The Empty Place: A Thesis in Ruins

A hybrid work — researched essay and narrative fiction — applying Claude Lefort's paradox of democratic power and Alexei Yurchak's anatomy of late socialism to the American collapse. In seven parts.

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The Empty Place: A Thesis in Ruins
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A hybrid work — researched essay and narrative fiction.

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Introduction

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This work began with two books and a question that would not leave.

The first book is Claude Lefort's *Democracy and Political Theory* (1988, English translation), and within it the essays – above all 'The Image of the Body and Totalitarianism' – in which Lefort proposes that democracy is the only regime that institutionalizes the *emptiness* of the place of power. No king's body, no Party, no One People may occupy it permanently; legitimacy is the permanent contest for a chair that belongs to no one. The paradox Lefort left us is that this emptiness is not self-sustaining. It exists only as long as it is believed in – and belief in an absence is the first casualty of any politics that promises presence, identity, wholeness.

The second book is Alexei Yurchak's *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (2005), an ethnography of the condition Lefort's paradox produces when it fails: a society whose official language has gone performative, whose citizens live *vnye* – inside and outside the system at once – and whose collapse arrives not as erosion but as recognition, overnight, of a death that happened years before.

The question is the one the title answers. What do these two instruments – one philosophical, one ethnographic, both built to anatomize the societies of the other Cold War pole – show when turned, without adjustment, on the United States of the 2016–2030s?

The answer is presented here in the only form that seemed honest. A pure thesis would falsify its object: the performative shift, the dead language, the kitchen-table *vnye* – these are things *lived*, and a discourse that merely asserts them would commit the very constative error the thesis diagnoses. A pure fiction would evade the argument. So the work moves in two registers: an essay apparatus that carries the claims (Lefort's empty place; Yurchak's performative shift, *stiob*,

and last generation; Tocqueville's associational bet; the arithmetic of the One and its remainder), and narrative interludes that carry the weight – Dale Kerner at the fairgrounds, Mara Okonkwo at the hinge of *nonetheless*, Sloane at the formatting desk of the list. The interludes are dated 2027–2032 and are fiction. The apparatus is not. The reader is asked to keep the two registers distinct, and to notice how difficult that is. That difficulty is part of the finding.

The thesis, whole: the American collapse is not a coup but a *furnishing of the empty place*; not a suppression of speech but a saturation of it; not a seizure of institutions but their conversion from constative to performative; not a dictatorship imposed on an unwilling people but a dead society – rich in kitchen tables, empty of townships – performing its forms until the morning it recognizes, all at once, that the performance has been the afterlife of a corpse. What survives is not the republic but the many: out of practice, nine chairs at a time.

The work is dedicated, as it must be, to the League woman – to everyone who has been running the registration drives since the Ford administration, sitting through the funeral with good posture, waiting to find out whether anyone else remembers what the chairs were for.

PART ONE

The Empty Place

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I. THE PARADOX, STATED PLAINLY

In 1981, the French philosopher Claude Lefort published an essay that contained, folded inside its dense prose, a time bomb for every democracy that would ever believe itself permanent. Writing against those who confused totalitarianism with mere authoritarian excess, Lefort located the difference not in the amount of violence a state deploys but in the *location of power itself*.

Under monarchy, power had a body. The king's flesh was the flesh of the realm – to see the king was to see the law. Under totalitarianism, power again acquires a body: the Party, the Leader, the People-as-One, a single organism in which the state, society, and truth are fused into one substance. The totalitarian fantasy, Lefort wrote, is the fantasy of a society *without division* – a body politic that has healed every wound by amputating every difference.

Democracy, by contrast, is the only regime that institutionalizes its own groundlessness. Lefort's famous formulation: in democracy, **the place of power is empty**. No one may occupy it permanently. The people rule, but 'the people' is not a body you can photograph, seize, or embalm in a mausoleum. Power circulates. It is held on loan, under contest, subject to periodic revocation. The legitimacy of the ruler rests on the fact that he can be removed – that the chair he sits in does not belong to him, and never will.

Here is the paradox Lefort identified, and here is why it matters now:

Democracy survives only so long as everyone performs belief in the emptiness of the place of power. The moment any actor – a party, a movement, a man – treats the place as fillable, as ownable, as something to be occupied permanently on behalf of 'the real people,' the democratic form continues

to exist while its substance drains away. The elections still happen. The ballots are still counted, more or less. The rituals persist. But the empty place has been furnished. Someone has moved in, hung curtains, changed the locks – and the population, still reciting the liturgy of democracy, does not notice the difference until the door no longer opens from the inside.

Lefort's paradox, then, is this: *democracy's greatest strength – that power belongs to no one – is also its point of maximum vulnerability, because the emptiness must be believed in to be real.* It is a negative theology. And negative theologies are always the first to be quietly abandoned by the faithful who grow tired of worshipping an absence.

II. THE AMERICAN FURNISHING

We are no longer speaking in the subjunctive. The Varieties of Democracy project's 2025 assessment, drawing on data through the end of that year, records that the United States 'is no longer a liberal democracy.'[1] The diagnosis came not with tanks but with paperwork – executive orders, personnel purges, the conversion of the civil service into an instrument of personal loyalty, the testing and then the ignoring of court orders. The Lowy Institute's 2026 report describes backsliding 'deepening' under the second Trump administration, driven by affective polarization so complete that 72% of Republicans and 63% of Democrats now describe the opposing party as more *immoral* than other Americans – up from 47% and 35% in 2016.[2]

Note what those numbers describe in Lefort's terms. Affective polarization is not disagreement. It is the *refusal of division's legitimacy*. Each camp has ceased to see the other as a rival for temporary occupation of the empty place, and has come to see it as a contaminant in the body politic – an infection to be purged so that the One People may finally coincide with itself. This is the totalitarian fantasy Lefort described, arriving not as an ideology of unity imposed from above but as a *mutual* popular demand. Two parties, each dreaming of a society without the other. The empty place does not get occupied by a tyrant; it gets *abolished by acclamation*, from both directions at once, each side believing it is saving democracy from the other.

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[1] V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2025* (University of Gothenburg, 2025): the United States assessed as no longer a liberal democracy, within the report's 'third wave of autocratization.'

[2] Lowy Institute, 2026 analysis of U.S. democratic backsliding, reporting Pew Research Center polarization data: 72% of Republicans and 63% of Democrats describing the opposing party as more immoral than other Americans, versus 47% and 35% in 2016.

This is the first correction the Lefortian frame forces on the standard narrative. The story Americans tell themselves is one of *defense against seizure* – guardrails, institutions, norms, resistance. But Lefort teaches that the place of power cannot be seized in a democracy where everyone still believes it is empty. The seizure is downstream. The prior event is the **collapse of belief in the emptiness itself** – the moment when enough citizens, on enough sides, conclude that *their* faction is the true people and therefore entitled to occupy the place forever. After that, the institution is a dead letter waiting for a hand to pick it up.

III. NARRATIVE INTERLUDE: THE CUSTODIAN

NARRATIVE INTERLUDE

Warren County, Ohio. November 2028. (Fiction.)

Dale Kerner had been a poll worker for twenty-two years, and he could tell you the exact sound of a democracy functioning: not cheering, not arguing – shuffling*. The sound of people who did not know each other standing in a line that belonged to no one, waiting to perform an act whose result none of them could dictate. It was the most boring sound in the world, and he had loved it the way you love a furnace hum, the way you love what only becomes audible when it stops.*

This year the county had consolidated forty-one polling places into four 'election integrity centers.' The justification was efficiency and security; the effect was that the line at the fairgrounds was four hours long and folded past the livestock pavilion, where the smell of old straw mixed with the November wet. Dale watched it from behind the check-in table. He was sixty-eight. He wore the lanyard. He knew the manual.

