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FEB. 1, 2021

# THE NEW YORKER



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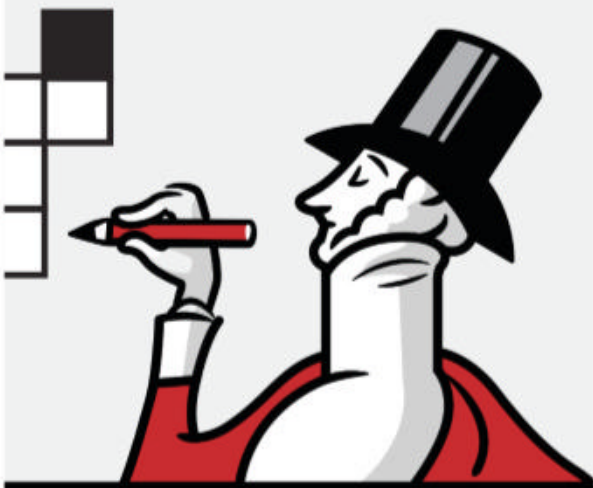
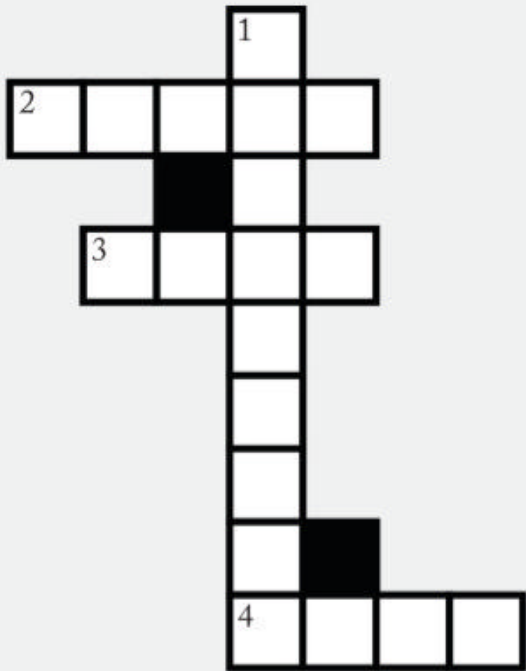
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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Jon Lee Anderson** (“*The Vanishing Wild*,” p. 30), a staff writer, began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 1998. He has published several books, including “Che Guevara.”

**Lauren Groff** (*Fiction*, p. 50) received the 2018-19 Story Prize for the short-story collection “Florida.” Her new novel, “Matrix,” will be out in September.

**John Seabrook** (“*Office Space*,” p. 40) is the author of four books, including, most recently, “The Song Machine.”

**Rachel Syme** (*Books*, p. 56), a staff writer, has covered style and consumer culture for the magazine since 2012.

**Michael Torres** (*Poem*, p. 44) was a winner of the 2019 National Poetry Series Open Competition, for “An Incomplete List of Names.” He teaches at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and in the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop.

**Casey Cep** (*Books*, p. 66), a staff writer, is the author of “Furious Hours.”

**Jane Mayer** (“*Trump Gets Dumped*,” p. 20) is the magazine’s chief Washington correspondent and the author of “Dark Money.”

**John Matthias** (“*Living with a Visionary*,” p. 26), a professor emeritus at the University of Notre Dame, has published some thirty books of poetry, fiction, memoir, translation, and criticism.

**Linda Gregerson** (*Poem*, p. 52) is the author of, most recently, “Prodigal: New and Selected Poems, 1976-2014.”

**Pankaj Mishra** (*Books*, p. 61) has written numerous books, including “From the Ruins of Empire,” “Age of Anger,” and “Bland Fanatics,” which came out in 2020.

**Diana Ejaita** (*Cover*), an illustrator and a textile designer, is based in Lagos and Berlin.

**Peter Schjeldahl** (*The Art World*, p. 76) has been the magazine’s art critic since 1998. His latest collection of reviews and criticism is “Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light.”

### THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



#### LETTER FROM THE U.K.

Louis Theroux’s documentaries, Anna Russell writes, fix a British gaze on the strangeness of America.



#### PAGE-TURNER

Katy Waldman on “Kink,” an anthology that confronts the challenge of turning sex into literature.

Download the New Yorker app for the latest news, commentary, criticism, and humor, plus this week’s magazine and all issues back to 2008.

# THE MAIL

## THE PANDEMIC IN AMERICA

Lawrence Wright's exhaustive and historically important account of the COVID-19 crisis contains the surprising revelation that Dr. Deborah Birx, the coordinator of the White House Coronavirus Task Force under Donald Trump, spent much of the past year travelling through the United States and cajoling governors, public-health officials, hospitals, universities, and others to impose masking orders and other measures to help stop the spread of the disease ("The Plague Year," January 4th & 11th). Birx and her colleague Irum Zaidi covered twenty-five thousand miles in rented cars, and seem to have persuaded even the governor of Texas to implement a mask mandate. Wright notes that Birx was "the only federal official" who consistently promoted masks and social distancing in this way. Although she did not halt the Trump Administration's sabotage of other lifesaving measures, Birx made critical arguments in places where they were most needed, and undoubtedly saved lives. Her actions were heroic and deserve recognition.

*Greg King  
Arcata, Calif.*

Reading Wright's report on the pandemic, I was struck by the admission of Robert Redfield, the C.D.C.'s head, about the awkwardness of altering the agency's guidance on mask wearing: "When you have to change the message, the second message doesn't always stick." He refers to the fact that at the beginning of the pandemic the C.D.C. and the Surgeon General explicitly advised healthy people not to wear masks; after their about-face, in April, the new message seemed never to fully sink in. I am reminded of *The Lancet's* publication of Andrew Wakefield's infamous study linking vaccines to autism. Even though the article was subsequently retracted, the anti-vaccine movement continues to point to its appearance in a prestigious, peer-reviewed medical journal as proof that vaccines are danger-

ous. It is tragic that, when it comes to both vaccine-linked autism and mask ineffectiveness, the dominant misinformation began not on a conspiracist's Web site but, rather, with a seal of approval from a respected, authoritative medical body. These cases underscore the grave importance of getting the message right the first time.

*Jason Schlabach  
Cincinnati, Ohio*

Wright's masterly article brings back to me the year's emotions: disbelief, fear, pity, compassion, anger, sorrow, despair, acquiescence, hope. His reporting reads like a novel. If only it were fiction.

*Patricia Licklider  
New York City*

## THE PRESCIENCE OF I. F. STONE

Anna Wiener, in her piece about the popular newsletter platform Substack, presents a useful history of the rise of the newsletter and of desktop publishing (A Critic at Large, January 4th & 11th). Wiener covers the genesis of the Zagat restaurant-review survey, in 1979, and Esther Dyson's newsletter about technology, from 1983, but does not mention what may be the most important American newsletter of the twentieth century, *I. F. Stone's Weekly*. For nearly two decades, starting in 1953, it was a masterpiece of muckraking political journalism. Stone attacked McCarthyism and was one of the first journalists to challenge Lyndon B. Johnson's account of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. By 1971, the newsletter had become essential reading for some seventy thousand subscribers. One wishes that Stone had lived to cover the politics of the past four years.

*Steven Nadler  
Madison, Wis.*

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to [themail@newyorker.com](mailto:themail@newyorker.com). Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

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- Prevent the flu in people 12 years of age and older following contact with a person who has the flu.

It is not known if XOFLUZA is safe and effective in children less than 12 years of age.

#### IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION

##### Who should not take XOFLUZA?

Do not take XOFLUZA if you are allergic to baloxavir marboxil or any of the ingredients in XOFLUZA.

##### Serious side effects of XOFLUZA may include:

- **Allergic reaction.** Get emergency medical help right away if you develop any of the following signs or symptoms of an allergic reaction:
  - trouble breathing
  - skin rash, hives or blisters
  - swelling of your face, throat or mouth
  - dizziness or lightheadedness

**The most common side effects of XOFLUZA** in clinical studies were diarrhea, bronchitis, nausea, sinusitis, and headache. These are not all the possible side effects of XOFLUZA.

Please see adjacent page for Brief Summary of full Prescribing Information.

## Brief Summary

XOFLUZA® (zoh-FLEW-zuh) (baloxavir marboxil) tablets

This is only a brief summary of important information about XOFLUZA. Talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist to learn more.

## What is XOFLUZA?

XOFLUZA is a prescription medicine used to:

- Treat the flu (influenza) in people 12 years of age and older who have had flu symptoms for no more than 48 hours.
- Prevent the flu in people 12 years of age and older following contact with a person who has the flu.

It is not known if XOFLUZA is safe and effective in children less than 12 years of age. XOFLUZA does not treat or prevent illness that is caused by infections other than the influenza virus. XOFLUZA does not prevent bacterial infections that may happen with the flu.

**Do not take XOFLUZA if you** are allergic to baloxavir marboxil or any of the ingredients in XOFLUZA.

**Before taking XOFLUZA**, tell your healthcare provider about all of your medical conditions, including if you are:

- **Pregnant or plan to become pregnant.** It is not known if XOFLUZA can harm your unborn baby.
- **Breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed.** It is not known if XOFLUZA passes into your breast milk.

**Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take:** Keep a list that includes all prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements, and show it to your healthcare provider and pharmacist. Talk to your healthcare provider before you receive a live flu vaccine after taking XOFLUZA.

## How should I take XOFLUZA?

- Take XOFLUZA exactly as directed by your healthcare provider or pharmacist.
- Take XOFLUZA with or without food.
- Do not take XOFLUZA with dairy products, calcium fortified beverages, laxatives, antacids, or oral supplements containing iron, zinc, selenium, calcium or magnesium.
- If you take too much XOFLUZA, go to the nearest emergency room right away.

## What are the possible side effects of XOFLUZA?

**XOFLUZA may cause serious side effects, including:**

**Allergic reactions.** Get emergency medical help right away if you develop any of these signs and symptoms of an allergic reaction:

- Trouble breathing
- Swelling of your face, throat or mouth
- Skin rash, hives or blisters
- Dizziness or lightheadedness

**The most common side effects of XOFLUZA** for treatment of the flu in adults and adolescents include:

- Diarrhea, bronchitis, sinusitis, headache, and nausea

XOFLUZA is not effective in treating infections other than influenza. Other kinds of infections can appear like flu or occur along with flu and may need different kinds of treatment. Tell your healthcare provider if you feel worse or develop new symptoms during or after treatment with XOFLUZA or if your flu symptoms do not start to get better.

These are not all the possible side effects of XOFLUZA. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects.

## General information about the safe and effective use of XOFLUZA.

Medicines are sometimes prescribed for purposes other than those listed in a Patient Information leaflet. Do not use XOFLUZA for a condition for which it was not prescribed. Do not give XOFLUZA to other people, even if they have the same symptoms that you have. It may harm them. You can ask for information about XOFLUZA that is written for health professionals.

**You are encouraged to report side effects to Genentech by calling 1-888-835-2555 or to the FDA by visiting [www.fda.gov/medwatch](http://www.fda.gov/medwatch) or calling 1-800-FDA-1088.**

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*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed.  
Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming.*

JANUARY 27 – FEBRUARY 2, 2021



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



**Boston Lyric Opera's** arresting stop-motion film of Philip Glass's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (available starting Jan. 29, at [operabox.tv](http://operabox.tv)) sets Edgar Allan Poe's tale of familial strife at a migrant-detention center on the U.S.-Mexico border. The Usher home and the government facility are both monuments to the misery of their inhabitants. As Glass's gradually intensifying music plays, a Guatemalan girl who has been separated from her mother dreams up a doll-like world populated by Poe's star-crossed characters.

## ART

### Jane Freilicher

For more than fifty years, as Abstract Expressionism gave way to Pop, then to Minimalism, and on to Neo-Expressionism, until art's isms exhausted themselves, Freilicher devoted herself to painting "eternally fixed afternoons," to borrow a phrase from Frank O'Hara's 1957 poem "Chez Jane." (In addition to being a phenomenal artist, Freilicher was a muse of the New York School.) In the attentive tradition of Pierre Bonnard—and with a similar passion for color—Freilicher, who died in 2014, at the age of ninety, found beauty at home, whether in her Greenwich Village apartment or at her house on the East End of Long Island. The best of these luminous views unify inside and outside—and still-life and landscape. The fifteen works in the exhibition "Jane Freilicher: Parts of a World," at the Kasmin gallery, lean into the artist's interior side.—*Andrea K. Scott (kasmingallery.com)*

### Samson Pollen

This prolific Bronx-born artist, who died in 2018, at the age of eighty-seven, made his name illustrating men's adventure magazines and pulp fiction, mixing cliffhanger moments and scenes of seduction with unmatched dynamism. Pollen's small paintings from the nineteen-sixties and seventies (on view at the Daniel Cooney gallery) represent the high-water mark of the genre, reading today as deliriously camp artifacts of vintage heterosexuality. "The Notorious Woman at Beach Camp 40, Stag Magazine," from 1967, includes a world of narrative detail: the lingerie-clad title character occupies the extreme foreground, facing an ocean horizon, as a man (also in underwear) darts from a tent with a handgun. The shenanigans in other skillfully articulated compositions range from the kind of behavior one might expect from a "Nympho Nurse" to a pitchfork duel and a meat-cleaver assault. The tricks Pollen employs to broadcast sexual suspense or to freeze action at the height of its drama are borrowed from comics, but his adherence to commercial conventions doesn't detract from his brilliant achievement: his unflagging ability to capture cinematic sweep in a single tableau.—*Johanna Fateman (danielcooneyfineart.com)*

### Betye Saar

Two years ago, when the Getty Research Institute acquired Saar's archive as the lodestar of its African-American art-history initiative, it cited the Los Angeles artist as "the conscience of the art world for over fifty years." True, Saar's work transforming racist symbols into icons of Black power—in one famous piece, she armed an Aunt Jemima figurine with a rifle—has a fierce moral imperative, but she is also the art world's foremost mystic, a truth-teller attuned to dreams, astrology, and ancestral memories. The small but abundant exhibition "Betye Saar: Call and Response," at the Morgan Library & Museum, pairs the artist's found-object assemblages with her less often seen sketchbooks, filled with notes jotted down in the studio and private visions recorded on her travels. The center of one fiery red-and-yellow watercolor and collage (from a spiral-bound pad that accompanied

Saar to Brazil, in 1994) is the torn label of a South African matchbook, printed with a recumbent lion. Saar's sun sign is Leo—think of the radiant piece as a portrait of the artist centering herself as she moves through the world.—*A.K.S. (themorgan.org)*

### Frederick Weston

When this Black, queer, H.I.V.-positive artist arrived in New York from Detroit, in 1973, he wanted to become a fashion designer. But the city's culture scene at the time was overwhelmingly white, and Weston—who died in October, at the age of seventy-three—retreated into a world that he could control. Subsisting on very little, and living in S.R.O.s, the artist made intelligent, wry, and wounded collages that expressed what he saw and felt: the ongoing marginalization of men like himself in the larger gay world, where standards of beauty were just as rigid as they were in any heter-

onormative realm. An important exhibition of Weston's work—by turns poetic and evocative, witty and weary—is on view at Ortuzar Projects. Conceived in collaboration with the artist, it does much to remind us that society's best visual critics often fall through the cracks, and to question why it still takes us so long to recognize them.—*Hilton Als (ortuzarprojects.com)*

### Stella Zhong

A raised floor the color of pale lichen transforms the Chapter gallery, on East Houston Street, into something like a sci-fi stage set or a miniature-golf course. The first association derives from a six-foot-tall inverted conical form, standing like an ossified tornado near the front of the space; the second is suggested by small sculptures that unexpectedly occupy pockets and fissures in the gallery floor. Among the largest of these loosely inset works is one that resembles a pair of spooning slugs. Zhong, who was born

## AT THE GALLERIES



Downtown New York is the Walt Whitman of places: it contains multitudes and contradicts itself. If you think it begins and ends in lower Manhattan, Sam Gordon wants to open your mind. The artist-curator organized the inspired polyphonic group show "**Downtown 2021**," at La Mama Galleria, to propose that the downtown spirit may be best reflected at galleries—many of them artist-run—in Brooklyn and Queens. (The exhibition is on view Fridays and Saturdays, through Feb. 20.) Works by about thirty painters, ceramicists, photographers, choreographers, filmmakers, and installationists advocate for the outer-borough spaces that have shown them, from the nonprofit feminist cooperative A.I.R., established in 1972 and now housed in Dumbo, to Zak's, which the young sculptor-to-watch Zak Kittnick began as a lark in his studio, in 2015. (The show includes a handsome, if gnomish, game table by Kittnick, made of bronze, brass, copper, and steel, from the Bushwick gallery Clearing.) Most of the art here is new; a noteworthy exception is the elegant formalism of the established, but under-recognized, Black sculptor Helen Evans Ramsaran, whose 1996 bronze "The Seat of Power" (pictured in the foreground above) is a testament to the discerning vision of the Bed-Stuy gallery Welancora.—*Andrea K. Scott*



The magician Derek DelGaudio doesn't do "patter." In his extraordinary show **"In & Of Itself,"** which ran for more than a year Off Broadway, he used his prodigious skills of prestidigitation in service of a meditation on selfhood. Coming into the theatre, each spectator selected, from a wall of pegs, a card that read "I AM," with various identities ("a sister," "a lawyer," "the walrus") printed below. These declarations set up a humdinger of an illusion, but they also mirrored DelGaudio's quest of self-discovery, including his experience growing up with a gay mother in conservative Colorado. A filmed version is now on Hulu, directed by Frank Oz. Card tricks shouldn't work on camera—you have to be there to disbelieve your eyes—but somehow that doesn't matter. What resonates, unexpectedly, is the footage of DelGaudio's audiences changing from night to night, reacting and participating as a spellbound group. This past year, "audience member" is one identity we've all had to forgo.—*Michael Schulman*

in Shenzhen, China, achieves an effect that is simultaneously playful and strangely cold—it's as though her surreal landscape is a digital rendering that's sprung to life. Navigating the installation (you're asked to remove your shoes when you enter the show) is rather like inhabiting the space of a video game. An oil painting of an orange cylinder on a teal plane marks the end of your journey—a final, adamantly confounding gesture.—*J.F. (chapter-ny.com)*

## THE THEATRE

### The Approach

Mark O'Rowe wrote **"The Approach"** specifically for Cathy Belton, Derbhle Crotty, and Aisling O'Sullivan—he wanted three of Ireland's foremost actresses to, at long last, share a stage. The play exposes the evolving relationship between Anna (O'Sullivan), Denise (Crotty), and Cora (Belton) through a series of dialogues spanning five years. O'Rowe (**"Howie the Rookie"**) dispenses information in a slow, seemingly innocuous manner that rewards close attention. The text is as natu-

ralistic as Sinéad McKenna's set for the play's 2018 premiere was abstract: a table, two chairs, two cups. This intimacy makes **"The Approach"** particularly well suited to a virtual production, so it's fitting that the original team is reuniting, once again under O'Rowe's direction, for three live streams from the Project Arts Centre, in Dublin, on Jan. 21, Jan. 23, and Jan. 24, presented in the U.S. by St. Ann's Warehouse; the play is available to stream until Jan. 31.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (stannswarehouse.org)*

### Reflections of Native Voices Festival

The indigenous collective Safe Harbors NYC launched this performance festival last year, as part of its mission to combat Native American stereotypes and foster cross-cultural exchange. The second annual edition is virtual but no less bustling. The East Village stalwarts New York Theatre Workshop and La Mama are hosting events on their Web sites, including **"Tipi Tales from the Stoop,"** by Murielle Borst-Tarrant (Kuna/Rappahannock Nations); **"Looking for Tiger Lily,"** by Anthony Hudson (Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde); and **"Blood,**

**Water, Earth,"** by Santee Smith (Kahnyn'kehàka Nation, Turtle Clan). Performances run Jan. 25-Feb. 7.—*Michael Schulman (nytw.org and lamama.org.)*

### The Work of Adrienne Kennedy: Inspiration and Influence

This digital festival of filmed readings from Round House Theatre, in association with McCarter Theatre Center, includes several of Kennedy's later plays. **"He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box,"** from 2018, tells the story of a fraught romance between Kay (Maya Jackson), a Black woman of mixed ancestry, and Chris (Michael Sweeney Hammond), the white heir to a prominent family who rule the affairs of the Georgia town where both were born and raised. There are quick cuts to highly symbolic representations of the actors' words—somebody's hand opens slowly to reveal, embedded on the palm, a series of graves—and the lighting (designed by Sherrice Mojgani) is a spectral, insistent blue. In **"Ohio State Murders,"** directed by Valerie Curtis-Newton, Kennedy's alter ego, Suzanne (Lynda Gravatt), tries to explain the source of the violent imagery in her plays. **"Sleep Deprivation Chamber,"** directed by Raymond O. Caldwell, tells the story of Suzanne's son, Teddy, who was accosted by police outside his own front door and badly beaten. If one motif hums through Kennedy's work, it is a nagging, sometimes unbearable suspicion that the past has hijacked the present.—*Vinson Cunningham (Reviewed in our issue of 1/18/21.) (roundhousetheatre.org)*

## DANCE

### Bijayini Satpathy

For years, Satpathy was the star of the classical Indian dance company Nrityagram, based near Bangalore. Then, in 2019, she struck out on her own, delivering a spellbinding solo performance, in New York, of dances associated with the tradition of Odissi. In a new fifteen-minute solo, recorded in Bangalore (streaming on Baryshnikov Arts Center's Web site, Feb. 1-15), Satpathy goes further in her exploration of Odissi movement, drawing on a personal style she has developed during the past year of solitary exploration. On Feb. 10, she and the modern-dance choreographer Mark Morris—a devotee of Indian classical music and dance—engage in a live conversation via Zoom.—*Marina Harss (bacnyc.org)*

### "Titon et l'Aurore"

This Baroque opera by Jean-Joseph Cassanéa de Mondonville, a pastoral allegory about a love affair between a shepherd and a goddess, is ideal material for the renowned puppeteer Basil Twist, who makes his international début as an all-in-one director and designer with this Opera Comique production. William Christie, Les Arts Florissants, and a fine cast handle the music while Twist provides the homespun fantasy: the three Graces on strings, wings of billowing silk, a dress of hanging vines, and a whole flock of life-size sheep that make like the cow over the moon. The production streams on medici.tv for free through April 19.—*Brian Seibert (opera-comique.com)*

## MUSIC

### Baltimore Symphony Orchestra

**CLASSICAL** Many orchestras have modelled their quarantine-era streaming initiatives on the conventional concert experience, playing to an unseen audience. The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra has adopted a different approach with “BSO Sessions,” offering polished, scripted episodes that intersperse performance footage with interviews and other video elements. The twelfth episode, available individually or via subscription, focusses on music by composers whose careers bridge the worlds of popular and concert music, including Radiohead’s Jonny Greenwood, the National’s Bryce Dessner, and the Pulitzer Prize winner (and Kanye West collaborator) Caroline Shaw.—*Steve Smith* (Jan. 27 at 8; [bsomusic.org](http://bsomusic.org).)

### CARM: “CARM”

**EXPERIMENTAL POP** The indie-famous vocalists trading singing duties on CARM’s self-titled début include Sufjan Stevens, Shara Nova, and Justin Vernon—but the headliner is the band’s brass player, CJ Camerieri. A founding member of the chamber ensemble yMusic, Camerieri has made frequent appearances in the pop world over the years, splashing color behind various stars. With CARM, he shifts the perspective, an effect akin to elevating a gifted character actor into a lead role. Even at the helm, the musician can maintain a wallflower’s disposition, his trumpet and French horn ducking in and out of the shadows cast by the album’s soundscape. On “Already Gone,” Yo La Tengo’s Georgia Hubley and Ira Kaplan sing alongside an anxious keyboard throb. For generations of listeners, the pair’s voices bespeak calm, often amid a gathering instrumental storm, which here comes from flashes of brass that menacingly build until, even more eerily, they disappear.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

### Eladio Carrión: “Monarca”

**LATIN TRAP** On his début album, “Sauce Boyz,” from 2020, the Puerto Rican rapper Eladio Carrión hinted at the robust versatility lurking behind his languid delivery. He had no trouble toggling from grimy trap *sucio* beats to sunny, up-tempo reggaetón, showing off an affable willingness to experiment. On his follow-up record, “Monarca,” Carrión is committed to proving he’s a utility player who can do a little bit of everything: the album drops him directly into popular *urbano* and sees him tackle dusky breakup balladry (“Discoteca”) and baroque trap-corrido sounds (the “Ele Uve” remix, with Natanael Cano and Ovi). The songs may not be the most innovative, but they set him up for future metamorphoses.—*Julyssa Lopez*

### “Myths and Hymns”

**MUSICAL THEATRE** Adam Guettel adapted the texts for his 1998 song cycle, “Myths and Hymns,” from Greek mythology and a nineteenth-century Presbyterian hymnal, but the pieces coexist peaceably in his extravagant, yearning, melodic style. The songs have an optimistic streak, encouraging us to see our heroes as human and take our blessings where we can find them. Ted Sperling, the artistic director of the New York City-based chorus MasterVoices, has divided the work into a four-part stream-

ing series, available on the group’s YouTube channel. The first chapter, entitled “Flight,” features a dreamy cast of Broadway and opera singers (Norm Lewis, Mykal Kilgore, Kelli O’Hara, Renée Fleming, Julia Bullock), but the art direction, cobbled together from a number of contributors, struggles with the question of how to stream music productions—a “Brady Bunch” grid is not the answer.—*Oussama Zahr*

### Peter Bernstein Quartet

**JAZZ** An artist can either strive for innovation or vigorously buff the precious metals that tradition has already entrusted to him. Playing straight-ahead jazz with unpretentious pride, the virtuoso guitarist Peter Bernstein has stayed the course; after a quarter century on the scene—now surrounded by a slew of prodigious fretmen—he’s taken on the mantle of the patriarch of mainstream neo-bop guitar. His latest album, “What Comes Next”—cut in the early days of the pandemic—proves that he remains in fighting shape. A live stream from the venerated basement club Village Vanguard finds him in charge of a trim quartet.—*Steve Futterman* (Jan. 29-30 at 8; [villagevanguard.com](http://villagevanguard.com).)

### “Peter Stampfel’s 20th Century”

**FOLK** The octogenarian folksinger Peter Stampfel performs in a friendly, cartoonish warble that can veer willfully into an agitated yowl. It’s not for every taste, but it proves surprisingly versatile across the four and a half hours of “Peter Stampfel’s 20th Century,” his new song-a-year survey. The concept works less well as the material moves into the present—he clearly doesn’t care much for pop after punk—but the pre-rock material, in particular, has a breezy jocularly that makes moldy oldies such as “Under the Bamboo Tree” (from 1902) or “The Way You Look Tonight” (1936) sound renewed, if not quite up to date.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

## POP



## MOVIES

### Enormous

The director Sophie Letourneur, French cinema’s near-mumblecorean, fuses sketch comedy with documentary inquiry in this tale of an odd couple’s tangled journey to parenthood. Claire (Marina Foïs), an acclaimed concert pianist, is a distracted dreamer who leaves all practical details to her husband, Fred (Jonathan Cohen). She’s too busy for children, but when Fred is seized with paternal instincts he abusively deceives her about contraception and Claire gets pregnant. Much of the film involves the couple’s consultations with doctors, midwives, and other professionals (real-life ones, filmed on site); much of the comedy comes from Fred’s outsized enthusiasm for his impending fatherhood (Cohen, a popular comedian in France, riffs wildly throughout). The movie confronts Fred’s domineering cruelty, yet Claire’s conflicts (keenly displayed in Foïs’s withdrawn bewilderment) get short dramatic shrift, replaced by antic physical and sexual comedy that nonetheless suggests the irrational bonds of love. What’s more, the tale seemingly anticipates the last burst of communal life before lockdown: completed in mid-2019, it culminates in a concert set on Feb. 29, 2020. In French.—*Richard Brody* (Streaming on MUBI and Amazon.)

### The Killers

The director Don Siegel’s Technicolor film noir, from 1964—very loosely based on Ernest Hemingway’s story of death and its dealers—displays the seamy side of life in sharp graphic lines. Lee Marvin and Clu Gulager play sardonic hit men who, after gunning down a race-car driver (John Cassavetes), suspect that there’s big money at stake and plan to get it. Their quest takes them to Miami, New Orleans, and Los Angeles; the story of a million missing

Despite Zayn Malik’s ambitious mindset, his music has often felt a bit forced, the result of a talented and well-meaning introvert tracing his influences too heavily-handedly. Since 2015, the English-Pakistani pop star and former One Direction member has been working toward a more “experimental” sound while shedding his boy-band image, and on his serene third album, “**Nobody Is Listening**,” he finally taps into something more natural: sophisticated, largely atmospheric pop that simmers like quiet-storm R. & B. The new dad has never seemed more resolved. He deploys cooing vocals that twist sharply and unexpectedly into falsetto, navigating an unpredictable journey—through soft rock (“Sweat”), new jack swing lite (“Vibez”), and acoustic soul (“Outside”)—that buffs down any jagged edges.—*Sheldon Pearce*

dollars is revealed in flashbacks that involve a femme fatale (Angie Dickinson) and her sugar daddy (Ronald Reagan, in his last movie role), a twisted love affair, and a heist gone awry. As in Hemingway's story, the killers are a couple of cutups; Gulager and Marvin bring weird and wicked humor to the assassins' dirty work. Siegel's terse, seething, and stylish direction glows with the blank radiance of sheet metal in sunlight; the movie's bright primary colors and glossy luxuries are imbued with menace, and its luminous delights convey a terrifyingly cold world view.—*R.B. (On TCM Jan. 31 and streaming on its site.)*

## Locked Down

This pandemic-lockdown drama, set in a cozy part of London, blends romantic collapse and desperate crime; it strains to dramatize the emotional emptiness of isolation and, instead, uses it as a facile premise. A longtime couple, Linda (Anne Hathaway), an unhappy executive with an international luxury-goods firm, and Paxton (Chiwetel Ejiofor), a laid-off van

driver with a drug problem, a criminal record, and a taste for poetry, are on the rocks. She's preparing to leave him when he gets an offer to transport jewels for Harrods—her former employer—and she decides that a heist will bring in enough money to liberate them from their jobs and each other. The script, by Steven Knight, piles clichés and stereotypes atop ludicrously rickety plotting, and the director, Doug Liman, replaces character traits with quirks and action with antics (including a now obligatory kooky-solo-dance scene). The only fun arises from an exuberant array of Zoom cameos (including Ben Stiller, Mindy Kaling, Ben Kingsley, and Claes Bang); as for the pandemic, it's treated like an apolitical, impersonal inconvenience.—*R.B. (Streaming on HBO Max.)*

## Marshall

The director Reginald Hudlin brings an apt blend of vigor and empathy to this historical drama, set in 1941. Chadwick Boseman stars as Thurgood Marshall, a young N.A.A.C.P. attorney who is dispatched to Bridgeport, Con-

necticut, to represent a Black man, Joseph Spell (Sterling K. Brown), who is accused of the rape and attempted murder of a wealthy white woman (Kate Hudson) for whom he worked as a chauffeur. As an out-of-state attorney, Marshall has to be paired with a local lawyer; the judge hearing the case high-handedly bars Marshall from speaking in court. Much of the action is set in the courtroom, where Hudlin (working with a script by the Bridgeport attorney Michael Koskoff and his son, the screenwriter Jacob Koskoff) lends physical energy to the language of ideas. He ties the dialectical action to Marshall's energetic and plainspoken brilliance—and to the behind-the-scenes insights of Marshall's wife, Buster (Keesha Sharp). Meanwhile, the movie urgently dramatizes the threat of racist violence that poisons personal relationships and judicial proceedings alike. Released in 2017.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, Google Play, and other services.)*

## Miracle in Milan

Fantasy casts a lurid light on unbearable realities in this political comedy by Vittorio De Sica, from 1951. Italy's crises of employment and housing are the subjects of its sentimental story, which is also a wildly imaginative tale brought to life with astonishing special effects and slapstick stunts. Its Chaplinesque star, Francesco Golisano—a nonprofessional actor and a superbly subtle physical comedian—plays Totò, a penniless orphan in a shantytown on the outskirts of Milan. When a predatory landlord summons his private army to displace its residents, Totò miraculously obtains the power of wish fulfillment, which he first deploys in an effort to help them—but his desperate neighbors quickly abuse this power, with chaotic results. This satire on the cravings of rich and poor alike is also a cry of despair; De Sica's celestial visions suggest that nothing short of a miracle will save those in need. In Italian.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon.)*

## Trance

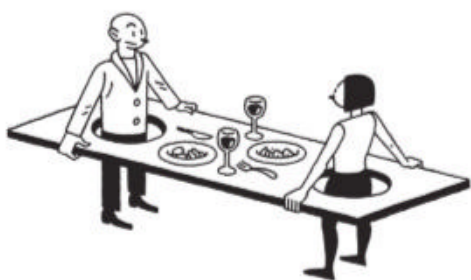
Danny Boyle's 2013 film stars James McAvoy as Simon, who steals a painting—a Goya, no less, just to warn us that mildness and serenity will not be the order of the day. After a blow to the head, Simon can't remember where he stashed his treasure; his partners in crime, led by the forceful Franck (Vincent Cassel), hit on the bright—or, if you prefer, risible—idea of sending him to a hypnotherapist (Rosario Dawson) to extract the truth. Then everything gets really weird. The movie exemplifies Boyle's cheerful capacity to dance a fine line between the sizzling and the silly; the more strangulated the plot, the less we seem to mind what happens to anybody. The only perceptible purpose of the story is to pay homage to Dawson, and rightly so; her character is a rare blend of she-devil and sculptured deity, rising above the follies of mere men. Hence, perhaps, the hellishly stylized London where she presides: a place where apartments come with glowing swimming pools and even the waste dumps look artfully disarrayed.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 4/8/13.) (Streaming on Amazon, iTunes, and other services.)*

## WHAT TO STREAM



The Sudanese cinema, long suppressed by the country's Islamist regime, has recently made a proudly self-conscious return, as with Suhaib Gasmelbari's documentary "Talking About Trees" (streaming Feb. 2-8 in the Human Rights Watch Film Festival), detailing a group of elder filmmakers' efforts to reopen a movie theatre. The director Amjad Abu Alala's first fiction feature, "**You Will Die at Twenty**" (streaming on virtual cinemas, including BAM), Sudan's first submission for the Oscars, is a wide-ranging coming-of-age drama about a boy named Muzamil who, in the aftermath of a mystical ceremony, bears the curse of the title. His mother tries to save him by sending him to a sheikh, who gives Muzamil a strict Islamic education and keeps him in isolation; but Muzamil, as he approaches the fateful age, wants to marry, and begins to question his education under the influence of a free-spirited older man who privately screens classic movies for him. Abu Alala's ardent attention to daily details, rooted in political and cultural history, offers a powerful symbolic vision of the tormented and violent legacy of dogmatism and dictatorship.—*Richard Brody*

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## TABLES FOR TWO

### Gastronomy Underground

Last summer, the chefs Pablo Rojas and Roxanna Mejia, both furloughed from their kitchen jobs, launched Gastronomy Underground, which delivers taco sets and multicourse meals to diners in Brooklyn. That the married couple, who are in their mid-twenties, have been undeterred by the challenges of the past year in their aspiration to cook professionally in New York City comes as little surprise. They met as college students in the border town of Brownsville, Texas, where Mejia grew up and where Rojas moved as a twelve-year-old. After a short time pursuing other careers, their shared passion for cooking (specifically baking, in Mejia's case) grew into "an itch to work in kitchens," Rojas told me recently.

In 2019, they sent fifty impassioned letters, cold, to high-profile restaurants around the country. After landing opportunities to stage at Eleven Madison Park and, before long, jobs at the NoMad and Bouchon Bakery, they sold most of their belongings and, with their two-year-old son, moved to New York. "The first eight months were brutal," Rojas admitted, "physically, emotionally, psychologi-

cally"—for a while, they saw each other only to swap places in their apartment between shifts—but "we loved it."

By the time the pandemic struck, Mejia and Rojas had found their footing. In April, they returned, for a time, to Texas. In July, back in New York, they began to brainstorm. The previous fall, they had secured a domain name for Gastronomy Underground, in hope of launching a rooftop dinner series; now they would take the concept on the road. At first, they partnered with some former colleagues, conceiving of the project as a collective of Mexican chefs in New York. But as those chefs lost their jobs, and in some cases their restaurant-sponsored visas, they returned to Mexico.

Gastronomy Underground, then, is a two-person operation, part of a growing movement of young Mexican chefs determined to deepen New Yorkers' understanding of Mexican food. In Brownsville, which abuts the Mexican town of Matamoros, Mejia grew up eating in a style typical of northern Mexico, "really big on meat, grilling pretty much every day, flour tortillas," Rojas told me. Hence Carne Asada Sunday, featuring grilled skirt steak—or vegetarian *alambre*, a mix of vegetables grilled with cheese—plus floppy handmade flour tortillas and all the fixings: *frijoles charros*, stewed with tomato, jalapeño, sausage, and dried chili; fluffy rice, steamed in beer and flecked with cilantro and coins of carrot; and toppings from avocado salsa and queso fresco to chopped onion and limes.

I admit that I did a double take when

I read the instruction to place the tortillas and meat in the microwave. But doing so brought the steak, which had been a bit pinker than I'd have liked, to the perfect rosy hue. The tortillas grew soft and steamy. (If I've learned one thing after nearly a year of eating creative takeout, it's that the microwave is the unsung hero of the kitchen.) On Taco Tuesday, I achieved similar results with smaller corn tortillas, topped with pork-confit carnitas or squash-and-eggplant *pipian*. The former, its luscious fat cut beautifully with bittersweet orange peel, pays homage to a style made famous in the state of Michoacán, where it is traditionally slow-cooked in enormous copper pots.

On a recent Friday, Rojas and Mejia offered a three-course tasting menu inspired by Radiohead, with an accompanying playlist. (Mise en place, they noted, could be translated to "everything in its right place.") None of the dishes—a grain-and-mushroom salad with celery-root purée; a seared steak with brioche; caraway sponge with chocolate ganache, blackberries, and tarragon—were as easy to classify as carnitas. But were they any less Mexican, as a reflection of Rojas and Mejia's instincts and of the country's complex identity? "We have a history of French occupation, we have a history of Spanish conquest," Rojas explained. "Five hundred-plus years of food culture blending together. We wanted to understand and explore what that would look like within our concept." (Meals \$45–\$70.)

