected from the Presidency in a way that is as inconceivable as his election:

- By African American women<sup>12</sup>
- By the Russian government<sup>13</sup>
- On a flight to mars.

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<sup>11</sup> For the Democratic nomination

<sup>12</sup> Who provided the decisive margin in alleged child molester Alabama Senator Roy Moore's 2017 defeat

<sup>13</sup> Granting him asylum à la Edward Snowden; they'd be interesting bunkmates.