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# THE NEW YORKER

AUG. 9, 2021

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# CONTRIBUTORS

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Rachel Syme takes readers on an interactive tour of her favorite Hollywood memoirs.

**U.S. JOURNAL**
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LEFT: NA KIM; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH FROM DONALDSON COLLECTION / GETTY; RIGHT: JESSICA INGRAM FOR THE NEW YORKER

# THE MAIL

## WHO WAS O. HENRY?

Louis Menand, in his review of the new Library of America volume of short stories by O. Henry, notes that the prolific writer once worked at a bank, and had various problems, large and small, handling money (Books, July 5th). Money is a theme in his stories, too. Indeed, in the opening line of "The Gift of the Magi," he informs the reader that Della has only $1.87 with which to buy Jim a Christmas gift. We learn that Jim's weekly salary has shrunk from thirty dollars to twenty, and that the weekly rental price of a furnished room is eight dollars. The story's obsession with such particulars is a reminder of the financial pressure that O. Henry felt when it came to writing and selling his stories—and perhaps also stems from his days as a teller, counting other people's pennies.

*Margaret Earley Whitt*
*Professor Emerita*
*Department of English*
*University of Denver*
*Denver, Colo.*

Menand's piece, which is full of surprising details, suggests that William Sidney Porter signed his stories with the pseudonym O. Henry in an effort to keep the public from learning of his three-year stint in prison. It's worth pointing out that, in Porter's time, many short-story writers for pulp magazines used pseudonyms. Sometimes pen names were employed to make it seem as though a magazine were written by many different contributors, as in the October, 1914, issue of the literary magazine *The Smart Set*, co-edited by George Jean Nathan and H. L. Mencken, which featured multiple stories by Robert Carlton Brown under different bylines. Pseudonyms were also used by women writing for male-dominated magazines, such as Alice B. Sheldon, who published her work under the name James Tiptree, Jr.; or because stories were written by groups of people, with plotlines supplied by story consultants. Porter's use of a pseudonym may have served the aim of concealing his past, but it was not unusual.

*Craig Saper*
*Owings Mills, Md.*

## CRAZY FOR COCKATOOS

Rebecca Mead's essay about how an Australasian cockatoo came to appear in a fifteenth-century Italian painting, and what it reveals about the world's interconnectedness at that time, mentions Chinese trade routes, but it doesn't explore China's own love affair with cockatoos ("Invasive Species," July 5th). After reading Mead's piece, I hastened to retrieve my copy of "The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T'ang Exotics," a delightful 1963 work by the American Sinologist Edward H. Schafer, which examines exotic goods imported to China in the years 618-907. In a chapter on birds, including hawks, falcons, peacocks, and parrots, he notes that "the 'white parrots' of Chinese literature were plainly cockatoos from . . . remote lands," brought in by seafarers and diplomats.

As in Europe, Schafer writes, cockatoos were immortalized in paintings in China. One "famous white cockatoo preserved in paint" was the pet of Yang Kuei-fei, a concubine of a Tang emperor, which was named Snow-Garbed Maiden; another, a cockatoo with "ten long pink feathers on its crown," was likely a gift from the Moluccas, in eastern Indonesia. And, in a charming anecdote, Schafer claims that, by special decree of the Emperor T'ai Tsung, both a five-colored parrot and a cockatoo—birds that "complained frequently" about the cold—"were manumitted and sent home again."

*Barbara Ann Porte*
*Arlington, Va.*

•

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# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

**Robert Longo** is a key figure of the Pictures Generation, an influential group of American artists who gave image-making conceptual cred starting in the late seventies. He is best known for his cinematic charcoal-on-paper works, epic in both subject matter—the eternal mysteries of the sea, in the case of "Untitled (Rumi)," from 2019, above—and scale (the magnificent hand-drawn piece is more than seven feet high). The exhibition "Robert Longo: A History of the Present" opens on Aug. 7 at Guild Hall, in East Hampton, New York.

## MUSIC

### Leon Bridges: "Gold-Digger Sound"

**SOUL** Leon Bridges made his musical début with tender soul songs that sounded as if they had been sitting in dusty record crates for decades. His voice, all warmth and rounded edges, replicated the essence of classic sixties singers with eerie accuracy, but nostalgia can quickly turn into shtick, and perpetually living in the past has its limitations. On his latest album, "Gold-Digger Sound," Bridges doesn't completely shake his affinity for throwback styles: songs such as "Details" and "Why Don't You Touch Me" have the smokiness of nineties R. & B.; others braid in touches of funk and rock. These tracks show that Bridges is versatile enough to stretch his skills across multiple eras, even if they never approach the future.—*Julyssa Lopez*

### Ron Carter

**JAZZ** Ron Carter now personifies the jazz bass—an aftereffect of a six-decade career in which he has appeared on more than two thousand recordings with a myriad of artists. When captaining his own ship, this hale living legend keeps his instrument firmly in the spotlight; the selfless supporting player who came to fame with Miles Davis in the sixties has long cast off any notions of overt deference. In this residency at the Blue Note, Carter displays his compelling rapport with the pianist Renee Rosnes, who intuits the byways of Carter's canny originals while surfing the waves of the bassist's imperturbable swing.—*Steve Futterman (Aug. 4-8.)*

### Clem Snide

**ALTERNATIVE ROCK** Eef Barzelay, the probing wordsmith driving Clem Snide, has spent time in Israel, Boston, New York, and Nashville, but he mostly seems to dwell under the Eeyore rain cloud that a certain kind of brainy songwriter will forever attract. Clem Snide's recent album, "Forever Just Beyond," springs from a thorny patch involving bankruptcy, familial strain, and wavering artistic faith. Produced and at times co-written by an Avett brother, it was poised to be a comeback but was released—when else?—in March of 2020. At the Loft at City Winery, Barzelay finally gets to air his new material, in which the anger that once lurked behind his songs melts into acuity. Throughout this record, Barzelay dispenses aphorisms that suggest a kind of bootleg rabbinical wisdom, staring down life, death, and despair. And what of the divine? "God is simply that which lies forever just beyond the limits," Barzelay sings, "of what we already seem to know."—*Jay Ruttenberg (Aug. 8.)*

### Dope Jams Open-Air Festival

**ELECTRONIC** The online dance-music retailer Dope Jams, founded by Paul Nickerson and Francis Engleheardt (who also issue recordings together as Slow to Speak), has always operated with a house-music puritan's streak, prizing soulful nineties organs, string pads, and straightforwardly uplifting grooves. That approach would seem to translate perfectly to this weekend getaway in Oak Hill, New York, in the Catskills, featuring a sharp representation of that particular vein of d.j., with Maurice Fulton, Osunlade, Eli Escobar, Soul Clap's Eli Goldstein, and Nickerson among the attractions. Tickets to the event—billed as "Kid friendly!"—are fifty dollars in advance.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Aug. 6-8.)*

### "Nadia Boulanger and Her World"

**CLASSICAL** The list of people who studied with Nadia Boulanger reads like a *Who's Who* of twentieth- and twenty-first-century American composers—Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, Marc Blitzstein, Walter Piston, Elliott Carter, Philip Glass—but the Bard Music Festival, in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, spotlights the great French pedagogue's own compositions in addition to her legacy as a teacher. Her beautifully balanced songs—along with the freer, more adventurous work of her sister, Lili, who died tragically at the age of twenty-four—fill out five programs during the festival's first weekend. Lili's sharply imagined cantata, "Faust et Hélène," which made her the first woman to win the Prix de Rome, anchors the opening program, and sprinklings of works by Poulenc, Satie, Debussy, Ravel, and Messiaen throughout the weekend evoke the cultural milieu of Paris in the first half of the last century.—*Oussama Zahr (Aug. 6-8.)*

### PUBLIQuartet

**CLASSICAL** Blending genres, conjuring new sounds and ideas from canonical standards, and taking a radical approach to inclusivity come as naturally as breathing to the members of the intrepid string band PUBLIQuartet. Hosted by Death of Classical as part of its inventive series "The Angel's Share," the group presents "Freedom and Faith," a program that explores spirituality and resilience in music spanning ten centuries. Included are works by Julia Perry, Jessica Meyer, Jessie Montgomery, and Caroline Shaw, alongside improvisations based on the music of Hildegard von Bingen, Ella Fitzgerald, and Nina Simone.—*Steve Smith (Aug. 4 and Aug. 6-7 at 6 and 7:30; deathofclassical.com.)*

## DANCE

### Drive East

The Indian-dance festival Drive East, now in its tenth season, is hybrid this year, with some performances broadcast exclusively online and others performed live (and also shown online) at the festival's previous home, La Mama. Loosely arranged around the theme of "becoming a conscious artist" are performances in a variety of classical forms, including Hindustani music, Sufi songs, bharata-natyam dance, and Kalaripayattu, a martial art developed in the coastal state of Kerala more than three thousand years ago. On Aug. 9, Vaibhav Arekar participates virtually, from his home city of Mumbai. He

## HIP-HOP

The London rapper and pianist **Dave** spent the last few years establishing himself as one of the premier writers in U.K. hip-hop; along the way, he's also become one of the most decorated, winning the Mercury Prize and the Brit Award for Album of the Year for his full-length début, "Psychodrama," from 2019. The rapper pulled the title for his follow-up, "We're All Alone in This Together," from a FaceTime conversation with the film-score composer Hans Zimmer. The music does carry vaguely cinematic flourishes, but Dave has described the project as less conceptual than canonical, signalling a broader canvas for his lyrics. His first album was a plea to be heeded. These songs find him in a different place—rich and successful, widely recognized and critically acclaimed. With everyone paying attention now, Dave rattles off revelations from his new perch, his personal questions opening out onto broader critiques of British society.—*Sheldon Pearce*

OPPOSITE: COURTESY THE ARTIST / METRO PICTURES / PACE GALLERY; RIGHT: ILLUSTRATION BY RAPHAELLE MACARON

## ON BROADWAY

Now that Bruce Springsteen has broken the ice, Broadway's first proper play after the shutdown comes in the form of **"Pass Over,"** Antoinette Chinonye Nwandu's verbally explosive drama. A riff on "Waiting for Godot," with a dash of Exodus, the play finds two Black teens, Moses (Jon Michael Hill) and Kitch (Namir Smallwood), hanging around a street corner, spinning the peril they face at the hands of the "po-po" into anxious, imaginative games. Danya Taymor's production drew acclaim in its previous stagings, at Chicago's Steppenwolf (where Spike Lee filmed it) and Off Broadway, at LCT3. But its transfer to the August Wilson, where it starts previews on Aug. 4, is bound to have new resonance after last year's protests, which called for change not just in policing but in the culture at large—including the theatre. This is the first of seven Broadway plays by Black playwrights slated to open between now and the end of the year.—*Michael Schulman*

is part of a rising generation of male dancers specializing in bharata natyam, recently considered the province of women. Arekar's approach brings a particular stillness and sharpness of line to stories of gods and goddesses drawn from the bharata-natyam repertoire. On Aug. 15, the San Francisco-based Ganesh Vasudeva presents his bharata-natyam dance drama inspired by Yann Martel's fantastical novel "Life of Pi."—*Marina Harss (Aug. 9-15; driveeast.org.)*

### Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival

Founded in 1976, Dallas Black Dance Theatre has waited a long time for its début at the Berkshires festival. In outdoor performances, Aug. 4-8, the company presents "Like Water," an inspirational, Pillow-commissioned première by the increasingly sought-after choreographer Darrell Grand Moultrie. The rest of the program—"Night Run," by Christopher L. Huggins, and "Face what's facing you!," by Claude Alexander III—similarly stresses perseverance. Video of the performance will be available on demand on the Pillow's Web site, Aug. 19-Sept. 2.—*Brian Seibert (jacobspillow.org)*

### Mark Morris Dance Group

The latest "Summer Cinema" haul from the Mark Morris video vault, available online, Aug. 5-Sept. 2, focusses on piano music. "Canonic ¾ Studies" (1982) delightfully spoofs ballet class through sequential imitation. "Bedtime," set to Schubert songs, starts as formally as a machine and ends with a richly complex narrative. "Sang-Froid" treats Chopin un-Romantically.—*B.S. (mmdg.org/summer-cinema)*

## TELEVISION

### I Think You Should Leave

The second season of Tim Robinson's zany sketch-comedy show, which premièred in 2019, landed on Netflix in early July. Robinson (formerly of "Saturday Night Live" and "Detroiters") and his co-creator, Zach Kanin (a former "S.N.L." writer and a *New Yorker* cartoonist), know how to craft an impeccable sight gag; as a performer, Robinson also makes a strange kind of music with language. He seems to calibrate each line reading to its funniest possible sound; he'll shriek a random word in an otherwise quiet sentence—"I didn't DO this!," from a sketch about a cable show called "Coffin Flop," which captures corpses falling out of shoddy caskets—or swallow words in the back of his throat like a bullfrog. "I Think You Should Leave" doesn't have an official recurring cast, but Robinson stocks the show with guest players—Sam Richardson, Tim Heidecker, John Early, Kate Berlant—who share a similar sense of chaotic repartee. He's slowly assembling a troupe of the best brains in alternative comedy, a motley band of thespians with a shared commitment to deranged, fantastical wordplay.—*Rachel Syme*

### Schmigadoon!

Mid-century musicals, with their plucky smiles and honeyed harmonies, aren't hard to mock, and for a while the new Apple TV+ series "Schmigadoon!" seems to be shooting singing fish in a barrel. Created by Ken Daurio and Cinco Paul (who wrote the earworm-y songs), it follows a semi-happy New York couple, both doctors, who wander into a candy-bright land where everyone bursts into song and the only escape is "true love." The jaded visitors, played by Cecily Strong and Keegan-Michael Key, cringe and scoff at the pure-hearted denizens, drawn from the likes of "Oklahoma!," "The Music Man," and "Carousel," with a schmig of "The Sound of Music." (The Broadway-certified cast includes Alan Cumming, Kristin Chenoweth, Ariana DeBose, and Aaron Tveit.) The jokes are good, if glib, only winking at the sex, violence, and backwardness that have always coursed beneath the genre. But then the show tries for something harder than parody—sincerity. It succeeds, thanks to mature performances by Key and Strong, a longtime gem on "Saturday Night Live" who finally gets to show her dramatic range.—*Michael Schulman*

### The White Lotus

This six-episode series—named for a fictional Hawaiian resort where rich American tourists are waited on by the resort's decidedly less wealthy, more ethnically diverse staff—created by Mike White for HBO, is a near-note-perfect tragicomedy. The guests include Nicole (Connie Britton), a Sheryl Sandberg-like tech C.F.O.; her beta husband, Mark (Steve Zahn); their porn-addicted sixteen-year-old son, Quinn (Fred Hechinger); their daughter, Olivia ("Euphoria" 's Sydney Sweeney), a bitchy, performatively woke college sophomore, who has brought along a friend, Paula (Brittany O'Grady); and Tanya (Jennifer Coolidge), a lonely alcoholic who carries around her dead mother's ashes. The chief coddlers are Belinda (Natasha Rothwell), a soothing, long-suffering spa manager, who is perhaps the only truly likable character on the show, and Armond (the Australian actor Murray Bartlett), a recovering addict whose sobriety is tested by his stressful job. The show was shot entirely at the Four Seasons in Maui, and the focus on a single site gives it a Pinteresque airlessness. The guests and the employees circle one another like animals in a cage, and White's greatest sympathy lies with those who have a more tenuous connection to power and money.—*Naomi Fry (Reviewed in our issue of 8/2/21.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMIEL LAW

## ART

### Diedrick Brackens

This Los Angeles-based artist's splendid, emotionally lush show, at the Shainman gallery, is a celebration of a subject that hasn't been championed much in American art—namely, Black men, seen joyfully alone and together. Brackens's handwoven tapestries bring to mind the traditions of both West African textiles and American quilting; his elongated figures occupy colorful spaces that enhance their implied movement and propulsive energy. Looking at these unabashedly romantic works, one is reminded of their obvious influences—the cutout silhouettes in Henri Matisse's "Jazz" series, the lives commemorated in the ongoing AIDS Memorial Quilt project. Nearly twenty years ago, Thelma Golden, now the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, curated the landmark exhibition "Black Romantic: The Figurative Impulse in Contemporary African-American Art," and it's wonderful to see how the ideas it identified—about dreams as they relate to Black lives—are still being explored, and so fully.—*Hilton Als (jackshainman.com)*

### Highwaymen

Terms such as "kitsch" and "motel painting" would likely not have rubbed the Highwaymen the wrong way. The silhouetted palm trees, sunsets, and moonlit seascapes painted in Florida by this informal group of twenty-six self-taught Black artists were made to be sold at affordable prices, ideally in bulk, door to door or from their cars along the roadside, hence the group's name. In the decades since they started working, in the nineteen-fifties, their art has gained increasing attention as a lush, savvy genre of folk art—or a populist strain of Pop. The Highwaymen tapped into a heady vision of American landscape and décor, fantasy aesthetics born of the postwar abundance they were largely denied during the Jim Crow era. The eleven paintings on view at the Charles Moffett gallery represent just a sliver of the artists' prodigious (and often anonymous and undated) output. But it's enough to relay the range of their enchanting style, from a wetland vista at dusk by Mary Ann Carroll, the sole Highwaywoman, in which tropical foliage appears as dark tracery against a streaked, blazing sky, to the cotton-candy clouds and buttery touch in a pair of canvases by Harold Newton, which evoke Fragonard in the Everglades.—*Johanna Fateman (charlesmoffett.com)*

### Lynn Hershman Leeson

The dystopian prescience of this pioneering American artist stands apart from that of other Cassandras: she isn't afraid to embrace new technologies that raise challenging ethical questions. "Twisted," Hershman Leeson's current retrospective at the New Museum, gathers together fifty years of her experimentations in the Bay Area, where she is based. Cast-wax masks made in the sixties—at once macabre and delightful—breathe when triggered by motion detectors, prefiguring the artist's long-standing interest in surveillance and interactivity. More recently, in 2017, she created two antibodies, working with a scientist at Novartis Pharmaceuticals. Between these endeavors lies an enthralling, varied body of work—drawing, sculpture, filmmaking, Internet art—united by her idiosyncratic futurism. As technology has evolved, so, too, have both the look and the content of Hershman Leeson's art; of the many through lines in her retrospective, several are very intentionally highlighted. From 1973 to 1978, Hershman Leeson created the fictional identity Roberta Breitmore through a series of public performances, beauty rituals, and bureaucratic records. Some forty years later, Roberta was resurrected in the form of the artist's genetically engineered antibody ERTA, a poetic redemption of Roberta's "life," which was initially conceived as a feminist deconstruction of identity.—*J.F. (newmuseum.org)*

### "The New Woman Behind the Camera"

This monumental show at the Met—a hundred and eighty-five works, made between the nineteen-twenties and the fifties, by a hundred and twenty female photographers from more than twenty countries—builds a case for the historic contributions of women to a field that, until very recently, was monotonously dominated by men. Genres include reportage, ethnography, fashion, advertising, and determinedly avant-garde experimentation. Widely recognized names (the Americans Berenice Abbott, Margaret Bourke-White, Dorothea Lange, and Helen Levitt among them) are few. The array of images tantalizes to the point of possibly maddening some viewers. Now for something that brought tears to my eyes: five shots of a Japanese actress, Yasue Yamamoto, taken in secret, around 1943 and 1944, after her theatre company was banned by Japan's wartime government. Yamamoto's tiny shifts of facial expression speak or, really, sing of muted emotions that are no less moving for being unidentifiable. The pictures are by the pioneering Japanese photographer Eiko Yamazawa, whose style is flatly vernacular, with nothing overtly dramatizing about it; timelessly here-and-now across a span of sixty-eight years, they didn't so much blow my mind as take it away and begin to replace it with a better one.—*Peter Schjeldahl (metmuseum.org)*

## AT THE GALLERIES

COURTESY DENNY DIMIN GALLERY

In the early nineteen-seventies, a group of American artists who shared an unironic love of craft, vivid color, and kitsch—rebels against the ornamentation-averse restraint of the Minimalists—became known as the Pattern and Decoration movement (a.k.a. P&D). By the mid-eighties, the initial enthusiasm, mostly in Europe, for the group's paintings, sculptures, ceramics, and textiles had waned. Individual artists succeeded, but P&D was written off as a footnote that was slightly embarrassing. (And also threatening: it's no coincidence that the group's focus on needlework, floral imagery, and other hallmarks of domesticity aligned it with feminism.) Today, when a loom is as good as a paintbrush to a young artist, the movement is back in the spotlight. The historical survey "With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art, 1972-1985" is installed at the Hessel Museum, at Bard College, through Nov. 28. A more intimate and entirely irresistible group show—cleverly titled **"Fringe"**—is on view at the Denny Dimin gallery through Aug. 20. It mixes original P&D artists (in charming pieces, from 1976, by Cynthia Carlson and Ree Morton and a sinuous 2020 canvas by Valerie Jaudon) with others whose works make a strong case for the movement's ongoing relevance, including the quilted irreverence of Natalie Baxter's "Housecoat III" (in the foreground, above), completed this year.—*Andrea K. Scott*

