



Fear and Loathing in Middle America

By Alex Roberts



Note from a resentful and sequestered journalist:

It's a real downer to be so perpetually right about this man all the time. Years ago, on a cruel Wednesday in November, the morning after Trump 'won', I had a brief conversation via Facebook with a family member.

He stated: "What a disaster."

To which I replied, "No, the disaster is yet to hit us."

*What a f***ing drag to be correct. The rally took place six months ago, for all I know, the VIRUS could have been banging around the corridors of that ugly squat Milwaukee structure already. At the time, it was one of the darkest eight hour periods of my life, a look into the other side only to find out that it was even worse than my 'good liberal' sensibilities could have fathomed.*

At the time of writing, I thought, perhaps I've gone too far with this one, crossing the Rubicon of objectivity. It turns out, no one quite went far enough in putting this man back into his place, and because of it all wishes of him slithering away seem a distant hope.

The Trump supporter, the ones that attend such rallies and wear big middle fingers that read 'HERE HILLARY!', the ones who'd show up to a rally in the depths of a frozen January, seemed as though

they'd follow the man of the long ties over a cliff if he'd merely pointed that way. There was something strange hanging in the air that day, like the feeling that the other shoe was about to drop, and do so squarely onto the bridge of one's nose.

*Sixth months later, the country lays tattered and beaten, split asunder by denial and modern political ineptitude swirled in with the Trump ethic's engrained cruelty. It was certain then that this was going to be an absolute emotional suck of a presidential campaign - one that would drag the country backwards in some inexplicable way yet to be revealed. Turns out, it was every way imaginable, even some from a nightmare. The US now sits at the end of the barrel of one man's ego, stuck in quarantine from the scourge of COVID-19, still arguing about masks for f***'s sake, the highest death tolls globally by far and Disney World throwing open its doors to keep the shareholders smiling via Zoom.*

I thought at the time, watching that audience and their fervor, Trump would surely win the election. I no longer think that, but it might not matter. The damage was done a long time ago, it just took a germ, a knee in a man's neck and decades of malignant systemic bullshit swirling together to prove it out.

It turns out some dumbness is terminal after all, but everyone was too worried about the "good of the country" to listen.

MILWAUKEE, January, 2020.

*F*** Your Feelings: Donald Trump 2020.* Indeed. A truer sentiment couldn't have been more reflected in the teeming mass of humanity that writhed back and forth between segmented caution tape lines in the January deep freeze of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Now, such heinous slogans were made for opportunity; it was \$20 (*CASH ONLY!*) and printed onto T-shirts, flying off a folded table as fast as wind-chapped hands could clamour for them.

It was the first thing that I saw as I came bounding out of Major Goolsby's Bar and Grill. I'd ventured into it to use the toilet (to avoid the horrors of portable loos used by thousands of waiting Trump supporters, many of whom had camped out on an overnight drunk in the line). On my way to the exit, I bumped into a table with six sorority age women, all silently eating Authentic Tennessee honey BBQ chicken wings and staring off idly into space; one of them wore a sign draped around her neck that said: *First Time Voter, All Time Republican*. None of them even looked up as the table rocked violently.

There were some 5,000 people out in the line, even this early, some two hours before the doors were set to open. I was wearing Republican "cosplay", a green polo shirt, pressed khakis and a backwards Milwaukee Brewers' baseball cap (an effort to make me look like a *good and decent* suburban conservative). These items, along with my winter-pasty Irish whiteness would serve me well; I could slide right in with these people and blend in, as long as I didn't say something tolerant and flag myself.

Within seconds of diving into the midst of the queue, flasks came zipping from hidden pockets; whiskey and vodka flowed out in bright red half litre frat-boy "solo cups". This was it, the centre of the universe for those yearning for the long-dead America that President Ronald Reagan destroyed in the 80s and then took credit for inventing; this was a carnival for depressed suburban accountant dads, their well-coiffed wives and an assortment of Northern US weirdos (like rednecks, but with strange heavily-nasal accents), ones that looked as though they'd simply hopped out of deer-hunting

season and hustled fixing carburetors to scrape together just enough gas money to get to the Tuesday day-drinking. All around me, people were pounding back booze like the end was nigh, and with the helicopters swirling back and forth overhead, I couldn't say it seemed they were far off base.