—Hannah Goldfield

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT MAN WITH A PLAN

President Joe Biden arrived in office with the kind of coherent, ambitious plan that Americans may almost have forgotten was possible. On Thursday, he issued the “National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness,” which embraces a set of priorities that includes better data collection and analysis, building more testing capacity, and sending a directive to the Occupational Safety and Health Agency to produce and enforce standards protecting workers from the virus. By the end of the week, he had signed thirty executive orders, which began the work of dismantling policies that Donald Trump had instituted in the service of his ego and his base. Biden’s orders bring the United States back into the Paris climate accord and the World Health Organization, end construction on the border wall, rescind the travel ban that targeted mostly Muslim countries, and disband the 1776 Commission, a last-ditch attempt to get historians to stop talking so much about the realities of slavery and racism. He also asked the Department of Education to extend through September a moratorium on the repayment of student loans and loan interest, and requested that federal agencies hold off on evictions and foreclosures until the end of March.

Despite the gravity of the challenges ahead, Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris are setting out with some distinct advantages. They won the election by more than seven million votes, amassing more ballots than any Presi-

dential ticket in U.S. history, and, thanks to Georgia, they have slim Democratic majorities in both the Senate and the House. Perhaps most critically, they have faith in the capacity of government to help people. Biden, by temperament and by experience—a very long career in public service which includes championing the Affordable Care Act, the most comprehensive health-care reform in decades—is well suited to trying to restore that faith for the rest of America.

He does face some formidable obstacles. For all that Trump tried to trash America’s democratic governance, his fellow-Republicans had been doing damage to the idea of government itself long before he became their standard-bearer. The extreme belief in small government that so many in the G.O.P. have espoused since the Reagan Administration, and particularly since the rise of the Tea Party, makes them more radical than most of

their conservative and even far-right counterparts in Western Europe and Canada. They helped create a climate in which scorn for the purpose and the efficacy of government dashed many Americans’ expectations that it could do much for them. That attitude got a big assist from Republicans in the Senate who have successfully wielded the filibuster—the mechanism that requires a super-majority of sixty senators to move a bill to a vote—to block progressive legislation and prevent even the discussion of, for example, a public option for health care.

For these reasons and more, Biden is going to have a hard time enacting his legislative agenda. Yet it’s crucial that he do so—not only for the practical good it would do for the whole country but because it might win over at least some of those currently alienated from the Democratic Party. It will be an invigorating start if he can get his COVID-19 relief plan through Congress—a proposal that would provide up to fourteen hundred dollars directly to households, increase funds for vaccine distribution and child care, and raise the federally guaranteed minimum wage to fifteen dollars an hour. It would require a two-thirds vote to get rid of the filibuster altogether, so Biden will likely have to work around it. But he can take advantage of budget reconciliation, a process by which, in certain circumstances, Congress can pass special budgets by a simple majority. (It worked, in 2010, to nail down some of the budget for Obamacare.)

The fact is that, in a harsh capitalist economy with a weak labor movement, where so many are vulnerable to the vagaries of gig work, rising housing costs,



unpredictable medical bills, and punishing student debt, people need help from the government. And, when they actually get it, they tend, not surprisingly, to like it. According to a Pew Research Center survey from April, eighty-nine per cent of Americans—equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans—think the two-trillion-dollar COVID-19 relief package that Congress passed last March was appropriate, and seventy-seven per cent think that more relief is needed.

Similarly, though congressional Republicans have repeatedly tried to repeal the A.C.A., and Republican attorneys general have mounted successive legal challenges to it, the law's protections, especially those guarding against the denial of insurance on the basis of preexisting conditions, are more popular than ever. About fifty per cent of Americans hold a favorable view of the A.C.A., according to a Kaiser Family Foundation poll, and seventy-nine per cent want to

retain the preexisting-conditions provision. In 2017, Guy Molyneux, a pollster conducting surveys for the Center for American Progress, found attitudes toward the role of government that should be encouraging to Biden. "Non-college whites believe government has let them down," Molyneux wrote in *The American Prospect*, "but most have no principled or ideological objections to government playing a strong role in the economy. Although just 20 percent trust the federal government, 50 percent also say that it should take a more active role in solving the nation's economic and social problems."

But, with congressional Republicans still stoking fears of socialism and the "deep state," it will take persistent eloquence and empathy from the explainer-in-chief to make the case for government's role. Biden is sometimes compared with Franklin Roosevelt. Both inherited a profound and confounding national crisis and promoted a belief that

government can assuage it. Both men's fundamental optimism seems compassionate rather than naïve, perhaps as a result of their having endured personal sorrows themselves (Roosevelt's affliction with polio; Biden's loss of his first wife and two of his children). "The admirable trait in Roosevelt is that he has the guts to try," the Republican senator Hiram Johnson said, with grudging admiration, adding that "he does it all with the rarest good nature."

By talking honestly about the difficulties the country faces but confidently about what government can accomplish, Biden may be able to do the same. "It's going to take months to turn things around," he said last week. In a few weeks' time, he predicted, half a million Americans will have died of COVID. But, the President added, "to a nation waiting for action, let me be clearest on this point: help is on the way."

—Margaret Talbot

## WIND ON CAPITOL HILL THE GREEN ZONE



The peaceful transition of power brought more than twenty thousand troops to Washington, D.C., for Inauguration Day. "It's like in Baghdad!" Read Scott Martin, a local pedicab operator, said as he circled the new security perimeter known as the capital's Green Zone, which spanned the National Mall and the White House. As Donald Trump was telling supporters at Joint Base Andrews to "have a good life," before flying away to Florida on Air Force One, to the strains of "My Way," Scott Martin, whose pedicab had a sign that depicted a pig and read "STOP THE SQUEAL," pedalled around Lincoln Park to watch the National Guard change shifts. Their body shields and shoulder pads were lined up on the grass beneath a statue of Lincoln and an emancipated slave. "They're out of U.S. military vehicles, so they're leasing tourist buses," Scott Martin explained. "But there are no tourists today."

Traditionally, inaugurals are like Woodstock for pedicabs. "This would

be an event that would attract, like, a hundred pedicabs if things were normal," Scott Martin said. "There's a community of us across the U.S., and Inauguration is like a reunion." This year, there were five in total. Scott Martin, a longtime Washingtonian, got into the business four years ago, after the Women's March. One of his first jobs in the city was at United Press International, but while he was on a weeklong holiday on a boat—this was pre-cell phone—the newswire went bankrupt. He later found work at a government-relations firm founded by former press secretaries to Jimmy Carter and Nancy Reagan, in an office down the hall from Jake Tapper. Eventually, pedicabs beckoned. "You can make a business as a has-been in Washington," Scott Martin said. Typically, pedicabs are popular beasts of burden for weekend tourists. (Members of Congress and tipsy Hill staffers sometimes flag them down in a pinch.)

Scott Martin had spent the three days before the Inauguration devising a route and probing the limitations of the lockdown. "This is forensic, not creative," he explained. He gestured to the barricades and razor wire set up alongside the Senate office buildings. "No civilians back there," he said. Then he took off toward the Supreme Court, which was approach-

able, at least before a bomb threat was called in later that morning. "All together, exhale!" Scott Martin cried out as he whizzed past soldiers stationed at intersections. "Keep having a boring day!" he shouted at the occupying forces. At a checkpoint for access to the Capitol itself—the Red Zone—he debated whether he could ride in. "I see tanks, guns, and guys in suits with duffel bags, so I'm guessing I can't go there."

Instead, he pedalled around the edge of the Green Zone, inching through downtown toward Black Lives Matter Plaza and the White House. It was desolate. "This reminds me of the eighties, when downtown was empty on the weekend," he said. "It used to be a *prairie* here." In front of the boarded-up plaza, a man with a sign that read "Stop hating each other because you disagree" played Bob Marley from a speaker. As Scott Martin described how Lincoln's casket had travelled through Washington, armed troops asked him to move out of an intersection.

Looking for other possible access points to view the inaugural ceremony, Scott Martin zipped by the Dubliner pub ("That's where the Proud Boys hung out") and eventually ended up opposite the National Museum of the American Indian, where a smattering of people stood. In the absence of jumbotrons, they



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live-streamed the proceedings on their phones. A woman in her seventies, who had come from South Carolina with her husband, wore a white feathered coat and sunglasses. They were staying at a Holiday Inn, where most of the other guests were National Guardsmen. (The day after the Inauguration, hundreds of troops were banished from the Capitol, and sent to sleep in a parking garage.) The husband explained, “We thought there would be a lot of Trump people, so we wanted to make a presence that wasn’t Trump crazies.” He added, “The biggest problem is we can’t find any open restaurants.” A lone protester stood silently, holding a sign that said “Joe and Jill are pretty-faced liars.”

Another pedicab driver, Alex Fry, pulled up. This was his third inaugural. “But my most profitable day in ten years was January 6th, when they raided the Capitol,” he said. The clientele was “mostly older couples who were tired of being in the cold and didn’t know where to go to find a restroom. Almost every ride I had was someone begging to know where a bathroom was. That rally didn’t set up any porta potties.” He went on, “Technically, we’re not even meant to be in the Green Zone, but if you ride on the sidewalk nobody seems to care.”

After Lady Gaga’s national anthem blared from a speaker on Fry’s pedicab, Scott Martin hopped back on his bike

and pedalled up the steep hill toward the Capitol. Behind the fencing, Biden had taken his oath. Trump had landed in Florida. Scott Martin reached the crest and could coast back toward the White House. “You never forget the downhill,” he said.

—*Antonia Hitchens*

## ATLANTA POSTCARD HOLDOUT



Two weeks before Joe Biden’s Inauguration, L. Lin Wood answered his telephone. The defamation attorney and conspiracy theorist was at home, in Atlanta, watching a human-trafficking segment on the One America News Network. “I saw there was a warning out,” Wood told the caller. Maybe there was work in it for him? His recent clients have included the Georgia congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene (Wood appends heart emojis to their correspondences) and Kyle Rittenhouse (“a hero”), and he has litigated on behalf of Donald Trump, whose election-fraud suits in Georgia had failed under Wood’s watch. “Nobody loses 0–60,” Wood said, “unless the deck is stacked!” Twitter had perma-

nently banned Wood, as it had Trump, for inciting violence. Parler was shut down. Wood lost more than a million followers on the two platforms combined. He’d soon be removed from a case in Delaware, owing to “textbook frivolous litigation.” There was also the matter of the Capitol insurrection, which Wood’s words (“rhetorical hyperbole!”) had arguably helped provoke.

Still, at home, watching OAN, Wood remained upbeat. “I have eternal life,” he said at one point during the hour-long call. He flitted from firing squads to what makes a good father to the pitching mechanics of a Double-A guy known as Flame Fleming, “who threw like a cannonball.” He waved away the fact that there had been a Trumpist insurrection the day before. “I don’t believe anybody died yesterday,” Wood said of the violence, which killed at least five, including a San Diego woman who, before she died storming the Capitol, had retweeted Wood’s call for Mike Pence to be charged with treason. “I think it was all staged,” he went on. “It was Antifa dressed up as Trump people.”

How did he know? “I apply critical thinking and the instincts God gave me,” he said, adding, “I’m not God!” Moments later, though, he did compare himself to King David. He continued, “I’m just a person who understands what’s going on and why.” He added a hedge: “If I am God, I’ve got one bad memory! I don’t remember creating myself, the clouds, the oceans, the stars. But do I try to live like God? This is the second harvest. God is getting ready to show he’s real again.”

Wood was not referring to Biden’s Inauguration. To make this point clear, he bet the caller a dinner at one of Atlanta’s most expensive steakhouses that Trump would be re-inaugurated on the twentieth. The idea may have held some purely theoretical appeal had Wood not already explained that he almost never wore a mask and had never taken a COVID test, “and wouldn’t believe it if I did.” Still, would Wood pay up? A few days later, his curious correspondent sent him a screenshot of Trump admitting that a new Administration would be inaugurated on the twentieth. Wood replied, by text, “Ha! Not so quick! I prefer to wait to see who is inaugurated first!” What did Wood think, then, a few days later,



*“It’s about three miles north, as the naked mole rat burrows.”*

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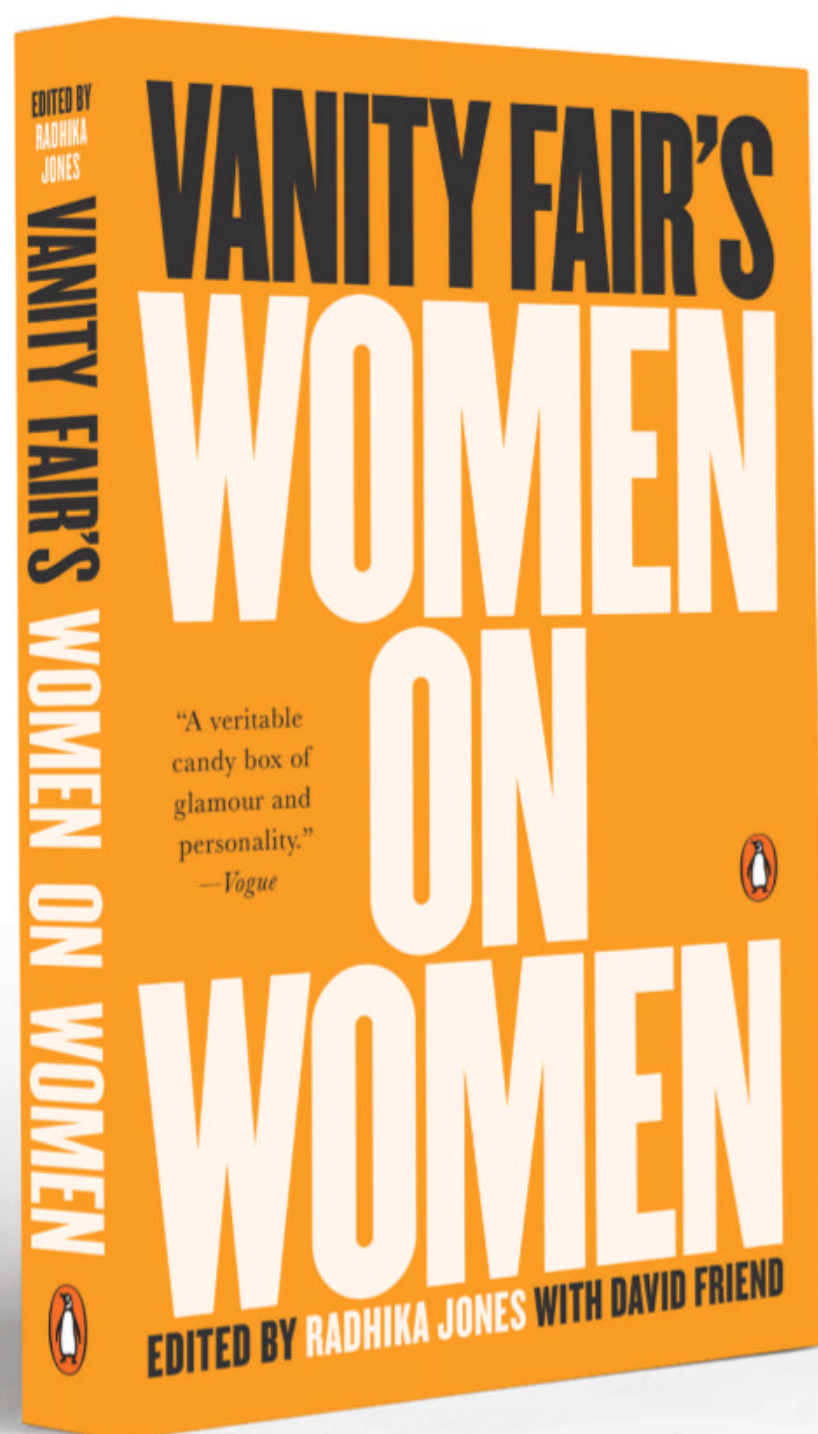
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when moving vans showed up at the White House? As a former sportswriter for the *Macon News*, Wood quoted Yogi Berra in his response: “It ain’t over till it’s over.” On January 19th, the baseball metaphors continued. “9 innings,” Wood texted. “Sometimes extra innings!”

The next morning, Trump finally flew off. Wood was among the millions who watched. What did he think now? The lawyer answered with a question: “What do you make of the gold-trimmed flags behind him when he spoke?” The caller noted that there were seventeen of them—much to the delight of the QAnon press corps. (“Q” is the seventeenth letter of the alphabet.) “I did not count them,” Wood wrote of the flags. “I was just enjoying the beauty of the gold trim.” And he added, in another text, referring to Biden’s speech, “Waiting for it to end so I can play with my puppies!”

Now in his late sixties, Wood said that he’d cried, as a young man, when Richard Nixon resigned. He had not cried, however, when Trump got on the plane to Mar-a-Lago. “I’m pretty calm about everything,” he said, television audible in the background, “even though a lot of people are pulling their hair out.” He went on, “It’s a way of God saying, ‘Hey, you better trust *me*.’” As for his own future, Wood looked on the bright side. “I’ve always wanted to write,” he said. “But I’ve never had the time to do it.” Before hanging up, he added, “I’m afraid they’re going to put me in jail, but that’s where Paul wrote some of his greatest chapters of the Bible.”

—Charles Bethea

## THE PICTURES THE NATURAL



On an evening in mid-January, two friends caught up over Zoom: the actor and director Fisher Stevens, from the set of “Succession,” and the actor and musician Justin Timberlake, from a remote location, in a room that resembled a sauna. Both were bearded, affable, and wearing black sweaters. Stevens directed the new movie “Palmer,” out this week,

in which Timberlake stars. “Hey, buddy!” Stevens called out. “Thank you for being flexible.” Timberlake smiled. “It’s all good,” he said. On “Succession,” Stevens’s character, Hugo, is a frequent punching bag for Logan (Brian Cox), the show’s patriarch; that day, the roughing up had run long. “Brian Cox yelled at me all day today,” Stevens said, beaming. “Not *me*—onscreen.” Timberlake, for his part, had just been announced as a performer at the Biden-Harris inaugural party. “It’s a crazy time for Justin and me both,” Stevens said. “But ‘Palmer,’ man! We loved making the film and loved working together, and we haven’t been able to kind of *hang*.”

Stevens, an Oscar-winning documentary director, was excited to direct a drama, and was surprised when Timberlake was suggested as a star: “I’m, like, *That’s* interesting.” He’d been impressed by him in films; then he saw him in concert. “I was blown away by the magnetism of him. Like, fuck! *Wow*. We talked about the script for a while and worked on ideas. It was a long dance with Justin to get him to do it.” (“I was *incredibly* difficult,” Timberlake said.) Stevens was on the set of “Succession,” Season 2, when he heard the good news about Timberlake. “I’ll never forget it,” Stevens said. “We were in Dundee, Scotland. I’m in between setups of this big scene with Brian’s character getting honored—that Jeremy Strong rap.” (Baseball shirt, “L. to the O.G.,” horror.) “And I get this call from Justin’s manager. I wanted to jump onstage and take the mike from Jeremy. ‘Yo! I’m gonna do a movie with Justin!’”

“Succession” skewers toxic masculinity via entertainingly baroque yelling; “Palmer,” a warm, patient film with sensitive performances, achieves similar ends through opposite means. Timberlake plays Eddie Palmer, an ex-convict and a former high-school football star who gets out of prison, moves in with his grandmother in rural Louisiana, struggles to find his way, and becomes a father figure to Sam (Ryder Allen), the son of a wayward neighbor. Sam’s love of playing with dolls, and of dressing up as princesses, is only part of his charm.

Timberlake, throughout his career, has tended to bring an air of comfortable ease to his performances, however unusual: singing and dancing at the Super Bowl or in a foam-rubber omelette suit and



Justin Timberlake

gloves on “S.N.L.”; playing Sean Parker, freewheeling Machiavellian, in “The Social Network.” In “Palmer,” his “first real ‘this is your movie’ experience,” as he put it, he conveys similar naturalness. “In my first conversations with Fisher, I remember saying, I *know* this guy,” Timberlake said. He also knew Sam. Timberlake, an only child, grew up in Memphis. “At eight years old, I was singing in church, and then found my love of the arts. I wanted to take voice lessons and was begging for piano lessons, starting to perform in local talent shows, and was bullied about it,” he said. “There’s something underlying here, which is our parameters of an idea of masculinity and what it means, especially in the rural South. I feel like I have a tiny bit of authority to speak on that, having experienced it. My grandfather, the loveliest man, would give you the shirt off of his back. But he was like John Wayne: barrel-chested, one of the toughest guys you had ever seen—you know, ‘Rub some dirt on it.’ There’s no time for men to have feelings.”

In the movie, Sam is bullied by a few but accepted by most: the townspeople aren’t ogres. Timberlake said, “In real life, there are delusional people, and then there are people like this”—moms cheerfully arranging tea-party playdates that include boys—“who do exist in the rural South.” He hopes that “Palmer,” in which “you watch these two misfits complete each other’s meaning,” has a positive impact during a volatile time. “Maybe you’re a parent and you see this movie and it has

some sort of butterfly effect, where you influence your child to not stand by and watch bullying in the schoolyard," he said. "This is where it begins." Stevens took his sweater off, revealing a T-shirt that said "It's a Warnock Life." Timberlake went on, "I'm having a milestone month—I'm performing at maybe the most important Inauguration I can be a part of in my lifetime, and a song that's a hopeful take on this moment. And then this movie, and then I turn forty."

Timberlake and Ant Clemons premiered their song "Better Days" at a virtual concert for Fair Fight, of Georgia; on the Inauguration Day broadcast, they performed the song with students and alumni from the Stax Music Academy, in Memphis. "If you're feeling lost in the night / It's O.K. to cry, just as long as you hold your head," they sang. "Better days are coming."

—Sarah Larson

## PARIS POSTCARD

### THE TRAP



Gabriel Matzneff was there waiting almost every afternoon when Vanessa Springora got out of school. In winter, he wore a gold-buttoned greatcoat; in springtime, a belted safari jacket. Sunglasses in all weather. He was a famous writer, with a letter in his wallet from the President to prove it. She was a middle schooler, his girlfriend. In 1986, he was about to turn fifty. She was fourteen. Perhaps the costumes provided a furtive thrill, for their affair was a flagrantly open act that no adult in his or her world saw fit to disrupt. Her mother had him over for dinner. Her teachers asked no questions. The police pursued no charges when they got an anonymous tip about the relationship. Matzneff's publishers paid for books in which he contemplated his attraction to what he called the "third sex" of "extreme youth, the age between ten and sixteen." Meanwhile, a doctor to whom Springora confided her fear of penetration (Matzneff had, until this point, sodomized her) while recovering from a strep infection at a hospital known for *treating children*

cut her hymen so that she could "discover the joy of sex."

Last year, Springora published "Le Consentement" ("Consent"), a memoir of what she has called her "triple predation—sexual, literary, and psychic." She wrote it as a "message in a bottle," she said recently, speaking on Zoom from her apartment in Paris, but it landed like a tidal wave, sweeping away the rationalizations and vanities in which sexual abusers in France had taken shelter for years. "Le Consentement" has sold some two hundred thousand copies and will be translated into twenty-three languages. According to the sociologist Pierre Verdrager, the book's success marks "a major turning point" in the perception of pedophilia in France. "MERCI, VANESSA SPRINGORA," read a sign that the feminist collective Les Colleuses pasted on a wall in Paris last year.

"Sexual abuse, and especially that of minors, is sadly universal, but what's particular to France in this story is the impunity, the silence that was imposed, not to protect a family or an institution but, rather, a literary figure who was placed at the top of the cultural pyramid," Springora said. Prosecutors opened an investigation into Matzneff's abuse of Springora and other children, and he will stand trial in September on separate charges. At eighty-four, he has continued to defend his "lasting and magnificent love affair" with Springora, whom he tormented well into her adulthood, publishing her adolescent correspondence and harassing her at work. But the state has finally stripped him of a lucrative subsidy for aging artists, by which he had collected more than a hundred and sixty thousand euros since 2002. "I think that my book arrived at the right moment," Springora said, e-cigarette in hand. "Five years ago, it probably would have been buried."

Springora met Matzneff at a dinner party that she attended with her mother. As cheese was being served, he turned his attention to Springora, who was sitting in a corner, bored, reading Balzac's "Eugénie Grandet." Later, her mother drove him home. "He had his arm against mine, his eyes on me, and the predatory smile of a large golden wildcat," Springora writes. Then the letters started arriving, composed in turquoise ink. When she began her manuscript, Springora, who runs the French publishing house

Julliard, worried that her story might seem like a "completely outdated" period piece: *soixante-huitard* parents, latchkey afternoons, a lax post-sexual-revolution intellectual milieu. (The only rule: "It is forbidden to forbid.") An insomniac, she wrote late at night, jotting fragments in a notebook by her bed. "I wanted to leave a trace in literary history," she said. "It was a very ambitious project, but the idea was to be able to leave—facing his own body of work—another book that would sing a different tune."

The social impact of "Le Consentement" has somewhat overshadowed the book's literary achievement, but one of the belated truths that emerges from its pages is that Springora is a writer. She wanted to be one, of course. But she fell



Vanessa Springora

out of love with words after Matzneff took over a homework assignment that she was doing one afternoon, reinventing her as a champion equestrian, although she'd been on a horse just once. "And so the dispossession began," she writes. It's crushing to think of the decades Springora lost, the books she didn't write, while Matzneff racked up prizes, stealing her vitality and pawning it off as his genius. For years, she avoided books, recognizing "the toxic load they can contain." Then "the solution finally presented itself to me," she writes. "Why not ensnare the hunter in his own trap, ambush him within the pages of a book?" Her sentences gleam like metal; each chapter snaps shut with the clean brutality of a latch. The better she writes, the freer she is.

—Lauren Collins

LETTER FROM WASHINGTON

# TRUMP GETS DUMPED

*Mitch McConnell's break with him was yet another act of self-interest.*

BY JANE MAYER



*McConnell's tactics infuriated such right-wing media figures as Sean Hannity.*

On the afternoon of January 6th, less than an hour before a violent mob supporting President Donald Trump broke into the Capitol, causing mayhem that led to the deaths of five Americans, Mitch McConnell, the Senate Majority Leader, gave the most powerful speech of his life. In a cold disavowal of Trump's false claims about rampant election fraud, McConnell, a Republican from Kentucky, stood behind the Senate dais and stated the obvious: despite two months of increasingly malign lies from Trump, and from many of his supporters in Congress, Joe Biden had won the Presidency. McConnell, in his dead-eyed, laconic manner, listed the damning facts, citing numerous federal judges and state officials who had rejected Trump's baseless assertions that the election had been "rigged" against him. "The voters, the courts, and the states have all spoken," McConnell said. "If we overrule them, it would damage our republic forever." Then, in a final jab, he pointed out that—contrary to Trump's ludicrous claim that he'd won a second term by a landslide—the election "actually was not unusually close."

Trump had lost by seven million votes in the popular ballot, and 306–232 in the Electoral College.

In the days after the Capitol attack, as horrifying footage emerged of marauders ransacking the building and chanting, "Hang Mike Pence!" and "Treason!," McConnell, through a series of anonymously sourced reports in major news outlets, distanced himself even further from the President. As a prominent Republican strategist noted, "Nothing's ever happenstance with McConnell"—and so each report was taken as a Delphic signal. On January 12th, the *Times* published a headline declaring that McConnell was "said to be pleased" about the Democrats' intention to impeach the President a second time. Unnamed associates revealed to reporters on Capitol Hill that McConnell was no longer speaking to Trump, and might vote to convict him if the impeachment process moved to a Senate trial. On January 13th, ten Republican members of the House of Representatives joined the Democrats in impeaching Trump, for "incitement of insurrection." Soon afterward, McCon-

nell made clear to his Republican colleagues that he regarded impeachment as a matter of individual conscience, not one of party loyalty. And on January 19th, the day before Biden was sworn in as President, McConnell shocked political circles by denouncing Trump even more directly. Speaking from the Senate floor, he said, with extraordinary bluntness, "The mob was fed lies. They were provoked by the President and other powerful people."

McConnell's denunciation of Trump won grudging praise from many corners, including people who rarely support him. Norman Ornstein, a political scientist and an emeritus scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, who has been fiercely critical of McConnell, told me, "I was surprised at Mitch's comments. They were more forthright than I expected. Good for him!" But nobody who has watched McConnell closely over the years views his split with Trump as a genuine moral reckoning. "There is no way that McConnell has had an epiphany and will now change his fundamental approach," Ornstein said. "He will always act ruthlessly when it serves his own interest." Indeed, the most remarkable aspect of McConnell's rupture with Trump may be not that it happened but, rather, that it took so long—and that the leader of the Party in Congress countenanced so much damage along the way.

Adam Jentleson, a former top Democratic Senate aide and the author of "Kill Switch," a new book about the Senate, said, of McConnell, "He should be deservedly held accountable for spending more than a month giving credence to Trump's claims of election fraud—on the Senate floor." Jentleson added that McConnell, by failing to speak out earlier, had "offered legitimacy" to Trump's war on the truth: "Other Republicans took their signals from McConnell and continued to fan the flames. You can blame the rioters, but the entire Republican Party was telling them their claims were legitimate."

McConnell's accusation that the insurrectionists had been "fed lies" was couched in the passive voice. It skipped over the fact that he hadn't even acknowledged the outcome of the election himself until December 15th—six

weeks after it took place, and following the Electoral College's certification of Biden as the winner. McConnell, in a brief speech on the Senate floor, congratulated him, calling him "President-elect." But McConnell did not publicly confront Trump's continued denials that he had lost until after the January 5th runoff election in Georgia, in which the Democratic Party gained two Senate seats, giving it control of the Senate and toppling McConnell from his position as Majority Leader. By then, according to some polls, as many as eighty-two per cent of Republican voters believed Trump's false claims of fraud, and when his enraged supporters gathered on the National Mall many of them were determined to use force to override the official election results. The ensuing assault and ransacking of the Capitol was not only the most serious attempt at an anti-democratic coup in the country's history; it also deepened the crisis of the Republican Party. Additionally, it triggered the flight of a striking number of its major corporate backers—a development that, if it continues, could make it considerably harder for McConnell to retake the Senate in 2022.

Still, given Trump's continuing popularity among Republicans, many people in Washington were surprised that McConnell—who is by far the most powerful, and often the most inscrutable, member of the Party in Congress—was willing to openly revolt against him. But John Yarmuth, a Democratic representative from Louisville, Kentucky, who has known McConnell since the late sixties, told me he'd long predicted that the alliance between Trump and McConnell would end once the President could no longer help McConnell. "Three years ago, I said he'd wait until Trump was an existential threat to the Party, and then cut him loose," Yarmuth said. "He's been furious with Trump for a long time. Many who know him have talked with him about how much he hates Trump." But, Yarmuth noted, McConnell, focussed on Republican judicial appointments, "made a Faustian deal for all those judges." Since 2017, McConnell has played an oversized role in helping Trump install more than two hundred conservative federal judges, including three Supreme Court Justices.

For four years, McConnell and oth-

ers in the establishment wing of the Republican Party embraced the conceit that they could temper Trump's behavior, exploit his popularity, and ignore the racist, violent, and corrupt forces he unleashed. Ornstein observed that McConnell, in a cynical bargain, "used Trump to accomplish his goals of packing the courts and getting tax cuts." (Since 2016, the top corporate tax rate has been nearly halved, to twenty-one per cent.) In exchange for these gifts to the Party's corporate backers, McConnell stayed largely silent in the face of Trump's inflammatory lies and slurs—even though, according to insiders, he privately held the President in contempt. He covered for Trump's political incompetence, eventually passing budgets and pandemic relief, despite Trump's tantrums and government shutdowns. And he protected Trump from accountability during the first impeachment trial, in early 2020, announcing in advance that there was "zero chance" a Senate under his leadership would convict the President.

But any pretense that McConnell could maintain control over Trump or over the Party's fate unravelled after the 2020 election. McConnell was caught between denouncing Trump's lies and alienating his supporters, thereby risking the loss of the two Senate seats in the Georgia runoff. Faced with a choice between truth and self-interest, McConnell opted for the latter. "He knew he had to keep the team together for Georgia," a former Trump Administration official close to McConnell's circle told me. "For him, being Majority Leader was the whole ballgame. It's hard to overstate. It's pretty obvious that for McConnell one of the reasons he was so indulgent of Trump was Georgia."

It is impossible to know whether McConnell would have confronted Trump's election lies earlier, had his own powerful job not been in play. But, in the weeks after November 3rd, McConnell continued to lend tacit support to Trump's increasingly dangerous claims that he was the true victor. In a combative Senate speech six days after the election, McConnell declared that Trump was "a hundred per cent within his rights to look into allegations of irregularities and weigh his legal options." He went on to scold the many public

figures who were demanding that Trump concede. "Let's not have any lectures about how the President should immediately, cheerfully accept preliminary election results from the same characters who just spent four years refusing to accept the validity of the last election," McConnell said. As he surely knew, it was a false equivalence: Democratic politicians had raised many questions about the effects of Russian interference on the 2016 election results, but Hillary Clinton had conceded the race the morning after the vote.

With only a few exceptions—most notably, Mitt Romney, the lone Republican senator who voted to convict during Trump's first impeachment trial—the vast majority of the Republican caucus in the Senate followed McConnell's lead. They avoided any acknowledgment of Biden's victory and declined to denounce Trump's flagrant lies or his outrageous, and potentially criminal, efforts to pressure officials into nullifying the votes in Georgia and in other swing states.

Several Republican advisers argued to me that McConnell had no reasonable choice. If he had confronted Trump before the Georgia runoff, they said, Trump would have launched a civil war within the Party, possibly even commanding his supporters not to vote. "It could have been worse," the former Trump official said. "Trump could have attacked" the two Republican Senate candidates, Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue, or the National Republican Senate Campaign Committee. As one of the advisers put it, "McConnell was trying to keep the wheels on the train for a few more hours."

The price of Trump's coöperation, however, grew ever higher. According to a well-informed Republican insider, Trump made unconscionable demands behind the scenes. He threatened to withhold his support for Loeffler and Perdue, and refused to campaign for them unless they joined his attacks on Georgia's election officials and repeated his false claims of widespread election fraud. Days before the runoff, the insider said, the President forced Perdue to leave the campaign trail for a secret meeting at Mar-a-Lago, Trump's private club in Palm Beach, Florida. There,

Trump coerced Perdue not just into taking his side on election fraud but also into supporting an increase in the size of pandemic-relief checks to two thousand dollars—a figure that McConnell and Senate Republicans opposed. If Perdue refused, Trump made clear, he might withdraw his support. At the time, a spokesman for Perdue's campaign denied that Trump had pressured Perdue. But, soon after the Mar-a-Lago meeting, both Perdue and Loeffler began echoing Trump's call for larger relief checks, placing themselves and McConnell in an embarrassing political bind. Trump, meanwhile, went on Twitter and attacked McConnell's opposition to the bigger relief checks, calling it a "death wish." The President's behavior toward the candidates led the insider to a simple conclusion: "Trump is a thug."

On January 3rd, the *Washington Post* reported that Trump had made a threatening phone call to Georgia's secretary of state, demanding that he "find" enough votes to overturn the state's Presidential results. The newspaper soon released a recording of the shocking call, leaving no doubt as to its authenticity. Despite the escalating provocations from the Oval Office, McConnell and all but a few renegade Republicans in the Senate remained studiously silent. They ducked or feigned ignorance when reporters asked them about death threats that Georgia's election officials were facing, and they ignored dire warnings from those officials, and many others, that bloodshed would result if Trump's lies weren't confronted.

As it turned out, the Republican leadership's complicity with Trump was not only cynical; it also may have been an egregious miscalculation, given that voter data suggests his unchecked behavior likely cost the Republican Party the two Georgia seats. The chaos and the intra-party warfare in the state appear to have led large numbers of moderate Republican voters in the suburbs to either vote Democratic or not vote at all. And in some deeply conservative pockets of Georgia where the President held rallies, such as the Dalton area, Republican turnout was unexpectedly low, likely because Trump had undermined his supporters' faith in the integrity of American elections.

By dawn on January 6th, it had be-

come clear that Loeffler and Perdue were both going to lose. The personal and political consequences for McConnell were cataclysmic. Stuart Stevens, a Republican strategist who helped lead Romney's 2012 Presidential campaign and was a founder of the anti-Trump group the Lincoln Project, told me, "McConnell had a forty-eight hours like no one else. He became Minority Leader and his Capitol was invaded. Domestic terrorists got inside it this time—unlike on 9/11." (On that day, Al Qaeda had planned to crash a United Airlines flight into the Capitol, but the plane went down after passengers overwhelmed the hijackers.) Stevens went on, "And what happened in Georgia was incredible. He's scared to death, too, at how corporate America is responding. Supporting the overthrow of the U.S. government isn't good for business."

After the January 6th insurrection, dozens of the largest corporate campaign donors, including A.T.&T., Comcast, and Honeywell, used their cash to send a message: their political action committees would no longer contribute to the hundred and forty-seven Republican representatives and senators who had opposed certification of the Presidential election even after the Capitol riot, on the spurious ground that the process had been less than fair. Even Koch Industries, the huge oil-refining conglomerate that has served as the conservative movement's piggy bank for decades, said that it was reevaluating its political contributions. McConnell, who once infamously declared that the three most important ingredients for political success in America are "money," "money," and "money," was reportedly alarmed. A spokesperson for McConnell denies this, but, according to the Associated Press, he spent much of the weekend after the Capitol assault talking with colleagues and the Republican Party's wealthy corporate donors, promising that he, too, was finally done with Trump.