What he noticed – what he could not stop noticing – was that nobody in the line believed the line mattered. Not in the old way, the civic-religion way, but not in the cynical way either. It was stranger than cynicism. The people in line spoke about the election the way his parents' generation had spoken about the weather: as something enormous, already decided, that you dressed for. A woman in a red jacket was explaining to her daughter, maybe eleven, that 'we vote so they can't say we didn't.' A man behind her said, to no one, 'They already know who won. They knew in August.' Nobody argued with him. That was the thing Dale kept turning over. Twenty years ago a statement like that would have started a fight – someone would have said that's not how it works, buddy, that's not how any of this works*. Now it just hung in the air with the straw smell, unobjectionable, a piece of the climate.*

At 7:14 p.m., a county observer he did not recognize – new lanyard, new color, a shade of blue the manual didn't mention – walked the length of the gymnasium photographing the tabulators with a phone. Dale asked to see her credential. She showed him a card that said ***FEDERAL ELECTION INTEGRITY DETAIL*** *and underneath, in smaller print, a motto he would later try and fail to remember exactly: something about the will of the people being the only credential. He thought:* that's not a credential, that's a sentence. *He signed her in anyway. What was the rule for refusing a motto?*

That night he drove home past the fairgrounds twice, because he had forgotten something, and then forgotten what. The second time, the parking lot was empty except for one light on in the pavilion, and he sat in the car a while, engine running, and it came to him – the thing he'd been trying to name all day. In 2004, in 2008, in 2016, in every election he'd ever worked, somebody in that line had always said, sooner or later, to a stranger: may the best man win *or* we'll see what the people decide*. It was the ritual sentence. It meant:* the outcome lives somewhere none of us is standing.

Nobody had said it. All day. Not once.

The place where the outcome lived had been moved indoors, behind the lanyards, into a room with a motto on the door. And the strangest thing – the thing he would tell his sister on the phone, lowering his voice though he lived alone – was that it had not been taken by force. It had been handed over*, in exchange for nothing, by people who had stopped believing there was anything in the room to steal.*

He sat in the car until the light in the pavilion went off. Then he drove home and slept soundly, which frightened him more than anything.

IV. WHERE THE ARGUMENT GOES NEXT

Part One has staked the claim: the American collapse is best understood not as a coup but as a **furnishing of the empty place** – Lefort's paradox resolving itself in the direction of totalitarian form, with democratic ritual intact. But a furnishing requires tenants who can live comfortably in a house whose foundations they've declared imaginary. How does a population *inhabit* a system it no longer believes is real? How does it perform the liturgy of democracy while experiencing it as weather – enormous, decided, climate-like?

For that, we need the second apparatus: Alexei Yurchak's *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* – the ethnography of a society where everyone knew the system was unreal, everyone performed it anyway, and the performance

itself became the substance of life. Yurchak called the condition **hypernormalization**: a state in which the system's falseness is common knowledge, its collapse is unimaginable, and these two facts coexist without tension – until, overnight, the forever ends.[3]

The last Soviet generation voted, marched, and recited. So does the last American one.

[3] Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2005); 'hypernormalization' as the condition in which the system's falseness is common knowledge and its collapse unimaginable.

PART TWO

Everything Was Forever – The Performative Shift

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I. THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE UNREAL

In 2005, the Berkeley anthropologist Alexei Yurchak published a book that should be read as the autopsy report of a civilization – not because the Soviet Union was exceptional, but because Yurchak discovered, in its final decades, the general mechanism by which a dead system continues to walk.

His question was deceptively simple. Everyone who lived through late socialism knew the system was false. The leaders knew; the KGB knew; the grandmothers in the bread lines knew. The ideology was performed with a precision that increased in direct proportion to its meaninglessness. And yet – this is Yurchak's empirical finding, the one that makes Western analysts squirm – *the system's falseness did not make it fragile*. On the contrary. The Soviet Union in 1984 was, by every institutional metric, immutable, eternal, boring. 'Everything was forever.' A CIA analyst who predicted its collapse in 1985 would have been transferred. Sovietologists who predicted it were considered cranks. And then, in the space of roughly thirty months, the forever ended – and afterward everyone agreed, with perfect retrospective confidence, that it had been doomed all along.

Yurchak's title encodes the whole argument: **Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More.** Collapse was not the slow erosion of a living system. It was the sudden detonation of a dead one – a system whose forms had been perfectly preserved precisely *because* their content had drained away, like a cathedral maintained by a congregation that no longer believes but has nowhere else to hold weddings.

The mechanism Yurchak identified he called the **performative shift**. Drawing on J.L. Austin's speech-act theory, he noted that in early Soviet life, ideological

statements were *constative* – they claimed to describe reality, and could be judged true or false. 'Socialism is superior to capitalism' was, in 1935, a proposition you could be shot for disputing, which meant it was a proposition – it had propositional content, however coerced. But by the Brezhnev era, the statements had become *performative*: their function was no longer to describe the world but to *enact membership*. When a factory collective voted unanimously to endorse the latest Five-Year Plan, no one was asserting that the plan was good. The vote's meaning lay entirely in the act of voting. The form had broken loose from its referent and was now orbiting only itself.

Yurchak's devastating insight: **a performative system is extraordinarily stable, because it cannot be falsified.** You cannot disprove a ritual. A statement can be wrong; a liturgy can only be skipped. And because the rituals were meaningless, they imposed no constraints on actual life – people built rich, strange, real lives *inside* and *alongside* the performance, in the gaps the system's emptiness left open. Yurchak called this life *vnye* – a Russian word meaning simultaneously 'outside' and 'inside': being of the system while not being in it. The last Soviet generation did not believe, did not rebel, and did not leave. It lived *vnye* – voting at work, reading banned poetry at kitchen tables, experiencing the two facts as entirely unrelated.

II. THE AMERICAN TRANSLATION

Now hold Yurchak's apparatus against the American present, and the mapping is not metaphorical. It is structural.

Consider the performative shift in American civic speech. 'Free and fair elections,' 'the peaceful transfer of power,' 'no one is above the law,' 'the institutions held' – track these phrases across the decade 2016–2026 and watch them undergo, in real time, precisely the constative-to-performative migration Yurchak documented. In 2015, 'the peaceful transfer of power' described a fact so boring it was never said aloud. By 2021 it was a slogan, chanted as if incantation could substitute for the thing described. By 2025 it functioned *purely* performatively: to say 'the institutions held' was not to assert anything about institutions but to declare one's membership in the tribe of the alarmed. And – this is the crucial, uncomfortable half of the symmetry – 'stop the steal' was equally performative. Its function was never to describe fraud (its believers, like Brezhnev-era factory voters, were curiously uninterested in evidence either way) but to enact belonging to the tribe of the besieged. Two liturgies, equally unmoored, facing each other across the empty place like rival choirs in a cathedral whose god has died.

The American *vnye* requires no imaginative leap. It is the country you already live in. It is the professional who drafts a compliance memo certifying that her agency's new directive is lawful while knowing it is not – the memo's function is not to assert legality but to perform the existence of review. It is the university that issues a statement whose every clause has been negotiated to say nothing, and whose issuance is nonetheless reported as an event. It is the journalist who writes 'experts say the move is unprecedented' – the seventh time that year the word *unprecedented* has appeared in his copy, a word that has undergone its own performative shift, since a thing cannot be unprecedented weekly. It is the citizen who votes, as Dale Kerner observed at the fairgrounds, 'so they can't say we didn't' – participation re-described as alibi, the constative act of choosing a government shrunk to the performative act of having shown up.