Red. It was all I saw. Not just the colour, but also the blinding feeling of it. Guys were hyped, this was their guy, a rock star idol straight out of the late 1980s, throwing a free festival for *them*. Simply everyone had on some kind of apparel. They'd all bought in and thrown down cash on this shameless shill; paying a billionaire to sport his likeness.

Scarves, hats, stars and stripes, camouflage MAGA jackets, signs, lewd buttons, T-shirts (several of them) that read in bold letters: *Hillary Sucks, but Monica BLOWS*.

That's what it was, although I realised it too late: I didn't match the crowd. For one hundred metres in any direction, everyone was branded and I wasn't.

People were slapping each other on the back. They were at ease here. They could really let loose and say how they really felt about jobs, Mexicans, the prospect of "war with those towel-heads in that sand-pit Iran", and their own collective victimisation. They were able to breathe out and send out FOX News talking points along with every liquor-tinged breath.

A fifty-five year old goateed man, while pulling a canned beer (the fifth I'd seen, but judging by his slur, the thirteenth of the day) from a cooler, saw this lack of conformity and my long hair and started in: "Man, I bet one of those liberals is going to raise their dumb f***ing head and say something. They always have to talk about their stupid feelings."

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I grinned a shit-eating grin and shot back, "I bet it'll be a whole bunch of them."

He lifted his shades and glared at me, beers and years of boredom behind his eyes. "You're not one of *them*, are you?"

I had a vision of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, when people who don't match up with the aliens are pointed and shrieked at by gaping horrific mouths. I looked back at him stone-faced. "My man, I'm a Christian soul, but you couldn't pay me to pray for that bitch Hillary."

He glared back, reading my face for a long moment before smiling slightly and tilting his Bud Light: Lime beer.

There was a lot of fear in this crowd; it was almost palpable. Several attendees made comments about having to "come out" as Trump supporters to family, friends, and co-workers. They all gave stories of heavy alienation. I'd had similar conversations with young and gay kids from the Deep South state of Georgia - tales of shunning and fearing disownment.

Perhaps this wasn't quite the audience for an impassioned discussion on historical disenfranchisement of minorities; to this line, they were the marginalised. It was obvious that they

finally felt *listened* to, they all seemed to have the same giddy expression of a secondary school student who just found out that she had a date to the dance.

The irony was thoroughly lost on all of these Trump supporters, however, as they failed to realise that victimisation isn't equal. It is clear from the crowd that a chief principle of a Trump crowd is playing to that ugly "woe-is-me" part of the lizard brain. In Trumpville, you really did get a raw deal all your life; you sad-sap white-male-of-the-first-world-making-60K-USD-a-year you.

Not only this, but it was probably a Honduran who delivered that shitty bargain up hot and steaming while stealing your jobs while you kept going to work every day.

Life, for some, just isn't fair.

Dear God, these well-fed victims were all drinking like it was pre-prom and it was all downhill from here in life. I watched five middle-aged women in matching navy blue *TRUMP 2020* shirts shotgun beers and then immediately throw the cans to the ground, only to pass a bottle of Fleischman's: Wisconsin's Number 1 Vodka! around in a circle; polishing it off in a mere two laps.

The scene outside was, to put it mildly, deeply strange. It was the same kind of weirdness that one would encounter heading into a rock-metal concert in the deep American South - shit always gets heavy in the event's parking lot; it is where the broke get loaded and the swag hustlers push their wares.

Now the feeling echoed eerily similar. Seven songs played in a sort of ramshackle list, but not in any rational order - songs by Lynyrd Skynyrd and Kid Rock would play twice in four tracks, followed by Elton John (not with permission to play his music) and, most jarringly, the Village People's *Macho Man*, a famous gay anthem of the 70s.

Such musical eclecticism led to tableaux playing out before me; such as watching two pot-bellied, white-goateed men wearing matching '*Christians for Trump!*' T-shirts, dancing and smiling with each other whilst holding hands in a sort of circular country jig.

I should have brought a flask myself, especially as I saw a young girl with an *Iranians for Trump* sign pose for selfies with overtly fascinated war-mongers in the line.

