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# THE NEW YORKER



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# THE NEW YORKER

JANUARY 18, 2021

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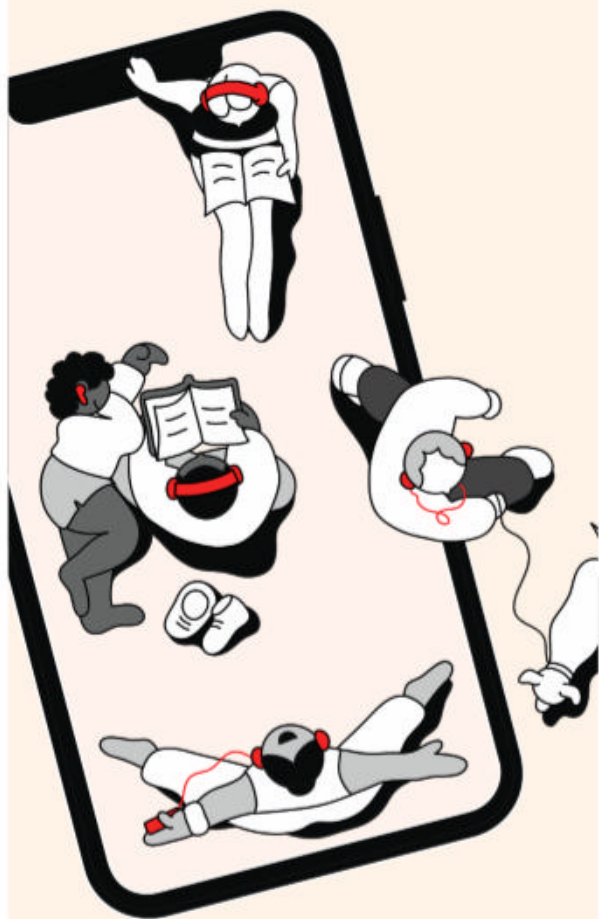
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**Graham Swift** (*Fiction*, p. 50) received the 1996 Booker Prize for *"Last Orders."* His most recent book is the novel *"Here We Are."*

**Jean Valentine** (*Poem*, p. 46), who died in December, began contributing poetry to *The New Yorker* in 1969. Her latest book, *"Shirt in Heaven,"* was published in 2015.

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**Jill Lepore** (*A Critic at Large*, p. 65) is a professor of history at Harvard. Her fourteenth book, *"If Then,"* came out in September.

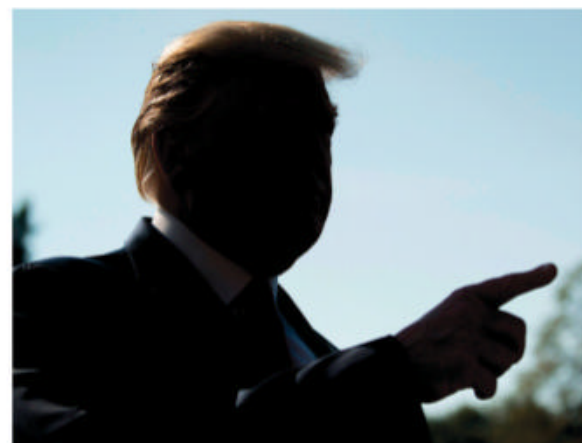
**Tyree Daye** (*Poem*, p. 55), the author of, most recently, the poetry collection *"Cardinal,"* teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor on why Black Americans have reason to be skeptical about a COVID vaccine.



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Benjamin Wallace-Wells on the vital importance of punishing Trump for inciting the Capitol Hill insurrection.

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# THE MAIL

## BONES OF THE HIMALAYAS

Douglas Preston, in his piece on the mysterious human remains found around Roopkund Lake, tells a thrilling story that highlights how far scientific study of ancient people's genomes has advanced in recent decades ("The Skeleton Lake," December 14th). But, all too often, celebrations of paleogenomics overshadow the ethical considerations of field work. The sprint to study DNA extracted from human remains has been described by some as a reckless "bone rush," or "vampire science"; research on genomes from across the globe, including such places as South Africa and New Caledonia, has raised questions about how to examine human origins without the participation of those whose history is under the microscope. Local communities do not seem to object to scientific work at the Himalayan lake, but a lack of criticism is not always consent. Given that paleogenomics investigates the heritage of millions of people, and disturbs the remains of those who cannot speak for themselves, we must work toward an ethical paradigm that includes explicit collaboration.

*Chip Colwell*  
Editor-in-chief, *Sapiens*  
Denver, Colo.

Preston explores the history of humanity in the Himalayas without mentioning the role of caste in South Asia. An increasingly influential corner of Indian society is using studies that track migration into South Asia to assert an Aryan identity and mark themselves as superior to others, in terms of both religion and caste. Questions about human history in South Asia are entangled with the politics of who belongs in Narendra Modi's India. Although this isn't directly at issue in Preston's article, readers of *The New Yorker* should know the stakes involved when it comes to the interpretation of genetic studies like the one he describes.

*Akanksha Awal*  
Fellow in Social Anthropology  
University of Oxford  
Oxford, England

## THE ORIGINS OF "LOLITA"

Ian Frazier, in writing about his personal history with Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita," does not mention Sarah Weinman's 2018 book, "The Real Lolita: The Kidnapping of Sally Horner and the Novel That Scandalized the World" ("Rereading 'Lolita,'" December 14th). Weinman reported a number of details about the story on which Nabokov may have based his novel. In 1948, Horner, who was then eleven years old, was abducted and sexually assaulted. Two years after she was rescued, she died in a car accident. It may still be defensible to view "Lolita" as a work of isolated literary creation, but it is becoming less socially acceptable to view the rape of a child metaphorically. In discussing the evolution of his understanding of the novel, Frazier passes over the book's basis in reality.

*Jessica Johnson*  
Toronto, Ont.

Frazier points out that "Lolita" contains no explicit references to Russian places or literature, and has very little Russian character at all. Even so, the book can be read as a satirical response to Dostoyevsky, whom Nabokov, a displaced liberal aristocrat, detested. As in "Crime and Punishment," the protagonist in "Lolita" is a criminal-as-victim, and pedophilia is a major theme in both novels. Humbert may be seen as an embodiment of Svidrigailov, the child-abusing aristocrat who mockingly embraces Raskolnikov as a kindred spirit. Nabokov also situates Lolita's death in Alaska—which is a hop, skip, and a jump from Siberia, where Raskolnikov served his sentence.

*Andy Leader*  
North Middlesex, Vt.

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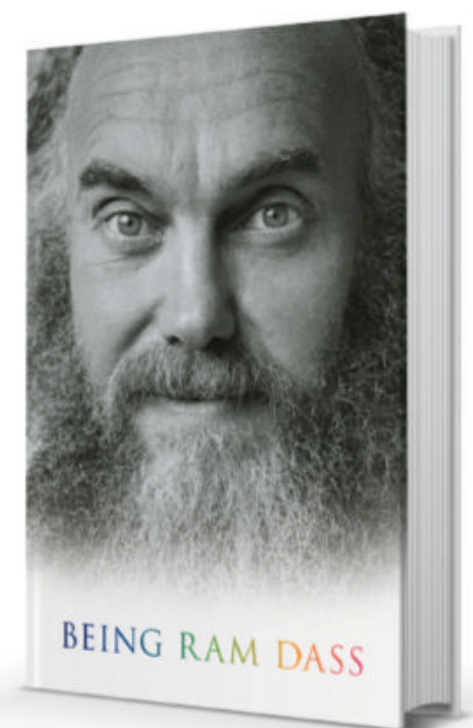
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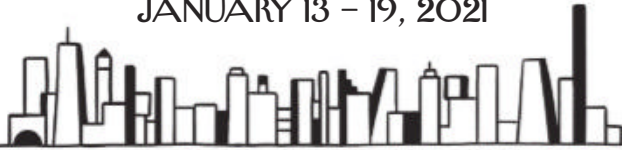
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*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed.  
Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming.*

JANUARY 13 – 19, 2021



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



The Malaysian textile artist Anne Samat wove the intricate, room-filling sculpture “Follow Your Heart Wholeheartedly” (pictured, in detail, above) for the inaugural **Asia Society Triennial**. Titled “We Do Not Dream Alone,” the ambitious exhibition, which features works by some forty contemporary artists and collectives from twenty-one countries, unfolds in two installments; the current show closes on Feb. 7, and the second opens on March 16. Advance tickets are required and available via [asiasociety.org](https://www.asiasociety.org).

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC HELGAS



## MUSIC

### “Aqua Net & Funyuns”

**OPERA** The new serial from Experiments in Opera, “Aqua Net & Funyuns,” shows that opera, in all its grandeur, isn’t incompatible with the smaller scale of a podcast. The series’ five musicalized radio plays are designed for both earbuds and stereo speakers: the conversational vocal lines are placed forward in the mix, and they’re often undergirded by simple, looping orchestrations. The two mysteries, Kamala Sankaram’s “The Understudy” and Tariq Al-Sabir’s “Beauty Shot,” hook listeners with their punchy music and cheeky cliffhangers. Every “Aqua Net” episode splices together acts from three different works—a perplexing decision given that the plots are not interlinked—but the organization has also made each deliciously snack-size opera available on its own.—*Oussama Zahr*

### Tina Brooks: “The Waiting Game”

**JAZZ** It hardly diminishes Tina Brooks to label him a second-tier tenor saxophonist, given that the first tier, circa 1961, included John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, and Stan Getz. A victim of liver failure in 1974, Brooks was a popular sideman who cut four albums under his own name, only one of which was issued in his lifetime. Recorded thirteen years before his death, “The Waiting Game” (now on vinyl, as part of the Blue Note’s “Tone Poet” series) was the final work of his truncated career. Sporting a poised and economical sensibility, Brooks was an uncommon hard-bop player. Surrounded here by fast company, including the trumpeter Johnny Coles and the drummer Philly Joe Jones, Brooks anchored a project that would have found its rightful place amid brisk competition had it seen the light of day.—*Steve Futterman*

### Aaron Frazer: “Introducing”

**SOUL** As the drummer and one of the singers for the soul-revivalist band Durand Jones & the Indications, Baltimore’s Aaron Frazer has flexed a distinctive, sky-high falsetto that’s practically tailor-made for retro melodies. His debut solo album, “Introducing,” produced by the Black Keys front man Dan Auerbach, agilely riffs on funk, jazz, doo-wop, and disco sounds, lacquering them with an updated pop sheen. Flirting with nostalgia is always a gamble, and a few of these songs teeter dangerously close to novelty, but, even when some of the old-school callbacks feel a touch too saccharine, the musicality manages to come through.—*Julyssa Lopez*

### Richie Hawtin: “Concept 1 96:12”

**ELECTRONIC** In 1996, the Canadian techno producer Richie Hawtin issued “Concept,” a series of monthly twelve-inch singles that marked a step away from throbbing warehouse anthems and toward a liny austerity that presaged the rise, in the early two-thousands, of minimal techno. Now, for the first time, the entire series is available digitally. Although it is drastically uneven—Hawtin would refine this style on the 1998 album “Consumed,” credited to Plastikman—on the best of these gentle, woozy, sometimes disorienting tracks you sense a new club-land paradigm in embryo.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

### The Kills: “Little Bastards”

**ROCK** Deep dives into music of the past have been one way to find comfort in a strange and tangled present, and the Kills’ compilation album “Little Bastards” offers a plunge into the spare, shadowy soundscapes that the band built back in the early two-thousands. The English duo mined old recordings, demos, and outtakes from its previous three albums for material, unearthing gems such as “Raise Me,” a boost of adrenaline guided by the piercing howl of Alison Mosshart’s voice and the rawness of Jamie Hince’s shrieking guitar. Beyond providing a hit or two of nostalgia, the project is fascinating to observe as a time-lapse view of how a band soldiers on as it progresses.—*J.L.*

### Moor Mother & billy woods: “BRASS”

**HIP-HOP** The experimental musician and poet Moor Mother and the truth-telling rapper billy woods found compatibility in shared knowledge. The two connected on the posse cut “Ramesses II”—in collaboration with the duo that woods belongs to, Armand Hammer—before teaming up for Adult Swim’s eclectic singles series, and their natural chemistry spawned a new union; in December, they quietly released an entire album together that harnesses that energy. “BRASS” is a haunted yet dazzling work of interwoven parables that finds the acerbic artists tapping into a collective history. Moor Mother, who has dabbled in noise and jazz, is also a self-described witch rapper, and here she tunes into that frequency when reciting powerful Afrofuturist proverbs. Woods, no stranger to ceding space, is pithy by nature and economical by necessity. Hearing their perfectly balanced invocations feels like unearthing a cache of closely guarded commandments.—*Sheldon Pearce*

### Quintron and Miss Pussycat: “Goblin Alert!”

**ROCK** Through the exuberant rock-and-roll anthems of “Goblin Alert!,” Quintron and Miss Pussycat present themselves as trashy, campy, sacrilegious miscreants, seemingly sprung from an early John Waters film, raring to dance. For its first album in nearly a decade, the New Orleans duo has replaced its drum machine with a human and added a guitarist, effectively streamlining its songs without curbing the mania at the band’s core. Unrestrained and gleeful, “Goblin Alert!” offers a live-wire good time, magnified by the humor inherent to an act long known for incorporating puppetry into its stage show. “Teen-agers don’t know shit,” Quintron declares at the album’s outset, flipping rock music’s long-held generational politics on their head.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

### R.A.P. Ferreira & Scallops Hotel: “Bob’s Son”

**HIP-HOP** In 2018, the underground rapper Rory Allen Philip Ferreira announced that he was done recording as milo, the moniker he’d been using since 2010. Last year, he debuted a new project as R.A.P. Ferreira and released an exquisite album called “purple moonlight pages.” The music was heavily influenced by the looseness and the spontaneity of jazz, but his raps remained carefully crafted, casually cryptic, and nearly poetic. His new album, “Bob’s Son,” sets jazz sounds aside, primarily featuring soul samples, but maintains a jazz spirit. Ferreira calls the LP an ode to the Beat poet Bob Kaufman, “the progenitor of abomunism,” whose semi-improvised style brought bebop to beatniks. There has never been a greater sense of swing in Ferreira’s raps, and his writing is as sharp as ever. By the time he performs Kaufman’s “Abomunist Manifesto,” the album’s grand finale, the two artists’ techniques begin to converge.—*S.P.*

## COUNTRY-ROCK EULOGY



Any humane listener would wish that “J.T.” did not have reason to exist. The gripping new Steve Earle album (made with his band, the Dukes) finds the hard-scrabble singer covering the work of his son Justin Townes Earle after his death last year. The talented younger Earle began his career in his father’s shadow, and he now recedes back into it. Yet the Earle family in mourning is more rollicking and clear-eyed than many indie rockers in the glow of youth. On “Harlem River Blues,” the LP’s showstopper, the narrator ponders suicide in eerily celebratory tones, lending the song’s desolation the wicked thrill of adventure. Devastatingly, the album’s encore, its sole non-Justin composition, is penned by Earle the elder. “Your last words to me,” he sings, in an unsettling disruption of life’s balance, “were ‘I love you, too.’”—*Jay Ruttenberg*





Your appetite for the new seven-part Netflix documentary series **“Pretend It’s a City”** will depend on particular factors: your interest in the oeuvre of Martin Scorsese, your tolerance for discursive monologuing, and your baseline affinity for New York City. The show follows Fran Lebowitz, the gruff, opinionated cultural critic in Chaplinesque suiting whose cocksure cosmopolitan takes landed with a provocative ker-thunk on the Manhattan literary scene, starting in the late seventies, with her books *“Metropolitan Life”* and *“Social Studies.”* Then Lebowitz quit writing and became a kind of curmudgeon emeritus, espousing unyielding advice on all aspects of urban life to anyone who will listen. (Some of her steadfast beliefs: tourists walk too slowly, iPhones are accursed objects, cigarettes are great, people who leave Manhattan for greener pastures are lily-livered.) Scorsese, for his part, finds pure joy in Lebowitz’s musings, which he also featured in his 2010 film *“Public Speaking.”* I loved that film, and so I should have inhaled *“Pretend It’s a City.”* Instead, I found it to be too much of a good thing. Scorsese allows his subject to wax grandiloquent even when her outrage engine runs out of steam. The series is at times a potent valentine to a city lost, but you can only listen to someone kvetch for so long.—*Rachel Syme*

## TELEVISION

## Lupin

In 1905, in reaction to the runaway success that the British writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was enjoying with Sherlock Holmes, the French writer Maurice Leblanc invented Arsène Lupin, a dashing thief and cunning mischief-maker who often wore a top hat and a monocle while pocketing the world’s most valuable diamonds. The Lupin character became a hit, and Leblanc spent decades churning out adventures. This massive body of work has been translated to television many times—but never as compellingly as in *“Lupin,”* a new Netflix series (by way of Gaumont Television, in France) in which the rakish Omar Sy plays a modern-day mastermind named Assane Diop, who works as a janitor at the Louvre. When Diop comes across an original Lupin novel, it grants him superpowers, including the ability to pull off near-perfect heists, and he sets out to avenge his late father. The show is stylish,

suspenseful, and, most of all, a wild romp through Paris; it makes for perfect armchair travel.—*Rachel Syme*

## Search Party

This show has been described in many ways: “Scooby-Doo” for millennials, a hipster crime-spree comedy, a devilish skewering of the entitled bruncherati that swanned around pre-pandemic Brooklyn. It is all of these things, and yet, season after season, the show, created by Sarah-Violet Bliss, Charles Rogers, and Michael Showalter, zigs when you think it will zag, managing to reinvent itself. The fourth season, which débuts Jan. 14 on HBO Max, continues the tale of four ragtag friends (Dory, Drew, Elliott, and Portia) who find themselves in hot water when they go searching for a missing college classmate and end up committing an accidental murder (oops!). The first season ended with the crime, the second chronicled the coverup, and the third became a propulsive legal drama in which Dory (Alia Shawkat) turned into a tricky Amanda Knox cipher. Now the

story shifts again: Dory has been kidnapped by a wee psychopath (a very silly and scary Cole Escola), who keeps her locked in a padded basement. The season is part “Room” and part “Silence of the Lambs,” while still maintaining its sardonic, quippy tone. The result is a truly absurdist, effervescently trippy ride.—*R.S.*

## DANCE

## Ballet Hispánico

In lieu of live performances, the company has been hosting periodic watch parties, screening archival footage adorned with live conversations. For the next few installments, it turns back to the nineteen-eighties and nineties, when its current artistic director, Eduardo Vilaro, was a dancer in the troupe. On Jan. 13, the selection is Vicente Nebrada’s 1984 work *“Arabesque,”* a flamenco-tinged suite of dances set to music by Enrique Granados.—*Brian Seibert (ballethispanico.org)*

## Mark Morris Dance Group

The revelatory “Dance On! Video Vault” series keeps spilling gems, now with footage picked by veteran dancers. For the latest installment, available through Jan. 31, Tina Fehlandt and Guillermo Resto have chosen *“Championship Wrestling After Roland Barthes”* (1984), a wicked sendup of the conventions of television wrestling, and *“New Love Song Waltzes”* (1982), an unromanticized look at the effort of love, set to Brahms. The second piece comes in a 1988 performance distinguished by the voices of Lorraine Hunt Lieberson and her mother, Marcia Hunt.—*B.S. (markmorrisdancegroup.org/dance-on-video-vault)*

## Martha Graham Dance Company

This month, America’s oldest dance company pays attention to nature. On Jan. 19, its online program zooms in on *“Canticle for Innocent Comedians,”* a pantheistic dance poem that Graham created in 1952. Some of the footage is vintage (Yuriko and Bertram Ross in the “Moon” duet), some recent (Lloyd Knight and the guest star Wendy Whelan in “Moon”), and some brand-new (the “Wind” section, rechoreographed by the company alumnus Robert Cohan).—*B.S. (marthagraham.org)*

## Sadler’s Wells / “Dancing Nation”

Sadler’s Wells reopened briefly in the fall, but, along with every other London theatre, it was recently forced to close. With the help of the government-run Arts Council, it presents a one-day festival of virtual dance, staged and filmed in accordance with COVID protocols. The festival will be shown in three hour-long tranches on Jan. 14 (at 3:30, 6:30, and 9:30) on the venue’s Web site. Performances include a starry duet for Akram Khan and Natalia Osipova, choreographed by Khan; a performance of Matthew Bourne’s *“Spitfire,”* a comic gem from 1988, in which six male dancers preen and pose to well-known nineteenth-century ballet music; the excellent *“Blak Whyte Gray,”* by the sophisticated hip-hop ensemble Boy Blue; and a 2018 work, *“Contagion,”* by a group called Shobana Jeyasingh Dance, inspired by the ravages of the Spanish flu.—*Marina Harss (sadlerswells.com)*



## ART

### David Hockney

This great portraitist has had a very large and devoted following in his pocket for years. The chief reason for this is the enormous pleasure Hockney gives to his viewers. Since he first began showing his work, in the early nineteen-sixties, the openly gay painter and photographer has excitedly shared his autobiography in countless canvases and sketches. In 1973, after a move to Paris, Hockney's exquisite drawings of his chosen family acquired a new depth and intimacy. It was as if the Ingres-inspired academicism of Hockney's work safeguarded the British artist from whimsy. Unfortunately, whimsy overtook him with the introduction of modern contrivances (Xerox machines, iPads) into his process, and the subjects of his portraits became subservient to his love of gizmos. Although there are many terrific examples of Hockney's works on paper, both early and late, in the stately and romantic show "David Hockney: Drawing from Life," at the Morgan Library (through May 30), one returns to his Paris years as a hallmark of his style, feeling, and poetic directness. Hockney revisits that mode in his 2019 portrait of the textile designer Celia Birtwell, whose love and gifts help hold the artist's un-tricked-out eye, and his admiration.—*Hilton Als* ([themorgan.org](http://themorgan.org))

### Meg Lipke

This Hudson Valley-based artist refers to her wall-mounted soft sculptures, on view at the Broadway gallery, as "paintings." Fair enough—Lipke's brightly colored, stuffed works are cut and sewn out of canvas, bridging diverse textile traditions and modes of painterly abstraction. (In particular, they recall the springy, ebullient shaped works of Elizabeth Murray.) Bigger is sometimes better in these padded compositions of woozy grids and amoebas, which can have a wacky throw-pillow quality; scaled up, they become formal experiments in the limits of the absurd. A case in point is the eleven-foot-tall "Black and White Vibrations," whose slumping rectangle is lent a jolt of buzzy energy by the expressive doodles on its surface. The smaller "Rainbow Hanger" is charming, too—an effortless balance of countercultural craft and pop references (as well as art-historical allusion). Its simplified pretzel shape, stained with pigment in a My Little Pony palette, boasts a floaty, psychedelic grace.—*Johanna Fateman* ([broadwaygallery.nyc](http://broadwaygallery.nyc))

### Hannah Whitaker

In a new suite of highly stylized portraits at the Marinaro gallery, Whitaker departs from her previous methods of elaborate in-camera masking and multiple exposures. Instead, the photographer achieves spectacular effects—dark stripes of shadow and laserlike flares of color—by carefully staging each shot of the same female subject. Sometimes the woman appears in silhouette; other times, she emerges from shadow or is revealed in a slice of light. Her naturalistic presence seems at odds with the pictures' stark techno-futurism, which might otherwise call for android perfection. A second intriguing series is installed in the gallery's lower level—assemblages of jigsawed, brightly painted, photo-printed shapes are outfitted with light bulbs. These lamp sculptures recall the designs of the Memphis Group, but, arranged in a con-

spiratorial cluster on the floor, they are clearly more than mere décor.—*J.F.* ([marinaro.biz](http://marinaro.biz))

### "100 Drawings from Now"

This invitational show, at the Drawing Center, in SoHo, speaks to our lockdown epoch with startling poignancy. All but one of the works were created since the pandemic's onset. Few are thematic. There are scant visual references to the spiky virus, though there are some good jokes on homebound malaise. Among the better-known artists, Raymond Pettibon pictures himself bingeing on episodes of "The Twilight Zone" and Katherine Bernhardt reports a homeopathic regimen of cigarettes and Xanax. Stylistic commonalities are scarce, aside from a frequent tilt toward wonky figuration. The show confirms a deltalike trend—or anti-trend—of eclectic eccentricities without any discernible mainstream. What unites Rashid Johnson's grease-stick abstraction, conjuring a state of alarm in a pigment that he has invented and dubbed Anxious Red; Cecily Brown's pencilled carnage of game an-

imals after a seventeenth-century still-life by Frans Snyders; and a meticulous, strikingly sombre self-portrait by R. Crumb? Isolation. Intended or not in individual cases, the melancholy gestalt is strong, as is its silver-lining irony of satisfying all artists' ruling wish: to be alone in the studio. Alone with themselves. Alone with drawing. I found myself experiencing the works less as calculated images than as prayers.—*Peter Schjeldahl* ([drawingcenter.org](http://drawingcenter.org))

## MOVIES

### Compensation

Zeinabu irene Davis's boldly original independent drama, from 1999, is a film in two parts, set at both the start and the end of the twentieth century in a Black community of Chicago. The deaf actress Michelle A. Banks stars as the earlier era's Malindy Brown, a dressmaker who migrates from the South and is courted

## AT THE GALLERIES



The most enthralling period piece onscreen right now isn't streaming on Netflix (sorry, "Bridgerton")—it's the six-minute marvel "Salacia," by the artist, filmmaker, and activist **Tourmaline**, making her solo gallery debut at Chapter NY (through Jan. 24), which has opened a pop-up location, at 126 Madison Street, for the occasion. Combining magic realism and historical fact, the 2019 film concerns the true story of Mary Jones (superbly played by Rowin Amone), a Black trans woman and sex worker in New York City, who was sentenced, in 1836, to five years in Sing Sing prison. By setting the film's domestic scenes in Seneca Village, a community of Black landowners razed in the mid-nineteenth century to make way for Central Park, Tourmaline dreams of a freedom for Jones that the world denied her. No spoilers here, but one climactic scene puts an Afrofuturist spin on "The Wizard of Oz," replacing Dorothy's mantra, "There's no place like home," with an incantation of self-invention. Five enticing self-portraits (including "Morning Cloak," pictured above), which Tourmaline photographed in 2020, serve as both establishing shots and an epilogue.—*Andrea K. Scott*



by a hearing laborer, Arthur Jones (John Earl Jelks)—and as Malaika Brown, a printer and artist in the nineties, who begins a relationship with Nico Jones (Jelks), a children's librarian. Both relationships pivot on the transmission of Black American culture (the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar is prominently featured) and of deaf culture, and both involve medical matters that are central to their times—tuberculosis in the earlier episode, AIDS in the later one. Davis evokes history with a virtually archeological imagination, presenting the earlier story as a silent movie that seemingly brings archival photographs to life; in the later story, with a blend of drama, music, text, dance, and documentary views of modern Chicago, she portrays modern life as historical in real time.—*Richard Brody* (*Streaming on the Criterion Channel.*)

## Luxor

The tension between the grip of memory and the power of immediate experience is poignantly portrayed in this documentary-rooted drama, written and directed by Zeina Durra. It stars Andrea Riseborough as Hana, a British

doctor who checks into a grand but faded hotel in the Egyptian city of the title, where she has gone to recover from the trauma of her work in Jordan with victims of the Syrian civil war. She has history with the city—two decades before, she took part in an archeological project there—and runs into an Egyptian archeologist named Sultan (Karim Saleh), a former lover who attempts to rekindle their relationship. Hana is open to his friendship but may be too unsteady for love; her self-healing involves extended wanderings through the city, as if to rediscover lost aspects of herself. The dialogue is thin and the action is patchy, but Durra films Hana's travels—and the places that she visits—with an ardent attention that fuses emotional life with aesthetic and intellectual exploration.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on Amazon, iTunes, and other services.*)

## Margaret

The writer and director Kenneth Lonergan's 2011 feature (shot in 2005) is a wildly ambitious strain of the Upper West Side bourgeois blues; it embraces large themes and deep moods with remarkable scope and nuance. It stars

Anna Paquin as Lisa Cohen, a headstrong private-school teen-ager whose innocent distraction of a bus driver leads to a fatal accident. Lisa tries to expiate her guilt by seeking out the victim's best friend (Jeannie Berlin, in an electrifyingly freewheeling performance). As Lisa's little world comes up against the realm of public power (via brilliant turns from Stephen Adly Guirgis, as a detective, and Michael Ealy and Jonathan Hadary, as lawyers), the movie rises to a grand symbolic pitch; it's a city symphony, romantic yet scathing, lyrical with street life and vaulting skylines, reckless with first adventure, and awed by the intellectual and poetic abstractions on which the great machine runs. The inspired cast includes J. Smith-Cameron, Matt Damon, Allison Janney, Jean Reno, Mark Ruffalo, Matthew Broderick, Kieran Culkin, and Rosemarie DeWitt—and Paquin holds her own with all of them.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on HBO Max, Amazon, and other services.*)

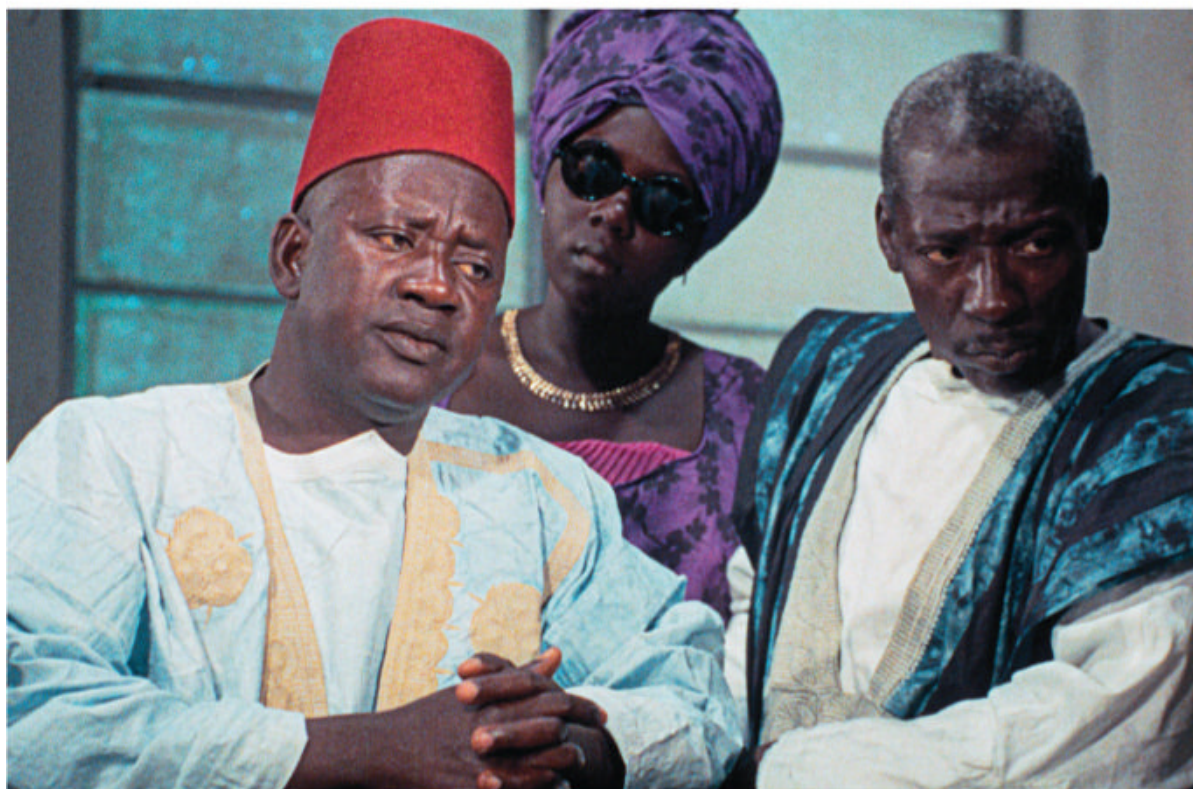
## Saving Mr. Banks

One Disney film tells the story of another—or, at least, of its begetting. For twenty years, Walt Disney (Tom Hanks) has fought for the rights to the “Mary Poppins” stories, only to bump into the immovable object of P. L. Travers (Emma Thompson), their creator. Now, at last, she is lured to Hollywood, much concerned at the fate of her characters on their journey to the screen. The light comedy of her clash with Disney and his minions is interleaved with flashbacks to her childhood in Australia, where she saw her beloved father (Colin Farrell) succumb to drink. The director John Lee Hancock's 2013 film arranges for past traumas to be dissolved in present laughter and in the catharsis of creative endeavor; the outcome is, for the most part, no more troubling than a trip to Disneyland. Yet the story is borne along by the expertise of the cast, which includes Paul Giamatti and Jason Schwartzman, and is made more piquant by Thompson. In her blending of snappiness and solitude, she hints that some sorrows are too stubborn to be wished away.—*Anthony Lane* (*Reviewed in our issue of 12/23/13.*) (*Streaming on Netflix, Disney+, and other services.*)

## When Tomorrow Comes

John M. Stahl's 1939 melodrama has a spare romantic simplicity—a New York hash-house waitress named Helen (Irene Dunne) has an affair with a big-time concert pianist named Phillipe (Charles Boyer), who turns out to be married. It begins with a thrilling set piece, in which Helen and her colleagues, while serving customers during the busy lunch hour, covertly pass word about a union meeting—sparking the lovers' first encounter. Stahl's studio-crafted city vividly evokes sweaty and teeming street life (including an abrasive encounter with the police), but the film's vital energy dissipates when the couple heads to Phillipe's Long Island estate. Helen, a frustrated singer, shares his artistic ideals but not his upper-crust habits, and, with him, she leaves behind both her harsh practical cares and her hearty social—and union—life. Despite the creaky script, Stahl conjures the lovers' stifled passion with rapt stillness; he makes frozen frames and static actors shiver with foreboding.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on the Criterion Channel.*)

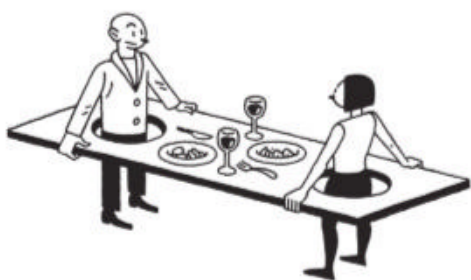
## WHAT TO STREAM



In “**Mandabi**,” from 1968, the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène ranged widely through private and public settings in the capital city of Dakar to satirize corruption born of misrule. The film (streaming on Film Forum's virtual cinema starting Jan. 15) is centered on the sixtysomething Ibrahima, the long-unemployed husband of two wives and the father of seven children, who receives a money order from a nephew in Paris. He's supposed to cash it for the young man's mother but, lacking the necessary documents, must endure a bureaucratic odyssey of bribery and favoritism to fulfill his duty. Meanwhile, Ibrahima and his wives, who can barely feed their family, rely on the money order to get credit from local merchants as neighbors besiege them for loans and alms, and shady businessmen vie for the deed to their home. Unredressed inequality is reflected in cultural conflict between the Francophone elite, in Euro-style suits, and the Wolof-speaking masses. Sembène looks ruefully yet tenderly at the ruses and wiles of the poor, whose desperate struggles—with the authorities and with one another—distract them from political revolt.—*Richard Brody*

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## TABLES FOR TWO

### Milu

333 Park Avenue South

Where were you during the Great Chili-Crisp Craze of 2020? It ranks as barely a blip in that extraordinary year yet still is useful in defining it. Chili crisp—commonly associated with Lao Gan Ma, a brand started some thirty years ago by a noodle-shop owner in China’s Guizhou Province, who became a billionaire after bottling her recipe—is a thick and crunchy chili-oil-based condiment that might include fried garlic, Sichuan peppercorn, sesame seeds, or fermented black beans among its ingredients. It keeps indefinitely and can be used to perk up just about anything, the ultimate shortcut for the home cook. Last spring, it rose to prominence as, arguably, the condiment of the pandemic. A variety produced in Chengdu, Sichuan, by a U.S.-based company called Fly by Jing became a commodity so hot that there was a months-long wait list, and Momofuku’s Chili Crunch sold out within hours of its début.

In 2021, so far, it’s proving much easier to obtain. At Milu, a new restaurant near Madison Square Park that serves

pan-regional Chinese food, a selection of retail items includes the elusive Fly by Jing chili crisp and the kitchen’s own milder, crunchier iteration. The counter-service restaurant, with a layout that feels designed to facilitate high turnover and a menu anchored by “bowls,” was originally conceived as a lunchtime destination for office workers. Two of its founders, Connie Chung, who is also the chef, and Vincent Chao, met while working at Make It Nice, the restaurant group behind Eleven Madison Park and its erstwhile fast-casual spinoff Made Nice. The attributes that set Milu apart in this milieu are also what suit it to a pandemic.

The chili crisp shares shelf space with other products for seriously elevating your pantry: artisanal Taiwanese soy sauces (one type brewed with pineapple, another finished over a wood fire) and soy pastes, jars of house-rendered duck fat, salted-egg potato chips from Singapore. Then there are the bowls, which are built with components not randomly slapped together, to check food-pyramid boxes, but balletically complementary, and modular enough that you can’t go wrong even if you choose to “build your own.” This is unexpectedly exquisite fast food that could do wonders to break up the monotony of a nine-to-five—or a stretch of health-mandated house arrest. Milu offers takeout and delivery in Manhattan, with plans to expand to Brooklyn.

Silky cubes of salmon are paired with charred broccoli dressed in a cilantro-yuzu emulsion. The salmon, in homage to the style of whole fish served at Cantonese

banquets, is both poached with ginger and scallion and served with a traditional ginger-scallion sauce. If ever there was a condiment that amounted to more than the sum of its parts, it’s Cantonese-style ginger-scallion sauce, which, with those two ingredients—finely minced, heavily salted, and doused in hot oil—achieves an alchemical transcendence.

Ginger-scallion sauce (a candidate for Condiment of 2021?) comes with the soy-roasted chicken, too. It would work just as well with the crisp-edged, melt-ingly marbled chunks of Yunnan-style brisket, though Milu serves these with a chili-garlic-mint sauce—plus the most beautiful marinated cucumbers I’ve ever seen. In part to maximize surface area—for soaking up chili-and-roasted-garlic oil—each cucumber is sliced into a Slinky-like form, not dissimilar to the Swedish Hasselback potato cut. In China, the technique alludes to the structure of an antique style of straw raincoat, and it’s often used for formal meals.

Piled on rice, the brisket and cucumbers or the salmon and broccoli, each topped with a handful of watercress-cilantro salad, is a banquet in a bowl. For an even more opulent spread, Milu offers family-style set meals, featuring seaweed-and-pressed-tofu salad, crackly-skinned sliced duck leg served with hoisin and duck-fat rice, and delightfully snappable chocolate-malt cookies sandwiching a layer of malt buttercream, a treat among treats. (*Bowls and entrées* \$11–\$26; *family-style set meals* \$45–\$80.)

