# WHY ARE PANTS SO BIG (AGAIN)

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At some point in the past few years, as if we didn't have enough to worry about, everyone's pants started to look wrong. For an improbably long time, the "right" pants — meaning those that conveyed some socially agreed-upon, base-line level of stylishness — had been, in a word, small. Snug through the thighs, throttled at the knees, close-cut at the calves, on intimate terms with the ankles. Running a minuscule gamut from skinny to the slightly-more-accommodating slim. There were exceptions, particularly when it came to women's pants. But on balance, fitted was the way good pants were supposed to fit.

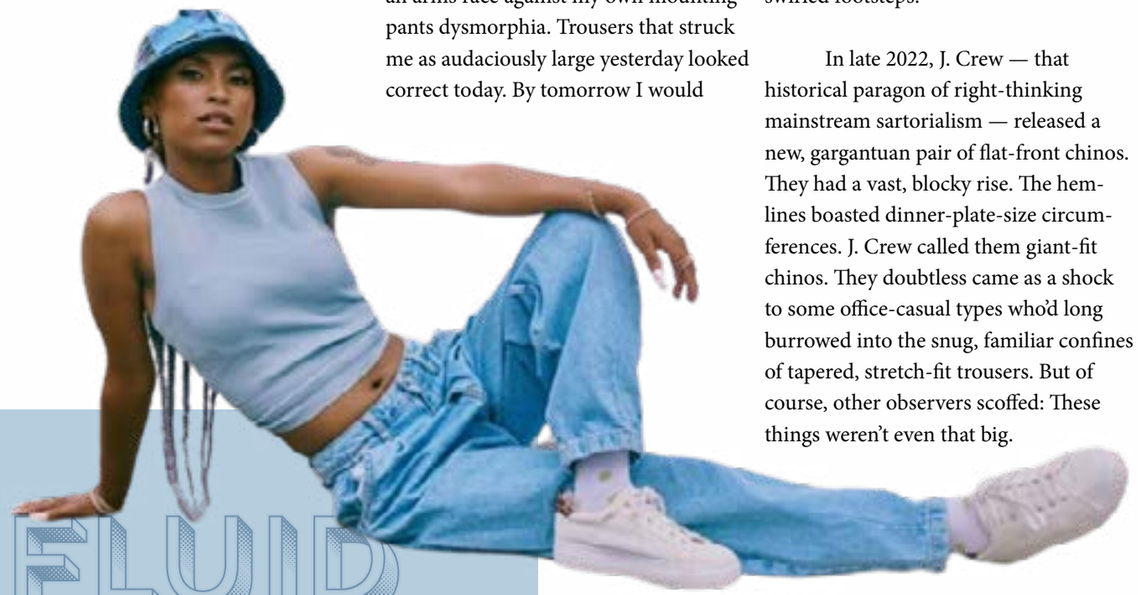
My pants had been slim for some 15 years, since so-called skinny jeans first hit the market in earnest, around 2005. Narrow silhouettes quickly spread, until they felt less like a trend and more like a structural fact of existence: A decade after their ascendance, slim-fit pants remained common currency across generations, demographics and body types. BTS, at the time the biggest pop group in the world, wore them. Underground Chicago drill rappers wore them, too. Hollywood leading men and neighborhood baristas, wedding planners and basketball players, morning-show hosts and accountants, youth pastors and construction workers, your nephew and your aunt. You might have wondered if we'd reached the End of Pants.

And then, in a rupture whose center I place within the broader pandemic-era upheavals of 2020, the "right" pants began to lurch away from the leg at scale. Jeans, a kind of Patient Zero for pants trends, showed symptoms of acute-onset elephantiasis. Stylish friends of mine and strangers whose outfits I ogled online abandoned their slim-fit denim for straight-leg vintage Levi's 501s — something like the Greenwich Mean Time of modern pants — and then swiftly abandoned those for ever-ampler models. Paul O'Neill, the global design director for Levi's, told me that in recent years he noticed a rise in kids hitting "thrift stores to buy jeans with a Size 46 or 48 waist and belting them, to get that oversize look." He'd made some of the company's baggiest-ever pants in response, and even baggier ones were in the works.

Month by month, pants got puffier, growing higher rises and sprouting more and more pleats. Hemlines that once severely tapered now expanded, hovering like U.F.O.s above shoes or pooling atop them like swirls of soft-serve ice cream. On Instagram, fashion mood-board accounts, which aggregate "aspirational" imagery, did an increasing-

ly brisk trade in photographs from the late ’80s and early ’90s of people wearing billowing trousers by Ralph Lauren, Giorgio Armani and Yohji Yamamoto.