The music was split through every thirteen minutes or so by a pre-recorded public announcement. A woman with a voice similar in tone to Aunt Lydia in *The Handmaid's Tale* would suddenly exclaim:

"Hi and Welcome to this patriotic campaign rally to re-elect Donald Trump, featuring your Commander-in-Chief, Donald J. Trump! We thank you for coming out to show your patriotism and your pride. Donald Trump cares about your First Amendment Rights....almost as much as he cares about your Second Amendment Rights! But there are some people who want to take advantage of Donald Trump's patriotism by interrupting his speech during the rally! If you see protesters, don't get violent, just hold up your complementary Trump signs and yell TRUMP TRUMP TRUMP! The police will be around to collect them shortly! Thank you and Keep America Great!"

A nearby bystander muttered, "The Iranians are smart man, they knew we'd have blown them into a sandbox, just like those f***ing terrorists in Iraq."

Jesus, this was going to be a long several hours out here, and the temperature was starting to drop. The wind picking up and sucking through the office blocks along the Milwaukee River, before swooping downwards to smack us.

Any faithful Midwesterner will tell you that the winters here are an atrocity, enough to make you curse your ancestors. Anyone you catch outside enjoying themselves in such foul climate is to be avoided, as they are probably up to no good. The bitter cold brings out the bitterness in people, a sentiment that was now being leaned into heavily.

Towards the front of the line, assorted hired security heavies were yelling, "WHATEVER YOU HAVE TO EAT, DISPOSE OF IT NOW! THERE ARE NO HANDWARMERS ALLOWED. THROW THEM AWAY NOW!" Soccer moms began to heft back entire sachets of wine; Skinny Girl Margaritas, martinis in water bottles, whatever their acrylic nails could reach.

The dirtiness was astounding towards the end of the queue; garbage cans overflowed three-fold their capacity and it was clear that many had brought chairs with the full intention of abandoning them. Folded camping chairs lay in piles, covered with soon-to-rot picnic platters of mysterious orange cheeses with Wisconsin-Made! processed beef summer sausage. Glass was everywhere, smashed into near dust on the ground. I had a terrible vision of being knocked to the ground by an overzealous ca -mechanic sporting a MAG' Hat, crushed under feet pounding towards seeing their false idol spit foul-smelling lies through a loudspeaker.

Now was not the time for such thoughts; it was time to smile and nod. Agree tacitly, scream inwardly: individual thought is strongly frowned upon in such crowds.

Three hours in and I finally made it to the door, a great inward wind tunnel sucking us all into its void towards several polo shirt-wearing ex-military types guarding a metal detector.

Now, when I'd heard of this spectacle guised as a legitimate political campaign rally, I acted quickly, signing up for a ticket online and spelling all of my details out with precision. If I were to subject myself to this Trumpian f***ery, I planned on coming correct and not being turned back rudely at the door.

I had assumed that security would be bordering on a prison camp, a Kafkaesque mess of purity-by-campaign-slogan hat. I'd scrubbed my pockets of all potential liberalisms and half-suspected to be found out for malicious statements I'd made about the "administration" in mid-2017 while drunk on White Cap in Nairobi.

Instead, there was no check - I was simply whisked through and searched thoroughly, pushed along further down the tunnel, like they needed the numbers and were filling the seats with any hapless idiot dumb enough to cut back on their hourly wages long enough to attend.

It played into the sudden rush of realisation as to just how disjointed and chaotic the whole thing was. Just like that, I was in, surrounded by cowboy hats and camo, although I noticed that all talk of "open carry" and "2nd Amendment Liberty" was quickly discarded in the name of the safety of The Republican Party.

There was a strong sense of unity in the Panther Arena, a bizarre squat throwback to 1960s' mid-size- market indoor coliseums; a beautiful modern facade outside, but once in, a droll concrete oval, with little character, only awkward scarlet *TRUMP!* posters to dot the walls.

Every 60 feet, tables with the exact same gaudy merchandise were placed. That same ugly feeling that used to come around when I'd been whisked around to curio shops in Kenya washed over me: that some faceless puppet master was pulling the strings, fleecing money out of pockets looking for an "authentic experience".

I found a seat to the stage left of the podium, some twenty metres away. I wedged myself between middle-aged conspiracy theorists and pondered my options. Who could I kick aside if someone yelled "GAY!" in the middle of this throng and caused a fear-driven stampede? The 60 year old singing *I'm Proud to be an American!* off-key while ogling the blonde FOX News anchor standing at the crowd fence down towards the floor seemed a prime target to trample over.