Still, with another impeachment trial looming in the Senate, it's unclear whether McConnell will truly end his compact with Trumpism. His recent denunciation of Trump sounded unequivocal. But he and his Republican caucus could make the same miscalculation that they made in Georgia, choosing to

placate the Trumpian base of the Party rather than confront its retrograde values and commitment to falsehoods. So far, McConnell has been characteristically cagey. Although he let it be known that he regards Trump's behavior as potentially impeachable, he also signalled that he hasn't personally decided whether he will vote to convict him. He explained that he wants first to hear the evidence. He also rejected Democrats' requests that he bring the Senate back from a winter recess to start the impeachment trial immediately, saying he prefers that the Senate trial begin in mid-February. Meanwhile, Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House, has said that she might start the trial process by sending the article of impeachment to the Senate as early as January 25th. Either way, it will be left to Chuck Schumer, the leader of the new Democratic majority in the Senate, to take on the politically perilous business of presiding over the trial of a former President—an unprecedented event in American history.

"I think McConnell is trying to have it both ways," Stevens told me. "He absolutely doesn't want to impeach and convict Trump. It would split his base and cause members of his caucus to face primary challengers." Stevens contended that McConnell, by signalling his openness to impeachment without committing to convicting Trump, was trying to avoid a meltdown of the Republican Party. Stevens likened McConnell to the top engineer at Chernobyl, who, after the power plant malfunctioned, thought that he could micromanage a nuclear disaster: "He tried to take the rods out." Stevens added, "If he really wanted an impeachment conviction, he'd have done the trial right away."

At first, political observers from both parties considered it possible that McConnell was merely using the threat of an impeachment trial as a brush-back—a way to hold Trump in line as he left office. Then McConnell directly accused Trump of having "provoked" the mob. Jim Manley, who served as the senior communications adviser to Harry Reid, the former Democratic Majority Leader, told me, "There is no going back now. He has decided to cut his losses, and do what he can to make sure Trump is no longer a threat to the Republican Party." McConnell and other

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Republican leaders, Manley suggested, “have gotten as much out of Trump as they can, and it’s now time to make sure Trump is damaged goods.”

But the risks for McConnell and other Senate Republicans are high. It’s never good for a party leader to get out too far ahead of his caucus members—he risks losing their fundamental support. Senator Lindsey Graham has criticized McConnell’s decision to blame Trump for the Capitol riot and has warned that, “without Trump’s help” in 2022, “we cannot take back the House and the Senate,” adding, “If you’re wanting to erase Donald Trump from the Party, *you’re* going to get erased.” McConnell’s maneuvers have also stirred the wrath of such powerful right-wing media figures as Sean Hannity, the Fox News host known for his unyielding sycophancy toward Trump. Hannity has called for McConnell to step down from the Party’s leadership in the Senate.

But if McConnell can muster the additional sixteen Republican votes necessary for a conviction—doing so requires the assent of two-thirds of the Senate, and the fifty Democratic senators are expected to vote as a bloc—he will have effectively purged Trump from the Party. Moreover, after a conviction, the Senate could hold a second vote, to bar Trump permanently from running for any federal office. Such a move might strengthen McConnell’s clout within the Party and help his wing of traditional Republicans reestablish itself as the face of the G.O.P. Al Cross, a veteran political reporter and the director of the Institute for Rural Journalism, at the University of Kentucky, said, of McConnell, “I think he sees a chance to make Trump this generation’s version of Nixon, leaving no doubt who is at the top of the Republican heap.” Banning Trump would also guarantee that a different Republican will secure the Party’s nomination for President in 2024. Otherwise, Trump threatens to cast a shadow over the Party’s future. He has discussed running again, and, shortly before flying to Florida on January 20th, he stood on a tarmac and vowed, “We will be back in some form.”

Jentleson, the former Senate aide, thinks that McConnell and his party are in a very tricky spot: “The glue that kept the Tea Party and establishment

Republicans together during the past few years was tax cuts and judges. And McConnell can’t deliver those anymore. So you could basically see the Republican Party coming apart at the seams. You need to marry the forty per cent that is the Trump base with the ten per cent that’s the establishment. McConnell is like a cartoon character striding aside a crack that’s getting wider as the two plates drift farther apart. They may not come back together. If they can’t reattach, they can’t win.”

There is another option: McConnell could just lie low and wait to see if the Democrats self-destruct. A divisive Senate impeachment trial may undercut Biden’s message of bipartisan unity, hampering his agenda in the crucial early months of his Presidency, when he needs momentum. McConnell has already seized on the fifty-fifty balance between the parties in the Senate in order to obstruct the Democrats. He’s refusing to devise rules for moving forward on Senate business unless Schumer yields to his demand not to alter the filibuster rule. Reviled by progressives, the rule requires a supermajority of sixty votes to pass legislation, rather than the simple majority that the Democrats now have if Vice-President Kamala Harris casts a tie-breaking vote. McConnell, who wrote a memoir titled “The Long Game,” is a master at outwaiting his foes. And, as Jentleson observed, one can never overestimate the appeal for politicians of “kicking the can down the road,” especially when confronted with tough decisions.

McConnell could conceivably make a play that would avoid a direct showdown over convicting Trump. A conservative legal argument has recently been advanced by J. Michael Luttig, a prominent former federal appeals-court judge: the Senate, he says, has no constitutional authority to hold an impeachment trial after a President has left office. Luttig’s argument has been challenged by numerous constitutional scholars, some of whom have cited an instance in which a lesser official was impeached after leaving office. But this politically convenient exit ramp is alluring, and Luttig is held in high regard by conservatives. The Republican senator Tom Cotton, of Arkansas, a Harvard Law School graduate, has eagerly embraced the theory,

arguing, “The Founders designed the impeachment process as a way to remove officeholders from public office—not an inquest against private citizens.” So has Joni Ernst, of Iowa, who is a member of McConnell’s leadership team.

Christopher Browning, a historian of the Holocaust and Nazi Germany, told me that McConnell has been almost “Houdini-like at escaping his own devil’s pact” with Trump. In a widely admired essay in *The New York Review of Books*, from 2018, Browning called McConnell “the gravedigger of American democracy,” and likened him to elected officials in Weimar Germany who struck early deals with Hitler, mistakenly believing that they could contain him and his followers. When I asked Browning if he still regarded McConnell in this way, he said that the new Minority Leader had “cut a better deal than most.” McConnell was “lucky that Trump was so lazy, feckless, and undisciplined.” Hitler didn’t go golfing, Browning pointed out. But Browning found little to celebrate in McConnell’s performance. “If Trump had won the election, Mitch would not be jumping ship,” he noted. “But the fact is Trump lost, and his coup failed. And that opened an escape hatch for Mitch.” Browning warned, however, that “the McConnell wing *was* ready to embrace Trump’s usurping of democracy—if Trump could pull it off.”

If McConnell does vote to convict Trump of high crimes and misdemeanors, it won’t be the first time that, out of political convenience, he has turned on his party’s leader. In 1973, when McConnell was an ambitious young lawyer, he wrote an op-ed in the Louisville *Courier-Journal* which referred to Richard Nixon’s Watergate scandal and denounced the corrupting influence of political money. Given McConnell’s later embrace of unregulated political funds, it may seem hard to square the author of that high-minded piece with the McConnell of today. But what remains consistent is that then, as now, he was acting in his self-interest. He later confessed to a biographer that the newspaper column was merely “playing for headlines.” McConnell was planning to run for office, as a Republican, and one thing was certain: he needed to protect himself from the stain of a disgraced President. ♦



## THINGS THAT ARE DIFFERENT IN EUROPE

BY SARAH HUTTO

More than half of U.S. travelers (54%) said they would feel comfortable traveling internationally six months after a vaccine becomes available.

—USA Today.

In Europe, they don't eat dinner until eleven-thirty at night. Small children and the elderly are roused from a deep sleep to come down for dinner and are made to eat six-course meals. Four of the courses are different kinds of pasta. Then they go back to sleep.

In Europe, a man's mistress comes over for dinner and eats with the entire family. Then she plays charades with everyone, and she usually wins. The man's wife doesn't mind, because she's tired of charades.

In Europe, they do all the shopping

for that night's dinner the same day. If there's any food left over from the day before, they throw it away. The cupboards must be kept empty for all the wine for the baby.

When you turn on a European faucet after noon, wine comes out. Before noon, it's espresso. If you want water, you have to collect it from the village fountain, which has a high metal content owing to all the coins that were tossed into it by people making wishes.

In Europe, everything is powered by windmills. Instead of an electrical circuit breaker, European homes have a tiny windmill in the basement that a leprechaun is constantly blowing on.

In Europe, they don't drive on the right side of the road. Most Europeans just ride around in a giant pocket-

book, like in "Mary Poppins," which observes no particular side of the road or any laws of physics.

In Europe, women don't shave their armpits. Many actually add hair to their armpits which they have collected from pets and farm animals. On the other hand, all European men, without exception, shave their armpits. They go to a special European barbershop called an *armpiterie*.

Europeans are more sexually comfortable than Americans, because they have sex only while wearing culottes.

All the beaches in Europe are topless. Europeans are unfazed by breasts. When a European woman removes her shirt before having sex, the man usually replies, "Big deal. I don't care about those at all."

Europeans are thinner than Americans, because they consume olive oil instead of water. Even at the Tour de France, cyclists are handed tiny cups of olive oil to rehydrate. Being slippery is usually what makes all the bikes crash at the end.

Europeans eat smaller portions than Americans, because all the plates are small, from olden times. European factories still haven't advanced enough to make bigger plates.

Instead of being born with arms, Europeans are born with baguette extremities. They nibble on their baguette arms throughout the day, and the baguettes grow back while they're sleeping.

In Europe, there are only four actors, who appear in every TV show, movie, and commercial. Three of the actors are men with eccentric teeth. There's one woman, and they have to replace her every few years, because she often dies of exhaustion.

Men in Europe carry purses. The purses are usually filled with blueprints of the Louvre, deeds to villas that you can buy for one dollar, and cheese that is being aged.

Europeans are less safety-conscious than Americans, which is why, on average, a European has three fewer toes than an American.

Europe is the continent of romance, which is why, each year, millions of Americans travel there for vacation. Few are ever heard from again. Investigations are pending. ♦

## LIVING WITH A VISIONARY

*We shared a world. Then Diana's hallucinations became her own reality.*

BY JOHN MATTHIAS



You would think it was a performance of some kind. When she wakes up, if she has slept at all, she tells me about the giants carrying trees and bushes on what she calls zip lines, which I am able to identify as telephone wires. Beneath the busy giants, she explains, there is a marching band playing familiar tunes by John Philip Sousa. She is not especially impressed by either of these things, and the various children playing games in the bedroom annoy her. “Out you go,” she says to them. Then she describes the man with no legs who spent the night lying beside her in bed. He had been mumbling in pain, but nobody would come to help him. She remembers her own pain, too. “I could hardly move,” she says.

And she can hardly move now. Her

legs are stiff, her back is cracking as I lift her out of bed. Although still clearly in pain, she gives me a sly look and gestures with her chin toward the flowerpot in the hallway. “The Flowery Man,” she says. “He’s very nice.”

She is fully articulate, in many ways her familiar self. She asks me if I saw the opera. I’m not sure which opera she means; we’ve seen many over the fifty years that we’ve been married. She means the one last night in our back yard. She describes it in detail—the stage set, the costumes, the “really amazing” lighting, the beautiful voices. I ask her what opera was performed. Now I get another look, not a sly one but a suspicious one.

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

I say that it’s not a matter of belief but of perception. I can’t see what she

sees. She tells me that this is a great pity. I miss so much of life. I used to have something of an imagination, but I’ve evidently lost it. Maybe she should start spending time with someone else. Also, she knows about my girlfriend. The one in the red jacket. There is no girlfriend, but there is a red jacket hanging over the back of her walker. Suddenly, she forgets the girlfriend and remembers the opera. “Oh,” she says. “It was ‘La Traviata,’ and we went together with Anna Netrebko before she sang.”

Now I have my own brief vision. Diana is only twenty-one, I am twenty-five. We have just arrived in South Bend, where I am teaching English at Notre Dame. A friend wrote about us in those days as having appeared to him like two fawns in the grove of our local Arcadia. Diana wore the clothes she had brought from England, including her miniskirt, and people in cars would honk their horns and stare. In London, where we had met, it had been the middle of the nineteen-sixties; at our Midwestern college, it was more like the fifties. A former student told me that when I held classes at home, for a change of scene, he and his classmates took bets on who would be lucky enough to talk to her.

I see her walking in from the kitchen with tea and her homemade scones. College boys—only boys were admitted back then—lift china cups balanced on wafer-thin saucers. Some have never eaten a crumbly scone or sipped tea out of such a delicate cup. Diana is often told she looks like Julie Christie, and my students all want to be Omar Sharif, Christie’s co-star in “Doctor Zhivago.” Some write poems inspired by Lara, Zhivago’s muse. Diana smiles at them, greeting those whose names she remembers. Hello, Vince. Hi there, Richard. She dazzles them. She dazzles me.

Art was her passion. Later, she earned an art-history degree and became the curator of education at our university’s museum. She devised a program of what she called “curriculum-structured tours,” ambitiously proposing to organize museum tours that would be relevant to any class. This she did—chemistry students learned about the properties of seventeenth-century paint, psychology majors studied portraits for signs of their subjects’ mental health—and eventually she

exported her innovations to other college campuses. Because of her, students began looking seriously at paintings and sculptures. They followed her hand, pointing out some luminous detail; they listened to the music of her voice, her British accent slowly becoming Americanized over the decades.

Diana trained a new set of gallery interns each year, teaching them about all there was to see and find in the museum's art. She loved them dearly, and they loved her back. She had been conducting tours for thirty years when a former intern, Maria, came by the house—ostensibly on an errand to collect some of Diana's library books. Really, she wanted to talk to me. She explained that Diana had started seeing things. The first time Maria noticed it, Diana was showing a class of French students a reduction of Charles Louis-Lucien Müller's "The Roll Call of the Last Victims of the Reign of Terror," from 1860. It's a very busy painting, with dozens of figures waiting to be transported to the guillotine. Diana told the students that at the center of "The Roll Call" was a man named General Marius. But General Marius wasn't there; he was around the corner, in a painting called "Marius and the Gaul," about which Diana had written her thesis, many years before. She was speaking in French, and at first Maria thought that Diana had got tangled up in the language. Surely it was her words, not her reality, that had become so confused.

Not too long after Maria's visit, Diana returned home one day looking tired and depressed. She sat down on the sofa next to me, took my hand, and said, "The students tell me that I'm seeing things that aren't there." I admitted that Maria had already told me about this. By then, Diana had begun treatment for Parkinson's disease, taking a standard cocktail of medicines in small amounts: levodopa combined with carbidopa, in a drug called Sinemet. She had received the diagnosis only because her doctor couldn't otherwise explain her onset of general weakness. Aside from fatigue, she had virtually no symptoms, and her behavior had been absolutely normal while taking Sinemet. Now she confessed that she was seeing things at home as well. She pointed at a wadded-up sweater on a chair across the room. "That's not really a cat, is it?"

I asked her what else she saw. "Little

people," she explained, "like Gulliver's Lilliputians." Objects had been changing shape—"morphing" was her word—for some time, but recently things had begun appearing out of nowhere. We saw a specialist in Chicago, who, like the neurologists Eric Ahlskog and Oliver Sacks, called these "illusions." We suspected that the hallucinations were a side effect of Sinemet, and, after consulting many books and articles, Diana and I began to titrate her medication ourselves. Most Parkinson's patients end up doing this, experimenting with how much they take of each medicine and at what time. There were new delivery systems for the basic mix of levodopa and carbidopa, and we tried them all, along with a number of adjuvant therapies.

At first, Diana could identify her illusions as such, and sometimes even dismiss them. ("Scat!" got rid of the cat.) The things she saw were not always frightening. Many of them seemed inspired by her work in the visual arts. Visiting a neighbor, Diana enthusiastically described a painting on a blank wall where, we later learned, one had been hanging until several days before. Her knowledge of eighteenth-century art may in part explain her delight in seeing topiary figures cut into very large trees, where I saw nothing but leaves. Some of the visions she told me about were clearly breathtaking. "If only you could see this," she said.

I couldn't see what she saw, but I could see her. She was somehow growing more beautiful—or beautiful in a new way. Everyone noticed this. Never one to use much makeup or even visit a hair stylist, she would wash her face in the morning, put up her hair or let it hang at shoulder length, and come downstairs to start her day. Her striking good looks belied the condition that would bring her down. It was Julie Christie all over again, but not from "Doctor Zhivago"; she was the aging Christie of Sarah Polley's movie "Away from Her." Adapted from Alice Munro's story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," the film is about a woman with Alzheimer's disease. Her decline is slow, until it is suddenly fast. Diana watched the movie without anxiety. She had not, so far, suffered any significant memory loss. When I reminded her that decades earlier my students had compared her to the actress, she laughed.

During a trip to Chicago to see her doctor, we had been approached by a man on the street, who said, "I just have to tell you how beautiful you are. Forgive me for intruding on your day." We got into a taxi, and Diana growled to me, "I sure don't feel very beautiful."

For two or three years, Diana's condition was manageable through modifications in her medications, and through her ability to recognize the hallucinations for what they were. At the art gallery, she avoided confusion by writing out scripts for her tours. She managed to retire when she was scheduled to, not before. It was shortly afterward that her hallucinations began to increase in frequency and intensity. She insisted that the topiary trees were the work of giants, and she described the giants' elaborate uniforms. Plays and operas were staged in our back yard, spontaneous parades appeared in the streets.

It became harder and harder for her to understand that her visions were not real. She sometimes asked me why these events were not written about in the paper or covered in the news on television. In the house, nothing held still: objects danced on the mantel, the ideograms on our hanging scroll of Chinese calligraphy flew around like butterflies. At the beginning, many of these transformations had given her pleasure. More and more, however, they annoyed and alarmed her. Three women were "hanging" in her closet and refused to leave. The Flowery Man roamed the house. There were rude people who masturbated into a dresser drawer and had sex on the living-room sofa.

When Diana could no longer shake these things off, she began to surrender to them. She slowly ceased to see them as hallucinations. I had read that it did not help to deny the reality of these visions, so I stopped doing that. I began trying to deal with them as if I could see what she did. Friends were encouraged to make the same allowances. For a while this helped. A fifth person at a dinner for four did not pose a big problem once you got used to this kind of thing. I informed the members of Diana's reading group that she might refer to people who weren't there, and they, too, made the adjustment.

One day, she shouted for my help. A

housepainter in white overalls, she told me, was painting over the portrait of one of our daughters that hung on the living-room wall. The man didn't speak; none of Diana's human apparitions ever spoke, though their mouths would move without sound, and sometimes they would respond to stern rebukes. I could say things like "I'll see the painter to the door." But often the damage had been done. In the case of our daughter's portrait, it continued to exist, for Diana, partially erased. She referred to the painting as "the half-faced child."

Some medications work for Parkinson's patients with hallucinations, but for Diana they all seemed to make things worse. In November of 2019, a new kind of confusion about both space and time took hold. One morning, I found her with her suitcase packed, ready to travel. When I asked where she was going, she wasn't sure. "Away," she said. She wasn't sure why. But, she insisted, "we certainly can't stay any longer in this person's house, in a place where we don't even speak the language."

Christmas approaches, and I return to the present tense. Everything that happens after this feels like it's still happening now. Slowly, through the winter, Diana's benign hallucinations become terrible and threatening presences. (Meanwhile, in China, a new and deadly virus is unleashed on the world.) Diana loses her ability to sleep, a common and debilitating feature of Parkinson's. Because she is either sleepless or tormented by nightmares, I am also unable to sleep. For a while, I am able to soothe her and offer comfort, but often her dreams continue unabated when she wakes up. Eventually, I am simply incorporated into them. When I ask her if she is awake, she says she does not know.

Her eating also becomes a problem, and I know that she is not getting proper nutrition. I use the blender again and again, counting calories, mixing in anything containing protein. She is getting very thin. I sleep only when she sleeps and eat a quick sandwich as I cook for her. She looks at me one morning and says, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Because Diana hides things, then

promptly forgets where they are, I often find myself searching for her medical-insurance cards, her driver's license, some kind of I.D. with her picture on it. She sends me on a wild-goose chase all over the house. This drawer. That closet. But I can never find what we need. The hallucinated people begin to take on more life than the living. And they have names. Not generic and rather charming names like the Flowery Man but monosyllabic

American names like Bob, Pete, Dick, George, Jack. No one seems to have a surname. "Jack who?" I ask her. She gives me a straight look and says, "Jack the Ripper." She keeps asking, "Who's in charge?" I wish I knew.

In March, as the pandemic descends on the Midwest, I try to explain why she cannot go out or see friends. She doesn't understand. I don't dare leave her alone, even for a short trip to the grocery store. She begins going outside when my back is turned, and she frightens some of the neighbors with things she claims to see. I make rules. No phoning friends after 10 P.M. No going outdoors after bed or going downstairs for breakfast in the middle of the night. I finally move to a bed in a separate room.

With the country in lockdown, I can no longer reach Diana's neurologist in Chicago. Local doctors help us refill some of her medications over the telephone, but have nothing to offer that might help the dementia that is now clearly part of the picture. My most recent reading makes me wonder whether she might have not Parkinson's but something called Lewy body dementia, which produces vivid hallucinations. Its terrifying symptoms are believed to have led to the suicide of the actor Robin Williams. Diana talks about "jumping in the river." (The St. Joseph River is only a few hundred yards from our front door.) Neighbors offer to do some shopping for us, but as the pandemic gets worse I hesitate to ask them for more help. When I finally make contact with two or three "senior helper" organizations, I am told that all their programs are on hold. I can do nothing but try to continue on my own. I begin taking pills myself—sedatives washed down with

glasses of Merlot. We are living on cans of beans and prescription drugs.

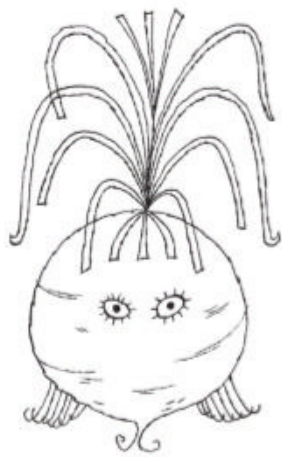
There are still moments when Diana is very happy. Sometimes, she seems to be in a state of bliss. She stands at the open doorway and gazes into the sky. I stand behind her. "Look!" she says. "Why can't you see?" I tell her that I'm trying, but maybe need some help. She becomes angry and shouts, "The gods! The gods!"

One day, I find Diana clutching a balled-up blanket to her breast. "What have you got?" I ask her. "A dead baby," she says. I have never seen such terror in her eyes. I have never seen it in anybody's eyes.

At some point—a day later, two days later—police arrive at the door. In the street, an ambulance is flashing its colored lights. The three policemen at the door have masks on, and I'm initially frightened by this, because I don't know that many people are now wearing them. Someone has called the police about a lady who lives here who may need to go to the hospital. I stand there gazing stupidly at the policemen. They ask if they can talk to the lady. I tell them she's my wife. Diana is on the sofa, more or less catatonic.

When I step onto the front porch, I notice some of our neighbors watching from their yards. I am asked questions about Diana and who has been looking after her. I begin to fear that I'm about to be arrested. Someone suggests that maybe it would be good for her to be completely checked out in the E.R., and possibly admitted for a day or so. The next thing I know, two of the ambulance men are bringing a stretcher up to the porch. One of them asks if he can talk to my wife. Finally, I'm able to say something. I say no. They are immediately suspicious. To my amazement, I hear Diana saying, "I'll talk to them. It's O.K." They ask her what's wrong. She describes a few of her hallucinations. She's worried about what's happened to the dead baby. What dead baby? I try to intervene, but already she's explaining that she had the dead baby in her arms just a moment ago. Perhaps it has rolled away. She gets down on one knee and reaches under the sofa. "Oh, good," she says, reappearing with the blanket. "Here it is."

While the medics are conferring with



one another, Diana suddenly says, “I think I should go to the hospital.” The ambulance guys seem delighted by this. Diana is put on the stretcher, and the ambulance disappears. No one asks what I think should be done. No one asks me to come along. In the confusion, the blanket has been left on the front porch. When everyone is gone, I take it inside.

That night, Diana is admitted to the hospital for observation. I won’t be able to visit her, because of COVID restrictions. I am frantic: they’ll get all the Parkinson’s meds mixed up, they don’t know her schedule. What will happen if she misses a dose of Sinemet?

What transpires in the next days and weeks is sometimes vividly clear and sometimes swirling in a surrealistic fog. At some point, it is decided that I, too, should be examined in the hospital. In the E.R., I am told that I am suffering from exhaustion, malnutrition, and dehydration. I end up on the same floor as Diana. By the time I arrive, she has told everyone that she is a movie director working on a documentary about art therapy in hospitals. From my bed, I explain to her doctors, who are different from my own, as much of her medical history as I can. I am allowed to talk to Diana only by phone.

Social workers keep appearing with documents for me to sign. My daughter Laura and I have agreed, in theory, that eventually Diana will have to move into an assisted-living community. A new facility for patients with dementia has recently been built near Laura’s house, in Worthington, Ohio. Laura wants to take Diana there, and I have to admit that I am no longer able to look after her. I am barely able to look after myself. I sign the papers giving Laura power of attorney for Diana and me. There are decisions to be made, bills to be paid, and I am flat on my back in the hospital.

COVID is tearing through the country. The hospital is filling up with patients, my bed is in demand. My doctors ask if I want to be sent home or to spend three days in the psychiatric hospital associated with the general hospital where I am being treated. They talk about rest, recovery.

Where I end up is not a health spa but more like a boot camp. Before I am moved, all my possessions are taken

away. No shoelaces, no belt. At the new facility, I am given a handful of large and small pills every three hours. At night, all patients are on suicide watch. I barely sleep. While I am in the psych ward, Diana is driven in a long-distance ambulance to the care facility in Ohio, where, after a fourteen-day quarantine, she will now live. How Diana deals with this news, what she understands and doesn’t understand, I do not know. She still thinks she is directing a documentary film. I am not allowed to see her before she leaves.

In the second psych ward where I find myself remanded, I am the oldest patient by far. The program of endless group therapies seems designed for adolescents. At seventy-nine, I am too weak to do many of the things demanded of me. When I do not immediately respond to the pills I’m given, there is talk of electroconvulsive therapy. I object, and an online hearing is convened, where a judge concludes that, although I must stay beyond the hospital’s mandatory seventy-two-hour observation period, I do not have to undergo shock therapy.

Meanwhile, I am terrified of COVID. Locked out of our rooms for most of the day, we are all in one another’s way, and patients share a common bathroom. One day, I am required to cut off my beard. Looking at myself in the mirror, I discover the corners of my mouth locked in a permanent grimace. The beard has hidden this from me: I can’t smile.

I try to explain to the staff that there has been some kind of mistake, that I need to rescue my wife, who has been taken to Ohio. The things I say to the nurses and therapists must sound mad. When I am finally allowed to see the chief psychiatrist, I hear the desperation in my voice. I watch the unbelieving faces of everyone around me, and wonder how often Diana saw the same incredulity in my own face.

Somehow, our family lawyer gets in touch with a woman named Mary, a registered nurse and “personal health-care advocate,” who is the one to finally secure my release from the psychiatric facility. I am asked to sign some papers that I haven’t read, and then I am free. On the way home in an ambulance, driving back the same way Diana came, I consider asking the attendants riding alongside me if they have heard of the

Flowery Man, the topiary trees, the little people—any of Diana’s hallucinated cast of characters. For years I have tried as hard as I could to see these things, to share Diana’s view of the passing world. In her absence, returning to the home where I must now begin to live by myself, I long all the more to understand the reality that she inhabits.

When COVID insinuated itself into the facility in Worthington, Ohio, in November, I had been at home for five months. For a couple of weeks, I had managed to communicate with Diana through screens. This confused her, though, so we started using the telephone instead. The last time I saw her face was on Zoom. She told me that she had something beginning with the letter “C.” Then she suddenly smiled her wonderful smile. “What a sweet little girl,” she said, following a hallucination with a sharp turn of her head.

Diana almost survived COVID. After testing positive, she spent several nights at the hospital, but was sent back to her facility with a normal temperature and a negative test result. For a few days, I was able to imagine seeing her again, even touching her. I had it all figured out. I would be among the first in line to be vaccinated, among the first to embrace a loved one who had been unreachable for so long. I didn’t care how many hallucinated people came along, as long as Diana was around to see them.

Then her blood-oxygen level dropped. She was not likely to live through the night. Laura put the phone to Diana’s ear, and I read the first poem I ever wrote for her—about waking together in a small Left Bank hotel in Paris before we were married. Finally, I started reading from a book of poetry I had written about her struggle. The dedicatory poem is about the Greek goddess Artemis, known by the Romans as Diana. Its final lines return to Diana the mortal, my wife:

If she could change, she  
Might be like the woman called by her  
Roman name  
Reading in a book beside the fire in my  
own house.  
She has come down all these years with me

I couldn’t continue. “You’re doing great, Dad,” my daughter said, “but she wants to know about the Flowery Man.” So I told her everything I knew. ♦



A REPORTER AT LARGE

# THE VANISHING WILD

*Paula Kahumbu's crusade to get  
Kenyans to save their country's animals.*

BY JON LEE ANDERSON

*In Kenya, those animals which poachers and cattle-herders have not killed off are being wiped out by new roads, power lines,*



*mushrooming towns, and overgrazed, shrinking rangelands.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KHADIJA FARAH

Seventy miles southwest of Nairobi, the Loita Hills climb toward the sky from the red stone cleft of the Great Rift Valley. Situated beside the Serengeti and the Maasai Mara, the Loitas provide a vital watershed for migratory animals on the plains below. Forest pigs, bushbuck, black-and-white colobus monkeys, leopards, and Cape buffalo find refuge there, along with elephants that come to graze when the plains are dry. The Loita forest, one of Kenya's last surviving stands of old-growth cedar, is sacred to the Maasai people, who call it Naimina Enkiyio—the Forest of the Lost Child, after the legend of a girl who followed wayward calves into the trees and never returned. Some twenty-five thousand Maasai live in settlements scattered through the lower valleys, where they herd goats and cows in sweeping meadows reminiscent of the Rocky Mountain foothills. The Loitas, rich in medicinal herbs and plants, are an irreplaceable resource for the *laibon*, the spiritual leaders of the Maasai.

Last fall, a *laibon* named Parmuat Koikai spent several days guiding Paula Kahumbu, a Kenyan conservationist, around the Loitas. Parmuat, a lithe man of fifty-five with a shaved head and drooping holes pierced in his earlobes, wore a traditional red *shuka* cloth and carried a *rungu*, a short club that Maasai warriors use for hunting. Kahumbu, though, was mostly interested in his defense of the local animals.

Kahumbu had come to the Loitas to shoot an episode of “Wildlife Warriors,” a popular television show in which she travels to wild places and meets Kenyans working to save endangered animals. An ecologist who has turned to storytelling, Kahumbu believes that one of the biggest threats to the country's wildlife is that most of its citizens don't see themselves as stakeholders in conservation efforts. “The problem is that Kenya is losing its wilderness, and conservation is not something Black Kenyans do—it's a white thing,” she told me recently. The goal of her show, she explained, is “to have people of color talking about animals, handling them, and expressing compassion for wildlife.”

The daughter of a white Englishwoman and a Kikuyu man, Kahumbu is fifty-four, with an open, friendly face

and an impish laugh. Her wardrobe is unself-conscious Outdoor Nerd: trekking shoes, baggy safari pants, a fly-fishing vest, a bright-colored bandanna holding back unruly hair. A bird or plant identification manual is invariably crammed into one of her many pockets. Onscreen, she projects the inexhaustible curiosity of a Kenyan David Attenborough. (“I’d never heard of a solar-powered G.P.S. on the back of a bird before! But how does it work?”) Each episode of her show focusses on Kenyans whom Kahumbu has selected as Wildlife Warrior “heroes.” One centered on amiable middle-aged women who work as elephant researchers at Amboseli National Park; others featured a voluble expert on vulturine guinea fowl and a young man who verified the existence of a rare black leopard in his area by rigging a nocturnal camera trap.

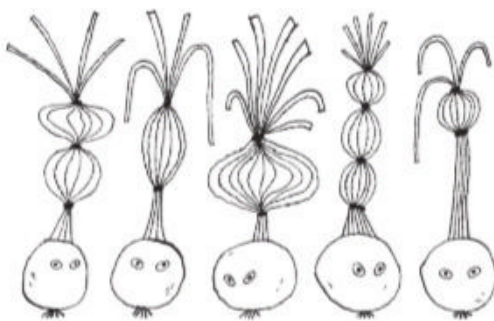
For the Loita episode, the hero was Parmuat, who had created a Maasai association to protect the forest. He told Kahumbu that the regional government was backing a plan to push a paved road through the Loitas, cutting the area in two. He and his fellow-*laibon* opposed the road, which they suspected was part of an effort by politicians and speculators to take over valuable parcels of land. A road would also bring outsiders, damaging the environment and rupturing the harmony of a place where the Maasai had lived since the nineteenth century. As it was, illegal cedar logging was encroaching on Naimina Enkiyio on all sides. Kahumbu feared the collapse of an ecosystem that supported countless species, many of them unknown to scientists but intimately familiar to people who for generations have used them for food and medicine. “Losing a place like the Loitas is like losing a treasure that we haven’t even realized that we have,” she said. “All that knowledge. That would be the greatest loss to Kenyans that I can think of.”

For decades, tourism has accounted for about a tenth of the Kenyan economy, largely driven by the country’s natural splendor. So many people come to see the Big Five—lions, leopards, rhinos, elephants, and buffalo—that in Kenya the minister of tourism and the minister of wildlife are the same

person. But the wilderness is deteriorating, threatened by climate change and by an exploding human population. When I first visited, in 1971, seven years after Kenya won independence from Great Britain, it was a nation of eleven million. Nairobi was a city of half a million inhabitants, with flame trees lining the streets and lions prowling the near suburbs. It was a destination for hunters, who left town on safari and returned for Martinis and clean sheets; the unsuccessful ones bought leopard-tail hatbands from the hotel shops to take home. The herds of wildlife seemed too vast to disappear.

Kenya banned hunting in 1977, yet the threats to wildlife only grew. The population began surging, and by the mid-nineties the growth rate was among the highest in the world. Since independence, Kenya’s population has quintupled, to fifty-two million, and the U.N. estimates that it will reach ninety-five million by 2050. Nairobi is now a sprawling city of four and a half million. Right next to the downtown is the packed slum of Kibera, Africa’s largest informal urban settlement, with a population some fifty times as dense as London’s.

Since 2000, the government has pushed the country toward economic growth, with backing from the West and sweeping infrastructure deals with China. On visits in the past decade, I found Chinese contractors bulldozing



Nairobi’s old colonial streets to construct freeways, which seemed to fill with gridlocked traffic as soon as they were built. The roads are lined with billboards advertising cell-phone data packages, new housing developments, and KFC dinner buckets. American-style malls have sprouted everywhere. When I visited this fall, bulldozers were uprooting century-old shade trees to make way for yet another overpass.

Fifty years ago, Kenya had a hun-

dred and sixty thousand elephants. Today, there are thirty-five thousand. A population of twenty thousand black rhinos is down to about a thousand, and only two northern white rhinos remain. Lions, cheetahs, giraffes, hyenas, and wild dogs are all endangered. Those animals which poachers and cattle-herders have not killed off, using guns and snares and cheap poisons, are being wiped out by new roads, power lines, mushrooming towns, and overgrazed, shrinking rangelands.

Kenya has twenty-three national parks, but the habitat they offer is not enough to sustain the animals. In recent years, some of the indigenous communities that control much of the country’s undeveloped land have made leasehold agreements with conservation groups and private safari companies. These arrangements have helped protect an estimated sixty-five per cent of Kenya’s wildlife, while also aiding pastoralist groups like the Maasai. But they are precarious—a patchwork of thousands of contracts, each one subject to renegotiation whenever a local leader raises his rate or a nonprofit loses funding. Where they fail, the wilderness habitat will disappear, and the animals will, too.

In Nairobi, the renowned conservationist and paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey told me that he did not expect most of Kenya’s wild animals to survive past mid-century. “I am not persuaded of the prospects for wildlife unless something gives,” he said. “And I don’t see it.”

Leakey, the son of the paleoanthropologists Mary and Louis Leakey, has been at the center of Kenyan conservation for decades, and his pessimism has upset the community. Paula Kahumbu admires Leakey, but she thinks that his frustration is tinged with an increasing sense of his own mortality. At seventy-six, he has endured kidney and liver transplants, and lost both legs in a plane crash. “He is locking himself into a narrative of hopelessness and discouraging a huge number of conservationists,” Kahumbu said. “I fear his words give weight to decision-makers—people who, when they hear him, might well say, ‘Why fund conservation when it’s too late?’ I personally think he is out of touch with what Kenyans want, think,

and aspire to. Over fifty per cent of Kenyans have watched my TV series. They support our campaigns, help us challenge the government, plant trees, defend parks and forests, and are starting conservation organizations of their own. I am aware of the challenges. Government is in the way. But we select our governments. So we *have* power.”

One morning, Kahumbu and her crew climbed to a meeting place high in the Loitas. Parmuat was waiting for them, wearing a hide around his neck and carrying a switch made from a cow’s tail; he had walked that morning from his village, an hour’s drive away. After a brief greeting, he led the group into a grove of Elgon olive and *podo* trees, stopping at a huge strangler fig, a tree as hefty and durable as a cathedral. Carrying a calabash full of milk, he walked slowly around the trunk, shaking its contents onto the bark and muttering an incantation. In Swahili, he explained to Kahumbu that he was blessing the tree and asking its permission to extract plants from the forest to make medicines.

In the effort to protect the forest, Parmuat was collaborating with Rob and Sarah O’Meara, a white couple in their fifties. The O’Mearas had moved to the area in 2014, after several years in the Maasai Mara, where they had set up one of the first wildlife conservancies. Sarah had known the Loitas intimately since childhood; her father, a Kenyan-born Englishman, had led safaris there, and had often taken her along.

When the O’Mearas arrived in the Loitas, the Maasai elders invited them to reclaim Sarah’s father’s old hunting camp. They found a spot next to a rushing stream and erected a minimally intrusive camp: a few tree houses, some tents, an open-air kitchen and living room. They hired Maasai as rangers, guides, and camp staff. Their visitors were mostly foreign bird-watchers and nature lovers, who were happy to pay generously to spend a week in an unspoiled setting.