—Hannah Goldfield





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# BOX



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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT THE FINAL DAYS

On March 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln arrived at the East Portico of the Capitol to deliver his first Inaugural Address. The nation was collapsing, the Southern slave states seceding. Word of an assassination conspiracy forced Lincoln to travel to the event under military guard. The Capitol building itself, sheathed in scaffolding, provided an easy metaphor for an unfinished republic. The immense bronze sculpture known as the Statue of Freedom had not yet been placed on the dome. It was still being cast on the outskirts of Washington.

Lincoln posed a direct question to the riven union. “Before entering upon so grave a matter as the destruction of our national fabric,” he said, “with all its benefits, its memories and its hopes, would it not be wise to ascertain precisely why we do it?” The South, in its drive to preserve chattel slavery, replied the following month, when Confederate batteries opened fire on Fort Sumter. Even as the Civil War death toll mounted, Lincoln ordered work to continue on the dome. “If people see the Capitol going on,” he said, “it is a sign we intend the Union shall go on.”

That was the first Republican President. The most recent one woke up last Wednesday in a rage, his powers receding, his psyche unravelling. Donald Trump had already lost the White House. Now, despite his best demagogic efforts in Georgia, he had failed to rescue the Senate for the Republican Party. Georgia would be represented by two

Democrats: the Reverend Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff, the first African-American and the first Jew, respectively, to be elected to the chamber by that state’s citizens.

At midday, Trump went to the Ellipse and spoke at a rally of MAGA supporters whom he had called on to help overturn the outcome of a free and fair election. From the podium, he said that the vote against him was “a criminal enterprise.” He told the crowd, “If you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.” He raged on like a wounded beast for about an hour, thanking his supporters for their “extraordinary love” and urging them to march to the Capitol: “I’ll be there with you.”

Trump, of course, would not be there with them. Cincinnatus went home and watched the ensuing riot on television. One vacant-eyed insurrectionist had on a hoodie with “Camp Auschwitz” written across the chest; another wore what the *Times* fashion critic described as “a sphagnum-covered ghillie suit.” Then came the results of Trump’s vile incitement: the broken windows and the assault on a pitifully small police force; the brandishing of the Confederate flag; the smug seizure of the Speaker’s office. A rioter scrawled “Murder the Media” on a door.

The insurrection lasted four hours. (As of Friday, there were five dead.) Once the Capitol was cleared, the solemn assurances that “this is not who we are” began. The attempt at self-soothing after such a traumatic event is understandable, but it is delusional. Was Charlottesville not who we are? Did more than seventy million people not vote for the Inciter-in-Chief? Surely, these events are *part* of who we are, *part* of the American picture. To ignore those parts, those features of our national landscape, is to fail to confront them.

Meanwhile, with less than two weeks left in Trump’s Presidency, some of his most ardent supporters are undergoing a moral awakening. An instinct for self-preservation has taken hold. A few Cabinet members and White House officials have resigned. Former associates, once obsequious in their service to the President, have issued rueful denunciations. The editors of the *Wall Street Journal’s* editorial page determined that, while removal under the Twenty-fifth Amendment, as demanded by the Democratic congressional leadership, is “unwise,” the President should resign.

The millions of Americans who understood this Presidency from its first day as a national emergency, a threat to





domestic and global security, can be excused for finding it curious that so many are now taking the exit ramp for the road to Damascus three years and fifty weeks later. How surprising can Trump's recent provocation be when for years he has served as an inspiration to bigots everywhere, to damaged souls plotting to mail pipe bombs to journalists and to kidnap the governor of Michigan?

This dawning of conscience is as bewitching as it is belated. The grandees of the G.O.P. always knew who Trump was—they were among the earliest to confront his most salient qualities. During the 2016 campaign, Ted Cruz called Trump “a pathological liar” and “a snivelling coward.” Chris Christie described him as a “carnival barker.” Mitch McConnell remarked, with poetic understatement, that Trump “doesn't know a lot about the issues.” And Lindsey Graham warned, “If we nominate Trump, we will get destroyed.” He added, “And we will deserve it.”

Trump's influences, conscious or not, include Father Coughlin, Joseph McCarthy, Roy Cohn, Newt Gingrich, the Tea Party, and more, but his reality-show wealth, his flair for social media, and an

attunement to white identity politics made him a man for his time. And, when he won, nearly everyone in the Republican establishment capitulated and sought a place in the firmament of power: Cruz, Christie, McConnell, and Graham; Mike Pence, William Barr, Betsy DeVos, Elaine Chao, Rupert Murdoch, and so many others.

Part of the bargain was ideological: if Trump came through with tax cuts for the wealthy and for corporations, and appointed conservative judges, then the humblings could be absorbed. Graham would overlook the way Trump attacked the war record of his close friend John McCain, as long as he got to play golf with the President and be seen as an insider. Cruz would ignore the way Trump had implied that his father was somehow involved in the assassination of J.F.K., as long as he could count on Trump's support in his next campaign. And Pence, who hungered for the Presidency, apparently figured that he could survive the daily humiliations as the President's courtier, assuming that his reward would be Trump's blessing and his “base voters.” But, as Trump's New York business partners knew, contracts

with him are vapor; the price of the ticket is never fixed.

Donald Trump still has millions of supporters, but he is likely a spent force as a politician. The three-minute-long speech he gave on Thursday night, calling for an orderly transfer of power, was as sincere as a hostage's gunpoint confession. He may yet be impeached again, two feet from the exit door. He could return as a TV blowhard for hire, but in the future his most prominent place in public life may well be in a courtroom.

In a disgraceful time, Joe Biden has acted with grace. He has been clear about the magnitude of what's ahead. “The work of the moment and the work of the next four years must be the restoration of democracy, of decency, honor, respect, the rule of law,” he has said. But repairing the “national fabric,” as Lincoln put it, is only part of what awaits Biden. So many issues—the climate catastrophe, the pandemic, the racial crisis—will not tolerate delay or merely symbolic change. The moment will not tolerate distractions. Donald Trump is just days from his eclipse. It cannot come soon enough.

—David Remnick

## ON CAPITOL HILL

“MA’AM, WE’VE GOT TO GO”



When one of the sergeant-at-arms staffers on the floor of the House of Representatives said that people were starting to move toward the Capitol, we didn't think much of it. We've had plenty of protests. But then you started seeing more worry. You could feel the energy. It wasn't the tone, it was the face. Next they said, “They've breached a wall, but everything's fine.” Then there was another breach over here, a breach over there. It just kept cascading. That was when we started hearing, “Do we have to bring the Speaker down from the rostrum?”

I'm the floor director for Speaker Nancy Pelosi. My job is to make sure that the House floor runs properly. Any legislative procedure that comes into the chamber falls under my staff's pur-

view. I came to D.C. after college, in the nineties, and started waiting tables at California Pizza Kitchen while I figured out how to get a job. I remember, when I first started working on the Hill, someone said, “You'll know when it's time to leave when you don't have that tingle when you see the Capitol.” Now I live a mile away, and when I walk to work the sun is behind me, shining on the Capitol, and when I walk out, if I turn around, I see the sun setting over the Capitol. It's special.

Originally, we'd been planning on spending more than twenty-four hours in the chamber. When the Arizona challenge happened, the Senate paraded out. They took the certified ballots with them in these big, fancy brown boxes that have been used for years.

As the notices came in, I found my old boss, Congressman Jim McGovern, from Massachusetts. I said, “Hey, we might need you up in the chair, just hold tight.” He's the chairman of the Rules Committee. He knows that sometimes the Speaker just needs a break.

All of a sudden, it hit. They say, “We need to bring the Speaker down.” I asked to not do this so fast that it's chaotic. Let's make it look normal. She was not expecting to come down. I said, “Ma'am, we've got to go.” We put Mr. McGovern up, she went out the doors, and she was out of my sight. The Majority Leader, the Majority Whip, and the Minority Whip, they were pulled out, too. That was when it really hit people.

It was a weird vibe. Some were calm, some getting agitated, and then you had a machismo from some people. The noise in the chamber picked up. People were really loud, really not listening. I went into the center of the chamber and just yelled, “Everyone sit down, stay calm, let's get some information!”

Capitol police said, “They're coming. They're inside the building.” They told us to pull out escape hoods—the gas masks. They started pointing: “Lock that door, lock that door!” We helped the police move a couple of old, credenza-type bookshelves into place in front of the doors. We become a hermetically



sealed room. You're not supposed to be able to get in. Well, at some point you start hearing: Bang! A couple of members were there. They were going to protect our colleagues, protect our friends, and protect the chamber.

Capitol police decided we're evacuating. They opened one of the doors into the Speaker's lobby and started pushing people out. But up in the gallery there's no easy way out. It's literally like an obstacle course. I'm pointing and yelling, "Go, go, go! That way! Get through!" The banging on the front door is intensifying. It sounded violent. All of a sudden you hear a crack. It sounded like a gunshot. The police had their guns out. And I just sprinted out of the chamber.

We ran down some stairs, underground into these old, old spaces. Some older folks can't move all that quickly. It took us a while, but we finally got to, essentially, a holding area.

We looked around the room. We didn't know what was happening, but we knew the Capitol had been overrun. Someone would say, "We're missing someone!" The Capitol police would try to find them. And then you have this din, the mechanical filter of a hundred and fifty gas masks—this high-pitched whirring. It sounded like a hundred and fifty kazoos.

It was a weird mix. Remember, this was everyone who'd been on the floor. In one corner, you had all the Republicans who think we stole the election. You can see people looking, thinking, The people outside are here because of what you're doing. We were also concerned about the fact that many of them don't wear masks. Some of them were saying they were glad the "protesters" were there. Everybody else, including many Republicans, was figuring out what's happening, what's going on with our institution, with our society, with our democracy. And how do we get back? We knew we had to finish that night. It was never a question of if—it was how. That's part of my job. I can't really get into this, but we have alternatives to the House chamber, if we need them.

Someone said, "Where are the boxes? Do we still have them?" One of the parliamentarians came over to me and said, "The ballot boxes are safe." If they'd



*"It's 2021, but I'm still writing 'yearlong fever dream of chaos and despair' on my checks."*

been stolen or destroyed, to be honest, I don't know what happens.

We started to go back around seven. There was this powder everywhere, a film everywhere. Broken glass. The same doors that the President comes through for the State of the Union—when they say, "Madam Speaker, the President of the United States!"—you could see the holes where they'd broken through.

The workers did the best they could to clean up. Who knows where they went, and how they came back? They're scared, too. They brought in one of those industrial cleaners you see at the mall at, like, five in the morning. One congressman, Andy Kim, a real nice, soft-spoken man from New Jersey, was helping.

The fact that the Capitol was invaded did not defuse tensions. When the Vice-President announced that Joe Biden is now the President-elect, people cheered. There was relief that we got this done. But it wasn't joyousness. There was a profound sadness afterward, and exhaustion, on the faces of my co-workers. All the trauma hit. This is the people's building. Every time a security threat makes it harder for someone to get in and see

how our democracy works is just sad. But the fact that they'd attack democracy—physically and literally attack it? I never thought it would happen.

When I headed home, it was about four. The sun was still down.

—Keith Stern  
(as told to Zach Helfand)

## A PROUD BOY SPEAKS CRETIN HOP



As federal law-enforcement officials consider investigating the President's role in instigating the deadly assault on the Capitol last week, they may want to check in with a heavyset expunk rocker who calls himself Bobby Pickles. Last Thursday, Pickles, the president of the West Palm Beach branch of the Proud Boys, described his experience of the uprising over the phone from Florida, where he runs a shop that sells T-shirts bearing such sayings as



"Trump 2020: Because Fuck You, Twice."

At the age of forty, Pickles, whose real name is Piccirillo, is a bit old to call himself a "boy." But, along with thousands of bearded and balding men in dad jeans, he headed to Washington to take part in what he called "kind of a last hurrah for Trump, who put so much on the line for us." Asked whether he was among those who rampaged through the Capitol, Pickles said, "No comment." Then he noted, "I'd never been to the Capitol before—and I have now!"

Before January 6th, he said, the Proud Boys, who are known for their misogynist, racist, and anti-Semitic views, had "no organized plan" that he knew of to storm the building. Pro-Trump chat groups had been ablaze with incendiary talk for weeks. But, he said, "the Proud Boys were just marching around the city before this started." As Trump addressed the rally, Pickles and his crew stopped for some halal chicken and rice. "We couldn't really see the President, so we were listening on our phones," he said. "And when we heard him say, 'Go to the Capitol,' we all were, like, 'Yeah!' It wasn't a direct order, like a Mafia boss. But it

was, like, 'Go to the Capitol!'" So directed, Pickles and his group began marching. Trump had made it sound as if he, too, planned to march to the Capitol to stop Congress from certifying Biden's victory. Instead, he retreated to the safety of the White House.

At the Capitol, the scene turned chaotic. "It happened in the moment. There was just so much momentum," Pickles recalled. "We felt compelled to storm the Capitol. There's nothing rational about it when you're caught up in something like that." He kept his phone's video camera on through the ensuing hours of occupation. "I felt like a war correspondent," he said. (Pickles hosts a podcast.) "We were trying to smash the cops to get in," he added. "This old dude on top of a cranelike thing in the middle of a big stand, who had a bullhorn, was saying, 'Come forward! Come forward!'" An older woman urged the rioters on, calling them "patriots." "She was funnelling people in through the windows," Pickles said. Nearby, "a dude with tattoos all over his neck and face" smashed glass.

Pickles found the media's suggestions that police hadn't mounted a serious chal-

lenge insulting. "It wasn't easy!" he said. "We were hit with pepper spray and tear gas. They were trying to keep people out. But we were rushing them." As if to demonstrate the group's valor, he exclaimed, "Someone got *shot*. And someone got hit with a pepper ball in the cheek! It left a big hole. And someone got hit in the eye." (This he found particularly scary, he said, because "one of my grandfathers had a glass eye, and it's my biggest fear.")

Pickles acknowledged the unfortunate optics of a group that claims to be devoted to law and order ransacking a federal building. "I know it looks hypocritical on our end, because of the whole B.L.M. thing," he said, referring to Trump's slurs against Black Lives Matter protesters. "But if you seriously believe your country's getting taken over by fraud, you're going to get nuts." (Pickles can be seen online wearing a shirt saying "Kyle Rittenhouse Did Nothing Wrong," about the suspect in a double murder of B.L.M. protesters.)

Pickles has a comfortable relationship with nihilism. He is happy to discuss his criminal record for grand theft (cashing a forged check) when he was eighteen, and his days as "a juvenile delinquent." "I grew up in the punk-rock scene," he said. "And Trump was like punk rock. It's, like, anti-establishment." He attended the University of Florida, where he was an English major and a liberal. "I've taken basket weaving and read about the Black prison experience," he said, with a snicker. (In his shop, Fat Enzo's, murals of Mark Twain and Hunter S. Thompson share wall space with Huey Long.) He explained that after his father died, in 2015, he sought out new male camaraderie. The Proud Boys filled a vacuum. He claims to have joined not because they are a hate group (as designated by the Southern Poverty Law Center) but because "they were seeking something." He said, "I came to the realization that Trump was awesome, and that I had been brainwashed." From right-wing podcasts and YouTube, he said, he has learned that "the pandemic is a scam," and that "we live in an inverted dictatorship run by the Deep State and globalists."

Still, Pickles claims to be rattled by what happened at the Capitol. "A lot of people were talking crazy stuff," he said. The mood among his fellow-insurrectionists was "getting to be a bit like that



*"No, I ordered the lifetime of doing whatever I want."*



movie 'Casino,' where Joe Pesci plays Crazy Nicky. If you beat him with a fist, he'll come back with a knife. And if you beat him with a knife, he'll come back with a gun. And if you get him with a gun, you better kill him, because he's going to come back and kill you. It's kind of like that in Washington, D.C., now. Things are escalating. I hate to see what happens next."

—Jane Mayer

## DISPATCH

### MOB RULE IN THE CAPITOL



Two hours into the siege of the U.S. Capitol, as another puff of tear gas wafted over the melee with police, Sharon Krahn, a grandmother from Dallas, looked on approvingly. "Our congressmen should be shitting their pants. They need to fear, because they're too posh," she said. "Their jobs are too cush, and their personal gain has taken priority over their sense of duty. Maybe they all started off with a good heart, you know, but power corrupts. Our government is proof positive of that."

She wore a plaid scarf and a gray wool hat, studded with sequins. I asked if the violence in front of us was going too far. "Whose house is this? This is the house of 'We the People.' If you do a bad job, your boss tells you about it," Krahn said. She nodded toward the Senate, where the elected officials had already evacuated to safety: "We're not happy with the job you've done." She drew a distinction between the scene in front of her and the domain of enemies she called "Antifa and B.L.M.," who, she said, have "no true aim except destruction and anarchy."

The day had begun with a typical rant from the President—a dejected, deluded improvisation about a stolen election, at a rally on the park south of the White House. But then it had turned. "We're going to the Capitol," he told the crowd, a maskless confederacy of the rebellious, the devout, the bored, and the bitter. "We're going to try and give our Republicans . . . the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country." In other circumstances, it might have

passed as his usual taunting, but, in this case, it was received as a call to arms.

For anyone who has been to the U.S. Capitol, the scenes that followed were so unhinged that they took a moment to absorb. In the two decades since September 11th, much of the grounds of Congress has been encircled by rings of security. Now any sense of control was gone. The mob quickly overwhelmed the police, broke windows, and forced open doors. A jittery throng coursed through the Capitol, mugging with the statues and lounging at the desks of senators and representatives. They rummaged through drawers and brandished their loot for photographers. A man in a wool Trump hat with a pompom on it, his face in a rictus of glee, carried off a carved wooden lectern bearing the seal of the Speaker of the House.

A leaderless scrum of hundreds, if not thousands, stood on the grand east staircase outside the Capitol, waving Trump flags. At the top of the stairs, a bald man in a white shirt and a Trump-style red tie shouted into a megaphone, "Our world is broken, our system is broken." A man in camouflage at the base of the steps shouted back, "Who the hell are you?" The man (who has not been identified) responded cryptically, "I am a federal employee." An armored black SWAT-team truck, which is often posted at the foot of the stairs, had been left marooned in a sea of people. They stood on the roof and the hood and stuck a sign on the windshield that said "Pelosi is Satan."

Police hung back, outnumbered and seemingly unsure how to respond. As the hours ticked toward 6 P.M.—the start of a curfew announced by Muriel Bowser, the mayor of Washington, D.C.—a white police van, led by a lone cop on a motorcycle, tried to part the crowd below the east stairs, but the crowd converged on it, banging on the metal walls of the van until the driver abandoned the attempt. The guy with the megaphone was still ranting: "We will not allow a new world order. . . . If you are truly innocent, you have nothing to worry about." According to police, five people died, including a woman who had been shot inside the Capitol and a police officer, and more than a dozen people were injured.

I introduced myself to a hopped-up guy walking away from the Senate side of the Capitol, and he said, "*The New*

*Yorker*? Fucking enemy of the people. Why don't I smash you in your fucking head?" He made an effort to draw a crowd: "Right there in the blue mask! Enemy of the fucking people!" But the people had other things on their minds, and nobody bothered to join him.

Five years after the Trump era began, a physical assault on American democracy felt both shocking and inevitable—a culmination of everything that had been building since 2015. What else was there to say of him that had not already been said? How much darker could his America become in its final fourteen days? Would the sight of government brought so low, so vulnerable, break the spell—or would it bring on another crescendo of fury?

Trump's Presidency entered its last weeks as a strange concatenation of causes: those of doomsayers and Oath Keeper-style militias, QAnon and Falun Gong. Members of the Chinese spiritual movement, banned by Beijing, are deeply enmeshed in Trump World, and, as rioters picked through the U.S. Capitol, a caravan of cars outside displayed signs that announced "Say no to CCP Chinese Communist Party" and "Stop forced organ harvesting in China." A couple walked past the organ-harvesting sign, and the woman saw a resonance in her American cause: "See, that's what we don't want to get to."

In the mob, a chant went up: *U.S.A.! U.S.A.!* When I met Krahn, the grandmother from Dallas, I asked if she thought Trump's victory had been stolen. "Absolutely, without a doubt," she said. Why? "O.K.," she said, and started ticking things off on her fingers. "The vote count changing on TV, the more-votes-than-voters, boxes of blank ballots, and, honestly, probably the biggest one is the refusal to audit the votes. Because, if this was fair, if this was a legitimate election, then we should be above reproach. Just like when the I.R.S. comes in and audits my books, I don't worry about it."

I asked where she got her news. "You have to be of a mind to dig through," she said. "So I do not listen to mainstream media anymore. I like C-SPAN because I want to see it happen and then derive my own conclusions from it. I do subscribe to *Epoch Times*, and I do read articles from *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, and I read the *New York Times*, and I read the *Wall Street Journal*, and I



listen to NPR.” She added, “I do not listen to CNN, and I don’t listen to Fox, because I’ve lost all respect. Hate ’em all.”

Krahn’s seventeen-year-old daughter, Annalee, wearing a wool Trump hat and thumbing out a message on her phone, approached with news. “They found more than one explosive device in the building. My sister just texted me,” she said. Her mom was skeptical: “I think they want to scare everybody and get everyone out of here.” (According to law-enforcement officials, pipe bombs were found Wednesday outside the headquarters of the Republican and Democratic National Committees.)

An hour or so later, after four o’clock, word passed through the crowd that Trump had put out a video. Two women who had flown in from Seneca, Missouri, huddled around a cell phone to watch it. Sara Clark owns a gun store that makes custom AK-47s. Her friend Stacie Dunbar is a secretary in a hospital. On the cracked screen of Dunbar’s phone, they watched Trump’s video, a hasty production seemingly taped in the Rose Garden. “I know your pain, I know you’re hurt,” he told the crowd. “We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election, and everyone knows it, especially the other side. But you have to go home now; we have to have peace. We have to have law and order.”

What do you think? I asked.

“I don’t know,” Clark said. “It’s not going to do us any good to beat the hell out of everything. But we didn’t lose. We shouldn’t give in.”

What do you do now? I asked. Clark turned the question on her friend. “I have no thoughts, honestly,” Dunbar said. “I’m at an absolute loss. We’re disenfranchised! It just sounded like he just gave up. Our President! Sounded like he just gave up. He gave in.”

Why? I asked.

“Because he doesn’t want us to do this,” Clark said, motioning toward the chaos.

“He doesn’t want anyone hurt. That’s what he said,” Dunbar added. Tears filled her eyes. “I did this for my kids,” she said. “I have a son in the Navy, and Trump’s done more for our military than any President ever has.”

What did you honestly expect would happen by coming here? I asked.

“A win! Four more years,” Clark said, with a mirthless laugh.

Seriously?

“Yes, absolutely,” she said.

“I wanted Pence to do the right thing, but Pence didn’t do the right thing,” Dunbar said.

As darkness approached, police fired a series of flash-bang grenades to shoo people down from the balconies and steps. A heavysset man in a white MAGA hat stood in a crosswalk, watching the crowd begin to move. He was happy. “They sent a message. That’s enough,” he said. He turned to walk away and added, “Of course, if we come back, it will be with a militia.”

—Evan Osnos

## GEORGIA POSTCARD THE RUN-ONS



A dozen cars were parked outside Adamson Middle School, a half hour south of downtown Atlanta, last Tuesday afternoon. Bundled-up and masked Georgians, most of them Black, hustled in and out to vote in the state’s Senate runoffs, which one man referred to as “the run-ons.” An informal exit poll of emotions rendered a unanimous result: relief.

Joe and Tina, a couple in their thirties, paused to describe low points from the past few weeks. “It was a Democrat who came to the door,” Joe, a logistics technician who wore shades and a grim expression, said. “I have Trump signs on my lawn and whatnot. He put a Warnock sign on my doorknob. I sent him running away. And no one ever came back.” Tina, an engineer with tattoos on her midriff, reached into their truck and pulled out “a barrage of stuff from today.” She pointed at a piece of mail, addressed to her using her maiden name. “I haven’t had that name in, like, fifteen years,” she said. She sifted through postcards from strangers and flyers from the campaigns and their PACs. “That’s a Perdue one,” she said. “And a Trump one.” One flyer claimed that the Democrats would ban hamburgers. “That’s the most I’ve gotten for Republicans,” she went on. “A lot of times I get, like, ten to fifteen

register-to-vote little things as well.”

“I wasn’t going to vote,” Joe said, “because of election integrity. I’m still grinding my teeth about what I just did.” He added, “There are things I feel need to be addressed. When you have dead voters voting—that right there is a proven fact.” He went on a while about things that he said “pissed me off,” concluding, “But I know there’s a lot of Americans counting on us Georgians to save the Republic, so I came to vote for the Republicans.” Tina tossed the mail into the truck, nodding.

Joe returned to the doomed Democratic door knocker. “Let me tell you how I sent him off running,” he said. “I said, ‘I don’t think I’m going to vote.’ When he was going to leave, he said, ‘Let me take that off your door.’ That’s when everything went upside down. I said, ‘Why would you put this on my door? You see all this stuff in my yard and you’re going to put this on my effing door.’ I think I threw it at him and said, ‘Get the eff out of here.’”

“That’s when they told you they were from Detroit,” Tina said.

“Yeah,” Joe went on, “they weren’t even from here. It almost seemed like someone dropped them off.” He added, before departing, “Republicans came by, too. They were nice.”

The next voter to appear was a sinewy owner of a small inflatables company, who introduced himself as Nick. “Bounce houses, waterslides,” he said, describing his company’s wares. It had been a rough year. “I wasn’t able to rent them out,” he said. “It’s nonessential. I lost half the season.” He blamed the Republicans in power, so voting for the Democrats had been an easy choice. “A lot of people need help.”

Election Day had a “weird vibe,” Nick went on. “Nobody seems friendly right now.” Interminable advertisements, he thought, had much to do with it. “The phone calls, the text messages, the e-mails, then—coming down to the final week—people showing up to my house,” he said. “I don’t like that.” He had a video camera attached to his doorbell, which he used to address knockers. “The lady yesterday,” he said, shaking his head. “You have to realize that what you find appropriate, others may not. I said, ‘This is borderline harassment.’ She was, like, ‘That’s your personal feelings.’ I said, ‘I know what needs to be done!’ I’m cool





*Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff*

with reminders. I'm not cool with the overaggressiveness."

An elderly woman named Aretha got into her car and turned on her radio. Another ad. "It's time for a change," she said, turning it off. "Oh, my God, I'm glad this day is over with."

A text came in from a Republican man in north Georgia, who'd voted for Trump in November—but for Warnock and Ossoff in the runoffs. He was annoyed by the ads, too. "Carpet bombing with simplicities," the message read. "Lies, half-truths, fearmongering, all of it an affront to an honest political debate." He added, referring to the party he'd supported most of his adult life, "Do not vote for a party that undermines democracy." Once again, Georgia didn't.

—Charles Bethea

## THE WAVES SOLSTICE SURFATHON



A little after 6:30 A.M. on the shortest day of 2020, Jeremy Grosvenor pulled his rusted-out 1988 Toyota pickup into a parking spot at a surf break in Montauk known as Dirt Lot. In the summer, the spot is crawling with surfers. But, with the sky still purple and the temperature around thirty-eight degrees, Grosvenor and one other middle-aged guy were the only ones who had shown up to paddle out. Still built like an athlete at fifty,

Grosvenor hopped out of the board-laden truck, climbed into its bed, and taped a hand-scrawled sign to the rear window:

WINTER SOLSTICE  
SURFATHON  
7:07 – 4:26?  
STOKED

Grosvenor is an artist who makes experimental films and sculptures with aerodynamic lines, but his primary mode of expression involves riding waves and otherwise pursuing locomotion in the waters off eastern Long Island. His recent projects—or, as he calls them, "water incidents"—include a gale-chasing expedition on a standup paddleboard and a swimming-and-camping trip, which involved towing a raft full of gear, attached by a leash to his waist, through the Atlantic. For the solstice, Grosvenor planned to surf continuously from sunrise to sunset, to raise money for the Montauk Food Pantry. "I love this time of the year," he said, pulling a wetsuit over a merino onesie and wool socks. "I don't find the dark gloomy. To me, it's beautiful and mysterious. And the solstice is a moment of transition, which I hope is also happening in the country."

Grosvenor exudes boyish, buoyant good nature, but he can get quasi-mystical when he describes "having faith in the sea as a sanctuary." Known for his ability to ride waves on pretty much anything, from standard surfboards to a nylon mat, he had chosen, for the solstice, a twelve-foot foam board, on the bottom of which he had written "FOOD." He had also brought along an old red canoe, which he loaded with jugs of water, trail mix, a thermos of miso soup, and tinned sardines, and anchored just beyond the breakers. "So I can eat like a seagull," he said.

A few minutes before seven, he paddled out past the breaking waves, and then, sitting on his heels, glided into the surf, quickly catching a gentle left peeler and popping to his feet for a long, easy ride. By then, he had been joined by five or six other surfers; a rotating group of about twenty-five would come and go throughout the day. From time to time, one of them would paddle over to chat, but Grosvenor mostly kept his own counsel, leisurely catching one wave after another and riding each with a silent economy of motion that contrasted with some of the hotdoggerly going on around him.

In between waves, he drifted, face down, one cheek resting on the board, or on his back, or sitting upright, windmilling his arms and kicking his legs to keep warm.

In the parking lot, wetsuited men and women stopped to read the sign on Grosvenor's truck. A little before noon, an East Hampton Marine Patrol truck rolled up and parked next to Stu Foley, the owner of a local surf shop, who had just got out of the water. Someone had called to report an empty canoe floating offshore.

Soon, Grosvenor's big-haired, twenty-five-year-old son, Mamoun, arrived, an audiobook of Zadie Smith's "White Teeth" blaring from his car's speakers. He had brought some doughnuts for his father, one of which he took along as he paddled out to join him. Grosvenor's wife, Saskia Friedrich, an artist, showed up in painted jeans, a puffer coat, and a purple beanie, with their Australian shepherds, Vishnu and Blinky. She recalled how, when Grosvenor took her ocean kayaking years ago, they noticed a large shadow pass under their boat, and it turned out to be a twenty-foot-long white shark. "Jeremy's got this almost yogic thing, allowing him to enjoy activities that would require us to overcome our natural discomfort or terror," she said.

Later, as the sun seemed to be giving up the ghost, Grosvenor told a floating correspondent that the day had been mostly easy and pleasant. Despite all the hours in the elements, things had never become hallucinatory, although he had been moved to tears once, he said, by the merging awareness of the beauty around him and the suffering of the world. He had managed to keep warm, except in three of his toes, through physical motion and deep breathing, he said, "like a stellar sea cow."

As dusk fell, a handful of spectators greeted Grosvenor's landfall with cheers. Mamoun, wearing a "Free Palestine" hoodie, threw his arms around his father and, handing him the last of the doughnuts, said, "All right! Free doughnut! Black lives matter!"

Grosvenor said that his day in the ocean had been a test run for a plan to surf twenty-four hours straight on the summer solstice. "So many plans—that's the problem," he said. "Because then you don't get anything done."

—Adam Green



LETTER FROM COLORADO

## BAD INFLUENCER

*Trolling the great outdoors.*

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

When people in and around Denver say, “Smells like Greeley,” they mean that the air reeks of the feedlots ringing the city of Greeley, the state’s slaughterhouse, and also that snow may be on the way. Updrafts blowing off the Plains condense in the high mountain air and deliver a precious resource: fresh powder for the ski areas; water for the ranchers, farmers, and marijuana growers. Renewal comes disguised as rot.

For David Lesh, the smell of Greeley has often prompted him to fly his single-engine airplane from Denver up to the mountains, to work and play in the snow. Lesh, who is thirty-five, has been skiing in the Colorado Rockies for sixteen winters. During many of them, he was a professional—he performed aerial tricks in photo and video shoots

on behalf of sponsors. In 2012, frustrated with this arrangement, he started designing and manufacturing his own mountain-sports outerwear, founding a company he eventually called Virtika. Effectively, he was sponsoring himself. Lesh, who markets the brand mostly on social media, projects a rogue persona and a lavish life style, full of decadence and danger. Rally cars, airplanes, parachutes, snowmobiles, machine guns, drugs, bikinis, booze: “Jackass” meets “Big Pimpin’,” by way of “Hot Dog.” The act has helped him acquire both a viable customer base—self-styled rebel snow-riders and park rats—and the contempt of his fellow-Coloradans.

He broadened both constituencies in the summer of 2019, after he and a friend went snowmobiling near Inde-

pendence Pass, just before Independence Day. Three women from Aspen, including the executive director of a local conservation group, happened to be out in the high country gathering data for a research project on the changing bloom times of alpine wildflowers. Lesh and his friend roared into view, riding their sleds below the snow line, across the fragile tundra. The women took photos of them, and of shrubs and grass that looked to have been torn up by their treads. The two men had apparently been riding their machines in a federal wilderness area, where motorized vehicles are forbidden. The women reported them to the U.S. Forest Service and to the *Aspen Times*—“Environmentally unconscionable,” one of the women said—while Lesh posted pictures that his friend had taken of him snowmobiling earlier in the day, shirtless under his red Virtika bib overalls. Lesh then posted an image of the *Aspen Times* article and wrote, “I’d like to thank everyone that made this possible,” with prayer-hands and laughing-face emojis. The Forest Service connected the dots, I.D.’d the perp, and filed charges. (Lesh had also recently posted photos



*“I want to be able to post fake things to the Internet,” David Lesh said. “That’s my fucking right as an American.”*



of himself on his sled on the summit of Mt. Elbert, Colorado's highest peak, also off limits to motorized transport.) Conservationists and editorial writers denounced him, as did three snowmobile trade associations, in a joint statement. "Stupid behavior for social media is never OK," the head of one of them said. Lesh had lost even the sled-necks.

Other provocations and federal charges ensued in the months that followed. By last summer, Lesh had become a Rocky Mountain pariah. Coloradans circulated a petition to have his business license revoked and to have him banished from the state. Death threats piled up, targeting not just him but his child (he doesn't have one) and his dog. He posted them all on his Instagram: "I hope you starve to death and your whole family dies"; "You have TINY DICK ENERGY"; "Lock your doors tonight"; "Go suck a fuck." People protested outside Virtika's headquarters and spat on Lesh's car. Three of his sponsored athletes ditched the brand. In the local press and on social media, people unearthed earlier sins. Some years back, Lesh had been arrested for arson, after setting fire to a tower of shopping carts and plowing through the blaze in an old Isuzu Trooper for a Virtika video. The same year, he got a ticket from the Colorado Division of Wildlife for chasing a moose. A Reddit user with the handle FoghornFarts (actually, a chemical engineer and his wife, a Web developer, in Denver) described witnessing his deplorable behavior on a 2019 trip through the Galápagos: Lesh and a girlfriend had apparently sneaked away from their guide to get photos of him astride a giant tortoise. Lesh's Instagram posts prompted the Ecuadoran authorities to threaten to revoke the guide's and the outfitter's licenses. One headline called him "THE WORST TOURIST IN THE WORLD."

In October, Lesh posted a photo on Instagram of him standing ankle-deep in a beloved and federally protected high-alpine lake near Aspen, before a backdrop of the Maroon Bells, the state's most recognizable peaks. He's seen in profile, semi-crouched and naked, shorts bunched below his knees. Against the reflection of the sky on the water, one can make out what appears to be a descending turd. "Moved to

Colorado 15 years ago, finally made it to Maroon Lake," the caption read. "A scenic dump with no one there was worth the wait."

The big outdoor-apparel companies like to proclaim their conservationist values and their stewardship of the wild places that their products enable humans to visit. Patagonia, the North Face, Arc'teryx, R.E.I.: such brands have gone to great lengths to assure their customers—as purchasers of factory-made petroleum-based clothing and as guests in places that would be better off without them—that they are part of the solution. Sometimes the companies come by the rectitude honestly, and sometimes it's just marketing, or green-washing. Either way, the presumption is that the public wants, or can be made to want, to buy goods from a company that takes pains to protect, rather than poop on, the natural world.

Lesh has stalked a customer more like himself: the gearhead, the flouter of pieties, the exploder of gas tanks. "Sure, that's what appeals to a wider demographic," he told me, when I asked him about the Patagonias of the world. "But, me being a little guy, it's not interesting or unique. You're not getting noticed being super 'eco this' and 'eco that.' It's also just not my thing. I got sick of all that crap when I lived in Boulder. It was just a bunch of Northern California, Audi-driving trustafarian kids, what I call 'hippiecrites.' Go get your seven-dollar mocha latte with the bamboo straw and think you're saving the world."

For decades, the conflict over the country's public lands has followed familiar political and cultural lines: on one side, miners, loggers, ranchers; on the other, hikers, tree huggers, dances with wolves. Ford versus Subaru, gun rack versus fly rod, dam versus kayak. Despite all the griping and the apocalyptic talk, each side usually got some of what it wanted. The wildlands and open spaces are still vast; so are the clearcuts, oil fields, and uranium pits. You could almost pretend there was enough country to go around. But that delusion has become tougher to sustain as newcomers have poured in from the coasts and money has got its way, and as the stories people tell one another about

how to live, work, and play in these formerly rugged places have grown to reflect the national discourse, and all its polarizing baloney, rather than any serious consideration of common sense or the greater good.

The pandemic has accelerated the crowding and brought on intimations of a reckoning. Bumped out of cities, jobs, ruts, and schools, people have taken to the road and, in many parts of the West, overrun campgrounds and trailheads. Van-lifers and bucket-listers flaunt their roseate pretenses on social media, luring others with their filtered, unpopulated sunrise shots of Yosemite or Zion, while the locals, their trout streams now bumper to bumper with drift boats, talk grimly of Rivergeddon. Many of them moved there to get away, and now the get-away is moving in on them.

Colorado's I-70 corridor, which runs from Denver through the Front Range, past Vail to the Colorado Plateau, is probably the busiest, most domesticated stretch of the mountain West—heavily contested ground. A fair portion of it is occupied by large second homes whose owners, when they come around at all, do so by private jet. The association of conservationism with wealth and privilege has created an opening for the Internet troll for whom the landscape is not so much a livelihood as it is a backdrop for nihilistic tomfoolery and self-promotion. Rocky Mountain high: a green screen for a goad. A crisis of ecology gives rise to a comedy of manners.

Maybe there is room, in a land of double standards, for some nose-thumb-ing. The night before I flew to Denver to meet Lesh, around Halloween, I flipped through the new catalogue for Stio, a small skiwear company based in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. On page 54, there was a spread depicting two fair-haired women with a herding dog in a snowy field. The caption read "Owner of *In Season* baking, Franny Weikert, and Ellen Stryker hang dry a batch of reusable bread wraps for a fundraiser in Teton Valley, Idaho." I could suddenly see the appeal of plowing a Trooper through a flaming tower of shopping carts. I thought of Edward Abbey, the high-country scold and original monkey-wrencher, who was notorious for chucking his empty beers out the window of his car. "Of course I



litter the public highway,” he said. “After all, it’s not the beer cans that are ugly; it’s the highway that is ugly.”

