

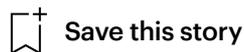
WHAT KIND OF NEW WORLD IS BEING BORN?

A Christmas essay.

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According to the Gospel of Luke, the Virgin Mary first learns that she'll soon give birth to Christ when she gets an unsolicited visit from an angel. Nice messenger service if you can get it. But before trusty Gabriel can dispense the good news upon which Christmas depends he has to calm the girl down. "Fear not," he says, and, in a way, this sombre reassurance is the Yuletide message in drastic miniature. This kid Jesus will save the world, Gabriel assures Mary. But if you've only known the world as it is—small, dark, inhospitable, beset by imperial Rome—you might be right not to get totally excited about what comes next. One person's salvation might be somebody else's death.

And then, of course, there's the sheer fear of birth. So much blood to bring love into the world! The real Nativity—for Mary, but also for anybody hoping to bring new life onto the scene—is a shocking, grisly business, including, these days, an operating table and a tangle of bleeping machines. Only a fool wouldn't be a little scared.

2025 in Review

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2025

Who knows what'll happen? What kind of new world is waiting? Christmas is the season of waiting and arrival, of tension and release, of birth as a paradigm-changing surprise. Recently, I've been thinking about the past year in this way, as something waiting to express itself in an unsettlingly new fashion. In some of the best moments of "Hamnet," one of the most discussed movies of the year, the actor Jessie Buckley twice portrays the violence of childbirth and how close it can bring you to the threshold between life and death. Life feels like that now: some new way of living keeps sloshing around the amniotic water, with more volume and vigor and perilous determination every day. Whatever it is, there's no guarantee that it'll be good.

More people are surrendering the tough, meaning-making work of cognition to A.I. products whose owners seem, at best, blithely uninterested in the lives and psyches of their customers. My girlfriend sent me a funny video the other day—it's a bunch of Brazilian guys who look exactly like Will Smith, Daniel Radcliffe, Vin Diesel, and Jackie Chan: highbrow stuff. I spent about twenty minutes replaying it, squinting my eyes, inspecting the evidence with scrutiny unequal to its importance, making sure it wasn't the product of some kind of tech deception before I allowed myself to laugh. Huge corporations are eating one another whole, happy to sell themselves and their publics out, sucking up to Donald Trump and plumping their own portfolios and pockets.

For much of the year, I very slowly read "America, América," Greg Grandin's brilliant parallel history of North and South America. The hero of the book's first section is the sixteenth-century Spanish priest and writer Bartolomé de

las Casas, who straddled the Old World and the New, issuing startling moral novelties to both. After a traumatizing early encounter with the horrors visited upon Indigenous people by the conquistadores and the colonial *encomienda* class, las Casas spent his life writing and speaking with an otherworldly energy against the conquest, frustrating both the Spanish crown and the hierarchy of the Catholic church. His keen focus on the equal personhood of the Indigenous people—who were undergoing a process that was “among the greatest mortality events in human history”—lit the fire of “a modern ethics of equality.” “In this,” Grandin says, las Casas was “a kind of Adam.”

Don't we need another one of those today? Some brave doula to help the world-to-come through the birth canal and to offer it an ethical path? I keep wondering: What kind of new moral being—good or bad—might be born in our time? One way to understand the worst actions and attitudes of Donald Trump is to recognize that he is auditioning with a cold cynicism for just this kind of role. Not only does he lie without shame, dole out violence as a way to keep power and entertain a perverse crowd, maintain an unstinting disdain for the poor and the weak and the lonely, and manifest sheer glee at the sight of other strongmen getting their way—but, just as ominously, he pretty brazenly *recommends* these behaviors to the rest of us. He lights the bomb of hatred and contempt, then looks out at us, smiling, as the flame eats the cord.

In January, during his second Inauguration, an event I keep trying to forget, he grimaced and mugged constantly—smirked while taking the oath, making po-faced ad-libs when talking disingenuously about God. He wanted, I think, to be seen taking serious things lightly, making a joke of rituals and sensibilities that he's glad to see fading away. What he presents, more than thin cultural and economic promises, is a bleak anthropology: *The time of restraint and fair dealing and good will is over, kid!*, he always seems to be saying, like a brutish “realist” out of a mid-century novel. *Get yours or get left behind.* He's surveyed the scene and sees a world finally bending itself in his inhumane direction. He wants the Nobel Peace Prize because he'd like to

redefine peace.

In April, upon the death of one of Trump's most steadfast and charismatic foils, Pope Francis, a new Pontiff was elected in Rome. Leo XIV, an Augustinian priest named Robert Francis Prevost, was raised in Chicago and spent much of his ministry in Peru—one of las Casas's intellectual battlefields in his campaign against the conquest. Prevost, a surprise to much of the Pope-watching public, stepped out onto the loggia wearing around his neck the ornate, blood-red papal stole that his predecessor had studiously eschewed, and, on his face, a modest smile. He had given himself a promising name. In 1891, Leo XIII—a fellow who used to go by Vincenzo Gioacchino Pecci, from Italy, where they used to make Popes—wrote a famous encyclical, "Rerum Novarum," or "Of the New Things." The letter was a response to the twinned hastenings of capitalism and industrial power, aimed at maintaining the dignity of workers in a time of uncertainty and upheaval.