And above all, it is the tone – Yurchak called the Soviet version *stiob*: an ironic over-identification with the official form so perfectly calibrated that its author could never be pinned as sincere or mocking. America in the mid-2020s became a stiob civilization. The meme is the native form of the last American generation exactly as the anekdot was of the last Soviet one. Watch how catastrophe was metabolized: not denied, not resisted – *formatted*. Every norm's demolition arrived already pre-ironized, pre-memed, pre-podcasted. The population's relationship to its own politics became that of an audience to a show it knows is scripted but cannot stop watching, because – as with late socialism – the collapse of the system is literally unimaginable, *and* its falseness is common knowledge, and these two facts coexist without tension. Hypernormalization is not the belief that things are normal. It is the knowledge that they are not, paired with the impossibility of acting on that knowledge.

III. NARRATIVE INTERLUDE: THE COMPLIANCE MEMORANDUM

NARRATIVE INTERLUDE

Washington, D.C. February 2027. (Fiction.)

Mara Okonkwo, Deputy General Counsel (Acting), had written the memo eleven times.

The directive itself was two sentences long. It had arrived not through the general counsel's office but through a liaison whose title – Senior Advisor for Presidential Priorities – did not appear in the agency's organizational chart, a chart Mara had once been able to draw from memory and no longer could, because it changed monthly now, boxes vanishing like teeth. The directive instructed the

agency to suspend enforcement of a statute. The statute was not ambiguous. The statute was, in fact, the reason the agency existed.

Her first draft said the directive was unlawful. That draft was returned to her by the General Counsel – a man who had been, eighteen months earlier, a podcast host – with a sticky note: tone. *Her second draft said the directive presented substantial legal risk. Returned:* whose risk? *Her fourth draft said the directive could be implemented consistent with the agency's enforcement discretion, pending further review. That draft was not returned.*

By the eleventh draft she had achieved the form. She knew the form now; everyone in the building knew the form; you could hear it being typed through the walls, the little percussion section of a government performing review. The form had three movements. First: a recitation of authorities, dense, correct, and entirely beside the point – the legal equivalent of a priest's vestments, worn to signal that a ritual was occurring. Second: the pivot sentence, always beginning Nonetheless *or* That said*, the hinge on which the entire republic swung, in which the authorities recited were gently set down and walked away from, like a dish one had decided not to wash. Third: the conclusion, which never said* the directive is lawful *– nobody said that anymore, that would be constative, that would be a claim – but instead said that implementation 'is within the range of reasonable interpretations,' a phrase she had chosen for its perfect emptiness, its quality of being about the* range *rather than the* terrain.

She signed it. She had a daughter in second grade. She had a mortgage in a county whose school system was the reason for the mortgage. These facts were not excuses; she would not have permitted herself excuses; they were simply the coordinates of her vnye*, the kitchen table at which she would, that evening, explain to no one – her husband had stopped asking; their marriage had quietly partitioned itself into topics that were discussable and topics that were the mortgage – that she had spent the day performing the rule of law. Not upholding it.* Performing *it. The performance was meticulous. The performance was, if anything, more meticulous than the old upholding had ever been, the way dead languages are pronounced with a care living ones never receive.*

That night she lay awake and thought about her law school professor, the con-law one, the one who had said – she could see the lecture hall, the winter light – the Constitution is not a suicide pact. *She had carried the sentence for twenty years as a warning about emergencies. Only now did she understand she had misread it. The sentence described a different arrangement entirely: a pact could die of natural causes, surrounded by its papers, while everyone in the room continued to quote it.*

She did not think she was a bad person. That was the thing she wished someone would believe, later, when the dissertations were written. She did not think she was a good person either. She thought she was a reasonable interpretation *of a person, within the range.*

IV. WHERE THE ARGUMENT GOES NEXT

Part One established the structure: the empty place furnished. Part Two has established the experience: the population living *vnye* inside the performance. What remains unexplained is the *texture of belief* – because Yurchak's most unsettling finding was not that people performed a system they disbelieved. It was that, when the system vanished, they discovered that the performance had been their life, and that nothing stood ready to replace it. The performative shift does not produce cynics waiting for liberation. It produces *orphans*.

Part Three: **'The Last Generation'** – who the last Soviet generation actually was, who the last American one is becoming, and why the people most fluent in the system's dead language are the least able to imagine anything after it.

PART THREE

The Last Generation

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I. WHO THEY WERE

Yurchak's book is often misread as a book about the Soviet Union's collapse. It is not. It is a book about the generation that was *formed* by a dead system – the people who came of age in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, who never knew a living ideology, who inherited the rituals the way one inherits furniture: heavy, meaningless, and too difficult to move. Yurchak calls them 'the last Soviet generation,' and the phrase carries a double load. They were the last generation of the Soviet Union. And they were the last generation to be recognizably *Soviet* – the final cohort for whom the system's forms, however empty, constituted the entire grammar of public life. After them, there was no Soviet person, because there was no longer a Soviet form to perform.

The critical finding – the one that should be read slowly, twice, with the American present in view – is that the last Soviet generation was *not* a generation of dissidents. It was not simmering with suppressed liberalism, waiting for the lid to lift. The Western fantasy of the captive democrat, the free mind trapped in the unfree body, finds almost no support in Yurchak's ethnography. What he found instead was stranger and more unsettling: a generation that had achieved a *complete and comfortable dissociation*. They performed the rituals flawlessly and believed none of them, and the two facts did not touch. A Young Pioneer could lead the oath at the morning lineup with sincere, even moving, delivery – and the sincerity attached to the *delivery*, to the craft of performance, never to the propositions sworn. The system's language was dead, but the deadness was not experienced as deprivation. It was experienced as *freedom*: because the forms demanded no belief, they left the entire interior of life uncolonized. One could

be a poet, a rock musician, a scientist, a mystic – all *vnye*, all inside the system and outside it at once, all without ever once needing to take the system's claims seriously enough to fight them.

This is the observation that breaks the standard collapse narrative, so it deserves emphasis: **the deadness of the system's language was not a problem the last generation suffered. It was a condition they exploited, and then – the tragedy – a condition they could not outlive.** When the system ended, it did not release a population of liberated democrats. It stranded a population of virtuoso performers with nothing left to perform. The old soviets of the anecdote – 'we pretend to work, they pretend to pay us' – had organized an entire civilization around the distinction between the official and the real. When the official collapsed, the real did not inherit the state. The real turned out to have been *parasitic on the official*: kitchen-table poetry needed the censorship that made it precious; the *vnye* life needed the liturgy whose emptiness had hollowed out the space it lived in. The orphans of Part Two's final sentence – here is their lineage. They were not freed. They were *evicted from a falseness that had become load-bearing*.

II. THE AMERICAN COHORT

Now name the American parallel precisely, because imprecision here is how the analysis collapses into vibe. The last American generation is not defined by age – it is defined by *formation*. It is the cohort, across ages, whose entire civic consciousness was built inside institutions whose language they never once experienced as descriptive.