The Virtika headquarters are in the Park Hill section of Denver, east of downtown, in a warehouse that used to be an industrial laundry. “Two idiots bought the place and tried to turn it into a weed grow,” Lesh said, after greeting me at the door. Bravo, a French bulldog, familiar from his videos, attacked my shoelaces. Lesh had bought the building from the idiots five years ago (there are still several marijuana operations nearby, including one called Dank; the neighborhood did not smell like Greeley), and now rented out two-thirds of the space, to a golf-instruction gym and an auto-repair garage.

Lesh is lean and strong, with blue eyes and long blond hair, often pulled back in a ponytail. He had on black fleece pants, a heavy gray work shirt, and Birkenstocks over white gym socks. He apologized for his complexion, which looked fine; the day before, at the urging of a girlfriend, he’d undergone a micro-needling facial procedure. He showed me a photo of this, and also some shots he’d just posted on Instagram of him using beeswax to remove his nostril hairs. Fastidious in some ways and in others not: he made clear that he had no fear of catching or spreading COVID. He doesn’t take precautions or wear a mask. Even though cases were now spiking in Colorado, he said that some doctors had told him the virus was less of a threat than the media would have us believe.

The open warehouse space combined a sprawling stockroom, stacked with boxes of Virtika inventory, and a workshop, where he soups up his snowmobiles and sports cars. In one corner, he had built an apartment, sparsely decorated, which he uses as an office and, now and then, as a bivouac. (His official residence is a one-bedroom condo in Breckenridge, a block from the chairlifts.) Upstairs, there is a kind of man ledge, with a sixteen-foot movie screen, concert speakers, and a massager lounge chair.

On the roof, which looks out toward downtown and the snowy high peaks

beyond, he had a hot tub, deck furniture, and a giant chess set, the kind where the rooks are the size of toddlers. He brought out a standard chessboard, and we played a game. He said he’d learned chess from Dan Bilzerian, the Instagram influencer, professional poker player, and former Presidential candidate. (He dropped out of the 2016 race and endorsed Donald Trump.) “He’s the one person who beats me,” Lesh said. Usually, around these parts, Lesh continued, he had to play without his queen to keep the games fair. By the time he beat me, he had two queens.

Downstairs, at a kitchen island, Lesh told me that there was a warrant out for his arrest. Stephen Laiche, his lawyer in Grand Junction, had strongly advised him to delete the Maroon Lake post. (“Taking a picture of yourself taking a dump is just gross,” Laiche recalls saying to himself. “Think that’s going to help you sell more clothes?”) Lesh didn’t want to. Laiche quit and filed a motion to be removed from the case. At the subsequent hearing—held remotely by phone, owing to the pandemic—Lesh, out of confusion or intransigence, failed to call in at the appointed time, and the judge issued the arrest warrant. Lesh hoped to clear it all up with the judge the following morning, at his phone-in arraignment.

The charges at hand had to do with two other Instagram incidents. Last April, with the Independence Pass charges still pending, and with the state’s ski hills and public lands shut down because of COVID, Lesh decided to poke the bear. He posted a couple of photos of him snowmobiling off a jump in a closed terrain park at the Keystone ski area, which, like Breckenridge, is operated by the company that owns Vail ski resort, on land belonging to the Forest Service. Lesh wrote, “Solid park sesh, no lift ticket needed. #Fuck-VailResorts.” This was trespassing, not just trolling. Keystone alerted the Forest Service and the sheriff’s office, which launched a new investigation. Lesh wrote, in a new post, “Those money hungry half-wits decimate wilderness around the world, build lifts, lodges, and resorts, and treat their customers and employ-

ees like shit . . . people flock by the millions and pay \$200/day to ski there. I post a picture, harming no one . . . everyone loses their minds.”

Soon afterward, Lesh posted another provocation: a picture of him standing atop a mossy fallen tree trunk that bisects Hanging Lake. The lake, an hour’s hike from the road, in Glenwood Canyon, is a popular and much photographed Colorado landmark, known for its aquamarine shallows and surrounding waterfalls and cliffs of mottled travertine. The Forest Service bans swimming there, and also fishing, dogs, and drones. A sign prohibits walking on the downed trunk, but there was Lesh on Instagram, out in the middle of the lake, shirtless, in a bathing suit: “Testing out our new board shorts (coming soon) on the world’s most famous log.” The comments came in hard and fast, a few praising the mischief (“Legend!”) but most strafing him as an “entitled tool” and a “fuckwit” who had desecrated one of Colorado’s most sacred sites for the purpose of pitching his crappy gear.

Lesh eventually settled the Independence Pass charges (he wound up with a five-hundred-dollar fine and fifty hours of community service), but not long afterward the U.S. Attorney in Grand Junction announced that the Feds were charging him with six new misdemeanors, relating to the incidents at Keystone and Hanging Lake. Each carried a possible jail term of up to six months. In setting the conditions of Lesh’s release, a judge ordered him to cease trespassing and breaking laws on public lands, and stipulated that any further violation would result in the forfeiture of his bond.

Lesh, at the kitchen island, began parsing his legal troubles. “I love the outdoors,” he said. “I don’t take extra napkins or use disposable silverware. I’m not wasteful. I’ve never destroyed anything.” He referred to his critics as “environmental terrorists or extremists.” With regard to Independence Pass, he went on, “They said I was in wilderness, I said I was not. They had zero evidence.” He added, “There’s some imaginary line drawn out there.” (The wilderness-area line, though not painted on the tundra, is not imaginary.) He and his friend hadn’t intended to ride on grass, but they had found themselves running out of snow on the way back to the road.





As for Keystone: “These multimillion-dollar ski areas like Vail desecrate the wilderness more than one snowmobile can. They chop down trees, use water and electricity to make snow, and build lodges, lifts, and parking lots. Here I am—or supposedly me—with one misdemeanor, in a terrain park, and everyone goes nuts. It’s absolutely ridiculous.”

An associate named Michelle Anderson, a former college-basketball player from Missouri, arrived and began working quietly on a laptop. Lesh said they’d met on Bumble and had dated for a while, and when that trailed off he’d hired her. He told me that she was the best employee he’d ever had. He also accused her of peeing too loudly in the bathroom off the kitchen. “I have a strong vagina,” she said. It had been eight months since I’d been in an office. Was this how people now spoke to one another at work?

That afternoon, Lesh received an anonymous package containing what was supposed to look like dung but was probably just mud with a little straw—he threw it in the trash. He’d been getting a lot of these.

“I don’t think Patagonia has to put up with this,” Anderson said.

“The more hate I got, the more people got behind me, from all over the world,” Lesh said. “These people couldn’t give two fucks about me walking on a log in Hanging Lake. It was an opportunity to reach a whole new group of people—while really solidifying the customer base we already had.”

Lesh came over to me and, standing close, said, “We’re going to post this video next week.” On his phone, he played a short sequence that purported to show that the Hanging Lake and Maroon Lake photos had been Photoshopped: the image of himself, and of his reflection in the water, being scrubbed into stock landscapes. If this video was real—and who at this point could say—he hadn’t stood on the log or crapped in the lake after all. He’d hoaxed an entire state, and the Feds.

“So I’ll release this and then we’ll see how eager they are to take it to trial,” Lesh said.

I asked if he’d told the judge or his lawyer about the Photoshopping. He said he’d been reluctant to tell his lawyer: “I wanted them to charge me with

something. The only evidence they have is the photos I posted on Instagram, which I know are fake, because I faked them. I was pissed off about them charging me for the snowmobiling on Independence Pass with zero evidence. I realized they are quick to respond to public outcry. I wanted to bait them into charging me.”

He went on, “I want to be able to post fake things to the Internet. That’s my fucking right as an American.”

For lunch, we drove to a food court downtown, where Lesh said he liked to take dates so that he doesn’t have to pay for their meals. “I have to drive sane, because of the warrant,” he said, and then proceeded to surge and swerve aggressively in and out of traffic in his souped-up black BMW, which had no rear license plate. Lesh declined to reveal Virtika’s annual sales, though he claimed they were up thirty per cent since he’d posted the photo at Hanging Lake; he said he owns the company outright and carries very little debt. “People generally think we’re bigger than we are,” he told me. “I wouldn’t sell it for less than three or five million dollars.” His life is a tax deduction: his airplane, his cars, his snowmobiles. “Everything’s a writeoff. I pay myself next to nothing.” In the past, he has laid himself off in the summer, in order to collect unemployment. He said he received an array of P.P.P. loans last spring. He manufactures the gear in China, ships it by

sea, and sells mostly direct to consumers. It’s not as rigorously designed and tested (or as expensive) as, say, the North Face’s, or as uselessly fashionable as Moncler’s. With its garish or industrial color schemes, baggy fits, and heavy materials, it draws its inspiration and utility from the terrain park, and targets groms and Newschoolers more than helicopter dads or hang-dryers of reusable bread wrappers.

People often run Lesh down as a trust-fund brat spending Daddy’s money. In the intermountain West, such suspicion is justifiably pervasive. Lesh has never had a trust fund, but he does have a kind of twisted inheritance. His parents, who are divorced, are artists. His father, Scott, is the son and grandson of tool-and-die-factory owners from Chicago. (His grandfather lost both thumbs in the machines.) Scott Lesh made sculptures out of dead animals. He scavenged roadkill and whatever carcasses he could find and framed them in animated postures. Lesh’s mother, a cellist, also from Chicago, is of Norwegian heritage.

After David was born, the family moved to India, first to what is now Mumbai and then to two outlying towns, Palaspe and Panvel. Lesh’s mother, with a guru and a couple of grants, pioneered the adaptation of Indian music for the cello. Lesh’s father scoured hills and riverbanks for animal and human remains. Both parents recall that David basically did not stop crying for the first two years of his life. He learned to speak Hindi



*“Don’t worry—my pet turtle Freddy is trained to get help in these situations and I’m sure he’s halfway to the castle by now.”*



and Marathi, and attended a makeshift preschool with an instructor who taught in English. “I was the only white kid in the entire town,” Lesh recalled.

“We were the only white family in a thirty-mile radius,” his mother said.

Not long before Lesh’s sixth birthday, the onset of the first Iraq War and a fear of retribution from the locals, many of whom were Muslim, spurred the family, now with an infant daughter, to flee India for Madison, Wisconsin. The parents got teaching jobs. “We were fucking broke,” Lesh said. “Food stamps, hand-me-downs.” Lesh, blue-eyed and blond-haired, spoke English with an Indian accent. He was an outcast, a weird kid with weird parents, and he struggled to find friends.

“My plan was to do really well and become a business consultant, like my mother’s brother, who was forty and fucking hot doctor chicks,” Lesh said. “He was the first person I knew who had a cell phone. I never wanted to be a broke artist like my parents. But in middle school I stopped caring. I was a little hooligan.” He was expelled in eighth grade for calling in a bomb threat, and in high school became known as Bomb Threat Boy. The guys he skied with, at a scrappy local hill called Tyrol Basin, called him the Criminal. By now, he and a gang of friends were stealing cars and motorcycles and boosting liquor from distribution warehouses. He was in and out of jail. At one point, he appeared as a plaintiff on the syndicated court-TV program “Judge Mathis,” trying to get a girl who had thrown a glass bottle at his new car to reimburse the cost of repairs. “He’s cynical,” the girl told the judge. “He’s a little jerk.” The judge ruled in Lesh’s favor. By senior year, he was living in a house with friends, dealing pot, and skiing competitively. For a time, out on probation, he wore an ankle bracelet, which on one occasion he cut off in order to enter a ski competition out of state. He got third place, and two weeks back in jail. Somehow, he managed to graduate from high school, and then began vagabonding around the West, racking up minor felonies for reckless motorcycling, and halfheartedly attending community college. Eventually, he ditched school and focussed on skiing.

After Lesh graduated from high school, his mother moved back to India.

“He was impossible,” she said, of his teen-age years. “Every day was a nightmare for me.” She now lives in Turkey.

Lesh had suggested that he fly me in his plane somewhere for dinner—over the mountains to Crested Butte, perhaps, or down to Colorado Springs. Single engine, small cockpit, Front Range updrafts, a pilot with a penchant for foolishness: I had misgivings.

For one, there was the time when he crashed a new plane into the waters off Half Moon Bay, California. He had taken to the air with a friend, with a plan to be photographed flying over the Golden Gate Bridge. Another friend trailed in a second small plane, to get the shot. Lesh’s engine conked out, and he skipped into the Pacific, four miles off the coast. He filmed the whole ordeal, while his friend sent out a Mayday call. They treaded water for forty-five minutes, waiting for the Coast Guard to arrive. Lesh’s poise under duress, his *Virtika* sweatshirt, and his history of attention-seeking soon led people to suspect that the whole thing was staged.

“How fucking dumb do you have to be to think I did that on purpose?” he told me. “Maybe I would’ve crashed my old airplane, which I was trying to sell and was overinsured, and not my new plane, which was underinsured.”

Lesh’s first brush with infamy had come five years before, when he released a series of vulgar videos, under the *Virtika* flag. The first, called “Last Friday,” chronicled a supposed day in the life of David Lesh. To the strains of Gucci Mane and Master P, he wakes up in bed with two naked women, chugs a bottle of booze, sparks a blunt, and then, sporting a grill over his teeth, flies his friends in his plane to the mountains to skid around on icy roads, shoot out road signs with handguns, pull stunts on skis and snowmobiles, then fly home for a rager at a night club. Naughty white boys playing tough: the video went viral and caused a stir. Among other things, it got Lesh and his friends fired from their jobs as coaches of the free-skiing team at the University of Colorado Boulder. A few weeks later, Lesh put out a mocking non-apology video, a twist on LeBron James’s “I am not a role model” ad (which was itself inspired by Charles Barkley’s 1993 Nike

spot of the same name). One sequence depicts twin naked Leshes having sex with each other. In another, he asks, “Should I tell you I’m an asshole?” and then shoots himself in the head. This wasn’t the kind of stuff you usually got from outdoor-athlete-adventurer exemplars on Instagram. This wasn’t “Protect Our Winters.”

A series of “Friday” videos ensued, each more incendiary than the last. Some of the sequences are obviously fantastical, some not. Lesh and his friends impersonate naked homeless men asleep in a dumpster, shoot heroin, vomit on one another, pour milk on naked breasts, abandon (and then blow up) a private jet full of women in bikinis, chop down trees and set them afire—and then toss tanks of fuel in the blaze and shoot those with machine guns. They also keep skiing, snowmobiling, and piling in and out of Lesh’s Beechcraft.

All this was another argument against signing on as his co-pilot. Sealing my decision was what I heard at his arraignment, via conference call, on the morning of October 30th—another instance of exhibiting what one might call questionable judgment, this time in the stiff and often merciless wind shear of the federal justice system. I dialled in and listened on mute.

The judge initiated the proceedings by dropping the arrest warrant, mainly on the ground that it wasn’t worth putting federal marshals at risk, during a pandemic, for such a petty offense. The prosecutor argued that the defendant needed a tighter leash: “David Lesh has made it abundantly clear he has little regard for court orders, whether those be orders to behave himself on public land or appear in court on time.” He said that he’d received twenty-two letters expressing “appall” at Lesh’s antics. (“Only twenty-two?” Lesh said to himself.)

By now, Lesh had told Laiche, the lawyer who was essentially firing him as a client, about the Photoshopping of the Maroon Lake photo. Laiche had worried that bringing this up in court would complicate Lesh’s defense and possibly open him up to other charges. (“I like the shit out of the guy,” Laiche told me. “We had fun. I wish the best for him.” He also said that people had been calling his office and making threats. “There was some crazy fucking lady from Texas:



‘Let David know we’re out to get him.’”)

The judge said, “It isn’t clear to the point of probable cause when the picture that supposedly purports to show Mr. Lesh pooping in Maroon Lake was taken.” The Forest Service’s forensic investigation had determined, for example, that the lake’s water level in the photo was higher than it had been this fall.

The prosecutor said, “The mere posting of the photograph shows the defendant’s intent to flout the orders of this court.”

The judge seemed to agree. He said that he was banning Lesh from setting foot on federally owned land—“to protect the land not only from Mr. Lesh’s direct actions but also from the influence that Mr. Lesh clearly has by posting these in the messages.”

Furthermore, the judge ordered Lesh not to post, “or cause to be posted, on any kind of social-media platform” (he named a dozen), anything depicting him violating any laws anywhere on federally owned land. That’s a lot of land. The ruling in effect forbade Lesh to ski and snowmobile—just about every ski area and backcountry slope in the state of Colorado is on federal turf—and therefore, in his view, to market his company and make a living. And, perhaps worst of all, it prevented him from continuing to play the role, online, of environmental outlaw. The judge asked if he understood the terms.

Lesh began to speak. “Your Honor, um, yeah, the post of the defecating in Maroon Lake, um, I—”

Lesh’s soon-to-be-former attorney spoke up: “Mr. Lesh. Your Honor, I’m advising David Lesh to refrain from talking about that. These issues can be dealt with through counsel, but, Mr. David Lesh, please don’t get into those matters right now.”

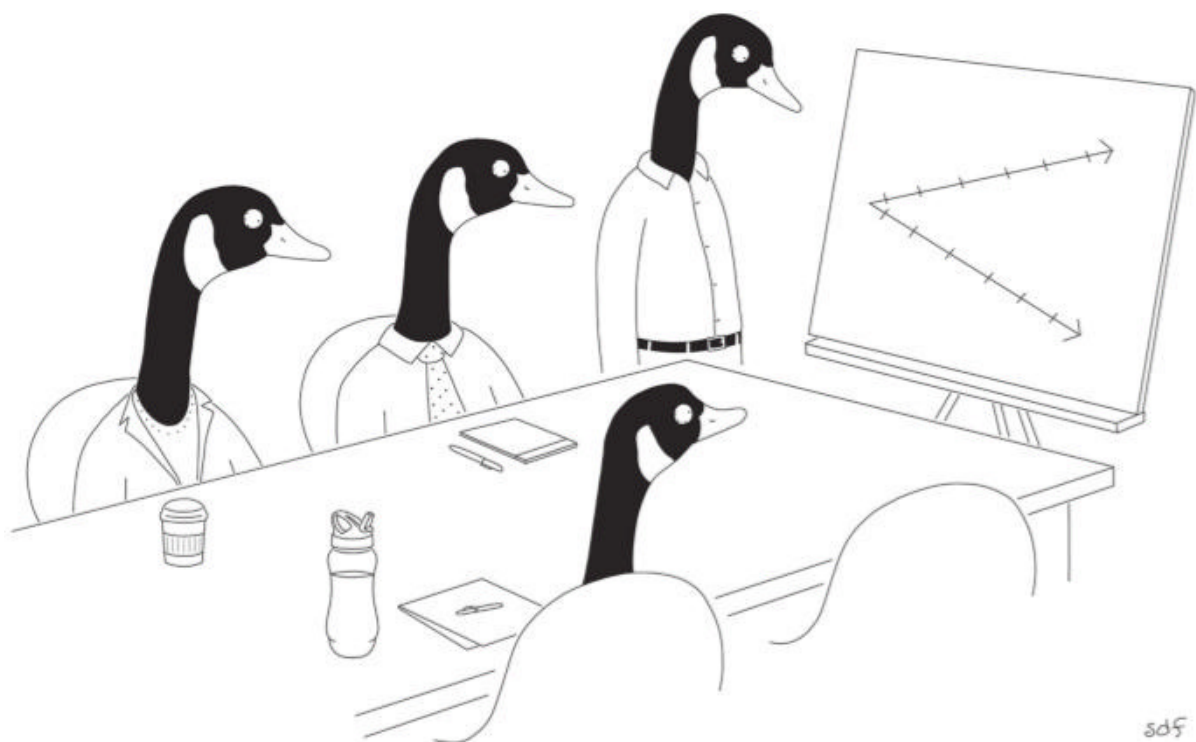
“O.K., I won’t get into the details of that image, but I do feel like—”

“Mr. Lesh! Mr. Lesh!”

“Please allow me to talk!”

“No, sir. David Lesh, please stop talking. Your Honor, would the court note my client is speaking over my advice and I’m advising David Lesh not to speak, not to say anything? His matters will be respected and addressed through counsel.”

“Your Honor, I would like to be able to talk.”



The judge said, “Stop talking for a moment. Your attorney is giving you frankly very good advice.”

Lesh asked for a continuance, so he could find new counsel.

“That request is denied,” the judge said.

That night, the night before Halloween, Lesh and a woman he was seeing, along with Anderson and another acquaintance, a solar-power entrepreneur from the eastern part of the state, went out for sushi, indoors, at a restaurant downtown. The election was a few days away. “I’m not going to vote,” Lesh said. “I think both candidates are garbage. If I were voting for my personal interests, it would be Trump, but I can’t.” The others were leaning toward Trump, though they were entertaining the idea of casting their ballots for Kanye West, who’d recently taken up residence in the Rockies, in Jackson Hole. They were all certain that Trump was going to win in a landslide. Afterward, they headed off to visit a haunted house, something called the Thirteenth Floor. Lesh had bought me a ticket, but, wary of COVID and weary of the company, I begged off.

A few weeks later, he released the video revealing his Photoshop handiwork. It begins with an overhead shot of him in bed, working on a laptop, surrounded by naked women. In the comments, his fans cheered him on for sticking it to the do-gooders and the snitches:

“SAVAGE!!!!” “Absolute troll god.” On Cyber Monday, Virtika had its biggest day ever of sales. Lesh’s new lawyer, in a bid for a modification of the judge’s terms, filed a motion detailing the Photoshopping scheme. (“The Maroon Lake Post is inauthentic. Mr. Lesh has never been to Maroon Lake.”) The judge eventually denied the motion. Meanwhile, on an early-season snowmobiling trip, Lesh wrecked his BMW. Then one of his tenants burned down an R.V., also torching a shipping container where Lesh had stored most of his keepsakes, personal effects, and tools. Lesh posted a photo of the rubble and wrote, “I think being raised in India by hippie, artist, musician parents helps minimize attachment to possessions.”

I talked to a lawyer in Colorado who is familiar with the case. He said, “I can tell you exactly what is going to happen to David Lesh. He is going to keep up these shenanigans. He’s going to go to trial. He’s going to insist on testifying, over the advice of his attorney. It’s a petty offense, but the judge will be sufficiently annoyed by him that he will give him two years’ probation, just enough to give David the room to step on his dick. He’ll have to meet with a probation officer once a month. They’ll UA him—urinalysis. Or they’ll get him for something. And that’s how David will be the first guy I’ve ever heard of to serve Bureau of Prisons time on a petty offense.” Perhaps that, too, would be good for business. ♦



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## Ask your doctor about XOFLUZA within the first 48 hours of your symptoms.

Over-the-counter flu medicines just treat symptoms, but prescription XOFLUZA works differently. It attacks the flu virus at its source with just one dose. But your window for prescription treatment is short, so you need to **act fast**.

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### INDICATION AND IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION

#### 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.

#### 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
  - swelling of your face, throat or mouth
  - skin rash, hives or blisters
  - 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.**

For more information, go to [www.xofluza.com](http://www.xofluza.com)

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# THE HARD CROWD

*Coming of age on the streets of San Francisco.*

BY RACHEL KUSHNER



**I**t's alright, Ma, I'm only bleeding." You live your life alone but tethered to the deed of a mother. You live your life naked to the world and what it will pile upon you. And, no, you will not avoid death. You won't survive it. And by "you" I mean not just Jesus, who is invoked in this Bob Dylan song, whether intentionally or not, but you as in you, the person reading this. Someone loves you. That's not small. You suffer and she watches, living or dead. She can't protect you, but it's alright, Ma, I can make it.

Jimmy Carter used a famous line from the same Dylan song—"he not busy being born is busy dying"—to make a point about patriotism: America was busy being

born, Carter said, *not* busy dying. Italics mine. This was in his acceptance speech at the 1976 Democratic National Convention, in Madison Square Garden. I watched it on television with my grandparents, in their bed, as the three of us ate bowls of ice milk from Carvel, whose packaging, like everything that year, was bicentennial-themed, in red, white, and blue. For Carter, a lifelong Christian, surely the idea of being born had an undertone of religious conversion, of being brought closer to God, not just born but *reborn*: in a state of constant renewal, rejuvenation, renovation, change. I liked Jimmy Carter, a peanut farmer who wore denim separates on the campaign trail

and was approved by my anti-establishment family. I was seven and could not have understood what Carter meant, what Dylan meant.

You are busy being born for the whole long ascent of life, and then, after some apex, you are busy dying—that's the logic of the line, as I interpret it. Here, "being born" is an open and existential category: you are gaining experience, living intensely in the present, before the period of life when you are finished with the new. This "dying" doesn't have to be negative. It, too, is an open and existential category of being: the age when the bulk of your experience, the succession of days lived in the present, is mostly over. You turn reflective, interior; you examine and sort and tally. You reach a point where so much is behind you, but it continues to exist *somewhere*, as memory and absence at once, as images you'll never see again. None of it matters; it is gone. But it all matters; it lingers.

**I**'ve been replaying film footage I found on YouTube that was shot in 1966 or 1967 from a car slowly moving along Market Street, at night, in downtown San Francisco, the city where I grew up. The film begins near Ninth and Market and moves northeast through Civic Center, past multiple bright signs and theatre marquees against the night sky, their neon, in pink, red, and warm white, bleeding into the fog. This view of Market is before my time and not quite the street I recall. It's fancier, with all this electric glitz. Neon is a "noble" gas. Whatever else that means, it fits this eerie film.

Civic Center was where we kids went looking for trouble. In the daytime, cutting school to flip through poster displays in head shops, and at night going to the Strand, a theatre where grownups shared their Ripple wine and their joints. This section of Market is the southern edge of the Tenderloin, where a friend of mine, older than the rest of us, was the first to get a job, at age fifteen, working at a KFC on Eddy Street. Her employment there seemed impossibly mature and with it, even if Eddy Street scared me. As soon as I turned fifteen, I copied her and got hired at a Baskin-Robbins on Geary. Spent my after-school days huffing nitrous for kicks while earning \$2.85 an hour. At sixteen, I graduated to retail sales at American Rag, a large

*The author (left) and her friend Emily, circa 1983, at a Woolworth's photo booth.*

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MATT DORFMAN /  
SOURCE: COURTESY THE AUTHOR



vintage-clothing store on Bush Street that later, suspiciously, burned down. Business was slow. I straightened racks of dead men's gabardine, slacks and jackets that were shiny with wear, and joked around with my co-worker Alvin Gibbs, a bass player from a semi-famous punk band, the UK Subs. On my break, I wandered Polk Street, past the rent boys who came and went from the infamous Leland Hotel. It, too, later burned.

The Baskin-Robbins where I worked is gone. You might think personal memories can't be stored in the generic features of a global franchise, and so what does it matter. I also figured as much, until my mother talked me into having breakfast at an IHOP where I'd been a waitress, for the purpose of a trip down memory lane. "Why bother?" I'd said to her. "Every IHOP is identical." I was certain that nothing of me could linger in a place of corporate sameness, but she insisted. We sat down in a booth for two, and I was plunged into sense memory. The syrup caddies on each table, which I'd had to refill and clean after every shift; the large iced-tea canisters, sweet and unsweetened; the blue vinyl of the banquettes; the clatter from the kitchen, with its rhythmic metal-on-metal scraping of grease from the fry surface; the murmur of the TV from the break room where girls watched their soaps. A residue was on everything, specific and personal. My mother sat across from me, watching me reëncounter myself.

The YouTube footage of Market Street in 1966 is professional-grade cinematography, perhaps shot to insert in a dramatic feature. I want to imagine that it was an outtake from Steve McQueen's "Bullitt," but I have no evidence except that it's around the right time. The camera pauses at an intersection just beyond a glowing pink arrow pointing south. Above this bright arrow is "Greyhound" in the same bubble-gum neon, and "BUS" in luminous white. This is how I know that we are near the intersection of Seventh and Market.

The Greyhound station was still there when I moved to San Francisco, in 1979, at age ten. I don't remember the pink neon sign, but the station, now gone, remains vivid. It had an edge to it that was starkly different from the drab, sterile, and foggy Sunset District,

where we lived. I remember a large poster just inside the entrance that featured an illustration of a young person in bell-bottoms, and a phone number: "Runaways, call for help." And I can still summon the rangy feel of the place, of people who were not arriving or departing but lurking, native inhabitants of an underground world that flourished inside the bus station.

Next to Greyhound, up a steep staircase, was Lyle Tuttle's tattoo parlor, where my oldest friend from San Francisco, Emily, a fellow Sunset girl, got her first tattoo, when we were sixteen. This was the eighties, and tattoos were not conventional and ubiquitous, as they are now. There were people in the Sunset who had them, but they were outlaw people. Like the girl in a house on Noriega where we hung out when I was twelve or thirteen, whose tattoo, on the inside of her thigh, was a cherry on a stem and, in script, the words "Not no more." I remember walking up the steep steps to Lyle Tuttle's with Emily, entering a cramped room where a shirtless man was leaning on a counter as Tuttle worked on his back. "You guys are drunk," Tuttle said. "Come back in two hours." If anyone cared that Emily was under eighteen, I have no memory of it, and neither does she.

Later, I briefly shared a flat on Oak Street with a tattoo artist named Freddy Corbin, who was becoming a local celebrity. Freddy was charming and charismatic, with glowing blue eyes. He and his tattoo-world friends lived like rock stars. They were paid in cash. I'd never seen money like that, casual piles of hundred-dollar bills lying around. Freddy drove a black '66 Malibu with custom plates. He had a diamond winking from one of his teeth. Women fawned over him. Our shared answering machine was full of messages from girls hoping Freddy would return their calls, but he became mostly dedicated to dope, along with his younger brother, Larry, and a girl named Noodles, who both lived upstairs. Larry and Noodles came down only once every few days, to answer the door and receive drugs, then went back upstairs. Later, I heard they'd both died. Freddy lived, got clean, is still famous.

The shadow over that Oak Street house is only one part of why I never wanted a tattoo. I find extreme steps

toward permanence frightening. I prefer memories that stay fragile, vulnerable to erasure, like the soft feel of the velvet couches in Freddy's living room. Plush, elegant furniture bought by someone living a perilous high life.

After the light changes on Seventh, the camera continues down Market, passing the Regal, a second-run movie house showing "The Bellboy," starring Jerry Lewis, according to the marquee. When I knew the Regal, it was a peepshow; instead of Jerry Lewis, its marquee featured a revolving "Double in the Bubble," its daily show starring two girls. On the other side of the street, out of view, is Fascination, a gambling parlor that my friend Sandy and I went to the year we were in eighth grade, because Sandy had a crush on the money changer there. We wasted a lot of time at Fascination, watching gaming addicts throw rubber balls up numbered wooden lanes, smoke curling from ashtrays next to each station. It was quiet in there, like a church—just the sound of rolling rubber balls. Those hours at Fascination, and many other corners of my history, made it into a novel of mine, "The Mars Room," after I decided that the real-world places and people I knew would never be in books unless I wrote the books. So I appointed myself the world's leading expert on ten square blocks of the Sunset District, the north section of the Great Highway, a stretch of Market, a few blocks in the Tenderloin.

The camera pans past the Warfield and, next to it, a theatre called the Crest. By the time I worked as a bartender at the Warfield, the Crest had become the Crazy Horse, a strip joint where a high-school friend, Jon Hirst, worked the door in between prison stints. The last time I ever saw Jon, we were drinking at the Charleston, around the corner on Sixth Street. I was with a new boyfriend. Jon was prison-cut and looking handsome in white jeans and a black leather jacket. He was in a nostalgic mood about our shared youth in the avenues. He leaned toward me so my boyfriend could not hear, and said, "If anyone ever fucks with you, I mean anyone, I will hurt that person." I hadn't asked for this service. It was part of Jon's tragic chivalry, his reactive aggression. His prison life continued



after he pleaded guilty to stabbing someone outside the 500 Club, on Seventeenth and Guerrero. A dispute had erupted over an interaction between the guy and a woman Jon and his friends were with, concerning the jukebox.

Farther down Sixth Street was the Rendezvous, where hardcore legends Agnostic Front played one New Year's, along with a band whose female singer was named Pearl Harbor and looked Hawaiian. The show ended early, because Agnostic Front's vocalist got into a fistfight with a fan, right there in front of the stage. Pearl Harbor, who was dressed in a nurse's uniform, stayed pure of the whole affair, standing to one side in her short white dress, white stockings, and starched white nurse's hat, as these brutes rolled around on the beer-covered floor.

The camera moves on. It gets to the Woolworth's at Powell and Market, where we used to steal makeup. On the other side of the street, out of view, is the enormous Emporium-Capwell, the emporium of our plunder, Guess and Calvin Klein, until, at least for me, I was caught, and formally arrested in the department store's subbasement, which featured, to my surprise, police ready to book us and interrogation rooms, where they handcuffed you to a metal pole, there in the bowels of the store. I remember a female officer with a Polaroid camera. I would be banned from the store for life, she said. This was the least of my worries, and I found it funny. She took a photo to put in my file. I gave her a big smile. I remember the moment, me chained to the pole and her standing over me. As she waved the photo dry, I caught a glimpse and vainly thought that, for once, I looked pretty good. It's always like that. You get full access to the bad and embarrassing photos, while the flattering one is out of reach. Who knows what happened to the photo, and my whole "dossier." Banned for life. But the Emporium-Capwell is gone. I have outlived it!

The camera swings south as it travels closer to Montgomery, down Market. It passes Thom McAn, where we went to buy black suede boots with slouchy tops. Every Sunset girl had a

pair, delicate boots that got wrecked at rainy keggers in the Grove, despite the aerosol protectant we sprayed on them.

So many of my hours are spent like this, but with me as the camera, panning backward into scenes that are not retrievable. I am no longer busy being born. But it's all right. The memories, the "material," it starts to answer questions. It gives testimony. It talks.

Years after passing the young hustlers in front of the Leland Hotel while on break from my job straightening dead men's suits, I became friends with one of those Polk Street boys. His name was Tommy. He was a regular during my shifts at

the Blue Lamp, my first bartending gig, on Geary and Jones, at the top of the Tenderloin. This was the early nineties, and all the girls I knew were bartenders or waitresses or strippers and most of the boys were bike messengers at Western or Lightning Express, or they drove taxis for Luxor.

Tommy's face was classically beautiful. It could have sold products, maybe cereal, or vitamins for growing boys. And he was blank like an advertisement, but his blankness was not artifice. It was a kind of refusal. He was perversely and resolutely blank, like a character in a Bret Easton Ellis novel, except with no money or class status. He wore the iconic hustler uniform—tight jeans, white tennies, aviator glasses, Walkman. He would come into the Blue Lamp and keep me company on slow afternoons. I found his blankness poignant; he was obviously so wounded that he had to void himself by any means he could. I knew him as Tommy or sometimes Thomas and learned his full name—Thomas Wenger—only when his face looked up at me one morning from a newspaper. Someone collecting bottles and cans had found Tommy's head in a dumpster three short blocks from the Blue Lamp. I don't know if the case was ever solved. It's been twenty-six years, but I can see Tommy now. He's wearing those aviator glasses and looking at me as I type these words, the two of us still in the old geometry, him seated at the bar, me behind it, the room afternoon-empty,

the day sagging to its slowest hour.

There were times, working at the Blue Lamp, when I felt sure that people who had come and gone on my shifts had committed grievous acts of violence. And, in fact, I may have seen Tommy with the person who killed him, unless that's merely my active imagination, though I never would have imagined that someone I knew would be decapitated, his head ending up in a dumpster. There are experiences that stay stubbornly resistant to knowledge or synthesis. I have never wanted to treat Tommy's death as material for fiction. It's not subtle. It evades comprehension. In any case, people would think I was making it up.

The owner of the Blue Lamp was named Bobby. I remember his golf cap and his white boat shoes and the purple broken capillaries on his face, the gallery of sad young women who tolerated him in exchange for money and a place to crash. Bobby lived out in the Excelsior, but he and his brother had built an apartment upstairs from the Blue Lamp, for especially wild nights. I never once went up there. It wasn't a place I wanted to see. Sometimes the swamper—Jer, we all called him—slept up there when he knew Bobby wasn't coming around, but mostly Jer slept in the bar's basement, on an old couch next to the syrup tanks. Jer's life philosophy was "Will work for beer." He restocked the coolers, fetched buckets of ice, mopped up after hours. Drank forty bottles of Budweiser a day, and resorted to harder stuff only on his periodic Greyhound trips to Sparks, to play the slots. (That Jer was a "Sparks type" and not a Reno type was one of the few things about himself that he vocalized.)

Whole parts of Jer, I suspected, were missing, or in some kind of permanent dormancy. I wondered who he had been before he lived this repetitive existence of buckets of ice and Budweiser, day after day after day. He owned nothing. He slept in his clothes, slept even in his mesh baseball hat. He lived at the bar and never went out of character. He was a drinker and a swamper. He said little, but it was him and me, bartender and barback, night after night. And Jer had my back literally. After 2 A.M. closings, he would come outside and watch me start my motorcycle, an orange Moto Guzzi I parked on its center stand on the sidewalk. He insisted that I call





the bar when I got home. I always did.

There was another bar up the street from the Blue Lamp that had a double bed in the back where a man lay all day, as if it were his hospice. You'd be playing pool and drinking with your friends and there was this man, in bed, behind a rubber curtain. Even the names of these establishments, all part of an informal Tenderloin circuit, evoke for me that half-lit world: Cinnabar, the Driftwood, Jonell's. I remember a man, youngish and well dressed, who would come into the Blue Lamp and act crazy on my shifts. Once, he came in threatening to kill himself. I said, "Go ahead, but not in here." Did I really say that? I can't remember what I said.

There was a girl who started cocktail-waitressing at the Blue Lamp on busy nights when we had live bands. She told me that her name was Johnny but also that it wasn't her real name. She was a recovering drug addict who missed heroin so much she started using it again in the months that she worked at the Blue Lamp. She bought a rock from one of the Sunday blues jammers and that was literally what he sold her. A pebble. He ripped her off, and why not. If Johnny is still alive, which may not be the case, do I really want to know the long and likely typical story of her recovery and humility and day-to-day hopes, very small hopes that, for her, are everything? The glamour of death, or the banality of survival: which is it going to be?

My friend Sandy, whose real name I have redacted from this story, came into the Blue Lamp asking me to hawk her engagement ring for her. We had grown up together and she'd even lived with my family for a while. My parents loved Sandy and love her still. They did their best. By the time she was looking to sell her ring, she had been living a hard life in the Tenderloin for a decade, working as a prostitute, and had become engaged to one of her johns. Who knows what happened to him. Maybe he bought a wife somewhere else.

I didn't pawn Sandy's ring. I can't remember why. I did a lot of other things for Sandy. Tried to keep her safe. Took my down comforter to her flophouse in Polk Gulch, the very blanket she'd slept under when she shared my room in junior high. Kept a box of baking soda in a kitchen cabinet of every house I lived

in, so that she could cook her drugs. She had a dealer who liked to eat cocaine instead of smoke it or shoot it. He would slice pieces off a large rock and nibble on them, like powdery peanut brittle. Sandy giggled about this idiosyncrasy as if it were cute. Anything she described became charming instead of horrible. That was her gift. She was blond and blue-eyed and too pretty for makeup, other than a little pot of opalescent gloss that she kept in her jacket pocket and which gave her lips a fuchsia sheen. She'd say to my parents in her sweet singsong, "Hi, Peter! Hi, Pinky!" Even when my dad went to visit her in jail. Hi, Peter!