"God damn, would you look at her, she's got the tits of an angel!" the singer was whispering in my ear. He was the kind of awkward older Midwestern man you never want to be spiraled downwards into a conversational hole with, "She's fair and balanced alright. HAHAAHAHAHAHA!"

I suddenly had the bad image of tens of thousands of once-decent Middle Americans being seduced by electric sex and overt racism over the entire eight-year run time of the Bush administration. I swallowed a grimace and leaned back towards him. "I heard that Roger Ailes (the now deceased CEO of FOX News) willed them to her."

He looked back at me, slightly perturbed. It was a gentle reminder that this was not the crowd for sarcasm.

And what was this crowd exactly? Down on the floor seemed to be the most "out there"; the veritable roadie of the Trump supporter, the parking lot people. From my perch, I could see conspiracy theories in print, awkward hats, and oh, so many atrocious haircuts.

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Collude This, Bitch! The letters were in glitter and framed a middle finger on a T-shirt; complements abounded to the wearer.

I sat in that sweaty seat, mainlining coffee as various campaign hangers-on came around and repeatedly asked me to volunteer, which I claimed I already had outside of Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. A couple seemed to doubt this, but I just shrugged and went back to pretending to enjoy the music. In this crowd, ignorance is woke.

Speaking of which, why this music? It was a major theme from the entire proceeding. Why are they playing *this* right now? It wasn't just that the artists being played had expressly told the Trump campaign to f*** off under threat of litigation, it was the odd mix of it. *Nessun Dorma* was followed by REMs' *Everybody Hurts*, followed again by *Proud to be an American*. The music rang out as though an American-idol obsessed 13 year old had made a mixtape; there was no thematic tie at all; the music rambled the same way Trump did. Was the audience being subconsciously primed for a stream of continual disjointed thoughts?

Paul McCartney had just began singing the refrain to The Beatles' *Hey Jude* when the music suddenly cut out, the recording coming to a screeching halt, leaving a brief void of silence and nervous laughter, only for the concert speakers hanging from the ceiling, at a volume that could only be described as apocalyptic, to blare forth the opening chords of Lionel Richie's *Hello* badly shaking the molded plastic seats down to the screws.

It is an odd thing to watch 9,300 adults simultaneously sing a song of youthful alienated and lonesome heartbreak, all whilst wearing identical hats.

And the arena kept filling up. Early on, as I sat idly in my seat, clasping a Trump sign that an overzealous young Republican had thrust rudely into my hands, I smirked and thought of Trump's repeated crowd size claims; the ones that made it seem he had an underlying issue with how big things are...

Now, however, the room continued to engorge, with people seemingly streaming in from God knows where, many piss drunk already.

"Hello? Is it me you're looking for?"

My ears ringing, I made my way back out for another cup of drastically overpriced coffee, poured by a mostly black concession stand staff that seemed absolutely dead set on avoiding making eye contact with any Trump supporting patrons.

Who could possibly be intimidated by a man with seven AR-15 rifle pins on his skull-and-bones T-shirt? It is his God-given right after all, just as long as the guns don't get into the hands of *the minorities*. There were a great many fashion statements seemingly derived exclusively from intimidation, a lot of awkward male posturing, a great many uncouth phallic references, both intentional and not.

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The majority of the Republican leadership in Wisconsin is, above all, boring as an insurance salesman's pitch during a heatwave. They meander through talking points, drone on about "fiscal responsibility" and yammer endlessly about "how every life is sacred" before "praying for the troops" who are "keeping us safe" in whatever military conflict has 100x the non-American casualties this week.

This is standard Bush-era, post-9/11 fare.

As such, these typical right wing tools seemed dreadfully out of place following the Trump campaign managers who came out to pounding 70s rock anthems before throwing T-shirts into the crowd at a high velocity and condemning the soul of the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, to burn in hell for eternity.

Everyone in the crowd sensed it; this was the state-fair/semi-professional stock car race/fireworks accident turned sentient and rampaging its way to the stage: the anticipation was now so thick that with each bland nothingness let forth from one of these faceless suits at the podium, the tension steadily built.

It was as if Wrestlemania was here and everyone wanted to be splattered by blood. This was no space for a PG rating.

"Hurry the hell up," I heard the creepy old man next to me mutter as Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson said some boring thing about bombing Iran if they didn't "respect agreements".

Yes, indeed, just ignore all serious things by those who can make such decisions and get to the main event. Politics isn't political to this crowd. This is only entertainment.