All manner of pants polarities rapidly inverted themselves. Perhaps the most epochal illustration concerned, of all people, Barack Obama. In 2009, he threw the first pitch at the All-Star Game wearing shapeless, wide-leg Levi’s — ur-uncool “dad jeans,” at the time. They inspired widespread ridicule, because the way pants fit is a kind of lingua franca: Even people who claim not to care at all about clothes feel qualified to judge. A decade later, though, those kinds of dad jeans were looking better than ever, and here were photos of Obama pushing 60 in far-too-tight, far-too-cropped chinos during a visit to Kuala Lumpur. Looking at these pictures side by side, we had incontrovertible proof: Skinny pants were the real dad pants now. You might still be wearing them, but they were no longer “right.”



## FLUID

In some ways, this shift felt entirely predictable, as if a rubber band stretched tight had snapped back to laxity. And yet it was disconcerting too, as if the rubber band had immediately become a balloon. It could be hard to trust your own eyes. I’d been feeling the rumblings of a Return to Big Pants since about 2017, when I remember worrying about the fact that I was 36 and still wearing essentially the same pants I’d worn at 26. There’s constancy, I thought, and then there’s becoming a relic of yourself — the balding guy still trying to make his high school haircut work. I made the conscious decision to resist fossilization and buy roomier pants, and over the next couple of years, I thought that’s what I did. My wife and my friends tell me they thought I did, too, having seen some of the new pants in question and deemed them conspicuously, if not laughably, large. And yet photographs confirm that, in absolute terms, my pants remained fitted for a while. I couldn’t see it clearly at first, but I was locked in an arms race against my own mounting pants dysmorphia. Trousers that struck me as audaciously large yesterday looked correct today. By tomorrow I would wonder if they weren’t actually a bit close-clinging.

The balloon just kept expanding. Casting about for signs of the times, pantswise, I noticed that the influential, idiosyncratically stylish rapper Tyler, the Creator — once seen only in slim jeans and cutoff shorts — took to full-fitting slacks. In 2019, the pop star Harry Styles began exploring a gender-fluid style that included expansively flared sailor’s pants (and, for a Vogue cover shoot, a big ruffly dress). In February 2021, the fashion critic Rachel Tashjian tweeted a photo from the Oscars of the Danish film editor Mikkel E.G. Nielsen in trousers whose tentlike expanse could have accommodated two of him. “Folks this is ***pants history*** unfolding before our eyes,” she declared. “After years of tiny, tight overly tailored pants, BIG TROUSERS return to the red carpet.” At subsequent awards shows, LaKeith Stanfield, Paul Mescal and Eddie Redmayne were among those to follow in Nielsen’s extravagantly enswirled footsteps.

In late 2022, J. Crew — that historical paragon of right-thinking mainstream sartorialism — released a new, gargantuan pair of flat-front chinos. They had a vast, blocky rise. The hemlines boasted dinner-plate-size circumferences. J. Crew called them giant-fit chinos. They doubtless came as a shock to some office-casual types who’d long burrowed into the snug, familiar confines of tapered, stretch-fit trousers. But of course, other observers scoffed: These things weren’t even that big.



Throughout the tumult, I consulted a screenshot I’d saved to my desktop. It was a 2021 tweet from the comedian Noah Garfinkel, who distilled the spiraling epistemological vertigo around pants into an absurdist fashion koan. “Whatever style pants look like [expletive] to you are the pants you’re supposed to wear,” he wrote, “and as soon as they start to look normal to you, those are not the right pants anymore. You should always be wearing pants you think look stupid.”

To state what’s obvious, I care a lot about pants. I’m tempted to say that I care too much about them, because we often frame a preoccupation with clothes as vain, frivolous and otherwise regrettable. It certainly can be those things. But I try to make sense of it as an abiding fascination with the beautiful, funny, fraught workings of a visual language that all of us speak all the time, deftly or ineptly, consciously or not. It’s a language whose stakes are heightened because, unless we count nudists and hermits, there is no way to opt out of speaking it — not to mention that it can be disorientingly difficult to know when a particular phrasing originated within you and when the words you’re speaking have been placed in your mouth from industry puppet-masters on high.