I don't know where Sandy is now. Under the radar. I've Googled. It's all court records. Bench warrants, failures to appear. I wrote to an ex-husband of hers through Facebook. He's brought up their children by himself. No response. I don't blame him. Probably he just wants a normal life.

I never wrote about most of the people from the Blue Lamp. The bar is gone. The main characters have died. Perhaps I feared that if I transformed them into fiction I'd lose my grasp on the real place, the evidence of which has evaporated. Or perhaps a person can write about things only when she is no longer the person who experienced them,

and that transition is not yet complete. In this sense, a conversion narrative is built into every autobiography: the writer purports to be the one who remembers, who saw, who did, who felt, but the writer is no longer that person. In writing things down, she is reborn. And yet still defined by the actions she took, even if she now distances herself from them. In all a writer's supposed self-exposure, her claim to authentic experience, the thing she leaves out is the galling idea that her life might become a subject put to paper. Might fill the pages of a book.

When I got my job at the Blue Lamp, I was living on the corner of Haight and Ashbury. Oliver Stone was making a movie about the Doors and attempting to reconstitute the Summer of Love for his film shoot. I disliked hippies and didn't even want to see fake ones, in costume. I suspect now that this animosity may have been partly due to the outsized influence of my parents' beatnik culture and their investment in jazz, in Blackness, in vernacular American forms as the true elevated art, even as my early childhood, in Eugene, Oregon, was loaded with hippies. By my twenties, they had begun to seem like an ahistorical performance: middle-class white kids who had stripped down to Jesus-like austerity, a penance I considered indulgent and lame.

Oliver Stone filmed on our corner,



*"If you don't have any small children, you can substitute mushrooms."*





*"What's he doing now?"*

under our windows. Probably he had made a deal with our landlord, paid him. We got nothing. So we entered and exited all day long. My look then was all black, with purple-dyed hair. My downstairs neighbor was in a band called Touch Me Hooker; their look was something like a glam-rock version of Motörhead. The film crew had to call "Cut!" every time someone from our building stepped out of the security gate. The next day, the film crew was back. We put speakers in our windows and played the Dead Boys. I'm not sure why we were so hostile. There was one Doors song I always liked, called "Peace Frog."

In her eponymous "White Album" essay, Joan Didion insists that Jim Morrison's pants are "black vinyl," not black leather. Did you notice? She does this at least three times, refers to Jim Morrison's pants as vinyl.

Dear Joan:

*Record albums* are made out of vinyl. Jim Morrison's pants were leather, and even a Sacramento debutante, a Berkeley Tri-Delt, should know the difference.

Sincerely,  
Rachel

As a sixteen-year-old freshman at Didion's alma mater, Berkeley, I was befriended by a Hare Krishna who sold vegetarian cookbooks on Sproul Plaza. He didn't seem like your typical Hare Krishna. He had a low and smoky voice with a downtown New York inflection and he was covered with tattoos—I could see them under his saffron robes. He had a grit, a gleam. A neck like a wrestler. He'd be out there selling his cookbooks and we'd talk. I wouldn't see him for a while. Then he'd be back. This went on for all four years of my college experience. Much later, I figured out, through my friend Alex Brown, that this tough-guy Hare Krishna was likely Harley Flanagan, the singer of the Cro-Mags, a New York City hardcore band that toured with Alex's band, Gorilla Biscuits. The Krishnas were apparently Harley's vacation from his Lower East Side life, or the Cro-Mags were his vacation from his Krishna gig. Or there was no conflict and he simply did both.

Terence McKenna, the eating-magic-mushrooms-made-us-human guy, was way beyond the hippies. I once saw him give an eerily convincing lecture at the

Palace of Fine Arts, in San Francisco. He made a lot of prophecies with charts, but I forgot to check if any of them came true. The industrial-noise and visual impresario Naut Humon was sitting in the row in front of me. He had dyed-black hair, wore steel-toed boots and a "boilersuit," as it's called. Remember Naut Humon? I believe he had a compound near a former Green Tortoise bus yard down in Hunters Point. Only a human would come up with a name like that.

This was in the era of Operation Green Sweep, when Bush—I mean H.W.—orchestrated D.E.A. raids of marijuana growers north of the city, in Humboldt County. My friend Sandy, whom I mentioned earlier, got in on that. Profited. Sandy knew these guys who rented a helicopter and hired a pilot. They swooped low over growers and scared people into fleeing and abandoning their crops. Then they went in dressed like Feds and bagged all the plants. Pot is now big business if you want to get rich the legal way. If I knew what was good for me, I'd be day-trading marijuana stocks right now, instead of writing this essay.

When Sandy and I wandered Haight Street as kids, the vibe was not good feelings and free love. It was sleazier, darker. We hung out at a head shop called the White Rabbit. People huffed ether in the back. I first heard "White Room" by Cream there, a song that ripples like a stone thrown into cold, still water. "At the party she was kindness in the hard crowd." It's a good line. Or is it that she was *kindest* in the hard crowd? Like, that was when she was virtuous? Either way, the key is that hard crowd. The White Rabbit was the hard crowd. The kids who went there. The kids I knew. Was I hard? Not compared with the world around me. I tell myself that it isn't a moral failing to be the soft one, but I'm actually not sure.

Later, skinheads ruined the Haight-Ashbury for me and a lot of other people. They crashed a party at my place. They fought someone at the party and threw him over the bannister at the top of the stairs. He landed on his head two floors down. I remember that this ended the party but not how badly hurt the person was. The skinheads had a Nazi march down Haight Street. The leader was someone I knew from Herbert Hoover



Middle School, a kid who'd "had trouble fitting in," as the platitudes tell us and the record confirms. He was a nerd, he was New Wave, he tried to be a skater, a peace punk, a skinhead, and eventually he went on "Geraldo" wearing a tie, talking Aryan pride. Before all that, he was a kid who invited us to his apartment to drink his dad's liquor. People started vandalizing the place, for kicks. Someone lit the living-room curtains on fire.

**T**ouch Me Hooker, the band my neighbor on Haight Street was in, included a guy I grew up with, Tony Guerrero. He and his brother Tommy lived around the corner from me in the Sunset. My brother skateboarded with them, was part of their crew until he broke his femur bombing the Ninth Avenue hill. Later, Tommy went pro. When we were kids, Tommy and Tony started a punk band called Free Beer: add that to a gig flyer and you'll get a crowd.

When I see people waxing romantic about the golden days of skateboarding, I am ambivalent. Caught up in the uglier parts. I think of people who were widely considered jackasses and who died in stupid ways suddenly being declared "legends." I can't let go of the bad memories. The constant belittling of us girls. The slurs and disrespect, even though we were their friends and part of their circle. Can't let it go, and yet those people, that circle, come first for me, in a cosmic order, on account of what we share.

As I said, I was the soft one. Maybe that's why I was so desperate to escape San Francisco, by which I mean desperate to leave a specific world inside that city, one I suspected I was too good for and, at the same time, felt inferior to. I had models that many of my friends did not have: educated parents who made me aware of, hungry for, the bigger world. But another part of my parents' influence was the bohemian idea that real meaning lay with the most brightly alive people, those who were free to wreck themselves. Not free in that way, I was the mind always at some remove: watching myself and other people, absorbing the events of their lives and mine. To be hard is to let things roll off you, to live in the present, not to dwell or worry. And even though I stayed out late, was committed to the end, some part of me had left early. To become a writer is to have left

early no matter what time you got home. And then I left for good, left San Francisco. My friends all stayed. But the place still defined me, as it has them.

Forty-three was our magic number, in the way someone's might be seven or thirteen. I see the number forty-three everywhere and remember that I'm in a cult for life, as a girl from the Sunset. I scan Facebook for the Sunset Irish boys, known for violence and beauty and scandal. They are posed "peckerwood style" in Kangol caps and wifebeaters in front of Harleys and custom cars. Many have been forced out of the city. They live in Rohnert Park or Santa Rosa or Stockton. But they have SF tattoos. Niners tattoos. Sunset tattoos. An image of the Cliff House with the foaming waves below, rolling into Kelly's Cove.

**S**ometimes I am boggled by the gallery of souls I've known. By the lore. The wild history, unsung. People crowd in and talk to me in dreams. People who died or disappeared or whose connection to my own life makes no logical sense, but exists, as strong as ever, in a past that seeps and stains instead of fading. The first time I took Ambien, a drug that makes some people sleep-fix sandwiches and sleepwalk on broken glass, I felt as if everyone I'd ever known were gathered around, not unpleasantly. It was a party and had a warm reunion feel to it. We were all there.

But sometimes the million stories I've got and the million people I've



known pelt the roof of my internal world like a hailstorm.

The Rendezvous, where Pearl Harbor performed in her white stockings and her starched nurse's hat, was down the street from the hotel where R. Crumb's brother Max lived. We knew Max because he sat out on the sidewalk all day bumming change and performing his lost mind for sidewalk traffic. We didn't know he was R. Crumb's brother. We

knew that only after the movie "Crumb" came out. I'm not sure if I'll ever watch that movie again. Too sad.

Harley from the Cro-Mags is a fixed memory from Berkeley, but whatever he wanted never registered. Maybe he just wanted to sell me vegetarian cookbooks. This was a few years after he almost held up the artist Richard Prince, who lived in Harley's East Village building. Richard said, "Hey, pal, I'm your neighbor. Rob someone else." (Harley denies that this happened.)

Richard Prince got his start at the same gallery where Alex Brown showed his work, Feature. There was another artist at Feature who supposedly painted on sleeping bags once upon a time. I actually never saw the Sleeping Bag Paintings. I heard about them and that was enough. There'd be a moment in a late-night conversation when someone would inevitably mention them. We'd all nod. "Yeah, the Sleeping Bag Paintings." Robert Rauschenberg made a painting on a quilted blanket. That's pretty close and way earlier: 1955. The blanket belonged to Dorothea Rockburne. I guess he borrowed it. A quilt is more traditional and American, while sleeping bags are for hippies, for transients with no respect.

I thought, as I wrote the previous paragraph, that I could be making this stuff up, that no one had painted on sleeping bags, the fabric was too slippery. But last night I ran into the guy who had. I hadn't seen him in twenty years. He confirmed. Not just the paintings but himself and also me. We exist.

**T**he things I've seen and the people I've known: maybe it just can't matter to you. That's what Jimmy Stewart says to Kim Novak in "Vertigo." He wants Novak's character, Judy, to wear her hair like the fictitious and unreachable Madeleine did. He wants Judy to be a Pacific Heights class act and not a downtown department-store tramp.

"Judy, please, it can't matter to you."

Outrageous. He's talking about a woman's own hair. Of course it matters to her.

I'm talking about my own life. Which not only can't matter to you—it might bore you.

So: Get your own gig. Make your litany, as I have just done. Keep your tally. Mind your dead, and your living, and you can bore me. ♦



## LIFE HACKS

*New gene-editing techniques could be used to revive species. Or do them in.*

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

**O**din, in Norse mythology, is an extremely powerful god who's also a trickster. He has only one eye, having sacrificed the other for wisdom. Among his many talents, he can wake the dead, calm storms, cure the sick, and blind his enemies. Not infrequently, he transforms himself into an animal; as a snake, he acquires the gift of poetry, which he transfers to people, inadvertently.

The Odin, in Oakland, California, is a company that sells genetic-engineering kits. The company's founder, Josiah Zayner, sports a side-swept undercut, multiple piercings, and a tattoo that urges: "Create Something Beautiful." He holds a Ph.D. in biophysics and is a well-known provocateur. Among his many stunts, he has coaxed his skin to produce a fluorescent protein, ingested a friend's poop in a D.I.Y. fecal-matter transplant, and attempted to deactivate one of his genes so that he could grow bigger muscles. (This last effort, he acknowledges, failed.) Zayner calls himself a genetic designer and has said that his goal is to give people access to the resources they need to modify life in their spare time.

The Odin's offerings range from a "Biohack the Planet" shot glass, which costs three bucks, to a "genetic engineering home lab kit," which runs almost two thousand dollars and includes a centrifuge, a polymerase-chain-reaction machine, and an electrophoresis gel box. I opted for something in between: the "bacterial CRISPR and fluorescent yeast combo kit," which set me back two hundred and nine dollars. It came in a cardboard box decorated with the company's logo, a twisting tree circled by a double helix. The tree, I believe, is supposed to represent Yggdrasil, whose trunk, in Norse mythology, rises through the center of the cosmos.

Inside the box, I found an assortment of lab tools—pipette tips, petri dishes, disposable gloves—as well as

several vials containing *E. coli* and all I'd need to rearrange its genome. The *E. coli* went into the fridge, next to the butter. The other vials went into a bin in the freezer, with the ice cream.

Genetic engineering is, by now, middle-aged. The first genetically engineered bacterium was produced in 1973. This was soon followed by a genetically engineered mouse, in 1974, and a genetically engineered tobacco plant, in 1983. The first genetically engineered food approved for human consumption, the Flavr Savr tomato, was introduced in 1994; it proved such a disappointment that it went out of production a few years later. Genetically engineered varieties of corn and soy were developed around the same time; these, by contrast, have become more or less ubiquitous.

In the past decade or so, genetic engineering has undergone its own transformation, thanks to CRISPR—short-hand for a suite of techniques, mostly borrowed from bacteria, that make it vastly easier for biohackers and researchers to manipulate DNA. (The acronym stands for "clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats.") CRISPR allows its users to snip a stretch of DNA and then either disable the affected sequence or replace it with a new one.

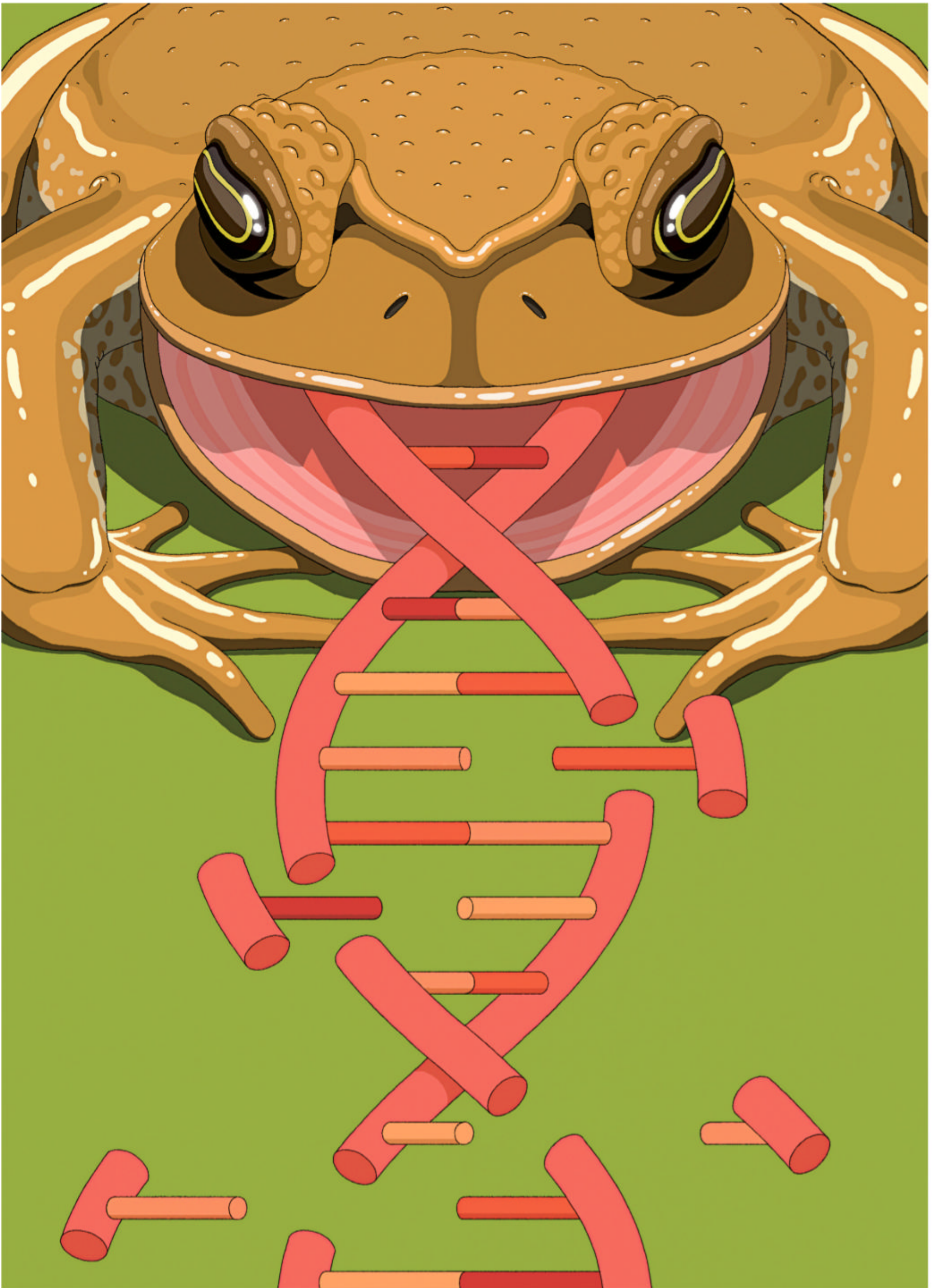
The possibilities that follow are pretty much endless. Jennifer Doudna, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and one of the developers of CRISPR, has put it like this: we now have "a way to rewrite the very molecules of life any way we wish." With CRISPR, biologists have already created—among many, many other living things—ants that can't smell, beagles that put on superhero-like brawn, pigs that resist swine fever, macaques that suffer from sleep disorders, coffee beans that contain no caffeine, salmon that don't lay eggs, mice that don't get fat, and bacteria whose genes contain, in code, Eadweard Muybridge's famous series of photographs

showing a horse in motion. Two years ago, a Chinese scientist, He Jiankui, announced that he had produced the world's first CRISPR-edited humans, twin baby girls. According to He, the girls' genes had been tweaked to confer resistance to H.I.V., though whether this is actually the case remains unclear. Following his announcement, He was fired from his academic post, in Shenzhen, and sentenced to three years in prison.

I have almost no experience in genetics and have not done hands-on lab work since high school. Still, by following the instructions that came in the box from the Odin, in the course of a weekend I was able to create a novel organism. First I grew a colony of *E. coli* in one of the petri dishes. Then I doused it with the various proteins and bits of designer DNA I'd stored in the freezer. The process swapped out one "letter" of the bacteria's genome, replacing an "A" (adenine) with a "C" (cytosine). Thanks to this emendation, my new and improved *E. coli* could, in effect, thumb its nose at streptomycin, a powerful antibiotic. Although it felt a little creepy engineering a drug-resistant strain of *E. coli* in my kitchen, there was also a definite sense of achievement, so much so that I decided to move on to the second project in the kit: inserting a jellyfish gene into yeast in order to make it glow.

**T**he Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness, in the city of Geelong, is one of the most advanced high-containment laboratories in the world. It sits behind two sets of gates, the second of which is intended to foil truck bombers, and its poured-concrete walls are thick enough, I was told, to withstand a plane crash. There are five hundred and twenty air-lock doors at the facility and four levels of security. "It's where you'd want to be in the zombie apocalypse," a staff member told me. Until recently, the center was known as





*The strongest argument for gene editing cane toads, house mice, and ship rats is the simplest: what's the alternative?*



the Australian Animal Health Laboratory, and at the highest biosecurity level—BSL-4—there are vials of some of the nastiest animal-borne pathogens on the planet, including Ebola. (The laboratory gets a shout-out in the movie “Contagion.”) Staff members who work in BSL-4 units can’t wear their own clothes into the lab and have to shower for at least three minutes before heading home. The animals at the facility, for their part, can’t leave at all. “Their only way out is through the incinerator” is how one employee put it to me.

About a year ago, not long before the pandemic began, I paid a visit to the center, which is an hour southwest of Melbourne. The draw was an experiment on a species of giant toad known familiarly as the cane toad. The toad was introduced to Australia as an agent of pest control, but it promptly got out of control itself, producing an ecological disaster. Researchers at the A.C.D.P. were hoping to put the toad back in the bottle, as it were, using CRISPR.

A molecular biologist named Mark Tizard, who was in charge of the project, had agreed to show me around. Tizard is a slight man with a fringe of white hair and twinkling blue eyes. Like many of the scientists I met in Australia, he’s from somewhere else—in his case, England. Before getting into amphibians, Tizard worked mostly on poultry. Several years ago, he and some colleagues at the center inserted a jellyfish gene into a hen. This gene, similar to the one I was planning to plug into my yeast, encodes a fluorescent protein. A chicken

in possession of it will, as a consequence, emit an eerie glow under UV light. Next, Tizard figured out a way to insert the fluorescence gene so that it would be passed down to male offspring only. The result is a hen whose chicks can be sexed while they’re still in their shells.

Tizard knows that many people are freaked out by genetically modified organisms. They find the idea of eating them repugnant, and of releasing them into the world anathema. Though he’s no provocateur, he, like Zayner, believes that such people are looking at things all wrong. “We have chickens that glow green,” Tizard told me. “And so we have school groups that come, and when they see the green chicken, you know, some of the kids go, ‘Oh, that’s really cool. Hey, if I eat that chicken, will I turn green?’ And I’m, like, ‘You eat chicken already, right? Have you grown feathers and a beak?’”

Anyway, according to Tizard, it’s too late to be worried about a few genes here and there. “If you look at a native Australian environment, you see eucalyptus trees, koalas, kookaburras, whatever,” he said. “If I look at it, as a scientist, what I’m seeing is multiple copies of the eucalyptus genome, multiple copies of the koala genome, and so on. And these genomes are interacting with each other. Then, all of a sudden, *ploomph*, you put an additional genome in there—the cane-toad genome. It was never there before, and its interaction with all these other genomes is catastrophic. It takes other genomes out completely.” He went on, “What people are not see-

ing is that this is already a genetically modified environment.” Invasive species alter the environment by adding entire creatures that don’t belong. Genetic engineers, by contrast, just alter a few stretches of DNA here and there.

“What we’re doing is potentially adding maybe ten more genes onto the twenty thousand toad genes that shouldn’t be there in the first place, and those ten will sabotage the rest and take them out of the system and so restore balance,” Tizard said. “The classic thing people say with molecular biology is: Are you playing God? Well, no. We are using our understanding of biological processes to see if we can benefit a system that is in trauma.”

Formally known as *Rhinella marina*, cane toads are a splotchy brown, with thick limbs and bumpy skin. Descriptions inevitably emphasize their size. “*Rhinella marina* is an enormous, warty bufonid (true toad),” the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service notes. The U.S. Geological Survey observes that “large individuals sitting on roadways are easily mistaken for boulders.” The biggest cane toad ever recorded was fifteen inches long and weighed six pounds—as much as a chubby chihuahua. A toad named Big Bette, who lived at the Queensland Museum, in Brisbane, in the nineteen-eighties, was nine and a half inches long and almost as wide—about the size of a dinner plate. The toads will eat almost anything they can fit in their oversized mouths, including mice, dog food, and other cane toads.

Cane toads are native to South America, Central America, and the southernmost tip of Texas. In the mid-eighteen-hundreds, they were brought to the Caribbean. The idea was to enlist the toads in the battle against beetle grubs, which were plaguing the region’s cash crop, sugar cane. (Sugar cane, too, is an import; it is native to New Guinea.) From the Caribbean, the toads were shipped to Hawaii. In 1935, a hundred and two toads were loaded onto a steamer in Honolulu, headed for Australia. A hundred and one survived the journey and ended up at a research station in sugar-cane country, in northeast Queensland. Within a year, they’d produced more than 1.5 million eggs. (A female cane toad can produce up to thirty thou-



*“It’s not that I can’t stand the cold—I just hate the holidays.”*



sand eggs at a go.) The resulting toadlets were intentionally released into the region's rivers and ponds.

It's doubtful that the toads ever did the sugar cane much good. Cane beetles perch too high off the ground for a boulder-size amphibian to reach. This didn't faze the toads. They found plenty else to eat, and continued to produce toadlets by the truckload. From a sliver of the Queensland coast, they pushed north, into the Cape York Peninsula, and south, into New South Wales. Sometime in the nineteen-eighties, they crossed into the Northern Territory. In 2005, they reached a spot known as Middle Point, in the western part of the Territory, not far from the city of Darwin.

Along the way, something curious happened. In the early phase of the invasion, the toads were advancing at the rate of about six miles a year. A few decades later, they were moving at the pace of twelve miles a year. By the time they hit Middle Point, they'd sped up to thirty miles a year. When researchers measured the individuals at the invasion front, they found out why. The toads had significantly longer legs than the toads back in Queensland, and this trait was heritable. The *Northern Territory News* played the story on its front page, under the headline "SUPER TOAD." Accompanying the article was a doctored photo of a cane toad wearing a cape. "It has invaded the Territory and now the hated cane toad is evolving," the newspaper gasped. Contra Darwin, it seemed, evolution *could* be observed in real time.

Cane toads are not just disturbingly large; from a human perspective, they're also ugly, with bony heads and what looks like a leering expression. The trait that makes them truly "hated," though, is that they're toxic. When an adult is bitten or feels threatened, it releases a milky goo that swims with heart-stopping compounds. Dogs often suffer cane-toad poisoning, the symptoms of which range from frothing at the mouth to cardiac arrest. People who are foolish enough to consume cane toads risk winding up dead.

Australia has no poisonous toads of its own; indeed, it has no native toads at all. So its fauna hasn't evolved to be wary of them. The cane-toad story is thus the Asian-carp story inside out, or maybe upside down. Invasive Asian carp are wreaking havoc in America

because nothing eats them; cane toads are a menace in Australia because just about everything eats them. The list of species whose numbers have crashed due to cane-toad consumption is long and varied. It includes freshwater crocodiles, which Australians call "freshies"; yellow-spotted monitor lizards, which can grow more than five feet long; northern blue-tongued lizards, which are actually skinks; Australian water dragons, which look like small dinosaurs; common death adders, which, as the name suggests, are venomous snakes; and king brown snakes, which are also venomous. By far the most winning animal on the victims list is the northern quoll, a sweet-looking marsupial. Northern quolls are about a foot long, with pointy faces and spotted brown coats. When young quolls graduate from their mother's pouch, she carries them on her back.

In an effort to slow down the cane toads, Australians have come up with all sorts of ingenious and not-so-ingenious schemes. The Toadinator is a trap fitted out with a portable speaker that plays the cane toad's song, which some compare to a dial tone and others to the thrum of a motor. Researchers at the University of Queensland have developed a bait that can be used to lure cane toad tadpoles to their doom. People shoot the toads with air rifles, whack them with hammers, bash them with golf clubs, purposely run them over with their cars, stick them in the freezer until they solidify, and spray them with a compound called HopStop, which, its manufacturer assures buyers, "anaesthetizes toads within seconds" and dispatches them within an hour. Communities organize "toad-busting" militias. A group called the Kimberley Toad Busters has recommended that the Australian government offer a bounty for each toad eliminated. The group's motto is "If everyone was a toad buster, the toads would be busted!"

At the point that Tizard got interested in cane toads, he'd never actually seen one. Geelong lies in southern Victoria, a region that the toads haven't yet conquered. But one day, at a meeting, he was seated next to a molecular biologist who studied the amphibian. She told

him that, despite all the busting, the toads kept on spreading. "She said it was such a shame, if only there was some new way of getting at it," Tizard recalled. "Well, I sat down and scratched my head."

He went on, "I thought, Toxins are generated by metabolic pathways. That means enzymes, and enzymes have to have genes to encode them. Well, we have tools that can break genes. Maybe we can break the gene that leads to the toxin."

As luck would have it, a team at the University of Queensland, led by a chemist named Rob Capon, had recently isolated a crucial enzyme behind the toxin.

Tizard brought on a postdoc, Caitlin Cooper, to help with the mechanics. Cooper has shoulder-length brown hair and an infectious laugh. (She, too, is from somewhere else—in her case, Massachusetts.) No one had ever tried to gene edit a cane toad before, so it was up to Cooper to figure out how to do it. Cane-toad eggs, she discovered, had to be washed and then pierced just so, with a very fine pipette, and this needed to be done quickly, before they had time to start dividing. "Refining the microinjection technique took quite a while," she told me.

As a sort of warmup exercise, Cooper set out to change the cane toad's color. A key pigment gene for toads (and, for that matter, mammals) codes for the enzyme tyrosinase, which controls the production of melanin. Cooper reasoned that disabling this pigment gene should produce toads that were light-colored instead of dark. She mixed some eggs and sperm in a petri dish, microinjected the resulting embryos with various CRISPR-related compounds, and waited. Three oddly mottled tadpoles emerged. One of the tadpoles died. The other two, both male, grew into mottled toadlets. They were christened Spot and Blondie. "I was absolutely rapt when this happened," Tizard told me.

Cooper next turned her attention to "breaking" the toads' toxicity. Cane toads store their poison in glands behind their shoulders. In its raw form, the poison is merely sickening. But, when attacked, toads can produce the enzyme that Capon isolated—bufotoxin hydrolase—which amplifies the venom's potency a





hundredfold. Using CRISPR, Cooper edited a second batch of embryos to delete a section of the gene that codes for bufotoxin hydrolase. The result was a batch of less toxic toadlets.

After we'd talked for a while, Cooper offered to show me her toads. This entailed penetrating deeper into the A.C.D.P., through more air-lock doors and layers of security. We all put scrubs on over our clothes and booties over our shoes. Cooper spritzed my tape recorder with some kind of cleaning fluid. "Quarantine Area," a sign said. "Heavy Penalties Apply." I decided it would be better not to mention the Odin and my own rather less secure gene-editing adventures.

Beyond the doors was a sort of anti-septic barnyard, filled with animals in variously sized enclosures. The smell was a cross between a hospital and a petting zoo. Near a bloc of mouse cages, the detoxed toadlets were hopping around a plastic tank. There were a dozen of them, about ten weeks old and each about three inches long. "They're very lively, as you can see," Cooper said. The tank had been outfitted with everything a person could imagine a toad would want: fake plants, a tub of water, a sunlamp. I thought of Toad Hall, "replete with every modern convenience." One of the toads stuck out its tongue and nabbed a cricket. "They will eat literally anything," Tizard said. "They'll eat each other. If a big one encounters a small one, it's lunch." Let loose in the Australian countryside, a knot of detoxed toads presumably wouldn't last long. Some would become lunch, for either freshies or lizards or death adders, and the rest would be outbred by the hundreds of millions of toxic toads already hopping across the landscape.

What Tizard had in mind for them was a career in education. Research on quolls suggests that the marsupials can be trained to steer clear of cane toads. Feed them toad legs laced with an emetic, and they will associate toads with nausea and learn to avoid them. Detoxed toads, according to Tizard, would make an even better training tool: "If they're eaten by a predator, the predator will get sick, but not die, and it will go, 'I'm never eating a toad again.'"

Before they could be used for teaching quolls—or for any other purpose—the detoxed toads would need a variety

of government permits. When I visited, Cooper and Tizard hadn't started in on the paperwork, but they were already contemplating other ways to tinker. Cooper thought it might be possible to fiddle with one of the genes that produce the gel coat on the toads' eggs and to do so in such a way that the eggs couldn't be fertilized.

"When she described the idea to me, I was, like, 'Brilliant!'" Tizard said. "If we can take steps to knock down their fecundity, that's absolute gold."

A few feet away from the detoxed toads, Spot and Blondie were sitting in their own tank, an even more elaborate affair, with a picture of a tropical scene propped in front for their enjoyment. They were almost a year old and fully grown, with thick rolls of flesh around their midsections, like sumo wrestlers. Spot was mostly brown, with one yellowish hind leg; Blondie was more richly variegated, with whitish hind legs and light patches on his forelimbs and chest. Cooper reached a gloved hand into the tank and pulled out Blondie, whom she'd described to me as "beautiful." He immediately peed on her. He appeared to be smiling malevolently. He had, it seemed to me, a face only a genetic engineer could love.

According to the standard version of genetics that kids learn in school, inheritance is a roll of the dice. Let's say a person (or a toad) has received one version of a gene from his mother—call it A—and a rival version of this gene—A1—from his father. Then any child of his will have even odds of inheriting an A or an A1, and so on. With each new generation, A and A1 will be passed down according to the laws of probability.

Like much else that's taught in school, this account is only partly true. There are genes that play by the rules and there are renegades that don't. Outlaw genes fix the game in their own favor and do so in a variety of devious ways. Some interfere with the replication of a rival gene; others make extra copies of themselves to increase their odds of being passed down; and still others manipulate the process of meiosis, by which eggs and sperm are formed. Such rule-breaking genes are said to "drive." Even if they confer no fitness advantage—indeed, even if they impose a fitness cost—they're

passed on more than half of the time. Some particularly self-serving genes are passed on more than ninety per cent of the time. Driving genes have been discovered lurking in a great many creatures, including mosquitoes, flour beetles, and lemmings, and it's believed that they could be found in a great many more, if anyone took the trouble to look for them. The most successful driving genes are hard to detect, because they've driven other variants to oblivion.

Since the nineteen-sixties, it's been a dream of biologists to exploit the power of gene drives—to drive the drive, as it were. Thanks to CRISPR, this dream has now been realized, and then some. In bacteria, which might be said to hold the original patent on the technology, CRISPR functions as an immune system. Bacteria that possess a "CRISPR locus" can incorporate snippets of DNA from viruses into their own genomes. They use these snippets, like mug shots, to recognize potential assailants. Then they dispatch CRISPR-associated, or Cas, enzymes, which work like tiny knives. The enzymes slice the invaders' DNA at critical locations, thus disabling them.

Genetic engineers have adapted the CRISPR-Cas system to cut pretty much any DNA sequence they wish. They've also figured out how to induce a damaged sequence to stitch into itself a thread of foreign DNA it's been supplied with. (This is how my *E. coli* were fooled into replacing an adenine with a cytosine.) Since the CRISPR-Cas system is a biological construct, it, too, is encoded in DNA. This turns out to be key to creating a gene drive. Insert the CRISPR-Cas genes into an organism and the organism can be programmed to perform the task of genetic reprogramming on itself.

In 2015, a group of scientists at Harvard announced that they'd used this self-reflexive trick to create a synthetic gene drive in yeast. (Starting with some cream-colored yeast and some red yeast, they produced colonies that, after a few generations, were all red.) This was followed three months later by an announcement from researchers at the University of California, San Diego, that they'd used much the same trick to create a synthetic gene drive in fruit flies. (Fruit flies are normally brown; the drive, pushing a gene for a kind of albinism, yielded offspring that were yellow.) Seven months later,



the San Diego researchers, along with some colleagues from the University of California, Irvine, announced that they had created a gene drive in *Anopheles* mosquitoes, which carry malaria.

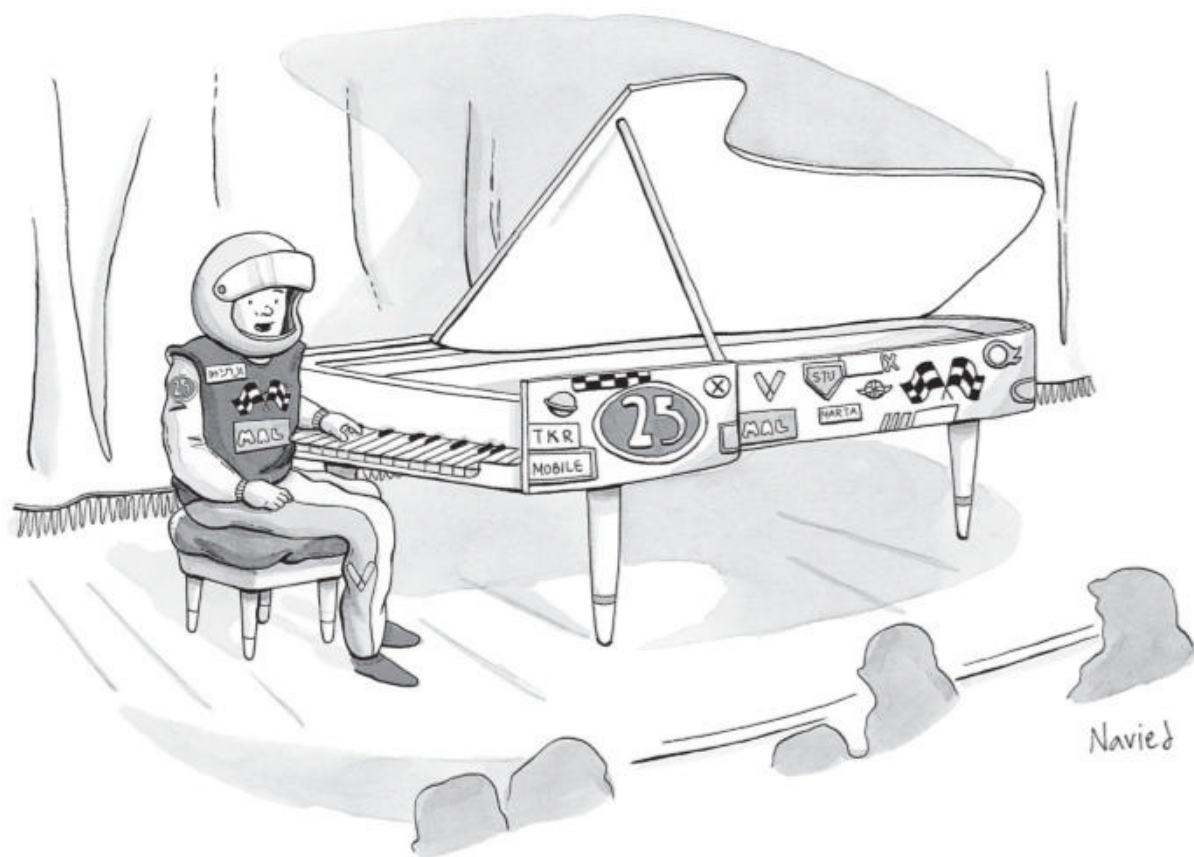
If CRISPR confers the power to “rewrite the very molecules of life,” a synthetic gene drive increases that power exponentially. Suppose the researchers in San Diego had released their yellow fruit flies. Assuming that those flies had found mates, swarming around some campus dumpster, their offspring, too, would have been yellow. And assuming that those offspring survived and also successfully mated, their progeny would, in turn, have been yellow. The trait would have continued to spread, ineluctably, from the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters, until yellow ruled.

And there’s nothing special about color in fruit flies. Just about any gene in any plant or animal can—in principle, at least—be programmed to load the inheritance dice in its own favor. This includes genes that have themselves been modified, or borrowed from other species. It should be possible, for example, to engineer a drive that would spread a broken toxin gene among cane toads. It may also be possible one day to create a drive for corals that would push a gene for heat tolerance, to help them survive global warming.

In a world of synthetic gene drives, the border between the human and the natural, between the laboratory and the wild, already deeply blurred, all but dissolves. In such a world, not only do people determine the conditions under which evolution is taking place, people can—again, in principle—determine the outcome.