## MOVIES

### American Splendor

In Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini's 2003 drama-documentary, the drama and the documentary look at each other but don't touch. The movie is about Harvey Pekar, a real-life and rusted-up gentleman from Cleveland. He works as a filing clerk, and his experiences have long been the subject of a comic strip, illustrated by—among others—Robert Crumb. So we get a good dose of Harvey. But we get an even better and funnier dose of Paul Giamatti, who plays an alternative Harvey, and who is framed, or sometimes drawn, in fond imitation of a comic book—the implication being that even the cruddiest lives can, in sympathetic hands, acquire shape and grace. The story, such as it is, moves from Harvey the record collector to Harvey the cancer sufferer to Harvey the talk-show guest. There is terrific supporting work from Hope Davis, as Mrs. Pekar, and Judah Friedlander, as Harvey's profoundly unusual friend Toby. Mild fame may have patronized these folks, but the movie pays them a comic homage that feels flattering, fast-witted, and true.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 8/11/03.) (Streaming on Amazon, Hulu, and other services.)*

### Bontoc Eulogy

Marlon Fuentes's only feature to date, from 1995, belongs to a genre unto itself—the personal mockumentary. In the film, Fuentes portrays himself as an émigré from the Philippines to the United States who has lost touch with his homeland and attempts to reconstruct his family history, especially that of his grandfather Markod. Soon after the end of the Philippine-American War, Markod, a member of the Igorot people, was lured from his family in the Mountain Province to the United States, where he—along with hundreds of other Filipinos—was put on display in the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Fuentes brilliantly combines a wide array of authentic archival footage (including of the fair) with faux-documentary scenes depicting Markod's travels, his American captivity, and his struggle to escape. With voice-over narration and his own on-camera presence, Fuentes dramatizes the ongoing effects of colonialism, from generation to generation and in the culture at large, and links the breakdown of family history to the whitewashing of history; his canny and visionary corrective sets the stage for change.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on OVID.tv starting Aug. 5.)*

### Seven Men from Now

Budd Boetticher's stark 1956 Western offers a Hemingwayesque intensity of unspoken emotion and bitter wisdom, with a visually terse style to match. Before you can blink, two of the seven men are gunned down by Stride (Randolph Scott), the former sheriff of Silver Springs, Colorado, who is trawling the desert for the bandits who killed his wife, a Wells Fargo clerk, in a robbery. But the stolen shipment of gold is still missing, and Masters (Lee Marvin), a criminal whom Stride had captured twice, is after it. Meanwhile, John and Annie Greer (Walter Reed and Gail Russell), Easterners en route to California whose wagon gets stuck in mud, are rescued by Stride, who falls for Annie but, on principle, keeps it to himself. In Boetticher's harshly judgmental view, the lawless and barren landscape proves the humanity of some but dehumanizes others: the crazed robbers pursuing Stride scuttle like scorpions among rocks, whereas the wounded hero, embodied by the huge yet delicate Scott, moves with a dancer's proud grace.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel, Amazon, and other services.)*

### The Swarm

What Alfred Hitchcock did for birds the French director Just Philippot does for grasshoppers in this extravagantly eerie, rootedly practical horror film. It's set in farm country in the South of France, where a young widow named Virginie (Suliane Brahim) attempts to save her property from foreclosure—and to support her children, the teen-age Laura (Marie Narbonne) and the young Gaston (Raphael Romand)—by raising a tentful of the insects, which she roasts, grinds, and sells as animal feed. But the bugs aren't thriving, and after Virginie accidentally discovers that they have a taste for blood—which makes them grow and reproduce rapidly—she takes exceptional measures to feed them what they crave, which turns the brood into an uncontrollable menace. Working with a script by Jérôme Genevray and Franck Victor, Philippot anchors the action in the relationships and the economics of rural life, with an eye to the prejudice aimed at Virginie's friend Karim (Sofian Khammes), an independent winegrower of North African descent, and to the universal dramas of family and adolescence. But the core of the film is the terror sparked by vampiric insects, which are depicted with a straightforward, unshakable creepiness.—*R.B. (Streaming on Netflix starting Aug. 6.)*

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## WHAT TO STREAM

COURTESY "BEYOND THE BOLEX"

The 2018 documentary **"Beyond the Bolex"** (streaming on Kanopy) depicts a surprising intersection of personal experience and historical revelation. Its director, Alyssa Bolsey, was in film school when she delved into the archives of her grandfather Emil, who died in 2004, and discovered that his father, Jacques, was an unheralded yet crucial figure in the history of cinema. A Russian Jewish émigré to Switzerland, Jacques Bolsey was a medical student and an artist in Geneva when he became obsessed with creating a small and inexpensive movie camera for serious amateur filmmakers, including himself. His major invention, the Bolex 16-mm. camera, went into mass production in 1935 and soon became standard equipment for independent filmmakers, as affirmed here in interviews with such directors as Wim Wenders, Barbara Hammer, and Jonas Mekas. In 1939, Jacques immigrated to the United States. His final invention failed commercially, but it was nonetheless his most visionary: a movie camera the size of a pack of cigarettes. Alyssa Bolsey's ardent research explores her polymathic great-grandfather's utopian industrial schemes as well as his spirit of innovation and situates his life and work amid the vast events of the times—the Depression, the Second World War, and the Holocaust.—*Richard Brody*

## TABLES FOR TWO

### Contento
88 E. 111th St.

Although I can't promise that every night at Contento, a new restaurant in East Harlem, is a party, I can report that, on a recent Saturday, around 10 P.M., when several patrons began to belt out "Seven Nation Army," by the White Stripes, an employee rejoined by playing it on the sound system, inspiring an impromptu dining-room-wide rave. The following Tuesday, someone was marking another year around the sun; a rousing sing-along to Stevie Wonder's "Happy Birthday" ensued.

There is much to celebrate at Contento, whose name is a Spanish cognate for "content," as in "happy": the opening itself, long delayed by COVID and longer dreamed of by its co-founder Yannick Benjamin, an accomplished sommelier and restaurant veteran (Le Cirque, Jean-Georges); Benjamin's thoughtfully curated, internationally sourced wine list, with a wide range of prices; a Peruvian-inspired menu from the chef Oscar Lorenzzi (a native of Lima who once ran the kitchen at the Waverly Inn), featuring such dishes as *ceviche clásico* and "quinotto," i.e. quinoa prepared like risotto—nutty, creamy, and brightly jewelled with fava beans and sweet peas.

But Contento's undercurrent of joy seems especially attributable to the restaurant's unusual commitment to inclusivity. In 2003, at the age of twenty-five, Benjamin—raised, in Hell's Kitchen, in a family of French immigrants who worked at restaurants including La Grenouille and Lutèce—was confined permanently to a wheelchair after a car accident. Though he didn't let paraplegia stop him from pursuing the ambitious career he'd already begun in food and wine, he faced no shortage of physical challenges, plus a great deal of stigma.

Benjamin and his partners designed Contento's small dining room, quite subtly, to accommodate both guests and staff members with disabilities. There are wide passageways between tables built slightly taller than average to fit wheelchairs, a handsomely curved bar bifurcated into two heights, and a roomy bathroom with an enormous, easy-sliding door. Adaptive flatware—intended for use by, say, someone with quadriplegia or A.L.S., with adjustable metal rings that make handles easier to grip—is available upon request.

Benjamin, a seasoned para-athlete, wheels effortlessly around the dining room and the sidewalk patio, a customized wine tray on his lap, making recommendations and pouring tastes with a laid-back manner belied by his personal uniform of crisp suits. Of the categories on his list—Wines of the Ancient World, East Coast Terroir (including a sparkling blueberry variety from Maine)—the most intriguing is, perhaps, Wines of Impact. These bottles come from winemakers who are in some way marginalized: a smooth Viognier from Kishor Vineyards, in Galilee, Israel, staffed by people with intellectual disabilities; a Pinot Noir from Kitá Wines, a vineyard on Chumash land in California's Santa Ynez Valley, run by a Chumash woman named Tara Gomez.

Before the car accident, "I was a six-foot-two white guy," Benjamin told me. "It's incredibly humbling to go into a situation like where I am now, in a wheelchair, paralyzed for the rest of my life." In the wine world, he said, "I stick out. I'm different." Contento's location, a forty-minute "push," as Benjamin calls wheelchair travel, from his home, in the South Bronx, reminds him of the diverse Hell's Kitchen of his youth. Lorenzzi's food, too, bridges cultures.

A comforting entrée of shaggy short ribs over saucy peanut udon noodles, dusted in togarashi, highlights Nikkei cuisine, a result of Japanese immigration to Peru in the first half of the twentieth century, as does the excellent Kurobuta (a Japanese term for Berkshire pork) katsu, served with spicy daikon slaw and yuzu aioli. Lorenzzi's devilled eggs, laced with a punchy, acidic hit of *ají amarillo*, a mild, citrusy chili essential to Peruvian cooking, link his roots with the American South. Contento sticks out, entirely on its own terms. *(Dishes $8–$31.)*

*—Hannah Goldfield*

PHOTOGRAPH BY MENGWEN CAO FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

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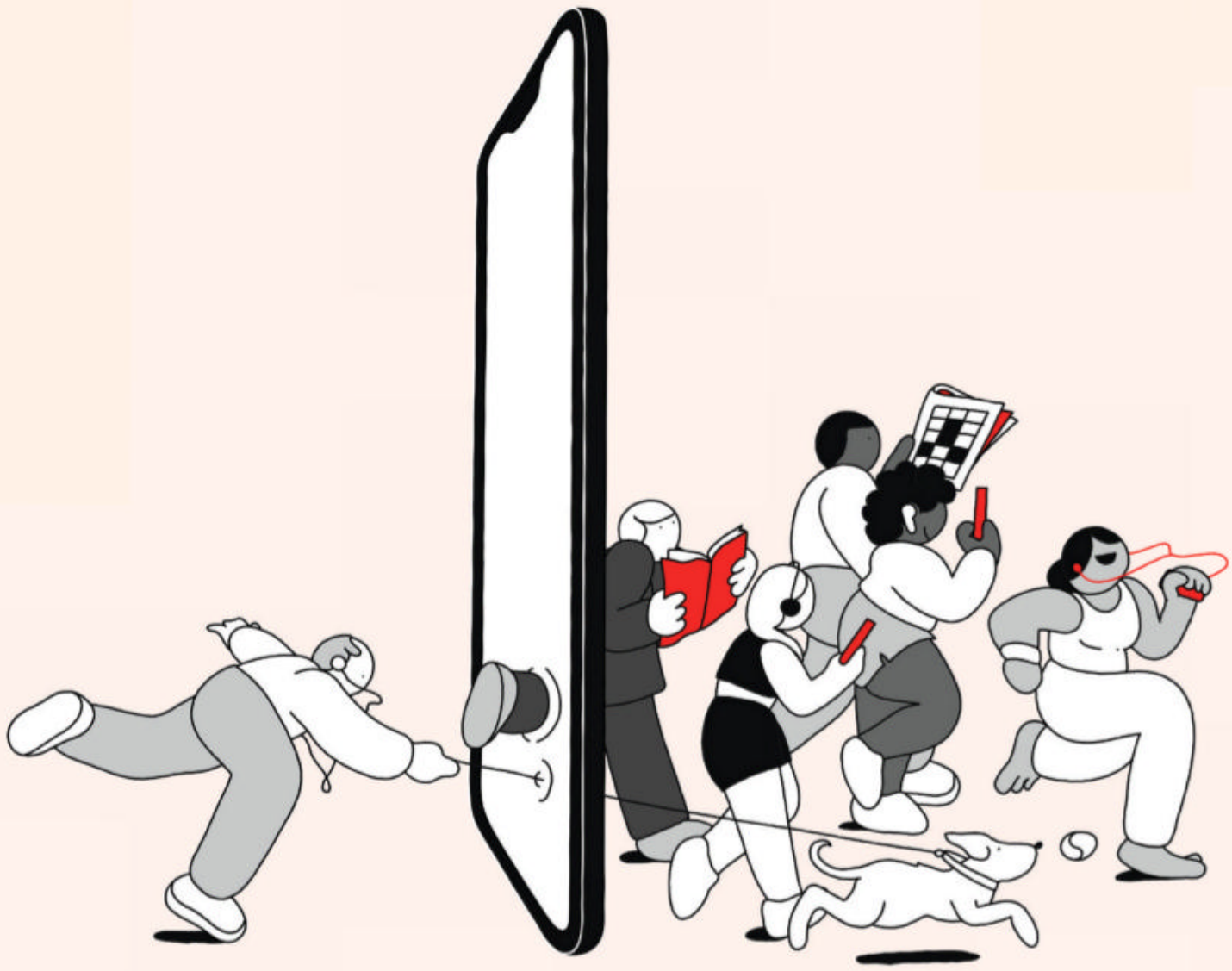

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# THE TALK OF THE TOWN

## COMMENT
### RESPONSIBLE PARTIES

At the first House select-committee hearing on the January 6th insurrection, last week, four law-enforcement officers presented excruciating details of their efforts to protect the Capitol and the lawmakers inside it from the mob that sought to disrupt the certification of the Presidential election. Aquilino Gonell, a Capitol Police sergeant, recalled how rioters set upon him, doused him with chemical irritants, and flashed lasers into his eyes. Michael Fanone, of the D.C. Metropolitan Police, said that he was Tased and beaten unconscious, and suffered a heart attack. Harry Dunn told of being taunted with a racist epithet that "no one had ever, ever called" him while he was "wearing the uniform of a Capitol Police officer." Daniel Hodges, the youthful Metropolitan Police officer who was recorded on video being crushed in a doorway, used a single word twenty-four times to describe the people who rampaged through Congress. He called them "terrorists."

Shortly after the insurrection, R. P. Eddy, a former director of the National Security Council, suggested on NPR that the reason the Department of Homeland Security and the F.B.I. had missed every glaring sign of what some members of the group that Donald Trump liked to call his "army" were planning for the sixth had to do with "the invisible obvious." It was difficult for officials, Eddy explained, "to realize that people who look just like them could want to commit this kind of unconstitutional violence." Representative Adam Kinzinger, of Illinois, one of two Republicans who joined the committee, against the wishes of the House Minority Leader, Kevin McCarthy, noted something similar in his opening statement. "We never imagined," he said, "that this could happen: an attack by our own people fostered and encouraged by those granted power through the very system they sought to overturn."

When Officer Hodges used the word "terrorist," he was demanding that the obvious be made visible. This is also the essential task of the committee: to assemble a comprehensive record of January 6th showing that those who entered the Capitol were not, as Trump said, "a loving crowd" but political extremists, incited by the President and abetted by Republican members of Congress and other government officials, whose deference to a seditious demagogue represents an ongoing threat to the country.

The insurrectionists, however, called themselves "patriots," seeming to believe that bearing the American flag earned them that title. To most people, the flag symbolizes the freedoms enshrined in the Constitution. But at the Capitol it was brandished as a weapon—along with the Trump flag, the Confederate battle flag, and the thin-blue-line flag—in an attempt to undermine what the committee's chair, Representative Bennie Thompson, called "the pillar of our democracy": the peaceful transfer of power. The insurrectionists, in calling themselves patriots, had absorbed a fundamental lesson of the Trump Presidency—how to pervert language so that the things you say are the opposite of what they actually mean.

That lesson was on display on the morning of the hearing, when Representative Elise Stefanik, who was once a vocal critic of the former President but has since become his willing enabler, stepped up to a bank of microphones outside the Capitol, alongside McCarthy. "The American people deserve to know the truth—that Nancy Pelosi bears responsibility, as Speaker of the House, for the tragedy that occurred on January 6th," Stefanik said, alleging that Pelosi had "prioritized her partisan political optics" over the safety of the police. The Speaker of the House is not, in fact, in charge of security. But at least, one could argue, the woman who is now the third-ranking Republican member of the House recognizes that the events of January 6th were tragic.

Stefanik ascended to the leadership

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

position because Representative Liz Cheney was ousted from it by her fellow-Republicans, this spring, for challenging Trump's lies that the election had been stolen. "No member of Congress should now attempt to defend the indefensible, obstruct this investigation, or whitewash what happened that day," Cheney, who joined Kinzinger as the only other Republican on the committee, said at the hearing. Or, as Sergeant Gonell put it, "What do you think people considering becoming law-enforcement officers think when they see elected leaders downplaying this?" Nevertheless, both McCarthy and Mitch McConnell, the Senate Minority Leader, said that they had been too busy to watch the officers' testimony.

Meanwhile, members of the now defunct America First caucus—a small cadre of House Republicans led by Marjorie Taylor Greene, whose attempt to promote "Anglo-Saxon political tradition" proved too retrograde even for other Trump loyalists in Congress—gathered outside the Department of Justice. Before hecklers could chase them away, they championed the more than five hundred people who have been charged so far in connection with the assault. Paul Gosar called those still in jail awaiting trial "political prisoners," following the lead of Louie Gohmert, who, in May, on the House floor, said that they were "political prisoners held hostage by their own government." This theme has become a talking point on the far right. Trump, too, has embraced it. Recently, on Fox News, he questioned why such "tremendous people" had been incarcerated.

The House select committee will reconvene sometime in August. Before that, according to Thompson, it is likely to begin issuing subpoenas to people, including some in the government, who may have known about events leading up to and surrounding the insurrection. Now that the Justice Department has allowed former officials to provide "unrestricted testimony," Trump's Attorney General William Barr and his acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen are likely to be called. So are members of Trump's inner circle, including Representative Jim Jordan, who spoke with him that day. (Jordan was one of two Republicans nominated to the committee by McCarthy and rejected by Pelosi, for having challenged the legitimacy of the election and for calling the committee "impeachment round three," after which McCarthy pulled all five of his nominees.) It's unclear if officials will honor subpoenas or ignore them, as happened during Trump's two impeachments, potentially forcing a protracted legal battle.

If they choose to obstruct the committee, the obvious—an invitation to incite and carry out future acts of insurrection—will be visible for all to see. The pillar of American democracy may yet be the final casualty of January 6th.

*—Sue Halpern*

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## FICTIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY
### MUD DEFENSE

David Adjaye, the architect, usually makes buildings for people to live in and to use. That's what an architect does. Recently, though, he dropped by the Gagosian gallery on Twenty-fourth Street to visit a new structure of his that serves no practical purpose, otherwise known as an art work: a labyrinthine citadel called "Asaase," a Twi word that means "earth." The curator Antwaun Sargent had commissioned the piece for "Social Works," a group show for which he asked a dozen Black artists to engage with social space "as a community-building tool." Adjaye's "Asaase" is made from blocks of rammed earth, a technique dating to the Neolithic period. Take some dirt—in this case, sixty tons' worth, from a limestone quarry outside Albany—add water and a soupçon of cement, pound vigorously, and voilà. After months spent contemplating the project, Adjaye described the experience of encountering the finished work as "insane."

Adjaye, dressed in loose layers of black, like a ninja in leather slip-ons, meditated on the relationship between humans and geology. "It's another creature," he said, of mud. He discussed oxidation, ionization, the properties of local stone. Once, while building a house on Park Avenue and Seventy-seventh Street, he hit Manhattan's famous schist. In the gallery, his silky British voice was at risk of being drowned out by the dentist-drill ambiance of nearby installation work. Crushed earth, like that used to make "Asaase," soaks up carbon dioxide, purifying the air. "Apparently, that's why ancient cultures survived for so long," Adjaye said. He swiped his palm along a fine layer of silt that had settled on the sculpture's outer wall. "The mud became a way of protecting these communities, because it was more than just an enclosure," he went on. "It was a kind of defense."

Adjaye entered "Asaase" through a sloping passageway and meandered down one of its curving corridors. The work begins low to the ground, but its walls swiftly rise to suggest a fortified city, or a temple. "This moment can really be very magical," he said, as he reached the inner sanctum. He leaned back to contemplate a looming column that serves as a focal point. Seen from the outside, it looks solid, but Adjaye had decided to hollow it out, so visitors are confronted with the surprise of emptiness—a trick.

A hair dryer lay across Adjaye's path. Also a moment, if a less magical one. A gallery technician in white overalls materialized to warn Adjaye, in a German accent, not to trip on the cord. She had been painting the concrete ground. Moving away, he murmured, "We put

*David Adjaye*

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a little pad down not to destroy Larry's floor."

Adjaye was born in 1966 in Tanzania, to Ghanaian parents; his father, who served as a diplomat for the newly independent Ghana, took the family from country to country, eventually settling in England. As an adult, Adjaye has kept up the habit of travel. "I'm terrified of being bored," he said. He likes to immerse himself in the places where he works. In 2010, when, together with the architect J. Max Bond, Jr., he was leading the design team for the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in Washington, D.C., he moved to New York, an Amtrak ride away. A few years ago, he was chosen to design Ghana's National Cathedral, in Accra. "It's the country of my ancestors, but it's still developing," he said. "It's not, like, going to be your metropolitan city. I talked to my wife, and we were, like, 'We should just go.'"

The couple arrived in Accra, with their two young children, in 2019, and soon found themselves grounded by the pandemic. Adjaye owns land in the village where his father grew up, and the family began to spend weekends there. "It's a converted Methodist, Presbyterian, animist, Muslim community," he explained. "My father actually comes from the head family, but he sort of ran away. In a weird way, I've come back." The village, with its low-slung buildings, partly inspired Adjaye to work with rammed earth. He is using the same method to build a house of his own there, the first that he has ever built for himself. Thus far, he has managed to keep his identity, both as an internationally renowned architect and as a town scion, a secret. "It's very lo-fi," he said. "At first my kids were, like, 'What the hell are we doing here?' Now they're obsessed."