Test it. A sixty-year-old and a twenty-five-year-old in 2026 share, it turns out, one identical civic experience: *neither has ever heard a public sentence whose function was to state a fact rather than to signal a position.* The sixty-year-old thinks he remembers such sentences, but he is remembering Walter Cronkite the way the last Soviets remembered Stalin – a foundational figure whose actual function was to be unavailable for verification. The twenty-five-year-old has no such memory to defend and is, therefore, the purer specimen: for her, the performative shift is not a decline she witnessed but the water she swims in. She does not experience 'no one is above the law' as a false statement. She experiences it as a *team uniform* – the sentence is not wrong, it is *theirs*, and its truth value is a category error, like asking whether a jersey is accurate.

Yurchak gives us the precise term for her condition, and it is not cynicism. Cynicism is a constative posture – it takes a position on truth, namely that

everyone is lying. The last generation's condition is post-cynical: the question of lying no longer arises, because the question of stating no longer arises. Watch the American version operate. When a norm is broken on live television, the last generation does not say *that's a lie* or *that's wrong*. It says: *this is crazy* – an aesthetic verdict, not a moral one; the audience's groan at a show jumping its shark, not the citizen's cry at a republic being wounded. The groan is sincere. That is what makes it stiob rather than satire. The feeling is real; only its grammar is dead.

And the exploitation of deadness – the *vnye* freedom – is fully Americanized by now. The entire digital economy of the 2020s ran on it. One lived one's real life in the group chat, the finsta, the private server, the kitchen table of Signal, while the public square filled with a language nobody spoke natively: the statements, the discourse, the takes, the official pieties and official heresies, all of it performed at full volume by a shrinking priesthood of professionals whose job was to keep the liturgy audible. The last Soviet generation had its censored poetry circulating in samizdat, precious because forbidden. The last American generation inverted this with perfect symmetry: its real life circulated in channels precious because *private*, while the public text – uncensored, ubiquitous, screamed from every surface – was the part nobody believed. The samizdat of the American collapse is not forbidden speech. It is *sincere* speech, which is far more dangerous and far better hidden.

III. NARRATIVE INTERLUDE: THE REUNION

NARRATIVE INTERLUDE

A suburb of Columbus, Ohio. June 2031. (Fiction.)

Dale Kerner's niece drove up from Cincinnati for her grandfather's eightieth with her daughter, Sloane, who was twenty-six and worked in something called narrative integrity, which no one at the party could get her to define, including Sloane.

The old people did what the old people did: they performed the country. Dale watched it from the patio with a cup of the punch, recognizing the liturgy from a thousand of these afternoons – the flag toothpicks, the invocation of the Founders, somebody's uncle saying this is still the greatest country on earth *with the flat fluency of a grace before meals, and the sentence passing around the table untouched, like a dish everyone served themselves from and nobody ate. Dale had spent three years, since the fairgrounds, trying to name what had gone out of the air in America, and it struck him now, watching his brother-in-law salute*

the potato salad, that he had been looking in the wrong register. The sentences were all still said. That was the whole of it. The sentences were all still said. *The Soviet Union, he had read somewhere – a book Sloane had left in the guest room, a Russian name he couldn't hold – had kept every form and lost every referent, and the old people here were doing it backwards: they had kept every referent, the flag and the Founders and the freedom, and lost any knowledge of what the words were* for, *what action they were supposed to perform in the world beyond the patio.*

But it was Sloane he kept watching.

Because Sloane did something none of them did, which was: nothing. She sat at the kids' table out of habit or irony or some alloy of the two, and when the great sentences went around she neither said them nor declined them nor rolled her eyes – she received them the way one receives weather on the other side of glass, with a mild, anthropological warmth. Her uncle said greatest country on earth *and Sloane said* totally, *and the word was a perfect instrument, Dale thought: it agreed without asserting, it participated without committing, it was a signature on a document written in disappearing ink. Later someone mentioned the election – the recent one, the one the courts were still partially sorting – and the table braced the way tables now braced, and Sloane said, brightly,* no, it's crazy, *and the tension dissolved, everyone laughed, even the uncle laughed, and the conversation moved to the potato salad, and Dale understood that he had just watched a door close that he had not known was a door.*

He found her later, inside, refilling the punch, and asked her – he had not planned to, the question formed as it left him – what she thought was going to happen.

'To the country?' She was very good, he noticed, at locating ambiguity; it was a professional skill, presumably, narrative integrity. 'I mean. It'll keep being like this. More of it.' She said it without dread, which was the part he would keep. 'Everything's always been like this. My whole life, every year, everyone's like this is the year it falls apart, *and then it's just – more. It's weirdly stable? Like, nothing works and nothing changes. It could go forever.'*

He wanted to tell her about the fairgrounds, about the silence where may the best man win *used to live, about the woman with the motto instead of a credential. He wanted to tell her that forever was exactly the word that frightened him – that the things which go forever are the things that are already over. Instead he asked her what narrative integrity was.*

She laughed, delighted, and told him, honestly: 'Nobody knows. That's kind of the job.'

IV. WHERE THE ARGUMENT GOES NEXT

Part Three has drawn the generation: fluent in the dead language, free inside its emptiness, and unable to imagine the form's removal. But a generation does not furnish the empty place by itself. Someone must carry in the furniture – and the furnishing of power, as Lefort knew, is never a single act but a sequence of small conversions, each one defensible, each one *within the range of reasonable interpretations*. The mechanisms deserve their own anatomy: not the coup, which is the form Americans were watching for, but the *conversion* – courts, elections, civil service, information – the four load-bearing institutions turned, one by one, from constative to performative while everyone watched a different screen.

Part Four: **'The Conversion of the Institutions.'**

PART FOUR

The Conversion of the Institutions

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I. THE WRONG WATCH

Every democracy dies with its defenders looking in the wrong direction. The reason is structural, not psychological: the form of death everyone anticipates is the *coup* – the sudden, violent, televised seizure, tanks at the television station, the constitution suspended by candlelight. The coup is the constative event par excellence: a single dramatic statement – *power now lives here* – falsifiable, photographable, resistible. Americans spent the decade 2016–2026 in a state of permanent coup-watch, scanning the horizon for a mushroom cloud, while the actual event proceeded on every side of them in the opposite register: not seizure but **conversion** – the slow migration of each institution from a thing that *says true things* to a thing that *performs membership*.

Conversion is invisible to coup-watch for a precise reason: it changes nothing about what an institution *looks like*. The converted court still hears cases. The converted election still counts ballots. The converted civil service still issues memoranda of impeccable formatting. The converted press still publishes, more voluminously than ever. From the outside – from the coup-watcher's vantage, scanning for tanks – everything is continuous, and continuity is taken as health. But Yurchak's law governs: the forms survive precisely *because* their content has drained; a ritual is the most durable structure known to politics, because it cannot be falsified, only skipped. The American institutions were not destroyed. They were *liturgized*.

The anatomy below treats the four load-bearing institutions in the order of their conversion. The order matters. Each conversion made the next one easier,

not by force but by *precedent of meaning* – once one word goes dead in the civic vocabulary, the adjacent words lose their reason to live.

II. THE COURTS: FROM ADJUDICATION TO AUDITION

The judiciary was the constative heart of the American system – the one institution whose entire product was statements claiming to be true: *the statute means this; the order is unlawful; the holding is.* Its conversion therefore required the most delicate operation, and it was executed with an elegance that will occupy historians: the courts were not packed, burned, or defied in a single clarifying confrontation. They were **auditioned**. Appointments ceased to be selections of interpreters and became castings of performers – the question at every confirmation hearing shifting, openly and without embarrassment, from *is this nominee qualified to say what the law is* to *will this nominee perform our side's reality*. The performative shift, arriving in the judiciary, completed the circuit Lefort had warned of: law, the discourse that was supposed to stand outside the contest for the empty place, became one more contestant for it.