The new Leo was entering the fray at a similar juncture, and, early in his papacy, he began to admit his anxiety over the development of artificial intelligence. In an address last May, with an understatement that has quickly become his signature, he spoke about the technology, predicting that it would "pose new challenges for the defense of human dignity, justice, and labor." He has continued to raise the issue, before groups of journalists and throngs of Catholic youth, always careful to avoid rote doomsaying but never seeming, either, to downplay its grave importance. In a similar way, in implicit counterpoint to Trump, he keeps speaking out on behalf of suffering people in Ukraine and Gaza and ICE detention centers and sundry other theatres of cruelty, articulating a hope that the swaddling clothes of the epoch to come won't have to be studded with spikes. His ongoing performance, though subtle, is one to watch.

To fret over the future of human creativity is, eventually, to mourn lost artists. Back in June, Sly Stone—a great American genius by my lights—slipped off the scene at the age of eighty-two. What always impressed me

about Stone was his interest in combination and synthesis, his strict disavowal, audible from one song to the next, of the idea of a “pure” music whose borders could be defined by genre, or by period, or, worst of all, by race.

Stone, raised in the multiculti Bay Area, came up playing music in the Church of God in Christ, a big Pentecostal denomination. He played in all kinds of bands and worked as a d.j. for a popular radio station. His eventual band, the Family Stone, was racially mixed—rare at the time—and, from the beginning, shone with evidence of its leader’s sophistication and restless ear. The name of the group’s debut album sounded like advance notice of an impending birth: “A Whole New Thing.” My favorite song on that record is “Advice.” I love the menacing nonsense of its opening lyrics:

Take my advice if you want a lover
I’m not going to be your brother
Are you afraid of what you might want to do
Or is reality hard for you?

Reality sometimes seemed very hard for Michael Archer, the singer better known by his stage name, D’Angelo, who died in October at fifty-one. He’d come along in the late nineties and, after the release of his first album, “Brown Sugar,” full of nicely made soul-funk confections such as “Lady” and “Shit, Damn, Motherfucker,” he became a paragon of “neo-soul,” a category meant to package a loosely connected group of musicians who took their sonic cues from the soul records of the sixties and seventies. D’Angelo’s talent was always more capacious than that label. His second album, “Voodoo,” full of off-kilter, behind-the-beat rhythms and ever-intensifying Pentecostal repetitions—he was a church boy, just like Sly—revealed him to be a skittish experimentalist, following a sound that emanated not from market imperatives but from some private grotto in his heart and head. “Voodoo” is often hailed as D’Angelo’s masterpiece, but for the past decade I have been much more in love with his third album, “Black Messiah,” which went even further in testing the limits of inwardness and intelligibility. His light, slurring, hornlike, Al Green-ish singing now melted into the rest of his

watery compositions, making the lyrics hard to hear but his great reservoir of unembarrassed feeling impossible to miss.

After the success of “Voodoo,” and, specifically, of the song “Untitled (How Does it Feel),” D’Angelo fled the mainstream spotlight, reportedly traumatized by his turn as a hunk-idol in the famously revealing music video for that song. He was a poet, a sophisticate whose music was the final outpouring of his encyclopedic knowledge of and vast affection for Black music. His songs outlined the shape of a complex identity to which no image—even the “sexiest”—could do real justice. D’Angelo was a guy, like many guys I know, who had trouble with his body. He was the kind of artist worth missing forever.

I spent a week this summer teaching at a small liberal-arts college in Upstate New York. Nice rhythm: workshops by day and readings of fiction and poetry by night. One night, the poet Chase Twichell read a suite of poems. Many of the pieces—I won’t quote them; they’re from an upcoming book—had to do with the death of her husband, the novelist Russell Banks. They were tough, funny, uncomfortable attempts to regularize the awful, oblong shape of grief. Twichell read without irony: no standup-comedy interludes between poems or undercutting faces while delivering her lines. She made only the smallest gestures—her thin, muscular arms julienned the air. Twichell has written often about her practice of Zen Buddhism, and one of her rare asides, offered after a particularly sad poem, had the feeling of ancient wisdom. “You don’t get to choose what you write about,” she said.

The truth of the statement shivered through me; I’ve been thinking about it for months now, less as a commentary on the writing life than a brutal fact of how it feels to live in history. All of us are surfing events, responding to tectonics deeper than we know. Only time will tell what we’ll be forced to sit and think through and attempt to describe. I admire people who stay faithful to their senses, who dedicate themselves to describing the harder edges of reality. One such artist is the filmmaker Raoul Peck, whose documentary “Orwell: 2+2=5” was, I feel sure, the most harrowing viewing experience of

my year.

The movie narrates the life of George Orwell, using a compendium of archival sources, including the great writer's letters and journals. But—as is often the case with Peck's bristlingly fertile and intelligent movies, such as "I Am Not Your Negro," a similar work of portraiture, about James Baldwin—the film spirals outward from the specifics of Orwell's biography, incorporating contemporary news clips and terrible images of children in danger, in Gaza and beyond. It asserts through juxtaposition and strong implication that the fascism against which Orwell inveighed is sitting, again, right now, at the doorstep of the world, waiting like a vampire to be invited fulsomely in.

It's scary stuff, reflecting with strident clarity a scary world. Peck strikes me as an updated version of an Old Testament prophet, spreading unwelcome truths at a moment of great significance. Or perhaps he's like Gabriel, bringing news that might cause us to stop and think, fish an unlikely salvation out of murky waters. These days surrounding the winter solstice are dark, dark, dark. Nice time to think about what we might make together when the light returns. Merry Christmas, no matter how sharp the birth pains. Fear not! ♦