He walked behind his sculpture, pausing to peer through a crack that had formed in one of its blocks. Some of the earth had crumbled during the truck trip to the gallery. "At first I freaked out," he said. He has since made his peace with his structure's flaws: "If it were too perfect, I think it would look too fake." He intended, he said, for "Asaase" to offer a "fictional anthropology" for an imagined civilization, rooted in African custom and mindful of the planet. "A kind of primitive, future sustainability," he added—earth, for the good of Earth.

—*Alexandra Schwartz*

## ADAPTATION
## STAR OF THE SHOW

When the actress Emily Mortimer was growing up, in London, her father, the dramatist Sir John Mortimer, would tell her tales of the Mitford sisters. The six aristocratic siblings were raised in isolation in the English countryside, where they developed a private language called Boudledidge, and they led adventuresome lives in the years between the wars. Nancy and Diana became part of the fashionable set the Bright Young Things, and another sister, Unity, befriended Hitler. "My dad talked often of this family of fascinating, extreme women, two of whom were allied with the Fascist Party, two of whom were allied with the Communist Party, and one of whom was a duchess," Mortimer recalled recently. "In fact, he knew Jessica Mitford, the Communist, and I remember her coming for lunch when I was very young."

In 1945, Nancy Mitford fictionalized her eccentric upbringing and romantic misadventures in her novel "The Pursuit of Love," which Mortimer discovered as a teen-ager. She has now adapted it into a whimsical BBC miniseries (it premièred on Amazon Prime last week), starring Lily James as a thrill-seeking débutante. But don't expect swelling violins: Mortimer, who also directed, gave the series an anachronistic soundtrack that includes Le Tigre, Sleater-Kinney, and T. Rex. "I just think it's got a bit of a punk-rock soul, that book," she said, walking through Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, where she lives with her husband, the actor Alessandro Nivola. She had just passed the restaurant where she spent days laboring over the script. She recalled, "A waiter came up to me at one point and said, 'Have you finished your map of the universe yet?'"

*Emily Mortimer*

One key to the Mitford universe: flowers. Jessica Mitford, in her memoir, "Hons and Rebels," from 1960, recalled that her mother, educating the girls in household economy, "once offered a prize of half a crown to the child who could produce the best budget for a young couple living on £500 a year; but Nancy ruined the contest by starting her list of expenditures with 'Flowers . . . £490.'" Mortimer borrowed the line for "The Pursuit of Love." "I remember my dad quoting that from Jessica's book," she said. She reached a small house in Cobble Hill and rang the bell. In the spirit of aristocratic leisure, Mortimer had signed up for a private flower-arranging class at something called Fleur Elise Bkln. The door opened: Fleur Elise Bkln turned out to be the home of Elise Bernhardt, a sixtysomething woman with a salt-and-pepper pixie cut. She led Mortimer to a rambling back yard.

Bernhardt started teaching the class in 2018, she said, after a trip to Japan exposed her to ikebana, a classical form of flower arranging. "Ikebana is very precise—which is why I study it, because I'm not," she explained. She began by asking her pupil to share a flower-related memory. "My dad loved gardening, and he had this big display of dahlias," Mortimer recalled. "I remember his first wife coming through the garden to visit. I must have been a little girl, and my dad went, 'Aren't the dahlias looking marvellous?' And she went, 'It's a very vulgar flower.'" Mortimer's face fell, as it had then.

Moving on, Bernhardt, who used to run a dance nonprofit, said, "Let me

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introduce you to our characters here—because, really, you're making a dance in a vase." Lined up in tubs were the dramatis personae: gerbera daisies, alstroemerias, leucadendrons, thistles, bear grass, sweet william. Bernhardt asked Mortimer to pick a vase—she chose a chipped Tunisian pitcher that Bernhardt had found at a flea market—and instructed, "I want you to decide who's the star of your show."

Mortimer selected celosia, a bunchy, ruffled flower that Bernhardt thought looked like brains, but which reminded Mortimer of petticoats. Bernhardt told her to start with three—"You want things asymmetrical"—and to leave room for negative space. "By the way," she added, "the star of the show may not end up being the star of the show."

Mortimer, a character actress, seemed pleased. (In "The Pursuit of Love," she cast herself as "the Bolter," the protagonist's flighty, monogamy-phobic mother.) Bernhardt laid out a couple of rules: vary the stem lengths so that the flowers aren't at a uniform height, and get rid of leaves, especially ugly ones. "No ugliness," she said, as she tore a leaf from one of Mortimer's celosias and hurled it into the bushes. "Or, as my ikebana teacher would say, 'Sayonara!'"

Next: the supporting players. Mortimer added hypericums and peonies, stuffing her pitcher to the hilt. "I may have gone a bit O.T.T.—over the top," she said.

"Perfection is overrated," Bernhardt assured her, adding, "I want to suggest that you take a few more leaves off."

"I guess minimalism is not my strong point, as my TV show will show you," Mortimer said, with a self-effacing laugh. After trimming some leaves and adding one more peony, she was done. Her arrangement, like "The Pursuit of Love," was an off-kilter period piece: petticoats and punk. Mortimer thanked her instructor and carried her creation out to the street. "It suffers a little bit from excess," she said. "But I like that."

—*Michael Schulman*

## TRANSPLANT DEPT.
## HOMESICK RESTAURANT

On the afternoon of the Puerto Rican Day Parade this year, Williamsburg was filled with the sound of salsa and the smell of rain, and Iván Garcia was in the kitchen of his restaurant, preparing for dinner service. "I'm checking all the equipment, like the temperature of the walk-in downstairs," he said. "I'm testing the flavors, saying, 'This is too spicy,' or 'This needs more salt.'"

Garcia, who has a "Viva la vida!" tattoo on a forearm and wears a silver ring in his left eyebrow, sat down at a long table in front of a burlap-lined wall and spread his hands. "My grandmother has a table for twenty people," he said. "She's an amazing cook. She used to cook every day, three meals a day." The restaurant, Mesa Coyoacan, is named for such tables, and for the neighborhood in Mexico City where Garcia grew up. He opened it in 2009; a few years later, he opened Zona Rosa, a casual spot nearby, where he cooks out of a silver trailer. "When I'm done here, I move to Zona Rosa," he said. "I try the mole, the salsa, the rice, the beans—I go back and forth."

Garcia hasn't been in Mexico since 2000, when, at the age of twenty-eight, he and a friend trekked across the U.S. border south of Phoenix. They reached New Jersey, where Garcia worked at a car wash, then in construction, then at a garment factory. The friend, dispirited, returned to Mexico. Garcia got a job as a dishwasher at a Scandinavian restaurant in Tribeca. "The chef was amazing, an incredible person," he said. "He gave me the opportunity to go into the kitchen as a line cook." Soon, Garcia was the chef at Barrio Chino, on the Lower East Side. His boyfriend, Gerardo Zabaleta, had followed him to New York, and they wanted to open a restaurant together. "But we had a little problem," Garcia said. "We were undocumented."

Garcia and Zabaleta are still undocumented, and that obstacle pervades "I Carry You With Me," a film about their lives, directed by Heidi Ewing, which opened in June. Garcia appears as himself; the actor Armando Espitia portrays him as a young man. At the start of the movie, the past and the present are enmeshed: Garcia is staring out a subway window, and Espitia is walking through a darkened field. "I had that dream again," Espitia says softly, in a voice-over. "It's so real. I'm in Mexico. My home . . . And I realize I can't go back."

If Garcia were to go home, he would be unable to return to the U.S. His son, who is twenty-eight and lives in Puebla, was six the last time they saw each other; although Garcia has video calls with his granddaughter, he has never met her. When his father died, he couldn't attend the funeral, and he worries about his ninety-one-year-old grandmother. A few years ago, his mother managed to get a

tourist visa to visit him in New York. "You know how much I was crying," he said. "When she came, I saw her in the airport—I saw her from far away, and I thought, No, I can't believe it." It had been fifteen years.

During the pandemic, immigration status made Garcia and many other restaurant workers ineligible for unemployment benefits. At the same time, Garcia's cooks had family members in Mexico who were losing their jobs, and remittances were more essential than ever. The staff at Mesa Coyoacan began cranking out meals for nonprofits, including Feed the Frontlines NYC, through which they sent four thousand meals to Elmhurst Hospital. "Nobody left. I have people who have been working here since Day One," Garcia said. "But, like many people in this country, we are working very hard, we are paying a lot of taxes, we are providing employment for American people, for immigrants—and we're still with no papers, we're still with no Social Security number."

Cooking is the only way Garcia can experience Mexico. "I miss my gastronomy," he said, as waiters bustled around him. "But I created a menu out of all my memories." The mole he serves is his grandmother's recipe, made less spicy for the gringos. Some dishes come from his mother's home town of Veracruz; others, from a trip he took in the nineties to Zabaleta's family home, in Chiapas. In the film, the young Garcia woos Zabaleta with the Puebla specialty *chiles en nogada*: stuffed poblano peppers doused in walnut sauce and sprinkled with pomegranate seeds. As Garcia tells it, he learned to cook the dish at a convent, where the nuns charged him a couple thousand pesos for the lesson. "It's very, very complicated," he said, of the recipe, grinning. "The poblano, we have to roast it, and peel it, and take out the seeds inside. But you'd better be careful—you cannot destroy the chili, because it has to be stuffed and look nice." He fills each one with chicken, pork, apples, peaches, toasted almonds, and raisins. The walnuts for the sauce must be peeled one by one. "In Mexico, it took me *hours* to peel them," Garcia said. "I remember seeing the nuns sitting, talking, peeling for hours. I was inspired by them. But here we are, like, *poom-poom-poom-poom*—done."

*—Fergus McIntosh*

## ROAD SHOW
### SITE-SPECIFIC

Modesto (Flako) Jimenez stood near an intersection in Brooklyn one Saturday, not far from the L train, telling the story of a sidewalk grease stain. "This is Yolanda's grease," he said. "She's been selling food here since I was a little kid. It's amazing to watch her cleaning it every morning. Like, 'You know you're not getting that grease out.'"

Earlier this year, Jimenez, a Dominican-born poet and theatre-maker, spent a couple of months driving pods of up to three passengers around Bushwick in a cab, for a site-specific performance piece called "Taxilandia." Jimenez wasn't interested in making a show for Zoom. "How do you show a neighborhood?" he asked. "Except by taking people through the neighborhood."

The first stop in "Taxilandia" is Jimenez's childhood home, which is his current home, too. He climbed into the driver's seat of a burgundy Lincoln Town Car with a Little Trees Black Ice air freshener dangling from the mirror. Jimenez, wearing brown glasses and a Yankees cap, held a coffee in his non-steering hand. "Now you locked in, boy," he said, eying his back-seat passenger through a protective sheet of plexiglass. "You ready?"

Jimenez drove a cab for nine years, typically working from 6 P.M. to 6 A.M. "I saw the real world," he said. If a conversation was stimulating, he would sometimes give the passenger what he called a two-dollar "keeping humanity alive" discount. He had riders sign a kind of guestbook, and some of his favorite interactions are preserved on social media, under the hashtag #bgtflow (for Brooklyn Gypsy Taxi). "People wrote everything in that guestbook," he said. "Their life stories. Or just 'This driver is crazy.'" He tended to feel safer inside the cab: "All the chaos of the city is closed out."

Seven years ago, Jimenez was a performer and a designated driver in a show called "Take Me Home," which whisked tightly packed mini-audiences through the streets of the financial district. "We did that show on Wall Street in crazy Manhattan traffic. Through a blizzard," he said. "No crashing."

"Taxilandia" is easier because the turf is more familiar. "See that furniture store?" Jimenez said. "It's always been a furniture store. Even when the Germans were here. The land demands it to be a furniture store. Every time I come by here, it looks like there's a new owner. But it's still the same furniture."

Jimenez's conversation, unlike his driving, careers crazily: Father Knickerbocker, nineteenth-century breweries, Robert Moses, redlining, white flight, gang life, the war on drugs, the pandemic. (More stoplights during the show mean more stories.) "I'm trying to get the word 'tour' out of my mouth, because it disconnects," he said. "It never holds you accountable. We gotta respect the land and its people." He forbids his passengers to take photographs: "I ain't no museum. I ain't no exhibition."

The principal subject of "Taxilandia" is gentrification, and Jimenez is happy to start difficult conversations with his riders. "After being uncomfortable, we can have a blast," he said. He also gets to celebrate the things that have stayed the same, such as Tony's, a pizza joint that opened in 1969: "It's, like, 'Watch me not change.' The neighborhood is gonna keep changing, but you're gonna be one of those constants. I love that friction."

The show includes a bodega pit stop, although snacking in the car is not permitted. It also includes murals. "That's what people think they came to see," Jimenez said. Pulling over near a depiction of the Notorious B.I.G. by Danielle Mastrion, he briefly relaxed his no-photos policy: "I don't mind that one. I know the artist. She's respecting the community."

Jimenez enjoys having a captive audience. "I'm a performer, and I have an ego," he said. "And I love this. I love that I'm in a car right now, at nine in the fucking morning on a Saturday, to talk. And to talk about changes."

The show does not involve finding a parking space, which is just as well. "That's Brooklyn," Jimenez said, as his rightful length of curb was claimed by another vehicle. He exhaled slowly. Then he drove on: "I'm, like, 'Well, if I go to jail, there's no show.'"

*—Darryn King*

BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPT.

# MANUFACTURING NATURE

*How a landscape architect designs ecosystems to protect cities from the sea.*

BY ERIC KLINENBERG

*In New York, Kate Orff will use oyster reefs to mitigate storm surges.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY THOMAS PRIOR

On a windy afternoon in April, the landscape architect Kate Orff stood on the open walkway of a container crane, some eighty feet above the Red Hook Terminal, in Brooklyn, and the Buttermilk Channel, a tidal strait on the southeast side of Governors Island. Most places in New York City make it easy to avoid thinking about the rivers, canals, and ocean waters that form an aquatic thoroughfare for the global economy and surround the industrial corridors, office towers, and densely populated neighborhoods where millions of people have settled. This place is not one of them.

Orff, who is forty-nine, pushed back strands of ash-brown hair that had blown loose from her ponytail, and pointed out the busy navigation channels, which, for more than two centuries, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has dredged in order to keep them deep and fast. Then she pointed toward the steel-and-concrete barriers that separate the city from the harbor but that, in 2012, proved no match for Superstorm Sandy.

"I'm interested in reworking the edges," Orff told me, squinting into the breeze. Farther west, along the Hudson River, we could make out the ports and cities in New Jersey where the risk of tidal flooding has more than doubled over the past generation, as sea levels have risen. Behind us were the Red Hook Houses, the largest public-housing complex in Brooklyn, with some twenty-five hundred units set on a peninsula, a former tidal marsh that will take on more and more water as the planet continues to warm.

"Before Buttermilk Channel was dredged, people used to walk from here to Governors Island at low tide," she said. "There were oysters, tide pools, grasses, lots of colorful marine life, and they were a big part of New York's coastal-protection system. They acted like breakwaters, absorbing wave energy and slowing the water before it hit the shore. We've spent the past one hundred years dredging out everything for shipping and hardening the edges. Now we have a different climate, and we need a different approach."

A great deal of Orff's work addresses the inescapable fact that the Atlantic Ocean is rising, and coming for the land. She's the founder of the design firm SCAPE, the director of the Urban Design Program at Columbia University, and the first landscape architect to win a MacArthur "genius" grant. She's also at the forefront of an emerging approach to climate resilience that argues we should be building *with* nature, not just *in* nature. Its guiding principle is that "gray infrastructure"—the dikes, dams, and seawalls that modern societies use to contain and control water—is often insufficient, and sometimes destructive. Green infrastructure, by contrast, involves strategically deploying wetlands, dunes, mangrove forests, and reefs to reduce threats of catastrophic flooding and coastal erosion, while also revitalizing the land. This carefully designed "second nature," the thinking goes, could be our second chance.

It won't be the same as the now disappeared natural world. Some conservationists advocate "rewilding," returning developed land to indigenous flora and fauna, but in places like New York City that's not an option. "I know people who have this romantic view that we should just let nature take its course," Orff said, eying the factories and tall buildings that line the riverfront. "But that doesn't take into account the damage we've already done."

That afternoon at the Red Hook Terminal, Orff, in a long black jacket and sneakers with fluorescent yellow laces,

was inspecting a mollusk setting tank belonging to the Billion Oyster Project, a nonprofit that aims to reintroduce the bivalve, in vast quantities, to the waterways of New York City—oysters being a critical part of her coastal-infrastructure plans. Correctly deployed, oysters can form dense reefs that slow the movement of water and mitigate the impact of storm surges. The Red Hook terminal is situated where the East River feeds into the Upper Bay, which was once a prime habitat for oysters; they could grow to weigh more than a pound apiece and fill an entire dinner plate. But, in the past century and a half, extensive river excavation, industrial pollution, and overharvesting have destroyed nearly every oyster colony in the New York Harbor region.

The Billion Oyster Project has retrofitted four beige nine-thousand-gallon shipping containers into oyster tanks. They look a little like back-yard aboveground swimming pools, complete with blue plastic interiors, and are connected to the harbor through PVC hoses and powerful water pumps. On Governors Island, several hundred yards away, project staffers and volunteers build wire cages, or gabions, filled with cleaned oyster shells. Then, in a cavernous warehouse at the Red Hook Terminal, the gabions are loaded into the salt-water-filled tanks. Next, oyster larvae are released into each tank, starting a process called "setting." After about a week, the shell-anchored larvae, or "spat," are transported to the restoration site and placed underwater, where they will spend their adult lives.

Much of Orff's work involves translating arcane topics—from ecology, marine biology, climate science, and architecture—into concepts that resonate with nonexperts. When she explains a project, Orff holds her interlocutor's gaze; you can sense her mind racing to calibrate the right language for the occasion, and you hear it as she punctuates her key ideas, her voice rising and then resting so that her words can sink in. "We're essentially mimicking the activity that would be happening naturally in a healthier body of water," Orff told me. "We have to hit the reset button if we want nature to come back. There's no more natural nature. Now it's a matter of design."

To the south, behind the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge, Staten Island was a greenish mound on the horizon. There, almost half a million people live near a triangular indentation of coastline and ocean known as the New York Bight, which funnels storm water directly onto the land. During Sandy, a sixteen-foot storm surge slammed into residential neighborhoods on the South Shore, tearing entire houses off their foundations. Twenty-four people died on the island. After the disaster, local leaders called for the government to safeguard coastal communities with a seawall. But blocking off the vulnerable parts of New York City would have been extraordinarily expensive, and the ecological costs of cutting off the flow of water into the Hudson River and its tributaries—or of locking it into places that experience heavy rainfall—were equally daunting. We can't live without water; the challenge is learning how to live with it.

When Orff looked into Staten Island's predicament, she couldn't help but notice how much it resembled the situation in other parts of New York City and, for that matter, in coastal cities throughout the world. At SCAPE, she put together a plan, called Living Breakwaters, for protecting and reanimating Staten Island's coastline. In 2014, the proposal earned the highest score in the billion-dollar Rebuild by Design competition, an Obama Administration initiative that invited designers, engineers, scientists, and planners to build systems for a wetter, warmer world. Orff designed a necklace of sloped rock formations and "reef streets" to be submerged in Raritan Bay, where they would attenuate the energy of waves crashing into the South Shore of Staten Island and serve as habitats for oysters, lobsters, and juvenile fish. The system, which would be largely invisible to the area's residents, wouldn't prevent storm water from reaching their sidewalks and streets. But it would lessen the impact, lowering the risk of major damage in future hurricanes while helping people connect with one another and with the ecosystems that sustain them.

The project, which will cost sixty million dollars in federal funding—a modest sum for a flood-protection system that protects a long urban shoreline—includes nine separate breakwater segments, spanning twenty-four hundred linear feet across the bay; a floating oyster nursery; an environmental-education hub; and a set of man-made tide pools, shallow rocky basins built in the zones where water and land mingle at high tide. "A lot of coastal infrastructure lacks surface complexity," Pippa Brashear, one of Orff's colleagues at SCAPE, told me. "It's mostly hard walls." The SCAPE project will be the opposite. "If you put on a scuba suit and swim around Living Breakwaters, you'll see something that looks like an oyster reef, with lots of nooks and crannies," she said. "It's designed to be messy, with lots of little critters, invertebrates like tunicates, really colorful sponges, young sea bass and striped bass and silversides darting around and finding places to hide. Then we'll have the oysters, hopefully tons of them. It'll be teeming with life."

"It's not easy," Orff said of the project's ambitions, which are both social and ecological. "But the oysters do a lot of the work."

Orff grew up in suburban Maryland and describes herself as "a classic latchkey kid." Her father, an engineer and an avid birder, was a civil servant who worked at NASA and the N.S.A.; her mother worked as a secretary for the county executive. "I had a lot of time to explore things and basically do whatever seemed interesting," Orff told me with a slightly mischievous smile. "For me, that wound up being a pretty weird mix of things." In high school, most kids get sorted into specific roles and identities: freaks and geeks, jocks and goths. Orff refused to be limited. She was an artist, the captain of her lacrosse team, a feminist, and a budding environmentalist.

At the University of Virginia, she studied with the late pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty and wrote an undergraduate thesis on ecofeminism; at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, another eminence, the architect Rem Koolhaas, selected her to join his six-person urban-design seminar and research team. "I wasn't even supposed to apply, because I was still so early in the program," Orff recalled. "One day, I saw my name posted on his board, and when I walked into his office he said, 'O.K., Kate. You are landscape.'"