The tell was the fate of the word *unprecedented*, which died of overuse around 2025 – a word that can be used weekly is a word that means *nothing is precedented anymore*, which is to say: precedent, the constative spine of common law, had quietly stopped binding. A system in which each ruling is a fresh performance of factional reality is not a court system. It is a theater with better acoustics.

III. THE ELECTIONS: FROM CHOICE TO CENSUS

Part One's fairgrounds scene documented the conversion of voting from decision to ritual – *we vote so they can't say we didn't*. The mechanism deserves its fuller account. Elections in a living democracy are constative instruments: they *constitute* a government by aggregating choices, and their legitimacy depends on the outcome being unknown in advance – the empty place kept empty by genuine uncertainty. The American conversion proceeded by inverting the function of uncertainty itself. Where uncertainty had once been the guarantor of legitimacy, it was rebranded as evidence of *fraud* – every close count, every late tally, every contested margin re-described as proof that the census had been tampered with. And census is the right word for what elections became: not mechanisms for choosing occupants of the empty place, but enumerations of the two peoples, ritual head-counts whose outcome each tribe knew in advance and whose function was to *display* that knowledge. When the count matched the tribe's number,

the election was real. When it didn't, the election was stolen. This is not a standard of evidence. It is a standard of *membership* – the performative shift in its purest civic form.

IV. THE CIVIL SERVICE: FROM EXPERTISE TO LOYALTY; THE PRESS: FROM RECORD TO CHORUS

The last two conversions can be taken together, because they are the same conversion in mirror image. The civil service's function was constative *upward* – to tell the executive true things about the world regardless of the executive's preferences. Its conversion to a loyalty instrument – scheduled, reclassified, purged, and refilled with appointees whose qualification was devotion – converted the entire informational metabolism of the state into performance. An executive that hears only performances of agreement will eventually govern a country that exists only in the performance. The late-Soviet planners who received falsified harvest figures from every level below them, each level performing competence at the level above, would have recognized the arrangement immediately.

The press performed the mirror operation: where the civil service stopped telling power true things, the press stopped telling the *public* true things – not because it was censored (censorship is a constative technology, it presupposes statements whose truth matters enough to suppress) but because it was *flooded*. The distinguishing pathology of the American information order was never suppression but saturation: so many statements, from so many performers, that the act of sorting true from false became a full-time job no citizen could hold alongside a mortgage, and so sorting was outsourced – to the tribe, to the feed, to the chorus. The chorus does not verify. It harmonizes. And a public that receives its reality pre-harmonized has undergone the performative shift without ever having felt the shift occur: it still reads the news, still argues about the news, still believes itself informed. It has merely ceased to believe that the news is *about* anything.

V. NARRATIVE INTERLUDE: THE AUDIT

NARRATIVE INTERLUDE

Washington, D.C. April 2028. (Fiction.)

The auditors came to Mara's agency on a Tuesday, and they were not auditors. She understood this within the first hour, in the way you understand weather. They were young – younger than she expected, and she had stopped expecting

experience – and they carried no binders, asked for no files, requested instead a series of what their memorandum called alignment conversations*. Mara's own conversation lasted eleven minutes. The young man across the conference table had her personnel file open but did not look at it. He asked her three questions. The first was:* What is the agency for? *The second was:* Who does the agency serve? *The third was:* What would you say is the single greatest obstacle to the American people getting what they voted for?

She noticed – she was a lawyer; noticing was the last professional skill left to her – that none of the questions had a verifiable answer. There was no response she could give that could be checked against the world. Each question was a small empty place, and she was being invited to furnish it. She understood, sitting there, that this was not an interview but a recitation*: the young man already knew the text, her text, everyone's text; the only thing being measured was whether she would speak it in her own voice. It was, she thought, the precise inverse of a deposition. A deposition extracts statements whose truth can be tested later. This extracted statements whose* loyalty *could be tested now. The record of the conversation, she felt certain, would contain no transcript. It would contain a verdict.*

She answered the questions. She heard her own voice do it, steady, well-modulated, within the range of reasonable interpretations. The agency serves the American people. The greatest obstacle is the gap between their will and its execution. *As she spoke she felt the odd, specific relief that the late converts always report – the relief of discovering that the liturgy, once begun, carries you. It wanted nothing from her but fluency. It did not ask her to believe. She had spent two years terrified that someday someone would ask her to believe.*

Afterward, in the stairwell, she met Kowalski from Enforcement, who had gone in before her. They stood together in the concrete light. Neither asked the other how it had gone, and Mara understood that this, too, was the liturgy: in the old building you would have compared notes, what did they ask you*, and the comparison itself would have been a small act of the rule of law, two statements brought into contact to see if the world they described was one world. Now there was nothing to compare. They had both recited. The recitations could not differ, because they were not about anything.*

'Well,' Kowalski said, at last, in the tone of a man remarking on rain.

'Well,' said Mara.

They went back upstairs. The agency continued. Everything continued. That was the part no one ever believed about the end of things: how much of it was continuing.

VI. WHERE THE ARGUMENT GOES NEXT

Four conversions, one pattern: the constative drained, the performative installed, the form preserved and displayed as proof that nothing had happened. But Lefort's paradox has a second movement we have not yet confronted. The empty place, once furnished, does not stay quietly furnished. Totalitarianism, in Lefort's analysis, is not merely the occupation of power's place – it is the fabrication of a *subject* to occupy it: the People-as-One, a body that must be continuously manufactured, because it does not exist. The fiction of the people requires an enemy to define itself against, always, without exception – the One is constituted by the expulsion of the Other, and the expulsion must never be completed, because the moment it is, the One dissolves back into the many.

Part Five: **'The Fiction of the People'** – who 'the real Americans' are, why the category can never be filled, and what happens to those designated as its outside.

PART FIVE

The Fiction of the People

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I. THE BODY THAT MUST BE MADE

Lefort's analysis of totalitarianism contains a proposition that sounds, at first hearing, like a paradox nested inside the paradox: *the People-as-One does not exist, and therefore it must be manufactured continuously, forever, without pause.* A king's body is given – born, anointed, buried. A party's membership is countable. But 'the people' in whose name totalitarian power speaks is a fiction in the strict sense: not a lie, but an *artifact*, a thing made. And because it is made, it is never finished. The totalitarian project is not the conquest of the state but the perpetual manufacture of its supposed author.

Democracy, in Lefort's account, is the regime that *accepts* this: the people is a name for an unknowable, uncountable, permanently divided many, and the empty place stays empty because no vote, however unanimous, can make the many into One. The totalitarian temptation – the thing that furnishes the place – begins the moment someone claims the many have been counted and found to be One, with a remainder. That remainder is the structural necessity: for the One to be visible, there must be an outside against which it is defined. Lefort's darkest observation is that the enemy is therefore not an accident of totalitarianism but its *load-bearing wall*. The People-as-One has no positive content – try to define it and you get abstractions, slogans, blood – so it must be defined by *subtraction*: we are the people, and they – the parasite, the traitor, the vermin, the enemy within – are not. The expulsion of the Other is not an episode in the life of the One. It is the One's *only mode of existence*. And it follows, with a logic as cold as arithmetic, that the expulsion can never be completed: a people that finally

purged all its enemies would dissolve on the spot into the divided many, and the furnished place of power would stand empty again, exposed.

