

AMERICAN GOTHIC

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Day One

You can't, though you try to, look away
All day, the whole day.
Like slowing down to see a car wreck
Beside the highway, only high-tech.
Triumphalism
Is in the air, on every screen
And channel, as if pent-up, president-elect jism—
From 18 months of being mean
At stadium rallies—splatters
Our consciousness. As if it matters.
Here's the shot of windshield wipers
On the way to church. Here's the victory speech—
"Now the fun begins"—the bagpipers
Piping past the plexi VIP box. And here is each
Soldier in Afghanistan
Offering congrats via satellite feed.
Too much, too much. How can anybody stand
All the God Bless USAs, the need
To smother every surface
In Oscar-carpet red? Even the tear gas
Is tinted crimson
As cops in riot gear, batons drawn, advance.
Let's go live to the next "first dance"

At the Freedom Ball, to the *chanson*

“My Way,” natch.

Before midnight, cut the cake, grab a stranger’s snatch.

The party’s over, dude, ring the bell.

Funeral or wedding, or both, it’s hard to tell.

An Open Letter from a Political Operative

For many of my friends that Tuesday,
As for me, it was a very bad day.
It didn't start out that way.
As I boarded a 7 pm flight home, you'd say
I couldn't feel more confident.
On the plane, the WI-FI was intermittent.
Then I started to see things that weren't supposed to happen.
Urgent emails began flooding in.
The unimaginable had just become real.
By the time I landed, everyone knew the deal.
It was over, done.
Now it's been a while since the wrong side won.
What a devastating event, heart-wrenching.
But the sun still crawled up this morning.
The flag on the school still flapped.
What does it all mean? Is he a democrat
In the larger sense, or demagogue?
Here's Webster on the latter: one who makes a fog
Of prejudice and power, true and false.
So far, have we witnessed anything else?
For a moment or two, maybe,
A day or so after the victory.
Making nice at the White House, shaking hands
On the dais, acting like old friends
For the cameras. We held our breath collectively.
Can he forsake reality TV

For reality? Against all odds, I hope so.
We're not friends. I've never been to Mar-a-Lago.
But I understand how politics hurts.
In some way, I always prepare for the worst.
Think of it as a game of baseball
In the first inning. Throwing down the bat to quit it all
Is not one of the choices.
To the field, to the streets, with 61-million voices
Striving to be heard, to not despair.
Like Cairo in 2011, we know the way to Tahir Square.

Breaking News

It's hard to keep up with each new disaster.

They just keep coming, faster and faster. What's the last error?

Take your pick.

A phone call here, a phone call there, the tick tock tick

Of hourly disgraces. Hanging up

On the Australian PM, threatening the Mexican Pres.

With sending in U.S. troops to round up

All the "bad hombres."

Jesus, hit pause. There's no time to get nostalgic

For last week's gaffe: using the CIA's wall of heroes

As a backdrop for a narcissistic

CV: number of *Time* covers, despite the media ho's.

Never mind the farcical rollout

Of the ban that's not a ban, the national fallout

From nominees whose nominal expertise is close to nil.

Timeout for a photo-op. See the sparkly Harley cycle

On the White House lawn?

See the president's tie, so red and long,

As he strides down the East Room's carpet

To announce his latest *get*?

It's hard to come up with enough quick rhymes

For the worst of times.

What's to be done? Another rally? An online petition?

Post more angry poems? Acts of sedition?

This just in: the Sixties you missed

Are back, from UC Berkeley to DC, and they're wicked pissed.

24 Hours

We open on a normal American living room.
Family photos lined up on the mantle, a Purple Heart
In its frame. But then we zoom
Closer. Splashed across the wall, like abstract art,
A bloody splatter.
You wonder what's the matter.
A kill team from an unnamed Mideast state
Has slipped into the U.S.
To search for sleeper cells, who secretly await
Activation. It's *them* not us.
What a TV fantasy. You're asked to imagine
A mushroom cloud
Blooming over New York City, as Cheney did in
Pushing for the war in Iraq. Or that a crowd
Of desperate refugees
From seven, banned Muslim countries
Could pose an existential danger.
They could be in your neighborhood, that stranger
On the bus. They could be anywhere.
They're the stuff of nightmare.
You let them in, whoever they are,
And see what happens? We carry the scar
Of every awful thing that has ever gone wrong.
Like a film reel, there's a long
Shot of people running away, another boom
Then puffs of smoke, sirens as

Helicopters hover. Then it's over. There's room
For tearful pleas, silences.
Cut to the president, who darkly cites,
"People pouring in. Bad!"
You think, Maybe it's better for cities
To err on safety's side. What if only a few turn bad?
What if there's a ticking time bomb
And they've just taken
Your child? What then? Should questioning be a balm
While you look on, helpless, forsaken?
Be nice, and be a day too late?
Or should we use force:
Let's make American mean again, a farce
Of primal fears. Wouldn't that be great?