Orff's first design job after her graduate training was at a traditional corporate design firm in Sausalito. One day,

*"Don't push that! It makes a super-annoying squeak sound!"*

• •

Koolhaas called and asked if the projects she was doing were "beautiful." "I was working on a courtyard at Stanford, a tourism complex in Egypt, a gated community in Myanmar," Orff told me. "I'm not even sure that one was legal. I said, 'No, they're not beautiful.' And he said, 'Well, why aren't you working with me?'" She went home, posted an ad to sell all her furniture, and then pulled up stakes. In 2000, Orff helped open a new Manhattan office for Koolhaas's firm, O.M.A. (Office for Metropolitan Architecture). She rented a small studio apartment on Fifteenth Street, and, like a typical New Yorker, she quickly discovered how much she needed to escape it.

Her friends recommended that she take advantage of Central Park. "But by then I had already spent all this time studying it in graduate school, and I was basically uninterested," Orff recalled. Instead, she volunteered with the National Audubon Society and started spending time at the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, a sprawling oasis in Queens, between Kennedy Airport and Rockaway Beach. It has more than twelve thousand acres of wetlands, dunes, salt marshes, forests, and beaches, along with some three hundred species of birds. For Orff, it became a source of inspiration.

"You could tell the whole history of New York in, like, one square metre of Jamaica Bay," Orff explained. "It was full of Lenape settlements, with shell mounds and hunting grounds. People lived between the water and the land. They caught every kind of fish." European settlers appreciated the area's flora and fauna, but they also liked its beaches, where they disposed of waste. "The entire bay is ringed with the detritus of modern society," Orff said. "It's where we put everything that we didn't value. Including horses. There's actually a place here called Dead Horse Bay, where horses who worked the streets of New York City—including the ones who lugged the soil they used to make Central Park—got shipped out and dumped. You can still find bones there, and some of them are *big*."

In Jamaica Bay, Orff met ecologists and environmental activists who were warning about the dangers of rising sea levels but struggling to gain traction in a city fixated on post-9/11 security concerns. "They understood that the marshes, and a lot of the life they nurtured, were going to disappear unless there was major intervention," she recalled. "And I started thinking about what that intervention would look like. I mean, what would it mean to design Jamaica Bay? You would need to garden it. You would plant oysters, plant marsh grass, renature the ecosystem. But where? And how?"

Orff took these questions to Kenneth Frampton, a renowned scholar of architecture at Columbia whose essay "Toward an Urban Landscape" was a formative influence, and they chatted in his office in Morningside Heights. At the end of the conversation, he said, "Kate, why aren't you teaching here?" Orff worked up a proposal for a new seminar called "Landscape, Infrastructure, Intervention," and the following year she joined the faculty of Columbia's graduate program. The course attracted students from different departments and created buzz around campus. "It was exciting to see so much interest in wetlands, coastlines, and urban infrastructure," she said.

In 2005, she launched SCAPE, where, by all accounts, she has cultivated a role more like a coach and a choreographer than a dictator who demands that the staff build their napkin sketches at scale. But her professional breakthrough came four years later, when she was invited to participate in "Rising Currents," a Museum of Modern Art exhibition that showcased new ideas for combatting global warming in the urban environment. Orff, the sole landscape designer leading a team for the show, was asked to develop a plan for Liberty State Park in New Jersey. But the site didn't work for her, because there wasn't enough daily social life to support the cultural connections she'd envisaged between people and place. "I didn't know what to do," she said. "So I told them I had a conflict of interest because of a client in Jersey. Bit of a stretch!"

Instead, she put in for the Gowanus Canal, a 1.8-mile-long, hundred-foot-wide waterway in Brooklyn that runs from Boerum Hill through Red Hook and into New York Harbor. Although it once nourished an abundant supply

of oysters, it's now better known for holding enough "black mayonnaise"—a toxic mixture of raw sewage, oil, coal, chemicals, and heavy metals—to fill twenty-two Olympic-size swimming pools. A few years earlier, in 2007, a young minke whale was spotted swimming near the mouth of the canal after a historic rainstorm. The *Daily News* nicknamed it Sludgie the Whale (a play on the popular Carvel ice-cream cake Fudgie the Whale), and New Yorkers rushed to see it. But the Gowanus, which receives about three hundred and sixty million gallons of untreated wastewater each year, was no place for a young whale to visit. Sludgie, injured and disoriented, promptly beached herself on some rocks and died. In March, 2010, just as Orff's exhibit was going up at MOMA, the E.P.A. designated the Gowanus a Superfund site, spurring a $1.5 billion dredging-and-cleaning project. (It finally began last year.)

Orff's submission, called "Oyster-Tecture," imagined a living reef in the canal made of tangles and webs of fuzzy rope that, by harnessing the filtration powers of shellfish and eelgrass, would help support a resurgence of aquatic biodiversity. On the banks of the canal, she designed a water park for families, with lots of places to sit and to stroll, and new channels that could flow out of the canal and feed into Brooklyn's residential communities; the waterfront, treated as a dumping ground for decades, would become a gathering place.

It was a utopian-sounding vision, and some people dismissed it. In the *Times*, the critic Nicolai Ouroussoff belittled what he called Orff's "effort to turn back the clock to a time when New York was an oyster capital of the world"; he found it "slightly hokey," which he ascribed to her being one of the show's "young and relatively untested" contributors.

"I was so riled up when that came out!" Orff recalled. "He didn't get it." Other influential people in the design profession did, however, and the Army Corps of Engineers asked for a meeting. "It's a beautiful idea," said Guy Nordenson, a Princeton University engineering and architecture professor whose research helped inspire the "Rising Currents" exhibition. "It connects with things Europeans are doing, making room for the river instead of walling it off." Orff delights in the popular appeal of Oyster-Tecture, convinced that ecological design should be an enticement to those who see climate change as cause for building a better world.

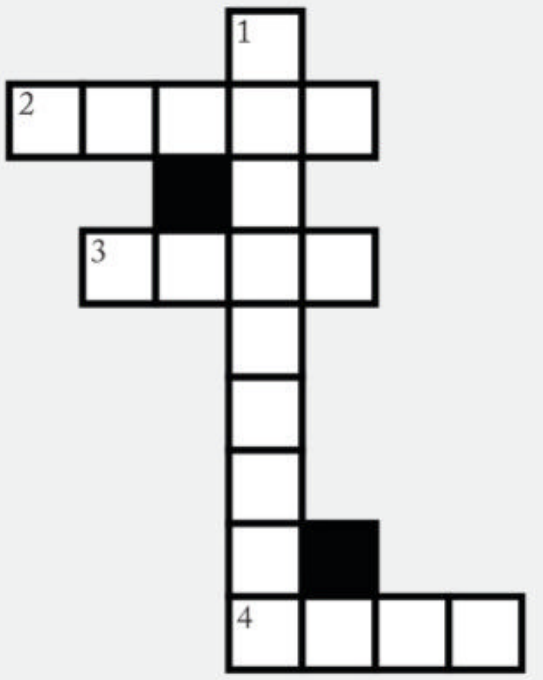
"The way we talk about global warming is usually dark and pessimistic," she told me. "It can be stifling. Part of my job is showing people new ways to see things, to offer a vision of places we can live in, responsibly, and also enjoy."

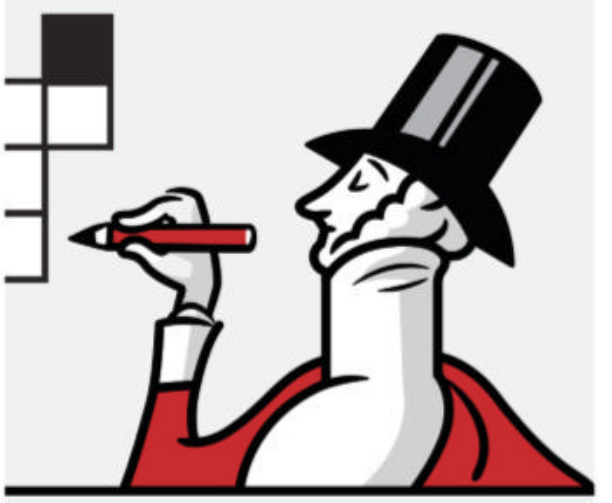
On a cold day this spring, Orff met me at Plumb Beach, a short, narrow stretch of shoreline at the southern edge of Brooklyn, and a nesting-and-breeding ground for horseshoe crabs. Right off the Belt Parkway, near Sheepshead Bay, the beach looks across to the Rockaway Peninsula, a natural barrier between it and the open ocean. It's sometimes referred to as New York City's "hidden beach," accessible only via an eastbound exit, and invisible until you step out of the parking lot and onto the sand. Giving me directions on the phone, Orff warned that the beach was like the seventh-and-a-half floor in the movie "Being John Malkovich." "It's after Exit 9 and before Exit 11, but there is no Exit 10," she told me. "It's a warp in time and space. Just trust that it's there."

Plumb Beach, the site of a federally funded ecological restoration project, provided an early test case of whether Orff-style natural infrastructure projects can succeed. The push for this approach in the United States came after Hurricane Katrina, in 2005, when some studies indicated that the disappearance of marshes and wetlands around the Gulf of Mexico had allowed storm waters to pick up force as they approached New Orleans, adding pressure on levees and seawalls. Calls to restore these ecological systems gained support from Congress and the Army Corps of Engineers. Today, the Corps has a team of nearly two hundred scientists, engineers, and resource managers, who are developing guidelines for the task. In the past


PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

The New Yorker Crossword Puzzle



1. Plot device sometimes used in thrillers.
2. Bad stuff to microwave.
3. N.Y.C. club said to have catalyzed the punk movement.
4. Apt to snoop.

Find a new crossword every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and a cryptic every Sunday, at newyorker.com/crossword

THE NEW YORKER

dozen or so years, they have done small-scale wetland restoration in Lower Township, New Jersey; on beaches and dunes in Encinitas, California; and at Shoalwater Bay, in Washington. But, for Orff, the Corps's work at Plumb Beach was particularly significant.

On the day I visited, the forecast was baffling: frigid conditions at the start of the day, howling winds later in the morning, and, by afternoon, record-high temperatures. The beach was desolate, with a lone dog walker, a young couple snuggling, and a long line of flowers that local residents had left near the water, seemingly as some kind of religious offering. The beach was sheltered by sloping dunes, covered in thick grasses and plants.

It hadn't always been that way. When a powerful storm hit Plumb Beach in 2009, Orff explained, "this was basically flat landscape, and the bay came close to washing away the Belt Parkway." The Corps built a beach berm, two jetties made of large rocks, and a substantial breakwater, to thicken the edge of the land and to shield developed areas inland from future storms.

In 2012, soon after the government had completed the first phase of the project—building the berm, with more than a hundred thousand cubic yards of sand from harbor-dredging work—Superstorm Sandy hit. Orff was living in Forest Hills at the time, with her husband and two young children. "Like most New Yorkers, I was watching the storm in real time," she remembered. "It was like a comet on a direct path to New York and New Jersey. But I don't think a lot of people here were thinking about the risk of mass deaths or major infrastructure failures. I was mainly concerned about trees falling on our house." She experienced nothing worse than a brief power loss, and woke up the next day feeling relieved—until she realized the extent of the damage throughout the city. The East River had rushed into a Con Edison substation, plunging a quarter of a million households into darkness. Scores of large apartment buildings were inundated. "The tunnels had turned into rivers," she said. "People were wading through the streets of Chelsea. And there were many deaths in Staten Island, including the Dresch family, in Tottenville, whose house got torn off its foundations by the waves. The father and daughter drowned in that water. Their story is burned in my memory."

In Plumb Beach, however, the berm held, blocking the storm surge and largely protecting the Belt Parkway, along with the people directly behind it. For Orff, the performance of the nature-based infrastructure during Sandy was revelatory. It suggested that a scaled-up version of Oyster-Tecture could be immediately useful—not for provoking discussion but for preserving communities along the coast.

As vulnerable as New York was, Orff knew that other population centers were still more so. Back in 2010, after the BP spill dumped nearly five million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico and its neighboring waterways and wetlands, Orff made her first visit to the Lower Mississippi Valley, the nation's largest floodplain, to begin a collaborative project with the photographer Richard Misrach. (It turned into the book "Petrochemical America.") She wanted to see the Mississippi Flyway, where nearly half of North America's waterfowl and sixty per cent of U.S. bird species migrate or winter, and where scores of fish and shellfish species make their home. Orff immediately took to the region, and SCAPE now runs a busy office in New Orleans. The entire city sits on one of Orff's "edges"—a site of extraordinary natural peril and promise.

On a hot, humid morning in late spring, I joined Orff and her collaborator David Muth, who directs the National Wildlife Federation's Gulf Program, on a skiff at the Pointe à la Hache Boat Harbor, elevation seven feet. We were about an hour's drive south of New Orleans. Our captain, Richie Blink, grew up shrimping on the bayous of the Mississippi River Delta; he now represents his district in the parish government, runs an ecotourism business, and, in his spare time, plants as many bald-cypress and willow trees as he can. "I've done about twenty-five thousand so far," he told me. "But we're gonna need a whole lot more."

Trees, as Blink sees it, are essential green infrastructure for shoring up one of the world's most fragile landscapes—what locals call the Bird's Foot. It's a strip of small islands, narrow canals, and murky wetlands that juts out from the mouth of the Mississippi River and extends Louisiana into the ocean; from above, the spindly stretches of land look like a young root system or, indeed, the delicate footprint of a bird. In recent decades, the foot has been retracting, with land disappearing into the sea at the staggering pace of a football field's worth every hundred minutes. If current trends continue, the remaining four-thousand-square-mile coastal area will become open water in about fifty years, leaving New Orleans and the towns around it even more vulnerable to catastrophic flooding. The land loss is not just a matter of rising sea levels; it's also driven by the way we've pumped water, oil, and gas from the ground, causing the terrain to sink, and by the way we've lined the banks of the Mississippi River with hard, flat construction material—including more than two thousand miles of federal levees. Because these levees confine the flow of the river, they increase its speed; instead of depositing sediment in marshlands along the way, the current sends it past the delta and its historic floodplain, into the Gulf of Mexico.

Today, though, Orff had been brought out on the water by a positive development. A few years earlier, new crevasses had formed in the riverbanks that hold the Mississippi River in place, and began slowing the flow of sediment out to sea. The backwaters were filling up with soil again. Gradually, but wondrously, new land was forming.

Although those crevasses were accidental, they also provided proof of principle. This year, Muth and Orff have lent their support to the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion, a $1.5-billion plan to tear open a great hole in the levee that lines the Mississippi River in lower Plaquemines Parish, sending some seventy-five thousand cubic feet of water and sediment per second into the West Bank wetlands.

"It's the best chance we have to restore and protect the coast before it drowns

forever," Muth told me. "We have funding for it, from the BP settlement, and about seventy per cent of the state supports it."

The main holdout is the fishing industry, for which brackish seawater breeds abundance, while the arrival of fresh river water is hostile to most shrimp and other valuable saltwater harvests. The proposal, scheduled for permitting next April, includes more than three hundred million dollars to compensate communities that suffer losses from the diversion.

"I understand why some people are worried about changes," Orff said. "But change is coming no matter what happens, and this is the way we can help."

Blink, whose round, youthful face was protected by a fraying baseball cap, steered the small, seafoam-green boat through a maze of tree-lined channels and canals. Every few minutes, Muth spotted a bird ("painted bunting!" "prothonotary warbler!" "roseate spoonbill!"), an alligator, feral cows, or, on one occasion, a pair of goats. Blink pulled the skiff up along a patch of earth that had surfaced recently, formed by sediment that would formerly have been swept out to sea. It was already thick with vegetation.

"Baby land!" Orff exclaimed, reaching her hand out to touch it from the bow.

"Careful," Muth said. "They call it cut-grass for a reason."

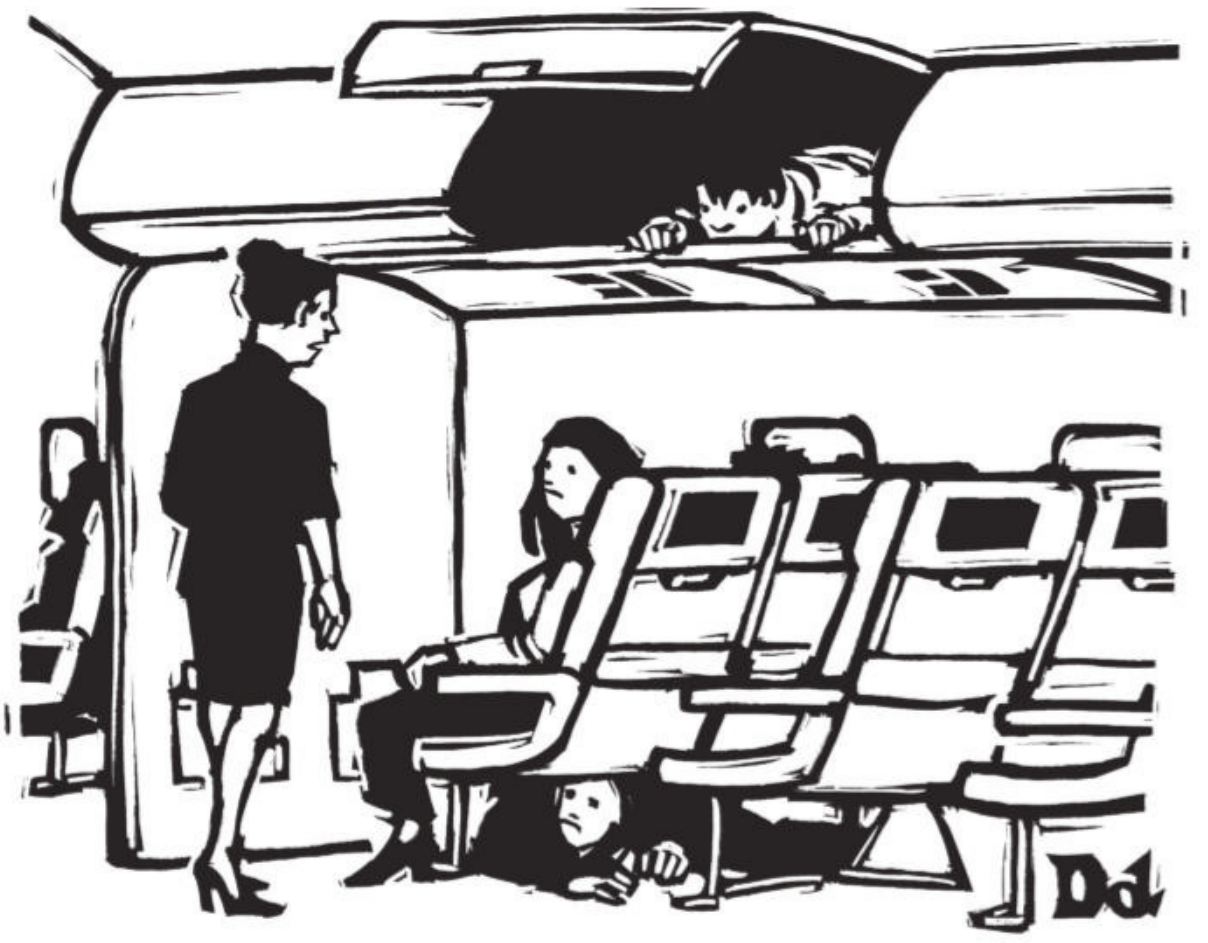
Orff, in orange Crocs and gray joggers, asked if it was safe to walk on.

"Sure," Blink responded. "Just look out for cottonmouths. They're all over this place."

Unfazed, Orff swung her legs out and stepped onto the soft, mucky terrain.

"Heron prints!" she called out. "And tiny willows."

Minutes later, she climbed back on board, beaming. "You may think this is silly," she said, "but I find it almost prehistoric here. There's something dangerous in the air, but also something overwhelmingly beautiful. You can feel the earth being born again."



*"Your anxiety should fit either under the seat or in the overhead compartment."*

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Mother Nature's designs for the planet did not need to withstand any legal or scientific scrutiny. Orff's plans must withstand both, and Living Breakwaters, in particular, had to provide evidence that it would function as intended in order to secure its funding. Using a supercomputer that digitally modelled what happened during Superstorm Sandy, the SCAPE team was able to fine-tune its design by testing different configurations of reefs and breakwaters: Where should they be built? How many should there be? Two potentially conflicting goals had to be balanced—to weaken waves but also to prevent beach erosion. "If you slow the waves too much, you wind up starving the beach," said Joseph Marrone, who works for Arcadis, a global engineering corporation known for large-scale water-management projects, and whose expertise Orff enlisted for Living Breakwaters.

But New York State funders weren't content with digital simulations; they insisted that the project be tested with more extensive hydrodynamic wave modelling, using actual water. And for good reason. The Princeton engineering scholar Guy Nordenson cautioned me, "The dynamics in coastal ecosystems are truly complex, and although we have exciting ideas about how to protect them they're not fully validated yet. It's not like the science on what happens to tall buildings in earthquakes or windstorms. The people putting those up don't just trust computer simulations. They put structures on shake tables or in wind tunnels and test them, physically."

In 2017, Living Breakwaters was finally subjected to physical, three-dimensional testing. The trials took place at a Canadian facility the size of an Olympic swimming complex, and the event had the nervous energy of a high-stakes sports competition. An exact model of the Breakwaters project had been built inside a long, narrow flume, at a one-to-twenty scale: each rock and concrete structure was painted a different color, so that observers would be able to easily identify which were unmoored during the simulation, and which held strong. The exact contours of the Raritan Bay floor had been replicated, too; even small variations could change the movement of the waves against the model shorelines. Probes were prepared to monitor wave energy and speed; "damage cams" were mounted at regular intervals.