II. 'THE REAL AMERICANS'

Hold this against the American sentence that did more work in the 2016–2026 decade than any other: *the American people want—*. Watch the sentence perform. Its referent was never enumerated; its function was never enumeration. 'The American people' in that sentence is Lefort's One, invoked at the moment of its manufacture, and – here is the distinctly American genius of the thing – invoked by *both* choirs from Part Two, each constructing its own One out of the expulsion of the other. The right's One was defined against the coastal, the credentialed, the illegal, the deep-state. The left's One was defined against the deplorable, the denier, the insurrectionist, the threat-to-democracy. Each side accused the other of dividing the country, and each accusation was true, and the truth of each accusation was the fuel of the other's furnace. This is the mutual totalitarianism Part One named: two Peoples-as-One, each requiring the other as its constitutive outside, locked in an embrace in which the actual, divided, muddled, unphotographable American many – the people Lefort meant – vanished from politics altogether, its place taken by two fictions in a mirror fight.

The structural law then asserted itself on schedule. Because the One is defined by subtraction, the definition must keep subtracting. The category 'real American' behaved exactly as Lefort's logic predicts: it shrank. The enemy-within roster that began with the foreign expanded to the bureaucrat, then the professor, then the judge, then the Republican of insufficient enthusiasm, then the voter of the wrong county – each expansion announced as the final purification, each purification requiring a next one, because the remainder, once expelled, must be replaced. Yurchak's Soviet citizens knew this machinery in its mature form: the category 'enemy of the people' had to be refilled every season, since the One it mirrored had no other mirror. In the American version the refilling was crowdsourced – the feed identified the week's subtraction faster than any commissariat – but the arithmetic was identical. The One is a body with a hole in it. The hole is where the enemy goes. The hole must never close.

III. NARRATIVE INTERLUDE: THE LIST

NARRATIVE INTERLUDE

Columbus, Ohio. October 2029. (Fiction.)

Sloane's job – she had finally explained it to her great-uncle Dale over the punch, that June, and the explanation had not helped – turned out to be this: she worked for a platform, in a division whose internal name was Civic Confidence, and her team maintained the list.

The list did not have a name. That was the first thing that had impressed her, professionally, when she'd been rotated onto the team – the discipline of it. A named list can be criticized; a name is a claim about the world, and claims can be falsified, and falsification is friction, and Civic Confidence existed to reduce friction. The list was simply the list*: a continuously updated registry of accounts, outlets, organizations, and – in the tier her team handled – persons, whose speech had been determined to fall outside the bounds of legitimate civic discourse. Determined by whom was a genuinely interesting question. The determinations arrived from a process that combined machine classification, partner-agency referral, and what the documentation called* community signal*, and the beauty of the process, Sloane had come to understand, was that no one inside it ever decided anything. Each stage performed a judgment that the previous stage had supposedly made. The classifier performed the judgment of the training data; the reviewer performed the judgment of the classifier; the manager performed the judgment of the reviewer; the platform performed the judgment of the partners; the partners performed the judgment of the community. You could audit the whole chain – she had once, as an exercise – and find, at every link, a reasonable person within the range of reasonable interpretations, and at no link a decision. The list simply* accreted*, the way the One accreted: by subtraction without a subtractor.*

Her week had a rhythm. Monday the batch arrived, four to six thousand entries. Her team did not read the entries – reading was upstream – they checked format*, provenance, flag consistency. Tuesday she did spot reviews, and spot review was where the thing got strange, because a spot review required her to look, actually look, at some individual's collected utterances, and the utterances were – this was the part she couldn't explain to Dale –* boring*. She had been on the team fourteen months and had never once flagged, or seen flagged, anything that read as dangerous. No plots. No manifestos. What she read was: a school-board candidate in Idaho who had used the phrase* stolen *about an election that was not, by any measure her own dashboard endorsed, stolen; a nurse in Florida who had said the wrong thing about the wrong medication; a retired accountant in Dayton – she had looked at his address twice, Dayton, forty minutes from the punch bowl – who had shared, over three years, eleven hundred posts, each one a performance, each one exactly as sincere and exactly as empty as her uncle's*

totally, *and who was now, by the accumulated weight of performed membership, outside the bounds of legitimate civic discourse.*

She had raised it once, in the one forum the company provided, a quarterly listening session. She had said: she understood the categories, but she was curious about the endpoint*. At what point was the list complete? What did the discourse look like when everything outside the bounds had been removed? The facilitator – a kind person, genuinely kind – had said that was such an important question, and that the list was not a destination but a* process*, a commitment, and Sloane had written in her notes* process, a commitment*, and had felt the sentence close over the question like water over a stone, and had thought, with the anthropological warmth that was her generation's inheritance:* that's crazy.

What she did not think – she was twenty-nine, and the thought had no grammar available to her – was that the list was the whole of it. That the One she could not define because no one could define it was being defined nightly in the data centers of Civic Confidence, negatively, four to six thousand subtractions a week, and that the endpoint she had asked about did not exist, because the endpoint was the death of the thing doing the subtracting, and the thing doing the subtracting had arranged, with a cunning no one had designed, that it should never arrive.

The accountant in Dayton posted again in November. The flag was consistent. She approved the format.

IV. WHERE THE ARGUMENT GOES NEXT

The One is manufactured, the remainder expelled, the hole never closing – but a hole in the body of a people is not an abstraction to the person it opens under. Part Six turns from the architecture to the experience: what it is to live in the society these machines produce, the *dead society* of the title – Yurchak's *vnye* generalized to an entire nation, in which the public world is performed, the private world is real, and the bond between them – the thing Tocqueville thought America had invented – quietly stops conducting.

Part Six: **'A Dead Society'** – on association, solitude, and the American kitchen table.

PART SIX

A Dead Society

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I. TOCQUEVILLE'S BET

Every account of American democracy, friendly or hostile, eventually pays its toll to Tocqueville, because Tocqueville made the bet on which the whole experiment rested. Arriving in 1831 to study prisons, he concluded that the thing actually holding the republic together was not its constitution – parchment, he saw, is parchment anywhere – but its *associations*: the township meetings, the juries, the church committees, the thousand voluntary bodies in which Americans practiced, daily and at small scale, the art of combining with strangers for a common purpose. The association was the school of democracy. In it, the citizen learned the one skill without which the empty place cannot be kept empty: how to be *a* people among other peoples, a many that acts together without becoming One. Tocqueville's famous worry – the seed of everything Lefort would later formalize – was that democratic equality contains a solvent for exactly this. The equal citizen, sovereign over himself, needing no one, retreats into 'the solitude of his own heart'; the society of associations flattens into a mass of individuals, each too weak alone to resist the tutelary power that rises to administer them. A people that stops associating does not riot. It *drifts* – into what he called, with uncanny mildness, an 'orderly, gentle, peaceful slavery.'

Tocqueville's bet, then: America's associations would hold against America's solitude. For two centuries the bet paid. The thesis of this part is that the bet has been quietly lost – not in the decade of collapse but across the half-century before it, and that the collapse was the collection of the debt.

II. THE DEATH OF THE BETWEEN

Put Tocqueville's framework against the American sociology of the early twenty-first century and the diagnosis assembles itself. The associational tissue – the bowling leagues and lodges, the union halls and church basements, the PTAs and precinct clubs, the entire unglamorous *between* that stood between the individual and the state – atrophied for reasons that were, in the moment, always rational: two incomes needed, commutes lengthened, congregations grayed, the local paper died, the mall replaced the square, the feed replaced the mall. Each substitution was an improvement in convenience and a small withdrawal from the only school in which the many is made. Robert Putnam charted the decline in 2000 and was received as a nostalgist; by 2020 his graphs had stopped being controversial and started being *uninteresting* – the performative shift's signature: a fact so fully absorbed it no longer described anything. Everyone knew Americans were lonely. The surgeon general declared an epidemic of it in 2023, which is to say the state officially noted the absence of the very tissue that was supposed to make the state unnecessary.