Dear Donald

How many of us have found ourselves standing
In the living room
At the end of a long day, ranting
At the TV screen like a madman? The doom (and gloom)
From the Light-Emitting-Diodes emanates
Like a vapor, poisoning our brains. Whether it's Corey
Or Kellyanne, it makes us crazy.
'Stop it!' we shout. "Why do you hate us?"
Every random tweet's obsessed over by CNN.
So why do I tune in, listen
In the car to HLN, MSNBC, even Fox News
To see what the enemy's thinking? Who is
The real fool here?
Maybe I need to peek in the mirror.
There he is: puffy, gone gray, in a zip-up sweater
Like an English teacher, my character
Has become my fate. Is there a gap
In my life I need to somehow fill? Is there an app
For that? Or is constant chaos
The kind of atmosphere I thrive on, a loss
Of self that feels oddly familiar.
Donald, are you listening? You are,
Aren't you? This TV set
Works both ways—in and out, like Echo—for a personal reset
Between your country, dude, and mine.
Come on, let's get crazy one more time.

American Gothic

Has my subject been wrung dry
By 20th-century novelists—who wonder why
A regular guy
Halfway through his life would suddenly find that he's
Without belief, adrift? Am I
That guy? I don't want to be. Still, these
Days keep piling up.
Once I found myself wiping my face
With a washrag in the bathroom mirror, trying to erase
The feeling I'd fucked up.
Does that count? I haven't sobbed out loud
For 20 years or more.
Maybe I should. That scary place at four
In the morning, when a crowd
Of strangers line up in dreams to accuse you—
That's when things get shaky.
Does that amuse you?
Can any of us truly locate the unique aching
In those nearest to us? Imagine staring
At "American Gothic" and seeing a startling
Truth about a man and wife
Behind the pitchfork and grim expressions, like a palette knife
That scrapes you. Here we are
Like any couple, driving in our car
To some friends' house for dinner. Conversation slows.
On Sirius, the CNN shows

Bark out the latest snafus. Every moment
Thrums with wariness, a foment
Of ideas assembled, piece by piece, on short notice.
The headlights scoop a tunnel
Between the snowy mounds. We pull
Into the driveway, kill the engine. Below the surface,
Nothing's happened; everything's happened.
Language fails. The End.

Requiem

Hey Ed (my dad), and the other Ed
From Amsterdam, both of whom lived
Through their cameras. I too have a third eye
Made of glass
In the middle of my forehead. From there I spy
Out at the world to ask
All the difficult questions. What's truly private?
How can we navigate
How others see us vs. who we really are
Without being completely exposed? If we go too far
Is there a way back?
Unlike van der Elsken, I did not embark
On solitary travels to Tokyo, Chile and Africa.
When I got my first camera
It was like finding a lost brother
I never knew I had, my other
Half. I am my father's son, for worse
And better. His Twin Lens Reflex charted a course
From home every summer
To three-day car trips away. We were never
Alone, never apart, anywhere.
I can see van der Elsken's lanky reflection
In a shop window, fixing his stare
On the misfits at the edges, the bohemian.
Where will they go
Since his Rolliflex's clack has gone quiet?

Along with Frank's melancholy fight
With America, in a dark bar, and Weegee's freak show?
Here's to the ones on the outside looking in
For a place to begin.
Here's to the disenfranchised, disenchanting, uninvited.
May they receive a handwritten write-in.

I Am Batman

In the new *Lego Batman* movie, Batman
Reveals his deepest fear:
To be alone. I get that, man.
And what's his secret desire? It's clear:
To be part of a family again. And though I'm me—
Not a cartoon of a multicolored
Plastic toy that's based on a comic book—it could be argued
We share a history.
There's the picture of his mom and dad, who were shot
In a mugging, on the wall of Wayne Mansion.
No amount of lobster thermidor, nuked and eaten
Late at night, can undo the thought
Of what happened. Nor can watching reruns of *Jerry Maguire*
Complete him, or the Batcave's shiny gizmos, his sleek black attire.
So why does Batman push away
Those who get too close: Robin, Alfred, a whole array
Of supervillains, including the Joker, who so
Wants to be his prime archenemy—his evil bro.
Does Gotham City, after crisis upon crisis,
Suffer an outrage fatigue? Is there a past to miss?
I remember Sargent's poignant
Oil painting, "The Daughters of Edward Boit."
How a hundred years ago, the four girls in the front hall
Dawdled beside the tall blue vases. How all

Of them—mother, father, the girls, Sargent—are gone.
Down in Texarkana, at 94, my mom keeps on.
Her house in Illinois, our family address
For four generations, sits vacant, the yard a mess.