Then members of the SCAPE team took their positions on a catwalk above the model and, with the click of a button, the tranquil pool began its transformation into a tempest. For a moment, the waves moved slowly. "It sounded

like being on a lakeshore," Brad Howe, a SCAPE designer, said. "We could hear the water lapping up on the rocks." Moments later, everything intensified, the tension in the room heightening along with the waves. "We had never tested the reef streets in a real wave environment, and we didn't know exactly what would happen," Howe went on. "Years of design work went into this. What if all those colored stones that we'd set in specific places for the breakwater wound up looking like a pile of spilled jelly beans?"

They ran two simulations, and the breakwaters performed superbly: no jelly-bean effect in the water, no inundation of the shore. Still, a few surprises turned up. Some tidal-pool units underperformed, and SCAPE decided to move them; the spacing between a few of the concrete blocks was adjusted, too. A third test, performed in a basin the size of half a soccer field, lasted several hours, and the results were even better than the team had expected. "When the tests ended, they drained the water out of the pool and I remember being, like, 'Oh, thank God, nothing moved!'" Pippa Brashear said. Orff's team left Canada feeling even more confident about the over-all design of Living Breakwaters—and about the likelihood that it would actually be built.

Later this summer, after seven years of environmental reviews and design refinements, the first in a series of barges loaded with armor stone and rock from a quarry in upstate New York will travel down the Hudson River and anchor off the coast of Tottenville, where marine contractors will begin installing Living Breakwaters. In total, those barges will be bringing a hundred and twenty-three thousand tons of quarried material. In a year or two, after the heaviest elements of the system have settled into Raritan Bay, a crew from the Billion Oyster Project will bring spat-on-shell oysters affixed to ecologically enhanced concrete units—mollusk habitats of various dimensions—to the landward side of the breakwater. The fantastic, "slightly hokey" idea that Orff first pitched at MOMA more than a decade ago will spring to life. When it's completed, which is expected to happen in 2024, it will be Orff's largest attempt to mend the landscape. In fact, it will be among the most extensive nature-based infrastructure systems in urban America.

And its timing finally seems right. In July, the Senate voted to advance a trillion-dollar bipartisan infrastructure plan that includes forty-seven billion dollars for "resilience." This is a fashionable but fungible term, and can mean anything from community-education projects (which, skeptics say, cynically transfer responsibility from government agencies to ordinary people), to levees, parks, and trees. Critics worry that, without a clear strategy, these investments will be ad hoc and short-sighted, driven by defense contractors and municipal politicians pitching conventional projects, such as seawalls and floodgates, rather than by the new generation of engineers, climate scientists, and designers who, like Orff, want to revitalize ecosystems and let nature do its work. Still, demand for new, cost-effective, and sustainable models—Orff's specialty—is high.

Orff is pressing ahead with new projects meant to address the overlapping crises of global warming, racial equity, and political polarization. In Memphis, she's collaborating with the architect Jeanne Gang and the artist Theaster Gates on Tom Lee Park (named for a Black man who, in 1925, helped save some thirty people from drowning after a steamer overturned in the Mississippi River). It's a space that aims to bring together communities in a segregated city, where many Black residents lack access to parklands. In Atlanta, she's leading a "participatory design" process for remaking the Chattahoochee RiverLands, a hundred-and-twenty-five-mile trail that will link urban, suburban, and rural Georgia—access will be just a short bike ride away from Atlanta. "We all know how divided the state is," she said. "My question is, Can we do with landscape what we can't do with political ideology or the Internet? Can we mend things, ecologically, and also repair the social world?"

At the same time, she's keeping a close eye on existing projects. (SCAPE has almost doubled its staffing in the past several years.) When Orff and I visited the Gowanus Canal during a stage of its Superfund cleansing, I noticed expensive real-estate developments featuring beautifully landscaped promenades along the canal, and fashionable bars and restaurants with prime water views. "We're still a long, long way from eating oysters grown in the Gowanus," Orff said. "But this used to be a sewage stream. Look how far we've come."

Recently, Orff and I met up in Tottenville, the town where Sandy swept George and Angela Dresch from their home. Two centuries ago, when Staten Island was farmland dotted with fishing shacks and small villages rather than an urban borough connected to Brooklyn by a highway and a suspension bridge, the community was organized around oysters. The beaches were long and expansive, the waterways shallow and slow. The South Shore was hit directly by the storms that came in off the Atlantic, but heavy reefs and wetlands buffered the coastline.

That afternoon, as we walked along the beach, Orff paused every few minutes to identify worrisome signs. There was a dead groundhog, lying face up in the sand; drainage pipes, once buried, had been unearthed by coastal erosion; tattered sandbags were evidence of previous makeshift flood-prevention efforts. Living Breakwaters, Orff expects, will offer not just natural protection but lasting restoration: in a few years, walking down the beach, she hopes to see a newly vital social landscape, with kayakers in the tamed water and bustling kiosks by the beach.

"I think of this as a blue-green infrastructure," Orff said of the waterfront. "It's engineered, but it's not a traditional engineering project. We're in a moment of crisis, and it's not enough to just make beautiful landscapes. We have to fix them, too."

She led me along the shoreline, where the waves rolled in slowly, and with each step our shoes sank deeper into the sand. The beach was calm and pleasant, the mood serene. But these days, as the climate changes and images circulate of catastrophic flooding—this summer, so far, in Germany, China, Ghana, Japan, and various places in the U.S.—there is always something ominous at the water's edge. Someday the storm winds will pick up again, and the ocean will come back for the land. There's another test coming; the only question is when. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

# LEFT BEHIND

BY ZOE PEARL

Lately, I've been starting to feel as though my friends are so much farther ahead of me in life. Every week, someone gets engaged, or announces a pregnancy, or complains of having a slimy alien parasite crawl down her throat, attach itself to her brain stem, and take over her body as part of a wide-scale invasion. Meanwhile, I'm still going on first dates!

It seems like just yesterday that we were all carefree twentysomethings with entry-level jobs, kissing strangers in bars at 2 A.M. But now my friends all have responsibilities, mortgages to pay, or a planet to overrun and strip of its natural resources until Earth is a lifeless husk.

I see my friends a lot more infrequently than I used to—everyone's so busy now, with work and the aforementioned alien invasion and all. When we do get together, it's a lot harder to relate. The only thing my friends want to talk about is their kids—at least, that's what I assume they're talking about. It's hard to tell, since they mostly communicate telepathically via alien hive mind. Talk about feeling left out of the group chat!

Don't get me wrong. I'm happy for my friends. I want what they have. Every time I see one of them showing off a new baby bump or spewing black bile from her eyeballs as the alien parasite sucks nutrients from its human host, I ask myself, When's it going to be my turn? But, alas, my body has repeatedly rejected the alien parasite, for reasons unknown. And I'm still going on first dates!

Social media hasn't helped. How do I stop comparing myself with others when their lives look so amazing? All the luxurious vacations and doting partners. My old roommate, Harper, posted about a big promotion at work: she got to infiltrate an emergency summit at Camp David, where the parasite controlling her body separated itself and infected twenty-nine world leaders. And all I could do was comment, "You go, #girlboss!," while sending out yet another job application.

I know life isn't linear, and I shouldn't compare my path with anyone else's. Some of my friends may get divorced, lose their jobs, or be used as a human shield in an alien counterstrike to protect the Hive Queen. We're just in different places in our lives.

At the end of the day, no matter where we are in our journeys, I know that my friends love me. Even as they strap me to an examination table and prepare to vivisect me and harvest my organs, and I scream, "Harper, I know you're still in there! It's me! Don't do this!," causing a half second's hesitation, just long enough for me to break free from my restraints, jab a pipe through Harper's abdomen, and escape alien captivity.

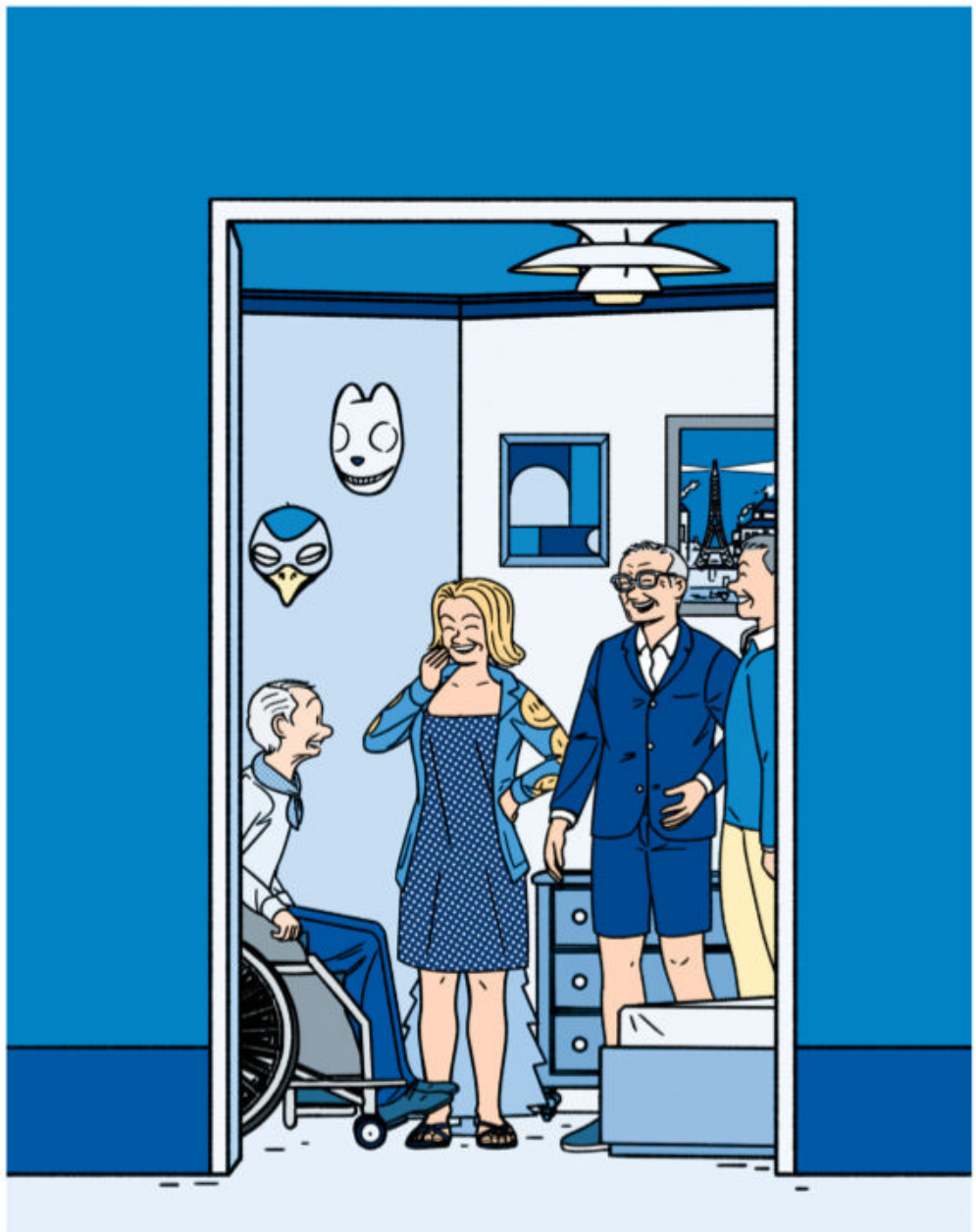
So, for now, I'm just going to focus on myself, maybe travel or take a pottery class, really use the time I have out here in the woods alone, hiding from the invaders, for some self-discovery. Because someday I might just meet one of the few other human survivors, and as we lock eyes, knowing that we may well be the last two of our species, I'll know that I've found my person, and see that the long journey was all worth it! ♦

PERSONAL HISTORY

# HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

*My father as a new man.*

BY DAVID SEDARIS



Something about a car running over a policeman and a second officer being injured. This is my assessment of a news story broadcast on the television in my father's room at Springmoor, the retirement community where he's spent the past three years in the assisted-living section. It is early April, three days before his ninety-eighth birthday, and Amy, Hugh, and I have just flown to Raleigh from New York. The plan is to hang out for a while, and then drive to the Sea Section, our house on Emerald Isle.

Dad is in his wheelchair, dressed and groomed for our visit. Hair combed. Real shoes on his feet. A red bandanna tied around his neck "Well, hey!" he calls as we walk in, an old turtle raising his head toward the sun. "Gosh, it's good to see you kids!"

As Amy and I move in to embrace him, Hugh wonders if we could possibly turn off the TV. "Well, sure," my father, still smothered in grown children, says. "I don't even know why it's on, to tell you the truth."

Hugh takes the remote off the bedside table, and, after he's killed the television, Amy asks if he can figure out the radio. As a non-blood relative, that seems to be his role during our visits to Springmoor—the servant.

"Find us a jazz station," I tell him.

"There we go!" my father says. "That would be fantastic!"

Neither Amy nor I care about the news anymore, at least the political news. I am vaguely aware that Andrew Cuomo has fallen out of favor, and that people who aren't me will be receiving government checks for some reason or other, but that's about it. When Trump was President, I started every morning by reading the New York *Times*, followed by the Washington *Post*, and would track both papers' Web sites regularly throughout the day. To be less than vigilant was to fall behind, and was there anything worse than not knowing what Stephen Miller just said about Wisconsin? My friend Mike likened this constant monitoring to having a second job. It was exhausting, and the moment that Joe Biden was sworn into office I let it all go. When the new President speaks, I feel the way I do on a plane when the pilot announces that after reaching our cruising altitude he will head due north, or take a left at Lake Erie. You don't need to tell me about your job, I always think. Just, you know, do it.

It's so freeing, no longer listening to political podcasts—no longer being enraged. I still browse the dailies, skipping over the stories about COVID, as I am finished with all that as well. The moment I got my first vaccine shot, I started thinking of the coronavirus the way I think of scurvy—something from a long-ago time that can no longer hurt me, something that mainly pirates get. "Yes," the papers would say. "But what if there's a powerful surge this summer? This Christmas? A year from now? What if our next pandemic is worse than this one? What if it kills all the fish and cattle and poultry and affects our skin's reaction to sunlight? What if it forces everyone to live underground and subsist on earthworms?"

My father tested positive for the coronavirus shortly before Christmas, at around the time he started wheeling himself to the front desk at Springmoor and asking if anyone there had seen his mother. He hasn't got Alzheimer's, nothing that severe. Rather, he's what used to be called "soft in the head." Gaga. It's a relatively new development—aside from the time he was discovered on the floor in his house, dehydrated and suffering from a bladder infection, he's always been not just lucid but commanding.

"If it happens several times in one



ILLUSTRATION BY JANNE IIVONEN

day, someone on the staff will contact me," Lisa told us over the phone. "Then I'll call and say, 'Dad, your mother died in 1976 and is buried beside your father at the Rural Cemetery in Cortland, New York. You bought the plot next to theirs, so that's where you'll be going."

There had to be a gentler way to say this, but I'm not sure the news really registered, especially after his diagnosis, when he was at his weakest. Every time the phone rang, I expected to hear that he had died. But my father recovered. "*Without* being hospitalized," I told my cousin Nancy. "*Plus* he lost ten pounds!" Not that he needed to.

When I ask him what it was like to have COVID, he offers a false-sounding laugh. He does that a lot now—"Ha-ha!" I suspect it's a cover for his failed hearing, that rather than saying "Could you repeat that?" he figures it's a safe bet that you are delivering a joke of some sort. "Hugh and I just went to Louisville to see his mother," I'd said to my dad the last time we were at Springmoor. "Joan is ninety now, and has blood cancer."

"Ha-ha!"

That was on Halloween. Socially distanced visits were allowed in the outdoor courtyard of my father's building, and after our allotted thirty minutes were up an aide disguised as a witch wheeled him back to his room.

"The costumes must do a real number on some of the residents," Amy said as we walked with Hugh to our rental car. "'And then a vampire came to take my blood pressure!' 'Sure he did, Grandpa.'"

A few days after we saw him, Springmoor was locked down. No one allowed in or out except staff, and all the residents confined to their rooms. The policy wasn't reversed until six months later. That's when we flew down from New York.

"You look great, Dad," Amy says in a voice that is almost but not quite a shout. Hugh has finally found a jazz station, and managed to tune out the static.

"Well, I'm a hundred years old!" my father tells us in his whisper of a voice. "Can you beat that?"

"Ninety-eight," Amy corrects him. "And not quite yet. Your birthday is on Monday and today is only Friday."

"A hundred years old!"

This isn't softheadedness but a lifelong tendency to exaggerate. "What the hell are you still doing up?" he'd demand of my brother, my sisters, and me every school night of our lives. "It's one o'clock in the morning!"

We'd point to the nearest clock. "Actually, it's nine-forty-five."

"It's one o'clock, dammit!"

"Then how come 'Barnaby Jones' is still on?"

"Go to bed!"

Amy has brought my father some chocolate turtles, and as he watches she opens the box, then hands him one. "Your room looks good, too. It's clean, and your stuff fits in real well."

"It's not bad, is it?" my father says. "You might not believe it, but this is the exact same square footage as the house, the basement of it, anyway."

This is simply not true, but we let it go.

"There are a few things I'd like to get rid of, but as a whole it's not too cluttered," he observes, turning a jerky semicircle in his wheelchair. "That was a real problem for me once upon a time. I used to be the *king* of clutter."

Were I his decorator, I'd definitely lose the Christmas tree that stands collecting dust on the console beneath his TV. It is a foot and a half tall, and made of plastic. Naked it might be O.K., but its baubles—which are the size of juniper berries, and gaudy—depress me. Beside it is a stack of cards sent by people I don't know, or whose names I only vaguely recognize from the Greek Orthodox church. "Has the priest been by?" I ask.

My father nods. "A few times. He doesn't much like me, though."

Amy takes a seat on the bed. "Why not?"

He laughs. "Let's just say I'm not as generous as I could be!"

My father is thinner than the last time I saw him, but somehow his face is fuller. Something else is different as well, but I can't put my finger on it. It's like when celebrities get face-lifts. I can see they've undergone a change, but I can never tell exactly what it is. Examining a photo on some gossip site, I'll wonder, What *is* it? The eyes? The mouth? "You don't look the same, for some reason," I say to my father.

He turns from me to Hugh, and then to Amy. "Well, *you* do. All of you do. The only one who's changed is me. I'm a hundred years old!"

"Ninety-eight on Monday," Amy says.

"A hundred years old!"

"Have you had your COVID shots?" I ask, knowing that he has.

"I'm not sure," he says. "Maybe."

I pick up a salmon carved out of something hard and porous, an antler maybe. It used to be in his basement office at the house. This was before he turned every room into an office, and buried himself in envelopes. "Hugh and I and Amy, we've each had one shot."

My father laughs. "Well, good for you. I haven't had a drink since I got here."

At first, I take this as a non sequitur. Then I realize that by "shot" he thinks we mean a shot of alcohol.

"They don't let you drink?" I ask.

"Oh, you can have a little, I guess, but it's not easy. You have to order it in advance, like medicine, and you only get a thimbleful," he says.

"What do you think would happen if you had a screwdriver?" Amy asks.

He thinks for a moment. "I'd probably get an erection!"

I really like this new version of my father. He's charming and positive and full of surprises. "One of the things I like about us as a family is that we laugh," he says. "Always! As far back as I can remember. It's what we're known for!"

Most of that laughter had been directed at him, and erupted the moment he left whichever room the rest of us were occupying. A Merriment Club member he definitely was not. But I like that he remembers things differently. "My offbeat sense of humor has won me a lot of friends," he tells us. "A hell of a lot."

"Friends *here*?" Amy asks.

"All over the damn place! Even the kids I used to roller-skate with, they come by sometimes."

He opens his hand and we see that the chocolate turtle he's been holding has melted. Amy fetches some toilet paper from the bathroom, and he sits passively as she cleans him off. "What is it you're wearing?" he asks.

She takes a step back so that he can

see her black-and-white polka-dot shift. Over it is a Japanese denim shirt with coaster-size smiley-face patches running up and down the sleeves. Her friend Paul recently told her that she dresses like a fat person, the defiant sort who thinks, You want to laugh, I'll give you something to laugh at.

"Interesting," my father says.

Whenever the conversation stalls, he turns it back to one of several subjects, the first being the inexpensive guitar he bought me when I was a child and insisted on bringing with him to Springmoor, this after it had sat neglected in a closet for more than half a century. "I'm trying to teach myself to play, but I just can't find the time to practice."

It seems to me that all he has is time. What else is there to do here, shut up in his room? "I've got to make some music!" he says. As he shakes his fist in frustration, I notice that he still has some chocolate beneath his thumbnail.

"You're too hard on yourself, Dad," Amy tells him. "You don't have to do everything, you know. Maybe it's O.K. to just relax for a change."

His second go-to topic is the art work hanging on his walls, most of it bought by him and my mother in the seventies and early eighties. "Now, this," he says, pointing to a framed serigraph over his bed, "this I could look at every minute of the day." It is a sentimental, naïf-style street scene of Paris in the early twentieth century—a veritable checklist of tropes and clichés by Michel Delacroix, who defines himself as a "painter of dreams and of the poetic past." On the two occasions when my father visited me in the actual Paris, he couldn't leave fast enough. It's only in pictures that he can stand the place. "I've got to write this guy a letter and tell him what his work means to me," he says. "The trick is finding the damn time!"