The first mammal to be fitted out with a CRISPR-assisted gene drive will almost certainly be a mouse. Mice are what’s known as a “model organism.” They breed quickly, are easy to raise, and their genome has been intensively studied.

Paul Thomas is a pioneer in mouse research. His lab is in Adelaide, at the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute, a sinuous building covered in pointy metal plates. (Adelaideans refer to the building as “the cheese grater”; when I went to visit, I thought it looked more like an ankylosaurus.) As soon as the first paper on CRISPR as a



*“This next piece is also allegro.”*

gene-editing tool was published, in 2012, Thomas recognized it as a game changer. “We jumped on it straightaway,” he told me. Within a year, his lab had used CRISPR to engineer a mouse afflicted with epilepsy.

When the first papers on synthetic gene drives came out, Thomas once again plunged in. “Being interested in CRISPR and being interested in mouse genetics, I couldn’t resist the opportunity to try to develop the technology,” he said. Initially, his goal was just to see if he could get the technology to work: “We didn’t really have much funding—we were doing it on the smell of an oily rag—and these experiments, they’re quite expensive.”

While Thomas was still, in his words, “just dabbling,” he was contacted by a group that calls itself GBIRD. The acronym, pronounced “gee-bird,” stands for Genetic Biocontrol of Invasive Rodents, and the group’s ethos might be described as Dr. Moreau joins Friends of the Earth. “Like you, we want to preserve our world for generations to come,” GBIRD’s Web site says. “There is hope.” The site features a picture of an albatross chick gazing lovingly at its mother.

GBIRD wanted Thomas’s help designing a very particular kind of mouse gene drive—a so-called suppression drive, intended to defeat natural selection entirely. Its purpose is to spread a trait so

deleterious that it can wipe out a population. Researchers in Britain have already engineered a suppression drive for *Anopheles gambiae* mosquitoes. Their goal is to eventually release the modified mosquitoes in Africa.

Thomas told me that there were various ways to go about designing a self-suppressing mouse, most having to do with sex. He was particularly keen on the idea of an X-shredder mouse. Mice, like other mammals, have two sex-determining chromosomes—XXs are female, XYs male. Sperm carry a single chromosome, either an X or a Y. An X-shredder mouse is a mouse who has been gene-edited so that all of his X-bearing sperm are defective. “Half the sperm drop out of the sperm pool, if you like,” Thomas explained. “They can’t develop any more. That leaves you with just Y-bearing sperm, so you get all male progeny.” Put the shredding instructions on the Y chromosome and the mouse’s offspring will, in turn, produce only sons, and so on. With each generation, the sex imbalance will grow, until there are no females left to reproduce.

Thomas said that work on a gene-drive mouse was going more slowly than he’d hoped. Still, he thought that by the end of the decade someone would develop one. It might be an X-shredder, or it might use a design scheme that’s





*"There had better not be any socialists under my bed."*

yet to be imagined. Mathematical modelling suggests that an effective suppression drive would be extremely efficient; a hundred gene-drive mice released on an island could take a population of fifty thousand ordinary mice down to zero within a few years. "So that's quite striking," Thomas said. "That's the best-case scenario. It's something to aim for."

**I**t's often said that we live in the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch defined by human impacts on the planet. One of the features of this new epoch is a redistribution of the world's rodents. Everywhere that people have settled—and even some places they've only visited—mice and rats have tagged along, often with ugly consequences.

The Pacific rat (*Rattus exulans*) was once confined to Southeast Asia. Starting about three thousand years ago, seafaring Polynesians carried it to nearly every island in the Pacific. Its arrival set off wave after wave of destruction that claimed an estimated thousand species of birds. Later, European colonists brought to those islands—and many others—ship rats (*Rattus rattus*), setting off further waves of extinctions that are still ongoing. In the case of New Zealand's Big South Cape Island, ship rats arrived in the nineteen-sixties, by which point naturalists were on hand

to watch the carnage. Despite intensive efforts to save them, three species endemic to the island—one bat and two birds—disappeared.

The house mouse (*Mus musculus*) originated on the Indian subcontinent; it can now be found from the tropics to very near the poles. According to Lee Silver, the author of "Mouse Genetics," "Only humans are as adaptable (some would say less so)." Under the right circumstances, mice can be just as fierce as rats, and every bit as deadly. Gough Island, which lies more or less midway between Africa and South America, is home to the world's last two thousand breeding pairs of Tristan albatross. Video cameras installed on the island have recorded gangs of *Mus musculus* attacking albatross chicks and eating them alive. "Working on Gough Island is like working in an ornithological trauma center," Alex Bond, a Canadian conservation biologist, has written.

For the past few decades, the weapon of choice against invasive rodents has been brodifacoum, an anticoagulant that induces internal hemorrhaging. Brodifacoum can be incorporated into bait and then dispensed from feeders, or it can be spread by hand, or dropped from the air. (First you ship a species around the world, then you poison it from helicopters.) Hundreds of uninhabited islands have been demoused and deratted in this way,

and such campaigns have helped bring scores of species back from the edge, including New Zealand's Campbell Island teal, a small, flightless duck, and the Antiguan racer, a grayish lizard-eating snake.

The downside of brodifacoum, from a rodent's perspective, is pretty obvious: internal bleeding is a slow and painful way to go. From an ecologist's perspective, too, there are drawbacks. Non-target animals often take the bait or eat rodents that have eaten it. In this way, poison spreads up and down the food chain. And if just one pregnant mouse survives an application, she can readily repopulate an island.

Gene-drive mice would scuttle around these problems. Impacts would be targeted. There would be no more bleeding to death. And, perhaps best of all, gene-drive rodents could be released on inhabited islands, where dropping anticoagulants from the air is, understandably, frowned upon.

But as is so often the case, solving one set of problems introduces new ones. In this case, big ones. Humongous ones. Gene-drive technology has been compared to Kurt Vonnegut's *ice-nine*, a single shard of which is enough to freeze all the water in the world. A single X-shredder mouse on the loose could, it's feared, have a similarly chilling effect—a sort of *mice-nine*.

To guard against a Vonnegutian catastrophe, various fail-safe schemes have been proposed, with names like killer rescue, multi-locus assortment, and daisy chain. All of them share a basic, hopeful premise: it should be possible to engineer a gene drive that's effective but not *too* effective. Such a drive might be engineered so as to exhaust itself after a few generations, or it might be yoked to a gene variant that's limited to a single population on a single island. It has also been suggested that if a gene drive did somehow manage to go rogue it might be possible to send out into the world another gene drive, featuring a "Cas9-triggered chain ablation"—or CATCHA—sequence, to chase it down. What could possibly go wrong?

**W**hile I was in Australia, I wanted to get out of the lab and into the countryside. I thought it would be fun to see some northern quolls. In the photos I'd found online, they looked



awfully cute—a bit like miniature badgers. But when I asked around I learned that quoll-spotting required a lot more expertise and time than I had. It would be much easier to find some of the amphibians that were killing them. So one evening I set out with a biologist named Lin Schwarzkopf to go toad hunting.

Schwarzkopf, who's from Canada, was one of the inventors of the Toadinator trap, and the first thing we did was stop by her office, at James Cook University, so that I could take a look at the device. It was a cage about the size of a toaster oven, with a plastic flap door. When Schwarzkopf turned on the trap's little speaker, the office reverberated with the toad's thrumming call.

"Male toads are attracted to anything that sounds even remotely like a cane toad," she told me. "If they hear a generator, they'll go to it." James Cook University is in northern Queensland, the region where the toads were first introduced. Schwarzkopf figured we should be able to locate some toads right on the university grounds. We strapped on headlamps and went outside. It was about 9 P.M., and the place was deserted, except for the two of us and a family of wallabies hopping nearby. We wandered around for a while, looking for the glint of a malevolent eye. Just as I was beginning to lose heart, Schwarzkopf spotted a toad in the leaf litter. Picking it up, she immediately identified it as female.

"They won't hurt you unless you give them a really hard time," she said, pointing out the toad's venom glands, which looked like two baggy pouches. "That's why you shouldn't hit them with a golf club. Because if you hit the glands the poison can spray out. And if it gets in your eyes it will blind you for a few days."

We wandered around some more. It had been very dry, Schwarzkopf observed, and the toads were probably short on moisture: "They love air-conditioning units—anything that's dripping." Near an old greenhouse, where someone had recently run a hose, we found two more toads. Schwarzkopf flipped over a rotting crate the size and shape of a coffin. "The mother lode!" she announced. In about a quarter inch of scummy water were more cane toads than I could count. Some were sitting

on top of one another. I thought they might try to get away; instead, they just sat there, unperturbed.

The strongest argument for gene editing cane toads, house mice, and ship rats is also the simplest: what's the alternative? The choice at this point is not between what was and what is but between what is and what will be, which often enough is nothing. This is the situation of the northern quolls, the Campbell Island teal, the Antiguan racer, and the Tristan albatross. Stick to a strict interpretation of the natural and these—along with thousands of other species—are goners. Rejecting gene editing as unnatural isn't, at this point, going to bring nature back.

"We are as gods and might as well get good at it," Stewart Brand, the editor of the "Whole Earth Catalog," wrote in its mission statement, in 1969. Recently, in response to the whole-earth transformation that's under way, Brand has sharpened his statement: "We are as gods and *have* to get good at it." Brand has co-founded a group, Revive & Restore, whose stated mission is "to enhance biodiversity through new techniques of genetic rescue." Among the more fantastic projects the group has backed is an effort to resurrect the passenger pigeon. The idea is to reverse history by rejiggering the genes of the bird's closest living relative, the band-tailed pigeon.

Much closer to realization is an effort to bring back the American chestnut tree. The tree, once common in the eastern U.S., was all but wiped out by chestnut



blight. (The blight, a fungal pathogen introduced to North America around 1900, killed off nearly every chestnut on the continent—an estimated four billion trees.) Researchers at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, in Syracuse, New York, have created a genetically modified chestnut that's immune to blight. The key to its resistance is a gene imported from wheat. Owing

to this single borrowed gene, the tree is considered transgenic and cannot be released into the world without federal permits. As a consequence, the blight-resistant saplings are, for now, confined to greenhouses and fenced-in plots.

As Tizard points out, we're constantly moving genes around the world, usually in the form of entire genomes. This is how chestnut blight arrived in North America in the first place: it was carried in on Asian chestnut trees, imported from Japan. If we can correct for our earlier tragic mistake by shifting just one more gene around, don't we owe it to the American chestnut to do so? The ability to "rewrite the very molecules of life" places us, it could be argued, under an obligation.

Of course, the argument against such intervention is also compelling. The reasoning behind genetic "rescue" is the sort responsible for many a world-altering screwup. (See, for example, cane toads.) The history of biological interventions designed to correct for previous biological interventions reads like Dr. Seuss's "The Cat in the Hat Comes Back." The Cat, after eating cake in the bathtub, is asked to clean up after himself:

Do you know how he did it?  
WITH MOTHER'S WHITE DRESS!  
Now the tub was all clean,  
But her dress was a mess!

In the nineteen-fifties, Hawaii's Department of Agriculture decided to control giant African snails, which had been introduced two decades earlier as garden ornaments, by importing rosy wolfsnails, which are also known as cannibal snails. The cannibal snails mostly left the giant snails alone. Instead, they ate their way through dozens of species of Hawaii's small endemic land snails, producing what E. O. Wilson has called "an extinction avalanche."

Responding to Brand, Wilson has observed, "We are not as gods. We're not yet sentient or intelligent enough to be much of anything."

Paul Kingsnorth, a British writer and activist, has put it this way: "We are as gods, but we have failed to get good at it. . . . We are Loki, killing the beautiful for fun. We are Saturn, devouring our children." Kingsnorth has also observed, "Sometimes doing nothing is better than doing something. Sometimes it is the other way around." ♦



# STRUCTURE AND FLOW

*How El Anatsui broke the seal on contemporary art.*

BY JULIAN LUCAS

When I saw El Anatsui's exhibition "Triumphant Scale" in Bern, Switzerland, on March 12, 2020, the World Health Organization had just declared COVID-19 a pandemic. I'd been looking for a flight back to New York since three o'clock in the morning, after learning that the United States was closing its borders with Europe. The streets were nearly empty in the quiet medieval capital, a city once home to Paul Klee and Albert Einstein. Every other building seemed to be made of the same gray-green sandstone. Kiosk displays alternately flashed ads for the exhibition and public-health advisories, which had grown more alarming in the four days I'd waited for Anatsui. Walking into the Kunstmuseum Bern, a stately neo-Renaissance structure overlooking the Aare, I realized that I would likely never meet the artist.

Under a skylight in the second-story rotunda hung "Gravity and Grace" (2010), a thirty-seven-foot sheet of more than ten thousand liquor-bottle tops joined with copper wire. Anatsui's works are often draped and folded, but this one was flat, and it shone like a dragon's hide stretched on an invisible rack. Shapes appeared in the field of aluminum disks, intricately arranged by chromatic value. A red sun enveloped in pink haze—Gravity—held court at one end; an oval of dusty blue—Grace—glimmered at the other. Around them, red, yellow, and silver caps swirled as though caught between orbits. The sculpture presided over the room like a faceless eminence, cautiously greeted by a semicircle of nineteenth-century busts.

Anatsui, a seventy-six-year-old Ghanaian sculptor based in Nigeria, has transfigured many grand spaces with his cascading metal mosaics. Museums don them like regalia, as though to signal their graduation into an enlightened cosmopolitan modernity; they have

graced, among other landmarks, the façades of London's Royal Academy, Venice's Museo Fortuny, and Marrakech's El Badi Palace. The sheets sell for millions, attracting collectors as disparate as MOMA, the Vatican, and Bloomberg L.P. In the past ten years, public fascination with their medium's trash-to-treasure novelty has matured into a broader appreciation of Anatsui's significance. The man who dazzled with a formal trick may also be the exemplary sculptor of our precariously networked world.

"Triumphant Scale," a career-spanning survey, drew record-breaking crowds when it opened, in March, 2019, at Munich's Haus der Kunst. From there, the show travelled to the Arab Museum of Modern Art, in Doha, where Anatsui was fêted by Qatari royalty. The exhibition had been slightly downsized for Bern, a city of mannered architecture and muted colors, where the artist's shimmering invertebrate creations seemed almost unreal by contrast. There were massive red and black monochrome works, whose uniformity drew attention to their subtle folds and textural variations. Others conjured up landscapes, like the sprawling floor sculpture that filled one small gallery with a garden of bottle-cap rosettes. I stood before the exquisitely varied "In the World but Don't Know the World" (2009) for half an hour without exhausting its cartography: white-gold seas, blue-and-yellow checkerboards, silver cities with grids of black streets and tiny red districts.

It was all aluminum, but up close I found an origami of distinct alterations. Many of the caps were crushed into the shape of fortune cookies; others were neatly folded into squares. A swath of see-through "lace" was linked together from the bottles' thin seals. Some of the caps weren't caps at all. The brightest blues were tiles of roofing strip, while squares of iridescent silver



*The artist pictured outside his studio in*





*Nsukka, Nigeria. "Life is a way of one being shuffled," Anatsui said. "And I've always wanted my work to be about life."*



had been cut from newsprint plates. I leaned in to read the tiny headlines and trademarks: “Liquor Headmaster,” “Plans for safe drinking water,” “Game of luck explained.” Every bit had been handled by countless individuals: Anatsui often describes his work as a gathering of “spiritual charge.”

It was an incontestable demonstration that bottle caps have “more versatility than canvas and oil,” as Anatsui recently wrote in the *Guardian*. A central principle of his work is the “unfixed form,” which leaves a sculpture’s final configuration up to curators and collectors. “He thinks of these as living objects, just like human beings,” Chika Okeke-Agulu, who curated “Triumphant Scale” with Okwui Enwezor, explained during our tour of the exhibition. He showed me one early metal sculpture made of rusty milk tins, which resembled a heap of oversized coins draped over a walrus. It was displayed as “Yam Mound,” but the same work, differently arranged, had appeared under other names and guises. Nobody sees the same Anatsui twice.

Okeke-Agulu, a scholar of modern and contemporary African art who teaches at Princeton, has known many Anatsuis. He studied with the artist as an undergraduate, later working as his

studio assistant, and had carved two of the wooden wall reliefs on view. For Okeke-Agulu, the exhibition was a deeply personal milestone shadowed by the loss of his collaborator; Enwezor, perhaps the most influential curator of his generation, had died a year earlier. Confined by illness to his Munich apartment, where he kept a scale model of the museum’s galleries, he oversaw the final preparations from his deathbed.

“Triumphant Scale” was in some ways the culmination of a campaign that began in 1994, when Okeke-Agulu published an interview with Anatsui in the inaugural issue of *Nka*, a journal that Enwezor founded to secure wider critical attention for African artists. Anatsui, who then worked in wood, had speculated about using cheap local materials to create large immersive sculptures. “It was precisely anticipating this moment,” Okeke-Agulu told me. “The day that an African artist, alone, would occupy a major Western museum.”

When I reached El Anatsui in April, Nigeria, like most of the world, had locked down. The sculptor was at home, trying, he said, “to keep the mind blank.” He lives in a quiet hilltop neighborhood with sweeping

views of Nsukka, the college town where he’s resided for forty-five years. From his balcony, he could see his shuttered studio, where a monumental sheet destined for the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, sat unfinished on the workroom floor. For Anatsui, who doesn’t sketch in advance—trees grow without a blueprint, he has remarked—work had more or less ceased. He’d cancelled trips to Bern, where I’d originally planned to meet him, and to Ghana, for the opening of a new studio near Accra. But he took the interruptions philosophically. “Life is a way of one being shuffled,” he said. “And I’ve always wanted my work to be about life.”

Anatsui is an extraordinarily deliberate man, prone to thoughtful silences that I couldn’t always distinguish from lags in our Skype connection. (“El doesn’t chat, inside the studio or out,” Amarachi Okafor, a former student of Anatsui’s who now works as his assistant and archivist, warned me.) His voice is low and gentle, with long, melodious vowels that he uses to dwell and reflect. Often stopping to revise and refine his words—or qualify them with a private laugh and a “Well, not *quiiite*”—he gives the impression of being both incurably restless and infinitely patient. At public appearances, where he tends to dress in slacks and colorfully patterned shirts, he’s a warm, unflappable presence: arms crossed, slight slouch, gaze steady between his close-cropped white hair and silver brow-line spectacles.

The artist typically begins his mornings at six, waking to the sound of bells from a nearby Carmelite monastery. He drives to work in a Hyundai Tucson, stereo tuned to the Pidgin English station Wazobia, 93.7 FM. The studio, which opened in 2018, is a three-story fortress the color of gunmetal which towers over every other structure in the vicinity. Crews of young assistants shape bottle caps from distilleries in Nsukka and across Nigeria. (A supplier in nearby Onitsha, known for its storied market, ships more than a ton of them every few months.) The men work in two large halls of a gated complex equipped with offices, showers, security personnel, and enough room for several large works in various stages of assembly. But Anatsui says that his studio is, if anything, too small. A couple of years



*“This is . . . a difficult . . . context . . . in which . . . to tell stories.”*



ago, he visited Anselm Kiefer's studio near Paris, where the German artist invited him to ride a bicycle across the hangar-size workshop. In comparison, he said, "my studio has no size at all."

Everything starts on the ground. Anatsui paces the floor in sandals, bottle caps crunching underfoot, taking pictures and inspecting each block of linked metal before indicating where it should fuse into the larger composite. The bigger sheets are made of separable sections, and, often, Anatsui can't be sure of exactly what a composition will look like until it's installed. Sometimes he ascends a staircase to a small balcony for a better view. From there he directs assembly using a laser pointer, guiding his assistants like the conductor of a symphony orchestra.

Anatsui recruited more than a hundred and fifty temporary workers to complete three monumental commissions for "Triumphant Scale." In the words of his studio manager, Uche Onyishi, he "extended his workshop into the community." Many were rural women who worked at home; others were students, teachers, or civil servants, some of whom earned more than their yearly salaries from the project. Nsukka's authorities took notice. Shortly after Anatsui returned from Munich, the town's traditional monarch awarded him an Igbo chieftaincy title—a rare distinction, especially for a foreign-born man—in recognition of his contributions to local life.

Afamefuna Orji, a mechanical engineer who once worked at Anatsui's studio, first approached the artist for a job as an impoverished teen-ager. Anatsui not only hired him—paying enough that his mother visited to make sure that the "studio" wasn't a front for petty crime—but supported his education. "Boys come to the studio, and in a few months they have motorbikes, they have businesses set up," Okafor told me. "Some of them graduate and still come back. It's art on another level."

The virus interrupted this intensely collaborative work. Anatsui spent much of the spring and summer reading, growing produce in his garden, and walking for exercise around the empty university campus, where he taught sculpture in the fine-arts department for thirty-six years. His few indulgences



*"The plot and the vichyssoise thicken."*

revolve around wellness. A yoga and squash enthusiast, he attends yearly retreats at health resorts from Kerala to West Palm Beach, where he adopted a raw vegetarian diet. When I asked if he ever drinks the liquor that furnishes material for his sculptures, he said no, but added that, as a young man, he drank quite a bit. Now an occasional glass of beer or wine suffices, though a former colleague recently introduced him to single-malt whiskey.

Anatsui, a lifelong bachelor, lives alone, but keeps in close touch with family in Ghana and the United States. It isn't always easy; Internet access comes and goes. He enjoys the comedy of Trevor Noah ("a brilliant chap") and often exchanges memes with a nephew in Brooklyn, though he hardly uses social media, except to read the latest in a WhatsApp group dedicated to the highlife music of his Ghanaian youth. (His college band once performed alongside a formative group led by Fela Kuti, whose horn Anatsui played between sets; he says it was "decrepit.") Because the local utilities are so unreliable, he generates his own electricity using solar panels, and collects rainwater in a tank.

He lived in faculty housing until his retirement, in 2011. Even now, his circumstances are modest. A friend called his two cars "disreputable-looking," while Orji, the former assistant, described his two-story concrete residence as hardly one of the nicest in the neighborhood. "I think my house is more beautiful than Prof's," he reflected. "He knows where to show off and where not to show off."

Like his bottle-cap sheets, often mischaracterized as a form of recycling, Anatsui's austere life style can easily be taken as a high-minded statement. In fact, he lives simply for the same reason that he uses found materials: to afford himself the maximum possible freedom. Anything that might impede his creativity is out, not least his own sculptures; the walls of his home are bare. "If you feel attached to your work, it means you have a feeling you have gotten to the end," he told me.

Anatsui's first bottle caps were an accidental discovery. In 1998, he was walking on the outskirts of Nsukka when he found a discarded bag of loose caps along the roadside. It was an invitation. For decades, the artist had been resurrecting refuse in metamorphic sculptures,





*At the Nsukka studio, a new work bound for Houston's Museum of Fine Arts.*

expanding the significance of everyday objects without effacing their origins. “I let the material lead me,” he said. “If it can’t say something, then it better not be *made* to say it.”

His process requires a great deal of patience. Anatsui didn’t know what to do with the first bottle caps he collected. Busy experimenting with other used metal—evaporated-milk cans, cassava graters—he kept them in his studio for two years before working them into a sculpture. Most were red and gold, with silver undersides and evocative brand names that changed as often as every few months. He eventually secured a regular supply from an area distillery, taking part in an active local market.

Later, Anatsui drew connections between his medium and the triangular trade that once linked Europe, Africa, and the Americas. But his first interest was in what bottle caps could *do*, and in what new dimensions they might open in his pursuit of flexibility and freedom. They proved an ideal material—vivid, malleable, local, abundant, and cheap.

Assisted by two former students, Anatsui started connecting the bits of metal with copper wire, as he’d previously done with can lids. There was little sign that anything significant was about to occur at the former warehouse then serving as his studio; Okafor, who worked with Anatsui on the first sheets,

said that “playing” with the caps was at first a form of busywork. Her friends used to come by and laugh, asking why she wasted her time in a “dirty-looking place” surrounded by old wood and metal. But she’d learned to see art differently: “You finish making it in the dirt, and then you come out and put it in a clean place.”

Anatsui’s Adam and Eve in the new medium were “Man’s Cloth” and “Woman’s Cloth.” The “male” was composed of flattened rectangular strips from the bottle’s neck; the “female” added circular bottle tops. Doubtful whether the caps had enough tensile strength to hold together at larger sizes, Anatsui made each one only a few yards long. He had conceived the pair as a one-off experiment but discovered a sense of possibility in the material. A mesh of liquor-bottle caps wasn’t a static thing but a kind of tactile “choir,” distilling opaque, elusive flashes from a community’s life. “What I’m interested in is the fact of many hands,” he told me. “When people see work like that, they should be able to feel the presence of those people.”

**I**n the early days, Anatsui would sometimes transport his bottle-cap sculptures in a practical way that surprised their recipients: folded in small crates or even in suitcases that he delivered himself. The first to receive such a shipment was Elisabeth Lalouschek, the artistic director at London’s October Gallery, where “Man’s Cloth” and “Woman’s Cloth” were installed in 2002. Anatsui hadn’t yet decided how to exhibit the metal sheets; in photographs he’d sent ahead, they were draped over bushes. Lalouschek installed them in their now familiar format: as wall hangings with ripples and folds, like metal tapestries.

Lalouschek had championed Anatsui’s work since the early nineties, when she saw his wooden reliefs featured in a Smithsonian documentary about contemporary Nigerian art. But the “alchemy” of these metal sheets struck her—and nearly everyone who saw them—as miraculous, a water-into-wine transformation. “It didn’t matter who walked into the gallery, whether it was a child or an ambassador or somebody else,” she said. “It affected them



all in some way or other. We had entered a completely new arena.”

Major collections that had previously paid scant attention to contemporary African art took notice. The British Museum acquired “Man’s Cloth” and “Woman’s Cloth.” The following year, Anatsui exhibited an entire group of the bottle-cap sheets for a solo show at the Mostyn Gallery, in Llandudno, Wales, an exhibition that ultimately travelled to nine other venues in Europe and the United States. By 2007, Anatsui’s bottle-cap sheets were in the collections of San Francisco’s de Young Museum, Paris’s Centre Pompidou, and New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The bottle-cap medium dramatically exceeded Anatsui’s expectations. He devised a spectrum of new elements from the deceptively simple material, and recruited a team of part-time assistants to incorporate them into ever-larger works. “Sasa,” a twenty-eight-foot synthesis of his developing style, was his first monumental bottle-cap sculpture, and featured prominently in “Africa Remix,” a blockbuster group show that opened in 2004, in Düsseldorf, then travelled to London, Paris, Tokyo, Stockholm, and Johannesburg.

The ratification of Anatsui’s new success came at the 2007 Venice Biennale, where his bottle-cap sculptures ravished the art world’s most influential audience. For the central exhibition in the Arsenale, once a medieval shipyard, he designed two monumental commissions. “Dusasa II,” a twenty-four-foot sheet that hung between pillars at the end of a long hallway, served as its culminating work. (The Metropolitan Museum swiftly acquired the sculpture, and recently showcased it in the autobiographical exhibition “Making the Met, 1870–2020.”) A third sculpture, “Fresh and Fading Memories,” fell like enchanted scaffolding over the fifteenth-century Palazzo Fortuny. It was the first of many flirtations with architecture, a white-gold sheet with colorful grid lines that bunched over the heavy wooden doors like a rising curtain. Careful tears disclosed the brick of the underlying façade; a curator told the artist that the work looked as if it might have been there for a hundred years.

In a highly factionalized art world, Anatsui found universal acclaim. To formalists, he was an Abstract Expressionist who worked in aluminum refuse; to the postmodern and the post-colonially minded, a maverick interrogator of consumption and commerce; to Old Guard Africanists, a renewer of ancient craft traditions. To most, his work was simply beautiful, with transcendent aspirations rare in the self-reflexive context of contemporary art. As it turned out, the unfixed form wasn’t just a way of sculpting. It was the principle of a career that had opened itself to the world without sacrificing its integrity.

In 1944, thirteen years before Ghana declared independence from Great Britain, El Anatsui was born in the Gold Coast lagoon village of Anyako. He warned me not to go looking for his birth name. “El” was a later adoption, which he chose in his mid-twenties from a list of words for the divine. His father was a fisherman and a weaver, but Anatsui, the youngest of thirty-two children, learned neither trade. After his mother died, the family shipped him across the lagoon to his uncle, a Presbyterian minister. Anatsui grew up in a mission house, learning the discipline that characterizes his life as an artist: “You do what is necessary—only—and don’t bother with extravagance.”

He discovered an aptitude for drawing and enrolled in art school, without his family’s encouragement. It was seven years after independence, and President Kwame Nkrumah spoke urgently about the need to assert an “African Personality.” It had yet to manifest at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, in Kumasi, where Anatsui studied a curriculum imported from Goldsmiths, University of London. He chose sculpture for its novelty, and wrote a thesis on chieftaincy regalia, prefiguring a talent for sculpture that effortlessly projects authority. He impressed his instructors, but questioned their emphasis on imported materials like plaster of Paris, and looked beyond the classroom for ways to “indigenize his aesthetic.”

After graduation, he took a teaching position in the coastal town of Winneba, and started buying circular wooden

trays that were used to display goods in local markets. He added metal inlays around the edges and used a heated rod to emboss them with symbols called *adinkra*. Often found on Ghanaian textiles, *adinkra* represent proverbs and adages. In “Triumphant Scale,” mounted on the wall like icons, they seemed to offer metaphysical sustenance in lieu of fish and beans.

The trays inaugurated a career-long commitment to making work from “whatever the environment throws up,” an embrace of the local that was also a pragmatic choice. Wherever Anatsui found himself, material would be readily available. In 1975, he left Ghana to teach at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, which had opened fifteen years earlier, and was the nation’s first university independent of any European institution. U.N.N., once among Nigeria’s leading schools, had suffered during the country’s civil war, when the majority-Igbo southeastern region attempted to secede as the Republic of Biafra. When Anatsui arrived, bullet holes still riddled the campus.

Under the debris, a revival was stirring, as Igbo artists and intellectuals unwelcome elsewhere in the country flocked to U.N.N. Among them were Chinua Achebe, who founded his magazine *Okike* at the university, and Uche Okeke, one of Nigeria’s leading painters, who had begun to fuse European modernism with indigenous design traditions in a movement called “natural synthesis.” Achebe opened one of Anatsui’s first solo exhibitions; Okeke was the chair of his department. Before long, the Ghanaian émigré was embedded in the so-called Nsukka school, which took inspiration from *uli*, a tradition of body- and mural-painting among Igbo women that is characterized by spare, linear designs.

By immersing himself in local styles, Anatsui began to forge his own deeply hybridized notion of the “African Personality.” He studied a panoply of sign systems—including the Bamum script from Cameroon, Yoruba Aroko symbols, and a locally indigenous system known as *nsibidi*, as well as *uli* and *adinkra*—growing obsessed with the esoteric scripts of a continent often depicted as devoid of writing traditions. “Rather than feeling that there wasn’t any writing tradition



in Africa, we had Tower of Babel syndrome,” he recalled discovering. He was similarly fascinated by Nigeria’s national museums and archeological sites, evidence of a patrimony more intact, as he saw it, than Ghana’s. History and its fractures, from the vanishing of ancient societies to the instability of post-colonial nations, became central to his subsequent works in clay and wood.

In Nsukka, Anatsui developed studio processes that could mimic the effects of time, the erosion and renewal of cultures. One influence was Nok terracotta figures, among the only remnants of a civilization that emerged in Nigeria two millennia ago. He began making “broken” ceramic sculptures from old potsherds, which he pulverized and fired at high temperatures with manganese. The metal admixture created a pockmarked, just-excavated appearance, and a solidity playfully at odds with their fragmentary shapes. “Chambers of Memory” (1977), which I saw in “Triumphant Scale,” resembles a Nok head, except that in the space behind its visage Anatsui has hollowed out empty rooms—voids of loss and forgetting, but also vessels of renewal. “When an old pot is destroyed,” Anatsui has written, “it comes back to life, providing that grog of experience which strengthens the new form.”

In 1980, Anatsui began working with a more brutal tool: the chainsaw, which became a surrogate for the colonial destruction of African cultures. He demonstrates its use in the Smithsonian documentary, appearing onscreen to the soothing narration of Ruby Dee. Laying a set of planks across the floor of his plein-air workshop, he gouges them along pre-marked lines, sawdust flying as he steps on the boards to keep them still. He applies the final details with a blowtorch, as though to cauterize gashes in the wounded wood—and, by extension, repair its shattered cultures. Fire, he explains, gives the cuts “an over-all black configuration which lends unity.”

The finished planks were mounted side by side on the wall like xylophone keys, provisionally ordered by the artist but left open to rearrangement. Sometimes Anatsui inscribed more delicate patterns using a router, or painted over certain markings in tempera. Of the many such works exhibited in Bern, the most

arresting was “Invitation to History” (1995), a sculpture that dramatizes the boundary between our knowledge of the past and its reality. Designed to lean against a wall, the relief has two layers: a crooked outer “fence” of unpainted planks, and a burnt-black core that seethes with colorful designs, which seems to beckon through the gaps.

Often, the carving was done by studio assistants, who worked from Anatsui’s rough preparatory drawings. (The speed and irreversibility of chainsaw carving made sketching unavoidable.) Most, in the early days, were his students at U.N.N., where Anatsui was known for his relaxed attitude and enigmatic assignments. Chika Okeke-Agulu, who studied with him in the eighties, recalled a lesson in figuration and abstraction that involved drawing the Nigerian specialty *egusi* soup.

“Any student who was keen enough, bright enough, could show up at his studio, and join whatever was being worked on,” Olu Oguibe, another artist who studied at U.N.N., told me. Recently known for erecting an obelisk to honor refugees and migrants in the central square of Kassel, Germany, he’s one of several former Anatsui students to achieve major success in the arts. Others include Sylvester Ogbechie, an art

historian, and Nnenna Okore, whose woven webs of recycled fibre also draw on the textures of Nsukka.

Oguibe credits Anatsui’s generous extracurricular mentorship for their success. He and Okeke-Agulu spent time not only at Anatsui’s studio but in his home, often poring over issues of the magazine *Sculpture*. “Because he was travelling and coming back with books and magazines on sculpture, visiting his home was like going to a big library for us,” Okeke-Agulu said. “We pined to be invited.”

The Nsukka art scene that sustained Anatsui’s work foundered in the nineteen-nineties, when Sani Abacha’s military dictatorship cracked down on universities. Colleagues like Okeke-Agulu and the painter Obiora Udechukwu left Nigeria. Increasingly, Anatsui turned abroad. He accepted residencies from Brazil to Namibia, and exhibited work in a group show of African artists at the 1990 Venice Biennale, earning a new degree of international recognition. His wooden reliefs were joined by larger, freestanding sculptures, often in groups suggesting themes of exodus. Driftwood from a beach near Copenhagen became “Akua’s Surviving Children,” a reflection on the Danish slave trade. Discarded palm-oil mortars from Nsukka

## THE CRICKET

In this little borrowed  
wooden house in January,

down on the field-colored rug  
I came across a cricket  
close to death, or sleeping.  
Not breathing, that I could see.

Out walking, I saw a skull of snow,  
and a snow-frog listening.

Back in the house,  
my cricket, your heart has stopped.  
Would you like snow over you?  
Or be in here together, by the hearth.

But now your body is fallen in pieces around you.  
Help me find a leaf for you to lie on, another  
to cover you.

—Jean Valentine (1934–2020)



households found new life as “On Their Fateful Journey Nowhere,” a procession of migrants with pestle arms stretched skyward.

In 1992, Anatsui created one of his largest works in Manaus, Brazil, at a residency with artists such as Antony Gormley and Marina Abramović. “Erosion,” a ten-foot sculpture carved from a single Amazonian pequiá-marfim tree, was as much performance as sculpture; after weeks of engraving the log’s surface with geometric figures and evocations of crowds, Anatsui revved up his chainsaw and defaced it. When I saw the sculpture in “Triumphant Scale,” it stood in the middle of the gallery like a wrecked totem, shredded in a spiral that ran from the top to a base surrounded by wood scraps and sawdust.

It was a step toward the monumental aspiration that Anatsui later discussed with Okeke-Agulu in *Nka*. In 1994, the man who would someday cloak entire museums in patchworks of gleaming aluminum was skeptical of the American vogue for immersive installations—“Most regale on mere size,” he says—but also wondered about ways to accomplish similar effects on the continent. Artists in Western cities might have art materials in abundance but so did Africans, Anatsui insisted, “depending on one’s choice.” Creators sufficiently attuned to their environment could sidestep scarcity and work in freedom, an old insight given new life by his experience in Brazil. “It could be that the freedom engendered monumental concepts,” Anatsui said. “I indulged in the extravagance.”

Anatsui has won several of the art world’s most prestigious awards—the Prince Claus Award, the Præmium Imperiale, the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement—and earned widespread recognition for the depth of his formal innovations, from his marriage of painting and sculpture to his insistence that art works need not be static objects “completed” by their creators. Robert Storr, who curated the 2007 Venice Biennale, credits him with renewing abstraction’s depleted emotional force, creating a formal language in which tragedy and sublimity are newly convincing. Yet, for all this, many casual museumgoers know Anatsui only

as the man who uses recyclables to make kente cloth.

The simplification has a basis in reality. Anatsui had drawn connections between his earlier wooden reliefs and the weaving of Ghanaian narrow-strip cloth, which also connects small, patterned segments into a larger composite. He used the word “cloth” in the titles of a few early bottle-cap sculptures, not realizing how tenaciously the metaphor would cling. The Metropolitan Museum discussed the metal sheets in a monograph on African textile traditions. Osaka’s National Museum of Ethnology displayed them along with a mannequin dressed in kente. Soon every other review and snippet of wall text was mentioning “metal cloth.”

The metaphor’s popularity undermined Anatsui’s principle of letting materials remain themselves. “The colors were selected by the bottles,” he told one interviewer, but “lazy art writers” had failed to look beyond the coincidence. The association also threatened to confine his work to the realm of ethnographic curiosity. Okeke-Agulu told me that he’d watched other African artists get sidelined by the neo-traditionalist label. Neglected by contemporary collections, their works became solitary novelties surrounded by masks in dimly lit vitrines.

Anatsui began saying that he didn’t want to be geographically defined. After a final 2005 show at New York’s



Skoto Gallery, a tiny but groundbreaking Chelsea venue devoted to contemporary African art, he began working with Jack Shainman, whose roster included such heavyweights as Nick Cave and Carrie Mae Weems. (Okwui Enwezor made the introduction.) Anatsui says that the decision was dictated by the size of his new bottle-cap sculptures, which had little room to breathe at Skoto. But the move also enabled him to command higher prices.

The ascetic artist turned out to be uncompromising when it came to the valuation of his work. His partnership with Shainman began at the 2007 Venice Biennale, when he asked the gallerist to prove himself by selling “Dusasa I” and “Dusasa II” for half a million dollars each. “My jaw hit the floor of the palazzo,” Shainman told me. “I want to be the piranha that everybody thinks pushed the market to that level,” he said, but, “truth be told, El tells me what the price will be. And, back then, it was always a lot more than I wanted.”