If, like many of the O’Mearas’ clients, you set your baseline for wildlife in rural New Jersey or the outer suburbs of London, there was plenty to see. During the night I spent there, baboons marauded around the camp, bellowing



*“Of course you can read me one of your poems—as long as you don’t mind if first I read you one of my novels.”*

and crashing through the trees. In the morning, Sarah explained that they were agitated by a leopard, which had been prowling the woods. In the forest, we were trailed by black-and-white colobus monkeys, which peered at us curiously as they leaped from branch to branch. But the O’Mearas were increasingly worried about the threats to wildlife. A few decades ago, Sarah told me, the forest was full of black rhinos, but they had long since fallen to poachers. Now animals were increasingly threatened by the development of their habitat—what conservationists refer to delicately as “human-animal conflict.”

One afternoon, Rob drove me up a ridge in his stripped-down Land Cruiser, with forest bushbuck scattering as we lumbered along the trail. From the crest, he pointed out an expanse of lowlands: the Serengeti, just over the border in Tanzania. In the other direction was the Maasai Mara. For aeons, in the East African wildlife migration, millions of wildebeest, zebra, and other animals moved from one range to the other; a smaller migration moved between the Maasai Mara and the Loita plains. In recent years, though, most of the open land had been sold off and fenced—using cedar illegally logged in the nearby forest—and the Loita migration had been halted.

Rob was conscious of the land’s pre-

carity. He had grown up on a farm near Lake Nakuru, which once belonged to the aviator and author Beryl Markham. When he was in his twenties, his parents sold the land and moved away. Returning for a visit a few years later, he found that the farm had been subdivided into fenced plots; the forest that had spread beyond it was gone.

On the ridge, Rob drew my eye to some clearings and tin roofs glinting on a hilltop, and explained that the government was privatizing land across Kenya. The process was begun by the colonial British, and has persisted since independence. Known as adjudication, it has now extended to areas where humans and wildlife have lived alongside one another, without roads or fences, for thousands of years. Land that has always been held communally is split into individual plots—but the new owners often find that their parcels are not large enough to maintain their traditional way of life, so they sell to speculators or developers. For a herdsman who suddenly lacks access to a range, the offer of a few thousand dollars may seem reasonable; it’s enough to build a cinder-block house and buy a Chinese motorbike. But even a small bit of fencing—let alone a cement factory, as I saw at the edge of Chyulu Hills National Park—can disrupt habitat. Driving through the plains below the ridge,

I had seen the last of the Loitas' great migratory herds: three or four hundred animals, grazing aimlessly between the fences of a hundred-acre plot.

For conservationists, the challenge is to convince indigenous people that tourism and eco-business can earn them as much as selling their land or leasing it to commercial farmers. Parmuat's community, where adjudication was still pending, favored a model that would keep most of the land in an unfenced wilderness trust, while providing income through leaseholds. But Maasai leaders were aware of the dangers.

Away from the cameras, I asked Parmuat if he thought the Loita forest would survive. To answer, he said, he would need to undertake the *laibon* ritual of "throwing the stones." He drew geometric figures on his face and arms with white paint, and then retrieved his charms—quartzes and smooth river stones, as well as cowrie shells and a few old coins—from a cow's horn. He tossed them onto a cloth, moving them around deliberately. The answer, he told me, was effectively "Ask again later." As outsiders came into the Loitas, the stones would warn against bad people, and tell him which medicine from the forest could stop them.

Kahumbu asked Parmuat if he could discern anything about her son, who lives in New Hampshire and works as a cybersecurity specialist. After consulting the stones again, he said, "Your son is fine, but has problems with his left foot." Kahumbu was astonished. She told me later, "I don't know how Parmuat could have known, but my son broke his left foot about ten years ago, and still has trouble with it. It's full of pins."

Parmuat asked if she had any other questions. "How are things at home?" she asked, meaning her house in Nairobi. The *laibon* threw the stones again and told her, "Everything is fine at home, but you're never there."

Paula Kahumbu grew up, with eight siblings, on a compound in Karen, a Nairobi suburb named for the Danish author Karen Blixen, who had owned a farm there fifty years earlier. In Blixen's time, the ranch overlooked bushland, where wild game roamed. Over the years, it had been subdivided,

and newcomers had poured in, building large homes on twenty-acre estates. By the early seventies, when Kahumbu was a girl, Karen was no longer a wilderness, but it remained full of towering trees and expansive gardens. Leopards and monkeys were as common as sparrows.

One day, Paula and her brother were playing along one of the lanes that bisected the neighborhood, when her brother, who had a slingshot, spotted a rock hyrax—a small, fuzzy mammal that looks like a woodchuck but is related to the elephant. Just then, a car pulled over beside them. "In it was a white man," Paula recalled. "He dissuaded us from disturbing the hyrax by telling us all about them, how amazing they were. He informed us that he lived in the estate right next door, and that whenever we wanted to know anything about animals we should come and ask him."

The man was Richard Leakey, and Kahumbu and her siblings began visiting him. "We'd go over with mice and birds and snakes we'd caught and had a kind of competition to see if there were any animals he didn't know about," she said. "He would always encourage us to put them back in the wild." Kahumbu, inspired, resolved to be a veterinarian when she grew up. But her father left the family when she was in her teens, and her mother, struggling to make ends meet, made her promise to go to secretarial school instead.

When she was sixteen, Kahumbu won a place in an expedition organized by a British academic organization. "They invited sixty kids to apply and put all of us on a hill for two days to see how we fared, and ten of us were selected," she said. The winners spent a month trekking through the remote north of Kenya, led by a Samburu man who had guided the legendary British explorer Wilfred Thesiger. "We were a bunch of kids on their own, climbing rain-forested mountains and walking across desert, and we covered over six hundred miles on foot," Kahumbu said. She was assigned to collect earwigs, wood lice, and scorpions. "I totally loved it," she said, laughing. "But at times it was very dangerous. Lions followed us. We almost got washed out by a flash flood, and, once, we ran out of water. It was high adventure, and I

realized that I could never be a secretary."

Kahumbu began attending typing classes, but after three months she "ran away," she said. The first thing she did was to go see Leakey, who had become the director of the National Museums of Kenya. Kahumbu told him that she wanted to be a wildlife ranger. Instead, he took her to the Institute of Primate Research, an offshoot of the museums, and asked the director to give her an internship.

Kahumbu was disturbed by the thought of subjecting monkeys to tests, and the work was unglamorous: "cleaning test tubes, cleaning monkey teeth, collecting and analyzing urine samples." But she loved being around the monkeys. "They all had tattooed identification numbers on their inner thighs, but I got to know each monkey by face," she said. She brought them peanuts, and they learned to search her pockets and her boots for hidden snacks. "I often got groomed, and gave grooming to the monkeys in return," she said. "I think I was the only person there they didn't fear."

After a year, the Kenyan government gave her a scholarship to attend college in England, and she spent three years studying biology and geography at the University of Bristol. In her last month, she got a letter from Leakey, urging her to continue studying. "He wanted me to think of myself as the scientist, not the scientist's *assistant*," Kahumbu said. She spent a year and a half at the University of Florida in Gainesville, where she wrote her master's thesis on how logging was devastating trees that rare red colobus monkeys depended upon for survival.

The thesis was informed by work that she had done in the Tana River Primate National Reserve, where the American conservation biologist Margaret Kinnaird was studying the monkeys. Kinnaird needed a Kenyan field assistant; Kahumbu got the job, and spent six months in the forest. "I was in heaven," she told me. "I was a girl in my twenties living in a tent in the bush. My mother was very unhappy about it, but I had a great time." The experience was also a wake-up call. Kenya's elephants were being devastated by ivory poachers. "We'd hear the gunshots, and we'd find the carcasses in the forest,"

Kahumbu said. “I guess we just normalized the dangers.”

With the surge in poaching, the late eighties were a crucial time for conservation in Kenya. Leakey became the head of the Kenya Wildlife Service, and instituted an aggressive program, firing ineffectual and corrupt officers and giving rangers who were attacked by poachers permission to respond with lethal force. In 1989, he had Kenya’s ivory stockpile—twelve tons of tusks, from hundreds of poached elephants—assembled and set on fire. The blaze made headlines around the world, enraging hunters and galvanizing conservationists. A few months later, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) instituted a global ban on elephant ivory.

After finishing her master’s degree, in 1992, Kahumbu came to work with Leakey. “The ivory ban had just happened,” she recalled. “It was a time of great energy.” She had given birth a few months earlier to a boy named Josh. The baby’s father was a Kenyan man, but Kahumbu is reserved about their relationship, saying only that she had planned to marry him but finally resolved to raise Josh by herself. “Richard never took any notice of my personal relationships,” she said. “But I think he was terrified I’d get married off and be yet another girl lost to science.”

At K.W.S., Kahumbu led the national-park system, but she wasn’t in the job for long. Shortly after she arrived, Leakey crashed his single-engine Cessna as he flew to the town of Naivasha, and lost both legs to amputation. Blaming the crash on sabotage ordered by corrupt officials, he quit his job in January, 1994, and Kahumbu left soon afterward, entering a doctoral program at Princeton.

For eight years, she shuttled between New Jersey and Kenya, where she studied a group of elephants that lived in a lowland forest called Shimba Hills. She became concerned that CITES was already reconsidering its ivory ban, under pressure from China. The committee’s next conference was scheduled to take place in Kenya in 2000—but the body’s major decisions tended to be made by Western countries. African delegations, which were often inexperienced and undertrained, had little input. Taking a leave of absence from Princeton, Ka-

humbu began working to strengthen Kenya’s CITES delegation. She put together a sizable team, “trained in everything from botany to spiders.” The ban remained in place.

Kahumbu fell into storytelling almost by accident. After she finished her doctorate, a Kenyan cement company hired her to oversee the rehabilitation of defunct limestone quarries near the Indian Ocean coast. For four years, she and Josh lived in a house on a beach, as she turned the old quarries into sanctuaries for oryx, eland, and hippos. “They were little Edens,” she said.

In 2004, Kahumbu brought an orphaned baby hippo to her reserve, and, with no other place to keep it, put it in a pen with a hundred-and-thirty-year-old giant tortoise. Overnight, the little hippo, Owen, and the tortoise, Mzee, became inseparable, swimming, eating, and sleeping together. Kahumbu got a Kenyan newspaper to publish a photo of the two, and was soon deluged with inquiring e-mails—“as many as a thousand a day,” she said. She started a blog narrated by the zookeeper, a Kenyan man named Stephen. In time, the blog grew into a photo book, “Owen and Mzee,” which sold more than a million copies.

By 2007, Leakey had helped found a conservation organization called WildlifeDirect, and he asked Kahumbu to

join him. The country’s wildlife populations were plummeting. “We looked at what was working and what wasn’t working in Kenyan conservation, and we realized that the courts weren’t punishing poachers adequately,” she told me. She set up a team to monitor the courts, where poachers were typically let off with small fines, and she used her access to the media to advocate for tougher implementation of laws. After two years, Leakey made Kahumbu the organization’s C.E.O. (He retired in 2017 to devote himself to new projects, notably raising funds for a somewhat pharaonic museum dedicated to East Africa’s ecology and its status as a birthplace of prehistoric man.)

In 2013, during an alarming surge in poaching, Kahumbu wrote an op-ed urging the public to do more to protect elephants. Margaret Kenyatta, Kenya’s First Lady, took an interest. (Kenyatta was surely aware that the former First Lady—her mother-in-law, Ngina—had been accused of joining a ring that smuggled elephant ivory in a government plane, a charge that she denies.) With her support, Kahumbu led a campaign called Hands Off Our Elephants, and began to organize a series of increasingly popular marches. “We now have thousands of people come,” Kahumbu said. “They say, ‘It’s the one thing I can do for the elephants.’”

Kahumbu became convinced that





*In her TV show, the ecologist Paula Kahumbu focusses on wildlife “heroes.”*

there was an “untapped desire among young Kenyans to do something about conservation.” She talked a Kenyan TV channel into airing a documentary about poaching, and then a weekly show about conservation. To fill the airtime, she asked the owners of documentaries that had been broadcast in the U.S. and the U.K. for the rights to show their films; the resulting series, “NTV Wild,” was promoted by Leakey.

Eventually, Kahumbu devised the idea for a show about Kenya’s conservation heroes, and secured funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development, Wild Lives Foundation, and the National Geographic Society. By the end of the first season, fifty-one per cent of Kenya’s television audience reported having watched “Wildlife Warriors.” The series was also picked up by a Nigerian network called EbonyLife TV, which broadcast it throughout Africa.

Kahumbu moved back into her childhood house two years ago, but, when I visited, she still seemed mostly to be camping out there. The hallway was cluttered with hiking boots and duffelbags; the dining table, which func-

tions as her command center, was strewn with maps and books. There were a few signs of domesticity. Kahumbu showed me her vegetable garden, and introduced me to her three dogs, which include a cheerful, decrepit eighteen-year-old she inherited from a previous landlady. Most of the time, though, she is on the road, scouting locations or filming episodes.

Kahumbu travels in a small convoy of safari vehicles built for viewing wildlife, along with two cameramen, a soundman, and several drivers, as well as her field producer, Yoko Seki, an amiable, pragmatic Japanese woman who grew up in Kenya and has been her friend since high school. On long drives, Kahumbu relaxes by studying nature manuals, trying to match pictures of species she has spotted. Curiosity can take precedence over haste: she frequently asks the drivers to stop so that she can photograph a flower or an unusual bird, interrogating whomever she can find about its properties and local name. In areas with cell-phone service, Kahumbu returns to work, calling allies around the country. During a recent drive, I listened as she mobilized resistance to highway crews who planned

to uproot a sacred fig tree, and agitated against a government proposal to erect a fence in the last open section of Nairobi National Park.

In one exchange, Kahumbu expressed outrage over an event that Kenya’s wildlife-and-tourism minister had announced for World Rhino Day. Out of five scheduled speakers, there were two Black people and not a single woman. “This kind of thing incenses me,” she said. “I happen to know several Black Kenyan women who know more about rhinos than some of these invitees.” As our car rumbled over an uneven dirt road, she texted one of the white participants and demanded to know why he had agreed to attend. Tersely, she pointed out that she had a policy against speaking at any conference in which she was the only Black person or the only woman, because she saw it as “intentional tokenism.” Kahumbu told him that he should decline the invitation, then peered at her phone. “He told me he would ask them to reconsider,” she said.

Growing up, Kahumbu says, she was “color-blind.” Her family rarely encountered the white former colonials who made up much of the country’s elite—a rowdy, insular group known as the Kenya Cowboys. Her father, a civil engineer, and her mother, who taught kindergarten at a private school, associated with a progressive crowd. “We went to a school where there were lots of mixed families,” Kahumbu recalled. “My mother was respected by Africans, and she also had white friends, who were usually in mixed marriages, too.”

Her parents had met, in the late fifties, at a tennis court in London. Her father was studying engineering, and her mother, who came from the Hereford countryside, was working toward an agriculture diploma. Their romance was swift. “She sent a telegram to her parents that she was getting married the next day to a man called John,” Kahumbu said. “They didn’t know till the wedding that he was an African.”

Kahumbu’s English grandparents did not reject the union, but British society was less accepting. Her parents had four children in quick succession, and found themselves shunned by landlords. A pattern developed: Kahumbu’s mother made rental agreements, and then, when the family showed up, land-

lords broke the agreements and gave them a month to move out. The family couldn't return to Kenya, because colonial laws prohibited mixed marriages. With independence, though, the laws were struck down, and they moved to Kenya the next year. Paula was born in 1966, the family's sixth child.

Kahumbu says that she didn't experience racism until she went to college in England. "I had a cute British boyfriend," she told me. "One day, we were walking down the street, and somebody spat at my feet. At first, I didn't realize why they had done that. Then I went to visit his family. They lived in Surrey, and were very proper people, and during our visit his mother made it quite clear that our relationship was not going anywhere."

When Kahumbu arrived in Florida, to begin her master's degree, she had an experience of discrimination that recalled her parents' in England. She called a real-estate agent who was advertising apartments, and he described a selection of available units. "When I went to see him, he said they were full," she said. "I got some friends of mine, whites, to call and go see him, and they were told there were vacant units. So I took him to court. He ended up having to pay my rent for a year." Kahumbu had won, but she was dismayed by how her American peers reacted when they learned about it. "They weren't surprised at all," she recalled. "They had normalized that behavior."

Almost despite her instincts, Kahumbu's work in wildlife conservation has taken on a racial dimension. Traditionally, most of Kenya's private conservation ventures, as well as the safari business, have been dominated by whites. Even wildlife films have tended to be presented by whites and aimed at white audiences. "Africa is always seen through the lens of a Western person—usually a white male, an expert—viewing our wildlife with awe," Kahumbu said. "Chimpanzee," perhaps the highest-grossing nature documentary ever released in the United States, is narrated by Tim Allen, famous for starring in the sitcom "Home Improvement." It contains no Black people, or people of any kind, except for a sequence that rolls behind the credits, showing the crew members and naturalists who worked on the film—all of whom are evidently

white. "To find Africans in wildlife documentaries who have a leading role is almost impossible," Kahumbu said. "Most also don't focus on Africans' relationships to nature, and so my program aims to show Africans how we have always been related to it. We've always had our own belief systems, and we don't necessarily need to import European ideas to save it."

While Kahumbu is trying to mend the racial divide, others are more confrontational. The carnivore ecologist Mordecai Ogada has drawn attention by campaigning against what he calls "white colonialist" control of wildlife tourism and conservation. Ogada is a compelling speaker and a forceful presence on social media; in 2016, he co-authored a book, "The Big Conservation Lie: The Untold Story of Wildlife Conservation in Kenya," with John Mbaria, a Kenyan journalist. On the cover, a beefy white man enjoys a cigar and a glass of brandy, while a native woman stoops over in labor; antelopes graze in the distance. "Coarsely speaking, the current white paradigm is that African wildlife is in danger, and the problem is that African people don't love the animals like white people do," Ogada explained in an interview promoting the book. "I would like to see a model where Black people are treated as the true custodians of the wildlife with which they share their lands and are intellectual participants in the discourse around this wildlife. That would be the Black paradigm, one in which white people are most welcome to participate." In December, I asked Ogada what changes could be made to involve more Black Africans in conservation. "Your question betrays the problem," he replied. "Why do you think we weren't involved in conservation before, and how do you think wildlife survived before the white saviors came?"

Kahumbu makes some of the same arguments. "Anyone who is not building local capacity—training local people, elevating them, getting them into positions of responsibility—is basically deluding themselves," she told me. But she regards Ogada's language as unproductive. "Ogada is exposing problems that need to be addressed, but he attributes them all to whites and colonialism," she said. "He is allergic to white people." (She told me she suspects that

he doesn't regard her as a "real Black Kenyan," because her mother was white.) Kahumbu argues that there are not enough resources devoted to conservation to allow for excluding anyone. "Wildlife numbers are plummeting across the continent without the buy-in of Africans," she said. "My bottom line on this issue of the apparent racial divide in conservation is that we cannot really complain if we are not taking action. We must be the catalysts for the change we want to see."

In September, during the United Nations General Assembly, President Uhuru Kenyatta stood before an international environmental forum and pledged to "set nature on the right path of zero biodiversity loss." Kahumbu was pleased that he had made a promise she could hold him to, but skeptical that much would change. "A very powerful statement," she said. "At the same time, there are many developments going on in Kenya, which are causing massive destruction."

One of Kahumbu's most visible battles involves Nairobi National Park, which has provided a haven around the capital since its creation, as Kenya's first national park, in 1946. The park, now separated from the city on three sides by an electrified fence, no longer has free-roaming rhinos, but it still has some lions and leopards; if you fly into the city's main airport, you can usually spot antelopes, giraffes, and zebras from the plane. In 2019, the park was bisected by a sixty-foot-high elevated bridge, to accommodate the Nairobi-to-Naivasha railway, part of a multibillion-dollar network built by the Chinese to replace the one erected by the colonial British.

Kahumbu argued that the placement of the railway was deliberate. "It could have gone around the park, rather than through it," she said. "It was done to send a message that development comes first, nature comes second." The line was intended to run to Kampala, about a hundred and thirty miles beyond the border with Uganda. Instead, it stops two hours past Nairobi, in an area that President Kenyatta has designated as a future industrial hub.

Even if Kenyatta wants to effect change, Kahumbu said, "there is a big problem, in terms of the President's

ability to push the ministers to adopt what he is saying.” Last year, after the government proposed building a private lodge and a tree-canopy walk inside Nairobi National Park, Kahumbu warned on Kenyan television that the construction would harm the park’s leopards and birds. “We don’t need a hotel in the middle of Nairobi National Park,” she said contemptuously. Around the same time, a music festival was held inside another national park, near a fragile colony of nesting birds, despite Kahumbu’s attempts to get a court order to stop it. Not long afterward, Kahumbu found herself denied entry at the country’s national parks.

Kahumbu knows that other conservationists have suffered far worse. Over the years, more than seventy rangers have been killed in gun battles with poachers; hundreds more have been wounded. Kenya’s tiny community of white conservationists has also suffered attacks. In 2018, Esmond Bradley Martin, an American who led investigations into the ivory trade, was tortured and stabbed to death in his home in Nairobi. The year before, Pokot tribesmen, apparently encouraged by land-hungry politicians, torched a safari lodge owned by the Italian-born conserva-

tionist Kuki Gallmann. Gallmann was shot in the stomach but survived after emergency surgery. In 2006, the conservationist Joan Root was killed at home by several men carrying Kalashnikovs. Not all of these murders were politically motivated. Kenya is a violent place, where people share news of crimes the way the British talk about the weather. But few crimes are ever solved, and the country’s notoriously corrupt police, as well as politicians, are often suspected of involvement.

Perhaps the most prominent conservationist to die in Kenya was George Adamson, who spent decades reintegrating captive lions into the wild. Adamson became internationally famous in the movie “Born Free,” from 1966, and was later the subject of a series of documentaries. In 1980, his wife, Joy, was killed at a remote camp. Nine years later, Adamson himself was gunned down by bandits, known as *shifta*, who had crossed the border from Somalia.

A couple of hundred miles northeast of Nairobi, I visited Adamson’s old camp, with his protégé Tony Fitzjohn. Fitz, as he is known, is a lean, wry man in his mid-seventies, whose torso and back are hatched with scars from a lion mauling. He arrived in Kenya from En-

gland in the late sixties, looking for trouble. He spent much of the next two decades working with Adamson in Kora, a dry triangle of scorpion-infested wilderness, bounded by the Tana River as it flows to the Indian Ocean. On the dirt track to their old camp, Fitz pointed out the spot where Adamson was killed. That day, Adamson had heard gunshots, and set out in his Land Rover to investigate. He came across a group of *shifta* raping one of his guests, who had driven out to the camp’s airstrip to meet other visitors. Adamson revved his truck at them, firing his pistol, and they shot back with AK-47s. “The world suddenly became, and remains, a smaller and harsher place,” Fitz told me.

Fitz spent the years after Adamson’s death in Tanzania, where the government had charged him with restoring wildlife to a poached-out valley southeast of Mt. Kilimanjaro. He brought the valley back to life, and also raised funds for a black-rhino sanctuary, but in 2019 he was eased out by the Tanzanian government, which was eager to take over the valley’s operation.

Fitz returned to Kenya, intent on restoring Kora. He found the area increasingly overrun by Somalis. Some were traditional herders, partisans in a territorial squabble that long predated the colonial border. Others were Al Shabaab—Islamist insurgents armed with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades. A small contingent of K.W.S. rangers had been installed after Adamson’s murder, but, with sparse funding and not enough fuel for their vehicles, they are little more than a symbolic deterrent. In 2015, Shabaab gunmen stormed a college dormitory in Garissa, a few hours by jeep from Kora, and murdered a hundred and forty-two students.

In the eighties, Fitz said, there were leopards and elephants and large families of hippos on the Tana River; he and Adamson had to take precautions when hiking, because rhinos roamed everywhere. But we saw little wildlife in Kora—just a few waterbuck, some of the tiny antelope known as dik-dik, and a handful of baboons. Instead, there were camels everywhere, watched over by Somali herders who hid whenever we approached. Along the riverbank, the herders had created rangeland by



*“Actually, on the seventh day I’d planned to get a lot more work done, but I woke up late and was just kind of dragging my ass all day and then it was like 8 P.M. so I just said screw it and went to bed.”*

cutting and burning groves of trees. There were no hippos at all.

One afternoon, Fitz took me to where George Adamson and several of his lions lay buried side by side. Adamson's tombstone had been smashed; shards were strewn among the mounds of rocks that people piled on graves to keep hungry animals from digging up the bodies. Fitz gestured at the thorn thicket around us and pointed to his ear: listen. From all around, I could hear the sound of camels grazing, the bells clanking around their necks.

A few weeks after Paula Kahumbu's trip to the Loitas, I accompanied her on a "recce" to find heroes for new episodes. Our first destination was a cheetah-research camp in northern Kenya, in the hot, dry lands of the Samburu people. We drove twelve hours from Nairobi, leaving the highway for dirt roads that snake for hundreds of miles through bushland before receding into desert around Lake Turkana. This was where Leakey's paleontological teams had made some of their most profound discoveries, including the nearly complete skeleton of a prehistoric human, 1.5 million years old, who became known as Turkana Boy.

Kahumbu pointed to a distant massif: one of the mountains she had climbed during the expedition that had redirected her life when she was sixteen. Except for a line of pylons that marched across the wilderness, to carry power from a wind farm near Lake Turkana, no development was visible. We travelled past Samburu camps, with rounded huts protected from predators by fences made of cut thornbush. Here and there, lone men carrying spears tended to flocks of white goats.

In an area known as Meibae, we arrived at a camp on an arid hillside, set up by the private conservation group Action for Cheetahs in Kenya. A half-dozen team members lived there, near a small outpost of K.W.S. rangers. They had set up camera traps and brought in trained sniffer dogs, who helped them search for scat and for other signs of cheetahs. But there were not many to be found.

"There are less than a thousand cheetahs left in Kenya," Kahumbu said. "But very few people seem to know they are

endangered. People often confuse them with leopards, which are nocturnal and actually better able to survive." For the past decade, Action for Cheetahs had monitored the cats' decline in Kenya, as they were devastated by human encroachment. Recently, the team had closed down a field study near Nairobi National Park, after most of the cheetahs they were monitoring were killed by vehicles as they crossed the highway. "Basically, there was no point in continuing their work there, because there were no cheetahs left," Kahumbu said glumly.

In Meibae, we spoke with a Samburu elder, a woman with a shaved head and an ornate array of beaded collars and silver anklets. When she was young, she said, there were giraffes and rhinos all around, but her children had never seen them. Cheetahs, too, had been ubiquitous, and it was considered a blessing if a cheetah ate one of your goats. Nowadays, the cheetahs had almost nothing but Samburu goats to eat, so they were regarded as pests. More often than not, people wanted to kill them.

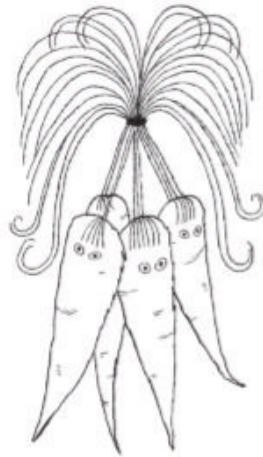
We saw no signs of cheetahs during our three-day visit—even though the Action for Cheetahs team leader, Cosmas Wambua, a genial Kenyan scientist in his forties, assured us that they were around. One afternoon, Cosmas arranged for his team to meet local teen-agers. He brought along a soccer ball and a volleyball, both emblazoned with a cheetah's face, and joined in a soccer game, playing fast and hard with the kids. Afterward, cooling off under a shade tree, everyone sat and talked about cheetahs. A young man, dressed in brilliantly colored blankets and waving a swagger stick, spoke about how his generation of Samburu had come to understand the importance of cheetahs. The teen-agers also hoped to do something with their lives besides grazing goats: one girl wanted to be a teacher, another a lawyer; a third, giggling with embarrassment, said that she wanted to be a d.j.

Kahumbu left Meibae feeling doubtful. "It was a bit daunting not even to see a cheetah," she said, as we drove south. "I'm having to rethink the episode, because we may not have a single cheetah

on film." She tried to design her shows to end with a triumph, she told me: "We want to see the payoff at the end, the success." Now it seemed remote. Perhaps she could wrap the episode around the Samburu elder. Or maybe Lulu, a young woman who was one of the team's sniffer-dog handlers. As she considered possibilities, her mood lifted. "Cosmas will be the hero," she said. "He's charismatic, hardworking, funny, a beautiful leader—and he's super knowledgeable and has a master's degree. He can help by showing us how this area could be revitalized, turned into a modern conservancy, where the young Samburus can be trained to do other jobs, rather than merely herders like their parents."

As we climbed onto the Laikipia plateau, our cell-phone signal returned, and Kahumbu began fielding calls. There was disturbing news from the Chyulu Hills conservation area. In a wildlife corridor connecting to Amboseli National Park, a crucial conduit for elephants, work crews had arrived, bearing a government permit; they had sunk two wells, cleared a large area of bush with bulldozers, and fenced the perimeter, to make way for a commercial avocado farm. Kahumbu made frantic calls to find out more. Any permit would have been obtained through bribery, she guessed, because the area was designated for conservation. But the main wildlife conservancies in the area had not yet filed a lawsuit. She suspected that the owners were afraid.

Another call brought more bad news. Rob and Sarah O'Meara had been threatened with eviction from the Loitas, by a government official who accused them of illegally logging cedar and airlifting it out by helicopter. It was a ludicrous accusation, but the O'Mearas would have to fight to be allowed to stay. In the meantime, they could only hope that Parmuat and their other Maasai allies could continue to protect the ancient forest. Kahumbu tried to remain upbeat. "There is a way of turning things around," she told me. "We got independence by arguing our point, didn't we? So of course things can change." ♦



## OFFICE SPACE

*The post-pandemic future of open-plan work.*

BY JOHN SEABROOK

David Corns, the California managing director of R/GA, a global advertising and marketing agency, needed to decide whether to renew the lease on the company's office in downtown San Francisco. It was spring, 2020, and the lease was set to expire on August 31st. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, commercial real estate was pricier in San Francisco than it was anywhere else in the country, including New York, where R/GA has its headquarters. Since leaving the office on March 13th, the hundred-person S.F. staff—the creatives, designers, strategists, account execs, and technologists who make digital products and services for Slack, Reddit, and Airbnb, among many other brands, along with support teams—had been working from home. “We have seen productivity go through the roof,” Corns told me. So why did the staff require so much expensive office space? Did they need any at all?

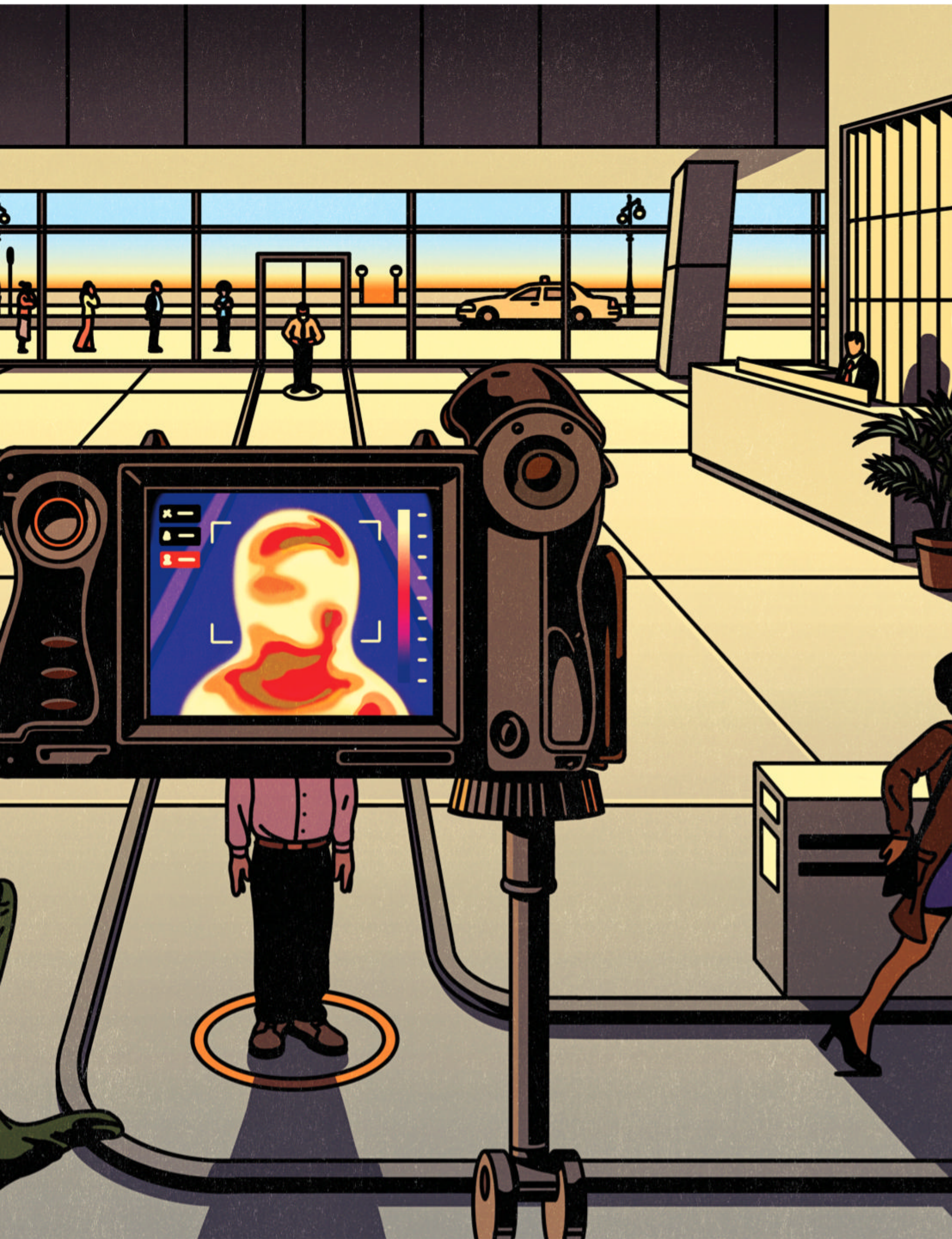
In the past three decades, a series of quiet revolutions in design have changed the way offices are used, erasing former hierarchies of walls and cubicles and incorporating workplace methodologies from the technology industry into team-based, open-plan layouts. At the same time, digital tools such as e-mail, Excel, Google Docs, video conferencing, virtual whiteboarding, and chat channels like Slack have made a worker's presence in those offices less essential. The pandemic has collapsed these divergent trends into an existential question: What's an office for? Is it a place for newbies to learn from experienced colleagues? A way for bosses to oversee shirkers? A platform for collaboration? A source of friends and social life? A respite from the family? A reason to leave the house? It turns out that work, which is what the office was supposed to be for, is possible to do from somewhere else.

The pandemic has presented R/GA and countless other large enterprises with an unprecedented opportunity to rethink the importance of presence, proximity, and place in workspace planning. Twenty-seven per cent of the American workforce will be remote in 2021, according to a recent survey by Upwork, a freelancing marketplace. About twenty million workers have moved—many of them out of major cities—or are planning to. Office vacancies continue to rise: CBRE, the world's largest commercial-real-estate-services firm, recently estimated a San Francisco vacancy rate of more than sixteen per cent, the highest on record. Major real-estate companies such as Boston Properties and Vornado Realty Trust, which, owing to long-term commercial leases, have traditionally been recession-proof, have lost more than a third of their stock-market value in the past year. Managers—and workers—are struggling to figure out what their post-pandemic offices will look like, and how to balance what appears to be a lasting shift toward remote work with the advantages of the physical workplace.

Before the pandemic, the physical and virtual workspaces often seemed to be at odds. The digital resources that now allow many workers to do their jobs from home had made it possible to come into the office and spend all day online. Although these tools claim to enhance the physical workspace by improving communication, they can undermine office culture by reducing the face-to-face encounters that open-plan layouts purport to promote.

“Digital technology should not be a substitute for human connection,” Microsoft's C.E.O., Satya Nadella, told me. (It is sometimes, of course, used for precisely that reason in open-plan offices—you can't concentrate on your

*What's an office for? The COVID-19 pandemic*



*has presented companies with an unprecedented opportunity to rethink the fundamentals of the physical workplace.*

own work if someone next to you is talking, and there are few spaces in which to speak privately with a colleague.) “Digital technology should help human connection when there are constraints of space and time,” Nadella added.

Corns discussed options with R/GA executives in New York, including Sean Lyons, the C.E.O.; Wes Harris, the global C.O.O.; and David Boehm, who oversees the company’s real estate and facilities. The New York executives also had to decide what to do about the company’s two-hundred-thousand-square-foot Manhattan base, an office, at 450 West Thirty-third Street, that was designed by the celebrated British architecture firm Foster + Partners. The design process is depicted in Gary Hustwit’s 2016 documentary, “Workplace,” which charts the evolution of the twenty-first-century office.

R/GA’s headquarters used to be a stop on design tours of cutting-edge New York City offices. Another must-see workspace was Campari America’s office, done by Gensler, the world’s largest workplace-design firm, and situated in the Grace Building, overlooking Bryant Park. But, as the pandemic dragged on, an expensive showplace office in Manhattan, where rental costs in a Class A high-rise can amount to twenty thousand dollars per employee per year, began to seem like an albatross of costly, unused space.

In San Francisco, Corns’s decision was relatively simple: “We said, ‘Let’s pull ourselves out of this lease, go fully virtual, and treat the office like we would treat any client project, where we start from a blank slate.’”

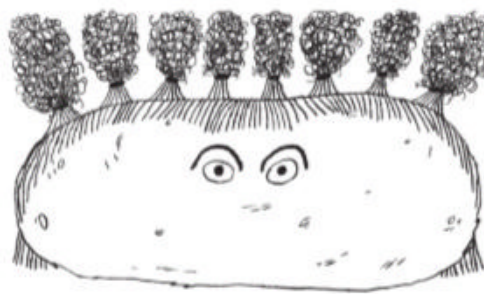
During the first six months of the pandemic, R/GA’s Talent Experience Team conducted a series of surveys and workshops with the agency’s sixteen hundred employees around the world. Wes Harris told me, “The first one was just: Are you able to get any work done? Are your clients satisfied? How are you feeling?” Results were positive. Remote work was working, by and large. Thirty per cent of supervisors said that their workers were more productive at home; only seven per cent said people were getting less done. Two months into the pandemic, it seemed

likely that working from home would be a permanent change, rather than a temporary stopgap.