Now Yurchak completes the picture, because the dead society is not an *absent* society – this is the refinement that matters. The Soviet kitchen table was not solitude. It was the opposite: intense, real, warm society – the only real society – flourishing *vnye*, in the shelter of a public world nobody inhabited. The American version arrived inverted in medium but identical in structure. The American kitchen table was the group chat, the server, the private channel: spaces of genuine association, genuine loyalty, genuine warmth – the real interior life of the nation – built entirely *outside* and in implicit opposition to the public world, which was left to the performers. The group chat is where Americans actually associated. The public square is where they went to recite. And the bond between the two – the thing Tocqueville's township had fused, the practice of being a public person among persons – dissolved. A people can be warm in private and dead in public indefinitely. That is precisely what the dead society *is*: not a society of the isolated but a society of the *disconnected-in-combination*, rich in kitchen tables, empty of townships, all of its associative genius flowing into channels that never touch the institutions that govern it.

The political consequence is the one the whole thesis has been building toward. Lefort's empty place cannot be guarded by individuals, and it cannot be guarded by private warmth. It can only be guarded by *the many acting as a public* – by people who have practiced, in bowling leagues and township meetings, the arts of combining without unifying, of disagreeing while remaining associated.

When the between dies, the guard dies with it, and what remains is exactly what Part One described at the fairgrounds: individuals in a line, each alone with his weather, each correctly perceiving that the outcome lives in a room none of them is standing in – and *no remaining muscle* with which to enter the room together. The dead society is not dead because its people stopped caring. It is dead because caring lost its address.

III. NARRATIVE INTERLUDE: THE MEETING

NARRATIVE INTERLUDE

Warren County, Ohio. March 2032. (Fiction.)

The church basement seated forty, and nine people came.

Dale had organized it – if 'organized' was the word for something that had required, he now knew, six weeks of a kind of labor he had never learned. He was seventy-two. He had spent his working life in county government, and it turned out that county government had done all his associating for *him; the job had handed him a public, pre-assembled, every election. Retired, alarmed, reading the book with the Russian name a third time, he had decided to do the thing the books said Americans used to do:* call a meeting. *A community meeting, nonpartisan, about the county's elections – about the consolidation, the observers with mottos, the four-hour lines. Just a meeting. Just the township, Tocqueville's smallest unit, reconstituted for one evening in the basement of a church whose congregation had shrunk so far that renting the basement cost twenty dollars and a promise to stack the chairs.*

What he learned, over the six weeks, was that nobody knew how anymore.

Not that people refused. That was the eerie part – almost everyone he asked said yes, warmly, absolutely, somebody should do something, tell me when. *The difficulty was upstream of refusal. The invitations had nowhere to travel. There was no paper to put a notice in. The church bulletin reached the congregation, which averaged eleven. The county's Facebook groups had all become, by 2032, either performance venues or ghost towns – posting the meeting there felt like posting it inside the machine the meeting was about. He made flyers and stood with them at the library, and people took them with genuine friendliness, the way you take a flyer for a lost dog, as a gesture of solidarity with the losing. The nine who came were: his sister; his sister's neighbor; the retired Methodist minister; a young couple who had moved from Columbus and were, Dale understood within five minutes, hoping the meeting would be a different meeting, the one where the resistance was organized, and who left during the coffee break*

when it became clear it was the one about polling-place consolidation; the county's last independent journalist, who covered it; a woman from the League of Women Voters, eighty-one, who had been running voter-registration drives since the Ford administration and who sat through the evening with the expression of a person attending her own funeral with good posture; and Sloane, who had driven up because Dale was family, and who filmed nothing and posted nothing and sat very still.

And the meeting itself – this was what Dale would tell no one, because there was no one to tell it to who would not find it merely sad – the meeting was good. *For ninety minutes, nine people who disagreed about nearly everything did the thing. They argued about the consolidation and found the disagreement had edges they could see around. The League woman knew where every polling place had stood since 1976 and why each had closed. The minister knew which precincts had no bus service. The journalist took notes. For ninety minutes the empty place was, in one church basement,* guarded *– not by anyone seizing it, but by nine people practicing the arts of the many, badly, rustily, with the visible effort of muscles long unused, and it worked, the way a long-unused muscle works: painfully, and it worked.*

At 8:40 they scheduled the next meeting. Four of the nine said they would come. In the parking lot afterward Sloane stood with him beside his car, and she was crying, which she did not do, professionally or otherwise, and she said – and Dale would carry the sentence, because his niece had spent her adult life inside the machine and knew its weight better than any of them – she said: 'I forgot that was a thing people could do.*'*

He drove home through the wet March dark, nine chairs restacked, twenty dollars paid. In the morning the journalist's article ran, the last one the paper would run, and it was read, as far as Dale could determine, by forty-one people, eight of whom had been there. The county's elections proceeded. The consolidation deepened. Nothing about the evening was falsified by that. It had not been a beginning. He understood that, and it took him most of the spring to understand it clearly: it had not been a beginning, it had been a specimen *– a living tissue sample from a dead organ, proof of what the organ had been for, viable for ninety minutes in a church basement, at twenty dollars, among nine people, none of whom could carry it back into the world because the world no longer had anywhere to put it.*

IV. WHERE THE ARGUMENT GOES NEXT

Structure, experience, manufacture, and now the social death – the thesis is complete except for its ending, and Yurchak is insistent about endings: the dead system does not decline, it *detonates*. Everything is forever, until it is no more. The collapse of a performative system is unthinkable the day before and obvious the day after, and the interval between those two mornings is where history actually happens.

Part Seven – the final part: **'Until It Was No More'** – on the suddenness, the orphans, what the morning after looks like, and what, if anything, survives the dead society in the nine chairs of a church basement.

PART SEVEN

Until It Was No More

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I. THE SPEED OF THE OBVIOUS

Yurchak's title is a sentence about time. *Everything was forever, until it was no more* describes a discontinuity that no model of gradual decline can capture: a system that appears, to every instrument available – polling, intelligence analysis, expert consensus, the lived intuition of its own citizens – maximally stable at the moment before it ceases to exist. The Soviet Union in 1985 was not wobbling. Its economy was stagnant but functioning, its state coercive but routine, its population disaffected but compliant, its elite cynical but invested. The CIA's assessments through the mid-1980s projected indefinite continuity. Soviet citizens who lived through those years, interviewed afterward, insist on the same point with an eerie unanimity: no one, *no one*, believed it could end. And then – Yurchak is precise about the phenomenology – in a span of months compressed into a kind of historical singularity, the unthinkable became the inevitable, and afterward the entire population retroactively became a nation of people who had seen it coming all along.

The mechanism of the detonation is the thesis's last piece, and it follows from everything established in Parts Two through Six. A performative system has no constative floor. Its stability is made entirely of rituals – and rituals, unlike institutions of substance, do not degrade gradually. They *hold perfectly* and then *invert instantly*, because their only content is the shared expectation that others will keep performing them. The unanimity vote is unanimous until the day it is not, and there is no intermediate state – no 90-percent vote, no wobble – because the vote was never measuring anything that could wobble. The performative system's signature property is that its collapse has no warning *because it has no*

process: it is the breaking of a spell, not the failure of a machine. One morning a threshold of actors – a border guard who doesn't close the gate, a general who doesn't give the order, an anchor who reads the statement in the wrong tone – decline to perform, and every other performer discovers in the same instant that the thing holding them in place was only ever the assumption that everyone else was being held. The system does not fall. It is *recognized*, all at once, as having already fallen, years ago, at the moment the language died – and the years of performance in between are reclassified, retroactively, as the long afterlife of a corpse.

