Trump, facing off on *The People's Court* against the three federal judges who rejected his initial travel ban. Cecily Strong, playing the celebrity judge Marilyn Milian, says, "I want one day without a CNN alert that scares the hell out of me." The crowd explodes into cheers. Baldwin's Trump starts talking about crime in Chicago; he points to Kenan Thompson's bailiff and says, "He knows what I'm talking about." Michaels decides to cut that line.

The rehearsal rolls seamlessly on, a frenetic ballet, with Baldwin playing the gay crab-boat captain, and a husband fighting with his wife on their first anniversary, and the drill sergeant, and the gym teacher, and a photographer for sexy calendars. Michaels watches and listens, and he rearranges the sketches in his head, fitting and refitting the blocks together like puzzle pieces. The crab boat isn't going to make it. Neither is the sexy calendar or the anniversary. The live show is going to end on the gym class. More specifically, it's going to end with the sound of a long fart.

Maybe 30 minutes after the end of the rehearsal, the studio welcomes a new crowd. The audience members watch a giant clock hanging from the ceiling and wait for 11:30 p.m. the way kids wait for the end of the school day. McCarthy sits in her chair in makeup and has her Spicer wig reapplied. Baldwin gathers himself in the sanctuary of his dressing room. He puts on his suit, no tie. He looks great. He is led to his mark near the door behind the *SNL* house band, the musicians' fingers ready on their instruments, poised to blow out the show's theme.

Baldwin stands in the dark and waits for his cue. His stomach begins to turn. His makeup is touched up. He goes over his lines in his head. He watches the action on the other side of the door on a monitor. The White House press-room set is rolled out for the second time tonight, and a deep, low rumble of anticipation runs through the building. His nerves start to crackle. McCarthy slays; somewhere, Sean Spicer is curling up into a ball. "LIVE FROM NEW YORK, IT'S SATURDAY NIGHT!" she screams.

The door opens for Alec Baldwin. All he can hear is applause and trumpets.

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HOW LATE-NIGHT COMEDY ALIENATED CONSERVATIVES, MADE LIBERALS SMUG, AND FUELED THE RISE OF TRUMP

BY CAITLIN FLANAGAN
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A **MONTH AFTER** the election, Trevor Noah, the host of *The Daily Show*, published an op-ed in *The New York Times* that sought to position himself and his show as instruments of healing in a broken land. It was called "Let's Not Be Divided, Divided People Are Easier to Rule," and it zapped around progressives' inboxes and Facebook feeds like a digital balm of Gilead. It was a reminder that we were not, in those fevered early weeks, being our best selves: "Instead of speaking in measured tones about what unites us, we are screaming at each other about what divides us." How true that was, and—one might churlishly observe—what a sea change from Noah's tone during the campaign, when he berated the Republican candidate for tweeting with "those fat little tiny fingers of yours" and for trying to think with "that stupid head," and when he advised the candidate that "maybe you should look in the mirror, asshole."

This combination of sentiments—the excoriating, profanity-strewn, ad hominem tirade against the president (and by extension against anyone who might agree, in any small measure, with his actions), and the saintly appeal for reaching out to the other side—dominates the political discussion inside the blue bubble these days. The excoriating outweighs the reaching-out at a ratio of about 20 to 1, but the earnestly expressed desire for a more humane form of discourse is enduring.

The late-night political-comedy shows—principally Noah's *Daily Show*, Samantha Bee's *Full Frontal*, and John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight*—staked their territory during the heat of the general election: unwavering, bombastic, belittling, humiliating screeds against Donald Trump. Fair enough. Trump is a man who on any casual summer day during the campaign could be found inciting a crowd to violence. This isn't the slippery slope; this is the ditch at the bottom of the hill. Once a man stands before a mob and exhorts the powerful to beat the outlier, it's all over except for the cannibalism and the cave painting. "Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth," said Abraham Lincoln. "Knock the crap out of them," said Donald Trump.

So Trump has it coming, and so do the minions pouring out of his clown car, with their lies and their gleeful disregard for what Nick Carraway called "the fundamental decencies." But somewhere along the way, the hosts of the late-night shows decided that they had carte blanche to insult not just the people within this administration, but also the ordinary citizens who support Trump, and even those who merely identify as conservatives. In March, Samantha Bee's show issued a formal apology to a young man who had attended the Conservative Political Action Conference and whom the show had blasted for having "Nazi hair." As it turned out, the young man was suffering from Stage 4 brain cancer—which a moment's research on the producers' part would have revealed: He had tweeted about his frightening diagnosis days before the conference. As part of its apology, the show contributed $1,000 to the GoFundMe campaign that is raising money for his medical expenses, so now we know the price of a cancer joke.