The next set of surveys, conducted in June and July, asked, Harris said, “Now that we are successfully working in a virtual world, what should the future post-COVID office look like, and how do you blend the physical and the digital in this new paradigm?” Everyone said that they missed seeing their colleagues in person, but very few workers envisaged returning to the office five days a week. One to three days was more appealing.

“People want to be able to work from anywhere, but there are times they want to collaborate,” Harris told me. Instead of a big central office like 450 West Thirty-third Street, with seating for twelve hundred and fifty employees and a two-hundred-person conference room, it might be better to have smaller satellite offices nearer to workers’ homes. Sean Lyons referenced “Dunbar’s number,” the British anthropologist Robin Dunbar’s theory, derived from studies of Neolithic villages and tribes, that humans can maintain stable social relationships with no more than a hundred and fifty people at any one time. R/GA was planning to open a hub office in Brooklyn, Lyons said, because so many of their New York people lived there.

Six months in, the final round of surveys showed that employees—driven by adrenaline and anxiety about underperforming, and because there wasn’t



much else to do while sheltering in place—were working all the time.

The surveys turned up a number of “pain points,” including a lack of spontaneous interactions with colleagues, difficulty integrating new hires into company culture remotely, Zoom fatigue, and ergonomically incorrect seating. But the sorest was felt by R/GA staff who had young children. For a

stressed-out parent, W.F.H. can quickly turn into *W.T.F.!*

But, for many of the company’s employees, fewer opportunities for collaboration and the erosion of company culture weren’t major drawbacks. A summary of the survey results reported that conducting meetings over Zoom meant “more voices are being heard and there is better meeting etiquette.” One respondent wrote, “People tend to wait for others to finish their thoughts before speaking.” Another observed, “WFH actually forces our entire team to work more closely.”

Early in the pandemic, Microsoft’s Nadella suggested in a conversation with editors of the *Times* that effective remote collaboration relied in part on “social capital.” The concept that communities grow out of personal interactions was popularized in Robert Putnam’s 2000 best-seller, “Bowling Alone.” In a job setting, social capital is accumulated by working in the presence of others, and depleted during virtual interactions. Nadella told the *Times* he was concerned that “maybe we are burning some of the social capital we built up in this phase where we are all working remote. What’s the measure for that?”

But when I spoke to Nadella he allowed that when you see people in their homes, with their noisy children and importunate pets, struggling to stay focussed and upbeat, “you have a different kind of empathy for your co-workers.”

At R/GA, the survey also revealed that, without the company’s New York headquarters, people who worked in other cities and countries felt much more involved. One worker wrote, “New York has stopped acting like it’s New York and everyone else.”

Finally, the survey asked the staff to imagine the office of the future: “More spaces for collaborating. Less individual desk space”; “Would love to see more team-oriented spaces like a table, screen, and partial privacy that a team can use and have informal meetings instead of everything requiring a conference room”; “The office can be very overwhelming and very hard to concentrate, that’s been the best part about working from home, being able to focus”; “I feel very wary

of big open floor plan spaces, which have always made it easy for bugs and viruses to travel.”

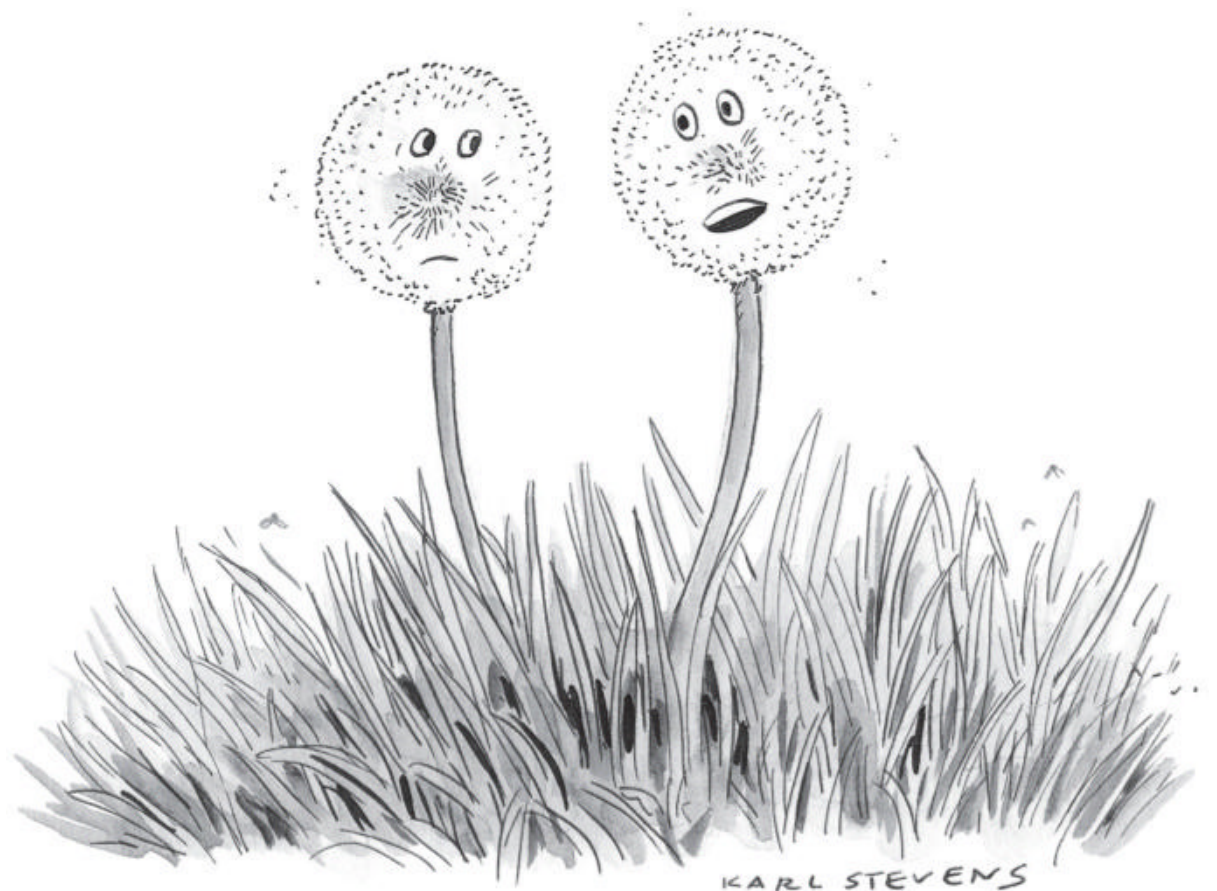
In all, R/GA gathered fifty-five hundred comments from seven hundred and fifty workers. Harris and his colleagues incorporated these findings into briefs that they would share with architects and designers as the company made its post-pandemic plans, beginning with the San Francisco office. David Boehm told me that he hoped the resulting design would serve as a prototype for the R/GA office of the future.

In August, Corns took out a lease on a new, smaller space in a high-rise on Fremont Street, in San Francisco’s financial district, at a much lower rent. “We had talked about getting three smaller spaces—in South Bay, Oakland, San Francisco—to cut people’s commute times,” he told me. “I thought we would actually go that route, but people said, ‘We want to be together.’”

Corns then sought out a designer to help create a workspace. After a brief search, he chose Primo Orpilla, a principal and co-founder of Studio O+A, an award-winning San Francisco-based architecture and design firm with three decades of experience creating workspaces for companies such as Facebook, Uber, and Yelp, some of them also clients of R/GA.

If you entered office life in the eighties, as I did, hierarchy was everywhere you looked. Bosses and other big shots had walled offices with views, while small fry toiled in cubicle reefs, bathed in fluorescent light. The industrial open-office setting where C. C. Baxter labors in Billy Wilder’s 1960 film, “The Apartment,” a kind of white-collar factory, gave way to the cube farm where Lester Burnham sits in “American Beauty,” from 1999. Conformity still reigned in the cubicle era, but at least an office schnook had partial visual privacy on three sides. (For sound privacy, you needed an office.) Although they are now derided, cubicles held their charms; I met and courted my wife in one. However, like Bud Baxter, my dream was to have a door with my name on it.

The cubicle evolved out of utopian notions of office flexibility and flow



*“The wind, the wind, that’s all you think about—you gotta learn to live in the moment.”*

that were promoted in the sixties by Robert Propst, the head of research for the Herman Miller company. Propst grasped that office work was fundamentally different from factory work. Nikil Saval, in his 2014 book, “Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace” (2014), writes, “Propst was among the first designers to argue that office work was mental work and that mental effort was tied to environmental enhancement of one’s physical properties.” Propst believed that, in particular, knowledge workers—a term coined by Peter Drucker in 1959—would benefit from what he called a “mind-oriented living space.” He sought to integrate a more dynamic concept of work into a program of hinged partitions and standing desks. The Action Office, as Propst called it, debuted in 1964. But by the mid-eighties it had evolved into the inert cubicle, and Propst was blamed for fathering it. What happened?

Propst’s action-oriented designs may or may not have increased productivity and collaboration, but they did enhance the bottom line, allowing office managers to add more employees without having to move to a bigger space. As density increased, partitions col-

lapsed into the smallest possible footprint: the ever-shrinking cube. Two years before Propst’s death, in 2000, he told an interviewer, “The dark side of this is that not all organizations are intelligent and progressive. Lots are run by crass people who can take the same kind of equipment and create hellholes. They make little bitty cubicles and stuff people in them. Barren, rat-hole places.”

Not long after I had been promoted to a private office—it was closer to Jonathan’s Pryce’s in “Brazil” (1985) than to Tom Hanks’s in “Big” (1988)—a democratizing design spirit began to emerge out of Silicon Valley, upending settled markers of status and reshuffling personal and collaborative space according to a more communal philosophy of team-based work. Perimeter offices moved inside, so that the whole space got natural light; the boss, at least, was more accessible. Cubicle walls dropped from sixty-five inches to forty-eight, then to thirty-six, and then disappeared altogether, replaced by contiguous desks, which was my allotted space at the *New Yorker* office when the pandemic hit.

Like many older workers who once

had offices, I hoped the pandemic might reverse the open-plan trend; people working in open offices take sixty-two per cent more sick leave, according to a 2011 Danish study. As I was to discover, the pandemic, far from reversing the decline of personal space in the office, seems likely to hasten its demise.

Growing up in the Bay Area in the seventies and eighties, Primo Orpilla got to see at first hand a new democratic design aesthetic bubbling up from the California tech scene. In the early eighties, the offices of most large tech companies were still what Orpilla calls Dilbertvilles, after the cubicle-dwelling engineer in the Scott Adams comic strip. “They were heavy, heavy hierarchical structures,” he told me—like those of Initech, the company in Mike Judge’s 1999 satire, “Office Space.” “Cubicles, offices, meeting rooms—that was it. We hadn’t had a brainstorm room yet—collaboration wasn’t even in the conversation. You just went from meeting to meeting to meeting.”

Orpilla studied interior design at San Jose State University, and, in the mid-eighties, he interned at a workplace firm in Sunnyvale, where he did space planning for the defense contractor Lockheed Martin, which was based nearby. “I got to observe engineers and how technology gets made,” he said. “There would be one superstar engineer who was the chief tech officer and the smartest guy in the room, and then a bunch of other engineers who needed guidance would form around him.” He noted how engineers would use movable whiteboards to create ad-hoc brainstorming rooms of their own. Unlike teams in hardware design, which tended to be stable and to pursue projects from beginning to end, software teams would form, dissolve, and reconfigure as the work progressed and as new, unforeseen problems arose.

Engineers were the company’s “brain trust,” Orpilla said. But “they were dealt with as second-class citizens. They took the cubes in the middle of the warehouse without windows. If you were a big sales guy, you had an office. It was all about the guys selling the product.”

By the late eighties, office managers started asking designers to facilitate this new, team-oriented style of work. “It all became about: How do we take care of the people who create this product?” Orpilla said. “They need to be inspired, they need to be fed, and we need to give them the spaces to do their work.” Free food and other amenities kept engineers in the office, coding into the night. “They work long hours, they tend to work in the dark,” Orpilla went on. “They like to hang out for long periods of time.”

The Internet boom of the nineties, which was led in part by entrepreneur-

ial engineers, played a role in spreading the team-based methodology to other forms of knowledge work. Creating a successful digital product such as Google’s Ad Words—an invention that helped turn the money-losing search company into an advertising-driven colossus—often involves cross-disciplinary teams of engineers, marketers, and product managers. As software became the engine of growth in the tech industry, and in the economy as a whole, hard-walled barriers between formerly separate divisions of workers continued to melt away.

Orpilla and his design partner, Verda Alexander, started Studio O+A in 1991.

## PORTRAIT OF MY BROTHER AT THIRTEEN AND 5’2”

Outside, my little brother presses his hands  
into the window A.C. unit’s aluminum grille  
like a film star at the Grauman’s Chinese Theatre

of the hood. It’s summer. Sort of. School began  
last week, but it takes all of August for us  
to remember the boys our mother wants us to be.

My father has just tossed a glass bottle  
into the street. Its pop and scatter against  
concrete is what I’ll remember; his laughter.

The car he tried to crack is up the block  
and anonymous again. By this time  
next year he will no longer be taller

than me or my brother. I grow impatient  
for this evening, his eventual quiet and closing  
of doors. It will take a decade before I begin

to wonder if each afternoon were actually  
a lesson for my older self to use. My father  
yells at us from across the driveway. I know

he will ask why I didn’t stop my brother  
from ruining the cooler. He’s a puzzle  
I’ve completed and stepped back from

without seeing much there. I want to watch  
my brother be young for the last time, watch him  
watch the impressions the metal has made

before his palms call back the blood.

—Michael Torres

Over the years, the amenities they provided became increasingly lavish. “We did skateboard ramps with DJ turntables, lots of game rooms with pool and ping-pong tables; we did music rooms and cafeterias with sophisticated barista bars and beer taps,” Alexander wrote in 2019, in an essay for *Fast Company*. Workplaces had laundry service, napping rooms, and gyms—further incentives to keep employees from leaving the office.

In the late nineties, a few businesses outside tech sought to seed similar cross-departmental innovation through open-plan design. Among the first was the advertising agency Chiat Day, whose co-founder Jay Chiat, after hiring Frank Gehry to build the company’s binocular-fronted building in Venice, Los Angeles, got rid of private offices, cubicles, and desks, making it possible to work from anywhere in the office. The Chiat Day workplace was like Propst’s Action Office after a triple espresso.

With today’s mobile technology and broadband speed, the plan might have worked, but Chiat, who died in 2002, was two decades ahead of his time. After the company moved out of the space, *Wired*’s 1999 postmortem noted that the Venice office had become “engulfed in petty turf wars, kindergarten-variety subterfuge, incessant griping, management bullying, employee insurrections, internal chaos, and plummeting productivity. Worst of all, there was no damn place to sit.”

Designers addressed complaints about the noise and the distractions by incorporating elements of “activity-based working,” a term coined, in 1994, by the Dutch design consultant Erik Veldhoen. Layouts featured a mixture of open areas for team-based work, “living rooms,” and “huddle spaces” meant to promote casual encounters and focussed work. Activity-based design also helped introduce “hot desking” (unassigned first-come, first-served seating), and “hoteling” (reservable desks).

Studio O+A offers prospective clients a menu of different “typologies”—semi-modular, activity-based room types that can be fitted into any open plan. These include the Think Tank (“A conceptual greenhouse in which the first sprouts of projects are nur-

tured”), the Library (“A place of respite”), and various Sanctuaries and yurt-like Shelters (“This ancient structure from the steppes of Mongolia is a popular modern amenity”).

Orpilla told me that O+A wanted to “create a kit of room types that suggest a certain type of behavior.” It was what made his job so interesting: “You’re changing behavior. That’s really what workplace design is about.”

In recent years, activity-based design has become a powerful tool in many companies’ branding and recruitment efforts. Gensler has specialized in creating this kind of space, and, with its design of the Campari America headquarters, which opened in March, 2019, the firm hit peak office-as-lifestyle. The place is intended for workers who are “living the brand every day,” Stefanie Shunk, Gensler’s lead designer on the project, told me as she showed me around the deserted workplace in early August. Desks are first-come, first-served, although Ugo Fiorenzo, the head of Campari America, admits to having a “preferred corner.” Personal items are stored in lockers; anything left behind on a desk at day’s end winds up on a “table of shame.” Fiorenzo described the aim of the design as “collaboration and collision.” There are five different bar spaces scattered around the two floors, including a speakeasy, the Boulevardier, hidden under the internal stairs. Shunk used the metaphor



of the perfect cocktail to describe the interior aesthetics: “Clarity, color, aroma, flavor, and finish.” The tasting profiles of particular liquors (the company also owns Wild Turkey, Skyy Vodka, and Grand Marnier, among other brands) inform the color palettes in branded meeting rooms.

Shunk and I were joined by Jaime Celebron, Campari’s senior director of human resources, at the reception desk, designed to look like a Milanese

espresso bar. Normally, “you’d kind of belly up to the bar,” Celebron said, nodding toward the white marble C-shaped counter. We were careful not to touch it.

It was Celebron’s first time back since the second week of March. “I wish you could see it with the people,” she said, looking stricken.

We followed the tour that new hires used to receive, ending up in the intimate-feeling Boulevardier. We didn’t stay long. With the pandemic, the bar felt like a COVID cocktail. Living the brand was one thing; getting sick from it was another.

In the months after the March shutdown, Gensler, O+A, and many other workplace designers scrambled to put together safety protocols for clients that, like Campari, were considering a speedy return to the office. Workplaces premised on bringing teams of people closer together now had to keep them apart.

“Clients are looking to us for answers,” Amanda Carroll, a principal at Gensler, told me. The white-collar workplace has never been regulated like manufacturing, construction, and health care, sectors where the Occupational Safety and Health Administration sets health and safety rules. With the pandemic, potentially fatal hazards entered the office, as did possible liability issues for employers, but OSHA declined to revise its standards. David Michaels, who headed OSHA during the Obama Administration, told the *Washington Post*, in June, “Thousands of workers have complained to OSHA, and OSHA has told them they’re on their own.” The Trump Administration was focussed on slashing regulations governing businesses, not creating more of them.

Some states have issued back-to-work protocols, but in many cases it’s left to designers like Carroll and her colleagues to develop best practices concerning social distancing, surface cleaning, and air quality, and to convey these to their clients as suggested procedures. Carroll told me, “We are used to industry standards on inclusivity and diversity, but this new social responsibility around health and wellness takes it to another dimension. Plus,

it's highly personal to individuals—what their perceived level of safety is.”

The Great Fomite Freakout—a term coined by Dylan Morris, a researcher at U.C.L.A.—was in full swing in early summer, when I began joining Zoom calls with designers at O+A, Gensler, and Arup, a global engineering and design firm. At first, when the virus was thought to be conveyed mainly in droplets of moisture, surfaces were believed to be a primary medium of transmission. (A fomite is an inanimate object that can carry contagions.) Anything that workers regularly touched—railings, elevator buttons, faucets, the reception desk, the coffeepot, the water cooler—was a possible hot spot. Carroll and her colleagues collected information on the antimicrobial properties of copper versus plastic and cardboard. Designers developed “sneeze guards” and transparent barriers around open-plan workstations, making them, in effect, see-through cubicles, and leading to an acute shortage of plexiglass.

It was then discovered that, although the virus can linger on some surfaces for days, it is extremely unlikely that a person can catch it by touching those surfaces. By early August, the

scientific consensus was that airborne transmission might be a greater threat than fomites. The possibility that the virus could circulate in the office's heating-and-air-conditioning system meant that designers had to add information about clients' H.V.A.C. systems to their portfolios of COVID-related considerations. It also meant that barriers alone wouldn't stop the virus from spreading.

The virtual meetings I sat in on were charged with a sense of high purpose, as designers on the front lines used their skills to potentially save lives. Signage was key; 2020 proved to be a golden age for graphic designers. Proposed safety signage in white-collar workplaces was greatly expanded to convey information about keeping social distance, hand washing, mask wearing, and one-way flow in “curated” elevators, lobbies, and hallways. Some signs used humor and whimsy: “HUG THAT SNEEZE,” “WASH YOUR PAWS.” Others sought to elicit empathy for colleagues.

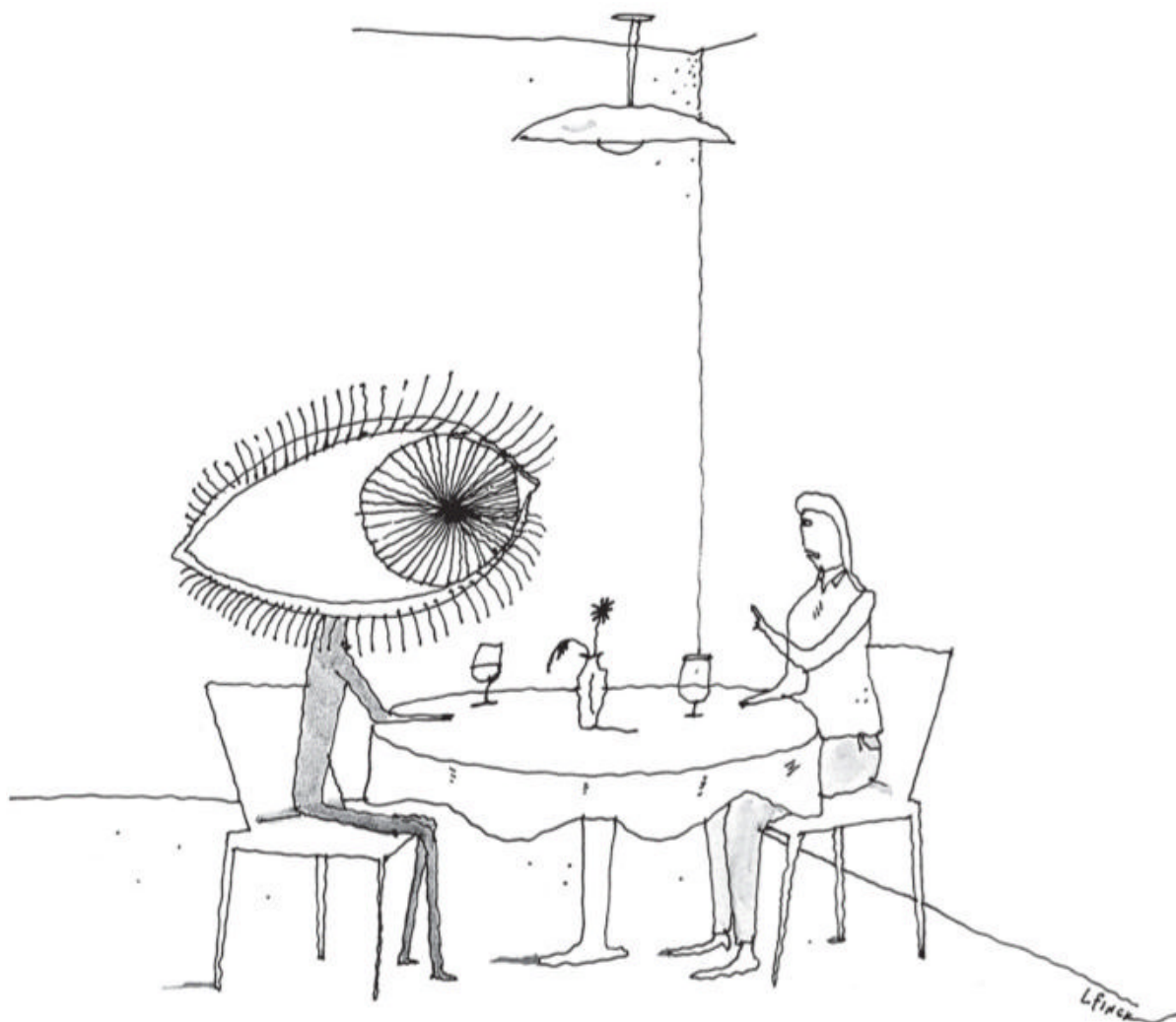
But, in spite of all the research and recommended interventions, the majority of offices remained almost empty; many of the signs were never deployed. By the end of November,

according to the Partnership for New York City, only ten per cent of white-collar workers in Manhattan had returned to their offices, and even as people get vaccinated it seems unlikely that many employers will be bringing staffs back before the summer of 2021; Google recently pushed its return date to September, 2021.

Some enhanced hygiene and cleaning procedures may outlive the pandemic, but they are likely to be absorbed into the voluntary rating system for “healthy buildings” administered by Fitwel, the real-estate industry's certification board, and operated by the Center for Active Design. Fitwel awards ratings to both buildings and individual workplaces based on things like access to natural light and the promotion of physical activity. Many COVID-related best practices have already been incorporated into Fitwel's downloadable Viral Response Module.

Studio O+A assembled its own COVID tool kit for office safety. Then Orpilla asked the staff to develop a new set of COVID-related typologies—activity-based spaces that might become standard features of a post-pandemic workplace. The Donning/Doffing Room was the top typology that emerged from a meeting I attended, in which the staff presented about a dozen ideas. This space, some version of which many other workplace firms were also proposing, would include a temperature-check station, an isolation room for people who tested hot, a place for mandatory hand washing, and lockers to store outside gear and shoes, in addition to personal items. (Thermal temperature checks are now common in those workplaces which have reopened, even as it's become clear that they aren't very useful at stopping the spread of COVID, because so many people with the disease are asymptomatic.) Other typologies that seemed like potential keepers included the Radio Station, a room with enhanced A/V capabilities to connect with remote workers; the Boot Camp, an area for new hires; and the Rickshaw, a small, enclosed private workspace.

Orpilla sent R/GA the tool kit and



*“You’re not listening to me.”*

the new typologies, and Corns came up with a design brief. O+A followed up with a questionnaire and a “visioning” session that added detail to the ideas outlined in the brief.

Meanwhile, in New York, Lyons and his team had decided to sublet the lower floor of R/GA’s HQ. The news was reported in *The Real Deal*, a real-estate magazine, in early September. The article noted that available sublet space in New York had spiked dramatically since the pandemic. The only businesses that seemed to be expanding their real-estate footprint in the city were Big Tech companies, which were also setting the standard for working from home. Amazon completed its lease agreement for the former Lord & Taylor department store, at Thirty-eighth Street and Fifth Avenue, and Facebook leased 1.5 million square feet in Hudson Yards. However, as Dror Poleg, the author of “Rethinking Real Estate” (2020) and a co-chair of the Urban Land Institute’s Technology and Innovation Council in New York, noted to me, both deals had been in process before the pandemic hit.

R/GA’s remaining floor at 450 West Thirty-third Street would become a hybrid workspace, where some employees would be physically present some of the time, working at reservable desks, but on any given day the bulk of employees would be remote. Sean Lyons, the C.E.O., envisaged people being in the office for three days a week and home for two, on average. “In the Singapore office, they want people in the office Monday and Friday, so they can begin and end the week together,” he said.

One of the pain points that the final round of R/GA surveys turned up was the fear that remote workers will lose out on opportunities that in-person workers get by virtue of proximity. Fifty-seven per cent of respondents thought that the stigma of working remotely would linger after the pandemic. “When working from home people felt others saw them as unproductive, difficult to reach, and taking an unofficial day off,” a summary found. “There is a lot of concern that when some return to the office, expectations and processes will shift back to favoring those who are physically present.”

The hybrid office sounds like a logical post-pandemic approach, and many companies are trying it, but mixing in-person and remote workers presents new challenges for managers. Ethan Bernstein, a professor at Harvard Business School who studies the workplace, told me that a hybrid setup is very hard to get right, and that he advises businesses to avoid it: “I’d say stay all virtual—hybrid is likely to deliver the worst of both worlds.” A hybrid company still has substantial real-estate costs, and it also has to contend with the potentially serious threat to company culture posed by resentful remote workers who feel that they’ve been unfairly denied plum assignments and promotions. And what about all the people who return to work to discover that they no longer have a desk, and that the sweaters and photographs and other personal items they left behind have been packed up or, worse, placed on a table of shame? As Bernstein put it, “People generally prefer a ‘home’ to a ‘hotel’—in life and at work.”

R/GA’s young and tech-savvy workers have been using tools like Zoom for years, Lyons told me, so he was not too worried about going hybrid: “We’ve always had to manage a hybrid workforce before that term was even out there. This creates an opportunity to take that a little bit further.” However, he added, “you do have to continually be open to looking for those potential divisions in the culture. We’re going to have to navigate that.”

By the time the pandemic hit, open-plan offices had become even more hated than cube farms. Well-heeled companies might be willing to spend money on activity-based typologies that offer respite from open-plan distractions, but, when times are hard and office budgets are cut, the yurt and the extra huddle space are often the first things to go. After the financial crisis of 2008, open-plan fell victim to some of the same sinister forces that cubed Propst’s workplace dreams. An open-plan layout was even easier to densify

than a cubicle farm. In 2010, the average North American employer allocated two hundred square feet to each worker; by 2017, that number had shrunk to about a hundred and thirty square feet.

Workers have responded to this steady erosion of personal space by building cubicles of sound with headphones. Bound in a sonic nutshell, you can feel like a king of infinite office space, as long as you don’t look up from your screen. Since most office work takes place on virtual desktops anyway, it was easy, pre-pandemic, to perform what was essentially remote work while occupying your employer’s expensive real estate.

In “The Truth About Open Offices,” an article published in the *Harvard Business Review* in December, 2019, Ethan Bernstein and Ben Waber, the president of Humanyze, a workplace-analytics firm, used smartphones and sensors to track face-to-face and digital interactions at two Fortune 500 companies before and after the companies moved from cubicles to open offices. The authors wrote, “We found that face-to-face interactions *dropped* by roughly 70% after the firms transitioned to open offices, while electronic interactions increased to compensate.” The virtual workplace, instead of complementing the physical one, had become a refuge from it.

The technology industry gave birth to the modern office, and then created the tools to do without it. This paradox helps explain tech’s tortured history with remote work. By 2009, forty per cent of I.B.M.’s workforce was remote. The I.B.M. Smarter Workforce Institute promoted “telework” to clients as the future, claiming that remote workers “were highly engaged, more likely to consider their workplaces as innovative, happier about their job prospects and less stressed than their more traditional, office-bound colleagues.”

But in 2017, with profits falling, the company delivered an ultimatum: everyone must return to the office or



leave the company. Likewise, Marissa Mayer, shortly after becoming the C.E.O. of Yahoo, in 2012, issued an edict to its twelve thousand employees banning W.F.H. Both companies cited diminished collaboration as a reason. (Mayer, a new mom at the time, built a “mother’s room” next to her office so that she could take the baby to work.) By 2016, about a third of Yahoo’s workforce had left. In 2017, Mayer herself departed the company, with two hundred and sixty million dollars.

With the onset of the pandemic, technology companies have once again become champions of remote work, while also expanding their real-estate portfolios. Facebook has said that it expects half its workforce to be remote by 2030. Twitter told its employees that they never have to return to the office. Microsoft plans to keep all but essential workers remote until this summer, but it is also proceeding with a multibillion-dollar renovation of its five-hundred-acre Redmond, Washington, campus. In August, R.E.I., the outdoor-equipment-and-clothing retailer, announced that it would not move into its four-hundred-thousand-square-foot headquarters in Bellevue, Washington. Facebook bought the complex in September for three hundred and sixty-eight million dollars. For Facebook, which has fifty-six thousand employees—more than four thousand of which were added during 2020—in eighty offices around the world, the former R.E.I. site represents a fraction of its future space needs, even if half its workers are remote in ten years.

Microsoft has traditionally had more of a wall-and-cubicle culture than younger tech businesses. The renovated Redmond digs will have fewer private offices and more team-based space. The company plans to start moving in by 2023.

Still, the pandemic has greatly accelerated Microsoft’s efforts to create a virtual office for the future. Jared Spataro, the company’s Vice-President for Modern Work, talked me through its plans, which will be designed around Teams, its conferencing software.

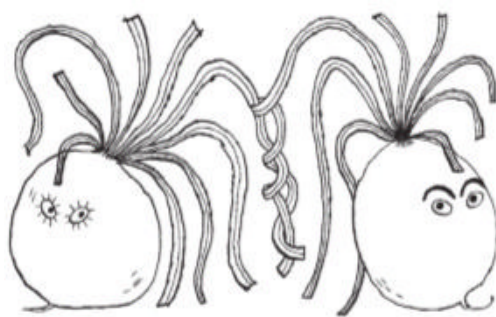
The PC revolution “digitized paperwork,” Spataro said. Instead of physical pages and folders sitting on a desk,

office workers had digital documents and files sitting on a virtual desktop inside a computer. But these digital desktops didn’t sit inside a virtual office, one in which you easily could move around among other desktops and meet in conference rooms or common areas. There was no virtual water cooler to facilitate serendipitous encounters.

The pandemic, Spataro went on, is accelerating a “second digital transformation”: the creation of a virtual cloud-based office that connects the desktops, where employees will go to work, whether they’re present in the physical office or working remotely. It sounds like the digital version of the open-plan-office revolution—the walls around the individual’s virtual desktop are coming down. And, once again, software engineers are leading the way.

“We think every company is going to need to invest in a digital workspace for each employee,” Spataro said. He added that he was already hearing from companies that want to use the money saved by reducing their physical footprint to build a custom office in the cloud, loaded with proprietary digital whiteboarding and visual-conferencing tools, which will transcend space and time. If you want to know what happened in the virtual office last Tuesday, you can go back and replay the meetings.

“Those spaces will very quickly become the center of gravity for work,” he went on. “We’ll use them in the



kitchen, we’ll use them in transit to our jobs. Even when we move back into real estate, we won’t be back to one hundred per cent. You will come into the office, do your work, and then roll up your workspace and take it with you.”

The privacy implications of the virtual office make the lack of personal space in the open-plan office seem

quaint. Each keystroke in a virtual office is trackable. In the mid-nineties, workers started to be issued key cards, which meant the company could know when you were in the building and when you weren’t. In a virtual workspace, it would know almost everything you do at work.

Spataro agreed that we will need some kind of worker bill of rights, detailing what personal information your employer owns. But, he added, that’s not Microsoft’s job: “That’s the domain of government.”

Toward the end of October, Orpilla and his staff convened a Zoom meeting with Corns and his colleagues to present O+A’s plan for R/GA’s San Francisco office. Everyone was working from home, except David Boehm, who was logging in from 450 West Thirty-third Street, where he was overseeing the remodelling of the downsized headquarters.

Dani Gelfand, a senior designer at O+A, led the group on a virtual tour of the proposed plan, beginning with the reception area. This space should “signal a feeling of safety,” she said. It featured touchless entry doors, sanitizing stations, an infrared temperature checkpoint, and an isolation room for people who register a fever. (At least in there they’ll get some privacy.)

Using her cursor, Gelfand directed us through the Donning/Doffing Room, noting the lockers for personal items. She continued through a communal pantry “employing touchless equipment where possible”—a contactless coffee machine, a touchless utensils dispenser, a pedal-operated water cooler—to a general-wellness room, which, she said, would be mainly for mothers but also for “prayer and decompression.” We followed Gelfand into the main communal workspace, which featured twenty-four-person workstations, with unassigned but reservable individual desks arranged in a pinwheel formation, and barriers between the desk surfaces that offered a modicum of visual privacy.

This part of the post-pandemic office looked much like the pre-pandemic open-plan layout, only more so. Corns, picking up on the similarity, said, “Nothing needs to look like an

office before. So these workstations don't need to be desks, per se."

"Maybe we just have lounge furniture and a place to plug in," Gelfand suggested.

The virtual tour then proceeded through an area with several "focus pods" that resembled three-sided restaurant booths. "The pods could be made higher, so they are more like an enclosed-booth experience," Gelfand noted. That sounded like a cubicle, the typology that dare not speak its name.

The rest of the office was taken up with a studio for photography and digital art work, and a number of semi-enclosed conference rooms with large video screens and better sound for connecting with staff working remotely. Gelfand likened this aspect of the plan to a "communications field office."

Boehm said that it looked like there would be a lot of traffic through the focus areas to get to the pantry and the studio. Compounding these potential distractions would be the sound of people conducting virtual meetings in the A/V areas. "Managing the sound in the office is going to be critical as we move forward," he said.

Everyone in the virtual meeting stared at the office plan on the screen, trying to imagine what it would be like to be on the floor physically while some co-workers were there virtually. The real office of the future, it seemed to me, lay somewhere between the physical space O+A had designed and the virtual space that we were all observing it from.

Finally, Gelfand noted there would be two private offices, as specified in the brief—one for human resources, for meetings requiring privacy, and the other for the managing director, Corns himself.

One day in December, I arranged to return to *The New Yorker's* office, on the twenty-third floor of One World Trade Center, in lower Manhattan, which the staff had vacated abruptly in March. It was a gray, blustery afternoon. The downtown sidewalks, normally lively at lunchtime, were deserted, except for construction workers, who were engaged in adding office and residential space to a market glutted with it. Like a supertanker, the ship that is



GARY BASKS IN THE GLOW OF A FIFTEEN-MINUTE WINDOW WITH NO EMPTY CARDBOARD BOXES IN THE HOUSE

New York commercial real estate is hard to turn. It keeps plowing ahead, even though it has reached the edge of the known world.

The silent lobby was empty except for masked security. A Christmas tree twinkled at the far end. I was reminded of the riotous office-party scene in "The Apartment." Remote work may increase efficiency and productivity, but a virtual office holiday party is a different thing entirely. Sitting at home, watching tipsy colleagues get flirty on a screen could bankrupt one's social capital.

The opening of King Vidor's silent film "The Crowd," from 1928, shows us the busy New York harbor, followed by the streets and sidewalks of midtown, teeming with people and traffic. Then the camera swoops in through a high window, and glides over a sea of identical desks in a vast, factory-style

open office, until it stops at a single desk with a name engraved on a small metal plaque—John Sims, the film's Everyman hero. In the ninety-second sequence, the crowded city has shrunk in scale, becoming only as big as one man at his desk.