After Vice President Mike Pence took the stage, briefly unbuttoned his jaw and let loose an incredibly boring vision of the world ending for 22 minutes, it was time for *it*.

Feet stomped and jaws clenched. Elvis was in the building. Then, as Michael Jackson's *Beat It* got cut and switched over to a blaring rendition of *Proud to be an American*, Donald Trump himself awkwardly popped out into view from behind a curtain, emerging to his comfort zone, announced by a lispng voice booming through the PA system.

He tottered around for some minutes, gesticulating wildly while the 10,000-strong crowd went somewhere well beyond ape-shit in pandemonium.

"F*** YEAH DONALD!" a man in a bright orange hunter vest screamed out from behind me, his voice cracking as if pre-pubescent. The crowd swayed back and forth, chanting "U-S-A!" in a unified boom, surging up and forward, staring at this strange-looking man now standing at the pulpit.

It has been ridiculed in the media, but it can't be understated just how strange this man's posture truly is. As he launched into his self-congratulations at nearly causing a regional war in the Middle East, I couldn't stop staring at his hips; they sat there as though they were displaced, somehow his torso shifted forward above them, requiring a stand and microphone for him to lean into, as if he wasn't truly whole unless screaming obscenities about minorities to his converted faithful.

After brief introductions, one of the most surreal six minutes of any speech ever came flowing with such stunning speed. I was flabbergasted. With one breath, the press was cursed as "corrupt, evil, liars". With the next, Iran was threatened with obliteration without subtlety.

The masses in the cheap seats were with him all the way.

Americans, by and large, have an ugly tinge of entitled jingoism to their conversational abilities and global view; and sometimes we just can't help ourselves but lean into these instincts, especially when drunk and encouraged.

Many within this weird country look down openly on people from other cultures. They talk about Africa as though it is a monolith made of people below their station. As they clamoured for a fascist leader who was openly lying to them, admitting it, then asking them to clap for the falsehoods, I took a mental note of just how "superior" American Democracy really was.

"You tell them Trump!" In came the harangues and chorus of agreement. From somewhere above, faint voices began to ring out, their words unclear, their message of protest practically crystal. Two girls, probably come down from some bastion of liberal tendencies at the *University*, revealed smuggled T-shirts and unfurled a cloth banner that read something to the affect of *NO TO WAR!*

The crowd universally booed and hissed them with vicious intent. Fists waved, middle fingers straightened. Trump waved his hands about like some sort of deeply disturbed conductor, before rebuking the girls to "go home to mommy!"

"He sure knows how to tell those pussies off, huh?" The same dirty old man was trying to engage me again, now breathing seemingly directly into my eardrum.

Knowing Americans, this same schmuck sitting next to me will probably print up six or seven of Trump's lamest threats, print them onto T-shirts and later be convicted of tax fraud when he launders prescription drug money through selling them on eBay. He'll then be pardoned by the administration via a midnight tweet storm. The world turns onward.

The crowd was stomping their feet; sin turned Pentacostal while led by their preacher. The first thirty minutes or so could be viewed as a sort of unhinged Greatest Hits album, like watching a fading rock star, propped up on just enough speed to bang out his most well-known chords. Trump struck out at all the classic notes:

"Bomb Iran? Just playing (or are we?)."

"How great is the military? Great, but only because they respect me, oh, how they respect me."

"Aren't Mexicans coming up from the south to surely rape your elderly first grade teacher and beat her poodle to death with a sack full of meth and drug profits? Almost definitely, but I alone can stop it. BECAUSE OF THE WALL."

"Police are great aren't they? It's surely a shame that the inner cities don't respect them enough."

"Democrats are a vile sack of evil, trying to convict me and get me out of the White House, but don't they know any better? I'll never leave. Just kidding, or am I?"

"Nasty Nancy Pelosi is trying to convict me in this horrible, ugly, witch-hunt; which I openly admit guilt to, but that's okay because I said so."

With this last statement, the masses roared their approval. Signs were held aloft; chants of "FOUR MORE YEARS" began in earnest, only to be soon drowned out with chants of "LOCK HER UP!" aimed at the Democratic Speaker of the House.