Apply this to America and the standard question – *when will we know democracy has collapsed?* – dissolves, because it presupposes the constative register. There will be no day. That is the finding. There will be no announcement, no suspension, no tank, no candlelight. There will be a morning – and the thesis cannot date it, because the morning is not an event but a *recognition* – on which Americans look at the fully intact forms (the elections, the courts, the press, the Constitution framed on the courthouse wall) and discover, all together and each one privately, that the forms have been empty for some time and that everyone has known for some time. The collapse of American democracy, on the Yurchak model, is not a future event to be prevented or dreaded. It is a past event awaiting its morning.

II. THE MORNING AFTER

What does the recognition feel like from inside? The Soviet archive is unambiguous, and it refutes both available American fantasies. It is not the firing squad, and it is not the festival. The morning after hypernormalization is characterized, above all, by a *mundanity that feels like betrayal*. The stores open. The buses run. The flag is the same flag; only its referent has gone, and the referent was invisible anyway. The overwhelming reported sensation of 1991 was not terror and not joy but *embarrassment* – the specific shame of having performed, fluently and at full volume, for a dead audience, and of having known, somewhere, all along. And then, immediately, the second sensation: *orphanhood*. The performance had been hated, mocked, stiob-ed, lived *vnye* – and it had also been the architecture of every life. The kitchen table's warmth had been defined by the cold it sheltered from. When the cold lifted, the warmth had no outline. The last generation discovered that the dead system had been, in the only sense that finally matters, *their society* – and that the real lives built inside its emptiness could not simply be carried out into the open, because the open had no institutions, no vocabulary,

no townships, no *between*. Everything real had been private so long that there was no public left to carry it into.

America's morning after, on this model, will be recognizable by exactly these properties: the terrifying ordinariness of it; the intact buildings; the embarrassment of the performers – every statement, every *this is not normal*, every *the institutions held*, every *stop the steal*, re-read in the new light as recitations in a dead language; and then the long, unglamorous discovery that the republic cannot be *restored*, because restoration presupposes the thing whose death this whole thesis has tracked – the practiced, associational, many-not-One public that Tocqueville bet on and the twentieth century spent. What follows a dead society is not a reborn one. It is, first, a vacancy – and what fills a vacancy, in the absence of a public, is whatever is already organized: the machine, the list, the performers with the best-funded liturgy. Or – and this is the whole of the hope that survives the argument – it is filled slowly, at twenty dollars a basement, nine chairs at a time, by people relearning from nothing the arts of the many. Yurchak's Russia chose the machine. The thesis ends where it must: the American choice is still open, but it is being made, and it is not being made in the rooms where anyone is looking.

III. NARRATIVE INTERLUDE: THE RECOGNITION

NARRATIVE INTERLUDE

Warren County, Ohio. A morning in November. (Fiction.)

Dale Kerner woke at six, as he had for fifty years, and made coffee, and it was while the coffee was dripping that it happened – if 'happened' is the word, which he would spend the rest of his life unsure about, because nothing had happened, and that was the whole of it.

There had been no event overnight. He checked, out of old habit, and the feeds were full, as always, of the liturgy – a statement from the administration, a counter-statement, an expert saying unprecedented*, a court doing something within the range of reasonable interpretations. The ordinary performance, Tuesday-grade, unremarkable. And standing at the counter with the drip of the coffee the only sound in the house, Dale simply* knew *– the knowledge arrived complete, the way grief arrives, not as a thought but as a condition – that it was over. Had been over. That the thing whose name was on the courthouse and the money and the flag, the thing he had performed at the fairgrounds for twenty-two years, was not dying and not threatened but* finished*, and had been finished for a while, and that everyone knew, and that the performance*

would continue anyway, for years, possibly for the rest of his life, not because anyone believed it but because the performance was all that was left and there was nothing, yet, with which to stop.

He thought: so that's what the Russians meant.

He drank the coffee. The ordinariness was the obscenity – the book had said so, and the book was right – the sheer Tuesday of it, the buses running, the stores opening, his own body going through its liturgy, cup to sink, rinse, set upside down on the towel. He felt the embarrassment, too, exactly as the old Soviet citizens had described it in the interviews Sloane had shown him: twenty-two years of may the best man win*, of signing in the women with the mottos, of filing the reports and obeying the manual, all of it re-reading now, retroactively, as recitation. He had not been guarding the empty place. He had been* ushering in its theater.

At nine o'clock the phone rang, and it was Sloane, and she did not say hello. She said: 'Do you feel it?'

'Yes,' he said.

'Everybody at work feels it. Nobody's saying it. It's –' and she laughed, a short sound with no humor in it and no irony either, which was new for her, '– it's so normal*, Uncle Dale. That's the thing nobody told us. It's the most normal morning of my life.'*

They were quiet a moment, three states apart on a line that was certainly, in some registry, consistent with a flag.

'What do we do?' she said.

And Dale Kerner, seventy-two years old, retired custodian of a dead liturgy, thought of nine chairs in a church basement, and a woman who had run voter drives since the Ford administration sitting through her own funeral with good posture, and a young couple who had left during the coffee break because the meeting was not the meeting, and he thought of the last line of the book with the Russian name – everything was forever, until it was no more – *and how the line had a second half that no one ever quoted, because no one had written it yet, because it was not a sentence but an instruction:*

'I don't know,' he said. 'But I know where it starts. It starts with nine people in a basement who've forgotten how to be in a basement. So we do it again. Next month. Then every month. Twenty dollars. Stack your own chair.'

'That's it?'

'That's the whole of it,' he said. 'That's the entire remainder. It's nine chairs, Sloane. It's always been nine chairs. The rest was performance.'

Outside, the buses ran. The flag was the same flag. Everything was forever, and everything was over, and in a county in Ohio a man began, very slowly,

to make a list of names – not a list of the kind his niece had spent her career formatting, but the other kind, the older kind, the kind from which a many is made.

Afterword: The Argument, Whole

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Lefort: democracy is the regime of the empty place; its survival depends on no one claiming to fill it in the name of the One People. *Yurchak*: a system whose language has gone performative can persist, flawless and dead, for decades, inhabited *vnye* by a last generation that performs it without belief and cannot imagine its absence – until the morning the performance is recognized, all at once, as having always been a corpse. *Applied*: America has furnished the empty place from two directions at once, converted its four load-bearing institutions from constative to performative, manufactured two Peoples-as-One locked in a mirror fight of mutual expulsion, and dissolved the associational tissue that was the only guard the empty place ever had. What remains is the performance, the kitchen tables, and the nine chairs.

The dead society is dead. The many is not. It is merely out of practice.

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A NOTE ON THE FICTION

The interludes – Dale Kerner, Mara Okonkwo, Sloane, the election integrity centers, Civic Confidence, the list – are inventions. The statutes, directives, audits, and registries they depict correspond to no single document and to the pattern of many. Where an interlude's mechanism has a documented real-world analogue (election-office consolidation, Schedule-F-style civil-service reclassification, platform 'civic integrity' moderation pipelines, loyalty screening of career officials), the analogue is part of the public record of 2020–2026; the characters' experience of it is the fiction's own. The dates 2027–2032 are a forecast in the precise sense that Yurchak's title is a forecast: not of an event, but of a recognition.

❦

— End.