As far as I could tell, I was the only soul in our Gensler-designed office. Post-it reminders from March were curling at the edges. The silence felt oppressive.

Following the new one-way directional signage, I eventually came to my desk. I booted up my virtual desktop, thinking I might take advantage of the rare quiet and privacy to actually do some work in the office. But I couldn't concentrate. I missed my colleagues. Whether walled, open, or cloud-based, an office is about the people who work there. Without the people, the office is an empty shell. ♦



Pretend, the mother had said when she crept to her daughter's room in the night, that tomorrow is just an ordinary day.

So the daughter had risen as usual and washed and made toast and warm milk for her brothers, and while they were eating she emptied their schoolbags into the toy chest and filled them with clothes, a toothbrush, one book for comfort. The children moved silently through the black morning, put on their shoes outside on the porch. The dog thumped his tail against the doghouse in the cold yard but was old and did not get up. The children's breath hovered low and white as they walked down to the bus stop, a strange presence trailing them in the road.

When they stopped by the mailbox, the younger brother said in a very small voice, Is she dead?

The older boy hissed, Shut up, you'll wake him, and all three looked at the house hunched up on the hill in the chilly dark, the green siding half installed last summer, the broken front window covered with cardboard.

The sister touched the little one's head and said, whispering, No, no, don't worry, she's alive. I heard her go out to feed the sheep, and then she left for work. The boy leaned like a cat into her hand.

He was six, his brother was nine, and the girl was twelve. These were my uncles and my mother as children.

Much later, she would tell me the story of this day at those times when it seemed as if her limbs were too heavy to move and she stood staring into the refrigerator for long spells, unable to decide what to make for dinner. Or when the sun would cycle into one window and out the other and she would sit on her bed unable to do anything other than breathe. Then I would sit quietly beside her, and she would tell the story the same way every time, as if ripping out something that had worked its roots deep inside her.

It was bitterly cold that day and the wind was supposed to rise, but for now all was airless, waiting. After some time, the older brother said, Kids are going to make fun of you, your face all mashed up like that.

My mother touched her eye and winced at the pain there, then shrugged.

They were so far out in the country, the bus came for them first, and the ride to town was long. At last it showed itself, yellow as sunrise at the end of the road. Its slowness as it pulled up was agonizing. My mother's heart began to beat fast. She let her brothers get on before her and told them to sit in the front seats. Mrs. Palmer, the driver, was a stout lady who played the organ at church, and whose voice when she shouted at the naughty boys in the back was high like soprano singing. She looked at my mother as she shut the bus door, then said in her singsong voice, You got yourself a shiner there, Michelle.

The bus hissed up from its crouch and lumbered off.

I know, my mother said. Listen, we need your help.

And when Mrs. Palmer considered her, then nodded, my mother asked quickly if she could please drop the three of them off when she picked up the Yoder kids. Their mother would be waiting there for them. Please, she said quietly.

The boys' faces were startled, they hadn't known, then an awful acceptance moved across them.

There was a silence before Mrs. Palmer said, Oh, honey, of course, and she shuffled her eyes back to the road. And I won't mark on the sheet that you were missing, neither. So they won't get it together to call your house until second period or so, give you a little time. She looked into the mirror at the boys and said cheerfully, I got a blueberry muffin. Anyone want a blueberry muffin?

We're O.K., thanks, my mother said, and sat beside her younger brother, who rested his head on her arm. The fields spun by, lightening to gray, the faintest of gold at the tops of the trees. Just before the bus slowed to meet the cluster of little Yoders, yawning, shifting from foot to foot, my mother saw the old Dodge tucked into a shallow ditch, headlights off.

Thank you, she said to Mrs. Palmer, as they got off, and Mrs. Palmer said, No thanks needed, only decent thing to do. I'll pray for you, honey. I'll pray for all of you; we're all sinners who yearn for salvation. For the first time since she rose that morning, my mother

was glad, because a person as full of music as the bus driver surely had the ear of God.

The three children ran through the exhaust from the bus as it rose and roared off.

They slid into the warm car where their mother clutched the steering wheel. She was very pale, but her hair was in its familiar small bouffant. My mother thought of the pain it must have cost my grandmother to do up her hair in the mirror so early in the morning, and felt ill.

You did good, babies, my grandmother said as well as she could, her mouth as smashed as it was. She turned the car. A calf galloped beside them for a few steps in the paddock by the road, and my younger uncle laughed and pressed his hand to the glass.

This is not the time for laughing, my uncle Joseph said sternly. He would grow up to be a grave man, living in an obsessively clean, bare efficiency, teaching mathematics at a community college.

Leave him be, Joey, my mother said. She said in a lower voice to her mother, Poor Ralphie thought you were dead.

Not dead yet, my grandmother said. By the skin of my teeth. She tried to smile at the boys in the mirror.

Where we going? Ralphie said. I didn't know we were going anywhere.

To see my friend in the city, my grandmother said. We'll call when we find a phone out of town. She put a cigarette in her mouth but fumbled with the lighter in her shaky hands until my mother took it and struck the flame for her.

They were going the long way so they wouldn't have to drive past the house again, and my mother watched the minute hand of the clock on the dash, feeling each second pulling her tighter inside.

Faster, Mama, she said quietly, and her mother said without looking at her, Last thing we need's being stopped by one of his buddies. I got to pick up my pay first.

The hospital loomed on the hill beside the river, elegant in its stone façade, and my grandmother parked around back, by the dumpster. Can't risk leaving you, she said. Come with, and bring your stuff. But when she began to walk she could only mince a little at a time, and my mother moved close, so she could

lean on her, and together they went faster.

They went up the steps through the back door into the kitchen. A man in a ridiculous hairnet, like a green mushroom, was carrying a basin of peeled potatoes in a bath of water. Without looking he barked, You're late, Ruby. But then the children caught his eye, and he saw the state of them, and put the potatoes down and reached out and touched my mother's face gently with his hot rough hand. Lord. She get it, too? he said. She's just a kid.

My mother told herself not to cry; she always cried when strangers were tender with her.

Put herself between us. She's a good girl, my grandmother said.

I'll kill the bastard myself, the man said. I'll strangle him if you want me to. Just say the word.

No need, my grandmother said. We're going. But I got to have my check, Dougie. All we got is four dollars and half a tank of gas, and I don't know what I'm going to do if that's all we got to live on.

Can't. No way, Dougie said. Check gets sent to the house, you know this. You filled the form. You checked the box.

My grandmother looked him directly in the face, perhaps for the first time, because she was a timid woman whose voice was low, who made herself a shadow in the world. He sighed and said, See what I can manage, then he disappeared into the office.

Now through the door of the cafeteria there came two women moving fast. One was a plump pretty teen-ager chewing gum, the cashier, and the other was Doris, my grandmother's friend, freckled and squat and blunt. For extra money, she made exquisite cakes, with flowers like irises and delphiniums in frosting. It was hard to believe a woman as tough as she was could hold such delicacy inside her.

Oh, Ruby, Doris said. It got even worse, huh. Jesus, take a look at you.

Shoved his gun in my mouth this time, my grandmother said. She didn't bother to whisper, because the kids had been there, they had seen it. Thought I was going to be shot. But, no, he just knocked out a few teeth. My grandmother gingerly lifted her lip with a finger to show her swollen bloodied gums. When Doris stepped forward to hug her, my grandmother winced away from her touch, and Doris took the hem

## HORSE IN A GAS MASK

Browband      cheekpiece      throatlatch  
bit.

Plus all the links and leathers for holding

this extra part on. We're meant to be accustomed  
to the bodies

in the mud. We've seen the documentaries,

we've read about the mustard gas. We know  
they're only

actors on a union wage. What is it

about the horse that falls—is that the way  
to put it—falls

just slightly out of solution here? Precipitate,

noun. That fails to hold its peace within the fiction.

There will  
have been a handler on the set, there are rules.

The barbed wire won't have torn his flank.

You can train  
a horse to stagger. Maybe. Check

the delicate ankles later on. But this ghastly  
reproduction  
of a ghastly piece of now-you're-allowed-to-

of her shirt and lifted it, and said, Oh, shit, when she saw the bruises marbling my grandmother's stomach and ribs.

Better go up and get looked at by a doctor, the cashier said, her damp pink mouth hanging open. That looks real ugly.

No time, my grandmother said. It's already too dangerous to show up here.

In silence, Doris took her cracked leather purse from the hook and put all the cash in her wallet in my mother's hand. The cashier blew a bubble, considering, then sighed and pulled down her own purse and did the same.

Bless you, ladies, my grandmother said. Then she took a shuddering breath and said, In a way, it was my fault. I thought I'd stay until we finished the shearing. You know he's rough with the sheep. I wanted to save them some blood.

Mama? my younger uncle said by the door.

No, don't you do that nonsense, you know that's not right, Doris said,

fiercely. It's his fault. Nobody else but his.

Mama? Ralphie said again, louder. It's him, he's here. He pointed out the window, where they could see just the nose of the cruiser coming to a stop behind my grandmother's Dodge.

Get down, Doris said, and they all crouched on the tile. They heard a car door slam. Doris, moving faster than seemed possible, went to the door and locked it. Half a second later the knob was rattled, and then there was a pounding, and then my mother couldn't hear for the blood rushing in her ears.

Doris picked up the pan of potatoes and came to the window wearing a furious face. What in hell you want? she shouted. Dare to show your face here.

There was a murmuring, then Doris shouted down through the glass, Not here, up in the E.R. getting looked at. Quite a number you done on her. Couldn't hardly walk. She said this nastily, glowering. Then she turned her

breathe-again, it isn't so wholly removed  
 from the world  
 as in a better world would be the case. You've seen  
 the newsreels? Everything black-and-white back  
 then, the one  
 man's hand on the first man's shoulder, next  
 man's hand on his, and then the whole retreating  
 line of them, gassed,  
 bandages over their eyes. It seems  
 the horses could go blind as well, no help for it,  
 something about  
 the goggles and their fogging up. So in  
 this latter-day story-by-means-of-moving-pictures  
 one part  
 punctures the set-to-music consolations of  
 it's-all-a-reënactment-with-a-proper-arc.  
 Cantle  
 pommel          stirrup          girth.  
 All suited to our purposes.  
 Camera.  
 Liquid eye.

—Linda Gregerson

back on the window and went to the stainless-steel table in the middle of the room, where the cashier watched out the window over Doris's shoulder.

They heard an engine starting up, and at last the cashier said in a thick voice, O.K., he got in and now he's driving around. But, like, when he figures out you're not up in the E.R. he's gonna just come into the kitchen through the cafeteria, you know. Like, there's no lock on that door and we can't stop him.

Doris called for Dougie in a sharp voice, and Dougie hurried out of the office with an envelope, looking flushed, a little shamefaced. He had been hiding in there, my mother understood.

I won't forget your kindness, all of you, my grandmother said, but my mother had to take the paycheck because my grandmother's hands were shaking too much.

Send us a postcard when you make it, Doris said. Get a move on.

My grandmother leaned on my mother again and they went out to the car as fast as they could, and it started, and slid the back way, down by the green bridge over the river. When they had twisted out of sight of the hospital, my grandmother stopped the car, opened her door, and vomited on the road.

She shut the door. All right, she said, wiping her mouth gingerly with a finger, and started the car up again.

My mother saw on the dashboard clock that it was just past eight. The teachers were doing roll call right now. Soon a girl would collect the sheets and take them to the office, where someone, thinking they were doing the right thing, would notice that all three of the kids were gone, and call their absence in, first to the house, where the phone would ring and ring. But then, getting hold of nobody, they would call it in to the station, and it would be radioed out imme-

diately to him. And he would know that not only was his wife gone but his kids were gone with her. They had an hour, maybe a little more, my mother calculated. An hour could maybe take them out of his jurisdiction. She told her mother this, pressing her foot on an imaginary accelerator. My grandmother did drive faster now through the back roads. Gusts of sharp wind pressed the car.

For some time, they were strung into their separate thoughts. My mother counted the cash. A hundred and twenty-three, she said with surprise.

Doris's grocery money, I bet, my grandmother said. Bless her.

Ralphie said sadly, I wish we could've brought Butch.

Yeah, just what we need, your stinky old dog, Joey said.

Can we go back someday to get him? Ralphie said, but my grandmother was silent.

My mother turned around to look at her brothers and said, bitterly, We're never going back. I hope it all burns down with him inside.

Hey, the little boy said weakly. That's not nice. He's my dad.

Mine, too, but I'd be happy if he eats rat poison, Uncle Joseph said. Then he bent forward and looked at the floor, then at the seat beside him, and said, Oh, jeez. Oh, no. Where's your knapsack, Ralphie?

Uncle Ralphie looked all around and said at last, with his eyes wide, I took it into the kitchen but I think I left it.

There was a long moment before this blow hit them all, at once.

Oh, this is bad, my mother said.

I'm so sorry, Ralphie said, starting to cry. Mama, I gotta go pee.

Surely Doris will hide it, my grandmother said.

Hold your bladder, Ralphie. But what if she doesn't find it in time? my mother said. What if she doesn't see it before he does? And he knows that you took us. And he gets on the radio for them all to keep an eye out for us. They could be looking for us now.

My grandmother cursed softly and looked at the rearview mirror. They were whipping terribly fast on the country curves now. The boys, in the back, were clutching the door handles.

My uncle Joey, in a display of self-control that made him seem like a tiny

ancient man, said, It's O.K., Ralphie, you didn't mean to leave your bag.

My younger uncle reached out his little hand, and Joseph, who hated all show of affection, held it. Ralphie had a fishing accident when I was a teenager, and my cold, dry uncle Joseph fell apart at the funeral, sobbing and letting snot run down his face, all twisted grotesquely in pain.

Mama, we got to get out of the state, my mother said. We'll be safer across state lines.

Shush now, I need to think, my grandmother said. Her hands had gone white on the wheel.

No, what we got to do is ditch the car, my uncle Joseph said, they'll be looking for it. Probably already are. We got to find a parking lot that's full of cars already, like a grocery store or something.

Then what do we do? my grandmother said in a strangled voice. We walk to Vermont? She laughed, a sharp sound.

No, then we take a bus, Joseph said in his hard, rational voice. We get on a bus and they can't find us then.

O.K., my mother said. O.K., yeah, Joey's right, that's a good plan. Good thinking. We're fifteen minutes out from Albany, they got a bus station, I know where it is.

It was her father who had once driven her there in his cruiser, because her middle-school choir was taking a bus down to New York City for a competition. He had stopped on the way for strawberry milkshakes. This was a good memory she had of him.

Fine, my grandmother said. Yes. I can't think of nothing else. I guess this will be our change of plans. But, for the first time since the night before, tears welled up in her eyes and began dripping down her bruised cheeks and she had to slow the car to see through them.

And then she started breathing crazily, and leaned forward until her forehead rested on the wheel, and the car stopped suddenly in the middle of the road. The wind howled around it.

Mama, we need to drive, my mother said. We need to drive now. We need to go.

I really, really have to pee, Ralphie said.

It's O.K., it's O.K., it's O.K., my grandmother whispered. It's just that my body is not really listening to me. I

can't move anything right now. I can't move my feet. Oh, God.

It's fine, my mother said softly. Don't worry. You're fine. You can take the time you need to calm down.

And at this moment my mother saw with terrible clarity that everything depended upon her. The knowledge was heavy on the nape of her neck, like a hand pressing down hard. And what came to her was the trail of bread crumbs from the fairy tale her mother used to tell her in the dark when she was tiny, and it was just the two of them in the bedroom, no brothers in this life, not yet, and the soft, kind moon was shining in the window and her father was downstairs, worlds away. So my mother said, in a soothing voice, So what we're going to do is, Mama's going to take a deep breath and we're going to drive down into Albany, over the tracks, take a right at the feed place, go down by the big brick church, and park in that lot behind it. It's only a block or two from the station. We're going to get out and walk as fast as we can and I'll go in and buy the tickets on the first bus out to wherever, and if we have time I can get us some food to eat on the bus. And we'll get on the bus, and it will slide us out of here so fast. It'll go wherever it's going, but eventually we'll get to the city. And the city is so enormous we can just hide there. And there are museums and parks and movie theatres and subways and everything in the city. And Mama will get a job and we'll go to school and we'll get an apartment and there'll be no more stupid sheep to take care of and it'll be safe. No more having to run out to the barn to sleep. Nobody can hurt us in the city, O.K., boys? We're going to have a life that will be so boring, every day it will be the same, and it is going to be wonderful. O.K.?

By now my mother had pried my grandmother's hands off the steering wheel and was chafing the blood back into them. O.K.? All we need is for you to take a deep breath.

You can do it, Mama, Joseph said. Ralphie covered his face with both hands. The grasses outside danced under the heavy wind, brushed flat, ruffled against the fur of the fields.

Then my mother prayed with her eyes open, her hands spread on the dash,

willing the car forward, and my grandmother slowly put the car back into gear and, panting, began to drive.

This was the way my mother later told the story, down to the smallest detail, as though dreaming it into life: the forsythia budding gold on the tips of the bushes, the last snow rotten in the ditches, the faces of the houses still depressed by winter, the gray clouds that hung down heavily as her mother drove into the valley of the town, the wind picking up so that the flag's rivets on the pole snapped crisply outside the bus station, where they waited on a metal bench that seared their bottoms and they shuddered from more than the cold. The bus roaring to life, wreathed in smoke, carrying them away. She told it almost as though she believed this happier version, but behind her words I see the true story, the sudden wail and my grandmother's blanched cheeks shining in red and blue and the acrid smell of piss. How just before the door opened and she was grabbed by the hair and dragged backward, my grandmother turned to her children and tried to smile, to give them this last glimpse of her.

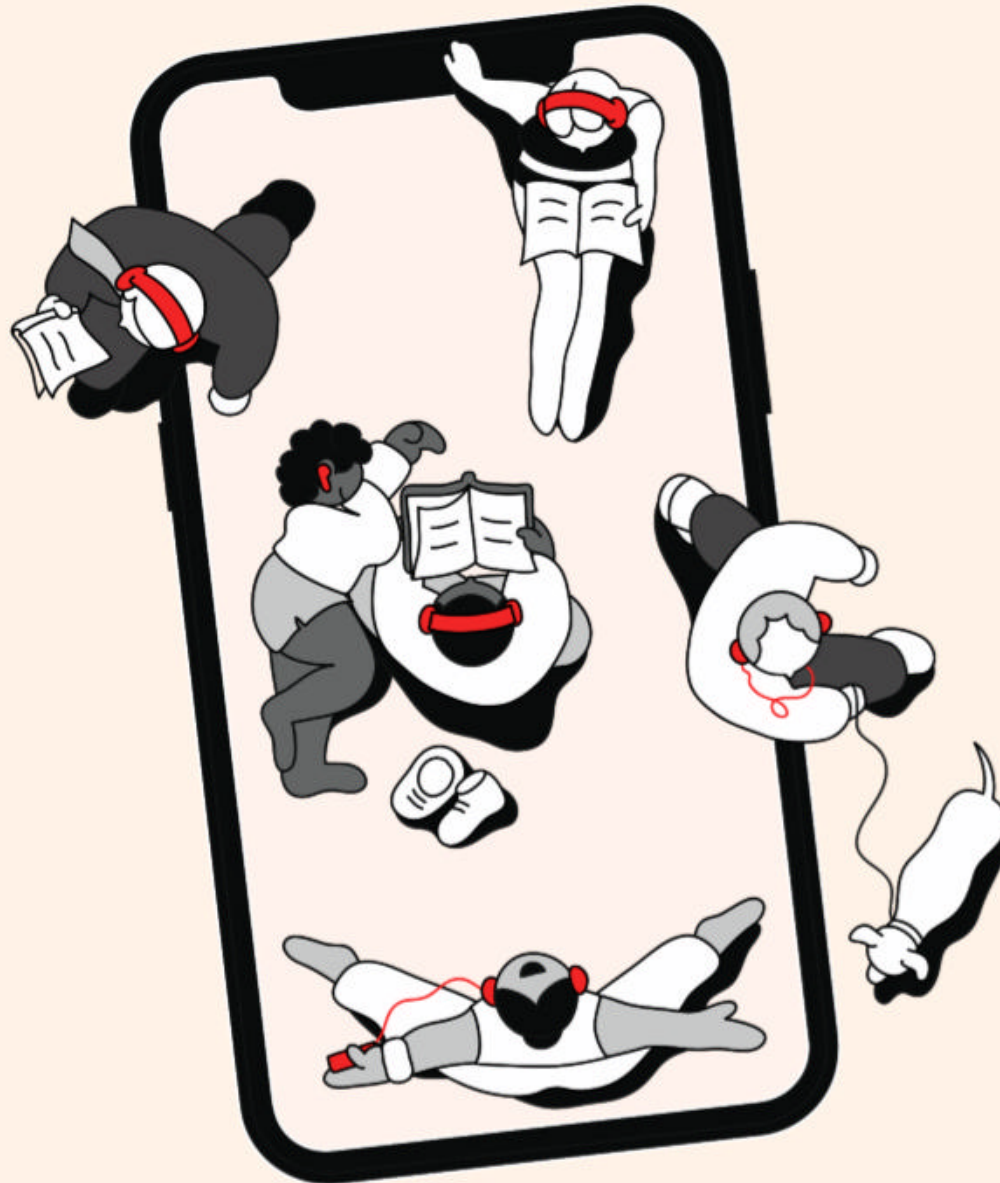
The three children survived. Eventually they would save themselves, struggling into lives and loves far from this place and this moment, each finding a kind of safe harbor, jobs and people and houses empty of violence. But always inside my mother there would blow a silent wind, a wind that died and gusted again, raging throughout her life, touching every moment she lived after this one. She tried her best, but she couldn't help filling me with this same wind. It seeped into me through her blood, through every bite of food she made for me, through every night she waited, shaking with fear, for me to come home by curfew, through every scolding, everything she forbade me to say or think or do or be, through all the ways she taught me how to move as a woman in the world. She was far from being the first to find it blowing through her, and of course I will not be the last. I look around and can see it in so many other women, passed down from a time beyond history, this wind that is dark and ceaseless and raging within. ♦

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# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## ON THE NOSE

*How to make sense of scents.*

BY RACHEL SYME

My obsession with perfume began when I was around ten years old, spritzing on layer after layer of my mother's Anaïs Anaïs and Poison, until I reeked of a duty-free store. It continued through my mall-rat teen-age years, when I blew through my babysitting tips at Bath & Body Works, convinced that I could amplify my personality with a generous dose of Sun-Ripened Raspberry. Throughout my twenties, I collected hundreds of fragrance samples, bought for less than five dollars apiece from Web sites with names like the Perfumed Court and Surrender to Chance. Tiny glass vials of liquid tuberose regularly spilled out of my coat pockets. So when an editor at a newspaper for which I occasionally wrote about hair and beauty trends asked me if I had anything to say about perfume, I told her I did. I assumed that the main requisite for the task was personal experience, not technical expertise; surely I already had the vocabulary for detailing the scent-scapes I'd been wandering for years. I knew I loved the smell of violets—their chalky, chocolate undertones. Or I thought I knew. Sitting down at my keyboard, I began to waver. Was it more like talcum powder and linden honey? Or like a Barbie-doll head sprinkled with lemonade?

Talking about smells can feel a little like talking about dreams—often tedious, rarely satisfying. The olfactory world is more private than we may think: even when we share space, such as a particularly ripe subway car, one commuter may describe eau d'armpit as sweet Gorgonzola cheese, another will detect rotting pumpkin, and a third a barnyardy, cayenne tang. What surprised me

is that using phrases like “barnyardy, cayenne tang” is a perfectly valid, even preferred, way to write about nasal experiences. Many of the most seasoned perfume critics incline toward the rhapsodic, as do the would-be critics who gather on the Internet to wax eloquent about the things they've smelled. One of my favorite hubs for odor aficionados, the Web site *Fragrantica*, an online “perfume encyclopedia” that launched in 2007, has the feel of a cacophonous bazaar: on its message boards, users swap perfumed prose back and forth, racking up hundreds of new posts each day.

On *Fragrantica*'s page for *Violette*, a violet soliflore (the industry term for a perfume that attempts to replicate the scent of a single flower) from the French house *Molinard*, you will find little consensus and lots of enthusiasm: “reminds me of sweet tarts from my childhood”; “This is a dance of fairies, in the deep of a forest where all is about light and shadows”; “a twilight summer sky, a glaring garland of bare incandescent bulbs, larded fruit pies, some musk from the crowd”; “my 5 year old son told me it smells disgusting, like ‘something dead.’” The desperate maximalism of these adjective pileups has a kind of poignancy. Smell—bodily and human yet invisible and heady—defies our expressive capacities in a way that other senses don't. In our clumsy efforts at the ineffable, there is both passion and melancholy.

Would it help if we had a scientific lingua franca for talking about these aromatic adventures? There is chemistry, of course, which explains why certain essences smell like pine-

cones, or cotton candy. Violets, whether you detect a puff of cocoa or a hint of Barbie, get their enchanting sillage (or fragrance trail) from ionones, aromatic compounds that invade and numb the nasal passages in delicate waves, giving the flower a bizarre ability to flirt with the nostrils. If we all knew about indoles, the fetid natural compounds found in both jasmine blooms and human excrement, or sabinene, a terpene that gives both cedar and oregano their herbaceous punch, would we be better able to understand our shared airspace?

The impulse to taxonomize our elusive sensory experiences is not a new one. In the 1976 book “*Wines: Their Sensory Evaluation*,” Maynard Amerine, a fermentation expert, and Edward B. Roessler, a mathematician, took fellow wine connoisseurs—who rival *Fragrantica* users in their love of florid verbiage—to task, insisting that poetic evocations be accompanied by statistically replicable evaluations. They didn't want to know what made a wine “angular” or “austere”; they wanted to understand what accounted for our perception of acidity. A similar desire for precision lies behind Harold McGee's nearly seven-hundred-page new book, “*Nose Dive: A Field Guide to the World's Smells*” (Penguin Press), the result of a ten-year quest to name and categorize every noticeable fragrance on earth.

Learning to detect specific scent notes “isn't just an intellectual exercise,” McGee writes. It's a full-body transformation. He cites the French sociologist Bruno Latour, who, in his 2004 essay “How to Talk About the Body,”

ABOVE: TAMARA SHOPSIN



*Shaped by the idiosyncrasies of memory, our experience of the olfactory world may be more private than we think.*

mused about the way that perfumers in training learn to identify increasingly delicate and obscure essences over time: “It is not by accident that the person is called a ‘nose’ as if, through practice, she had acquired an organ that defined her ability to detect chemical and other differences.” A nose isn’t born; she’s made.

McGee, a food scientist in San Francisco, is especially interested in the playful *pas de deux* between the nose and the tongue. His 1984 book, “On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen,” popularized what became known as molecular gastronomy and earned him a mythological status among swaggering chefs who wanted to test the boundaries between stoves and Bunsen burners. The award-winning British chef Heston Blumenthal, best known for his offal innovations and porridge made with snails, once said that McGee’s tome “defined my unconventional approach to cooking. I wasn’t inquisitive before that.”

McGee’s immersion in what he calls the “osmocism” (from the ancient Greek root for “odor”) began with the mystery of why certain unrelated foods mirror one another on the palate. He noticed that some Parmesan cheese tasted like pineapple, and that some oysters had the same vegetal crispness as raw cucumber. Other analogies were more far-fetched, but compelling: green tea could be oceanic, and some red wine had a distinct aftertaste of horse manure. “The flavor echoes I’d perceived,” he concluded, “are similarities specifically in smells.” McGee started by breaking down gastronomical odors, but soon expanded beyond the kitchen, documenting the smells of asteroids, asphalt, urine, wet earth, seaweed, sourdough, yogurt, dead animals, saffron, and smoke—the “mundane yet revelatory things that fill our lives.”

This collision of the mundane and the revelatory makes McGee’s book as enjoyable to thumb through as the *Fragrantica* forums, though his guide is much better researched and far less baroque. It unfolds like a set of smart answers to essentially silly questions about quotidian life. Ever wonder why sweaty armpits stink? And, in the worst cases, why they stink of shallots in particular? McGee reports that the apocrine sweat

glands, which kick into high gear during adolescence, do their best to hide the evidence of their own microbiomal bouquet. Sugars and amino acids bind to volatile, potentially rank molecules, thereby preventing the release of any foul smell. But when bacterial interlopers, such as bacillus and staphylococcus, break these bonds and “liberate” compounds like hydroxymethyl-hexanoic acid, then the full power of B.O. is unleashed: “rancid, animal, cumin-like.”

McGee’s tangled web of fragrance families starts to reveal fascinating relationships. By charting the genealogy of the piquant invaders of teen-age underarms, he discovers that they are the “very same molecules that scent goat and sheep meats, milks, cheeses, and wools.” This is no accident. Traditional cheese-makers cultivated their curds with a “sweat-like brine” for weeks. Once humans realized they could mimic their own bodily ripeness in their food, they simply couldn’t help themselves. “The smells of the human body may be socially embarrassing,” McGee writes, “but for children, and privately for adults, they’re often irresistible.”

The cozy relationships between natural secretions and savory foods, or accidental emissions and eros, are well known to anyone who has nuzzled the dirty scalp of a loved one, but McGee lays out the molecular evidence for these desires. We might like to think we are most drawn to lovely, “clean” smells—laundry, linden blossoms, a eucalyptus breeze—but more often than not our greatest sensory delight comes from our most intimate, and most odiferous, nooks and crannies.

It’s tempting to wonder how my perfume writing might have been different if I’d had “Nose Dive” on hand when I was starting out. In 2010, I puzzled over a new trend in “animalic” perfumes—unwashed, nocturnal scents with names like *Ma Bête* and *Bat*. (These were synthetic essences; fragrance-industry overseers now heavily regulate the use of many animal-derived products, such as castoreum, from beaver glands, and hardened whale feces known as *ambergris*.) At the time, I took a philosophical view: maybe these carnal scents evinced a longing for strangers’ bodily funk in an age of alienation.

McGee does not make such grand

claims; he is more interested in analyzing the deep origin stories of smells than in tracking changeable cultural trends. Many of the molecules we smell today, he notes, have been around since the planet’s earliest days. Plenty of them are toxic—ammonia, say—but, even when dangerous, these primordial scents often have an intoxicating allure. “The smells of earth will always be our reference points,” McGee writes. “Lighter fluid or stove fuel, scorched oil, a vinegar dressing, a deviled egg, a just-unwrapped cheese, a sip of wine or rum: all offer distant echoes of the early cosmos.”

He is occasionally drawn to poetic diversions, citing research showing that *petrichor*, the sublime scent emitted when rain hits rocks or pavement, comes not from the minerals in the stone but from an imperceptible layer of “volatiles” covering all outdoor surfaces. These volatiles, generated by fungi, plants, and even human technology, are, McGee writes, “usually too sparse and omnipresent for us to notice them in the air around us.” It is only during a storm that what soil scientists call a “wet-up” can occur, and a fine mist of abundant life becomes perceptible to our noses. Rain reminds us of what is already there; it reattunes us to the ambient magnitude of the natural world. (Many perfumers have sought to bottle *petrichor*: one scent, inspired by a foggy hike in Northern Ireland, contains “ozonic and radiant materials.”) Our sense of smell has many functions: it’s a warning system, a taste enhancer, a pheromone alarm. But it is also an instrument for wonder, for noticing that which we often take for granted, and for which we rarely have a name.

In 2014, a Rockefeller University study claimed that the human nose, long thought to be inferior to dog or bear snouts, could isolate more than a trillion smells. The study, part of a burgeoning academic field called *scent studies*, did not stand up to review—it turned out there was a flaw in the mathematics—but it kicked off more research to determine the actual might of the human organ. In 2017, a neuroscientist at Rutgers University named John McGann published a provocative paper that, by comparing the olfactory bulbs of different animals, also seemed to suggest that

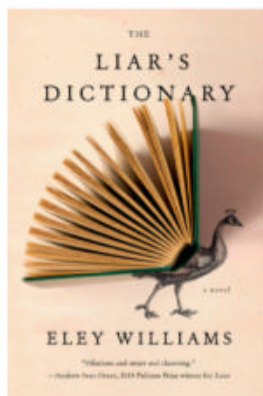
we're better smellers than we've gotten credit for. "We put the human bulb next to the mouse bulb and gasped," he wrote. "It was gigantic."

Scent studies were good for business, too. In recent years, the number of scented products for the home has exploded: where there was once just "lemon fresh" or "ocean breeze" dish soap, now there are hundreds of varieties, including "honeycrisp apple," "sea salt neroli," and "palmarosa wild mint." One study predicted that the scented-candle business will net \$4.22 billion by the end of 2024. You can now find candles that mimic the smells of Catholic Mass, a warm French baguette, a tomato vine in the hot sun, and a rotting bouquet inside a funeral home.

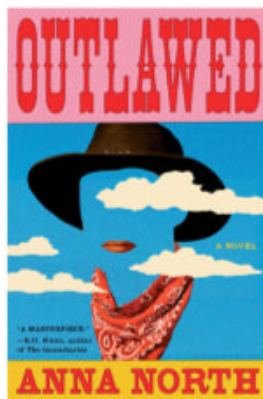
In "Smells: A Cultural History of Odours in Early Modern Times" (Polity), the French professor and historian Robert Muchembled is eager to note a cynical connection between the recent boom in the science of fragrance and the expanding scented marketplace. "The recent surge of interest in the human sense of smell is part of a vast cultural phenomenon whose underlying causes are deep-rooted, yet readily identifiable," he writes. "You just have to follow the money." Muchembled grumbles that the emphasis on novelty has overtaken a crucial aspect of understanding our nostrils—of how they adjust not only to molecules but also to changing societal mores.

Muchembled evokes the sensory world of Europe from the Renaissance to the early nineteenth century, a place and time that were extremely stinky. The streets of Grenoble, France, he writes, were stagnant cesspools of human and animal excrement, where "the hoi polloi were expected to let their betters walk on the higher side away from the gutter" to avoid being splashed with the repulsive muck. Human noses were always sensitive, but also highly adaptable. People in the Middle Ages did not think that roads lined with chicken droppings smelled pleasant; they simply got used to the stench. This phenomenon persists, as my colleague Charles Duhigg found while digging into the marketing of Febreze spray in his book "The Power of Habit." The smell-masking product was initially marketed to smokers and people with

## BRIEFLY NOTED



**The Liar's Dictionary**, by Eley Williams (Doubleday). A playful paean to lexicology, this novel tells the story of two Londoners, Peter and Mallory, employed more than a hundred years apart by the publisher of a fictional rival to the Oxford English Dictionary. They are bound together by a number of false entries in the dictionary, put there by Peter, in 1899, and now being winnowed out by Mallory. As she works, we learn of their respective struggles: Peter, an awkward loner who speaks with a fake lisp, is in love with a co-worker's fiancée; and Mallory, to her girlfriend's dismay, is afraid to come out as a lesbian. Although the book abounds in dramatic incident, its main focus, like the characters', is not actions but words, and "the transformative power of proper attention paid to small things."



**Outlawed**, by Anna North (Bloomsbury). This virtuosic modernization of the Western is set in the Dakotas in a slightly altered version of the eighteen-nineties, a time when barren women are believed to cast spells causing miscarriages and birth defects: "Too many lost babies at once, and people would start looking for the witch." When Ada, the narrator, fails to conceive, she is forced to go into hiding. She enters a convent, where every Sister has a similar story, and then joins a gang of female and nonbinary outlaws, led by a charismatic figure called the Kid. They teach her to ride, to shoot, and to walk like a man. Awed by her companions, "strong, high-spirited, masters of their various crafts," Ada reflects, "Perhaps I would not be green forever."



**Aftershocks**, by Nadia Owusu (Simon & Schuster). Earthquakes are a metaphor for psychological struggles, family ruptures, and centuries of diasporic and colonial history in this ambitious memoir. The author, a Tanzanian-born American citizen, grew up with her father, a Ghanaian official for the United Nations, in Europe and Africa, witnessing poverty and violence. Her feelings of rootlessness were compounded by her mother's early abandonment and her father's untimely death. Against a backdrop of global events—wars, occupations, genocides—Owusu charts the rifts and convergences that have shaped her life. The book's roving structure, encompassing meditations on race, belonging, and fluid identity, reflects Owusu's fragmented efforts to understand herself.



**Café Europa Revisited**, by Slavenka Drakulić (Penguin). Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall seemed to promise a more open and affluent Europe, the chasm between East and West persists. In these essays, Drakulić crisscrosses the continent, vividly rendering its changing politics. Lives in the East are still shadowed by the Communist past: Slovaks discover that they are being sold fish sticks that contain less fish than ones of the same brand in Austria; Croats spend years navigating a moribund property-registry system. Amid a surge of nativist politics and anti-immigrant sentiment, Drakulić's composite portrait provides a clear-eyed look at European values, and what they really amount to.

pets, but nobody bought the stuff; people with “smelly” houses no longer noticed the smell. It was only by appealing to obsessive cleaners—people who didn’t actually need Febreze—that a wild best-seller was launched.

Febreze is hardly the first fashion to be born of our attempts to control the scentosphere. In smellier eras, certain professions took a large load of the olfactory burden: leather tanners, fishmongers, and fabric cutters (urine mixed with vinegar was a common color fixative for textiles). Creating a barrier between these trades and the general public led to fragrant innovations. Perfume became popular as a method of masking the curdled, meaty scent that emanated from leather goods. “Scented gloves,” Muchembled writes, “were the absolute height of high-society fashion in the reign of Louis XIII.”

And it wasn’t just the floral and the powdery that were in vogue. After a perfumer submerged a hide for gloves in a bath of orange-flower water, he would rub it with a mixture of ambergris, musk (glandular secretions from a deer), and civet (the perineal discharge of a bushy, mongoose-like mammal). French women, it seems, wanted their hands to smell at once like nature’s serenity and its monstrosity. The British, ascetics to their core, apparently found this practice distasteful; one Elizabethan playwright wrote, of kissing a lady’s glove, that “civet makes me sick.”

Smell can never truly be understood through science, Muchembled argues, because it is always vulnerable to the whims of popular taste. In sixteenth-century France, amid religious moralizing and the pervasive fear of witchcraft, the scent of a woman’s undercarriage, once considered an ambrosial ideal, became synonymous with the occult. The stigma was worse for aging women, who became seen as olfactory ogres; Muchembled quotes the poet Joachim du Bellay’s disgust at an “old woman older than the world/older yet than squalid filth.”