Three rows down and to the left, a rotund woman was wearing a jean jacket with the words "DON'T IMPEACH!" sequined onto the back. She turned towards me slightly, and wiped a tear away from her eyes. There was broad grin on her face. Could this be the best day of her life? For some reason, I thought of some dull-eyed American I'd met in a Nairobi bar back in 2013, asking me why Kenyans were so blind in their political loyalty to oligarchs who couldn't care less if they died.

With that, as his speech rose and fell, with that awkward cadence of his, he took pause, within which a bearded hipster launched an emphatic "F*** YOU!" from the mid-tier of the bleachers, only to be pushed slightly, and have cardboard TRUMP signs shoved into his chin. Two tired-eyed cops come and collect him by either elbow, pulling him out as he dragged his VANS sneakers along the polished concrete.

As the police were duck-walking him out, presumably to throw him headlong into a soiled snowbank, Trump paraded several of the top Wisconsin right wing establishment onto the stage; each were yanked back and forth with an extended and aggressive handshake, as though they were show dogs being broken in by their overzealous owner.

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Show of dominance. That's what it was. I'd seen it before, when lions fight, the king has to put the lesser males in their place.

This was pure animalism in politics. Superiority had to be shown, teeth had to be bared and someone

had to show the neck. The enemy had to be pointed out and shouted down. There can be no dissent in such circles – and within America, the dominant tend to have gun racks on their trucks.

While the first 30 minutes of the 87 minutes were utter lunacy, it was trackable insanity, the kind that you expect to see during a monster truck rally, a rodeo, a semi-professional wrestling title bout or a ladder match during a hailstorm in Florida. Utterly bonkers, but not unexpected.

Nothing, however, could have prepared me for the left turns during the middle section of the speech. The political “monster truck” that is Donald J. Trump went off script and was the campaign rally equivalent of watching a giant machine of metal and air-brushed flame patterns veer off into the crowd. There was simply no predicting where Trump’s verbal tirades would take us next.

I tried to keep track. I swear I did. I was regrettably entirely sober, wide awake, and pumped full of the adrenaline that can only come with the temptation of taking off my shoe and throwing it at Mike Pence to find out if he was in fact a mere hologram.

“THE WATER!”

Trump shouted it into the microphone and let the words hang out in space, the crowd screaming, his orange tanned hands held up into the air.

“It’s terrible. The water comes down from the north, into California, but Gavin Newsom, that horrible governor, he takes the water. He doesn’t know what to do with the water. He sends the water out into the ocean!”

“The Ocean! The Pacific Ocean! Imagine that. And the fish, oh the fish, they don’t know what to do with it! Is it good water? We know, but they don’t care!”

“AND THE DISHES! Oh God, the dishes. You do the dishes once. It’s not enough. The dishwashers aren’t strong because they’re taking the water. You have to put them through one-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten times! And the light bulbs! They’re toxic! You have to unscrew them? You have to unscrew them. And walk them into the dump and put them down?! Who will do that?! So we’re going to give you the water back. Through the sinks, through the showers, and through the other thing! The toilets! You’re getting the water back! And I will be the one to give it back to you!”

There was no hiding it; my jaw was agape. I truly had no idea what he was talking about. It was then, and only then, that I was really afraid during the entire ugly proceeding. I realised that not only is this man a bigot and all the rest, but there might actually be an element of true mental derangement within him, an element that his multitude of supporters embrace wholeheartedly, without remorse. This man, rambling about sinks and light bulbs within millimetres of a full-blown war with Iran, a conflict with a people that he was truly incapable of reasoning with. They were brown after all.

*“F*** THOSE LIGHTBULBS!”* The cry came from a bearded man, now beet-red in the face, flanked on either side by his teenage sons who stared at him, beaming.

Trump rambled onwards; all the while without any care, utterly gauche, to the extent it was damn near respectable. One thing was clear: that Trump was a total master of his craft, however bizarre and atrocious his craft might be.

As he went into his bombastic closing remarks, the thousands stayed with him, beat for beat, rising and falling, laughing on cue, cheering and booing with utter abandon – like the finale flourish of a fireworks display.

An ill-fated Bernie Bro pulled out a “Bernie Sanders for President 2020” sign. Trump looked down at him from the stage and the crowd pounced, viciously pulling at him, jostling him back and forth.

“HIT HIM!” A woman’s voice from somewhere close to me.

Two heavies came from the back down onto the floor, closing in on this long-haired liberal getting shoved back and forth; a cork in the storm.

