

It is fortunate that people are being so precious during the debate.

You are very good, Mr. Smith, at getting free grog.
You have showed how dumb you are twice.

[Libretto]

JUST A GIRL WHO CAN'T SAY NO

From the lyrics to "All Things to All Men," a song from Pornography: the Musical, written by the poet Simon Armitage, in which women sing about their experiences in the adult-film industry. The musical was broadcast on British television last fall.

Yesterday lying alone in a bedroom
Yesterday crying and dying of boredom
But I was a showgirl, destined for stardom

Today I'm the nurse getting off with the doctor
Tomorrow I'm shocked by a driving instructor

Today I'm the teacher who fancies the student
Tonight I'm the student who fancies the teacher
Tomorrow it's fun with a nun and a preacher

Today I'm the girl with a crush on her sister
Tonight I'm the traitor who teases the jailor
Tomorrow I'm taken down south by a sailor

Today I'm surprised by the size of the postman
Tonight I'm alone in the house with a truncheon
Tomorrow I'm frisked by a team of policemen

Today I'm the missus who calls for a plumber
Tonight I'm the stripper who swallows a python
Then bends over backward to help out the juggler
Tomorrow I'm doused with a hose by a fireman

Today I'm a virgin at home on her lonesome
Who's joined by a soldier who makes it a twosome
Who's come with his brother who makes it a threesome
Who's come with his uncle who makes it a foursome

Then in walks a swordsman, an oarsman, a horseman
And five or six pillaging Norsemen—it's awesome

The typist, the gymnast, the tart, and the matron
Yesterday lying alone in a bedroom
Yesterday crying and dying of boredom
But destined for stardom

WALES: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
rent-a-gob
vermin

YUKON

We know that some members in this House are dinosaurlike, but surely...

Mistruths are sometimes not always the truth, Mr. Speaker.

[Consideration]