Our own experience confirms that smells are subject not just to major cultural changes but also to minor shifts in context: the same smell that greets you at the door of a cheesemonger has a very different effect when confronted at the door of a porta-potty. Where McGee seeks a common vocabulary for

exploring the osmocasm, Muchembled reminds us that the variables of time and place may defy a truly shared language. What we smell depends on what’s in vogue and what’s valued—on what cultural forces happen to be swirling in the air.

In Muchembled’s telling, a radical turning point in our olfactive history arrived with the plague. When the disease swept across Europe, in the fourteenth century, the nose was regarded mainly as a kind of built-in weather-vane for dangers; it rooted out rot, fire, and disease. The going assumption during the plague years—endorsed by authorities such as the French doctor Antoine Mizauld—was that the illness spread through putrid aromas, and that the best protection from the epidemic was to cloak yourself in prophylactic perfume. Mizauld’s preventive suggestions included carrying a pomander (a lemon, an orange, or a lime studded with cloves) or a handkerchief full of laurel leaves, soaked in cinnamon and rose water. He also recommended dabbing the eyes and nose with a spike of lavender oil and purifying the air inside the home by burning sweet-smelling substances such as benzoin, nutmeg, and myrrh on a bed of hot coals, often inside a small, bird-shaped container.

After the plague eventually passed, Muchembled theorizes, a new kind of mass euphoria set in when people were able to smell for pleasure again. After all the suffering and annihilation, the nostrils were allowed a sumptuous victory lap. This is the thinking that led Diderot, in the mid-eighteenth century, to write that the nose was the most “voluptuous” of the organs, turning our sensual antennae toward hedonism and delight.

These ideas hit differently today, as we face a virus that often spreads by way of our noses. In the first few weeks of lockdown, one of the eeriest developments was the discovery that many COVID-19 patients lost their sense of smell and taste. I found myself constantly huffing coffee beans and garlic cloves, just to insure that my schnoz was still functional. Now, after eleven months indoors, I am not even sure I know what my apartment really smells like. Like the dwellers of medieval

Grenoble or Febreze’s mistaken targets, I’ve no doubt grown numb to my balmy bubble.

While we’ve lived in lockdown for the past year, daily encounters with surprising smells have dramatically diminished. The mask that I wear on walks filters out most of the odors of city life. I cannot remember the last time I was lured in, like a hapless Gretel, by the caramel allure of a Nuts 4 Nuts cart, or forced out of an elevator by a cloud of noxious gardenia, wishing a stranger had practiced more restraint. It takes effort to seek out novel aromas these days, and I’ve become increasingly madcap in my pursuits, ordering pickled beets, incense papers, and double-ginger tea just to shock my nose out of its stupor.

The stupor can be systemic. Some people with COVID-19 seem to have been afflicted with lasting anosmia—the loss of smell—and the effects go beyond missing the zest of a just-peeled orange or the salt of a sea breeze; they may report feeling depressed or adrift. Dr. Sandeep Robert Datta, a neurobiologist, recently told the *Times* that, while many think of scent as “an aesthetic bonus sense,” it is a vital link between people and their environment. Losing that link can be traumatic. “People’s sense of well-being declines,” Datta said. “It can be really jarring and disconcerting.” Perhaps anosmia feels so traumatic because smell is so personal, wrapped up with one’s own idiosyncratic narrative and memory. Spongy vanilla cake dunked in tea may have rocketed Marcel Proust backward into his pampered youth, but the whiff of madeleines will mean something entirely different—if it means anything—to you.

I’ve continued reading *Fragrantica* late into the night in my own little cloister, hoping that we will one day soon return to inhabiting a common scent-scape. But I also have a new appreciation for the elusive quest to track down smells: while there is an undeniable appeal to pursuing a “proper language” for discussing the osmocasm, there is also something to be gained by accepting that much of the pleasure of nasal perception is untranslatable. When we are at last able to swoon together again, unmasked and unmoored, over lilacs or hot brioche, what we will really be sharing is secret reverie. ♦

## STRUGGLE SESSIONS

*What are the Cultural Revolution's lessons for our current moment?*

BY PANKAJ MISHRA



On September 24, 1970, the Rolling Stones interrupted their concert at the Palais des Sports in Paris to invite a French Maoist called Serge July onstage. News of an earthshaking event called the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution had been trickling out of China since 1966. Information was scarce, but many writers and activists in the West who were opposed to the United States and its war in Vietnam were becoming fascinated with Mao Zedong, their earlier infatuation with Soviet-style Marxism having soured. Jean-Paul Sartre hawked copies of a banned Maoist newspaper in Paris, and Michel Foucault was among those who

turned to China for political inspiration, in what Sartre called “new forms of class struggle in a period of organized capitalism.”

Editors at the influential French periodical *Tel Quel* learned Chinese in order to translate Mao’s poetry. One of them was the feminist critic Julia Kristeva, who later travelled to China with Roland Barthes. Women’s-liberation movements in the West embraced Mao’s slogan “Women hold up half the sky.” In 1967, the Black Panther leaders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale financed the purchase of guns by selling copies of Mao’s Little Red Book. In 1971, John Lennon said that he now

wore a Mao badge and distanced himself from the 1968 Beatles song “Revolution,” which claimed, “If you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao / You ain’t going to make it with anyone anyhow.” But the Rolling Stones’ Paris concert was Maoism’s biggest popular outing. July, who, with Sartre, later co-founded the newspaper *Libération*, asked the throng to support French fellow-Maoists facing imprisonment for their beliefs. There was a standing ovation, and then Mick Jagger launched into “Sympathy for the Devil.”

Western intellectuals and artists would have felt much less sympathy for the Devil had they heard about the ordeals of their counterparts in China, as described in “The World Turned Upside Down” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), a thick catalogue of gruesome atrocities, blunders, bedlam, and ideological dissimulation, by the Chinese journalist Yang Jisheng. Yang mentions a group of elderly writers in Beijing who, in August, 1966, three months after Mao formally launched the Cultural Revolution, were denounced as “ox demons and snake spirits” (Mao’s preferred term for class enemies) and flogged with belt buckles and bamboo sticks by teen-age girls. Among the writers subjected to this early “struggle session” was the novelist Lao She, the world-famous author of “Rickshaw Boy.” He killed himself the following day.

There were other events that month—“bloody August,” as it came to be called—that might have made Foucault reconsider his view of Maoism as anti-authoritarian praxis. At a prestigious secondary school in Beijing, attended by the daughters of both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, students savagely beat a teacher named Bian Zhongyun and left her dying in a handcart. As detailed in a large-character poster that was adopted by cultural revolutionaries across China, one of the indictments against Bian was her inadequate esteem for Mao. While taking her students through an earthquake drill, she had failed to stress the importance of rescuing the Chairman’s portrait.

Red Guards—a pseudo-military designation adopted by secondary-school and university students who

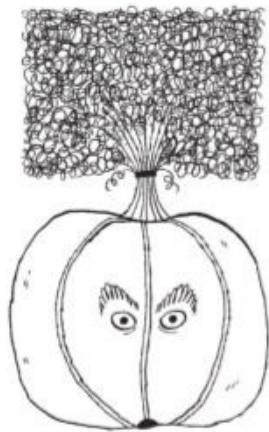
*In 1968, the son of a purged official is publicly punished for defending his father.*

saw themselves as the Chairman's sentinels—soon appeared all over China, charging people with manifestly ridiculous crimes and physically assaulting them before jeering crowds. Much murderous insanity erupted after 1966, but the Cultural Revolution's most iconic images remain those of the struggle sessions: victims with bowed heads in dunce caps, the outlandish accusations against them scrawled on heavy signboards hanging from their necks. Such pictures, and others, in "Forbidden Memory" (Potomac), by the Tibetan activist and poet Tsering Woeser, show that even Tibet, the far-flung region that China had occupied since 1950, did not escape the turmoil. Woeser describes the devastation wrought on Tibet's Buddhist traditions by a campaign to humiliate the elderly and to obliterate what were known as the Four Olds—"old thinking, old culture, old customs, and old habits of the exploiting classes." The photographs in Woeser's book were taken by her father, a soldier in the Chinese military, and found by her after he died. There are vandalized monasteries and bonfires of books and manuscripts—a rare pictorial record of a tragedy in which ideological delirium turned ordinary people into monsters who devoured their own. (Notably, almost all the persecutors in the photographs are Tibetan, not Han Chinese.) In one revealing photo, Tibet's most famous female lama, once hailed as a true patriot for spurning the Dalai Lama, cowers before a young Tibetan woman who has her fists raised.

Closer to the center of things, in Xi'an, the Red Guards paraded Xi Zhongxun, a stalwart of the Chinese Communist Revolution who had fallen out with Mao, around on a truck and then beat him. His wife, in Beijing, was forced to publicly denounce their son—Xi Jinping, China's current President. Xi Jinping's half sister was, according to official accounts, "persecuted to death"; most probably, like many people tortured by the Red Guards, she committed suicide. Xi spent years living in a cave dwelling, one of sixteen

million youths exiled to the countryside by Mao.

According to estimates quoted by Yang, as many as a million and a half people were killed, thirty-six million persecuted, and a hundred million altogether affected in a countrywide upheaval that lasted, with varying intensity, for a decade—from 1966 to 1976, when Mao died. Mao's decrees, faithfully amplified by the *People's Daily*, which exhorted readers to "sweep away the monsters and demons," gave people license to unleash their id. In Guangxi Province, where the number of confirmed murder victims reached nearly ninety thousand, some killers consumed the flesh of their victims. In Hunan



Province, members of two rival factions filled a river with bloated corpses. A dam downstream became clogged, its reservoir shimmering red.

In 1981, the Chinese Communist Party described the Cultural Revolution as an error. It trod carefully around Mao's role, instead blaming the excesses on his wife, Jiang Qing, and three other ultra-Maoists—collectively known, and feared, as the Gang of Four. Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese leader supervising this pseudo-autopsy, had been maltreated during the Cultural Revolution, but he had also abetted it, and was eager to indefinitely postpone close scrutiny. He urged the Chinese to "unite and look forward" (*tuanjie yizhi xiang qian kan*). As class struggle gave way to a scramble for upward mobility, the sheer expediency of this repudiation of the past was captured in a popular pun on Deng's slogan: "look for money" (*xiang qian kan*).

In the four decades since, China has moved from being the headquarters of world revolution to being the epicenter of global capitalism. Its leaders can plausibly claim to have engineered the swiftest economic reversal in history: the redemption from extreme poverty of hundreds of millions of people in less than three decades, and the construction of modern infrastructure. Some great enigmas, however, remain unsolved: How did a well-organized,

disciplined, and successful political party disembowel itself? How did a tightly centralized state unravel so quickly? How could siblings, neighbors, colleagues, and classmates turn on one another so viciously? And how did victims and persecutors—the roles changing with bewildering speed—live with each other afterward? Full explanations are missing not only because archives are mostly inaccessible to scholars but also because the Cultural Revolution was fundamentally a civil war, implicating almost all of China's leaders. Discussion of it is so fraught with taboo in China that Yang does not even mention Xi Jinping, surely the most prominent and consequential survivor today of Mao's "chaos under heaven."

Notwithstanding this strategic omission, Yang's book offers the most comprehensive journalistic account yet of contemporary China's foundational trauma. Memoirs of the Cultural Revolution, first appearing in the nineteen-eighties, belong by now to a distinct nonfiction genre—from confessions by repentant former Red Guards (Jung Chang's "Wild Swans," Ma Bo's "Blood Red Sunset") to searing accounts by victims (Ji Xianlin's "The Cowshed") to family sagas (Aiping Mu's "The Vermilion Gate"). The period's outrages animate the work of many of China's prominent novelists, such as Wang Anyi, Mo Yan, Su Tong, and, most conspicuously, Yu Hua, whose two-volume novel "Brothers" includes an extended description of a lynching, with details that seem implausible but that are amply verified by eyewitness testimony.

Yang provides the larger political backdrop to these granular accounts of cruelty and suffering. At the outset of the Cultural Revolution, he was studying engineering at Beijing's prestigious Tsinghua University, and he was one of the many students who travelled around the country to promote the cause. In 1968, he became a reporter for Xinhua News Agency, a position that gave him access to many otherwise unreachable sources. This vantage enabled him to write "Tombstone" (2012), a well-regarded history of the Great Famine, caused by Mao's Great Leap Forward. The new book

is almost a sequel, and Mao remains the central figure: China's unchallenged leader, as determined as ever to fast-forward the country into genuine Communism. With the Great Leap Forward, Mao had hoped to industrialize China by encouraging household steel production. With the Cultural Revolution, he seemed to sideline economic development in favor of a large-scale engineering of human souls and minds. Social equality, in this view, would come about by plunging the Chinese into "continuous revolution," a fierce class struggle that would permanently inflame the political consciousness of the masses.

Yang describes the background to Mao's change of direction. The spectacle of Khrushchev denouncing Stalin, in 1956, only to be himself removed and disgraced, in 1964, made Mao increasingly prone to see "revisionists" at every turn. He feared that the Chinese Revolution, achieved at tremendous cost, risked decaying into a self-aggrandizing, Soviet-style bureaucracy, remote from ordinary people. Mao was also smarting from the obvious failure of his economic policies, and from implicit criticism by colleagues such as Liu Shaoqi, China's de-jure head of state from 1959 onward. Yang describes, in often overwhelming detail, the intricate internal power struggle that eventually erupted into the Cultural Revolution—with Mao variously consulting and shunning a small group of confidants, including his wife, a former actress; China's long-standing Premier, Zhou Enlai; and the military hero Lin Biao, who had replaced Peng Dehuai, a strong critic of Mao, as the Minister of Defense in 1959, and proceeded to turn the People's Liberation Army into a pro-Mao redoubt.

Sensing political opposition in his own party, Mao reached beyond it, to people previously not active in politics, for allies. He tapped into widespread grievance among peasants and workers who felt that the Chinese Revolution was not working out for them. In particular, the Red Guards gave Mao a way of bypassing the Party and securing the personal fealty of the fervent rank and file. As the newly empowered students formed ad-hoc organizations, and assaulted institu-

tions and figures of authority, Mao proclaimed that "to rebel is justified," and that students should not hesitate to "bombard the headquarters." In 1966, he frequently appeared in Tiananmen Square, wearing a red armband, with hundreds of thousands of Red Guards waving flags and books. Many of his fans avoided washing their hands after shaking his. Mao's own hands were once so damaged by all the pressing of callow flesh that he was unable to write for days afterward. Predictably, though, he soon lost control of the world he had turned upside down.

Late in 1966, the younger Red Guards were challenged by an older cohort, who formed competing Red Guard units; they, in turn, were challenged by heavily armed "rebel forces." All factions claimed recognition as the true voice of the Chairman. By early 1967, workers had joined the fray, most significantly in Shanghai, where they surpassed Red Guards in revolutionary fervor. Mao became nervous about the "people's commune" they established, though he and his followers had

often upheld the Paris Commune, from 1871, as a model of mass democracy. So ferocious was one military mutiny, in Wuhan, that Mao, who had arrived in the city to mediate between rival groups, had to flee in a military jet, amid rumors that a swimmer with a knife in his mouth had been spotted in the lake by Mao's villa. "Which direction are we going?" the pilot asked Mao as he boarded the plane. "Just take off first," Mao replied.

Growing alarmed by the sight of continuous revolution, Mao tried to restore order in the cities, exiling millions of young urban men and women to the countryside to "learn from the peasants." He purged Liu Shaoqi, who died shortly thereafter, and Deng Xiaoping was sent to work in a tractor-repair factory in a remote rural province. Mao increasingly turned to the People's Liberation Army to establish control. He replaced broken structures of government with "revolutionary committees." These committees, dominated by Army commanders, were effectively a form of military dictatorship in many parts of China. Partly in order



*"And they stumbled through the door at half past two in the morning after unplanned drinks with Lexi and Dave, nary a thought given to Sammy's dinner bowl, which had sat empty for hours."*

to keep the military on his side, Mao named his Defense Minister, Lin Biao, as his official successor, in October, 1968. But a border conflict with the Soviet Union the following year further expanded the military's power, and a paranoid Mao, soon regretting his move, sought to isolate Lin. In an extraordinary turn of events, in 1971, Lin died in a plane crash in Mongolia with several of his family members; allegedly, he was fleeing China after failing to assassinate Mao.

Prompted, even forced, by internal crises and external challenges, Mao opened China's doors to the United States and, in early 1972, received Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger in Beijing, much to the bewilderment of those in the West who had seen China as leading a global resistance to American imperialism. (When Kissinger flattered Mao, saying that students at Harvard University had pored over his collected works, he demurely replied, "There is nothing instructive in what I wrote.") The following year, Mao brought back Deng Xiaoping, entrusting him with China's ailing economy. Then he changed his mind again, once it became apparent that the lingering malevolence of the Gang

of Four was causing people to rally behind Deng. Mao had just re-purged Deng and launched a new campaign against Deng's "capitalist roading" when, in September, 1976, he died. Within a month, the Gang of Four was in prison. (Jiang Qing, given a life sentence, spent her time in jail making dolls for export, until authorities noticed that she embroidered her name on all of them; she killed herself in 1991.) The Cultural Revolution was over, and Deng was soon ushering China into an era of willed amnesia and "looking for money."

The surreal events of the Cultural Revolution seem far removed from a country that today has, by some estimates, the world's largest concentration of billionaires. Yet Xi Jinping's policies, which prioritize stability and economic growth above all, serve as a reminder of how fundamentally the Cultural Revolution reordered Chinese politics and society. Yang, although obliged to omit Xi's personal trajectory—from son of Mao's comrade to China's supreme leader—nonetheless leaves his readers in no doubt about the "ultimate victor" of the Cultural Revolution: what he calls the

"bureaucratic clique," and the children of the privileged. Senior Party cadres and officials, once restored to their positions, were able to usher their offspring into the best universities. In the system Deng built after the Cultural Revolution, a much bigger bureaucracy was conceived to "manage society." Deeply networked within China's wealthy classes, the bureaucratic clique came to control "all the country's resources and the direction of reform," deciding "who would pay the costs of reforms and how the benefits of reform would be distributed." Andrew Walder, who has published several authoritative books on Maoist China, puts it bluntly: "China today is the very definition of what the Cultural Revolution was intended to forestall"—namely, a "capitalist oligarchy with unprecedented levels of corruption and inequality."

Yang stresses the need for a political system in China that both restricts arbitrary power and cages the "rapaciousness" of capital. But the Cultural Revolution has instilled in many Chinese people a politically paralyzing lesson—that attempts to achieve social equality can go calamitously wrong. The Chinese critic Wang Hui has pointed out that criticisms of China's many problems are often met with a potent accusation: "So, do you want to return to the days of the Cultural Revolution?" As Xi Jinping turns the world's largest revolutionary party into the world's most successful conservative institution, he is undoubtedly helped by this deeply ingrained fear of anarchy.

Outside China, the legacy of the Cultural Revolution is even more complex. Julia Lovell, in her recent study, "Maoism: A Global History," demonstrates how ill-informed Western fervor for Mao eventually helped discredit and divide the left in Europe and in America, enabling the political right to claim a moral high ground. Many zealous adepts of Maoism in the West turned to highlighting the evils of ideological and religious extremism. Sympathy for nonwhite victims of imperialism and slavery, and struggling postcolonial peoples in general, came to be stigmatized as a sign of excessive sentimentality and guilt.



*"Stop trying to make walnut night happen, Dad."*

This journey from Third Worldism to Western supremacism can be traced in the titles of three books from the past four decades by Pascal Bruckner, one of the French dabblers in Maoism—"The Tears of the White Man: Compassion as Contempt" (1983), "The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism" (2006), and "An Imaginary Racism: Islamophobia and Guilt" (2017).

Misperceptions of China abound in this sectarian discourse. As the Soviet Union imploded after a failed experiment with political and economic reform, China, the last surviving Communist superpower, was presumed to have no option but to embrace Western-style multiparty democracy as well as capitalism. But China has managed to postpone the end of history—largely thanks to the Cultural Revolution. In the Soviet Union, when Mikhail Gorbachev introduced his hopeful plans for perestroika and glasnost, the Communist Party and the military had faced little domestic challenge to their authority since the death of Stalin; along with bureaucratic cliques that had serenely fattened themselves during decades of economic and political stagnation, they were able to contest, and finally thwart, Gorbachev's vision. In China, by contrast, such institutions had been greatly damaged by the Cultural Revolution, with the result that Deng, setting out to rebuild them in his image, faced much less opposition. Class struggle during the Cultural Revolution had left the old power holders as well as the revolutionary masses utterly exhausted, desperate for stability and peace. Deng shored up his authority and appeal by reinstating purged and disgraced officials and by rehabilitating many victims of the Red Guards, including, posthumously, the novelist Lao She.

During the worst years of the Cultural Revolution, Mao had rejected all emendations to his economic playbook. Even when China seemed on the verge of economic collapse, he railed against "capitalist roading." Deng not only accelerated the marketization of the Chinese economy but also strengthened the party that Mao had done so much to undermine, promoting faceless officials known for their administrative

and technical competence to senior positions. China's unique "model"—a market economy supervised by a technocratic party-state—could only have been erected on ground brutally levelled by Mao's Cultural Revolution.

"History," E. M. Cioran once wrote, "is irony *on the move*." Bearing out this maxim, cultural revolutions have now erupted right in the heart of Western democracies. Chaos-loving leaders have grasped power by promising to return sovereignty to the people and by denouncing political-party apparatuses. Mao, who was convinced that "anyone who wants to overturn a regime needs to first create public opinion," wouldn't have failed to recognize that the phenomenon commonly termed "populism" has exposed some old and insoluble conundrums: Who or what does a political party represent? How can political representation work in a society consisting of manifold socioeconomic groups with clashing interests?

The appeal of Maoism for many Western activists in the nineteen-sixties and seventies came from its promise of spontaneous direct democracy—political engagement outside the conventional framework of elections and parties. This seemed a way out of a crisis caused by calcified party bureaucracies, self-serving élites, and their seemingly uncontrollable disasters, such as the endless war in Vietnam. That breakdown of political representation, which provoked uprisings on the left, has now occurred on an enlarged scale in the West, and it is aggravated by attempts, this time by an insurgent ultra-right, to forge popular sovereignty, overthrow the old ruling class, and smash its most sacred norms. The great question of China's Maoist experiment looms over the United States as Donald Trump vacates the White House: Why did a rich and powerful society suddenly start destroying itself?

The Trumpian assault on the West's "olds" has long been in the making, and it is, at least partly, a consequence of

political decay and intellectual ossification—akin to what Mao diagnosed in his own party. Beginning in the nineteen-eighties, a consensus about the virtues of deregulation, financialization, privatization, and international trade bound Democrats to Republicans (and Tories to New Labour in Britain). Political parties steadily lost their old and distinctive identities as representatives of particular classes and groups; they were no longer political antagonists working to leverage their basic principles—social welfare for the liberal left, stability and continuity for the conservative right—into policies. Instead, they became bureaucratic machines, working primarily to advance the interests of a few politicians and their sponsors.

In 2010, Tony Judt warned, not long before his death, that the traditional

way of doing politics in the West—through "mass movements, communities organized around an ideology, even religious or political ideas, trade unions and political parties"—had become dangerously extinct. There were, Judt wrote, "no external inputs, no new kinds of people, only the political class breeding itself." Trump emerged six years later, channelling an iconoclastic fury at this inbred ruling class and its cherished monuments.

Trump failed to purge all the old élites, largely because he was forced to depend on them, and the Proud Boys never came close to matching the ferocity and reach of the Red Guards. Nevertheless, Trump's most devoted followers, whether assaulting his opponents or bombarding the headquarters in Washington, D.C., took their society to the brink of civil war while their chairman openly delighted in chaos under heaven. Order appears to have been temporarily restored (in part by Big Tech, one of Trump's enablers). But the problem of political representation in a polarized, unequal, and now economically debilitated society remains treacherously unresolved. Four traumatic years of Trump are passing into history, but the United States seems to have completed only the first phase of its own cultural revolution. ♦



## DOCTOR DOCTOR

*A new biography of the trailblazing Blackwell sisters.*

BY CASEY CEP



A metrotome sounds like a more pleasant device than it is. A switchblade of sorts, it was once used to treat fertility issues. A doctor would push the metrotome into a woman's uterus, press the handle, and release the blade; when he pulled it out, it cut through one side of her cervix. After that, the doctor reinserted the tool and repeated the procedure on the other side. Eventually a version of the metrotome was made with a double blade that could cut both sides of the cervix at once—a supposed improvement on the original design.

Elizabeth Blackwell did not approve of metrotomes, or much of anything else that male doctors recommended for fe-

male patients in the nineteenth century. When one of her relatives faced the prospect of being treated with one, she argued for less invasive interventions and cautioned that the scarring resulting from the procedure might make pregnancy even less likely. Blackwell, who was born in England in 1821, and immigrated to the United States with her family as a child, was America's first female doctor. Her younger sister Emily was the third. Although neither sibling was especially interested in women's health, the lack of opportunities available to them in the field of medicine meant that they mostly treated female patients and were often limited to ob-

stetric and gynecological care. In order to expand their practice, they opened the New York Infirmary for Indigent Women and Children, the first hospital staffed entirely by women, which went on to treat more than a million patients in its first hundred years.

The Blackwells were medical pioneers, but, except for a few professional awards named in their honor and a plaque commemorating the location of their infirmary, they have largely been forgotten. A new biography by the writer Janice P. Nimura, *"The Doctors Blackwell: How Two Pioneering Sisters Brought Medicine to Women and Women to Medicine"* (Norton), attempts to redress that situation by considering their lives in the broader history of medicine and social reform. It is an admirable project, even though, as the story of the Blackwells makes clear, context is not always flattering.

Elizabeth Blackwell was admitted to Geneva Medical College as a joke. She was twenty-six years old and had already apprenticed herself to two physicians, but she was rejected by more than a dozen schools. The only acceptance letter came from the students of Geneva Medical College, an Episcopal school in upstate New York. Dated October 20, 1847, it contained the following resolutions: "That one of the radical principles of a Republican Government is the universal education of both sexes; that to every branch of scientific education the door should be open equally to all; that the application of Elizabeth Blackwell to become a member of our class, meets our entire approbation; and in extending our unanimous invitation, we pledge ourselves that no conduct of ours shall cause her to regret her attendance at this institution."

Although this promising letter purported to reflect the deliberations "of the entire Medical Class of Geneva Medical College," it failed to explain why Blackwell's admission had been relegated to the student body. The answer was that the faculty had opposed it but did not wish to offend one of her recommenders, and so punted the issue to the students. Nor did the letter explain how those students had come to unanimously support her application: aware of the faculty's opposition, delighted by

*Their degrees made them pioneers, but the sisters pointedly rejected feminism.*

the prospect of pranking them, and knowing that their decision had to be unanimous, they menaced the only dissenter until he relented. In the end, the motives of Blackwell's fellow-students did not matter; she set off right away, starting the fall term a few weeks behind the men in her class.

It was a return of sorts for Blackwell, since her family had initially settled in Manhattan. Her father, Samuel, worked in the sugar trade, running highly combustible refineries that processed raw sugar from the Caribbean, first in Bristol, England, until that facility was destroyed by fire, and then on New York's Duane Street, until that one burned down, too. The British had already outlawed the slave trade, but plenty of industries still depended on the labor of the enslaved elsewhere; though Samuel was an advocate of abolition, and his children gave up sugar in their tea to protest slavery, he never gave up his career.

The elder Blackwells were English Dissenters, and their religious ideals manifested not only in their abolitionism but also in domestic thrift, moral zealotry, and a commitment to their children's education—for their five girls as well as for their four boys. The family got to know William Lloyd Garrison in New York, and when they later moved to the Midwest they worshipped in Lyman Beecher's church and befriended his children, Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. When transcendentalism arrived in Ohio, some of the Blackwells began attending William Henry Channing's church, the Unitarian Society.

All nine of the Blackwell children inherited the reformist energies, moral seriousness, and social daring of their parents. Some of the girls attended the feminist lectures of Lucretia Mott and the Grimké sisters, one went on to translate the novels of George Sand and the philosophical works of Charles Fourier, and one was welcomed into the parlors of Lord Byron's widow and George Eliot. Although none of the Blackwell daughters ever wed, one of the sons married Antoinette Brown, the first female ordained minister in the United States, and another married the suffragist Lucy Stone, one of the first American women to earn a college degree

and the first one on record to keep her maiden name. These relationships and much else are thoroughly chronicled in the more than two hundred thousand pages of letters, diaries, speeches, and other family writings that survive. Yet those copious documents contain a maddening elision: nothing in them adequately explains why two of the sisters went into medicine.

Neither of the Blackwells showed any early interest in the subject. "I hated everything connected with the body, and could not bear the sight of a medical book," Elizabeth writes in an autobiography that she published in 1895. "I had been always foolishly ashamed of any form of illness." She did, however, watch steadfastly as her father died of complications from what was likely malaria a few years after immigrating, tracking his pulse and breathing as both weakened and noting those measurements in her journal, along with the amount of brandy, broth, and laudanum he was spoon-fed in his final days. Many accounts have suggested that this was formative for her career, but Elizabeth did not cite her father's death as contributing to her decision to become a doctor. Instead, she describes how a female friend encouraged her to consider medicine: "If I could have been treated by a lady doctor," Blackwell remembers her saying, "my worst sufferings would have been spared me."

That remark does not go very far in explaining the persistence with which Elizabeth pursued her medical education and encouraged one of her sisters to do the same, or the perseverance both showed in trying to put their degrees to use. When Elizabeth started medical school, in 1847, the American Medical Association had only just been founded, in part to standardize education, and an M.D. could be earned in two years. While she was at Geneva, townspeople came to gape at her during classes, fellow-students disparaged her, and medical journals covered her enrollment as if it were some new disease that needed to be observed and possibly cured. Even the British humor magazine *Punch* took notice, initially, if facetiously, applauding the first female doctor for "qualifying herself for that very important duty of a good wife—

tending a husband in sickness," later belittling her with a mocking poem called "An M.D. in a Gown," and eventually publishing a caricature of her sister treating a dog.

Emily started medical school just four years after Elizabeth completed her degree. She was rejected by Geneva, which had decided not to admit any more female students; instead, she began her studies at Rush Medical College, in Chicago. But she was forced to leave after her first year, when the trustees decided that their new ban on admitting female students required that they expel the one they had already enrolled. She finished her degree at Cleveland Medical College, graduating on February 22, 1854, in a ceremony also attended by that school's only other female graduate. Both of the Blackwells struggled to find places where they could practice medicine. Elizabeth worked one summer at Philadelphia's Blockley Almshouse, where she cared for the indigent and the mentally ill. After that she went to Europe, working first in obstetrics at La Maternité, in Paris, then studying surgery at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, in London. Emily managed to find a slot attending lectures and observing operations at Bellevue Hospital, in New York, but, ultimately, she, too, had to go abroad, moving to Scotland, where she trained with the queen's physician, James Simpson, a professor at the University of Edinburgh whose thriving obstetrics practice included some of the earliest experiments with chloroform and ether.

Among the many women who sought treatment from Simpson during Emily Blackwell's time in Edinburgh was a cousin's wife, Marie Blackwell, who had been unable to have children. Simpson, a champion of the metrotome, recommended surgery for Marie right away. Emily spent the rest of the year tending to her cousin, whose procedure was technically a success, since her cervix was widened, at least temporarily, and she did not hemorrhage, but whose convalescence included bouts of inflammation, peritonitis, and ovaritis, along with painful mouth sores from the mercury in the drugs she had been prescribed. "The whole case from beginning to end strikes me as a horrid barbarism," Elizabeth wrote from New York when she heard

about all the complications. Be that as it may, Emily insisted that her close supervision of Marie's care had "made a Dr of me."

Marie Blackwell's experience was like that of many patients before the arrival of antibiotics and antiseptics, and "The Doctors Blackwell" is best on the fascinating and harrowing history of modern medicine. As Nimura explains, the sisters entered the field at a time when it had hardly advanced beyond the four bodily humors. "Thermometers were not yet in use to diagnose fever, and aside from poking, listening, peering, and taking a patient's pulse, there was no accurate way to divine what might be happening inside the body, and even less certainty about why," Nimura writes. "Treatment was a matter of better-out-than-in: trying to expel the problem with a toxic arsenal of emetics, laxatives, diuretics, and expectorants, not to mention lancets, leeches, and blisters."

Neither sister was satisfied with the way medicine was being practiced or taught. "Medicine is always an evil," Elizabeth once wrote, "though sometimes a necessary evil." She experienced both realities firsthand after losing her eyesight to gonorrheal conjunctivitis, which she contracted while she was treating a newborn. Her own subsequent treatment included three weeks of cauterizing her eyelids, leeching her

temples, painting her forehead with mercury, and applying belladonna and opium ointments. She regained vision in her right eye, but not her left. When the pain and swelling did not subside, she went for hydrotherapy in what is now the Czech Republic. The naturopath who ran the water-cure sanatorium had grown famous for surviving a near-fatal accident as a teen-ager by treating himself with wet bandages and drinking water, and Blackwell hoped to experience his alternative cures for herself. But the sight in the left eye never returned; eventually she had it removed and replaced with a glass prosthesis.

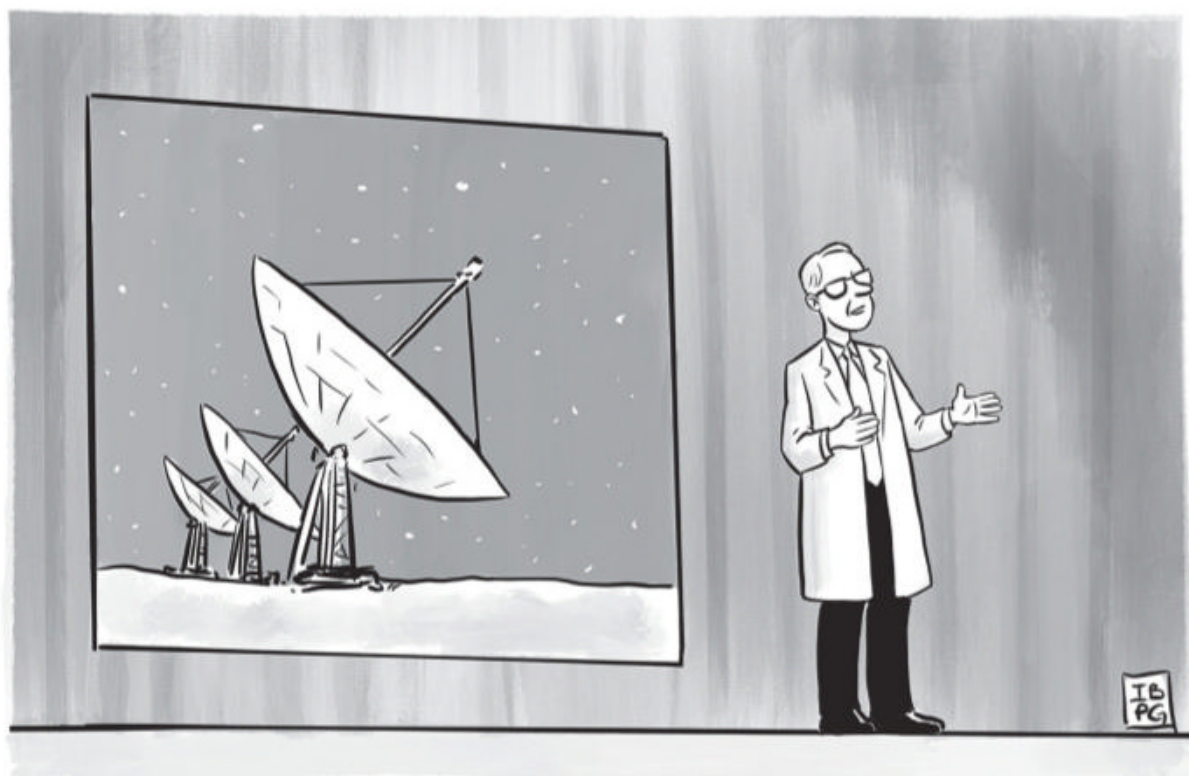
The failures of her own case did not entirely sour Elizabeth on novel treatments, and when she and her sister opened the New York Infirmary for Indigent Women and Children, in 1857, they promoted practices borrowed from hydrotherapy and hygienic cures—basic routines of bathing and sanitation that were so contrary to mainstream methods that they attracted protests for "killing women in childbirth with cold water." In fact, they were saving women; one of the greatest innovations in health care at the time was hand washing, which doctors had previously failed to do even when moving between morgues and maternity wards. Despite the opposition, the Blackwells and their staff treated nearly a thousand patients in their first year, and performed three dozen surgeries. Both sisters also began

giving lectures and teaching classes on public health.

Although their degrees and their methods made them pioneers, that word implies a radicalism they rejected. Elizabeth, in particular, disdained the poverty and the alleged promiscuity of some of her patients. Even as germ theory was taking hold, she came to regard disease as a moral failing. She espoused phrenology, opposed contraception, and campaigned against vaccinations. Neither sister was especially supportive of other women seeking medical degrees, even going so far as to refuse them the honorific of "Doctor." Only begrudgingly and for financial reasons did they finally add a female medical college to their infirmary, after long dismissing women's schools as inferior.

Seneca Falls, New York, the site of a historic feminist convention, in 1848, was not far from where Elizabeth got her medical education, but she criticized the activists who gathered there, and when the second Woman's Rights Convention later praised her as "a harbinger of the day when woman shall stand forth 'redeemed and disenthralled,' and perform those important duties which are so truly within her sphere," she condemned the movement. "I'm very sorry my name was mixed up with the Rochester absurdity," she wrote. "I understand all the good that's in them & esteem it for as much as it's worth, but they mistake the matter & make themselves very foolish."