It was hardly the first time *Full Frontal* had gone, guns blazing, after the sick or the meek. During the campaign, Bee dispatched a correspondent to go shoot fish in a barrel at something called the Western Conservative Summit, which the reporter described as "an annual Denver gathering popular with hard-right Christian conservatives." He interviewed an earnest young boy who talked about going to church on Sundays and Bible study on Wednesdays, and about his hope to start a group called Children for Trump. For this, the boy—who spoke with the unguarded openness of a child who has assumed goodwill on the part of an adult—was described as "Jerry Falwell in blond, larval form." Trump and Bee are on different sides politically, but culturally they are drinking from the same cup, one filled with the poisonous nectar of reality TV and its baseless values, which have now moved to the very center of our national discourse. Trump and Bee share a penchant for verbal cruelty and a willingness to mock the defenseless. Both consider self-restraint, once the hallmark of the admirable, to be for chumps.

Yes, yes, I know: She is a comedian, he is the president of the United States; there is no scale by which their words and actions can be reasonably compared. Yet while for Bee, as for so many in her

field, Michelle Obama's "When they go low, we go high" may have been a ravishing meme, Trump's mockery of a war hero, grieving parents, and a disabled man showed how you get the job done. When John Oliver told viewers that if they opposed abortion they had to change the channel until the last minute of the program, when they would be shown "an adorable bucket of sloths," he perfectly encapsulated the tone of these shows: one imbued with the conviction that they and their fans are intellectually and morally superior to those who espouse any of the beliefs of the political right. Two days before the election, every talking head on television was assuring us that Trump didn't have a chance, because he lacked a "ground game." After his victory, one had to wonder whether some part of his ground game had been conducted night after night after night on television, under flattering studio lights and with excellent production values and comedy writing.

Though aimed at blue-state sophisticates, these shows are an unintended but powerful form of propaganda for conservatives. When Republicans see these harsh jokes—which echo down through the morning news shows and the chattering day's worth of viral clips, along with those of Jimmy Kimmel, Stephen Colbert, and Seth Meyers—they don't just see a handful of comics mocking them. They see HBO, Comedy Central, TBS, ABC, CBS, and NBC. In other words, they see exactly what Donald Trump has taught them: that the entire media landscape loathes them, their values, their family, and their religion. It is hardly a reach for them to further imagine that the legitimate news shows on these channels are run by similarly partisan players—nor is it at all illogical. No wonder so many of Trump's followers are inclined to believe only the things that he or his spokespeople tell them directly—everyone else on the tube thinks they're a bunch of trailer-park, Oxy-snorting half-wits who divide their time between retweeting Alex Jones fantasies and ironing their Klan hoods.

Of course, late-night entertainers can hardly be expected to ignore the comedic bounty with which Trump and his henchmen have blessed them. And in this bizarre new political reality, treating Trump the way other presidents have traditionally been treated puts the host in danger of committing the grave sin of "normalizing" him, as Jimmy Fallon did last fall.

Trump had appeared on Fallon's *Tonight Show* before the primaries, in September 2015, back when he was still the joke candidate, back when a lighthearted interview with him rang no alarm bells. The two evinced an immediate television rapport—Fallon as straight man, Trump as the same Trump he's been on television and radio shows for more than three decades. But when Fallon had him on again a year later, the situation was very different. Now Trump was the Republican nominee, and his bag of tricks—inciting violence in crowds, threatening religious tests, calling the press a pack of liars—was no longer so amusing. Fallon didn't see any need to turn his show into *Meet the Press*. He leaned toward Trump and said, "Donald, I just wanted to ask you if there's something we could do that's just not ... presidential, really." And then, with his guest's permission (it was a bit; they'd worked it out beforehand), he playfully reached over and mussed up that famous hair. Fallon was lambasted the next day (a tweet from Jon Lovett, a former speechwriter for Barack Obama, was representative: "This photo will be in history books and the caption will not be about how Jimmy Fallon is such a fun nice guy"), and rightly so. By then Trump had exhibited enough ugly and norm-breaking behavior to have made treating him as a lovable bridge-and-tunnel celebrity straight out of Queens circa 1975—President Crazy Eddie, President Tom Carvel—beyond the pale. Trump had already revealed himself to be a dangerous person; perhaps the best thing that can be said about the man is that he let America know exactly what it would be getting if he were elected. It was a huge mistake on Fallon's part, one he has been paying for ever since—his ratings have not recovered from it.