In 2020, I started writing a newsletter about style and culture called Blackbird Spyplane. Perhaps the most common question from readers concerned — you guessed it — pants. Specifically, How Should They Fit Now? This is because, among clothes, pants command a unique, and uniquely vexing, signifying power: No other garment we routinely wear is as totemic, as eloquent or as problematic. One pants-preoccupied friend of mine, the Wall Street Journal fashion writer Jacob Gallagher, has called pants “the core of an outfit.” The GQ fashion writer Samuel Hine — a dedicated pants Talmudist — recently described them to me as “the most essential garment you can wear.” Even those of us with zero avowed interest in fashion are prone to feel anxiety, vulnerability and dissatisfaction around our pants. Larry David once said that “trying on pants is one of the most humiliating things a man can suffer.” In a 2021 interview, David Lynch — a master of the dread that lurks beneath the surface of the quotidian — confessed: “I am searching for a good pair of pants. I never found a pair of pants that I just love,” adding, “If they’re not right, which they never are, it’s a sadness.”

## VEXING

Some reasons for the power of pants are abstract and cultural, and others are straightforwardly material. As the writer Sofi Thanhauser phrases it in her indispensable 2022 book, “Worn: A People’s History of Clothing,” garment-making is “a trade based on fantasy as much as it is on necessity.” At the heart of the fantasy is the notion that, by wearing the right clothes the right way, we can bring the way we look into deeper harmony with the way we wish we looked. A century ago, a woman wearing pants represented a symbolic appropriation — outré to some, liberatory to others — of masculine-coded power. Today, there is nothing scandalous about the sight of a woman in pants. And yet they remain inextricable from the enforcement and subversion of gender norms, even as they prove semiotically slippery in this exact regard: At some points, big pants have read as manly and skinny ones as feminine. At other points, these valences have flipped perfectly.

In strictly physical terms, no article of clothing does more to articulate and augment the line of our bodies — to beautify us or deform us — than pants. They tend to occupy the most visual square footage in any given outfit. They also tend to move more than other clothes as our bodies move through the world, which creates more inflection points where they can attract notice — and where they can go wrong. “A T-shirt is so much simpler,” Hine said. “A sweater is so much simpler. Even with a button-up, you can fake it: roll up the sleeves, unbutton the neck.” But “there’s no place to hide in a bad-fitting pair of pants.

“Pants are diabolical as design objects,” Hine went on. “You can look at the measurements for the waist and the inseam, but that won’t tell you anything besides how they fit in two places, when there’s so many other variables — the rise, the hemline, fabric weight, drape. It’s an object that throughout history was made by tailors and craftsmen, and when it got mass-produced and casualized, what happened was they took this really intricate garment and tried to tell us, ‘Everyone can wear this every day, and it’ll be easy to find a pair that makes sense for your body’ — but it’s actually an enormous challenge.”

It’s a challenge whether you’re a self-identifying clotheshorse or someone who simply doesn’t want to look comically out of touch, like Obama on the pitcher’s mound. This is a big part of why trends around the “right” pants tend to move so slowly. Once you find a style you like — or once you acquiesce to the style you’re supposed to like and then hope your perception adjusts accordingly — it’s reasonable to want to drop anchor.

That was particularly true with a style as extreme as slim pants, which required a leap of faith for lots of people to accept in the first place. Skinny silhouettes were, in hindsight, a highly unlikely proposition for mass adoption: not just physically constrictive but also revealing to a degree that could verge on a violation of privacy. And yet, in short order, the ultraslim look flowed outward from tip-of-the-spear European jeans makers like Cheap Monday and A.P.C. to “elevated” mall brands like J. Crew. Influential designer labels like Band of Outsiders and Dior Homme made slim-fit synonymous with a chic, faintly roguish urbanity, and Thom Browne went one further, cutting trousers not just tight but also high, positing the exposed male ankle as its own sort of statement accessory. Fast-fashion chains like Zara and H&M peddled unisex pantomimes of these skinny upmarket styles, and before long, so did mass-retail behemoths like Old Navy and Target, signaling and consolidating small pants’ grip on the zeitgeist.