Blackwell's rejection of the suffragists is both curious and confounding. "Women are feeble, narrow, frivolous at present: ignorant of their own capacities, and undeveloped in thought and feeling," she explained in a letter, but then emphasized that this was their own fault: "The exclusion and constraint woman suffers, is not the result of purposed injury or premeditated insult. It has arisen naturally, without violence, simply because woman has desired nothing more." This is a surprising conclusion from a woman who had desired something more, only to face resistance at every stage of her career from all-male institutions—and who then watched her sister suffer the same systematic exclusion. And yet, Blackwell also held in that letter that "when woman, with matured strength, with steady purpose, presents her lofty claim, all barriers will give way, and man



*"We've found five planets in our galaxy that may have life and two that have Wi-Fi."*

will welcome, with a thrill of joy, the new birth of his sister spirit.”

But some of the only men who actually did so were Elizabeth’s brothers, and she excoriated them for it. She disapproved of their marriages to feminists and was appalled when her younger brother Henry wrote to ask for her help in editing a protest statement he planned to read during his wedding ceremony. He and his fiancée wanted to denounce the laws that “refuse to recognize the wife as an independent, rational being” and grant the husband powers “which no honorable man should possess.” Elizabeth called the statement foolish, and she accused him of acting “in bad taste” and performing “vulgar vanity” by politicizing his marriage.

Today, Lucy Stone, Henry’s wife, is better known than Elizabeth Blackwell, and their brother Samuel’s wife, Antoinette Brown, is better known than Emily Blackwell. This is hardly surprising: in addition to their own accomplishments, both of those women joined movements that championed the cause of other women, who, down through subsequent generations, had reason to honor and remember them. By contrast, the Blackwells come across in Nimura’s book as careerist, and what interiority we glimpse of them can feel cramped and ungenerous. Elizabeth, in particular, envied the popularity and financial success of Florence Nightingale and looked down on nursing. She dismissed Dorothea Dix, who helped to organize medical care for the Union during the Civil War, as “meddler general,” and serially alienated both her colleagues and members of her own family.

“First” is a tricky designation: sometimes it is genuinely significant, and sometimes it is essentially trivial. For one thing, it can obscure the rate of change and minimize the backlash such firsts often leave in their wake. Nimura ends her book on the celebratory note that, while only six per cent of physicians in the U.S. were women when the Blackwells died, thirty-five per cent are today. That seems to imply slow and steady progress, but, in reality, there was a higher proportion of female doctors in 1900 than there was in 1950—evidence of a more complicated trend that involved both discriminatory admissions policies

and increasing social pressures that discouraged women from entering medicine in the first place.

As the Blackwells illustrate, the championing of firsts can also overshadow more interesting stories—about the two of them, for starters, since Emily was the more talented and devoted physician and kept the infirmary going for decades after her sister left it. More broadly, there have been other women who were abler practitioners but were never admitted to medical school, who completed rigorous schooling but were never awarded a degree, who obtained their degrees by passing as men, or who earned their degrees slightly later but had more accomplished careers.

Take St. Fabiola, born in the fourth century, who spent much of her life healing the sick. Or James Miranda Barry, born a woman three decades before Elizabeth Blackwell, who lived as a man, obtained a medical degree in 1812, and rose to the rank of inspector general as a surgeon in the British Army. Or Rebecca Lee Crumpler, the first Black woman in America to earn a medical degree, fifteen years after Blackwell, who used her education to care for emancipated slaves through the Freedmen’s Bureau. Around the same time, another woman offended the Blackwells by appearing beside them as a “Female Physician” in the New York City directory: Ann Trow Lohman, an abortionist better known as Madame Restell, who had no medical degree, but who was one of the most popular health-care providers in the country.

Such women come and go in the pages of “The Doctors Blackwell,” but Nimura largely fixes her focus on the two sisters. Her book hews closely to the structure of Elizabeth Blackwell’s autobiography—a questionable decision, since it means that, like Blackwell, she is slow to get into the actual practice of medicine and quick to leave it. The last forty years of the sisters’ lives are confined to Nimura’s final chapter, which is called “Divergence,” because it describes the period when their collaboration ended. Elizabeth left their infirmary in 1869 and returned to England, where she gave up medicine and focussed on her moral crusades against “social evil.” Emily practiced until she was seventy-three, retiring only after closing the women’s medical college, in 1899. She raised an adopted

daughter and lived for the rest of her life with Elizabeth Cushier, an obstetrician who had graduated from the Blackwells’ college. The sisters died just a few months apart, in 1910.

Nimura is not an apologist for the Blackwells. While she dutifully reports the facts of their lives, she never fully confronts their deepest contradictions: as women who sought their own advancement while opposing women’s rights, as doctors for whom the etiology of disease lay in moral degeneracy. The Blackwells may not have felt the need to explain their inconsistencies, but it is one of the tasks of a biographer to make her subjects intelligible. Instead, Nimura, who seems to regard complexity as its own virtue, remains circumspect about the discordances of their public lives and their private ones, too. Like Emily, Elizabeth adopted a child, an Irish orphan Nimura describes as “a daughter to compensate for her childlessness.” Perhaps; but the girl worked as an unpaid domestic servant, was forced to address her employer as “Dr. Elizabeth,” and was prevented from pursuing her own social or professional interests and from marrying. And despite the passage of more than a century Nimura is as coy as her subject in describing the decades-long relationship of the younger Blackwell, offering this anachronistic assessment: “Emily’s partnership with Elizabeth Cushier was warmed by love.”

But, if Nimura is too frequently deferential toward her subjects, she is a close and delightful observer of their world. One of the strengths of her book is that it brims with hints of richer stories: the whole of the Blackwell clan and their spouses; the cohort of pioneering female doctors to which the Blackwells belonged; above all, the advancement of medicine beyond its days of “horrid barbarism” and the roles that women have played in that progress. However unsympathetic the Blackwells seem, the material good that they and their infirmary accomplished for countless women can’t be gainsaid. The metrotome has long since fallen out of use, but the institution the Blackwells founded has not: the New York Infirmary for Indigent Women and Children, now part of New York-Presbyterian Hospital, endures. ♦

A CRITIC AT LARGE

# THE FALCONER

*What we get wrong about Joan Didion.*

BY NATHAN HELLER



In the spring of 1967, Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne, freelance writers married to each other and living in Los Angeles, were engaged to write a regular column for the *Saturday Evening Post*. This was a good gig. The space they had to fill was neither long nor short—about twelve hundred words, a gallop larger than the Comment that opens this magazine. The *Post* paid them well, and Didion and Dunne each had to file one piece a month. The column, called “Points West,” entailed their visiting a place of West Coast interest, interviewing a few people or no people, and composing a

dispatch. Didion wrote one column about touring Alcatraz, another on the general secretary of a small Marxist-Leninist group. The *Post* was struggling to stay afloat (it went under two years later), and that chaos let the new columnists shimmy unorthodox ideas past their desperate editors. Didion’s first effort was a dispatch from her parents’ house. A few weeks later, her “Points West” was about wandering Newport, Rhode Island. (“Newport is curiously Western,” she announced in the piece, sounding awfully like a writer trying to get away with something.) The column work left time for other projects,

and Didion spent the spring through September of 1967 on a ten-thousand-word assignment about the hippie movement, the rest on a novel she’d been struggling with. At some point, an editor suggested that she had the makings of a collection, so she stacked her columns with past articles she liked (a report from Hawaii, the best of some self-help columns she’d churned out while a junior editor at *Vogue*), set them in a canny order with a three-paragraph introduction, and sent them off. This was “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” her first nonfiction book. It has claims to being the most influential essay collection of the past sixty years.

Didion, now eighty-six, has been an object of fascination ever since, boosted by the black-lace renaissance she experienced after publishing “The Year of Magical Thinking” (2005), her raw and ruminative account of the months following Dunne’s sudden death. Generally, writers who hold readers’ imaginations across decades do so because there’s something unsolved in their project, something that doesn’t square and thus seems subject to the realm of magic. In Didion’s case, a disconnect appears between the jobber-like shape of her writing life—a shape she often emphasizes in descriptions of her working habits—and the forms that emerged as the work accrued. For all her success, Didion was seventy before she finished a nonfiction book that was not drawn from newsstand-magazine assignments. She and Dunne started doing that work with an eye to covering the bills, and then a little more. (Their *Post* rates allowed them to rent a tumbledown Hollywood mansion, buy a banana-colored Corvette Stingray, raise a child, and dine well.) And yet the mosaic-like nonfiction books that Didion produced are the opposite of jobber books, or market-pitched books, or even useful, fibrous, admirably executed books. These are strange books, unusually shaped. They changed the way that journalistic storytelling and analysis were done.

Because a sentence of Didion is unmistakable, people often presume that her advances were in prose style. The opening of the “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” collection announced her voice:

*“I wanted not a window on the world but the world itself,” Didion wrote.*

The San Bernardino Valley lies only an hour east of Los Angeles by the San Bernardino Freeway but is in certain ways an alien place: not the coastal California of the subtropical twilights and the soft westerlies off the Pacific but a harsher California, haunted by the Mojave just beyond the mountains, devastated by the hot dry Santa Ana wind that comes down through the passes at 100 miles an hour and whines through the eucalyptus windbreaks and works on the nerves.

There's the entwining of sensuous and ominous images. And there's the fine, tight verbal detail work: the vowel suspensions ("ways an alien place"), the ricocheting consonants ("harsher . . . haunted . . . Mojave"), the softly anagrammatic games of sound ("subtropical twilights and the soft westerlies"). Didion worked hard at her sentences, and no magazine journalist has done better than her best. But style is just the baseline of good writing. Didion's innovation was something else.

Most writers of nonfiction operate in the sphere of high craft: like a silversmith producing teapots, they work to create elevated and distinctive versions of known objects. A master will produce a range of creative variations, yet the teapots always remain teapots, and the marks of individuation rise from a shared language of form and technique. Didion's nonfiction was produced in that craftwork tradition, but it operates more in the sphere of art: it declares its own terms and vernacular, and, if successful, conveys meaning in a way that transcends its parts.

The title essay of her second collection, "The White Album" (1979), offers the clearest glimpse of how that reimagination happens. The heart of the essay is a cluster of "Points West" columns: brief reports on protests at San Francisco State, a Huey Newton press conference, a studio visit with the Doors—her normal craftwork as a working writer. When composing the "White Album" essay, Didion lined those pieces up like flagstones in a path. Together, she knew, they had to tell a bigger story, because they came from the same place (coastal California) in the same time (1968) and from the same vantage (hers). But what was the story?

To figure it out, Didion started adding stones from elsewhere in the quarry: circumstances surrounding the production of the newsstand columns, details

from her home life. She included an extract from a psychological evaluation she'd had that summer. ("The Rorschach record is interpreted as describing a personality in process of deterioration with abundant signs of failing defenses.") She wrote about remembering a line by Ezra Pound on the drive to report at San Francisco State. She threaded these bits with what she called flash cuts, scene changes separated by space breaks; in other words, she started with the craft part—the polished sentences, the tidy magazine page—and built outward, collaging what was already published with what wasn't, reframing and rejuxtaposing what had been previously pinned in pristine prose. This process of redigesting published craftwork into art is how Didion shaped her nonfiction books for fifty years. It made her farseeing, and a thorny voice about the way public stories were told.

The prickliness of Didion's project was on my mind as I read her new collection, "Let Me Tell You What I Mean" (Knopf). "New" here refers mostly to the state of the binding, because the newest thing that Didion contributed is twenty years old. The foreword, very fruitful, is by Hilton Als. The volume's keystone is a few "Points West" columns from 1968 which she in some cases had collaged into previous books but which have not been reprinted in their original, stand-alone form until now. In that sense, "Let Me Tell You What I Mean" is less a selected essays than a rejected essays, a director's un-cut of her older work. Traditionally, this is the sort of collection squeezed out by itchy heirs after an author's death.

It's happy news, then, that the book still offers some familiar pleasures. The earliest columns, from the late sixties, remain crisp and engaging on the page (not a given for late-sixties writing). Other essays, such as a piece on the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, from 1989, are, if not exactly urgent, nice to have around. Didion stopped publishing new material in 2011, a silence that's well earned but bittersweet in light of recent events, and "Let Me Tell You What I Mean" is meant to summon the old feelings. Yet the book ends

up a study in the limits of Didion's prose, because its parts, for all their elegance, don't make a whole. Devoted readers will find the book unrecognizable as a Didion collection in any real sense.

To understand why, it is useful to go back to the summer of 1967, when Didion was writing her report on the hippies—the title essay of "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." The late-sixties youth movements purported to be about community and coming together, but Didion saw them as a symptom of a shared society unravelling and public communication breaking down. (The title comes from a Yeats poem that begins, "Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer.") "It was the first time I had dealt directly and flatly with the evidence of atomization," she later explained. Struggling to describe this dissolution, she decided to express the problem structurally. The hippie essay, written as a series of pruned scenes from the Haight-Ashbury separated by breaks, marked her first true use of flash cuts.

The piece "failed to suggest that I was talking about something more general than a handful of children wearing mandalas on their foreheads," Didion later wrote. But the concept of atomization, and the collage technique, stuck. When Didion was gathering essays for her first collection, she did something notable with a piece she called "Los Angeles Notebook." She took one of her "Points West" columns, about the Santa Ana wind, and put a flash cut after it. She lopped off the opening to a critics piece she'd written on books by Helen Gurley Brown and dropped that in, followed by another cut. In this way, she built a new essay from the wholes and bits of old material, tracing out flares of life around Los Angeles in the mid-sixties. They were part of one story, but, crucially, they did not connect.

Didion had spent four years failing to write a novel called "Play It as It Lays." What she disliked in the work in progress, about an actress in Los Angeles, was that it smelled of "novel"; everything seemed formed and directed in a way that was untrue to life. In 1969, after reworking the "Los Angeles Notebook" essay, Didion saw how

to make the novel work. “Play It as It Lays” (1970) is commonly said to be about anomie, but more specifically it’s about a world in insular pieces, of characters trapped in their Hollywood realms. (Didion envisioned a novel of tight scenes, consumed in a single sitting—a book written as a movie, in other words, and thus caged within the storytelling rhythms of the industry.) The novel’s short chapters, some of them less than a page, change vantage and jump characters among disparate spheres using freeways and white space. “I played and replayed these scenes and others like them, composed them as if for the camera, trying to find some order, a pattern. I found none,” one of her characters says. “Play It as It Lays” was Didion’s first fiction of atomization.

Didion went on to use the collage technique to assemble the long pieces in “The White Album” and the books that followed, reconsidering her own published craftwork and later bringing that scrutiny to texts produced by other people. Where she saw evidence of atomization in American society, she made efforts to push back.

“The only American newspapers that do not leave me in the grip of a profound physical conviction that the oxygen has been cut off from my brain tissue, very probably by an Associated Press wire, are the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Free Press*, the *Los Angeles Open City*, and the *East Village Other*,” Didion wrote in a “Points West” column from 1968 which opens the new collection. She likes the alternative press not because it’s good or useful (“I have never read anything I needed to know in an underground paper”) but because it breaks past a communication barrier. These papers assume that the reader “will understand if they talk to him straight; this assumption of a shared language and a common ethic lends their reports a considerable cogency of style.”

Shared language and a common ethic are precisely what Didion had noticed coming apart in the supposedly liberated togetherness of the late sixties. And the problem, in her view, did not fade when the love beads went away. In “Insider Baseball,” her influential piece for *The New York Review of Books*,

born of tagging along with the Presidential campaigns of 1988, she argued that the so-called “democratic process” had become unlinked from the people it was supposed to speak to and for:

Access to it is correctly limited to its own professionals, to those who manage policy and those who report on it, to those who run the polls and those who quote them, to those who ask and those who answer the questions on the Sunday shows, to the media consultants, to the columnists, to the issues advisers, to those who give off-the-record breakfasts and to those who attend them; to that handful of insiders who invent, year in and year out, the narrative of public life.

Politics had come to be programming produced for élites, by élites, in a bubble disconnected from others. If this warning seemed eccentric on the eve of electing an institutional Vice-President and, four years later, the Man from Hope, it does not seem so today. The problem Didion first identified in 1967 has been treated as a revelation in recent years.

Her position as a disaffected insider—hanging out with the Doors but crying foul on the Summer of Love, writing for the newsstand but declaiming its idiocy—made her an aggressive contrarian. In fact, her recent canonization notwithstanding, Didion spent most of her career as a magnet for daggers in the letters columns. “Between Joan Didion and me it is still a missed connection,” a reader



complained in 1969, responding to a *Life* column she wrote for a while (abortively, owing to its unpopularity with editors). In *The New York Review of Books* a decade later: “Evidently where Joan Didion lives problems of love and psyche evaporate in a haze of margaritas by age twenty-one and folks can get down to the real business of living.”

That was in response to a searing broadside against the films of Woody

Allen which Didion published in 1979. Allen had recently released “Annie Hall” and “Manhattan,” reaching his peak of appeal among people likely to read essays by Joan Didion in *The New York Review of Books*. She objected to the films’ urbane-sounding references (“the false and desperate knowingness of the smartest kid in the class”), and she was annoyed by characters’ superficial-seeming efforts to be deep (“They share sodas, and wonder ‘what love is’”). In Didion’s view, Allen’s movies were a simpleminded person’s idea of a smart person’s picture. She was needling her readers, naturally, but the objection also shows a lot about her narrative intelligence and about the way she should be read.

If atomization is one of the key concepts in Didion’s work, another is what she came to call “sentimentality”: belief in a story with a preordained shape and an emotional logic. That kind of storytelling was everywhere in America, she thought. And it was insidious, because it allowed destructive ideas to sneak in underneath the petticoats of right-thinking endeavors. One of the columns in the new collection picks apart a meeting of Gamblers Anonymous. What irked Didion was that although the meeting seemed to be about taking responsibility, it actually refracted blame. “I thought that it was simply the predilection of many of the members to dwell upon how ‘powerless’ they were, how buffeted by forces beyond their control,” she wrote. “There was a great deal of talk about miracles, and Higher Presences, and a Power Greater Than Ourselves”—prefab sentimental stories that let gamblers avoid seeing things squarely. Done well, contrarianism is based on the idea that what matters isn’t which team colors you wear but which goal the ball lands in when you kick it. Didion did it well and, as with the hippies, traced how a moment of supposed healing spun toward delusion and drove people farther apart.

Atomization and sentimentality exacerbate each other, after all: you break the bridges of connection across society, and then give each island a fairy tale about its uniqueness. Didion was interested in how that happens. One

of her most frequently read essays is a late-sixties account of loving and leaving New York, “Goodbye to All That.” It tends to be remembered as a half-trite paean to a white-collar New York youth, a kind of classed-up precursor to the “Emily in Paris” Weltanschauung. Yet the essay’s actual point is astringent. New Yorkers’ mythology about their city’s sophistication and specialness, Didion suggested, was another sentimental narrative. She had found her place in town by embracing that view, but outgrew it in time—“at some point the golden rhythm was broken, and I am not that young any more,” she wrote. And so she moved to Los Angeles, where the grownups live.

This claim for California as a stronghold of urbanity and groundedness was contrary, even petulant. Didion had grown up in Sacramento and began her reporting from California at a moment when the national narrative of the West Coast—what went on there, what it meant—was shaped by editors and emissaries from New York. (That hasn’t changed.) But, where the Eastern press had decided that California stood for futurism, beaches, lush life, and togetherness, Didion insisted on a California of dusty houses, dry inland landscapes, fires and snakes, and social alienation. Like her contemporary the Bay Area poet Robert Hass, she was obsessed with the motions of mind but shy of abstractions; both realized that what is often called “the world of ideas” is vulnerable to tendentious manipulation. And so they pinned their ideas to details of landscape: this realization fixed to this tree, or the sight of the Bevatron at night, that one to a jasmine-covered porch—the Northern California style of intellection. What this meant was that thinking was an experiential process that emerged in movement from place to place—in the flash cuts—and you didn’t *need* a sentimental narrative in order to give it sense, as you did in New York.

Didion left the city in 1964, but this remained her perception when she returned twenty-four years later:

The insistent sentimentalization of experience . . . is not new in New York. A preference for broad strokes, for the distortion and flattening of character, and for the reduction of events to narrative, has been for well over



*“Maybe America does have a gun problem.”*

a hundred years the heart of the way the city presents itself: Lady Liberty, huddled masses, ticker-tape parades, heroes, gutters, bright lights, broken hearts, eight million stories in the naked city; eight million stories and all the same story, each devised to obscure not only the city’s actual tensions of race and class but also, more significantly, the civic and commercial arrangements that rendered those tensions irreconcilable.

This description of “distortion and flattening,” of reducing life to recognizable story lines, is from “New York: Sentimental Journeys,” a study of the Central Park jogger case that Didion wrote, in 1991, for *The New York Review of Books*. The case—in which a twenty-eight-year-old female banker was brutalized and raped and five youths of color were convicted, and then, decades later, exonerated—became a Rorschach blot, with some people (largely white) seeing a city “systematically ruined, violated, raped by its underclass” and others (largely of color) seeing a city “in which the powerless had been systematically ruined, violated, raped by the powerful.”

Didion saw something else: a city

victimized by decades of fatuous thinking and poor planning. New York, she thought, had clung to sentimental narratives about melting pots and special opportunities—“the assurance that the world is knowable, even flat, and New York its center, its motor, its dangerous but vital ‘energy’”—to the extent of being blind to the fraying of its civic and economic fibre. In crisis, New Yorkers simply doubled down, appointing heroes or villains in the jogger case, trying to keep the fairy tale aloft. “Sentimental Journeys” was a controversial piece when it appeared, yet it offered a frame for New York’s dramas over the next three decades. Even more important, it insisted on a link between the fate of a society and the way that its stories were told.

What it meant to be a writer—imaginatively and morally—had interested Didion since she spent her teen-age years retyping Hemingway sentences, trying to understand the way they worked. Fifty years

later, she wrote about his afterlives in “Last Words,” an essay for this magazine condemning the publication of books that Hemingway had deemed incomplete. To edit a dead author’s near-finished work for publication, Didion thought, was to assume that he or she was playing by the usual rules. But it was precisely *not* working in this consensus realm that made great artists great.

A common criticism of Didion suggests that the peppering of her prose with proper nouns (the Bendel’s black wool challis dress, the Grès perfume) is somehow unserious. (For whatever reason, these complaints usually come from men.) But the correct way to understand this impulse is in the lineage of front writing. As Adam Gopnik has noted in these pages, it is Hemingway who’s forever telling you which wines to enjoy while fighting in Spain, how to take your brasserie coffee—how to make his particular yours. Didion feminized that way of writing, pushing against the postwar idea that women writers were obliged to be either mini Virginia Woolfs, mincing abstractions from the parlor, or Shulamith Fire-

stones, raging for liberation. Part of what Didion took from Hemingway, by her account, was a mind-set of “romantic individualism,” “looking but not joining,” and a commitment to the details that gave distinctiveness and precision to that outside view. A trip to the Royal Hawaiian in the midst of a rocky marriage, the right soap to pack for a reporting trip while your husband stays with the baby: in Didion’s work, these were as important in their hard details as Hemingway’s *crabe mexicaine* and Sancerre at Prunier. Hemingway mythologized his authorial life style so well that generations of writers longed to live and work his way. Didion saw what he was doing, and appropriated the technique.

Yet what made the modernists daring was sometimes a weak point of their endeavor: the writing doesn’t always let readers know how it wants to be read. Hemingway’s theory was that if you, the writer, could reduce what you saw in your imagination to the igniting gestures and images—don’t elaborate why you feel sad about your marriage ending; just nail the image of the burning farmhouse that launched you

on that train of thought—then you could get readers’ minds to make the same turns at the same intersections, and convey the world more immersively than through exposition. He explained his theory rarely and badly (hence the endless rancid chestnuts about lean prose, laconic dialogue, and crossing important things out), but Didion didn’t miss the point. “When I talk about pictures in my mind I am talking, quite specifically, about images that shimmer around the edges. . . . The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what’s going on in the picture,” she noted, in “Why I Write.” And yet she added in signposts Hemingway left out. A first-rate Didion piece explains its terms as it goes, as if the manual were part of the main text. She is perpetually on guard about saying stuff either not clearly enough (the title “Let Me Tell You What I Mean” emerges from her work) or so clearly as to be subject to “distortion and flattening,” and thus untrue to what she means.

“I wanted not a window on the world but the world itself. I wanted everything in the picture” is how she puts it in “Telling Stories,” an essay from 1978 included in the new collection. She is explaining why she lost, or maybe never had, a desire to write salable short stories—tightly constructed pieces hung on a “little epiphany.” For her, the key to capturing life on the page without the usual sort of reduction, she says in the same essay, was figuring out how to use the first person across time.

Didion’s “I” ended up nearly as known as Hemingway’s “and,” and carries the same mixed blessing of being caricatured more than characterized. The caricature has Didion as a histrionic oversharer—a kind of literary Tori Spelling. Yet her reasons for embracing the “I” were mostly technical. You had to let readers know who you were and where your camera stood, she thought. It meant that Didion was always in her own crosshairs, and eventually turned the contrarian impulse on herself.

One of the commonest motifs in Didion’s writing is, bizarrely, Oregon



Trail-type survivalism. She had been taught that those who colonized California were “the adventurous, the restless, and the daring.” She had been raised to believe that, as her mother put it, California was now “too regulated, too taxed, too expensive.” In “Where I Was From” (2003), she finally put this origin story of heroic, contrary individualism under the glass.

Didion built the book in her usual way, setting down reported articles and weaving in flashes of personal context. What created California economically and politically, she showed, was actually constant support from the East-reaching web of American society, industry, and, especially, the federal government. “The sheer geographical isolation of different parts of the state tended to obscure the elementary fact of its interrelatedness,” she wrote. The refusal to acknowledge this public interrelatedness, to insist on the determining value of the personal, the private, and the exceptional, had been California’s fragmenting delusion, and her own. I suspect that “Where I Was From” is among the least read of Didion’s nonfiction books, which is unfortunate, because it’s her “Gatsby”: the book in which she scrutinized her most basic ideas of heroic particularism and found that she had not escaped “the blinkering effect of the local dreamtime.” That’s a moving thing for a writer to acknowledge, and a hard one. The final sentences of the book are Didion’s suggestion that she’s not quite ready, in her life, to give the sentimental story up.

The intense burst of mythologizing that attended Didion’s books about the deaths of her husband (“The Year of Magical Thinking”) and her daughter (“Blue Nights,” from 2011) arrived, then, with a certain weirdness. One can now order something called a “Didion dress,” modelled on her late-sixties wardrobe. Not long ago, in a bookshop, I came across a Picador Modern Classics edition of “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” shrunk down to pocket size, presumably to be car-

ried in the way that certain people carry miniature versions of the Bible or the Constitution. I tried and failed to think of a writer who’d treat such a thing more mercilessly than the author of that book.

An artist who has spent years doing the work on her own terms should not look fashionability in the mouth. But it is odd to find Didion embraced by the world of mainstream sentimental thinking which she charged against for decades. One wonders whether the fans for whom she’s now an Instagram totem, or the many journalists who claim her, realize that she cast her career toward challenging precepts and paragons like theirs.

It matters only because everything matters. Didion once wrote, “Style is character,” and, because the phrase has seemed to apply to her life and work, it often gets quoted to mean that character comes down to nothing more than style. But the line, which appears in an essay about Georgia O’Keeffe, is actually about the burden of creative choice. “Every choice one made alone—every word chosen or rejected, every brush stroke laid or not laid down—betrayed one’s character,” Didion wrote. Reducing the world, as on the canvas or the page, is a process of foreclosing on its fullness, choosing this way and not that one, and how you make those choices reveals everything about the person that you are. Didion praised O’Keeffe for “hardness” in trying to render in art what sensible people told her was unrenderable. “‘The men’ believed it was impossible to paint New York, so Georgia O’Keeffe painted New York,” she wrote. She was impressed by O’Keeffe’s snubbing of those who received her work devotedly but unseriously: “This is a woman who in 1939 could advise her admirers that they were missing her point, that their appreciation of her famous flowers was merely sentimental.” And she lauded O’Keeffe’s frank engagement with her time. “She is simply hard, a straight shooter, a woman clean of received wisdom and open to what she sees,” Didion wrote, and she meant it, too. ♦



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## MOVEMENTS OF ONE

*Josef Albers and Giorgio Morandi.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



Morandi's *"Natura Morta (Still Life),"* from 1953, occults the obvious.

Imagine bits of wood trapped in eddies of a stream, going round and round atop the waters that flow beneath them. The image comes to mind in response to a surprising show—surprisingly great, contrary to my skeptical expectation—at David Zwirner's New York gallery. The works on display are by two artists who can seem bizarrely mismatched: Josef Albers, the starchy German-American abstract painter, Yale School of Art professor, and color theorist, who died in 1976, at the age of eighty-eight, and Giorgio Morandi, the seraphic Italian still-life painter of bottles, vases, and other sorts of domestic objects, who died in 1964, at the age of seventy-three.

In 1950, Albers wedded himself to a format of three or four nested, hard-edged squares on square supports—"Homage to the Square," he called them—centered a bit below the pic-

tures' vertical midpoints. That was it, for him. His occasional departures from the formula in the following years availed little. The point was color, explored through often arcane contrasts between the central squares and the ones that border them. The combinations never feel familiar or predictable, and you would need acres of color charts to denominate Albers's palette.

Morandi spent half a century transfixed by items in his studio, often arranged on a single high tabletop that he had built so he could work standing up. Often woozily drawn and always tenderly brushed in muted colors, the tableaux look but don't feel repetitive. Each could be the first and only one, quietly struggling with the defining problem of pictorial representation—the reduction of three dimensions to two. A fixation on that challenge seemed to bar Morandi (the odd

tentative landscape notwithstanding) from extending his scope in either subject or form. It's as if, every day, he had to finally get right something that can't be got at all: reality as it is, at one with our perception of it.

Albers, who spent thirteen years studying and teaching at the Bauhaus, is academic and even pedantic in spirit, easy to admire while hard to like. Morandi is deeply poetic. What does displaying their paintings together accomplish? In terms of formal art history, nothing in itself; they're so different. But then I think of those circling bits of wood. Both artists worked independently of the canons of modern art without being outsiders—they were in the stream but resistant to its direction. They weren't eccentric, even. Rather, their approach proposed artistic visions that deviated from the forward march of modernism: alternative movements of one. The artists' insistence can seem exasperated, as though they were waiting for the world to catch on to truths that were obvious to them. They were brothers in perseverance. To my amazement, viewing them together electrifies, as their works' extremes play off each other. Think of it as a pas de deux of a drill sergeant (Albers) and an enchanter (Morandi). There's a crackle in perception when you turn from works by one artist to those of the other.

The Zwirner show is one of the best installed that I've ever seen. Its four large rooms host rhythmic arrays and alternations that induce that crackle: the soft cosmos of Morandi is both relieved and refreshed by the architectonics of Albers, and vice versa. The artists share an intensity of artistic vocation. Neither looked over his shoulder at trends of the day. Most of the pieces in the show (twenty-three by each artist) are small. This was Morandi's habitual scale and Albers's most successful one. Albers shines when his superimposed squares deliver their color rhymes and clashes at a glance. His strongest proportion is little more than a foot square—head-size. Extended to larger canvases, the dynamic weakens. Having to shift your gaze from one part of a painting by him to another is tedious: no new information awaits

you. The ambition implied by big-ness—a fashion made almost obligatory by Abstract Expressionism back then—calls unwelcome attention to the arbitrary parameters of Albers's style. You've stopped looking at the work and fallen to only thinking about it. His strong suit was condensation.

Naming the colors that Albers used is a non-starter, even with an allowance for the physiological fact that all of our color perceptions are hopelessly subjective and indescribable—an evolutionarily primitive function of our brains. (Tell me what red is. Take your time. I'll wait.) By wizardly variations of tone and chroma, he explores the secret lives of hues that seem startled to find themselves conjoined. The result is, remarkably, never decorative; Albers may even be at his most compelling when he flirts with ugliness, throwing monkey wrenches into our instinctive quests for harmony. Colors may never be more themselves than when, in juxtaposition, they don't work. A philosophical commitment rules, governing decisions at a high, rather stern pitch of consciousness. This effect can intimidate when it is taken as an indication that someone, the artist, understands phenomena that you and I will always fumble to grasp. Albers exalts expertise. But be brave. You'll be better from having undergone the salutary ordeal.

The only possible impediment to appreciating Morandi is incredulity at the idea of small, grayish, unresolved images of mundane things as major art. But I believe that no one who is sentient can indefinitely discount Morandi. His efforts to nego-

tiate pictorial depth yield one fresh epiphany after another. It feels not quite right to think of the works as pictures. Morandi cares less about *what* his painted objects are than about *where* they are: standing alone or overlapping at variable distances while, of course, occupying the same paint surface. He describes a metaphysical predicament between what's there in the world and what's here in us. This doesn't require precise drawing or balanced composition. He is not a realist. Sometimes the surface of the shelf appears porous, and gives no felt sense of support for the things atop it. At other times, he alters the level of the line that indicates the junction of the shelf and a wall, from one side to the other of what is rendered in front of it. What's a shelf? What's a wall? What's their interrelation? (Both are flat, as is painting.) Morandi drains our seeing of complacency. He occults the obvious. Normal physics of mass and gravity don't apply to adventures of the eye in space that is given material presence.

I'm leaving out the charm and, on occasion, the beauty of Morandi's repertory company of performing objects—a certain fluted white vase wins kudos whenever it is onstage—because they are incidental to a spatial conundrum that is kept in tension by beautiful over-all brushwork. I'm also setting aside the role of color in Morandi: the practically infinite variations of grays and browns, tinted or patched here and there with subtle coloration, often orangish, that imparts emotional moods to the works, no less affecting for being ungrasp-

able. Morandi painted a zone of reality that is within reach yet cannot be touched, infusing vision with a delicate frustration of tactility. The result is an ontological mystery, confounding sight with touch and both with wonderment at their mutuality.

The Zwirner show provides a capital jump start to sensibilities deadened by nearly a year of scant physical encounters with art. Commercially, the show plainly aims to boost the allure of artists who, while well known, remain at the fringes of major fame. A cynical thought of the marketing motive hardened my heart in advance of my visit. But "money talks" is a vulgarism disarmed when money says something intelligent and exciting. I had forgotten, after previously having taken for granted, the free services to cultivation, and to sociability, of good galleries. Nearly a year of being disheartened by the online garishness and promotional smarm of digitized images has set me up to rediscover the pungency of direct aesthetic experience. There can be no meaningful discourse about art divorced from that. Intellectual appreciation starves for want of it. The less you see, the dumber you get.

I feel passably smarter now, thanks to the Zwirner show, and returned to the flow of sensation and reflection that constitutes a life in art. Mixed feelings about Albers and renewed reverence for Morandi give my lately wandering mind work to do. Not incidentally, I'm reminded to rejoice at being a New Yorker, in (well, nearby—upstate, pending vaccination) the world's premier city of art galleries. ♦

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VOLUME XCVI, NO. 46, February 1, 2021. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for four combined issues: January 4 & 11, February 15 & 22, April 26 & May 3, and July 12 & 19) by Condé Nast, a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Eric Gillin, chief business officer; Lauren Kamen Macri, vice-president of sales; Rob Novick, vice-president of finance; Fabio B. Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast Global: Roger Lynch, chief executive officer; Pamela Drucker Mann, global chief revenue officer and president, U.S. revenue; Anna Wintour, U.S. artistic director and global content advisor; Mike Goss, chief financial officer; Samantha Morgan, chief of staff; Sanjay Bhakta, chief product and technology officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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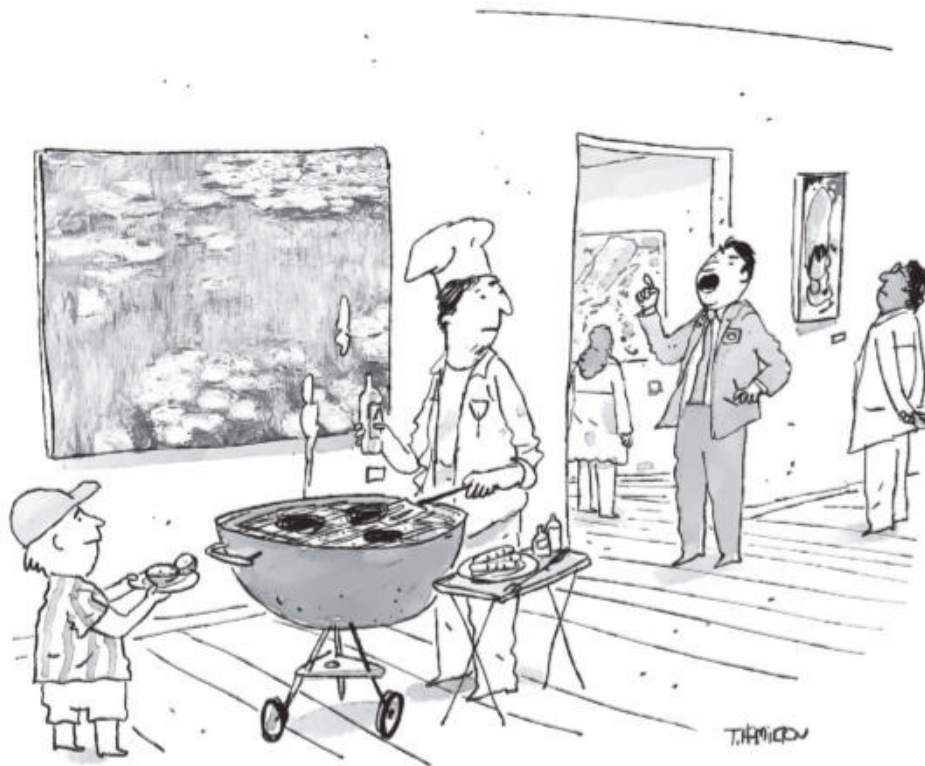
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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Tim Hamilton, must be received by Sunday, January 31st. The finalists in the January 18th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 15th & 22nd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

### THE FINALISTS



*“You were right—putting him  
on commission changed his attitude.”*  
J. F. Martin, Naples, Fla.

*“Now he breaks stereotypes instead.”*  
Ray Joyce, Acton, Mass.

*“He doesn't charge as much as he used to.”*  
Alex Merrett, London, England

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“Can't wait to see the look on his face when  
we put these back on the tree.”*  
Steve Ferguson, San Rafael, Calif.



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