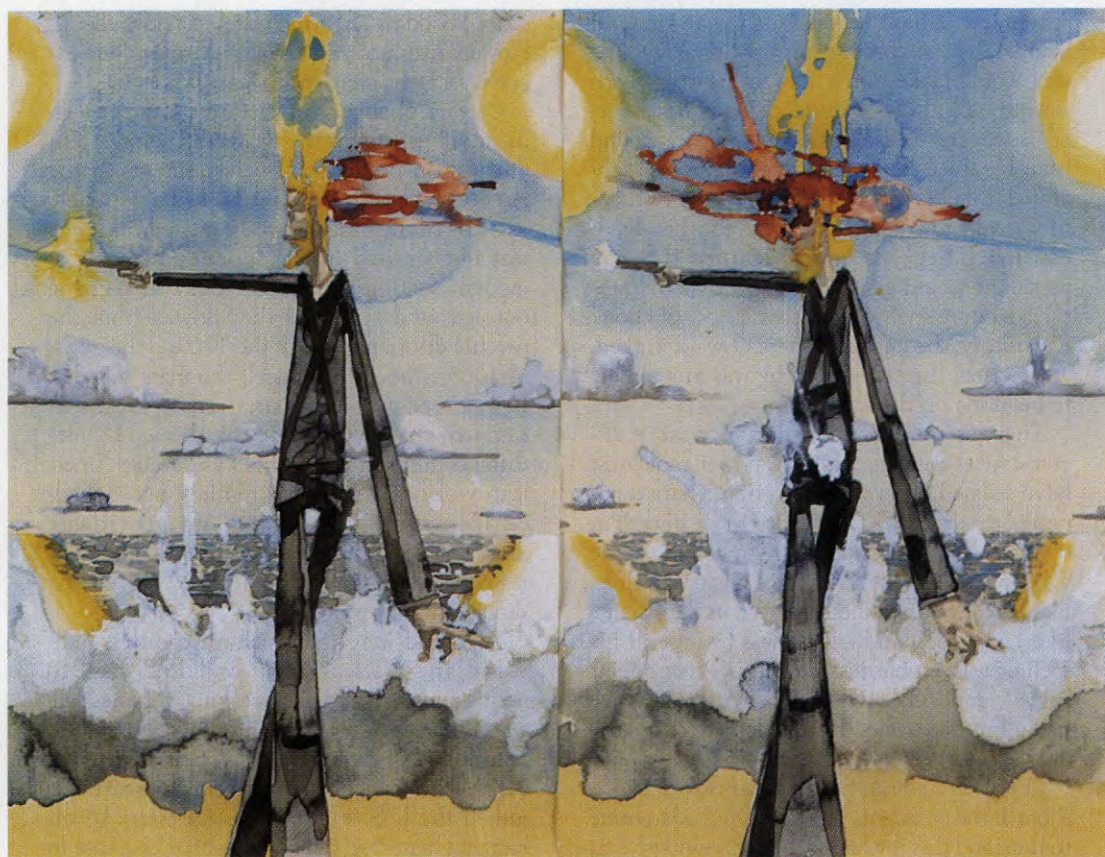
THE AMERICAN ABSURD

By Don DeLillo, from a November 20 Frontline forum hosted by Wen Stephenson as an online companion to the documentary Who Was Lee Harvey Oswald? DeLillo's fictionalized account of the Kennedy assassination, Libra, was published in 1988 by Viking.

What's at stake is our trust in a coherent reality. That day in Dallas changed the way we think about the world. Powerful events build their own networks of chaos and ambiguity, and the assassination of the president has become a landmark in the history of such events. The physical evidence contradicts itself; the eyewitness accounts do not coincide; there are failures of memory; there are conflicting memories. For forty years, responsible people have disagreed over the number of gunmen, the number of shots, the origin of the shots, the time span between shots, the paths the bullets took, the number of wounds on the president's body, the size and shape of the wounds, and many other crucial details of the basic investigation.

Then there are the human puzzles, the organizational links—Oswald's fragile marriage, his dismal state of mind, his attitude toward Kennedy, his relationships with intelligence agencies. There are the Soviet and Cuban themes, the organized-crime theme, the double-agent theme, and many others, all with their sets of supporting evidence. There are the official documents lost, missing, altered, classified, and destroyed. There is the flood of coincidence, large and small. There is the plausible conviction that Oswald was part of a conspiracy, the sensible belief that Oswald acted alone. A culture of distrust and paranoia began to develop, a sense of the secret manipulation of history, and this feeling intensified through the decades, from Dallas to Vietnam to Watergate to the doorstep of Iraq.

What happened during that moment in Dal-



Suicide, by Barnaby Furnas, was on display last fall at Marianne Boesky Gallery, in New York City.

las, and in the months and years before—in Oswald's life—that we can determine with certainty? How did such a vivid fragment of reality, caught on film before hundreds of witnesses, with trained security personnel on the scene, become so deeply lost in the maze of documentation, dispute, rumor, paradox, lies, dreams, illusions, ideologies, absurdities, murders, suicides, and endlessly suggestive human involvements?

Something happened. Oswald fired three shots from a sixth-floor window. But was there something else—a clear motive, a larger design, a second gunman? The truth is knowable. But probably not, ever, incontrovertible.

He didn't think of himself as "Lee Harvey Oswald." The state and the media, in response to significant criminal acts, will sometimes include the subject's middle name as a way of imposing an institutional gravity on the matter. This practice, in Oswald's case, produced an early stereotype, a drifter with three first names and a pale, spare, squinting look—someone superficially familiar. The fact that he was a dead man before the weekend was over created another kind of dis-

ance. It is also true that many people did not want to see "the real Oswald" because they were unwilling to grant fully human status to the man accused of murdering the president.

In fact, he may have seemed a little unreal to himself. He used many false names and appears at times less an amateur actor in his own life than a character, someone put together out of doctored photos, tourist cards, mail-order forms, visa applications, and altered signatures. He tried to break out of a marginal life by joining the Marines, then defecting to the Soviet Union, then attempting suicide; by reading Karl Marx and ordering guns through the mail; and by trying to kill Major General Edwin A. Walker, a notorious right-wing figure, in April 1963. It may be tempting to think of Oswald as a figure out of modernist literature, an American variation of Beckett's sad and wailing Krapp, whose last tape (in this case) is secretly fabricated by the KGB or the FBI.