The relatively glacial pace of pants trends helps explain why they work so well as time stamps for bygone eras. There is no straightforwardly legible connection between the defining character of an era and the shape of its trousers: Big pants and skinny pants have flourished during economic boom times and depressions (you could drop Charlie Chaplin’s Tramp into a circa-2024 fashion mood board pretty readily), during wartime and peace, during Democratic and Republican presidencies. But if you’re trying to date an old photograph by the clothes people are wearing, I’d argue that, among the many possible clues available to you — lapel sizes, color combinations, shoe styles, hair accessories — the way pants fit offers the most reliable and pungent index of a given time. (On Instagram in 2019, the style-savvy musician John Mayer delivered a tongue-in-cheek lecture on this




subject that concluded with a call to get dressed from the “pants out.”)

We think about the 1950s and we might picture leather biker jackets, but we definitely picture dark-indigo straight-leg jeans with fat, flipped-up cuffs. We think of the late ’60s and the ’70s and we picture bell-bottoms. The ’80s? Pegged and acid-washed jeans, and then toward decade’s end, voluminous Armani-style trousers. That voluminousness held into the ’90s, moderated a bit in the baggy chinos and corduroys of Gap, J. Crew and Polo. And then, thanks to a youth culture increasingly infatuated with skateboarders, rappers, ravers and drug dealers, pants got as wide as ever — wider even than in the ’30s and ’40s, when high-waisted, lavishly pleated, shoe-swallowing trousers dominated, but with classical tailoring nowhere in evidence on an unruly, engulfing pair of jeans made circa 1995 by JNCO or Karl Kani. As the millennium neared, and through the early 2000s, volume diminished along the leg in stages: Rises dropped, exposing hip bones and midriffs, and silhouettes slimmed at the thigh. The last remaining vestige of mid-90s enormousness was a boot-cut flare at the calf, which finally dissipated when the slim pant took its throne.

Of course, word of the king’s death hasn’t reached everyone yet. Saager Dilawri, a very stylish man who owns one of my favorite clothing shops, the Vancouver-based Neighbour, told me that, over the holidays, he got a drink with some guys he plays hockey with. “I was wearing loose jeans, and everyone was wearing slim pants — maybe too slim,” Dilawri recalled. “And one of them came up to me and said: ‘Back in the day we all wore loose pants, then we were told, “Slim pants are cool,” so now we’re all wearing slim pants. You’re the only one here wearing loose pants. Are the trends changing again?’”

If, in 2024, pants feel unsettled, it’s not only because the consensus around the “right” pants has whipped so precipitously from small to big but also because, at the very same time, a more fundamentally nagging question has started to creep up: Is there actually anything resembling consensus around trends anymore?

When we try to impose coherent sense onto trends, in all their vast and ungainly workings, we often reach for cyclical metaphors, whereby past styles are understood to loop back around, given enough time, in an endless recurrence. If you zoom out far enough, all the paroxysms around self-presentation arrange themselves into an orderly, eminently predictable swing between big and small — you could call it the pants pendulum.

But the tidiness of such metaphors runs into trouble in the internet age, where trends accelerate, proliferate and fragment across a multitude of demographics and subcultures. Information that once moved at the relatively manageable pace of movies, magazines and seasonal runway collections can now travel from “early adopters” to latecomers in the span of a few weeks, if not days.

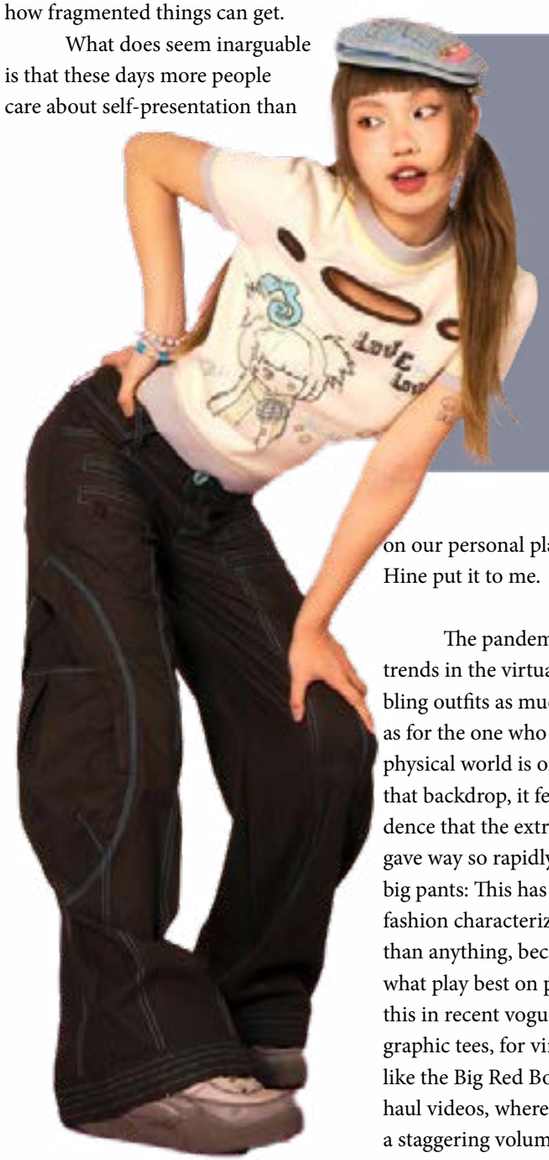
That has been true since the early 2000s. But it has been abetted, in the past few years, by a few factors. One is an explosion in the online resale market. A profusion of vintage and secondhand platforms like Grailed, Depop and the RealReal, along with an innumerable flurry of Instagram-based vintage shops,