Despite their tattoos and Bill Goldberg haircuts; I ignorantly thought to myself, “At least security is here and will save him.”

But they grabbed him all the harder, ripping his sign downwards, tearing at it and pushing him out the back. How dare he have the audacity to support someone other than the great leader?

Trump peaked into crescendo, rambling on about the inevitability of winning this year and that the best people, the chosen people, the tough people were on his side. They would take no other result; and the scrum down on the floor bellowed their support. This wasn’t politics, it was a death roll, and the grip was tightening.

The Rolling Stones’ *You Can’t Always Get What You Want* began to play, and with much more glad-handing, waving, and awkward displays of faux-nationalistic pride, he was gone, little more than a thin wisp of a hair plug disappearing behind a curtain.

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The spell held over the crowd, but started to dissipate. We began to file out, shuffling bashfully towards the exits, as if we were all leaving some truly horrific live sex show in Mtwapa. In such circumstances, don’t make eye contact.

There were several black Trump supporters amongst the crowd, and more than a dozen people caught their eye, giving a little fist pump of “unity”. The underlying sentiment was to return to their cohort and tell them, “No, no, I swear there were black people there who support Trump too! See he can’t be racist! It is a lie spun by liberal geeks, worried about their feelings!”

“HEY YOU!” A frat-boy was screaming into my face, thrusting his pointer finger. He looked animated, and surely, this would be the end of me. I had gone too far out on a limb here, and now I was to be “outed”.

He was motioning to my hat, which sported the insignia of the Milwaukee Brewers baseball club. Without smiling, he gave me a thumbs up and walked sullenly away. I started to cut around people as I traversed the crowd towards the exit. I felt as though my welcome was overstayed and now it was mostly certainly past the hour of bouncing.

The cold was a shock to the system, like waking up suddenly after a long night of drinking. I found myself looking for my wallet several times, wondering, “Where was I?”

A feeling of unease had come over me, especially looking about at the grinning faces streaming past me as I paused to stuff the TRUMP 2020! sign deep into my sleeve. It was the same sense one would

have waking up after a night out next to someone that you know you shouldn't have called.

It was a kind of toxic satisfaction, exhilaration definitely, happiness of a sort - but all pervaded by a destitute hanging melancholy, of witnessing something truly bizarre, only to realise that you have to meander back to your schlubby life and under-sized apartment.

Could the people around me know just how wrong-headed almost everything that just happened had been? Looking around, I couldn't see it; they'd bought into all of this a long time ago and had cast their lot.

"They'd bought in because he simply refuses to give in the way they did." It struck me, to Trump supporters, he really was some kind of magical maverick, condemning the norm and doing it "his way"; the tax code and civility couldn't stop him. "It doesn't matter if *our guy does it* as long as he wins."

A beating of drums suddenly struck up, the bass thumping dull within my chest. Streaming out into the cold, we were careening towards it, as the zip-tied metal-grate fences surrounded on all other sides kept us walled in.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a city known for terminal dumbness at all levels of authority figures, had made another gangbusters decision: to line up six token cops in riot gear and let the exiting Trump contingent of thousands file straight into the waiting protesters; for Trump can go nowhere without an audience. I must admit, that while inside, I'd forgotten about them entirely; now it was unavoidable.

*"YOU'RE A F***ING EMBARRASSMENT!"* One middle-aged white female Trump supporter screamed into the face of a young Latina girl, probably 16 years old, banging a cow bell while chanting, "NO FASCIST USA!"

I'd had enough, I tucked the sign in deep and crossed over the line. As I did, a cup full of ice came flying in and went over the shoulder of an old white-haired hippy man who was banging a tambourine slightly off-beat. The ice scattered on the concrete at our feet.

Megaphones and drums split the night and the wind howled around us. Some in the crowd held glow sticks, which, when mixed with the reddish tinge of police tail lights, gave the entire tableau a hue of a football riot about to break loose.

Shit, it was a Tuesday in January, in bitter cold Wisconsin. The campaign hadn't even really cracked off yet. The scene looked to spin downwards, liquored up left versus just-incited right. And in all of this, it was clear, despite it all, the man in the over-sized suits was certain to win again.

There are no consequences for such men in history. They will continue to ensure their victory because they know a dark truth that their foes never could grasp: that politics is just a game of monopoly, and if you're not cheating, then you're just not trying.

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