Anatsui’s insistence elicited a miserly racism from some collectors. “People will say to me, ‘My God, those prices! Why don’t you talk to him for me? That’s so much for an African artist. What will he do with all that money?’” Shainman told me. But Anatsui’s stubbornness paid off. Aigboje Aig-Imoukhuede, a prominent Nigerian banker and art collector, described him as the first Black artist based in Africa to have his works valued at an “international” price standard: “Prior to him, there were always discounts.”

Nowadays, it isn’t unheard-of for modern and contemporary African art to sell for millions of dollars; in 2017, Anatsui was joined by the Nigerian-born painter Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Sotheby’s and other international auction houses have opened divisions dedicated to new art from the continent. Long-dead masters, like the Nigerian sculptor Ben Enwonwu, have found international markets. The wave of “discoveries” has even inspired Anatsui imitators, notably Serge Attukwei Clottey, a young Ghanaian whose monumental, draped hangings made of plastic jerrycans are sometimes mistaken on Instagram for Anatsui’s work. (One of them hangs at Facebook’s headquarters, in Menlo Park.)

Along with the demand for contemporary African art have come new questions about who gets to see it. In the *New York Times*, Okeke-Agulu has decried what he calls the “gentrification” of African cultural creativity. Even as campaigns for the repatriation of colonial plunder meet with unprecedented success, Western collectors have dominated the market for African visual talent. Residents of London, New York, or Kansas City can see



an El Anatsui bottle-cap sculpture on demand, but Nigerians and Ghanaians must travel thousands of miles.

The landscape may be changing with a new wave of art institutions, from Dakar's Museum of Black Civilizations to the architect David Adjaye's planned Edo Museum, in Benin City, Nigeria. In 2017, the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa opened in a former grain silo in Cape Town, becoming the world's biggest museum dedicated to contemporary art from the continent. Anatsui was prominently featured in the inaugural exhibition; later, his largest bottle-cap sculpture, "TSIATSIA—Searching for Connection" (2013), was installed in the museum's vast atrium.

More individual African collectors are buying, too. In 2017, Liza Essers, the owner and director of South Africa's Goodman Gallery, organized Anatsui's first solo exhibition of bottle-cap sculptures in Africa. She sold many of the works to collectors from the region, who are growing more numerous.

A small contingent of Nigerians have

been collecting Anatsui's work from the outset. The Yoruba prince Yemisi Shyllon, who recently opened a private museum in Lagos for his extensive collection, owns several of Anatsui's early trays. Aig-Imoukhuede, who as the C.E.O. of Access Bank helped build one of the country's largest corporate collections, has avidly acquired the artist's bottle-cap sheets and wooden reliefs. The Nobel Prize-winning writer Wole Soyinka keeps Anatsui's "Wonder Masquerade" (1990)—one of a series of freestanding wooden sculptures inspired by Nigerian masking traditions—in his sitting room in Lagos. "I'm not surprised that in Europe it's this catapult again," Soyinka told me. "But of course, long before then, *we* had seen and admired and enjoyed his artistic genius."

When I last spoke with Anatsui, in early November, he'd just completed the long-delayed work for the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. On the final day, his assistants at

the newly reopened studio cleaned the sculpture's eight massive sections with soap and brushes before hosing them down, stomping them into crate-size bundles, and sending them on their way.

Like many of Anatsui's recent installations, the sculpture is a complicated dance with architecture: in this case, an underground arrival hall for a new building to house the museum's expanding collection of contemporary art. Visitors will reach it through a tunnel designed to "subtract color," by the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson, known for his experiments with light. From there, they emerge to a dreamlike flash of sky: a hundred-and-ten-foot sheet of bottle tops displaying their metallic undersides along a curved wall. Across this white-gold expanse play suggestions of weather—jagged lightning, storm-cloud abrasions, multicolored flecks strewn by invisible currents—which float as though painted on the gold-leaf paper of a Japanese landscape.

A section of the work arches to accommodate a second tunnel that leads to another gallery building. Anatsui told me that he sometimes dreams of renouncing shows and commissions to work in freedom, "like Christo and Jeanne-Claude." For now, his negotiation with given spaces continues. For a site-specific installation at the Conciergerie, in Paris, several of his bottle-cap sculptures have been hung in fireplaces at the former royal palace.

Ultimately, he said, architectural obstacles are often productive. Three of the most ambitious commissions for "Triumphant Scale" were designed specifically for Munich's Haus der Kunst. In 2017, when Anatsui first saw the museum, a gargantuan neoclassical construction from the Third Reich, he knew that he wanted to throw it off balance. "He kept complaining that everything in the museum was so rigid," Damian Lentini, who assisted with the show's curation, told me. "He wanted to mess up the symmetry." The result was "Second Wave," which covered the museum's three-hundred-and-sixty-foot façade in slanting columns of aluminum newsprint plates.

Outdoor installations have given new dimension to his long preoccu-





pation with the elements. In Marakech, on the fringes of the Sahara, one large sculpture spent months in the sun. The red caps faded, acquiring an uneven delicacy that Anatsui compared to the unpredictably colored glazes of Japanese rakuware. “You can’t get it in any other way—it’s only time that can do it,” he said of the effect, which he hopes to duplicate in the studio. Light and longevity, to his mind, “shear things of their prose.”

Many have wondered when Anatsui might “move on” from bottle caps. A few years after Venice, critics were warning that the material risked becoming “formulaic” and its creator “a token African artist for Western collectors.” Now it seems clear that they underestimated Anatsui’s medium and misconstrued his persistence; in fact, he’s spent two decades ringing changes on his protean material.

Susan Vogel, a curator, scholar, and filmmaker, was once among the skeptics. “I wasn’t sure that maybe the bottle tops weren’t a kind of a gimmick,” she told me. But after making “Fold Crumple Crush” (2010), a documentary about Anatsui shot in Venice and Nsukka, she became one of the leading experts on his creative development. In her book “El Anatsui: Art and Life,” published in an expanded second edition this month, Vogel tracks the evolution of the artist’s medium from the first decade’s “cloth” works—rectangular, warmly colored, and quilt-like—to the past decade’s profusion of styles and shapes. Anatsui now works more like a painter, she writes, creating focussed, graphic expressions against simplified backgrounds. Greater shifts may come as he secures new sources of metal.

Anatsui used to buy liquor-bottle caps from a distillery near Nsukka, but his new supplier in Onitsha offers more variety: caps from bottles of medicine, bitters, and even wine. Aluminum roofing strips furnish certain colors, like blue, green, and beige, and serve as a way of introducing the textures of the local cityscape. Recently, he has started incorporating caps from bottles of Goya olive oil, which is imported for ceremonies in the deeply Christian region. Anatsui left the church at a young age, but a latent re-

ligiosity suffuses his sculptures. “There’s no way you can dodge it,” he said. “A lot of people are involved, so it has to touch your work.” David Adjaye, who designed Ghana’s new national cathedral, in Accra, has asked Anatsui to make an altarpiece.

The project will be a kind of homecoming for the artist. After four decades in Nigeria, Anatsui is finally returning, at least part of the time, to Ghana. Retirement isn’t the idea: he has constructed a two-million-dollar studio and residence in Tema, a bustling port city thirty minutes from Accra. The complex is shaped like three linked hexagons, in an allusion to the bottle-cap sheets, but Anatsui will be looking for fresh material. One possibility is old fishing boats, which are plentiful in the area, not far from the lagoon where he grew up.

Anatsui also aspires to welcome local artists for residencies, as well as foreign ones who have “something to offer” artists and craftsmen in the community. He’s bothered that so few non-Africans see the continent as a destination for studying the arts. “There are as many centers as there are people, civilizations, societies,” he says. “And each can develop a center in a way that it’s able to offer something to the rest of the world.”

Someday Anatsui will stop making bottle-cap sculptures. Already, he has lost certain materials, as thrifty Nigerian distilleries switch to plastic or adventitiously rebrand their spirits. He uses more colors than ever, but deploys them sparingly, often as accents in monochromatic works. “In the past, I have revelled in color freely,” Anatsui told me. “But I think it’s getting too loud for somebody my age.” For Ghana’s pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, he created “Earth Shedding Its Skin,” a wide sheet of brilliant yellow caps corroded by silvery cobwebs that disclosed the underlying wall. It marked a return to the elegiac mood of his wooden sculptures, a medium he’s revisiting: in a concrete lot adjoining the studio in Nsukka, he has amassed more than a hundred wooden mortars.



Lately, he’s been studying mathematics—in particular, the two fields known as chaos theory and catastrophe theory, which concern the self-organization of seemingly random systems. Among contemporary artists, he’s drawn to experiments with environment and light: Olafur Eliasson, Anish Kapoor, and James Turrell, who has spent more than forty years transforming an extinct Arizona volcano, Roden Crater, into a labyrinth of observatories for the contemplation of time and light. Anatsui would try his own hand at land art if he found an opportunity. In whatever medium, his works will go on evolving, unfurling their challenge to new sets of hands and eyes.

Shortly before I left Bern for the airport, I spent a few minutes with one of Anatsui’s rarely exhibited works on paper, a small black-and-white aquatint titled “Chief with History Behind Him” (1987). The subject is faceless, wearing a striped cap and billowing robes. Over his shoulders hovers a cloud of shapes and symbols: spirals, squares, zigzags, small creatures, curved swords. This detritus haunts the man, who reminded me of the central figure in Paul Klee’s monoprint “Angelus Novus.” Walter Benjamin, who once owned it, described it as the angel of history caught in a storm, ceaselessly blown into the future as he contemplates the wreckage of events.

Anatsui’s vision isn’t quite as melancholic. His sculptures are mirrors of entropy, but also affirmations of a collectively constructed freedom. There is grandeur and humility in his gathering of spiritual sediment, a profoundly material reminder that art, like life, is only an emergence from what the Chinese poet Du Fu called “the loom of origins/ tangling our human ways.” Bottle caps, though, might have a better shot at eternity than most of us. In 2012, when Hurricane Sandy flooded galleries in Chelsea, Anatsui was among the few artists sure to find his works unscathed. He’s discovered a kind of immortality in something cheaper than a penny, fragile enough to tear by hand. ♦



Blushes | Graham Swift





Dr. Cole eased his car from his garage, then stopped, out of habit, to watch in his rearview mirror the garage door slide gently down and the light above it extinguish itself. This had once given him an absurd, vain satisfaction; now it was his only goodbye. The car was expensive and comfortable, as was the house that went with it: large, sedate, islanded in lawns and leafage, like the others in the discreet crescent.

As he drove off, the purr of the engine and the crackle of gravel were the only sounds, except for—though inside his car he couldn't hear it—the great anthem of birds. It was a little after six on an April morning, but at eight it would still be astonishingly quiet. Except for the birds. They had become extraordinarily loud, as if by some conscious effort. But that was an illusion. It was the contrast with the silence. Less than an hour ago, he'd been lying in bed, listening to them and marvelling. A solitary man in a big house, surrounded, hymned by birds.

And the roads, even the main ones, would be empty. They would be just as empty at eight. The phrase "ghost town" sometimes came to Dr. Cole as he made this journey. Ghost world. He would reach the hospital within fifteen minutes. Normally—when had "normally" ceased to apply?—it might take forty-five.

As he turned out of the driveway, a fox slipped nonchalantly through the beam of his headlights. One morning, he had counted six foxes. The birds and the foxes. They had reclaimed the world.

This journey was his time not just for counting foxes but for thought. Or, rather, his corridor for memories, which came thick and fast, unbidden. Ghosts. He had proved what was commonly said: that, when we are old, it is our earliest recollections that return to us most pressingly, while the later stuff recedes.

The later stuff could be soberly condensed: two marriages, one divorce, no children in either marriage, and the second much longer and more meaningful than the first. His second wife had been the love of his life—he could say that without hesitation. But she'd been dead now for most of two years. The loss of his life. She'd died only a

year after he retired. For a while, they'd lain together in the bed in which he'd just been lying alone, listening, as dawn broke, to the birds. She'd said to him once, softly, "We can do this now." As if lying there together were the simplest but greatest gift retirement could bring. It was.

Despite or because of the empty roads, he'd begun to leave earlier than he needed to, so that he could deliberately dawdle, even take detours, to permit the gush of memory to run its course. It was memory, not thought. His mind simply filled and throbbed, a function of driving. He vaguely rejoiced in the peaceful roads that allowed it to happen. That word, too, came to him. "Peace." In a little while, he would enter a scene of war.

He had come forward. How could he not? He was seventy-two and retired, but how could he not? He was a specialist in respiratory disease. He had retired shortly after his mother had died. She was ninety-two. Decades ago, after his parents' divorce, it was his mother who'd wanted him to be a doctor. It was his mother who'd almost exclusively claimed him, and he hadn't resisted. He had become not just a doctor but, as it turned out, a top man in his field. So he'd fulfilled his mother's dream, and more.

A top man in medicine, but he hadn't been able to save her. Or his wife. Within two years they were both gone. The women of his life.

He'd come forward. It was hardly a choice. He'd come forward like a called-up reservist. They'd been "honored" to have him back. But what did that mean amid such havoc? A queue of casualties. A queue of deaths. One of which, he clearly understood, might be his own. All of them understood it. It might be any one of them.

What they didn't know, as he strove to be a figure of cool authority, was that he actually liked being there. It "took the mind off," as they say. It gave him something to do.

Except now it took the mind off in a different way. It didn't happen on the journeys home. He did his extendable, unquantifiable "shift." He found something to eat. He drove home, numb. He slept. Thank goodness, he could sleep. It was only here,

on these dawn rides, that his life returned to him, from its wondrous distances. Otherwise, it had departed; it had seemed already over. And now he understood—accepted—that soon it might be truly over.

As he held the wheel, he was a child again. If it were a matter of calculation, he could say with exactness that he was ten. But he didn't have to calculate. He was ten.

He was ten, and he was lying in bed on a sunny June morning because he was ill. He saw his mother's face as she leaned toward him. She was sitting on the end of his bed, now and then stroking his covered foot or knee, and, though he was ill, her face didn't look in the least bit troubled. It looked full of gladness and even quite merry.

She would have been—what?—a woman in her early thirties. And Dr. Henderson's face—Dr. Henderson!—though it was the face of a doctor and therefore provisionally grave, also looked quite merry. This always happened when he visited. Doctors "visited" in those days. He would loom in the doorway, holding his doctor's bag, a forbidding figure, more often than not still in his black winter coat and bringing with him a residue of chilly air. But very quickly he would melt and become friendly, even jolly. And how old would he have been? In his late thirties. A "young doctor."

Now he would be dead, of course.

But on this morning Dr. Henderson wore a pale-gray lightweight summer suit. He sat down at the bedside on the chair that was always provided for him. It wasn't part of the bedroom furniture. His mother would fetch it. The chair for Dr. Henderson! He could see it now. It had striped upholstery, red on cream, and he later learned that the stripes were called Regency stripes. Its usual place was in his parents' room, where it seemed not to be used for sitting on, since when he looked it was nearly always draped with items of his parents' clothing. So now Dr. Henderson sat where his parents' clothes had mingled.

But even before he sat, even as he crossed the room, he said, "Well, Jimmy, you're a lucky man. You could have been poorly on your tenth birthday. Many





*"Just call now and then, to let us know you exist."*

happy returns, if I'm not too late. Your mother tells me you had a wonderful birthday party. Let's take a look at you."

The doctor sat on the chair. His mother sat on the bed. This was how it always was. There was no question of it being the other way round. His mother stroked his foot or knee and sometimes leaned toward him. And Dr. Henderson bent over him in his professional way.

Each time, lying there, he'd have the thought, but keep it to himself, that they were like a little family. They were like the little group of three that normally lived in this house. And suppose his father, who was now busy at work, were to be suddenly replaced by Dr. Henderson. Would it be so terrible? Dr. Henderson had a way—though at ten he didn't yet have the word for it—of being fatherly. Was Dr. Henderson even more fatherly than his own father?

His mother's face was so bright and glad, and there seemed this morning to flutter round them all a particular kind of glee.

He knew what it was. He felt it himself, even though he was unwell. It seemed that he had now completed the

list of illnesses that, though they were illnesses, it was highly desirable he should have. It was like a duty, a duty that had taken, in his case, ten years. His whole life! Each illness was challenging, one or two were nasty, but at the same time a strange source of pride and pleasure. Now he'd done them all. He was to be congratulated, and not just for his recent birthday.

And as he lay there, ill, the object of his mother's and Dr. Henderson's attention, he felt a strange surge of happiness. Even the word "happy" seemed to hover over him, like Dr. Henderson's not yet conferred diagnosis, like something that might hover over him all his life.

"Well, Jimmy, I'd say, by the look of you, your mother was quite right. She'll be doing my job next. Mind you, as illnesses go, it's not one of the hardest to spot."

Dr. Henderson gave his mother a quick glance that might have been called cheeky. It was a nice glance. His mother often used the word "cheeky" (usually about her son)—"Don't be cheeky." And now it would have been particularly appropriate.

Dr. Henderson said, "Scarlet fever. I'd say so, too."

Then his mother said, with a sly kind of smile, "Unless he's just blushing."

Dr. Henderson couldn't have known what special meaning this had. If his mother had been given to winking, she might at this point have winked.

Dr. Henderson gave a half snort, half laugh. "So what have you got to blush about, young man? Open wide."

And how clever of him. To have asked such a question, then taken away the means of answering it. The question floated off into the air as Dr. Henderson inspected his tongue and tonsils.

"Scarlet fever, no doubt about it. Let's have a look at your rash."

As he drove now between rows of tomblike houses, he remembered his little pajama top, striped like the chair, but in softer colors. And he remembered his rash, the creepy feeling of it, and how, long after it had gone away and he was otherwise well, his skin was still strange and rough. And he remembered the whole list—of which this, in his case, was the last—of those childhood illnesses, with their names that were themselves faintly childish and fairy-tale-like, as if invented for infant use. Measles, mumps, chicken pox, whooping cough . . . All of them to be undergone, then left behind, usually forever, like little piles of children's clothes that were no longer needed, like miniature versions of the clothes on the chair in his parents' bedroom.

Children everywhere went through it. The illnesses had once been perilous and in some cases still were, and could even potentially kill. When he was smaller, there had still been the real frightener, polio. Though that had been simply dealt with, one morning, by a jab in his arm. Frightening enough. But he hadn't cried. And his mother, then, too, had looked particularly glad, though it was a different kind of gladness. There was even a slight wetness in her eye. It was all over. Polio dealt with. And you didn't even have to lie in bed for two days. A jab in the arm. It meant you could never get it, because you'd had it already, in a manner of speaking. His mother had tried to explain. It was called vaccination.

Another fox. In the dim light, you



couldn't see their faces or even their reddish fur, but he always had the impression that they were wearing a sneer.

His bedroom curtains had been half closed—a ritual of sickness. His mouth was silenced again by the insertion of a thermometer. Dr. Henderson, armed by his mother's prior diagnosis, produced medicines from his bag and gave his mother some words of instruction. Two of the pills were to be taken immediately. He wrote a supplementary prescription. Then he removed the thermometer, looked at it, wiped it carefully, and put it back into a little liquid-filled tube.

"It's a mild case, Jimmy. You hardly have a temperature. I've seen much worse. You'll live. You'll be right as rain in a few days if you do as your mother says. And no school for at least a week."

You'll live!

"As for blushing, young man, I can't cure that. You'll have to take care of that by yourself."

He tightened his lips, both serious and not, then, snapping his bag shut, he got up from his chair and looked at his watch. "Your mother's promised me a cup of tea."

Dr. Henderson was always offered a cup of tea.

His mother got up, too, and they stood together at his bedside, as if he were their child. Dr. Henderson said, "And no playing with your friends, either. But you've already done that. A wonderful birthday party. You're lucky you didn't miss it. I'm sorry I missed it myself."

Then they went downstairs, leaving him with the sudden thought that Dr. Henderson might never enter his bedroom again. If this was the last illness. And then with the thought, not so stabbing, yet puzzling: Why should Dr. Henderson be sorry to have missed his party? Had he been invited?

And then with the sudden returning image, as he lay in bed, of that party, every detail of it. A memory merely a week old. But now, sixty and more years later, it came back to him just as piercingly fresh.

That party! Even the hypothetical presence at it of Dr. Henderson. Though why, indeed, should he have been there? Why should he have been standing there, a special guest, among the gag-

gle of mums? The mums were the only grownups at the party. There were no men. It was a teatime party. All the men were absent at work. All the fathers. All the doctors, too.

But it was true. It was a wonderful party. It reënveloped him now. The best of his birthday parties, because, after all, he was ten, a big boy, two numbers to his name. And the best party because—but this, he now knew, was hindsight, neither a thing nor a word he had then—in less than a year's time his parents would start the process of not living together. The world would disintegrate.

It wasn't his mother and Dr. Henderson, as he might have supposed, even vaguely wished. His mother sometimes went to see Dr. Henderson by herself. But this was only to "see her doctor," in his surgery. "Women's stuff," his father had once bafflingly said about these visits. Then shrugged, as if he didn't care.

Putting two and two together, he'd wondered if this "stuff" might have to do with the little brother or sister he'd once been promised. But surely that was all finished with long ago, long before he was ten. His mother had settled for just one. So had he—settled on being the one. It was his mother and him. Then he'd dared to suppose that the visits might not be about anything medical at all.

But it had been his father. It had been the other way round. When his



father went to work, he didn't, sometimes, just go to work.

Though none of this had clouded his tenth-birthday party, no more than had the illness he would have a week later.

A wonderful party on a gorgeous summer's day in the garden that lay beneath his bedroom window. If he'd got up from his sickbed, he might have surveyed the scene of his

party. But he didn't need to—it was in his head.

As it was in his head now.

The lawn strewn with his guests, his school friends. Only an hour before, they'd all been at school and the lawn had been just a lawn, quietly basking in the June sun. But a transformation had occurred. The boys, including himself, had been thrust into clean shirts and the girls, more willingly, perhaps, into party frocks. Then they'd all regathered at his house and taken possession of the lawn.

On the narrow terrace between house and lawn stood a table bearing food and drink, and round it clustered the mums, in party frocks of their own. Under the table, hidden by a tablecloth hanging to the ground, had been, though not for long, everything needed for a succession of party games, and the presents to go with them. Everyone, he understood, was to have presents, but he would have the most and the best.

And so it had transpired. What was on the table was soon pillaged—the tablecloth would eventually need a serious wash—and what was underneath achieved its purpose. The lawn became strewn not just with children but with torn and crumpled wrapping paper and other debris from the games, not to mention many smeared and sticky paper plates and cups, some trodden on.

And all this joyous litter was a tribute to his mother's toil. How she must have labored that day, preparing little fancy cakes—and one big one—as well as ice cream, jellies, bottles of lemonade, jugs of lemon and orange squash to be topped up with ice cubes from the new fridge. In the brief interval between his return from school and the start of it all, he had watched her set everything out with unpanicking efficiency, a calm smile on her face. How she must have worked—wrapping the presents as well!—and how unflappably and triumphantly she had assembled the results of her work.

In the unit, soon, he would inwardly invoke, to assert his necessary poise, his mother's busy serenity before his tenth-birthday party.

At the last moment, she'd gone up quickly to her bedroom to put on her



own party frock. She reappeared in a dress that was a mass of swirling red blooms on white, and in a delicate waft of perfume. Her day dress would have been left on the Regency chair.

Then the front doorbell began to ring.

He saw it all now, as he drove toward what was no party at all: the children in charge of the lawn, the women subserviently but floridly in charge of the table, dispensing the food and drink and stepping onto the grass, some in unsuitably high heels, only to deal with the games and the crucial issuing of presents.

The names of some of his friends, his party guests, came clearly back to him, though he had not thought of them for decades: Bobby Scott, Nigel Wilson, Helen Fletcher, Wendy Simms . . . There they were on the lawn. Where were they now?

A party for both children and mums, an invisible wavering line between the two. But there was a moment when the mothers all claimed him. They drew him away from his pride of place on the lawn and took him aside. They said things like “You mustn’t forget us, Jimmy.” Or “Let’s have some of you, too.”

It was Mrs. Simms who said that. “Let’s have some of you, too.” Whatever it meant. She said it after popping into her mouth, almost whole, one of the little cakes, and as she did so her eyes bulged and goggled in exactly the same way that her daughter’s did when she attempted the same. She flicked away bits of cake from her lips, then waggled her fingers in the air. Her party dress was also flowery—they were in a garden, after all—and had no sleeves and a deep collar. When she brushed her mouth, a sizable crumb fell into her neckline and disappeared. Did she know? Did she see that he saw? But she said, after the waggly thing, “Let’s have some of you, too, Jimmy.” And added, “Us girls, too.” So all the mums were now “girls.” It was confusing.

And then she said, which was even more confusing, “So come on, Jim, you’ve got to tell us.” Her eyes swivelled round the crowded lawn. “You can tell us. Which one do you like best? Which one is your favorite?”

Then, as if to correct herself, she said, “Which party frock?” More and more confusion. Did she really mean, as he’d momentarily thought, “Which girl?” or did she mean “Which frock?” Or was it one and the same? In order to give an answer, did he have to separate the girls from their frocks? Which was a thought. Did he have an answer anyway?

So he said nothing. He struggled, a magnet for confusion. Was Mrs. Simms really wanting him to choose her daughter, Wendy, both frock and girl? Then another mum—was it Mrs. Scott?—chimed in, “He’s blushing!” Worse and worse.

But his mother quickly and gently said, “Leave him alone. Let him be. It’s his party.” It wasn’t reproachful of the other women; it was just a little soft statement that at once rescued him. He felt again now, a seventy-two-year-old man at the wheel of a car, its protective touch winging to him like a bird.

And had he immediately stopped blushing? How could he know? And perhaps no one knew, not even Mrs. Simms, that he was blushing not at the choice put to him but at the thought of that crumb that had dropped down her dress. Where had it gone? And at the thought of all these grownup party dresses, rustling, pressing, and whispering round him, which had been put on in more complicated ways than the girls’ ones and, it was at least partly true to say, especially for him.

For a moment, he’d been claimed by the women, even made to feel he belonged to them. And been made to understand that they were also girls. And for a moment, too, after his mother’s magical intervention, he’d even seemed to see everything through their eyes. Not just the spectacle of the party, of the child-sprinkled lawn, which supposedly still guarded his secret choice, but *everything*. Everything all around. Not just the lawn but the rest of the garden and the adjoining gardens, all with their own lawns and trellises and cascades of roses and apple trees and clumps of hydrangea bushes. And the houses with their red-tiled roofs and glinting windows, many of them flung open as if to draw delighted breath on this scintillating afternoon.

He let his eyes sweep round, the way their eyes—he saw—now and then swept giddily round to take it all in. *Everything*.

The houses, he had once been told, were roughly the same age as him. They’d been new when his parents moved in. The homes of pioneers. Now they were settled and established and ten years old but still had an aura of newness. Just like him. Inside the houses were new fridges, new televisions.

Though not inside or even outside them on this radiant day were all the fathers, who—but had he thought this then?—were working like billy-o to pay for it all, to keep the whole sublime fabric intact.

Why should Dr. Henderson have been invited?

Here and there among the gardens were tall, massive trees, their leaves green-gold in the afternoon light, left over from when it had all been farmland, hedgerows and fields. A farmhouse and barns had once stood where his primary school was now. It was hard to believe.

He looked around and could even see how to the mums it must look like Heaven. Everything that they’d once wished and hoped for. It was Heaven. And they’d achieved it, as they’d achieved their children and watched them grow, as they’d achieved this party—if he didn’t see it then, he saw it now—a dazzling homage to it all.

He saw that it was happiness. What else? He gasped, holding the wheel, at the sweet breath of it all. A seventy-two-year-old man driving between Heaven and Hell.

He gasped and recognized that this was his chosen field. The breath of life. Breath.

And why do we blush? Why are some of us prone to this blazoning of embarrassment, that is itself a cause for further embarrassment? Can you blush from sheer happiness, its flagrant touch on your skin? He was acquainted with the workings of the human body, but he knew no more about blushing than, apparently, Dr. Henderson had known. It wasn’t his field. It was supposedly an affliction of the young and even innocent. Later,



## WHAT THE ANGELS EAT

as children we ate watermelons over trash bags in my aunt's back yard  
filled with so many black & blue-eyed crows  
it stopped being an omen & they'd eat what fell to the ground  
& our skin stayed on

we'd get yelled at for spitting seeds at each other  
saliva thick with red  
we made a war from the sweetest things  
the flies made a mess of our dancing  
the flies made a dance in our messes

our mothers thanked god it was not the blood feared  
a watermelon's vine would wrap itself around you  
if you fell asleep under them watching meteors  
melons make magic under midnight moons

i once grew watermelons that flowers could sing  
if i sat there singing  
the way my aunts break out into song i mean beautiful  
like that the flowers would start moving

i'm so free i make a river on both sides of my mouth  
a fruit full of kinship  
it once grew wild & bitter  
in the kalahari desert

*the grandmother of all the watermelons* the first water  
my grandmothers share a bowl every sunday  
and drip juice on the floor  
but never stain a sole  
the only fruit the dead can eat

—Tyree Daye

you got over it. "Blushing like a girl."  
Or boy.

But he knew that he himself could still go pink-faced for no obvious reason. Perhaps he was blushing now, in his car, recalling the blushes of decades ago. Though did you blush—it was a paradox—if no one could see you? And soon he would be concealing himself not just in a face mask but in layers of protective clothing. All to spare his blushes?

Was it the crumb in Mrs. Simms's bosom, or the vexing question she had put to him? Was it the prospect that lay behind the question, that had never so invitingly floated before his vision? That life itself might be a great choosing of *girls*. Girls! How delightful. What happiness.

But, if it was true, it was over now. The women of his life. And he himself might be near the end, for all the care he took with his protective gear.

Near the end and, so it seemed, near the beginning. Ten. It was what they said happened when you drowned. You saw your whole life pass before you. And it was what the patients did, in the unit, when they reached the end. Effectively, they drowned.

The hospital was now very close. He could see in the dip of the road its tall incinerator chimney and the spangle of lit-up windows in the not yet full April daylight. At any moment, he might be chased and overtaken by an ambulance, with a quick blast of its siren. One morning, he'd been overtaken by three.

In a few minutes, he would have to switch off his memory. Apply himself only to what was before him. He would have to turn off his life.

How would this pandemic pan out? No one knew. He could only do what he could, for several uncountable hours, in a place of great suffering. And risk.

Some of the staff were near to snapping, he could see. Psychiatry was not his field, either, but he could see. They had homes and families to deal with, not just in their memories. They did not have empty mansions with automatic garage doors.

A cheery colleague had said in one of their brief breaks that this was only a blip. The pandemic was a blip. It was just a great preliminary distraction from the real calamity, that the planet would be uninhabitable, for human beings, within a century. Unless miracles were performed.

He saw again the shimmering ancient trees, watching like sentinels over the gardens. He saw the lawn. His father had mowed it specially on the eve of his birthday. He saw the party frocks. He saw that wardrobe of illnesses so gallantly put on by little souls, then happily discarded. He saw Mrs. Simms. Her bare shoulders. He saw his mother. And he saw himself lying in bed just a week later, his mother leaning toward him and Dr. Henderson in his chair.

It was because of Dr. Henderson, he was sure of it, that his mother had wanted him to become a doctor. The two of them had left his bedroom and gone downstairs for their cups of tea. He could hear only the murmur of their voices. No words. Grownup conversation. Then Dr. Henderson had left.

But he heard again now his mother saying to Dr. Henderson in the striped chair, "Unless he's just blushing," though with that look that was meant for him, lying beneath the bedclothes. And so he knew, after Dr. Henderson had completed his diagnosis, that it must have been on his tenth birthday, at his wonderful birthday party, that he'd caught scarlet fever. ♦

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Graham Swift on ghost worlds.



# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## STARTING FRESH

*The value of learning to do things you'll never do well.*

BY MARGARET TALBOT

**A**mong the things I have not missed since entering middle age is the sensation of being an absolute beginner. It has been decades since I've sat in a classroom in a gathering cloud of incomprehension (Algebra 2, tenth grade) or sincerely tried, lesson after lesson, to acquire a skill that was clearly not destined to play a large role in my life (modern dance, twelfth grade). Learning to ride a bicycle in my early thirties was an exception—a little mortifying when my husband had to run alongside the bike, as you would with a child—but ultimately rewarding. Less so was the time when a group of Japanese schoolchildren tried to teach me origami at a public event where I was the guest of honor—I'll never forget their sombre puzzlement as my clumsy fingers mutilated yet another paper crane.

Like Tom Vanderbilt, a journalist and the author of “Beginners: The Joy and Transformative Power of Lifelong Learning” (Knopf), I learn new facts all the time but new skills seldom. Journalists regularly drop into unfamiliar subcultures and domains of expertise, learning enough at least to ask the right questions. The distinction he draws between his energetic stockpiling of declarative knowledge, or knowing *that*, and his scant attention to procedural knowledge, or knowing *how*, is familiar to me. The prospect of reinventing myself as, say, a late-blooming skier or ceramicist or marathon runner sparks only an idle interest, something like wondering what it might be like to live in some small town you pass on the highway.

There is certainly a way to put a positive spin on that reluctance. If you love

your job and find it intellectually and creatively fulfilling, you may not feel the urge to discover other rooms in the house of your mind, whatever hidden talents and lost callings may repose there. But there are less happy forces at work, too. There's the fear of being bad at something you think is worthwhile—and, maybe even more so, being *seen* to be bad at it—when you have accustomed yourself to knowing, more or less, what you're doing. What's the point of starting something new when you know you'll never be much good at it? Middle age, to go by my experience—and plenty of research—brings greater emotional equanimity, an unspectacular advantage but a relief. (The lows aren't as low, the highs not as high.) Starting all over at something would seem to put you right back into that emotional churn—exhilaration, self-doubt, but without the open-ended possibilities and renewable energy of youth. Parties mean something different and far more exciting when you're younger and you might meet a person who will change your life; so does learning something new—it might be fun, but it's less likely to transform your destiny at forty or fifty.

In “Old in Art School: A Memoir of Starting Over,” Nell Painter, as distinguished a historian as they come—legions of honors, seven books, a Princeton professorship—recounts her experience earning first a B.F.A. at Rutgers and then an M.F.A. at the Rhode Island School of Design while in her sixties. As a Black woman used to feeling either uncomfortably singled out or ignored in public spaces where Black women were few, she was taken aback

in art school to find that “old” was such an overwhelming signifier: “It wasn't that I stopped being my individual self or stopped being black or stopped being female, but that *old*, now linked to my sex, obscured everything else beyond *old lady*.” Painter finds herself periodically undone by the overt discouragement of some of her teachers or the silence of her fellow-students during group crits of her work—wondering if they were “critiquing me, old-black-woman-totally-out-of-place,” or her work. Reading her book, I was full of admiration for Painter's willingness to take herself out of a world in which her currency—scholarly accomplishment—commanded respect and put herself into a different one where that coin often went unrecognized altogether, all out of exultation in the art-making itself. But her quest also induced some anxiety in me.

Painter is no dilettante: she's clear about not wanting to be a “Sunday Painter”; she is determined to be an Artist, and recognized as such. But “dilettante” is one of those words which deter people from taking up new pursuits as adults. Many of us are wary of being dismissed as dabblers, people who have a little too much leisure, who are a little too cute and privileged in our pastimes. This seems a narrative worth pushing back against. We might remember, as Vanderbilt points out, that the word “dilettante” comes from the Italian for “to delight.” In the eighteenth century, a group of aristocratic Englishmen popularized the term, founding the Society of the Dilettanti to undertake tours of the Continent, promote the art of knowledgeable conversation,

ABOVE: TAMARA SHOPSIN





*The joys—and occasional embarrassments—of being a novice could be an antidote to the strain of being a perfectionist.*



collect art, and subsidize archeological expeditions. Frederick II of Prussia dissed the dilettanti as “lovers of the arts and sciences” who “understand them only superficially but who however are ranked in superior class to those who are totally ignorant.” (They were, of course, wealthy, with oodles of time on their hands.) The term turned more pejorative in modern times, with the rise of professions and of licensed expertise. But if you think of dilettantism as an endorsement of learning for learning’s sake—not for remuneration or career advancement but merely because it delights the mind—what’s not to love?

Maybe it could be an antidote to the self-reported perfectionism that has grown steadily more prevalent among college students in the past three decades. Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill, the authors of a 2019 study on perfectionism among American, British, and Canadian college students, have written that “increasingly, young people hold irrational ideals for themselves, ideals that manifest in unrealistic expectations for academic and professional achievement, how they should look, and what they should own,” and are worried that others will judge them harshly for their perceived failings. This is not, the researchers point out, good for mental health. In the U.S., we’ll be living, for the foreseeable future, in a competitive, individualistic, allegedly meritocratic society, where we can inspect and troll and post humiliating videos of one another

all the live-long day. Being willing to involve yourself in something you’re mediocre at but intrinsically enjoy, to give yourself over to the imperfect pursuit of something you’d like to know how to do for no particular reason, seems like a small form of resistance.

Tom Vanderbilt got motivated to start learning again during the time he spent waiting about while his young daughter did her round of lessons and activities. Many of us have been there, “on some windowless lower level of a school huddled near an electrical outlet to keep your device alive,” as he nicely puts it—waiting, avoiding the parents who want to talk scores and rankings, trying to shoehorn a bit of work into a stranded hour or two. But not many of us are inspired to wonder, in such moments, why we ourselves aren’t in there practicing our embouchure on the trumpet or our Salchow on the ice. This may speak to my essential laziness, but I have fond memories of curling up on the child-size couch in the musty, overheated basement of our local community center reading a book for a stolen hour, while my kids took drum lessons and fencing classes. Vanderbilt, on the other hand, asks himself whether “we, in our constant chaperoning of these lessons, were imparting a subtle lesson: that learning was for the young.” Rather than molder on the sidelines, he decides to throw himself into acquiring five new skills. (That’s his term, though I started to

think of these skills as “accomplishments” in the way that marriageable Jane Austen heroines have them, talents that make a long evening pass more agreeably, that can turn a person into more engaging company, for herself as much as for others.) Vanderbilt’s search is for “the naïve optimism, the hypervigilant alertness that comes with novelty and insecurity, the willingness to look foolish, and the permission to ask obvious questions—the unencumbered *beginner’s mind*.” And so he tries to achieve competence, not mastery, in chess, singing, surfing, drawing, and making. (He learns to weld a wedding ring to replace two he lost surfing.) He adds juggling, not because he’s so interested in it but because—with its steep and obvious learning curve (most people, starting from scratch, can learn to juggle three balls in a few days) and its fun factor—juggling is an oft-used task for laboratory studies of how people learn. These accomplishments aren’t likely to help his job performance as a journalist, or to be marketable in any way, except insofar as the learning of them forms the idea for the book.