have joined eBay to make clothes from all previous eras readily shoppable, at least theoretically. Now you can rummage, time-travel and trend-hop through bygone styles as never before. Another factor is the unholy churn of fast fashion, a business model epitomized by notorious brands like FashionNova and Shein, whose output makes older fast-fashion merchants look quaint. Shein, for its part, puts out thousands of new styles a day — inconceivable kilotons of cheap, essentially disposable clothes produced in response to the most flitting tremors of consumer demand.

The result is a mounting sense not merely that more trends are happening all at once, but that all trends are happening all at once. While there's some truth to this, I'm not sure it's the whole story. Because when I look at the long dominance of slim pants, I also see evidence — much like when I look at the long dominance of the Marvel Comics Universe (only freshly on the wane) or the long dominance of Taylor Swift (no waning in sight) — that a powerful monoculture can survive the hyperfragmentary internet age just fine.

After all, our relationship to clothes unfolds in the context of a garment industry comparable in scale to agriculture and fossil fuels — an industry that, as such, requires economies of scale vast enough, and concentrations of demand broad enough, to ensure profitability. For our part, we tend to wear the clothes we wear not just because we "like" them but also because we want to telegraph our taste, cultural affiliations and social status to other people. This game of signaling gets less fun if too many people can read our cues, but it breaks down entirely in the opposite scenario, in which no one picks up on our cues at all, because everyone speaks in a different tongue: a Tower of Babel, for pants. Neither the would-be garment-seller nor the would-be outfit-flaunter can operate in the absence of some sufficiently widespread shared lexicon of taste and desire — and that would seem to put a hard limit on just how fragmented things can get.

What does seem inarguable is that these days more people care about self-presentation than ever, owing to the fact that — between dating-app selfies, social-media fit pics, TikTok style-tutorial accounts, "Get Ready With Me" videos, Discord servers and other gaping digital maws to feed with visual evidence of ourselves — there is simply more self-presenting happening than ever. "We're all image-makers on our personal platforms now," as GQ's Hine put it to me.



# VAST FLOW

The pandemic accelerated many trends in the virtualization of life; assembling outfits as much for your digital self as for the one who moves through the physical world is one of them. Against that backdrop, it feels like no coincidence that the extreme of skinny pants gave way so rapidly to the extreme of big pants: This has been a moment in fashion characterized by extremes more than anything, because extremes are what play best on phone screens. We see this in recent vogues for eye-popping graphic tees, for viral novelty footwear like the Big Red Boots and for so-called haul videos, where the point is to flaunt a staggering volume of new acquisitions. We also see it, less intuitively, in the countervailing vogue for "quiet luxury," a style of dressing that is putatively about tasteful restraint — no logos, no garish, déclassé patterns — but in actual practice is deafening in its emphasis on soft, pampering fabrics, excessive volumes, sumptuous hues and, never far from mind, astronomical pricing.

Where fashion and technology converge is in their mutual dependence on novelty and obsolescence — products need to phase out so that different products can phase in — and the current swing to big pants might prove nothing more than a brief overcorrection after the long reign of small ones. There are some reasons to be bullish about the chances of mainstream big-pants hegemony. J. Crew now offers the giant-fit chino in a range of colors, and Madewell, whose customer is similar, recently relaunched its men's line with a bunch of wide and baggy pants styles. In 2022, Levi's rolled out a reissue of its infamously wide '90s-era SilverTab jeans with Kohl's, as mass-market a retailer as you can imagine. And yet, some people think skinny is bound to make a swift comeback — slim pants were surprisingly well-represented on designer runways in January — and I'm already seeing an uptick in Y2K-style ultra-low-rise flares. If the internet hasn't broken the pants pendulum, where is the pendulum right now, exactly?

