

## **The Pessimism Deficit**

By SARAH VOWELL

A couple of weeks ago, I was doing a reading at one of those bookstores on the West Coast where at least five people will hiss like snakes and radiators if an author even mentions the names of certain senior administration officials. And that was back before members of the executive branch actually started shooting their friends.

The question-and-answer period included the usual random lineup of what I call the "Garry Wills questions." They're the sort of undignified "What historical figure would you like to make out with?" queries my way-more-upstanding-nonfiction-colleague Mr. Wills never has to endure. Probably because everyone knows the Socratic author of "Lincoln at Gettysburg" and "Why I Am a Catholic" would answer with another question, namely, "Do you consider Snoop Dogg to be a historical figure?"

Then a man raised his hand and asked me to give him a reason to be "optimistic" about America. Huh. That was a new one. That's how depressing things are in this country right now — citizens are coming to me for optimism. And I'm the person who came to town to read from a book that ends with me walking across Union Square from the Lincoln statue toward the Gandhi statue and noting, "They shot him, too."

I was so taken aback by the optimism request I think I mumbled something about seeking solace in art and the land, culminating in a drippy anecdote about my sunrise flight over Mount Hood and Crater Lake while listening to "Adagio for Strings." But that question keeps dogging me.

My go-to worldview is pessimism. I see a Times Square billboard promoting a musical that has its audience "dancing in the aisles" and I can't help but think, "That is a fire hazard." But it has been my happy experience that if one moves through life in a constant state of low-key dread, then one gets to be continually pleasantly surprised.

Like, suppose I was to be asked to write a guest column for a newspaper I find consistently infuriating because, for example, its arts section prints claptrap proclamations like "No woman really loves Bob Dylan," thereby making me want to jump in a cab with a boombox and my two copies of "Blonde on Blonde" and plant myself on 43rd Street, blaring "Most Likely You Go Your Way and I'll Go Mine" at said newspaper's windows. I would dread such an assignment until I felt the glee of getting paid to carp at said paper within its own pages. See? Pleasant surprise.

Sure, there are reasons to be hopeful about the United States. And most of them do involve art or the land. Like those Ed Ruscha paintings representing the nation at last year's Venice Biennale. There's something so true and rebellious about his skies; to look at them is to get that same smiley, breathy

relief a Westerner feels the second she crosses to the left bank of the Mississippi.

Or there's the current Broadway revival of "Sweeney Todd," with its strange rhythms and cheeky poetics and actors playing instruments, making a listener wish she'd never given up the baritone horn. Or there was last week's "Inside the Actors Studio" with Dave Chappelle, in which Chappelle was funny, of course, but also so self-possessed and thoughtful and morally outraged he had a kind of biblical grandeur.

And what about the glory that is Glacier National Park? Or the good news that bald eagles are no longer an endangered species?

I got the feeling, though, that the man asking for optimism at that bookstore wasn't looking for raves about paintings or ice age deposits (especially since global warming is likely to make Glacier National Park glacier-free by 2030). I got the feeling that he was asking for reasons to be optimistic about the government.

Alas, I see my initial worries about the current administration as the greatest betrayal in my whole life by my old pal pessimism. I attended the president's inauguration in 2001. When he took the presidential oath, I cried. What was I so afraid of? I was weeping because I was terrified that the new president would wreck the economy and muck up my drinking water. Isn't that adorable? I lacked the pessimistic imagination to dread that tens of thousands of human beings would be spied on or maimed or tortured or killed or stranded or drowned, thanks to his incompetence.

I feel like a fool. All those years of Sunday school, and still the apocalypse catches me off guard.