Vanderbilt is good on the specific joys and embarrassments of being a late-blooming novice, or “kook,” as surfers sometimes call gauche beginners. How you think you know how to sing a song but actually know only how to sing *along* with one, so that, when you hear your own voice, stripped of the merciful camouflage the recorded version provides, “you’re not only hearing the song as you’ve never quite heard it, you are hearing your voice as you’ve never quite heard it.” The particular, democratic pleasure of making that voice coalesce with others’ in a choir, coupled with the way, when friends and family come to see your adult group perform, “the parental smile of eternal indulgence gives way to a more complicated expression.” The fact that feedback, especially the positive kind stressing what you’re doing right, delivered by an actual human teacher or coach watching what you do, is crucial for a beginner—which might seem obvious except that, in an age when so many instructional videos of every sort are available online, you might get lulled into thinking you could learn just as well without it. The weirdness of the phenomenon that, for many of us, our drawing skills are frozen forever as they



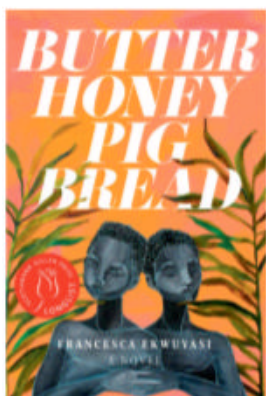
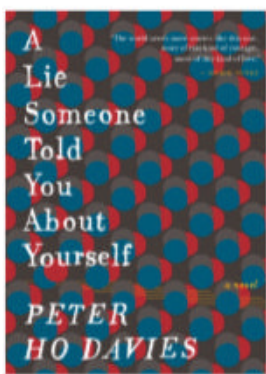
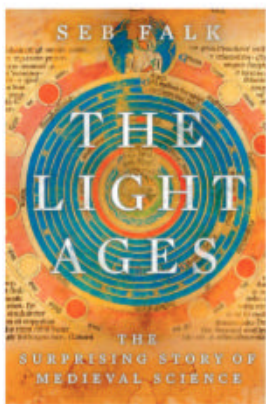
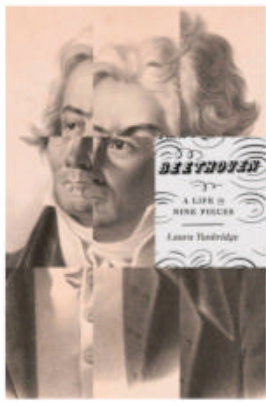
*“He’s giggling to himself. Get ready for a dad joke.”*



were when we were kids. Children tend to draw better, Vanderbilt explains, when they are around five years old and rendering what they feel; later, they fall into what the psychologist Howard Gardner calls “the doldrums of *literalism*”—trying to draw exactly what they see but without the technical skill or instruction that would allow them to do so effectively. Many of us never progress beyond that stage. Personally, I’m stuck at about age eight, when I filled notebooks with ungainly, scampering horses. Yet I was entranced by how both Vanderbilt and, in her far more ambitious way, Painter describe drawing as an unusually absorbing, almost meditative task—one that makes you look at the world differently even when you’re not actually doing it and pours you into undistracted flow when you are.

One problem with teaching an old dog new tricks is that certain cognitive abilities decline with age, and by “age” I mean starting as early as one’s twenties. Mental-processing speed is the big one. Maybe that’s one reason that air-traffic controllers have to retire at age fifty-six, while English professors can stay at it indefinitely. Vanderbilt cites the work of Neil Charness, a psychology professor at Florida State University, who has shown that the older a chess player is the slower she is to perceive a threatened check, no matter what her skill level. Processing speed is why I invariably lose against my daughter (pretty good-naturedly, if you ask me) at a game that I continue to play: Anomia. In this game, players flip cards bearing the names of categories (dog breeds, Olympic athletes, talk-show hosts, whatever), and, if your card displays the same small symbol as one of your opponents’ does, you try to be the first to call out something belonging to the other person’s category. If my daughter and I each had ten minutes to list as many talk-show hosts as we could, I’d probably triumph—after all, I have several decades of late-night-TV viewing over her. But, with speed the essence, a second’s lag in my response speed cooks my goose every game.

Still, as Rich Karlgaard notes in his reassuring book “Late Bloomers: The Hidden Strengths of Learning and Succeeding at Your Own Pace,” there are



## BRIEFLY NOTED

**Beethoven**, by *Laura Tunbridge* (Yale). Focussing on nine pivotal works, this study, equal parts musicological and biographical, complicates the simplistic portrait of Beethoven as an isolated, single-minded genius. Although he seemed inclined to rebellion and irreverence, he still relied upon a close circle of friends and patrons—especially as he began to lose his hearing—and saw his fortunes as bound up with theirs. His music also testifies to his political awareness. Tunbridge writes that “Fidelio,” his only opera, “roots him as a man of his time rather than allowing him to float free of worldly concerns, a transcendent genius.”

**The Light Ages**, by *Seb Falk* (Norton). The figure at the heart of this exploration of medieval astronomers, philosophers, and physicians is John of Westwyk, a brilliant fourteenth-century Benedictine monk who created an equatorium, a kind of analog computer for determining the positions of the planets. As John passes in and out of the historical record, Falk provides an expansive survey of Eastern polymaths, squabbling theorists, political schemers, and optimistic overreachers. Those dreamers can be the most beguiling: the eleventh-century monk Eilmer of Malmesbury leaped from an abbey tower with wings attached to his hands and feet, flying two hundred metres before plunging to earth. Falk, always generous, applauds him for having “piloted an experimental glider, not wholly without success.”

**A Lie Someone Told You About Yourself**, by *Peter Ho Davies* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). This semi-autobiographical novel relates the experiences of a father through two life-changing decisions—to have a child, and not to have one—which he comes to see as “two sides of the same coin.” His wife’s first pregnancy ends in a “virtuous abortion,” after tests reveal fatal abnormalities. The couple grieve for years, even as the father frets over the ethics of a man’s mourning a woman’s abortion, particularly when the procedure is under attack. They eventually become parents to a boy who is later diagnosed as being “somewhere on the spectrum.” Davies treats twists of fate with clear-eyed realism, humor, and grace. “All these doubts and regrets,” he writes. “And all—miraculously, paradoxically—worth it.”

**Butter Honey Pig Bread**, by *Francesca Ekwuyasi* (Arsenal Pulp). Spanning decades, this fast-paced debut novel moves from Lagos to Montreal, Halifax, and London as it traces the sorrows and triumphs of a pair of estranged twin sisters and their troubled mother. The mother, seemingly schizophrenic, is in fact an ogbanje, a restless spirit believed by the Igbo to resist remaining in a human body. She struggles against the compulsion to return to her spirit kin, while the twins desperately try to shape happy, earthbound lives, despite childhood trauma and adult disappointments. The novel abounds with sex, death, and food—whose preparation offers these characters catharsis, knowledge, and sometimes simply pleasure.



cognitive compensations. “Our brains are constantly forming neural networks and pattern-recognition capabilities that we didn’t have in our youth when we had blazing synaptic horsepower,” he writes. Fluid intelligence, which encompasses the capacity to suss out novel challenges and think on one’s feet, favors the young. But crystallized intelligence—the ability to draw on one’s accumulated store of knowledge, expertise, and *Fingerspitzengefühl*—is often enriched by advancing age. And there’s more to it than that: particular cognitive skills rise and fall at different rates across the life span, as Joshua K. Hartshorne, now a professor of psychology at Boston College, and Laura T. Germine, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, show in a 2015 paper on the subject. Processing speed peaks in the late teens, short-term memory for names at around twenty-two, short-term memory for faces at around thirty, vocabulary at around fifty (in some studies, even at around sixty-five), while social understanding, including the ability to recognize and interpret other people’s emotions, rises at around forty and tends to remain high. “Not only is there no age at which humans are performing at peak at all cognitive tasks,” Hartshorne and Germine conclude, “there may not be an age at which humans are at peak on *most* cognitive tasks.” This helps Karlgaard’s case that we need a “kinder clock for human development”—societal pressure on young adults to specialize and succeed right out of college is as wrong-headed and oppressive on the one end of life as patronizing attitudes toward the old are on the other.

The gift of crystallized intelligence explains why some people can bloom spectacularly when they’re older—especially, perhaps, in a field like literature, where a rich vein of life experience can be a writerly asset. Annie Proulx published her first novel at the age of fifty-six, Raymond Chandler at fifty-one. Frank McCourt, who had been a high-school teacher in New York City for much of his career, published his first book, the Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir “Angela’s Ashes,” at sixty-six. Edith Wharton, who had been a society matron prone to neurasthenia and trapped in a gilded cage of a marriage, produced no novels until she was forty. Publish-

ing fiction awakened her from what she described as “a kind of torpor,” a familiar feeling for the true later bloomer. “I had groped my way through to my vocation,” Wharton wrote, “and thereafter I never questioned that story-telling was my job.”

In science and technology, we often think of the people who make precocious breakthroughs as the true geniuses—Einstein developing his special theory of relativity at twenty-six. Einstein himself once said that “a person who has not made his great contribution to science before the age of thirty will never do so.” A classic paper on the relationship between age and scientific creativity showed that American Nobel winners tended to have done their prize-winning work at thirty-six in physics, thirty-nine in chemistry, and forty-one in medicine—that creativity rose in the twenties and thirties and began a gradual decline in the forties.

That picture has been complicated by more recent research. According to a 2014 working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research, which undertook a broad review of the research on age and scientific breakthroughs, the average age at which people make significant contributions to science has been rising during the twentieth century—notably to forty-eight, for physicists. (One explanation might be that the “burden of knowledge” that people have to take on in many scientific disciplines has increased.) Meanwhile, a 2016 paper in *Science* that considered a wider range of scientists than Nobelists concluded that “the highest-impact work in a scientist’s career is randomly distributed within her body of work. That is, the highest-impact work can be, with the same probability, anywhere in the sequence of papers published by a scientist—it could be the first publication, could appear mid-career, or could be a scientist’s last publication.”

When it comes to more garden-variety late blooming, the kind of new competencies that Vanderbilt is seeking, he seems to have gone about it in the most promising way. For one thing, it appears that people may learn better when they are learning multiple skills at once, as Vanderbilt did. A recent study that looked at the experiences of adults

over fifty-five who learned three new skills at once—for example, Spanish, drawing, and music composition—found that they not only acquired proficiency in these areas but improved their cognitive functioning over all, including working and episodic memory. In a 2017 paper, Rachel Wu, a neuroscientist at U.C. Riverside, and her co-authors, George W. Rebok and Feng Vankee Lin, propose six factors that they think are needed to sustain cognitive development, factors that tend to be less present in people’s lives as they enter young adulthood and certainly as they grow old. These include what the Stanford psychology professor Carol Dweck calls a “growth mindset,” the belief that abilities are not fixed but can improve with effort; a commitment to serious rather than “hobby learning” (in which “the learner casually picks up skills for a short period and then quits due to difficulty, disinterest, or other time commitments”); a forgiving environment that promotes what Dweck calls a “not yet” rather than a “cannot” approach; and a habit of learning multiple skills simultaneously, which may help by encouraging the application of capacities acquired in one domain to another. What these elements have in common, Wu and her co-authors point out, is that they tend to replicate how children learn.

So eager have I been all my life to leave behind the subjects I was bad at and hunker down with the ones I was good at—a balm in many ways—that, until reading these books, I’d sort of forgotten the youthful pleasure of moving our little tokens ahead on a bunch of winding pathways of aptitude, lagging behind here, surging ahead there. I’d been out of touch with that sense of life as something that might encompass multiple possibilities for skill and artistry. But now I’ve been thinking about taking up singing in a serious way again, learning some of the jazz standards my mom, a professional singer, used to croon to me at bedtime. If learning like a child sounds a little airy-fairy, whatever the neuroscience research says, try recalling what it felt like to learn how to do something new when you didn’t really care what your performance of it said about your place in the world, when you didn’t know what you didn’t know. It might feel like a whole new beginning. ♦



## DISPOSSESSIONS

*Human history and the hunger for land.*

BY FRANCISCO CANTÚ



The final piece of terrain to be incorporated into the contiguous United States was an oddly shaped strip stretching from Las Cruces, New Mexico, to Yuma, Arizona. Known as the Gadsden Purchase, the area was obtained from Mexico in 1854 for ten million dollars, adding nearly thirty thousand square miles to a nation still drunk with Manifest Destiny expansionism. The motivations for acquiring the land were many—it contained huge deposits of ore and precious metals, held vast agricultural potential in the soils of its fertile river valleys, and, most important, had an arid climate that could allow a rail route to connect

the coasts while remaining free from snowpack year-round.

Like much of the American West, the Gadsden region bears unmistakable scars of our nation's drive for expansion and control. Today, it is dotted with ghost towns and gaping open-pit mines, its rivers are in various stages of death and diversion, and its land has been divided up according to innumerable private and public interests, forming a patchwork of national monuments and state parks, militarized borderlands and for-profit prisons, fiercely defended ranches and sovereign Indigenous nations. The stories that can be unearthed in places like

Gadsden, where I have long made my home, are woven throughout Simon Winchester's new book, "Land: How the Hunger for Ownership Shaped the Modern World" (Harper). Winchester, a British-American author who has frequented the nonfiction best-seller lists during the past two decades, examines our duelling impulses for appropriation and exploitation, on the one hand, and stewardship and restoration, on the other, tracing our relationship to land from the dawn of agriculture to the current age. Moving across varied histories and geographies, he offers us one case study after another of how the once seemingly inexhaustible surface of the Earth has devolved into a commodity, the ultimate object of contestation and control.

By way of an origin story, Winchester imagines two English farmers of the late Bronze Age. The men are neighbors, friends, and, he suggests, sometimes rivals. One farmer plows his flat fields in furrows; the other, cultivating an adjoining hillside, terraces his slopes with lynchet strips. Where one farmer's furrows meet the other's lynchets, an easily discernible division is created, giving rise to "the first-ever mutually acknowledged and accepted border between two pieces of land, pieces farmed or maintained or presided over—or owned—by two different people." Small agricultural frontiers like these, Winchester's thinking goes, constituted boundary lines in their humblest and simplest form, and soon evolved into boundaries between towns, cities, districts, and nations.

As borders proliferated, so did the need to demarcate them. Moving twenty-eight hundred years into the future with characteristic breeziness, Winchester considers nineteenth-century efforts to mark, measure, and map huge swaths of the planet. In 1816, the astronomer Friedrich Georg Wilhelm von Struve set out to calculate the length of the Earth's meridians, employing an arsenal of theodolites, telescopes, brass measuring chains, and other hulking surveying tools to triangulate points across great distances and impossibly varied topography. Four decades later, Struve's Geodetic Arc was

*Territorial expansion once meant conquest, but other modes are being explored.*



completed, spanning ten countries and nearly two thousand miles, from the tip of Norway to the Black Sea coast of Ukraine. The line was a monumental achievement of engineering—it allowed Struve to determine the circumference of the Earth with astonishing accuracy, Winchester tells us, coming within sixteen hundred metres of the figure NASA settled upon more than a century later with the aid of satellite technology.

Winchester is a master at capturing the Old World wonder and romance of exploits like Struve's—his past books have delved into such subjects as the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary (“The Professor and the Madman”) and the birth of modern geology (“The Map That Changed the World”). In “Land,” his prose frequently exudes the comfort and charm of a beloved encyclopedia come to life, centuries and continents abutting through the pages: there’s a micro-history of a hundred-acre tract he owns in eastern New York, an appreciation of Britain’s once ubiquitous Ordnance Survey maps, and the saga of the German cartographer Albrecht Penck, who sought to bring far-flung nations together in order to map the Earth’s entire surface at a one-to-one-million scale. These early chapters also read as a lament for bygone eras of exploration and map-making, with Winchester delighting in the cartographer’s nobility of spirit and the intellectual honesty of the craft, wrongly denigrated, he thinks, by “modern revisionism” and its anti-imperialist preoccupations.

But Winchester’s nostalgia leads him to skate over the involvement of cartographers, surveyors, and other diligent functionaries in the inner workings of conquest and empire. “Physical geographers back then,” he maintains, “took pride in remaining as politically neutral as the land was itself, caring little for which nation ruled what, only for the nature of the world’s fantastically varied surfaces.” In fact, American surveyors in charge of delineating the U.S. border with Mexico were decidedly less apolitical about their task than Winchester proposes. The various teams of “surveyor-dreamers,” as he calls them, seemed to take little in-

terest in the nature of the Southwest. Despite traversing the world’s most biodiverse desert, they found the flora “more unpleasant to the sight than the barren earth itself”; the landscape, they reported, was “utterly worthless for any purpose other than to constitute a barrier.” William H. Emory, who headed the first post-Gadsden survey, complained in 1856 that the new boundary would limit the “inevitable expansive force” of America. When the Gadsden line was resurveyed, in 1892, the U.S. War Department dispatched a military escort of twenty enlisted cavalrymen and thirty infantrymen, “as a protection against Indians or other marauders.” In this sense, as the nineteenth century’s surveyors and map-makers moved across the horizon, they served not only as beacons of scientific progress and civilizational promise but as grim harbingers of the encroaching technology and militarization that soon came to define ever-hardening lines across the globe.

As Winchester enters the twentieth century, he begins to grapple more directly with the enduring violence wrought by casual imperial boundary-making. His case in point is Britain’s postwar partition of India, completed in a mere handful of weeks during the summer of 1947 by Sir Cyril Radcliffe—a London lawyer who had never before been to India—from a dining-room table in Simla, British India’s



“summer capital,” nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas. Radcliffe’s “bloody line” precipitated widespread exodus and carnage among Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims and left a bewildering jumble of enclaves and exclaves on either side, islands within islands, where tens of thousands found themselves marooned in nations not their own. This, Winchester writes, is “land demarcation made insane,” the inevitable consequence of borders concocted

by foreign minds and laid out “in no sense as a reflection of any settled order of local history or geography.”

The narrative of American dispossession—the replacement of Native peoples with white settlers—serves as a sort of centerpiece for Winchester’s book. Beginning with a primer on the underpinnings of colonial ownership, he describes how the first conquistadores were emboldened by the fifteenth-century Doctrine of Discovery, in which the Pope affirmed their right to take possession of foreign lands inhabited by non-Christians. Similarly, the early British colonists in Massachusetts and Virginia found justification for expanding their dominion in the legal and philosophical writings of figures such as Hugo Grotius and John Locke, who argued that unclaimed lands were free for the taking, and that it was a Christian duty to own and improve them. Early settlers readily concocted laws to authorize the extermination, enslavement, and forcible relocation of one tribe after another. So potent was the colonists’ perceived right to usurp territory that when the British imposed their Proclamation Line of 1763, banning settlement west of the Appalachians, it stoked early calls for revolution against the Crown, imprinting a violent appetite for land upon our nascent national psyche.

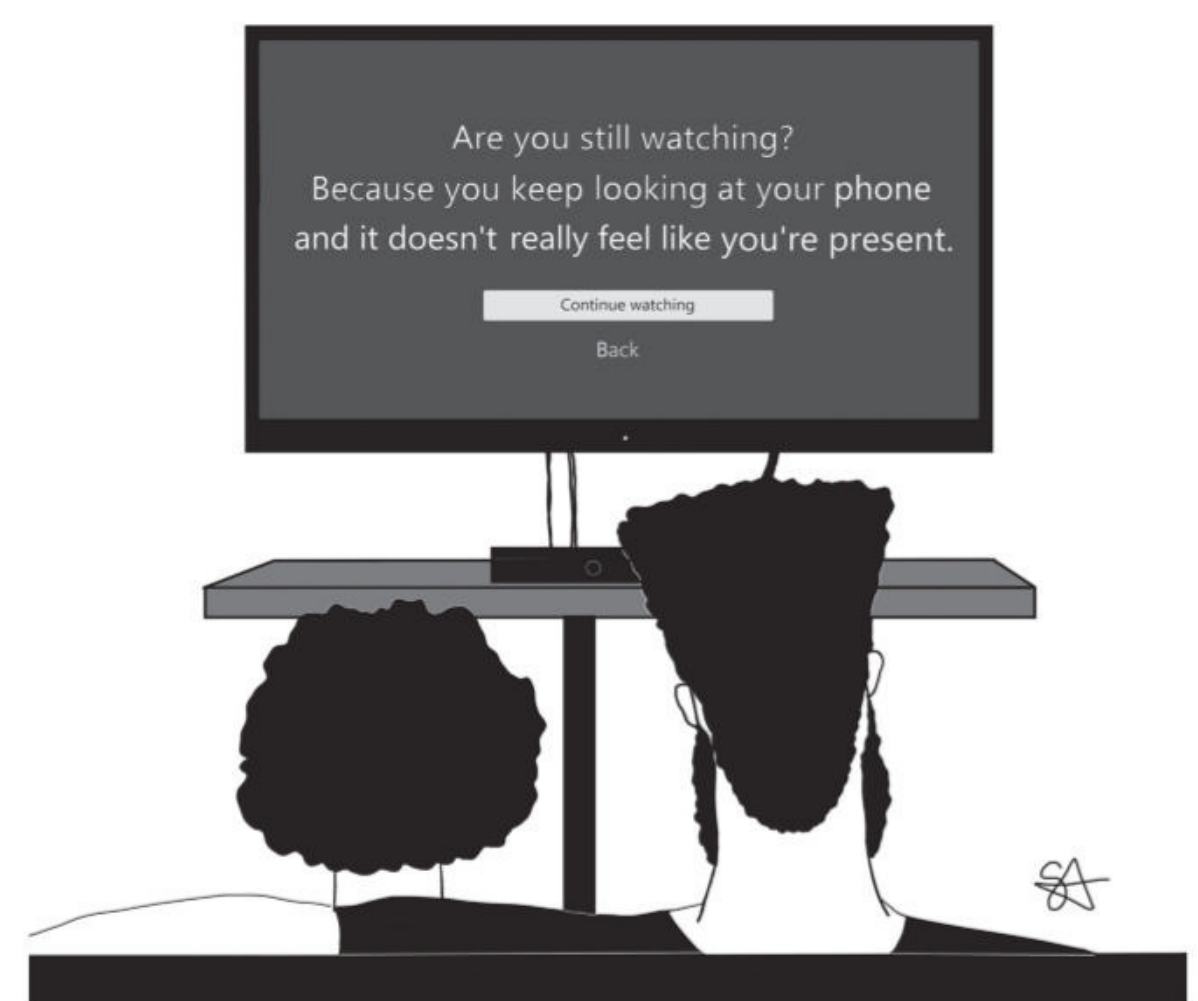
Winchester’s wide-angle view mostly gets the big-picture history right—the narrative arc of expulsion and exploitation—but when he zooms in he is often unable to resist the register of grand adventure. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his depiction of the Oklahoma land run—the iconic scene of mounted pilgrims stampeding across an open prairie, staking flags to claim their own hundred-and-sixty-acre parcels, freshly prepared for the taking by the U.S. Land Office. The moment is eminently cinematic, and has been portrayed in monuments, novels, and films, including Ron Howard’s 1992 epic, “Far and Away,” in which Tom Cruise holds a black claim flag up to the sky and cries out, “This land is mine! Mine by destiny!” before being crushed by a falling horse and dying in the arms of Nicole Kidman. Despite Winchester’s earlier acknowledgment of “the apocalypse, in-



deed, the holocaust” of Native peoples, he turns again and again to the accounts of white settlers, soldiers, and journalists, and only once cites a Native scholar across more than thirty pages. This shortcoming is characteristic of mainstream popular history, where corrective scholarship has only just begun to complicate the timeworn tradition of aggrandizing colonial narratives.

Even as Winchester dutifully recognizes the “shameful” and “repellent” treatment of America’s Indigenous population, he tosses up odd quips and cheeky asides, declaring, for example, that Spanish conquistadores were a “dishonorable exception” among the European colonizers. He goes on to offer a rosy depiction of the friendships that settlers like Henry Hudson and Francis Drake cultivated with local Natives, overselling brief and oft-mythologized preludes to what became long campaigns of subjugation and extermination. Winchester’s account is further undermined by a failure to capture the ongoing nature of many of his chosen histories. Of the dispossessed tribes in Oklahoma, for example, he contends that “such anger as they might justly feel has long ago ebbed, and it just simmers in the far background.” This will come as news to those who converged at Standing Rock to oppose the Dakota Access Pipeline—a mass protest that, as chronicled in Nick Estes’s “Our History Is the Future,” was informed by an unbroken legacy of resistance and has grown to become the largest Indigenous movement of the twenty-first century. It even reaches into the Sonoran Desert, where O’odham water and land defenders have climbed into the buckets of bulldozers to block the expansion of Trump’s border wall across their ancestral lands, cleaved ever since the Gadsden Purchase sketched a frontier across their dryland farms and sacred springs.

Expulsion and dispossession is, to be sure, a perennial tactic in the accumulation of land. Centuries before Britain began building its empire, powerful private and state interests set about appropriating land long held in common by English villagers, through a variety of legal and parliamentary maneuvers, in a process known as enclosure. These appropriations were bolstered by a bur-



geoning top-down philosophy of individualism, consolidation, and, ultimately, privatization. Many villagers, after being forcibly evicted from land they had coöperatively tilled and managed since time immemorial, joined resistance movements, such as the Levellers and the Diggers, while others moved to growing towns and cities, swept into a state-engineered demographic shift that would help produce the urbanized labor force required to run the newfangled machines and factories of the emerging Industrial Revolution.

“Land” vividly depicts the brutal enclosures that took place in Scotland at the beginning of the nineteenth century. During these Highland Clearances, as they came to be known, thousands of crofters were violently forced from their homes in order to convert entire farms and villages into pastureland for sheep. These clearances have often been associated with a single villainous couple, the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland, but Winchester relates that they were in fact carried out by a number of regional élites—a “punctilious” lawyer, a diligent agricultural specialist, and a team of enforcers willing to set fire to houses and churches. In

the following chapter, he turns his attention to today’s biggest landowners, such as the Australian mining heiress Gina Rinehart, the American media magnates Ted Turner and John Malone, and the fracking billionaires Dan and Farris Wilks, all of whom possess country-size properties.

As Winchester gallops back and forth through history, he too often seems content to assemble an eccentric cast of characters without saying much about the systems that have empowered them. Even as he reports that America’s top hundred landowners now control an area as large as the state of Florida, and that their accumulation of property has increased by fifty per cent since 2007, he does little to ground us in the political and economic dynamics behind the historical events he has laid out.

Enclosure is a subject that, Winchester observes, “invites the electromagnetism of the doctrinaire.” It’s true that Karl Marx pointed to the enclosures as a transformational stage in European and world history, the beginning of a centuries-long process of “primitive accumulation,” in which communal property and relations were



gradually privatized to make way for an economic reordering centered on wage labor and the personal amassing of capital. An alternative reading of history might hold that Winchester's two Bronze Age farmers didn't recognize each other as rivals at all, or see their parcels as being in any way divided. But Winchester quickly dismisses such possibilities, assuring us that the appropriation of land has been "an inherent human trait for a very long while."

Our current moment, as many scholars have suggested, might be understood as a new age of enclosure. The British geographer David Harvey argues that post-seventies neoliberalism has breathed new life into many of the mechanisms of primitive accumulation identified by Marx. This time, an "accumulation by dispossession" is being propelled by international credit systems and personal debt. The feminist historian Silvia Federici posits that enclosure extends to the body, too, especially female bodies, long appropriated for unpaid housework and the reproduction of future waged workers. Today, she argues, we are even witnessing an enclosure of interpersonal relationships as they are replaced with monetized online and social-media interactions. It's a pattern that has now been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Throughout "Land," Winchester does offer examples of alternative modes of land use, with chapters on rewilding efforts, Aboriginal fire management, and the Netherlands' momentous draining of the two-thousand-square-mile Zuider Zee, which carved out an entirely man-made province from tempestuous waters while effectively displacing no one at all. He also writes about new modes of ownership, chronicling the affirmation of Indigenous land rights in New Zealand, the untangling of colonial models of possession in Africa, and the resurgence of land trusts in the United States. But, even as he discusses the adoption of cooperative-friendly legislation in places like the Scottish Isles, he criticizes the political unpleasantness that has been necessary to achieve it. On the whole, he seems rather disengaged from the messier, more radical elements of resistance that often precede meaningful change.

It is a shame, for there are grand

narratives here as well. What of the Zapatistas of Mexico, Indigenous rebels in the southern state of Chiapas who, in 1994, rose up against five centuries of peonage, implementing communitarian management and establishing autonomous control over huge swaths of the state, and who have, to this day, managed to keep the military and powerful landowners at bay? In this case, a hunger for access, not ownership, has shaped history.

In one of Winchester's most memorable chapters, he narrates the story of Akira Aramaki, a farmer who spent two years interned in Idaho's Minidoka Relocation Center, where more than nine thousand Japanese-Americans were held during the Second World War. Akira's father arrived in the Pacific Northwest at the dawn of the twentieth century, and sought respite from rampant anti-Asian sentiment in Seattle by carving out a tract of farmland from a then remote woodland on the other side of Lake Washington. Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, the Aramakis seemed to have achieved a version of the American Dream against great odds, acquiring ten acres that yielded lucrative strawberry harvests year after year. But it was the American-born Akira, not his father, who legally held the title to the farm, thanks to "alien land laws" that excluded Asian immigrants from owning property. In telling Akira's story, Winchester focusses not so much on his time at the Minidoka concentration camp as on the period after his return, when well-worn structures of dispossession still churned against him and the other hundred and twenty thousand newly freed Japanese-Americans. Winchester writes, "The houses they had left behind had often been vandalized and their possessions stolen; and in many a case the title to the land a Japanese family had once possessed had somehow vanished, like a will-o'-the-wisp, and they found themselves just as landless as when their parents had arrived, decades before."

During the years of Japanese internment, the Gadsden scrublands, too, played host to several concentration camps. Recently, I drove to the ruins of one such facility, tucked away among

an expanse of citrus orchards and cotton fields, a few miles from a busy interstate and just thirty minutes from a thriving complex of immigrant-detention centers. The barracks that once packed the desert floor, housing thirteen thousand inmates, had been reduced to bare concrete pads, crumbled and pushed apart as if by tectonic force. Walking around the former camp, I imagined the prescribed orientation of walkways, gathering areas, and guardhouses. At the end of one rectangular building site, I found a half circle of stones, the edge of what had been a plant bed made from thoughtfully placed rocks of various shapes and sizes, now overgrown with creosote and dried grasses. Perhaps it had been created by prisoners long ago to bring some semblance of beauty to the grounds they were made to tread each day—a place where they could briefly turn their gaze away from the forces preventing them from reaching into a soil they might call their own.

Winchester muses, at one point, that a landscape "forgives or forgets almost all of the assaults that mankind willfully or neglectfully imposes upon it." It's a perspective in stark contrast to that of countless Indigenous groups, for whom land possesses a kind of memory. Arizona's internment sites are distinct from others, in part because they were the only camps built within the boundaries of active Native American reservations. Dismissing the objections of tribal leaders, government officials promised that the forced labor of the Japanese would serve to improve their lands at no cost to them. Indeed, the inmates, after being made to finish construction of the buildings in which they would be imprisoned, had to cultivate farmland and pick cotton, as well as build roads, bridges, canals, and schools. Much of this infrastructure remains, but the actual sites of incarceration have been left almost entirely unused. In some cases, their abandonment has been a matter of joint agreement between tribal associations and descendants of the interned, who sometimes still come together to remove trash from the long-silent ruins and perform maintenance on the simple memorials that stand out from the stones and the hills above. ♦



A CRITIC AT LARGE

# WE WORK

*Labor without end.*

BY JILL LEPORE



Maria Fernandes died at the age of thirty-two while sleeping in her car in a Wawa parking lot in New Jersey. It was the summer of 2014, and she worked low-wage jobs at three different Dunkin' Donuts, and slept in her Kia in between shifts, with the engine running and a container of gasoline in the back, in case she ran out. In the locked car, still wearing her white-and-brown Dunkin' Donuts uniform, she died from gasoline and exhaust fumes. A Rutgers professor called her “the real face of the recession.” Fernandes had been trying to sleep between shifts, but all kinds of workers were spending hours in their cars, waiting for shifts. Within a year of Fernandes’s

death, Elizabeth Warren and other Senate and House Democrats reintroduced a bill called the Schedules That Work Act; it would have required food service, retail, and warehouse companies to let employees know about changes to their schedules at least two weeks in advance and barred them from firing employees for asking for regular hours. “A single mom should know if her hours have been cancelled before she arranges for day care and drives halfway across town,” Warren said, of the bill. “Someone who wants to go to school to try to get an education should be able to request more predictable hours without getting fired, just for asking. And a worker who is told to wait

around on call for hours, with no guarantee of actual work, should get something for his time.” The bill never had any chance of passing. It was reintroduced again in 2017 and in 2019. It has never even come up for a vote.

Americans work more hours than their counterparts in peer nations, including France and Germany, and many work more than fifty hours a week. Real wages declined for the rank and file in the nineteen-seventies, as did the percentage of Americans who belong to unions, which may be a related development. One can argue that these post-industrial developments mark a return to a pre-industrial order. The gig economy is a form of vassalage. And even workers who don’t work for gig companies like Uber or TaskRabbit now work like gig workers. Most jobs created between 2005 and 2015 were temporary jobs. Four in five hourly retail workers in the United States have no reliable schedule from one week to another. Instead, their schedules are often set by algorithms that aim to maximize profits for investors by reducing breaks and pauses in service—the labor equivalent of the just-in-time manufacturing system that was developed in the nineteen-seventies in Japan, a country that coined a word for “death by overwork” but whose average employee today works fewer hours than his American counterpart. As the sociologist Jamie K. McCallum reports in “Worked Over: How Round-the-Clock Work Is Killing the American Dream” (Basic), Americans have fewer paid holidays than workers in other countries, and the United States is all but alone in having no guaranteed maternity leave and no legal right to sick leave or vacation time. Meanwhile, we’re told to love work, and to find meaning in it, as if work were a family, or a religion, or a body of knowledge.

“Meaningful work” is an expression that had barely appeared in the English language before the early nineteen-seventies, as McCallum observes. “Once upon a time, it was assumed, to put it bluntly, that work sucked,” Sarah Jaffe writes in “Work Won’t Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone” (Bold Type). That started to change in the nineteen-seventies, both McCallum and Jaffe argue, when, in their telling, managers began informing workers that they

*As the U.S. labor movement unravelled, people began working harder, for less.*



should expect to discover life's purpose in work. "With dollar-compensation no longer the overwhelmingly most important factor in job motivation," the chairman of the New York Stock Exchange wrote, "management must develop a better understanding of the more elusive, less tangible factors that add up to 'job satisfaction.'" After a while, everyone was supposed to love work. "Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life" popped up all over the place in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, along with the unpaid internship, the busting of unions, and campaigns to cut taxes on capital gains. It soon became, in Silicon Valley and on Wall Street, a catechism. "The only way to do great work is to love what you do," Steve Jobs told a graduating class at Stanford in 2005. "If you love what you're doing, it's not 'work,'" David M. Rubenstein, a C.E.O. of the Carlyle Group, said on CNBC in 2014. "Everywhere you look you hear people talking about meaning," a disillusioned Google engineer told McCallum. "They aren't philosophers. They aren't psychologists. They sell banner ads." It's not pointless. But it's not poetry. Still, does it have to be?

In the eighteen-twenties and thirties, the French mathematician Gaspard-Gustave de Coriolis, studying the effect produced when, for instance, one billiard ball hits another, used the word

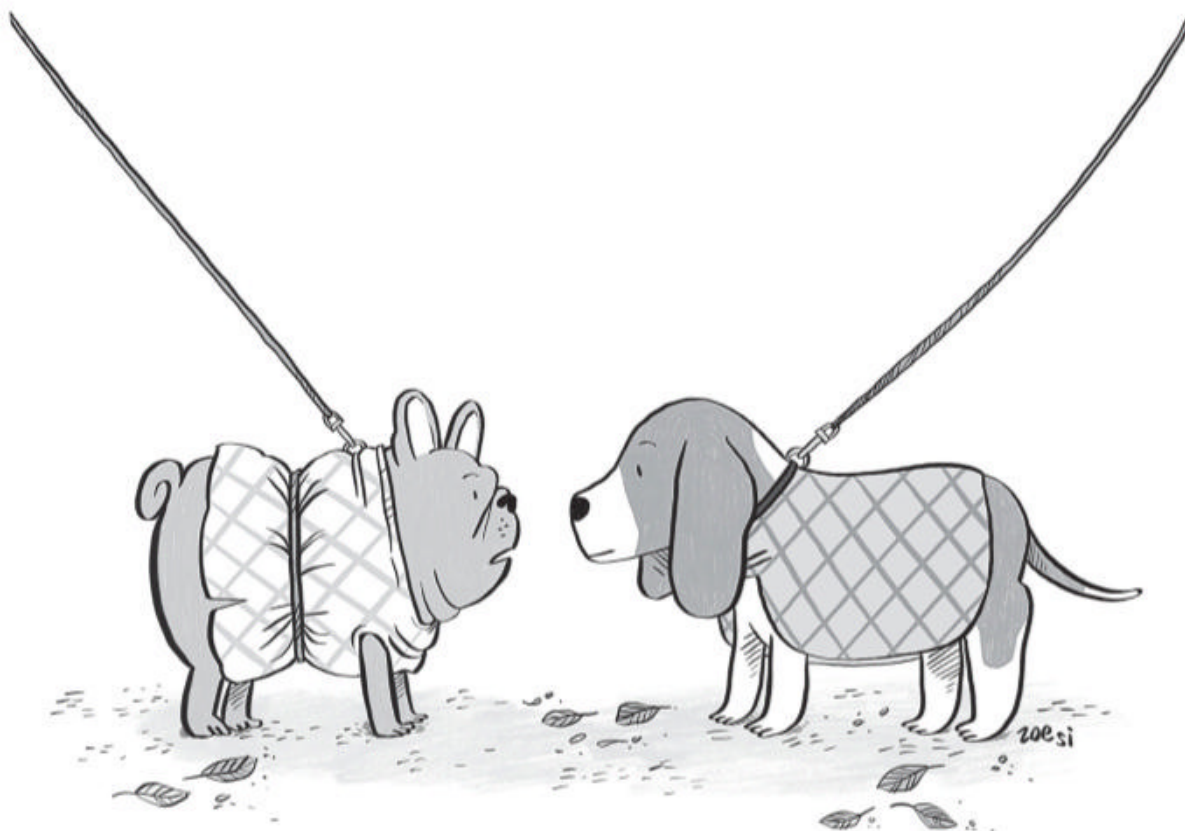
*"travail."* Experimenters soon began applying the English equivalent, "work," to describe, say, what a steam engine does when it converts steam pressure into the motion that runs a machine. By the end of the industrializing nineteenth century, work had generally come to mean the time and effort people spend on the labor required to feed their needs. More and more, it meant the effort men spend, doing work in exchange for money, to provide for the needs of their families. That emerging definition is part of the story of how the unpaid and often invisible work that women do, at home, came to be called something other than work. Another kind of analytical cleavage took root, too, between work and what came to be called craft.