The best we can do is argue. Late last year, a popular user on X who posts under the name InternetHippo went viral with an image of arrows arranged in a clockwise circle. There was a pair of skinny jeans at 12 o'clock, baggy jeans at 6 o'clock and a red marker indicating 4 o'clock: "I believe we are approximately here in the society pant cycle," a caption declared. Some 147,000 people liked the tweet, and across more than 2,000 responses, debate ensued along the lines you'd expect — this is too early; this is too late; who cares, wear whatever you like.

"Wear whatever you like" has long struck me as up there with "be yourself" when it comes to useless style advice, as if your personal style didn't always contain some irreducible level of dialogue with the tastes, prerogatives and opinions of others — as if taste were something that could ever take the form of pure monologue. And yet, as fascinated as I am with pants, scrolling through the replies I felt nothing so strongly as the urge to escape the "society pant cycle" entirely — to step off the carousel once and for all.

Over the past few years, I've come into possession of several beloved pants whose fit, on a binary, is big. I'm very happy with them, and all things being equal, if we want clothes to transform us, then a pair of pants with more fabric than less would seem to present more potential for interesting and felicitous transformations than is possible in the more austere, monotone idiom of slim-fit. So why can't I forget about the pants pendulum, gracefully bow out here and settle into, if not a uniform, something similarly unbudging?

David Lynch's perfect pants, much like David Lynch's perfect self, do not and cannot exist.

Part of me thinks it's possible. Imagining myself wearing these pants for decades to come, I'm heartened by the fact that when I see older men in big

pants, they typically look great, whereas older men in skinny pants seem a bit confused about how old they are. It's funny: There's an age before which it's actively commendable to explore and make mistakes, and an age after which exploration and mistake-making become the embarrassing evidence of a lost soul. Look at those pants. This poor bastard still doesn't have it figured out.

But that, in the end, might be the biggest fantasy that attaches to clothes — namely, that any of us can ever have it figured out, arriving at a place of such self-knowledge that we no longer err. The way you look in clothes is, in fact, a profoundly flawed and paradoxical marker of self-knowledge, because the way you look in clothes is, ultimately, not just up to you. It's up to other people. What's more, as with any social compact, it's subject to an endlessly shifting, inescapable array of historical contingencies and aesthetic renegotiations — or, as we familiarly describe them, trends.

That's why David Lynch has never found his perfect pair of pants. Because David Lynch's perfect pants, much like David Lynch's perfect self, do not and cannot exist. That impossibility could drive us nuts, or we could embrace it — take it as a license to play around with how we see ourselves, to keep testing the borders of our comfort zones, trying on different selves, one pair of pants at a time. In this light, Noah Garfinkel's joke about how "you should always be wearing pants you think look stupid" might contain some of the wisest style advice I've encountered: Your capacity for stupidity is how you know you're still alive.

Recently, a late-period portrait of Miles Davis — as universal an avatar of coolness as modernity has produced — made the rounds on style-focused corners of the internet. This was not the natty, circa-1950s, Oxford-button-up-and-slim-trousers Miles Davis we're used to seeing. He has long hair and tiny sunglasses. He is leaning against a white Ferrari Testarossa. His name is on the license plate. But none of that is the focal point. The focal point is Davis's enormous pants. They are tan, with deep pleats and a towering rise, and they pool behind the tongues of his white loafers like tidal waves converging on a couple of dinghies. They are large but not structureless — they echo and expand on his stance with a graceful excess, the way a sail echoes and expands on the wind. They look tremendously, gorgeously, inspiringly stupid.

I think there's a lesson in this picture for those of us who wear pants — even the 100 percent of us who are not Miles Davis. As I write this paragraph, I'm sitting in a pair of wide-legged, double-pleated, dusty-eggplant-colored corduroys. When I glance down at them, they feel stupid to me in the most pleasingly strange, personally appropriate way possible. When I get up and walk around, the way they slosh around my legs strikes me as even stupider. I love them. Maybe the best I can do is hope that my pants feel like this for a very long time — and that if the day comes when they don't, that I'm not too tired, or too proud, to find another pair of pants this

STUPID.