ONE CLUE TO Trump's improbable victory lies in the fact that getting a noogie from a comic on late-night television is now considered a "normalizing" activity for a presidential candidate. The implication

is that you're not fit for executive office unless you can clown for us on the tube when we're half awake.

John F. Kennedy was the first candidate to appear on late-night television, visiting Jack Paar's set in 1960. No matter what you think of the short, dangerous presidency of JFK, watching their conversation could bring you to tears. At one point, Paar invites audience members to ask their own questions of the senator. "Let's have, you know, responsible questions from responsible people," Paar says, and I waited for the laugh, but it didn't come. It wasn't a joke. This wasn't Judy Garland making eyes at him and telling Lana Turner stories and biting her thumb seductively. This was a chance to interview someone who wanted to be the president, and Paar asked his audience members to act accordingly—which they did. (It was a love-in about the commie threat, including certain dark intimations about Southeast Asia, but what are you going to do? *Camelot!*)

The new age officially began with Bill Clinton's 1992 appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, playing his saxophone. This wasn't Richard Nixon—too little, too late—solemnly playing his own mournful composition on a baby grand piano for Paar in 1963, after losing both the presidential and the California gubernatorial elections. This was "Heartbreak Hotel," with the audience on their feet, Bubba in shades, Arsenio out of his mind for the power of "the big man." This was the president as entertainer, the president as a guy so young and so cool that he could slide right onto the set of the most with-it late-night show and sit in with the band. Who couldn't love this guy? Well, possibly the family of Ricky Ray Rector, the retarded man on Arkansas's death row, whom Clinton had cruelly allowed to be executed just five months earlier to prove he was tough on crime. A pointed question about that bit of horror might have been more instructive to the electorate than the sax solo and Hall's penetrating inquiries about whether Clinton preferred the young Elvis or the old Elvis for a postage stamp. But somewhere along the way, we decided that we wanted the values of a Las Vegas lounge act to become part of our most important civic conversation. So the stunt, the shtick, the mildly embarrassing question—soon President Bubba, well on his way to reelection, would be telling an MTV crowd whether he wore boxers or briefs—became an essential campaign feature, and now we have a reality-TV star for president. You could argue that by giving Trump a noogie, Fallon did the responsible thing: He subjected the man to one of the requisite tests of fitness for office. We created our own black hole, and we collapsed into it.

THOUGH AIMED AT BLUE-STATE SOPHISTICATES, LATE-NIGHT COMEDY SHOWS ARE AN UNINTENDED BUT POWERFUL FORM OF PROPAGANDA FOR CONSERVATIVES.

Trump's appearance with Fallon may mark a moment in our national story. It was the last fleeting glimmer of anything approaching goodwill—and possibly of anything deserving it—between political factions. Since then it's been a race to the bottom, as the crudeness of the president is matched by that of "the resistance," with all of us being judged by how well—how thoroughly and consistently and elaborately—we can hate each other. Nothing about this time is elevating. It's just all of us—on the left and on the right—sworn to our bitterness and our anger.

As I embarked on writing this essay, Trump had just made what was then the latest in his endless series of preposterous moves: He had tweeted, without evidence but with certainty, that Trump Tower had been "wiretapped" by Barack Obama in the final days of the campaign. In the range of things Trump is capable of saying, doing, or tweeting, this was not "big league"; it was just another day at batting practice. But the episode was one more stunning reminder of how this impulsive, self-obsessed leader—who holds grudges, lies recklessly, and appoints his own family members to substantive positions—is making America into a laughingstock around the world. We are a country with the greatest creed in all of history—the Constitution of the United States—yet we are looking more and more like a banana republic.

I've thought about that a lot—but I've also thought a good deal about the boy on Samantha Bee's program. I thought about the moment her producer approached the child's mother to sign a release so that the woman's young son could be humiliated on television. Was it a satisfying moment, or was it accompanied by a small glint of recognition that embarrassing children is a crappy way to make a living? I thought about the boy waiting eagerly to see himself on television, feeling a surge of pride that he'd talked about church and Bible study. And I thought about the moment when he realized that it had all been a trick—that the grown-up who had seemed so nice had only wanted to hurt him.

My God, I thought. *What have we become?*

Caitlin Flanagan is the author of Girl Land *and* To Hell With All That.