Two of the paintings in the room are by my father, done in the late sixties. His art phase came from nowhere, and, during its brief, six-month span, he was prolific, churning out twenty or so canvases, most done with a palette knife rather than a brush. All of them are copies—of van Gogh, of Zurbarán and Picasso. They wouldn't fool anyone, but as children we were awed by his talent. The problem was what to paint, or, in his case, to copy. Some of his choices were questionable—a stagecoach silhouetted against a tangerine-colored sunset comes to mind—but in retrospect they fit right in with the rest of the house. Back in the seventies, we thought of our color scheme as permanently modern. What could replace all that orange and brown and avocado? By the early eighties, it was laughable, but now it's back and we're able to think fondly of our milk-chocolate walls, and the stout wicker burro that used to pout atop the piano, one of our father's acrylic bullfighters seemingly afire on the wall behind it.

When Dad retired from I.B.M., the art work became a greater part of his identity. He *had been* an engineer, but he *was* an art lover. This didn't extend to museums—who needed them when he had his living room! "I'm an actual collector, while David, he's more of an investor," he sniffed to my friend Lee after I bought a Picasso that was painted by Picasso and did not look—dare I say it—like cake frosting.

Then, there's my father's collection of masks, some of which are hanging high on the wall over his bed. The best of them were made by tribes in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska, bought on fly-fishing trips. A few others are African or Mexican. They used to leer down from the panelled wall above the staircase in our house, and it is odd but not unpleasant to see them in this new setting. When walking along the hall at Springmoor, I always peek into the other rooms, none of which resemble my father's. There are the neighbors, and then there is Dad—Dad who is listening to Eric Dolphy and holding the guitar he has never in his life played. "You know, four of the strings on this thing came off my old violin, the one I had in grade school!"

No, they didn't, but who cares. Before his mind started failing, my father consumed a steady diet of Fox News and conservative talk radio that kept him at a constant boiling point. "Who's that Black guy?" he demanded in 2014. The family was together at the Sea Section, and we were talking about Michael Brown, who'd been shot and killed three months earlier, in Ferguson, Missouri.

"What Black guy?" I asked.

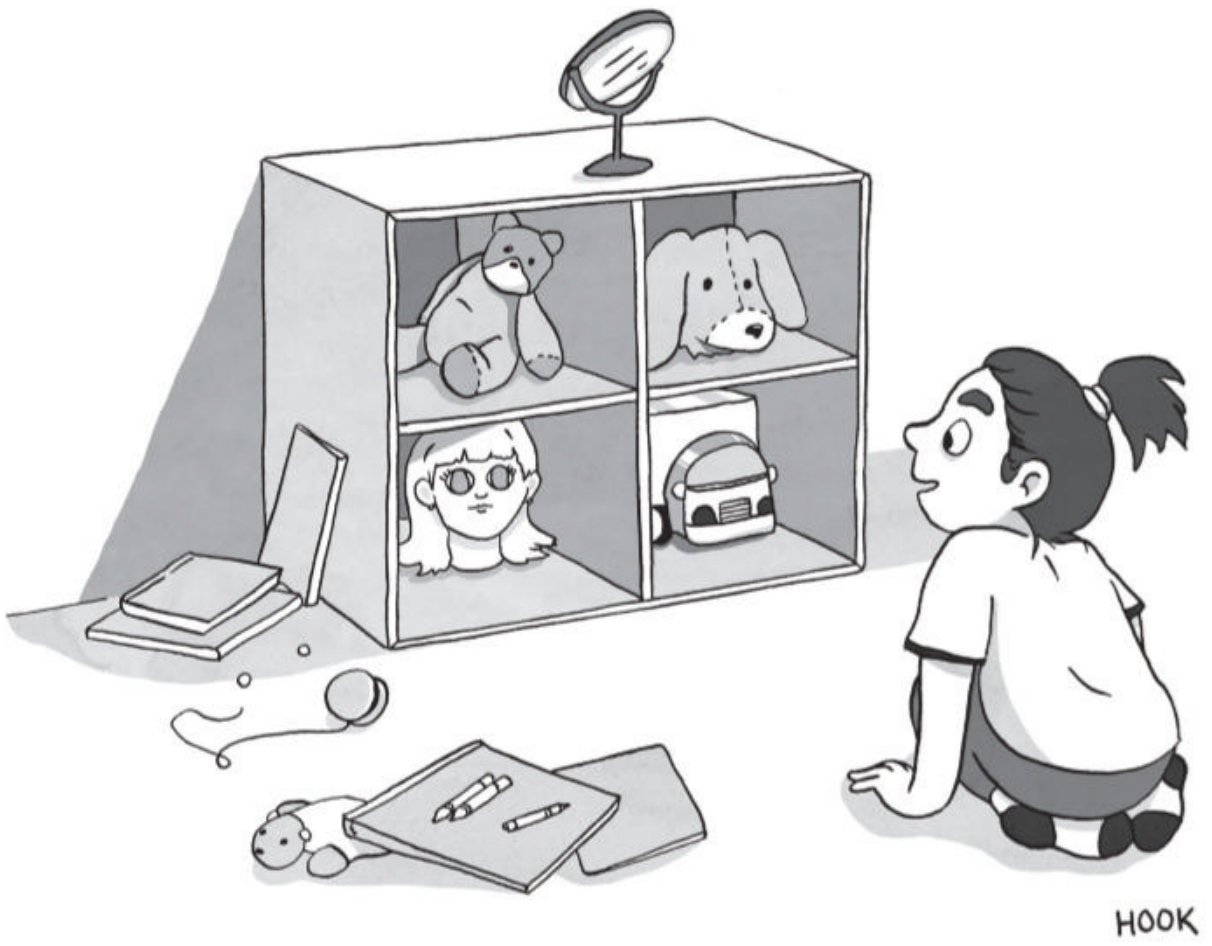
"Oh, you know the one."

"Bill Cosby?" Amy offered.

"Gil Scott-Heron?" I asked.

"Stevie Wonder?" Gretchen called from the living room.

Lisa said, "Denzel Washington?"




*"Well, it was so good to see everyone! What do you all have planned for the rest of the afternoon?"*

"You know who I mean," Dad said. "He's got that son."

"Jesse Jackson?"

"He's the one. Always stirring up trouble."

Now, though, our father has taken a few steps back, and, like me, seems all the better for it. "How did you feel when Biden was elected?" I ask. The question is a violation of the pact Amy and I made before arriving: Don't stir him up, don't confuse him.

"Actually," he says, "I was for that other one."

Hugh says, "Trump."

My father nods. "That's right. I believed what he was telling us. And, well, it seems that I was wrong. That guy was bad news."

Never did I expect to hear this: Trump was "bad" *and* "I was wrong"—practically in the same breath. "Who are you?" I want to ask the gentle gnome in front of me. "And what have you done with Lou Sedaris?"

"So Biden . . . I guess he's O.K.," my father says, looking, with his red bandanna, like the leftist he never was.

Amy, Hugh, and I are just recovering when an aide walks in and announces that it is five o'clock, time for dinner. "I'll wheel Mr. Sedaris down . . ."

"Oh, we'll take him," Amy says.

"Take what?" my father asks, confused by the sudden activity.

I push him out the door and past a TV that's showing the news. Again the incident at the Capitol. Some people hit by a car, someone shot.

"This is like that old joke," I say to my father as we near the dining room. "A man bitches to his wife, 'You're always pushing me around and talking behind my back.' And she says, 'What do you expect—you're in a wheelchair!'"

My father roars, "Ha!"

The dining room, which fits maybe six tables, is full when we arrive. Women greatly outnumber men, and no one except for us and the staff is ambulatory. The air should smell like food, but instead it smells like Amy, her perfume. She wears so much that it manages to both precede her *and* trail behind her, lingering long after she's moved on. That said, I like it. A combination of five different scents, none of which is flowery or particularly sweet, it leaves her smelling like a strange cookie, maybe one with pencil shavings in it.

*"She loves me not."*

• •

"Eat, why don't you," my father says.

I am conscious of everyone watching. *Visitors! Lou has visitors!*

While Amy and Hugh talk to an aide, my father looks up and pats the space beside him at the table. "Stay for dinner. They can make you anything you want."

I can't remember my mother's last words to me. They were delivered over the phone at the end of a casual conversation. "See you," she might have said, or "I'll call back in a few days." And in the thoughtless way you respond when you think you have forever with the person on the other end of the line, I likely said, "O.K."

My father's last words to me, spoken in the too-hot, too-bright dining room at his assisted-living facility three days before his ninety-eighth birthday, are "Don't go yet. Don't leave."

My last words to him—and I think they are as telling as his, given all we've been through—are "We need to get to the beach before the grocery stores close." They look cold on paper, and when he dies, a few weeks later, and I *realize* they were the last words I said to him, I will think, Maybe I can warm them up onstage when I read this part out loud. For, rather than thinking of his death, I will be thinking of the story of his death, so much so that after his funeral Amy will ask, "Did I see you taking notes during the service?"

There'll be no surprise in her voice. Rather, it will be the way you might playfully scold a squirrel: "Did you just jump up from the deck and completely empty that bird feeder?"

The squirrel and me—it's in our nature, though maybe not forever. For our natures, I have just recently learned from my father, can change. Or maybe they're simply revealed, and the dear, cheerful man I saw that afternoon at Springmoor was there all along, smothered in layers of rage and impatience that burned away as he blazed into the homestretch.

For the moment, though, leaving the dining room in the company of Hugh and Amy, I am thinking that we'll have to do this again, and soon. Fly to Raleigh. See Dad. Maybe have a picnic in his room. I'll talk Gretchen into coming. Lisa will be there, too, and our brother, Paul. All of us together and laughing so loudly we'll be asked by some aide to close the door. Because, really, isn't that what we're known for? ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

# THE BIG MONEY BEHIND THE BIG LIE

*Trump's attacks on democracy are being promoted by rich conservatives determined to win at all costs.*

BY JANE MAYER

It was tempting to dismiss the show unfolding inside the Dream City Church in Phoenix, Arizona, as an unintended comedy. One night in June, a few hundred people gathered for the première of "The Deep Rig," a film financed by the multimillionaire founder of Overstock.com, Patrick Byrne, who is a vocal supporter of former President Donald Trump. Styled as a documentary, the movie asserts that the 2020 Presidential election was stolen by supporters of Joe Biden, including by Antifa members who chatted about their sinister plot on a conference call. The evening's program featured live appearances by Byrne and a local QAnon conspiracist, BabyQ, who claimed to be receiving messages from his future self. They were joined by the film's director, who had previously made an exposé contending that the real perpetrators of 9/11 were space aliens.

But the event, for all its absurdities, had a dark surprise: "The Deep Rig" repeatedly quotes Doug Logan, the C.E.O. of Cyber Ninjas, a Florida-based company that consults with clients on software security. In a voice-over, Logan warns, "If we don't fix our election integrity now, we may no longer have a democracy." He also suggests, without evidence, that members of the "deep state," such as C.I.A. agents, have intentionally spread disinformation about the election. Although it wasn't the first time that Logan had promoted what has come to be known as the Big Lie about the 2020 election—he had tweeted unsubstantiated claims that Trump had been victimized by voter fraud—the film offered stark confirmation of Logan's entanglement in fringe conspiracies. Nevertheless, the president of the Arizona State Senate, Karen Fann, has put Logan's company in charge of a "forensic audit"—an ongoing review of the state's 2020 Presidential vote. It's an unprecedented undertaking, with potentially explosive consequences for American democracy.

Approximately 2.1 million Presidential votes were cast in Maricopa County, which includes Phoenix and accounts for most of the state's population. In recent years, younger voters and people of color have turned the county's electorate increasingly Democratic—a shift that helped Biden win the traditionally conservative state, by 10,457 votes. Since the election, the county has become a focus of ire for Trump and his supporters. By March, when Logan's company was hired, the county had already undergone four election audits, all of which upheld the outcome. Governor Doug Ducey, a Republican and a former Trump ally, had certified Biden's victory. But Trump's core supporters were not assuaged.

As soon as the Fox News Decision Desk called the state for Biden, at 11:20 P.M. on November 3rd, Trump demanded that the network "reverse this!" When Fox held firm, he declared, "This is a major fraud." By the time of the "Deep Rig" première, the standoff had dragged on for more than half a year. The Cyber Ninjas audit was supposed to conclude in May, but at the company's request Fann has repeatedly extended it. On July 28th, the auditors completed a hand recount, but they are still demanding access to the computer routers used by Maricopa County and also want to scrutinize images of mail-in-ballot envelopes. The U.S. Department of Justice has warned that "private actors who have neither experience nor expertise in handling" ballots could face prosecution for failing to follow federal audit rules. Trump, meanwhile, has fixated on Arizona's audit, describing it as a step toward his "reinstatement." On July 24th, he appeared in Phoenix for a "Rally to Protect Our Elections," and said, "I am not the one trying to undermine American democracy—I'm the one trying to save American democracy." Predicting that the audit would vindicate him, he rambled angrily for nearly two hours about having been cheated, calling the election "a scam—the greatest crime in history."

In June, I stood in the bleachers at the Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Phoenix, where the audit was taking place, and witnessed people examining carton after carton of paper ballots cast by Arizonans last fall. Some inspectors used microscopes to investigate surreal allegations: that some ballots had been filled out by machines or were Asian counterfeits with telltale bamboo fibres. Other inspectors looked for creases in mail-in ballots, to determine whether they had been legitimately sent in envelopes or—as Trump has alleged—dumped in bulk.

As the audit has unfolded, various violations of professional norms have been observed, including inspectors caught with pens whose ink matched what was used on ballots. One auditor turned out to have been an unsuccessful Republican candidate during the election. As I watched the proceedings, black-vested paid supervisors monitored the process, but their role was cloaked in secrecy. The audit is almost entirely privately funded, and a county judge in Arizona recently ordered the State Senate to disclose who is paying for it. Last week, Cyber Ninjas acknowledged having received $5.7 million in private donations, most of it from nonprofit groups led by Trump allies who live outside Arizona, including Byrne.

I was joined in the bleachers by Ken Bennett, a former Arizona secretary of state and a Republican, whom the State Senate had designated its liaison to the audit. He acknowledged that, if the auditors end up claiming to have found large discrepancies, "that will of course be very inflammatory." Indeed, a recent incendiary claim by the auditors—that

*Bill Gates, a Republican official in Arizona, is appalled by his party's "national effort to delegitimize the election system."*

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHEN ROSS GOLDSTEIN

*"You're dead."*

• •

the vote had tallied about seventy thousand more mail-in ballots than had been postmarked—prompted one Republican state senator to propose a recall of Arizona's electoral votes for Biden. (In fact, the auditors misunderstood what they were counting.) Nevertheless, Bennett defended the audit process: "It's important to prove to both sides that the election was done accurately and fairly. If we lurch from one election to another with almost half the electorate thinking the election was a fraud, it's going to rip our country apart."

Many experts on democratic governance, however, believe that efforts to upend long-settled election practices are what truly threaten to rip the country apart. Chad Campbell, a Democrat who was the minority leader in the Arizona House of Representatives until 2014, when he left to become a consultant in Phoenix, has been shocked by the state's anti-democratic turn. For several years, he sat next to Karen Fann when she was a member of the House, and in his view she's gone from being a traditional Republican lawmaker to being a member of "Trump's cult of personality." He said, "I don't know if she believes it or not, or which would be worse." Arizona, he added, is in the midst of a "nonviolent overthrow in some ways—it's subtle, and not in people's face because it's not happening with weapons. But it's still a complete overthrow of democracy. They're trying to disenfranchise everyone who is not older white guys."

Arizona is hardly the only place where attacks on the electoral process are under way: a well-funded national movement has been exploiting Trump's claims of fraud in order to promote alterations to the way that ballots are cast and counted in forty-nine states, eighteen of which have passed new voting laws in the past six months. Republican-dominated legislatures have also stripped secretaries of state and other independent election officials of their power. The chair of Arizona's Republican Party, Kelli Ward, has referred to the state's audit as a "domino," and has expressed hope that it will inspire similar challenges elsewhere.

Ralph Neas has been involved in voting-rights battles since the nineteen-eighties, when, as a Republican, he served as the executive director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. He has overseen a study of the Arizona audit for the nonpartisan Century Foundation, and he told me that, though the audit is a "farce," it may nonetheless have "extraordinary consequences." He said, "The Maricopa County audit exposes exactly what the Big Lie is all about. If they come up with an analysis that discredits the 2020 election results in Arizona, it will be replicated in other states, furthering more chaos. That will enable new legislation. Millions of Americans could be disenfranchised, helping Donald Trump to be elected again in 2024. That's the bottom line. Maricopa County is the prism through which to view everything. It's not so much about 2020—it's about 2022 and 2024. This is a coördinated national effort to distort not just what happened in 2020 but to regain the House of Representatives and the Presidency."

Richard Hasen, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine, and one of the country's foremost election-law experts, told me, "I'm scared shitless." Referring to the array of new laws passed by Republican state legislatures since the 2020 election, he said, "It's not just about voter suppression. What I'm really worried about is election *subversion*. Election officials are being put in place who will mess with the count."

Arizona's secretary of state, Katie Hobbs, whose office has authority over the administration of elections, told me that the conspiracy-driven audit "looks so comical you have to laugh at it sometimes." But Hobbs, a Democrat, who is running for governor, warned, "It's dangerous. It's feeding the kind of misinformation that led to the January 6th insurrection." QAnon followers have been celebrating the audit as the beginning of a "Great Awakening" that will eject Biden from the White House. She noted, "I've gotten death threats. I've had armed protestors outside my house. Every day, there is a total barrage of social media to our office. We've had to route our phones to voice mail so that no one has to listen to it. It can be really traumatizing. I feel beaten up." She added, "But I'm not going to cave to their tactics—because I think they're laying the groundwork to steal the 2024 elections."

Although the Arizona audit may appear to be the product of local extremists, it has been fed by sophisticated, well-funded national organizations whose boards of directors include some of the country's wealthiest and highest-profile conservatives. Dark-money organizations, sustained by undisclosed donors, have relentlessly promoted the myth that American elections are rife with fraud, and, according to leaked records of their internal deliberations, they have drafted, supported, and in some cases taken credit for state laws that make it harder to vote.

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, a

Democrat from Rhode Island who has tracked the flow of dark money in American politics, told me that a "flotilla of front groups" once focussed on advancing such conservative causes as capturing the courts and opposing abortion have now "more or less shifted to work on the voter-suppression thing." These groups have cast their campaigns as high-minded attempts to maintain "election integrity," but Whitehouse believes that they are in fact tampering with the guardrails of democracy.

One of the movement's leaders is the Heritage Foundation, the prominent conservative think tank in Washington, D.C. It has been working with the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)—a corporate-funded nonprofit that generates model laws for state legislators—on ways to impose new voting restrictions. Among those deep in the fight is Leonard Leo, a chairman of the Federalist Society, the legal organization known for its decades-long campaign to fill the courts with conservative judges. In February, 2020, the Judicial Education Project, a group tied to Leo, quietly rebranded itself as the Honest Elections Project, which subsequently filed briefs at the Supreme Court, and in numerous states, opposing mail-in ballots and other reforms that have made it easier for people to vote.

Another newcomer to the cause is the Election Integrity Project California. And a group called FreedomWorks, which once concentrated on opposing government regulation, is now demanding expanded government regulation of voters, with a project called the National Election Protection Initiative.

These disparate nonprofits have one thing in common: they have all received funding from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. Based in Milwaukee, the private, tax-exempt organization has become an extraordinary force in persuading mainstream Republicans to support radical challenges to election rules—a tactic once relegated to the far right. With an endowment of some eight hundred and fifty million dollars, the foundation funds a network of groups that have been stoking fear about election fraud, in some cases for years. Public records show that, since 2012, the foundation has spent some eighteen million dollars supporting eleven conservative groups involved in election issues.

It might seem improbable that a low-profile family foundation in Wisconsin has assumed a central role in current struggles over American democracy. But the modern conservative movement has depended on leveraging the fortunes of wealthy reactionaries. In 1903, Lynde Bradley, a high-school dropout in Milwaukee, founded what would become the Allen-Bradley company. He was soon joined by his brother Harry, and they got rich by selling electronic instruments such as rheostats. Harry, a John Birch Society founding member, started a small family foundation that initially devoted much of its giving to needy employees and to civic causes in Milwaukee. In 1985, after the brothers' death, their heirs sold the company to the defense contractor Rockwell International, for $1.65 billion, generating an enormous windfall for the foundation. The Bradley Foundation remains small in comparison with such liberal behemoths as the Ford Foundation, but it has become singularly preoccupied with wielding national political influence. It has funded conservative projects ranging from school-choice initiatives to the controversial scholarship of Charles Murray, the co-author of the 1994 book "The Bell Curve," which argues that Blacks are less likely than whites to join the "cognitive elite." And, at least as far back as 2012, it has funded groups challenging voting rights in the name of fighting fraud.

Since the 2020 election, this movement has evolved into a broader and more aggressive assault on democracy. According to some surveys, a third of Americans now believe that Biden was illegitimately elected, and nearly half of Trump supporters agree that Republican legislators should overturn the results in some states that Biden won. Jonathan Rauch, of the Brookings Institution, recently told *The Economist*, "We need to regard what's happening now as epistemic warfare by some Americans on other Americans." Pillars of the conservative establishment, faced with a changing U.S. voter population that threatens their agenda, are exploiting Trump's contempt for norms to devise ways to hold on to power. Senator Whitehouse said of the campaign, "It's a massive covert operation run by a small group of billionaire élites. These are powerful interests with practically unlimited resources who have moved on to manipulating that most precious of American gifts—the vote."