In "Work: A Deep History, from the Stone Age to the Age of Robots" (Penguin Press), the South African anthropologist James Suzman, a specialist on the Khoisan peoples, disputes the economic definition of "work." One culture's work is another's leisure; one people's needs are, to another people, mere wants. Suzman proposes, instead, to define "work" as "purposefully expending energy or effort on a task to achieve a goal or end," a definition so committed to its universality as to risk becoming meaningless. He insists that the key word here is "purposeful": to act purposefully is to understand cause and

effect. Among the traits that distinguish *Homo sapiens* from other primates, Suzman argues, is this capacity, which—because of humans' harnessing of, for instance, fire—makes possible a different relationship to provisioning. This argument is both old and fashionable: gorillas often spend more than fifty hours a week gathering and eating food; human hunter-gatherers, acting purposefully, typically spend only between fifteen and seventeen hours a week on feeding themselves, leaving them plenty of time for all sorts of other things. "Hazda men seem much more concerned with games of chance than with chances of game," the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins quipped about African hunter-gatherers, whom he called "the original affluent society."

If human beings are able to spend less time working than other primates, why do so many people now work as hard as gorillas? Suzman's answer is at once anthropological and historical, and it has to do with agriculture. "For 95 per cent of our species' history," Suzman writes, "work did not occupy anything like the hallowed place in people's lives that it does now." According to Suzman, "up until the Industrial Revolution, any gains in productivity farming peoples generated as a result of working harder, adopting new technologies, techniques, or crops, or acquiring new land were always soon gobbled up by populations that quickly grew to numbers that could not be sustained." The harder farmers worked, the harder they had to work.

For much of human history, a great many people who tilled the land were serfs and slaves. The harder they worked, notwithstanding catastrophic events like plagues and droughts, the more they produced, and the better the landowner and his family ate. The idea that it's virtuous to spend more of your time working was embodied by the figure of the yeoman farmer, a smallholder who owned his own land and understood hard work, in Benjamin Franklin's formulation, as "the way to wealth." Then came the rise of the factory. The Industrial Revolution alienated people from the products of their labor, as Karl Marx observed. It also, Glenn Adamson argues in "Craft: An American History" (Bloomsbury), alienated people from



*"It draws an awful lot of attention to my midsection, is all."*



their past. “The United States has become disconnected from the history of its own making,” Adamson writes. In America, Noah Webster wrote in 1785, “every man is in some measure an artist.” And every woman, too. At the time of the nation’s founding, American households had all kinds of ties to markets, even to far-distant markets, but Americans also made their own clothes and houses and furniture; they made their own bedding, their own bread and beer; they made their own music. If hardly anyone made everything—because people also traded and swapped and bought and sold—nearly everyone made some things.

“A man is no worse metaphysician for knowing how to drive a nail home without splitting the board,” Ralph Waldo Emerson said in 1837, a few years before his friend Henry David Thoreau set about building a cabin on Walden Pond. Nineteenth-century American writers celebrated the making of things, none more than Whitman:

House-building, measuring, sawing the boards,  
Blacksmithing, glass-blowing, nail-making,  
coopering, tin-roofing, shingle-dressing,  
Ship-joining, dock-building, fish-curing,  
flagging of sidewalks by flaggers,  
The pump, the pile-driver, the great derrick,  
the coal-kiln and brick-kiln,  
Coal-mines and all that is down there,  
the lamps in the darkness, echoes,  
songs, what meditations, what vast native  
thoughts looking through smutch’d  
faces, . . .  
Flour-works, grinding of wheat, rye, maize,  
rice, the barrels and the half and quarter  
barrels, the loaded barges, the high piles  
on wharves and levees,  
The men and the work of the men on ferries,  
railroads, coasters, fish-boats, canals;  
The hourly routine of your own or any man’s  
life, the shop, yard, store, or factory,  
These shows all near you by day and night—  
workman! whoever you are, your daily  
life!

During the decades when Emerson and Thoreau and Whitman were writing, factories were bringing all kinds of work out of the household and the artisan’s shop and into the factory through the division of labor, breaking down the work of making something into dozens of tiny steps, each to be done by a different man or machine. The shop work of the cordwainer became the machine labor of the factory employee.

Both artisans and factory workers

therefore fought for fewer hours and higher wages. The gains they extracted from governments were hard-won, and stinting. In 1819, the British Parliament passed a Factory Act that barred the employment of children under the age of nine in cotton mills. An 1833 law capped the number of mill hours worked by children between thirteen and eighteen at twelve per day.

Finally, by the second half of the nineteenth century, some of the economic rewards of this system reached the workers themselves; goods were vastly cheaper. Still, industrial people were people cleaved by class, suffering from alienation, and worried that their work had become meaningless. “Craft,” meanwhile, became suffused with meaning, romantic and nostalgic, gendered and racialized. “The only real handicraft this country knows,” according to an article in Gustav Stickley’s *The Craftsman*, at the height of the Arts and Crafts movement in America, is “that of the Indian.” Suzman argues that the aimlessness Émile Durkheim believed to be an often fleeting consequence of the process of industrialization is, instead, a characteristic of modern life: “As energy-capture rates have surged, new technologies have come online and our cities have continued to swell, constant and unpredictable change has become the new normal everywhere, and anomie looks increasingly like the permanent condition of the modern age.”

Anomie is one thing, poverty another. In the United States and the United Kingdom, the labor movement grew in strength and achieved an astonishing set of gains. In 1877, railroad workers across America went on strike. In 1882, in New York, Americans held the first Labor Day parade. The labor movement’s call for shorter hours, in an era whose watchwords were “scientific management” and “efficiency,” was largely won in the nineteen-teens and twenties under what became known as “the Fordist bargain,” when Henry Ford began implementing an eight-hour workday and a five-day workweek in exchange for higher productivity and less turnover. In both the U.K. and the

U.S., according to some estimates, the average number of hours worked per week fell from about sixty, in 1880, to below fifty, by 1930. John Maynard Keynes predicted that, a hundred years in the future, the problem for workers would be too much leisure, since they would work no more than fifteen hours a week. Everyone would suffer from boredom. “There is no country and no people, I think, who can look forward to the age of leisure and of abundance without a dread,” Keynes wrote. “It is a fearful problem for the ordinary person, with no special talents, to occupy himself.”

In stepped heritage tourism and the hobby industry. Crafts, in an age of mass-produced consumer goods, became collectibles. Curators began collecting Americana, hand-forged tools, and hand-stitched gowns. During the Colonial Revival, industrialists built museums to hold the remains of the age of the artisan. In the nineteen-thirties, the Museum of Modern Art mounted an exhibit called “American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America: 1750-1900”; John D. Rockefeller funded the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, in Williamsburg, Virginia; Henry Ford opened Greenfield Village, in Dearborn, Michigan. “It was a strange sensation to pass old wagons while walking with one who had rendered them obsolete,” a New York *Times* reporter who toured Greenfield with Ford wrote. Another *Times* writer noted, “The unparalleled Dearborn collection of spinning wheels, Dutch ovens, covered bridges and other relics of an early American past is the work of a man whose life mission has been to take us away from that past as quickly as might be.”

The do-it-yourself movement, a craft craze, took off in the nineteen-fifties. In the new, postwar suburbs, white middle-class suburban men built workshops, places where, after a long day at the office or the factory, they could make things by hand. “Millions have taken to heart Thoreau’s example,” one commentator wrote, “withdrawing to their basement and garage workshops to find there a temporary Walden.” C. Wright Mills, the famed author of the 1951 classic







“White Collar,” a study of the alienation and boredom of the office worker, bought a Shopsmith, a woodworking machine, for his workshop. Theodor Adorno, meanwhile, boasted that he had no hobbies, and bemoaned the “hobby ideology” as just another way that capitalism destroyed any possibility of free time.

The leisure that Keynes predicted never came. Average weekly hours for wage workers fell from 1930 to 1970, but, in recent decades, a lot of workers have been scrambling for more. Why? Put another way: Who killed Maria Fernandes?

The problem with the argument that it’s stupid to look for meaning in work—a form of false consciousness to find purpose in your job—and rare to love what you do is that it’s wrong. All sorts of people doing all kinds of work like the companionship they find in the workplace, the chance to get out of the house, the feeling of doing something, the sense of accomplishment. In 1974, Studs Terkel published “Working,” a compilation of more than a hundred and thirty interviews with Americans talking about what they do all day, and what they think about it. It was a study, he explained, of Americans’ search “for

daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.”

Terkel loved his job as a radio broadcaster. He thought of himself as an artisan. “It is, for better or worse, in my hands,” he wrote. “I’d like to believe I’m the old-time cobbler, making the whole shoe.” He interviewed everyone from telephone operators to spot welders. He found plenty of people who hated their jobs. “It don’t stop,” an assembly-line welder at a Ford plant told him. “It just goes and goes and goes. I bet there’s men who have lived and died out there, never seen the end of that line. And they never will—because it’s endless. It’s like a serpent. It’s just all body, no tail.” But most of the people Terkel talked to also took a whole lot of pride in their work. “Masonry is older than carpentry, which goes clear back to Bible times,” a stonemason told him. “Stone is the oldest and best building material that ever was.” A hotel switchboard operator said, “You cannot have a business and have a bad switchboard operator. We are the hub of that hotel.” A twenty-six-year-old stewardess told Terkel, “The first two months I started flying I had already been to London,

Paris, and Rome. And me from Broken Bow, Nebraska.”

Plenty of people still feel that way about their jobs. But Terkel’s interviews, conducted in the early seventies, captured the end of an era. Key labor-movement achievements—eight hours a day, often with health care and a pension—unravelling. The idea of the family wage began to collapse, as Kirsten Swinth points out in “Feminism’s Forgotten Fight: The Unfinished Struggle for Work and Family” (Harvard). Income inequality had just begun to rise. In places like the United States and the United Kingdom, manufacturing was dying, and so were unions. When Richard Donkin started writing for the *Financial Times*, in 1987, six reporters were assigned to a section of the paper that chronicled the goings on in the labor movement: strikes, stoppages, union negotiations, pay deals, labor legislation. By 2001, when Donkin published his history of work, “Blood, Sweat and Tears,” the labor pages had gone, “because labor, as we knew it,” he writes, “no longer exists.” Donkin, who was born in 1957, had witnessed the dwindling power of unions, and mourned the end of the separation of work from home. “Once we may have left our work behind,” he writes. “Today we take it with us. . . . Our working life is woven, warp across weft, into the texture of our domestic existence.”

That’s not the full story. The industrial-era division between home and work was always an artifice, one the women’s movement tried to expose. In 1968, in “The Politics of Housework,” the radical feminist Pat Mainardi issued an eviscerating indictment of men whose home life was taken care of by women. “One hour a day is a low estimate of the amount of time one has to spend ‘keeping’ oneself,” she wrote. “By foisting this off on others, man gains seven hours a week—one working day more to play with his mind and not his human needs.” More women joined the paid labor force. Men balked at joining the unpaid labor force, at home. “It is as if the 60 to 80 hour work week she puts in . . . were imaginary,” a Boston feminist observed. To protest, women proposed a labor action. “Oppressed Women: Don’t Cook Dinner Tonight!” read one sign at the Women’s Strike for Equality in 1970. “Housewives Are Un-



paid Slave Laborers! Tell Him What to Do with the Broom!" *Ms.* offered, by way of illustration, a sample letter of resignation:

This is to inform you that I am no longer running this household. The cupboards, the Lysol, the linoleum, the washer, the dryer, the marketing—they're all yours. I HEREBY RESIGN. . . .

You can fend for yourselves. Best of luck.  
Mom

Feminists urged economists to count housework as work, calculating, in 1976, that housework constituted forty-four per cent of the G.N.P. Groups that included the New York Wages for Housework Committee, Black Women for Wages for Housework, and Wages Due Lesbians fought a "wages for housework" campaign, calling the exploitation of women's domestic labor an international crime.

They allied with welfare-rights activists, who, after all, were seeking wages for mothers and who, starting in 1967, as the National Welfare Rights Organization, also campaigned for a kind of basic income. "The greatest thing that a woman can do is to raise her own children, and our society should recognize it as a job," the chair of the Milwaukee County Welfare Rights Organization argued in 1972. "A person should be paid an adequate income to do that." What they did not do was support the Nixon Administration's Family Assistance Plan, whose benefits they believed to be inadequate and whose work requirement they rejected. It never became law. Still, by 1976 wages for housework, a proposal born among radical feminists, had earned the support of one in four Americans.

Meanwhile, crafts became a commercial juggernaut—especially hobbies for women, the she-shed equivalent of the workbench in the garage. Michaels and Hobby Lobby, craft superstores, along with Martha Stewart's books, peddling needlepoint, knitting, and pastry-making, boomed in the nineteen-eighties. Some women began to pay to do, as hobbies, what other women protested doing, as unpaid labor.

Another way to think about the key turning point of the nineteen-seventies is that activists sought collective-bargaining agreements for housework just when industrial union membership

was plummeting. Outside of agriculture, more than one in three working Americans belonged to a union in the fifties. In 1983, one in five belonged to a union; by 2019, only one in ten did. Union membership declined; income inequality rose. To explain this, Suzman points to the "Great Decoupling" of the nineteen-eighties: wages and economic growth used to track each other. From about 1980, in the United States, the G.D.P. kept growing, even as real wages stagnated. To compensate, many Americans worked more hours, and took on extra jobs, especially in the service sector. (Currently, more than eighty per cent of U.S. employment is in the service sector.)

In the early nineteen-eighties, Dunkin' Donuts launched one of the most iconic television ad campaigns in American history. A schlumpy guy named Fred the Baker drags himself out of bed in the middle of the night, puts on his Dunkin' Donuts uniform muttering, "Time to make the doughnuts," before shuffling, half-asleep, out the door, barely saying goodbye to his wife, who is still in curlers. In one ad, he's so dog-tired that he falls asleep at a dinner party, his head dropping onto a plate of mashed potatoes. In another, he goes out his front door and then comes back through the same door, day after day, ragged and weary, muttering, "Made the doughnuts," until, finally, he bumps into himself, at once coming home and going to work. This campaign proved so popular that Dunkin' Donuts made more than a hundred different versions; these ads were on television, around the clock, from the year Maria Fernandes was born until the year she turned fifteen. In 1997, when the actor who played the baker finally retired from the role, "Saturday Night Live" ran a skit, featuring Jon Lovitz, looking back at just how long this ad campaign had lasted. "My character, Fred the Baker, well he's sure seen America through some tough times," he says. "The Gulf War, just another time to make the doughnuts. The Rodney King beating, time to make the doughnuts."

With the G.D.P. rising and wages flat or falling for so many Americans, where did all that wealth go? Much of it went to chief executives: in 1965, C.E.O. compensation was twenty times

that of the average worker; by 2015, it was more than two hundred times that of the average worker. That year, Nigel Travis, the C.E.O. of Dunkin' Brands, took in \$5.4 million in compensation (down from \$10.2 million the previous year) and called a proposed fifteen-dollar-an-hour minimum wage "absolutely outrageous."

Chief executives wouldn't have been able to plunder so much money if the federal government hadn't let them do it. The Biden-Harris campaign endorsed a raft of legislation designed to end what Democrats call the "war on unions." Even if this stuff could pass, which is unlikely, there are other forces driving income inequality. "THE DEATH OF MARIA FERNANDES DEMANDS A CALL TO ACTION," ran the headline of an article by the head of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, a few days after her death. She reportedly worked more than eighty hours a week and earned less than forty thousand dollars a year. (Asked for comment, a spokesperson for Dunkin' claims that her employers "offered positions of greater responsibility" for a higher wage, but asserts that she "didn't express interest.") She may have really liked selling doughnuts. But that is not the point.

Maria Fernandes, the daughter of Portuguese immigrants, rented a basement room in Newark for five hundred and fifty dollars a month. She was born in Fall River, Massachusetts. According to reporting by the Associated Press, her family returned to Portugal when she was eleven, but around the time she turned eighteen she came back to the United States. She had wanted, once, to be an actress, a police officer, a flight attendant, or maybe a beautician. She spoke four languages—English, Portuguese, French, and Spanish. She was chatty; friends nicknamed her Radio. For a while, she had a boyfriend whose bills she paid. Normally, she worked from 2 to 9 P.M. at the Dunkin' Donuts kiosk inside Newark's Penn Station. Then she drove to Linden, where she worked from 10 P.M. to 6 A.M. On weekends, she took morning shifts in Harrison. The boyfriend told her to quit one of those jobs. She said, "No, I'm used to it now." ♦



MUSICAL EVENTS

# ROAD TRIP

*David Hockney's "Wagner Drive."*

BY ALEX ROSS

On a crisp afternoon in December, a friend and I sat in an idling car at the corner of Las Flores Canyon Road and the Pacific Coast Highway, in Malibu, preparing to witness a performance of "Wagner Drive," a large-scale audiovisual work by the artist David Hockney. We were the sole audience for the piece, and also its executants. My friend drove; I operated the stereo. When the clock read 4:09 P.M.—forty minutes before sunset—I hit Play on the sequence of recordings that Hockney has specified for the event. The Wagner did not begin right away: first came "America," from "West Side Story." As we headed north on the P.C.H., the lyrics complemented a panorama of motels, pizza places, surf shops, and car-rental outfits: "Automo-

bile in America, / Chromium steel in America, / Wire-spoke wheel in America, / Very big deal in America!"

With a rightward turn onto Malibu Canyon Road, the beginning of a twisting climb into the Santa Monica Mountains, landscape and music changed in tandem. "America" gave way to an orchestral arrangement of the Entrance of the Gods into Valhalla, from "Das Rheingold." (The Wagner items on Hockney's playlist come from albums that Adrian Boult made with the London Philharmonic and the London Symphony in the early nineteen-seventies.) The raw might of the sound—rugged brass figures jutting through hazy string arpeggios—reinforced the geological drama of our ascent: the Santa Monica Mountains rise

straight from the sea, their tilted sedimentary layers and volcanic formations evidence of tectonic mayhem at the border between the North American and the Pacific plates.

After four and a half miles, we turned right on Piuma Road, which climbs seventeen hundred feet, to the top of a ridge. At almost the same moment, the mystical prelude to "Parsifal," Wagner's final opera, began to unfurl. The weightless sonorities and blended timbres of the composer's late style suited the veering, dissolving perspectives of the drive: sundrenched south-facing mountains, purple-tinted inland ranges, road-hugging rock faces, occasional vistas of a now distant ocean. A hilltop mid-century-modern home, struck by the slanting winter sun, became a sleek update of Monsalvat, Wagner's Grail Temple. The brass choir of the Dresden Amen harmonized with the mountain-and-ocean panorama of the Malibu Canyon Overlook, although the blare of brass from our car distracted a couple who were trying to have a romantic moment.

Nine minutes before sunset, we turned left onto Las Flores Canyon Road, which



© DAVID HOCKNEY

*"Pacific Coast Highway and Santa Monica" (1990), from a series of paintings replicating vistas from the Malibu drives.*



would lead us back to our point of departure. The soundtrack was now Siegfried's Funeral Music, the memorial to the failed hero of the "Ring." The first part of this descending leg took place in deep shadow, as the road briefly swerved north before heading back south. The muffled drumbeats of Siegfried's funeral procession matched the loss of light and the onset of a nighttime chill. As Hockney intended, the orange disk of the sun reappeared over a gray-blue ocean just as the orchestra moved into the major and intoned Siegfried's leitmotifs at high volume—a magnificent, valedictory mood. None of the filmmakers who live in the vicinity could have more perfectly choreographed this golden-hour blend of sight and sound.

Eventually, as in every Hollywood phantasmagoria, illusion surrendered to reality. The Funeral Music wound to its close as the road straightened out and houses became crowded together. Malibu's beach culture reasserted itself: weathered Siegfrieds toted surfboards back to their cars. Wagner's grandeur took on an ironic, melancholic tinge, promising a state of transcendence that contemporary existence was bound to foreclose. Still, when the sun plunged into the ocean on cue, it was like no other sunset I had seen—the final frame of a live film with an invisible director.

Hockney, with his utopian explosions of primal color, might seem a curious fit for Wagner, the master of shadow and foreboding. Nonetheless, the composer has long been one of Hockney's musical favorites. The painter has attended the Bayreuth Festival three times, and in 1987 he designed a production of "Tristan und Isolde" for the Los Angeles Opera. Around the same time, he bought a beach house at the bottom of Las Flores Canyon, and in the early nineties he began plotting mountain routes that could be timed with Wagner selections. These expeditions informed his ideas about the play of light on landscape, both on canvas and in the theatre. When he experienced hearing loss, he had his Mercedes outfitted with a potent stereo system. Friends and fellow-artists were invited along for the ride.

There are actually three Wagner drives: the Malibu Canyon route; a more extended traversal of the Santa Monica

Mountains, which involves going up Kanan Dume Road; and an excursion in the San Gabriel Mountains, well to the east, which is closer to Hockney's principal Los Angeles home, in the Hollywood Hills. Until recently, the capacity to perform "Wagner Drive" rested exclusively with Hockney, but in 2016 the art historian Arthur Kolat completed a master's thesis on the subject, in the course of which he interviewed Hockney and codified directions and musical cues for the drives. Kolat passed them on to me, and this past summer I started trying them out. These adventures had the virtue of adhering to even the strictest pandemic-era restrictions: I could attend performances without leaving my car.

In what sense is "Wagner Drive" an art work? Kolat's thesis takes up that question, suggesting that the drives may have begun as a lark and then taken on larger creative significance. Certainly, they cast light on the rest of Hockney's oeuvre. Around 1990, he produced a dozen or so sizable paintings—"Pacific Coast Highway and Santa Monica" is the biggest, measuring six and a half feet by ten feet—that replicate vistas from the Malibu drives. Their brash colors seem unreal, and yet the slash of red-orange at the top of a bluish slope in "Thrusting Rocks" is faithful to the heightened sensory impact of the Wagner experience. Similar hues appeared in Hockney's lustrous opera stagings, which include "Tristan," "The Rake's Progress," "The Magic Flute," and a Stravinsky triple bill.

In musical terms, the drives dwell on the cinematic side of Wagner, emphasizing spectacular surfaces over psychological depths. When you hear the bombastic Entrance of the Gods during the ascent into the mountains, you forget the dark subtext of the "Rheingold" finale—the Rhinemaidens decrying the hollowness of the spectacle, Loge laughingly predicting doom. The otherworldly beauties of "Parsifal" become divorced from the sickly decadence of life at the Grail Temple. The experience borders on kitsch, but in a bracing way. Inserting the "Ring" and "Parsifal" into an echt-American road ritual banishes the portentousness of Wagner discourse and restores a sense of make-believe. The bouncy Bernstein prelude puts you in the right mind-set. (The San Gabriel drive leads off with Sousa marches.)

Sometimes I felt a real sense of wonder. When I tried out the Kanan Dume drive, which lasts for about ninety minutes, road construction prevented a turn onto Mulholland Drive, which in this area is woodsier and more rustic than on its famous ridgetop stretches to the east. So I made a detour, staying on Kanan Dume Road awhile longer. At the moment the Entrance of the Gods ended, I entered a tunnel, and the "Parsifal" prelude kicked in just as I emerged. The change accorded with another geological shift, into a landscape marked by the Conejo volcanic formation: orange-brown tones gave way to paler, starker colors. Wagner set his opera in the "northern mountains of Gothic Spain," but this austere terrain would have served just as well.

"The drive into the Santa Monica Mountains is a bit like Monsalvat, isn't it?" Hockney said to me, during a video call the other day. The artist, who is eighty-three, has spent the pandemic year in Normandy, France, where he recently bought a seventeenth-century house—a "Seven Dwarves house," he calls it. He was dressed in his usual pastel tones, with circular yellow-framed glasses perched on his nose.

When I asked about the origin of "Wagner Drive," Hockney said, "Well, the first thing I did was, when I was driving once to Las Vegas—past Las Vegas, to Zion Park—I listened to Handel's 'Messiah,' and I realized that all religions come from the desert, from someone contemplating the cosmos in the desert." That advisory aside, he emphasized the playfulness of his Wagner conceit: "I took some kids on it once, and they said, 'Oh, this is like a movie,' and I realized, Well, they would never have listened to the 'Parsifal' prelude just sitting at home."

The notion that "Wagner Drive" could take on a life of its own, even without the artist's supervision, pleased him. "Yes, it could be adapted by anybody," he told me. I posed the question that Kolat had contemplated before me: In what sense are the drives art works or performances? Hockney answered, "When I did them, I could take only two people in the car. But I did realize it was a kind of performance piece or performance art. It was *now*. It was only now—when it was over, it was gone. Performance is now, isn't it? It has to be now." ♦



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THE THEATRE

# ON BOOK

*The restlessly inventive plays of Adrienne Kennedy.*

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM



A weird thing happens when you watch an actor look down at a sheet of paper and read her lines. Suddenly, you're aware—painfully or pleasantly, depending on the subtlety of the maneuver—that this character is a locomotive, moving inexorably along the track that is the script. One question in great dramas is how an individual's free will might chafe against the world's immovable fixtures. The actor's eye on the page offers a slightly dark answer: maybe our liberty is an illusion, and our lives, like a play or a piece of music, are churning toward an inevitable destination. The slang for actors who haven't yet learned all their lines is that they're still "on book." Perhaps

that applies to all of us, just reading aloud and ambling toward our marks with some dim awareness of an ending.

I kept thinking about that awful possibility while watching "The Work of Adrienne Kennedy: Inspiration and Influence," a digital "festival" of filmed readings put on by Round House Theatre, in association with McCarter Theatre Center. Kennedy, who is eighty-nine, is one of our greatest and least definable living playwrights, restlessly inventive and ruthlessly unshy about the pressures exerted by history upon our lives. If one motif hums through her work (besides herself: she is our foremost artist of theatrical autobiography), it is a nagging,

sometimes unbearable suspicion that the past has hijacked the present.

Kennedy's most famous play, the surrealist one-act "Funnyhouse of a Negro," from 1964, is a kind of dream masquerade. A woman called Negro-Sarah—the specificity of a name smashed up against the bleak determinism of a category—sits surrounded by a chorus of hypervocal historical figures who are meant to act as alternate "selves." One is a Habsburg duchess; one is the Congolese freedom fighter Patrice Lumumba; another is Jesus. Sarah wears a noose around her neck like a victim-in-waiting but talks like a member of a cosseted—if a bit bugged-out—bourgeoisie. She's "soulless, educated and irreligious," she says. "I want to possess no moral value, particularly value as to my being. I want not to be. I ask nothing except anonymity." Negro-Sarah would like to use her middle-classness as a talisman to ward off recognition and pain. She thinks of her white friends "as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro." And yet, irreversibly, that fact breaks the embankment like a flood. Because of the color of her skin and the history it holds, Sarah—like her selves, whose monologues are haunted by mixed parentage—signifies wildly, full of "moral value" well beyond her own control.

In "Funnyhouse," with its gruesome contortions and mordant humor, Kennedy reminds me of the conceptual artist Adrian Piper, whose best gag might be the drawing "Self Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features." For both artists, realism falls apart under the absurdity of race and the unction of history. Between who you are and how you're seen lies a possibly unbridgeable gap.

The plays that are presented in "The Work of Adrienne Kennedy" come from later in the playwright's career, and show a development in her thinking. "He Brought Her Heart Back in a Box," Kennedy's most recent play, first produced in 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 they both were born and raised. The harrowing stakes of their courtship are clear from the start, but Kennedy's mode of

*One motif in Kennedy's work is the suspicion that the past has hijacked the present.*



narration—a series of dreamy dispatches that never quite settle into dialogue—shows just how misty this doomed matter of the heart really is.

The Round House production, directed by Nichole A. Watson, doubles down on Kennedy's suspenseful gauziness. 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 Mogjani) is a spectral, insistent blue. I came away thinking that Kennedy's work is unusually well suited to filmic treatment: when her characters speak, they not only advance the plot but impart lush and unlikely images. A great filmmaker interested more in rhythm and the uncanny than in strict narrative—someone like Garrett Bradley or Kahlil Joseph—could make a Tarkovskian masterpiece after soaking in Kennedy's oeuvre.

Still, despite the richness of the imagery, I kept thinking about the actors, who weren't so much acting as reading out loud. Every once in a while, they'd steal a glance at the text, which made me think of them less as performers than as partakers in a closet play, trying to bring the show out into the living room, where the rest of us could hear. If the Kennedy of "Funnyhouse" was trying to find an identity, or a narrative, worth living out, she has, in later years, begun to acknowledge that somebody, somewhere, has already staked out a plan, like it or not. (The stage directions, read by Agyeiwaa Asante, give that sense a concrete voice.) Romantic choice is often a metaphor for the more drastic currents lurking elsewhere in our lives, eager to take us under.

That feeling grows stronger in a pair of plays written in the nineties—"Ohio State Murders" and "Sleep Deprivation Chamber"—which feature Kennedy's alter ego, Suzanne Alexander. Suzanne, like Kennedy, is a celebrated playwright who travels to universities and gives talks about such topics as "the construction of a play with Aristotelian elements." In "Ohio State Murders," directed by Valerie Curtis-Newton, Suzanne (Lynda Gravatt) tries to explain the source of the violent imagery in her plays. Her lecture—confined to the page, a reminder of a lost feeling of freedom—is, in Kennedy's hands, a roving monologue, which

acts as a background for a story set in the past. The young Suzanne (Billie Krishawn) is a student at Ohio State University, infatuated with Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" and, more problematically, her white English professor. Upward mobility, which Negro-Sarah hoped might earn her a pass from trouble, has introduced the young Suzanne to the beginning of an inevitable tragedy.

"Sleep Deprivation Chamber," which Kennedy wrote in collaboration with her son Adam, and is directed here by Raymond O. Caldwell, tells the story of Suzanne's son, Teddy, who was accosted by police outside his own front door—an eerie forecast of the incident involving the Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates and the Cambridge police, which was refereed by Barack Obama—and badly beaten. Absurdly, it's Teddy (Deimoni Brewington) who stands accused of a crime. Again, Suzanne's literary activity provides a pretext for narration. Between flashbacks to the assault and scenes of a deposition, Suzanne writes letters to public officials who might be able to help her son.

Suzanne seems to share—if a bit more jadedly—Negro-Sarah's ill-fated hope in Black exceptionalism. In her letters, Suzanne talks about her brother-in-law, a Stanford professor emeritus who has fallen into a race-induced depression, and her daughter, also a lecturer at Stanford, making sure to mention her own success. She describes the indignity done to her son as something that has been done to "our son and our family." Teddy's father, livid, says that the police have "tangled with the wrong family." "We are innocent," Suzanne says—all of us. Even though, deep down, she knows that her family's well-earned prestige won't save Teddy, she can't help but interpret the incident as an affront to the entire edifice of the Black middle class. It was supposed to help!

Instead, everybody's following a script. When, in a flashback, Rex Daugherty, who plays the police officer, looked down at his pages, it felt like a revelation, a belated admission that his tough-guy spiel is, indeed, just a spiel, a play out of some book, just as his later violence would turn out to be. Teddy's cries seem scripted, too. We all know them, and could even join in if the occasion ever arose. "Please let me up," he says. "I can't breathe!" ♦

# THE REAL ACTION IS OFF THE FIELD.

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## AFTERMATHS

*"Pieces of a Woman" and "Some Kind of Heaven."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

Not until half an hour has passed, in "Pieces of a Woman," does the title appear on the screen. It's a long wait, but the director, Kornél Mundruczó, is hardly idling. He has his hands full. The bulk of that time is consumed by a scene of childbirth, which is filmed in a single take. The mother is Martha Weiss (Vanessa Kirby), and she has elected to have

as in mood, the film amounts to a set of variations on the theme of winter. Dirty snow, crunching underfoot, is much the same color as the sky. Gray succeeds gray, like ashes after dust.

The trauma that strikes Martha and Sean, at the outset, is a blow to a life that was already cracked. As a couple, they hail from different sides of the

Of Sean's family we know nothing. Of Martha's, however, we learn all too much. For one thing, her mother, Elizabeth, is old enough to be her grandmother. This would be a serious flaw in the film's credibility were she not played by Ellen Burstyn, who can convince an audience of anything. We first meet Elizabeth as she's buying a car for Sean (of whom she disapproves) and Martha, thus displaying both generosity and control. Only later do we realize that the car salesman is the boyfriend of Martha's sister, Anita (Iliza Shlesinger). Likewise, when Elizabeth, incensed by what befell her daughter—"this monstrosity," she calls it—decides to launch a legal case, she gets Martha's cousin Suzanne (Sarah Snook) involved as an attorney. Just to keep things cozy, Sean then has sex with Suzanne in the offices of the law firm, which surely counts as contributory negligence. All of this may sound way too entangled, but that's the point; a movie that opened with two people trying to have a family of their own gradually grows, like a creeper, into a movie about a family, and a history, from which there is no escape.

There are traces of Elia Kazan and Sidney Lumet in "Pieces of a Woman," and Martin Scorsese, who has championed the film, is one of its executive producers, but what it most resembles is James Gray's "The Yards" (2000), another clannish saga, of equal gloom, with a cast that included Burstyn. The wider environment of Gray's tale, which was set amid the railroads of New York City, felt grimy and lived in, whereas Mundruczó—who, like his screenwriter and partner, Kata Wéber, is Hungarian—is at his most assured when he shuts out Boston and moves inside. Many of the more torturous events are framed at a cooling distance, through intervening doorways, and the unquestionable highlight of the movie is a gathering at Elizabeth's elegant house, where she has cooked a duck for the occasion, and invited her loved ones for a roasting.

There's nothing like watching two formidable actresses square off against each other, pushing what should be a heart-to-heart to the brink of hand-to-hand combat. That's how it felt in "Autumn Sonata" (1978), with Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann as a mother and her daughter, and that's how it feels in



Vanessa Kirby stars in Kornél Mundruczó's film.

her child in the home that she shares with her partner, Sean (Shia LaBeouf). Their preferred midwife is unavailable, so a stand-in named Eva (Molly Parker) turns up to assist. She is kindly and calm, though her tranquillity frays when the baby, yet to emerge and clearly in distress, develops an irregular heartbeat. An ambulance is called. What happens next I won't reveal; suffice it to say that, for many viewers (and not only mothers), this first act of the movie will be too much to bear.

The story, which takes place in present-day Boston, is divided into sections. Each of them is prefaced by a date, and by a wide shot of the Charles River as it changes through the seasons. To be honest, it doesn't change *that* much; in climate,

tracks. He's gutsy and ursine, with a dense beard, a lunging gait, and a job in construction. "Here's a Scrabble word," he says, describing himself: "Boorish." (Every LaBeouf performance teeters on the verge of too much; in this instance, though, the excessiveness aids the role.) Sean once had a drinking problem but swears that it's behind him, meaning that it can tap him on the shoulder anytime. Martha is better dressed, more articulate, and given to unnerving silences. We see her in an office, sitting briefly at her desk, yet what she does there we are never told. Why do some movies take such pains to scour the emotional landscape of their characters and yet—unless they are astronauts or assassins—show so little interest in their work?



"Pieces of a Woman," with Burstyn and Kirby in full cry. I regret not seeing Kirby on the London stage, as Elena in "Uncle Vanya" and as Stella in "A Streetcar Named Desire" (an obvious influence on Mundruczó's film), but, even in the minor part of the White Widow in "Mission: Impossible—Fallout" (2018), she kept us guessing. Was her poise no more than insouciance, or were potent forces being held in check? Now we know. In the new movie, Martha seems frighteningly stunned and glacial in the wake of her private disaster, yet Kirby releases regular hints—as much with passing gestures as with words—of the pressure that is building beneath the ice.

Burstyn has more to say, and some of Elizabeth's lines are of such practiced cruelty that you wonder whether she notices what she's doing. She can't ask one of the family to baste the duck without casting aspersions. We sense a deep exasperation at human failings, and some of that depth is disclosed when, in a lengthy speech, she harks back to another difficult birth—her own, as a Jewish child, at the time of the Shoah. This kind of declaration is extremely hard to pull off, and it's shot in an unbroken closeup, yet Burstyn holds steady, without grandstanding, and leaves us with the impression of an ironclad survivor who retains even less pity for others than she does for herself. Hence the alarming decisiveness with which she gives Sean a check and tells him to get lost.

In short, this is magisterial stuff, the only hindrance being the neatness of the moral design. In Mundruczó's "White God" (2015), rebellious dogs raced through Budapest, snapping at

any attempt to treat them as allegorical, but here, for some reason, the various strands are tied together in careful symbolic patterns, the effect being to deplete rather than to strengthen the narrative. We understand, for example, that Martha is determined to create a new life, but does she really have to be shown entering a bookstore, buying a guide to germination, and patiently coaxing apple seeds to sprout? More flagrant still is the coda—a rosy and ridiculous epilogue, which must have been tacked on by the Head of Happiness at the studio. The good news is that the film is embarrassed, not mortally harmed, by such superfluities. For the most part, "Pieces of a Woman" is a model of concentration and clout, fired up by actors of unstinting ardor. What it will do to the popularity of home births, on the other hand, I hate to think.

Dennis is a player. He hangs out at a pool, in Florida, hoping to pick up rich single women and, just like that, move in with them. Right now, he's sleeping on the rear seat of his van, so he needs a place to stay. He can't go back to California, where he came from, because of a D.U.I. charge. "I wanted to live fast, love hard, and die poor," Dennis says. Frankly, the guy means trouble, and he's not done yet. Why should he be? He's only eighty-one.

Then, there's Reggie. Same sort of age, different problem. Reggie gets busted by the cops with marijuana on his person and cocaine in his wallet. He goes to court, says that he wants to represent himself, and praises the judge for having "a nice, shiny face."

None of this is easy for Reggie's wife, Anne, especially when he comes home, announces that he's God, and hits himself on the head with a rock, but she's had time to acclimatize. They've been together for forty-seven years.

Welcome to the Villages—"America's largest retirement community," according to "Some Kind of Heaven," a new documentary directed by Lance Oppenheim. The Villages, northwest of Orlando, took root in the nineteen-seventies, blossomed in the eighties, and now houses a population of around a hundred and thirty thousand. The community is described onscreen as "God's waiting room," though the emphasis is strictly on living to the max rather than getting ready to die. Just ask the belly dancers, the synchronized swimmers, or the Villages Golf Cart Precision Drill Team.

Oppenheim doesn't waste much space on the upside. He aims straight for the undergrowth, and treats the Villages as one big Carl Hiaasen novel waiting to happen. I kept expecting to see an alligator slouch across the golf course with the bottom half of Reggie in its mouth. The star of the show is Barbara, a Bostonian widow with no savings left; lonely but stoical, she laughs merrily when her Yorkshire terrier, Fifi, makes out with her cat on camera. (My guess would be that Fifi sees more action than Dennis.) Midway through the film, Barbara meets a sprightly gent named Lynn. "He talked a lot about margaritas," she says. Uh-oh. Not your kind of heaven, Barbara. Move on. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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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 Joe Dator, must be received by Sunday, January 17th. The finalists in the December 21st contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 1st 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



“

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### THE FINALISTS



*“A friendly gesture can make first contact go a lot better.”*  
Greg Shaw, San Jose, Calif.

*“As long as we're up here, we should do the gutters.”*  
Lawrence Wood, Chicago, Ill.

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

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“Your meal came with a toy?”*  
Jonathan Roa, Los Angeles, Calif.



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