But Oswald *was* real. He loved his daughters, beat his wife, took out the garbage. He did not move from logical set A to logical set B, as such things are configured in most examinations of his life. He was driven, like many of us, by obscure motivations, large and small incon-

sistencies. When he fired a shot at General Walker, he was committing a political act, one that would make him a man in history, which is what he'd always wanted. Seven months later, however, his life was coming down around him. He lived in a cheap rooming house, separated from his family, harassed by the FBI, denied a visa to Cuba, working at another dead-end job. Then one day he learned that the president would visit Dallas and that the motorcade, stunningly, would pass the School Book Depository, the building where Oswald worked, at precisely the time when he was most likely to be alone on the sixth floor.

This was not history but dreams, a set of circumstances carrying an eerie power that must have seemed otherworldly to him. Oswald appeared to admire JFK. He tended to see himself in the president. They had things in common. Lee was always reading two or three books at a time, like Jack. Lee did military service in the Pacific, like Jack. His handwriting was awful and his spelling was terrible, just like Jack's. At one point his wife and Jack's wife were both pregnant. Lee had a brother named Robert and so, of course, did Jack.

Oswald would not have walked two blocks to shoot at the president. The president had to come to him, and this is what happened, ruinously, on November 22.

It was an act of naked desperation. Oswald abandoned his claim to history and became the first of those soft white dreamy young men who plan the murder of a famous individual—a president, a presidential candidate, a rock star—as a way of organizing their loneliness and misery, making a network out of it, a web of connections.

Think of Oswald the defector, the pro-Castro activist, the earnest student of world affairs. In the end, there was nothing left of him but a defeated ego, a self isolated from the world and from other people. He fell out of history and politics and became a figure in one of his own bent daydreams.

The twentieth century was built largely out of absurd moments and events. In time we had to invent an adjective, European and literary, that might encapsulate the feeling of impending menace and distorted reality and the sense of a vast alienating force that presses the edges of individual choice.

These things are Kafkaesque.

In America it is the individual himself, floating on random streams of disaffection, who tends to set the terms of the absurd.

A man walks into a diner and shoots eleven strangers. What city was that, and who remembers the shooter's name?

A couple of teenagers wander through their

school building shooting teachers and students. How many times did this happen, and where exactly, and who were the kids with the guns?

Oswald changed history not only through his involvement in the death of the president but also in prefiguring such moments of the American absurd. He was not media-poisoned, as many of the others have been, and his crime was not steeped in the supermarket cult of modern folklore and dread. But think of the outrages and atrocities that flowed from the psychic disorientation of the 1960s—the assassinations, the cult murders, the mass suicides. It was surely the assassination of President Kennedy that began to give us a sense of something coming undone. This was vintage American violence, lonely and rootless, but it shaded into something older and previously distant, a condition of estrangement and helplessness, an undependable reality. We felt the shock of unmeaning.

If Oswald were truly such a weightless individual, the Warren Report would not have to number twenty-six back-breaking volumes. He was a man who managed in a brief lifetime to compile an extraordinary personal history, dense with incident and shifting context. He joined the U.S. Marines, quoted Marx to his barracks mates, served at a sensitive U-2 base in Japan, and would eventually develop connections of various kinds, some documented, others only conjectured, with people of provocative political shadings—from Tokyo to Moscow to Minsk and from there to New Orleans, Mexico City, and Dallas.

There are the men who knew Oswald. Then there is the man who killed him. More connections, further implications, particularly with regard to organized-crime figures.

It is true that some theorists have searched for the conspiracy that explains everything as a way out of the mist that has drifted through the decades. But who were the conspirators? If there was a plot, it was small, crude, and largely improvised—not the master plan that would allegedly balance the loss of the president. Our state in the world, the fact that we are human, is the only element the equation needs in order to be balanced. We're able to think into the stars, imagine alternative lives for ourselves, and there are times when we feel equal, some of us, to the vast social reality around us.

What else would make a man decide he might run for president?

Oswald was detached, frequently foolish, sometimes cruel, and persistently self-deluding. At times, an unredeemable little rat. But he found a way to link himself with a man who was shaping history. This is what guns are for, to bring balance to the world.