An animating force behind the Bradley Foundation's war on "election fraud" is Cleta Mitchell, a fiercely partisan Republican election lawyer, who joined the organization's board of directors in 2012. Until recently, she was virtually unknown to most Americans. But, on January 3rd, the Washington *Post* exposed the contents of a private phone call, recorded the previous day, during which Trump threatened election officials in Georgia with a "criminal offense" unless they could "find" 11,780 more votes for him—just enough to alter the results. Also on the call was Mitchell, who challenged the officials to provide records proving that dead people hadn't cast votes. The call was widely criticized as a rogue effort to overturn the election, and Foley & Lardner, the Milwaukee-based law firm where Mitchell was a partner, announced that it was "concerned" about her role, and then parted ways with her. Trump's call prompted the district attorney in Fulton County, Georgia, to begin a criminal investigation.

In a series of e-mails and phone calls with me, Mitchell adamantly defended her work with the Trump campaign, and said that in Georgia, where she has centered her efforts, "I don't think we can say with certainty who won." She told me that there were countless election "irregularities," such as voters using post-office boxes as their residences, in violation of state law. "I believe there were more illegal votes cast than the margin of victory," she said. "The only remedy is a new election." Georgia's secretary of state rejected her claims, but Mitchell insists that the decision lacked a rigorous evaluation of the evidence. With her support, diehard conspiracy theorists are still litigating the matter in Fulton County, which includes most of Atlanta. Because they keep demanding that election officials prove a negative—that corruption *didn't* happen—their requests to keep interrogating the results can be repeated almost indefinitely. Despite three independent counts of Georgia's vote, including a hand recount, all of which confirmed Biden's victory, Mitchell argues that "Trump never got his day in court," adding,

"There are a lot of miscarriages of justice I've seen and experienced in my life, and this was one of them."

Mitchell, who is seventy, has warm friendships with people in both parties, and she often appears grandmotherly, in pastel knit suits and reading glasses. But, like Angela Lansbury in "The Manchurian Candidate," to whom she bears a striking resemblance, she should not be underestimated. She began her political career in Oklahoma, as an outspoken Democrat and a champion of the Equal Rights Amendment. She was elected to the state legislature in her twenties, but then lost a bid for lieutenant governor, in 1986. She told me that she subsequently underwent a political conversion: when her stepson squandered the college tuition that she was paying, she turned against the idea of welfare in favor of personal responsibility, and began reading conservative critiques of liberalism. When I first interviewed her for this magazine, in 1996, she told me that "overreaching government regulation is one of the great scandals of our times."

On behalf of Republican candidates and groups, she began to fight limits on campaign spending. She also represented numerous right-wing nonprofits, including the National Rifle Association, whose board she joined in the early two-thousands. A former N.R.A. official recently told the *Guardian* that Mitchell was the "fringe of the fringe," and a Republican voting-rights lawyer said that "she tells clients what they want to hear, regardless of the law or reality."

In our conversations, Mitchell mocked what she called the mainstream media's "narrative" of a "vast right-wing conspiracy to suppress the vote of Black people," and insisted that the fraud problem was significant. "I actually think your readers need to hear from people like me—believe it or not, there are tens of millions of us," she wrote. "We are not crazy. At least not to us. We are intelligent and educated people who are very concerned about the future of America. And we are among the vast majority of Americans who support election-integrity measures." Echoing what has become the right's standard talking point, she declared that her agenda for elections is "to make it harder to cheat."

Mitchell told me that the Democrats used the pandemic as a "great pretext" to "be able to cheat": they caused "administrative chaos" by changing rules about early and absentee voting, and they didn't adequately police fraud. She denied that race had motivated her actions in Georgia. Yet, in an e-mail to me, she said that Democrats are "using black voters as a prop to accomplish their political objectives."

Few experts have found Mitchell's evidence convincing. On November 12, 2020, the Trump Administration's own election authorities declared the Presidential vote to be "the most secure in American history." It is true that in many American elections there are small numbers of questionable ballots. An Associated Press investigation found that, in 2020, a hundred and eighty-two of the 3.4 million ballots cast in Arizona were problematic. Four of the ballots have led to criminal charges. But the consensus among nonpartisan experts is that the amount of fraud, particularly in major races, is negligible. As Phil Keisling, a former secretary of state in Oregon, who pioneered universal voting by mail, has said, "Voters don't cast fraudulent ballots for the same reason counterfeiters don't manufacture pennies—it doesn't pay."

What explains, then, the hardening conviction among Republicans that the 2020 race was stolen? Michael Podhorzer, a senior adviser to the president of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., which invested deeply in expanding Democratic turnout in 2020, suggests that the two parties now have irreconcilable beliefs about whose votes are legitimate. "What blue-state people don't understand about why the Big Lie works," he said, is that it doesn't actually require proof of fraud. "What animates it is the belief that Biden won because votes were cast by some people in this country who others think are not 'real' Americans." This anti-democratic belief has been bolstered by a constellation of established institutions on the right: "white evangelical churches, legislators, media companies, nonprofits, and even now paramilitary groups." Podhorzer noted, "Trump won white America by eight points. He won non-urban areas by over twenty points. He *is* the democratically elected President of white America. It's almost like he represents a nation within a nation."

Alarmism about election fraud in America extends at least as far back as Reconstruction, when white Southerners disenfranchised newly empowered Black voters and politicians by accusing them of corruption. After the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, some white conservatives were frank about their hostility to democracy. Forty years ago, Paul Weyrich, who helped establish the Heritage Foundation and other conservative groups, admitted, "I don't want everybody to vote. . . . As a matter of fact, our leverage in the elections quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down."

Like many conservatives of her generation, Cleta Mitchell was galvanized by the disputed 2000 election, in which George W. Bush and Al Gore battled for weeks over the outcome in Florida. She repeatedly spoke out on behalf of Bush, who won the state by only five hundred and thirty-seven votes. A dispute over recounts ended up at the Supreme Court.

Few people noticed at the time, but in that case, Bush v. Gore, Chief Justice William Rehnquist, along with Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas, hinted at a radical reading of the Constitution that, two decades later, undergirds many of the court challenges on behalf of Trump. In a concurring opinion, the Justices argued that state legislatures have the plenary power to run elections and can even pass laws giving themselves the right to appoint electors. Today, the so-called Independent Legislature Doctrine has informed Trump and the right's attempts to use Republican-dominated state legislatures to overrule the popular will. Nathaniel Persily, an election-law expert at Stanford, told me, "It's giving intellectual respectability to an otherwise insane, anti-democratic argument."

Barack Obama's election in 2008 made plain that the voting-rights wars were fuelled, in no small part, by racial animus. Bigoted conspiracists, including Trump, spent years trying to undermine the result by falsely claiming that Obama wasn't born in America. Birtherism, which attempted to undercut a

landmark election in which the turnout rate among Black voters nearly matched that of whites, was a progenitor of the Big Lie. As Penda Hair, a founder of the Advancement Project, a progressive voting-rights advocacy group, told me, conservatives were looking at Obama's victory "and saying, 'We've got to clamp things down'—they'd always tried to suppress the Black vote, but it was then that they came up with new schemes."

Mitchell was at the forefront of the right's offensive. In 2010, she accused the Majority Leader of the Senate, the Democrat Harry Reid, who was running for reëlection in Nevada, of planning "to steal this election if he can't win it outright." Her evidence was that Democrats in the state had provided "clearly illegal" free food at voter-turnout events—a negligible infraction, given that Reid won by more than forty thousand votes.

A year later, Mitchell successfully defended Trump, who had been exploring a Presidential bid, against charges that he had taken illegal campaign contributions. She had been recommended to Trump by Chris Ruddy, the founder of the conservative media company Newsmax, which was also a Mitchell client. Later, Ruddy introduced the future President to Mitchell over dinner at Mar-a-Lago. (She told me that she found Trump "gracious," and noted that, since the 2020 election, she has talked with him "pretty often.")

In 2013, the Supreme Court struck down a key section of the Voting Rights Act, eliminating the Justice Department's power to screen proposed changes to election procedures in states with discriminatory histories, one of which was Arizona. Terry Goddard, a former Arizona attorney general and a Democrat, told me that "the state has a history of voter suppression, especially against Native Americans." Before Rehnquist became a Supreme Court Justice, in 1971, he lived in Arizona, where he was accused of administering literacy tests to voters of color. In the mid-two-thousands, Goddard recalled, Republican leaders erected many barriers aimed at deterring Latino voters, some of which the courts struck down. But the 2013 Supreme Court ruling initiated a new era of election manipulation.

Around this time, Mitchell became a director at the Bradley Foundation. Among the board members were George F. Will, the syndicated columnist, and Robert George, a Princeton political philosopher known for his defense of traditional Catholic values. By 2017, Will, who has been a critic of Trump, had stepped down from the Bradley board. But George has continued to serve as a director, even as the foundation has heavily funded groups promulgating the falsehood that election fraud is widespread in America, particularly in minority communities, and sowing doubt about the legitimacy of Biden's win. The foundation, meanwhile, has given nearly three million dollars to programs that George established at Princeton. He has written in praise of Pence's refusal to decertify Biden's election, and has lamented that so many Americans believe, "wrongly," that "the election was 'stolen.'" But he declined to discuss with me why, then, he serves on the Bradley Foundation's board.

The board includes Art Pope, the libertarian discount-store magnate, who serves on the board of governors at the University of North Carolina. Pope, who has also acknowledged the legitimacy of Biden's victory, declined to discuss his role at the foundation. Another board member is Paul Clement, a partner at the law firm Kirkland & Ellis, who is one of the country's most distinguished Supreme Court litigators. He could not be reached for comment.

Mitchell argues that the right spends "a pittance" on election issues compared with the left. "Have you looked at the Democracy Alliance?" she asked me. The Alliance, whose membership is secret, distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in dark money to many left-leaning causes. But, when it comes to influencing elections, the contrast with the Bradley Foundation is clear. Whereas the Alliance's efforts have centered on increasing voter participation, the Bradley Foundation has focussed on disqualifying ostensibly illegitimate voters.

Like most private nonprofits, the Bradley Foundation doesn't disclose much about its inner workings. But in 2016 hackers posted online some of the group's confidential documents, which showed that, once Mitchell became a director, she began urging the foundation to support nonprofit organizations policing election fraud. Mitchell has professional ties to several of the groups that received money, although she says that she has abstained from voting on grants to any of those organizations.

One recipient of Bradley money is True the Vote, a Texas-based group that, among other things, trains people to monitor polling sites. Mitchell has served as its legal counsel, and hacked documents show that she advocated to the I.R.S. that the group deserved tax-exempt status as a charity. To earn such a designation, a group must file federal tax forms promising not to engage in electoral politics. In a letter of support, she asserted that "fraudulent voting occurs

*"That's a good boy—keep distracting Mommy so she can remember how to have conversations with humans."*

in the United States," citing a 2010 case in which the F.B.I. arrested nine Floridians for election violations. But, as with many voter-fraud allegations, the details of the case were less than advertised. The accusation involved a school-board election in a rural Black community in which a campaign had collected dozens of absentee ballots, in violation of the law. The charges were eventually dismissed. The judge found "no intent to cast a false or fraudulent ballot." True the Vote, which was granted tax-exempt status, has since been the subject of numerous complaints from voters, who have accused it of intimidation and racism.

Last year, a Reuters report characterized Mitchell as one of four lawyers leading the conservative war on "election fraud," and described True the Vote as one of the movement's hubs. The story linked the group and three other conservative nonprofits to at least sixty-one election lawsuits since 2012. Reuters noted that, during the same period, the four groups, along with two others devoted to election-integrity issues, have received more than three and a half million dollars from the Bradley Foundation.

It's a surprisingly short leap from making accusations of voter fraud to calling for the nullification of a supposedly tainted election. The Public Interest Legal Foundation, a group funded by the Bradley Foundation, is leading the way. Based in Indiana, it has become a prolific source of litigation; in the past year alone, it has brought nine election-law cases in eight states. It has amassed some of the most visible lawyers obsessed with election fraud, including Mitchell, who is its chair and sits on its board.

One of the group's directors is John Eastman, a former law professor at Chapman University, in California. On January 4, 2021, he visited the White House, where he spoke with Trump about ways to void the election. In a nod to the Independent Legislature Doctrine, Eastman and Trump tried to persuade Vice-President Mike Pence to halt the certification of the Electoral College vote, instead throwing the election to the state legislatures. Pence was not persuaded.

Two days later, Eastman spoke at Trump's "Save America" rally in Washington, hours before the crowds ransacked the Capitol in an effort to stop Congress from certifying Biden's win. "This is bigger than President Trump!" Eastman declared. "It is the very essence of our republican form of government, and it has to be done!" He thundered that election officials had robbed Trump by illegally casting ballots in the name of non-voters whose records they had extracted, after the polls had closed, from a "secret folder" in electronic voting machines. He told the crowd that the scandal was visible in "the data." There is no evidence of such malfeasance, however. Eastman, who recently retired, under pressure, from Chapman University, and was stripped of his public duties at another post that he held, at the University of Colorado Boulder, told me he still believes that the election was stolen, and thinks that the audits in Arizona and other states will help prove it. The Bradley Foundation declined to comment on him, or on Mitchell, when asked about its role in funding their activities.

Two other Public Interest Legal Foundation lawyers—its president, J. Christian Adams, and another board member, Hans von Spakovsky—served in George W. Bush's Justice Department, where they began efforts to use the Voting Rights Act, which was designed to protect Black voters, to prosecute purported fraud by Black voters and election officials. Both men have argued strenuously that American elections are rife with serious fraud, and in 2017 they got a rare opportunity to make their case, when Trump appointed them to a Presidential commission on election integrity. Within months, after the commission was unable to find significant evidence of election fraud, it acrimoniously disbanded. Adams and von Spakovsky, who are members of what *Roll Call* has termed the Voter Fraud Brain Trust, have nevertheless continued their crusade, sustained partly by Bradley funds. Von Spakovsky now heads the Heritage Foundation's Election Law Reform Initiative, which has received grants from the Bradley Foundation.

At Heritage, von Spakovsky has over-

## HANDBAG

I felt some desire and I lost my cents
it was expensive to feel so much

I lost my sense and my money  I did
not consent though it was consensual

It was a con and it cost me my self
I was selfless I was trailing a scent

I was moaning but not for the money
and that's a mistake I lost my sole take

and now there's nowhere to stake a claim
I'd put a stake in his heart but I can't

O Bacchus will you dress me in grape leaves
I'm back to the bar to begin again

and needing a quaff of some rich stuff
and some hair dye and a bewitching scent

and all that is sensual and cunning
without a cent or sense in the world

and nothing in my handbag but my soul

—*Sarah Arvio*

seen a national tracking system monitoring election-fraud cases. But its data on Arizona, the putative center of the storm, is not exactly alarming: of the millions of votes cast in the state from 2016 to 2020, only nine individuals were convicted of fraud. Each instance involved someone casting a duplicate ballot in another state. There were no recorded cases of identity fraud, ballot stuffing, voting by non-citizens, or other nefarious schemes. The numbers confirm that there is *some* voter fraud, or at least confusion, but not remotely enough to affect election outcomes.

Even Benjamin Ginsberg, a Republican lawyer who for years led the Party's election-law fights, recently conceded to the *Times* that "a party that's increasingly old and white whose base is a diminishing share of the population is conjuring up charges of fraud to erect barriers to voting for people it fears won't support its candidates."

The Voter Fraud Brain Trust lent support to Trump's lies from the time he took office. In 2016, when he lost the popular vote by nearly three million ballots, he insisted that he had actually won it, spuriously blaming rampant fraud in California. Soon afterward, von Spakovsky gave Trump's false claim credence by publishing an essay at Heritage arguing that there was no way to disprove the allegation, because "we have an election system that's based on the honor system."

More than a year before the 2020 election, Cleta Mitchell and her allies sensed political peril for Trump and began reviewing strategies to help keep him in office. According to a leaked video of an address that she gave in May, 2019, to the Council for National Policy, a secretive conservative society, she warned that Democrats were successfully registering what she sarcastically referred to as "the disenfranchised." She continued, "They know that if they target *certain* communities and they can get them registered and get them to the polls, then those groups . . . will vote ninety per cent, ninety-five per cent for Democrats."

One possible countermove was for conservative state legislators to reëngineer the way the Electoral College has worked for more than a hundred years, in essence by invoking the Independent Legislature Doctrine. The Constitution gives states the authority to choose their Presidential electors "in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct." Since the late nineteenth century, states have delegated that authority to the popular vote. But, arguably, the Constitution permits state legislatures to take this authority back. Legislators could argue that an election had been compromised by irregularities or fraud, forcing them to intervene.

In August, 2019, e-mails show, Mitchell co-chaired a high-level working group with Shawnna Bolick, a Republican state representative from Phoenix. Among the topics slated for discussion was the Electoral College. The working group was convened by ALEC, the corporate-backed nonprofit that transmits conservative policy ideas and legislation to state lawmakers. The Bradley Foundation has long supported ALEC, and Mitchell has worked closely with it, serving as its outside counsel until recently.

Mitchell and Bolick declined to answer questions about the working group's focus, but it appears that Bolick's participation was productive. After the election, she signed a resolution demanding that Congress block the certification of Biden's victory and award Arizona's electors to Trump. Then, early this year, Bolick introduced a bill proposing a radical reading of Article II of the Constitution, along the lines of the Independent Legislature Doctrine. It would enable a majority of the Arizona legislature to override the popular vote if it found fault with the outcome, and dictate the state's Electoral College votes itself—anytime up until Inauguration Day. Bolick has described her bill as just "a good, democratic check and balance," but her measure was considered so extreme that it died in committee, despite Republican majorities in both houses of the legislature. Yet, simply by putting forth the idea as legislation, she helped lend legitimacy to the audacious scheme that the Trump campaign desperately pursued in the final days before Biden's Inauguration: to rely on Republican-led state legislatures to overturn Electoral College votes. Ian Bassin, the executive director of Protect Democracy, who served as an associate White House counsel under Obama, told me, "Institutions like the Heritage Foundation and ALEC are providing the grease to turn these attacks on democracy into law."

Bolick has since announced her candidacy for secretary of state in Arizona. Her husband, Clint Bolick, is an Arizona Supreme Court justice and a leader in right-wing legal circles. Clarence Thomas, one of the three U.S. Supreme Court Justices who signed on to the concurring opinion in Bush v. Gore laying out the Independent Legislature Doctrine, is the godfather of one of Clint Bolick's sons. If Shawnna Bolick wins her race, she will oversee future elections in the state. And, if the Supreme Court faces another case in which arguments about the Independent Legislature Doctrine come into play, there may now be enough conservative Justices to agree with Thomas that there are circumstances under which legislatures, not voters, could have the final word in American elections.

Months before the 2020 vote, Lisa Nelson, the C.E.O. of ALEC, also anticipated contesting the election results. That February, she told a private gathering of the Council for National Policy about a high-level review that her group had undertaken of ways to challenge "the validity" of the Presidential returns. A video of the proceedings was obtained by the investigative group Documented, and first reported by the Washington *Spectator*. In her speech, Nelson noted that she was working with Mitchell and von Spakovsky.

Although the law bars charitable organizations such as the Council for National Policy from engaging in electoral politics, Nelson unabashedly acknowledged, "Obviously, we all want President Trump to win, and win the national vote." She went on, "But it's very clear that, really, what it comes down to is the states, and the state legislators." One plan, she said, was to urge conservative legislators to voice doubt to their respective secretaries of state, questioning the election's outcome and asking, "What *did* happen that night?"

By August, 2020, when the Council for National Policy held another meeting, the pandemic had hurt Trump's prospects, and talk within the membership about potential Democratic election fraud had reached a frenzy. At the meeting, Adams, the Public Interest Legal Foundation's president, echoed Trump's raging about mail-in ballots, describing them as "the No. 1 left-wing

agenda." He urged conservatives not to be deterred by criticism: "Be not afraid of the accusations that you're a voter suppressor, you're a racist, and so forth."

A younger member of the organization, Charlie Kirk—a founder of Turning Point USA, which promotes right-wing ideas on school campuses—injected a note of optimism. He suggested that the pandemic, by closing campuses, would likely suppress voting among college students, a left-leaning bloc. "*Please* keep the campuses closed," he said, to cheers. "Like, it's a great thing!"

Five months later, Turning Point Action, a "social welfare organization" run by Kirk's group, was one of nearly a dozen groups behind Trump's "March to Save America," on January 6th. Shortly before the rally, Kirk tweeted that the groups he leads would send "80+ buses full of patriots to DC to fight for this president." His tweet was deleted after the crowds assaulted the Capitol.

Turning Point, which has received small grants from the Bradley Foundation, is headquartered in Arizona, and it has played a significant role in the radicalization of the state, in part by amplifying fear and anger about voter fraud. Turning Point's chief operating officer, Tyler Bowyer, is a member of the Republican National Committee and a former chair of the Maricopa County Republican Party. Bowyer's friend Jake Hoffman runs an Arizona-based digital-marketing company, Rally Forge, that has been Turning Point's highest-compensated contractor. In the summer of 2020, Rally Forge helped Turning Point use social media to spread incendiary misinformation about the coming elections. In September, the Washington *Post* reported that Rally Forge, on behalf of Turning Point Action, had paid teenagers to deceptively post thousands of copycat propaganda messages, much as Russia had done during the 2016 campaign. Adult leaders had instructed the teens to tweak the wording of their posts, to evade detection by technology companies. Some messages were posted under the teens' accounts, but others were sent under assumed personae. Many posts claimed that mail-in ballots would "lead to fraud," and that Democrats planned to steal the Presidency.

Turning Point Action denied that it ran a troll farm, arguing that the teenage employees were genuine, but a study by the Internet Observatory at Stanford's Cyber Policy Center documented the scheme, along with other dubious practices by Rally Forge. In 2016, the company fabricated a politician—complete with a doctored photograph—to run as an Independent write-in candidate against Andy Biggs, a far-right Republican seeking an open congressional seat in Arizona. The ploy, evidently intended to siphon votes from Biggs's Democratic opponent, didn't go far, but it was hardly the company's only scam. The *Guardian* has shown how Rally Forge also created a phony left-wing front group, America Progress Now, which promoted Green Party candidates online in 2018, apparently to hurt Democrats in several races.

In October, 2020, Rally Forge was banned from Facebook, and its president, Hoffman, was permanently suspended by Twitter. Undeterred, he ran as a pro-Trump Republican for the Arizona House—and won. Remarkably, the chamber's Republican leadership then appointed him the vice-chair of the Committee on Government and Elections. Since getting elected, Hoffman has challenged the legitimacy of Biden's victory, called for election audits, and, in coördination with the Heritage Foundation, used his position to propose numerous bills making it more difficult to vote.

This past spring, at a private gathering outside Tucson, Jessica Anderson, the executive director of Heritage Action—the politically active arm of the Heritage Foundation—singled out Hoffman for praise. As a leaked video of her remarks revealed, she told supporters that, with the help of Hoffman and other state legislators, the nonprofit group was rewriting America's election laws. "In some cases, we actually draft them for them, or we have a sentinel on our behalf give them the model legislation so it has that grassroots, from-the-bottom-up type of vibe," Anderson explained. "We've got three bills done in Arizona!" She continued, "We're moving four more through the state of Arizona right now . . . simple bills, all straight from the Heritage recommendations." One of the bills, she noted, was "written and carried by Jake Hoffman," whom she described as "a longtime friend of the Heritage Foundation."

Hoffman's bills have made the Heritage Foundation's wish list a reality. Voting by mail has long been popular in Arizona, with as many as ninety per cent of voters doing so in 2020, but one of Hoffman's bills made it a felony to send a mail-in ballot to residents who hadn't requested one, unless they were on an official list of early voters. Another bill, which Hoffman supported, will, according to one estimate, push as many as two hundred thousand people off the state's list of early voters. Opponents say that this legislation will disproportionately purge Latinos, who constitute twenty-four per cent of the state's eligible voters. Another bill by Hoffman banned state election officials from accepting outside donations to help pay for any aspect of election administration, including voter registration. (One of the bill's targets was Mark Zuckerberg, whose foundation helped county election officials in Arizona handle the pandemic.) In February, at a hearing of the Committee on Government and Elections, a witness from the Washington-based Capital Research Center—also funded by the Bradley Foundation—testified in support of Hoffman's legislation. Athena Salman, the ranking Democrat, told me she was incensed that Hoffman—"a guy who paid teen-agers to lie"—was put on the election committee. "It's the fox guarding the henhouse!" she said.

Anderson, of Heritage, declined to respond to questions about the group's collaborations with Hoffman, instead sending a prepared statement: "After a year when voters' trust in our elections plummeted, restoring that trust should be the top priority of legislators and governors nationwide. That's why Heritage Action is deploying our established grassroots network for state advocacy for the first time ever. There is nothing more important than ensuring every American is confident their vote counts—and we will do whatever it takes to get there."

Hoffman, who formerly served as a town-council member in Queen Creek, a deeply conservative part of Maricopa County, did not respond to requests for comment. Kristin Clark, a Democrat who mounted a write-in campaign against him after the news of his troll farm broke, called Hoffman an "unintelligent man who wants to be a big guy." She told me, "The Republicans here have changed.

They were conservative, but now they've sold out. It's money that's changed it. All these giant, corporate groups that are faceless—it's outside money." In her view, "Jake Hoffman is but a cog."

The spark that ignited the Arizona audit was an amateur video, taken on Election Night, of an unidentified female voter outside a polling place in what Kristin Clark recognized as Hoffman's district. The voter claimed that election workers had tried to sabotage her ballot by deliberately giving her a Sharpie that the electronic scanners couldn't read. Her claim was false: the scanners could read Sharpie ink, and the ballots had been designed so that the flip side wouldn't be affected if the ink bled through. Nevertheless, the video went viral. Among the first to spread the Sharpiegate conspiracy was another one of Charlie Kirk's youth groups, Students for Trump. The next day, as Trump furiously insisted he had won an election that he ended up losing by roughly seven million votes, protesters staged angry rallies in Maricopa County, where ballots were still being counted. Adding an aura of legal credibility to the conspiracy theory, Adams, the Public Interest Legal Foundation president, immediately filed suit against Maricopa County, alleging that a Sharpie-using voter he represented had been disenfranchised. The case was soon dismissed, but not before Adams tweeted, "JUST FILED to have our client's right to #vote upheld. Her #Sharpie ballot was CANCELLED without CURE." Arizona's attorney general, Mark Brnovich, a Republican, investigated, and his office took only a day to conclude that the Sharpie story was nonsense. But, by then, many Trump supporters no longer trusted Arizona's election results. Clark, the former Democratic challenger to Hoffman, told me that she watched in horror as "they took B.S. and made it real!"

A day after the election, the office of Katie Hobbs, Arizona's secretary of state, reported that, based on a routine, bipartisan hand recount of a sample of ballots, "no discrepancies were found" in Maricopa County. Within days, the mainstream media had called the election for Biden, based on late returns from Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Georgia. But Cleta Mitchell, who had been dispatched by Trump's chief of staff, Mark

Meadows, to help the Trump campaign in Georgia, told Fox News, "We're already double-checking and finding dead people having voted." As Georgia was ratifying its results with a recount, she tweeted that the tally was "FAKE!!!"

Meanwhile, on the conservative Web site Townhall, Hoffman demanded "a full audit of the vote count in swing states," adding that the election was "far from over." He claimed that there had been "countless violations of state election law, statistical anomalies and election irregularities in more than a half dozen states," and argued that state legislatures should therefore have the final say. By December, he had joined his friend Bowyer and other members of the state's Republican Party in filing suit against Arizona's governor, calling for the state to set aside Arizona's eleven electoral votes and allow the legislature to intervene.

At the same time, another version of the Independent Legislature Doctrine argument was being mounted in Pennsylvania, by the Honest Elections Project, the group tied to Leonard Leo, of the Federalist Society. Local Republicans had challenged a state-court ruling that adjusted voting procedures during the pandemic. The Honest Elections Project filed a brief with the U.S. Supreme Court arguing that the Pennsylvania court had usurped the legislature's authority to oversee elections. The effort didn't succeed, but Richard Hasen, the election-law professor, regards such arguments as "powder kegs" that threaten American democracy. Leo didn't respond to requests for comment, but Hasen believes that Leo is trying to preserve "minority rule" in elections in order to advance his agenda. Hasen told me, "Making it harder to vote helps them get more Republican victories, which helps them get more conservative judges and courts."

In the case of Arizona, it took only a week for a federal district court to dismiss Hoffman and Bowyer's suit, citing an absence of "relevant or reliable evidence." The court admonished the plaintiffs that "gossip and innuendo" cannot "be the basis for upending Arizona's 2020 General Election." Hoffman and the other plaintiffs appealed the case to the U.S. Supreme Court, which declined to hear the matter, but it waited to do

so until March. In the meantime, election-fraud conspiracy theories in Arizona were growing out of control.

On November 12th, Biden was declared the winner in Maricopa County. Soon after, a Republican member of the county's Board of Supervisors, Bill Gates, was picking up takeout food for his family when the board's chairman—one of four Republicans on the five-person board—called to warn him to be careful going home. Ninety angry people had gathered outside the chairman's house, and Gates's place could be next. "We'd all been doxed," Gates told me. He and his wife are the legal guardians of a teen-ager whose father, a Ugandan, was nearly killed by henchmen for Idi Amin. "It's chilling to see the parallels," Gates told me. "You'd never think there were any parallels to a strongman autocracy in Africa." Gates considers himself a political-science nerd, but, he said, "I had no concept that we were heading where we were heading."

Gates, who moved to Arizona as a teen-ager, was a latchkey kid whose idea of entertainment was watching C-SPAN. He is forty-nine and describes himself as a "child of the Reagan Revolution" who started a Republican club in high school. He attended Drake University, in Iowa, partly so that he could witness the state's Presidential caucuses. Winning a Truman Scholarship opened his way to Harvard Law School, where he joined the Federalist Society, the Harvard Law School Republican Club, and the *Journal of Law and Public Policy*. At Harvard, membership in all three was called the "conservative trifecta." Gates can scarcely believe how the Republican Party and the conservative movement have changed in the years since.

Over breakfast in June, in Phoenix, he apologized for his eyes welling up with tears as he described his efforts to stand up to his own party's mob. He said that he and the other county supervisors had been "feeling great" about how well their administration of the election had gone despite the pandemic. But, as the final ballots were counted and Trump fell behind, Maricopa County became the focal point of conspiracy theorists. "Alex Jones and those guys start coming out here, and they're protesting outside of our election center as the counting is going on," he said. He could hear people screaming, and what sounded like a drum: "It was Lollapalooza for the alt-right—it was crazy." He started getting calls and e-mails saying, "You guys need to stop the steal." Gates told me, "I'd wonder, Is this a real person?" But some angry messages came from people he knew. They said they'd never support him again. "People thought I was failing them," Gates said. "I have been called a traitor so many times in the last six months."

*"I know this is hard, but I just can't be with someone who gets so many fewer bug bites than me."*

Gates says that Karen Fann, the Arizona Senate's president, confided to him that she knew there was "nothing to" the fraud charges. (She didn't respond to requests for comment.) Nevertheless, she buckled under the political pressure and authorized a subpoena of the county's ballots, for the "forensic audit." At one point, county supervisors were told that if they didn't comply they would face contempt charges and, potentially, could be imprisoned. For a time, the official Twitter account for the audit accused the supervisors, without evidence, of "spoliation" of the ballots. "I get a little emotional when I talk about it," Gates said. "My daughter called me, frantically trying to find out whether or not I was going to be thrown in jail." Trump supporters set up a guillotine on a grassy plaza outside Arizona's statehouse, demanding the supervisors' heads. Inside, Gates recalled, one Republican member after another rose to denounce the county supervisors.

A representative for the national Republican Party tried to silence Gates when he spoke out to defend the integrity of Arizona's election. He told me that Hoffman's ally Tyler Bowyer, of the Republican National Committee, paid him a visit and warned, "You need to stop it." According to Gates, Bowyer made it clear that "the Republican National Committee supports this audit." Andrew Kolvet, a spokesman for Bowyer, denied that the visit was an official attempt at intimidation, calling it instead a "personal courtesy."

Gates said that after he received death threats he fled with his family to an Airbnb. At one point, the sheriff sent two deputies to guard Gates's home overnight. Trump supporters, Gates said, "are basically asking Republican leaders to bow before the altar of the Big Lie—'You're willing to do it? O.K., great. You're not? You're a RINO. You're a Commie. You are not a Republican.' It's been incredibly effective, really, when you think about where we've come from January 6th."

Part of what had drawn Gates to the Republican Party was the Reagan-era doctrine of confronting totalitarianism. He'd long had a fascination with emerging democracies, particularly the former Soviet republics. He had come up with what he admits was a "kooky" retirement plan—"to go to some place like Uzbeki-

stan and help." He told me, "I'd always thought that, if I had a tragic end, it would be in some place like Tajikistan." He shook his head. "If you had told me, 'You're going to be doing this in the U.S.,' I would have told you, 'You're crazy.'"

Some of the political pressure on election officials in Arizona was exerted directly by Trump and his associates, potentially illegally. Interfering in a federal election can be a crime. As the *Arizona Republic* has reported, the President and his legal adviser Rudy Giuliani phoned state and local officials, including Fann. The White House switchboard tried to connect Trump with the chairman of the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors, but, even though the chairman was a Republican, he ducked the call, lest the President interfere improperly. Giuliani called Gates's cell phone when he was shopping at Walgreens on Christmas Eve. Not recognizing the number, Gates didn't answer. "You can't make this stuff up," he told me. Giuliani left a voice mail saying it was a "shame" that two Republicans couldn't work things out—he'd come up with a "nice way" to "get this thing fixed up."

"I never returned the phone call," Gates said. A week later, when news broke of Trump's notorious call to officials in Georgia, Gates was more relieved than ever that he hadn't called Giuliani back. A panel of judges in New York has since suspended Giuliani's law license, for threatening the public interest by making "demonstrably false and misleading statements" about the Presidential election.

By New Year's Eve, when Trump tried and failed to reach the chairman of the Maricopa County board, his Administration was in extraordinary turmoil. Attorney General William Barr had resigned from the Justice Department after declaring that it had detected no significant election fraud. Even so, Trump continued to demand that the department investigate a variety of loony conspiracies, including a plot to erase Trump votes using Italian military satellites. According to a leaked e-mail, a Justice Department attorney disparaged the satellite theory as "pure insanity." A man supposedly involved in the plot issued a denial to Reuters, and Italian police suggested that the allegation was baseless. But the conspiracy theory, which became known as Italygate, had bubbled up from the same pools of dark money that were funding other election misinformation. Records show that Italygate was spread by a "social welfare organization" called Nations in Action, whose directors included von Spakovsky. When Talking Points Memo contacted von Spakovsky, he said that he had resigned from the board on January 8th. But the money trail remains. Crooks and Liars, a progressive investigative-reporting site, dug up tax filings showing that the group's 501(c)(3) sibling, the Nations in Action Globally Lifting Up Fund, had received thousands of dollars from the Judicial Crisis Network—a nonprofit enterprise, closely tied to Leonard Leo, that also funds Turning Point Action.

While Justice Department officials were fending off conspiracy theories being spread by tax-exempt charities in Washington, the pressure was even more acute on local officials in Phoenix. Trump tweeted relentlessly about the audit. He "clearly has had a fascination with this issue, because he thinks it's the key to his reinstatement," Gates told me. "It's not about Arizona. We're literally pawns in this. This is a national effort to delegitimize the election system." Gates predicted that, if "Arizona can question this, and show that Trump won," the game will move on to Colorado, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Virginia, all of which have sent Republican delegations to observe Arizona's audit. Noting that both QAnon followers and his own state's Republican Party chair had referred to "dominoes" in connection with the audit, Gates said, "We know what that game is, and how it works."

It would be tempting for Gates, a lifetime Republican with political ambitions, to blame only Trump for his party's antidemocratic turn. But he has few such illusions. What's really going on, he believes, is a reactionary backlash against Obama: "I've thought about it a lot. I believe the election of President Obama frightened a lot of Americans." Gates argues that the fear isn't entirely about race. He thinks it's also about cosmopolitanism, secularism, and other contemporary values that make white conservatives uncomfortable. But in the end, he said, "the diversification of America is frightening to a lot of people in my party."

Gates believes that his party's reaction may backfire. Polls show that, although the Arizona audit is wildly popular among Republican voters in the state, it alienates independents, who constitute approximately a third of the state's electorate—and whose support is necessary for statewide candidates to win.

For now, though, conservative groups seem to be doubling down on their investments in election-fraud alarmism. In the next two years, Heritage Action plans to spend twenty-four million dollars mobilizing supporters and lobbyists who will promote "election integrity," starting in eight battleground states, including Arizona. It is coördinating its effort with the Election Transparency Initiative, a joint venture of two anti-abortion groups, the Susan B. Anthony List and the American Principles Project. The Election Transparency Initiative has set a fund-raising goal of five million dollars. Cleta Mitchell, having left her law firm, has joined FreedomWorks, the free-market group, where she plans to lead a ten-million-dollar project on voting issues. She will also head the Election Integrity Network at the Conservative Partnership Institute, another Washington-based nonprofit. As a senior legal fellow there, she told the Washington *Examiner,* she will "help bring all these strings" of conservative election-law activism together, and she added, "I've had my finger in so many different pieces of the election-integrity pie for so long."

Back in Arizona, where the auditors are demanding still more time, Gates believes that the Big Lie has become a "grift" used to motivate Republican voters and donors to support conservative candidates and political groups. "The sad thing is that there are probably millions of people—hardworking, good Americans, maybe retired—who have paid their taxes, always followed the law, and they truly believe this, because of what they've been fed by their leaders," he said. "And what's so dispiriting is that the people who are pushing it from the top? They know better." ♦

PROFILES

# ON AN EPIC SCALE

*How Kerry James Marshall takes on the Western canon.*

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

For the first thirty years of his career, Kerry James Marshall was a successful but little known artist. His figurative paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, and videos appeared in gallery and museum shows here and abroad, and selling them was never a problem. He won awards, residencies, and grants, including a MacArthur Fellowship in 1997, but in the contemporary-art world, which started to look more closely at Black artists in the nineties, Marshall was an outlier, and happy to be one. He had an unshakable confidence in himself as an artist, and the undistracted solitude of his practice allowed him to spend most of his time in the studio. The curator Helen Molesworth told me that during the three years it took to put together "Mastry," Marshall's first major retrospective in the United States, which opened in 2016 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and travelled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, "there were still people in the art world who didn't know who he was."

This is no longer the case. The exhibition outed Marshall as a great artist, a virtuoso of landscape, portraiture, still-life, history painting, and other genres of the Western canon since the Renaissance. The return to figurative art in the past two decades has been embraced by a new wave of younger Black artists, and for many of them, it is now clear, Kerry James Marshall has been a primary inspiration. "Kerry's influence expands so far beyond his own project," Rashid Johnson, who at forty-three is one of the strongest voices in contemporary art, told me. "He's an electric and dynamic thinker who's also had an enormous influence on those of us who use abstraction and more conceptual approaches. There are two artists without whom I probably would not have become one—David Hammons and Kerry James Marshall."

Marshall, whose calm manner and impeccable courtesy put people at ease, talks about his work with clarity and precision. "Everything I do is based on my understanding of art history," he told me recently. "The foundation of art as an activity among human beings has always been some form of representation, and there isn't a mode of art-making that I haven't explored, and put into use when it was necessary." His painting is figurative but not realistic. In 1993, he made two paintings that set him on a course that was entirely his own. He was thirty-eight years old, living in Chicago with his wife, the actress Cheryl Lynn Bruce, and he had recently moved into his first real studio, a three-hundred-and-fifty-square-foot office space with an eleven-foot-high ceiling. The new paintings were much bigger than anything he had done for quite a while—nine feet high by ten feet wide. "The Lost Boys" shows two young Black boys, one of whom sits in a dollar-a-ride toy car; the other stands nearby, holding a pink water pistol, beside a tree that has a yellow "Do Not Cross" police tape around its trunk. The boys look directly at the viewer, and there is something unnerving about them, a sense of sadness and vulnerability.

The painting, Marshall said, came partly out of experiences he'd had during his own boyhood, in South Central Los Angeles, where his family lived in the nineteen-sixties. "This was the period when the Crips and the Bloods came into existence and everything changed," Marshall recalled. "The level of violence grew exponentially. Before, gangs were groups of guys who hung out together and now and then they would have a fight, but it was a *fight*. When the Crips came, it was just shooting, and a lot of young people died. My

*Marshall's "Past Times," from 1997. "Every-*

older brother, Wayne, narrowly escaped a drive-by shooting on our block. 'The Lost Boys' was built around a child who was killed by a police officer because he had a toy pistol that they mistook for a gun. When I finished 'The Lost Boys,' I stood back and said, 'This is the kind of painting I always imagined myself making.' It seemed to me to have the scale of the great history paintings, mixed with the rich surface effects you get from modernist painting. I felt it was a synthesis of everything I'd seen, everything I'd read, everything that I thought was important

© KERRY JAMES MARSHALL / COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

*thing I do is based on my understanding of art history," he says. "There isn't a mode of art-making that I haven't explored."*

about the whole practice of painting and making pictures."

The other painting, which he began working on at the same time as "The Lost Boys," is called "De Style." The title is a play on the Dutch movement De Stijl, founded in 1917, which opened the way to pure, hard-edge abstraction in art and architecture, and the setting is a barbershop—the window sign reads "Percy's House of Style." A customer is in the chair, and three others wait, two seated and one standing. Behind them, red cabinets with white drawers form a structure of precise rectangles, echoing Mondrian. Our attention is drawn to the men's elaborate hair styles—sculptured masses on the standing figure, a tower of stacked braids on one of the sitters, who I could have sworn was a woman. (Marshall said they're all men.) He went on to explain how young men of his generation in South Central had been captivated by the blaxploitation movies of the seventies, which "gave us models of high style and sophistication that a lot of guys I was in high school with emulated. My brother and I did each other's hair. I had mine in rollers when I went to bed. Guys were spending as much on their hair as girls did. And not only hair. We designed our own suits and had them made. You worked all summer so you could start school in the fall with a new wardrobe." For a Black teen-ager in Los Angeles, life was in the details. "Just walking is not a simple thing," Marshall told the curator Terrie Sultan. "You've got to walk with style."

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art bought "De Style" the year Marshall painted it—his first sale to a major museum. The price was "around twelve

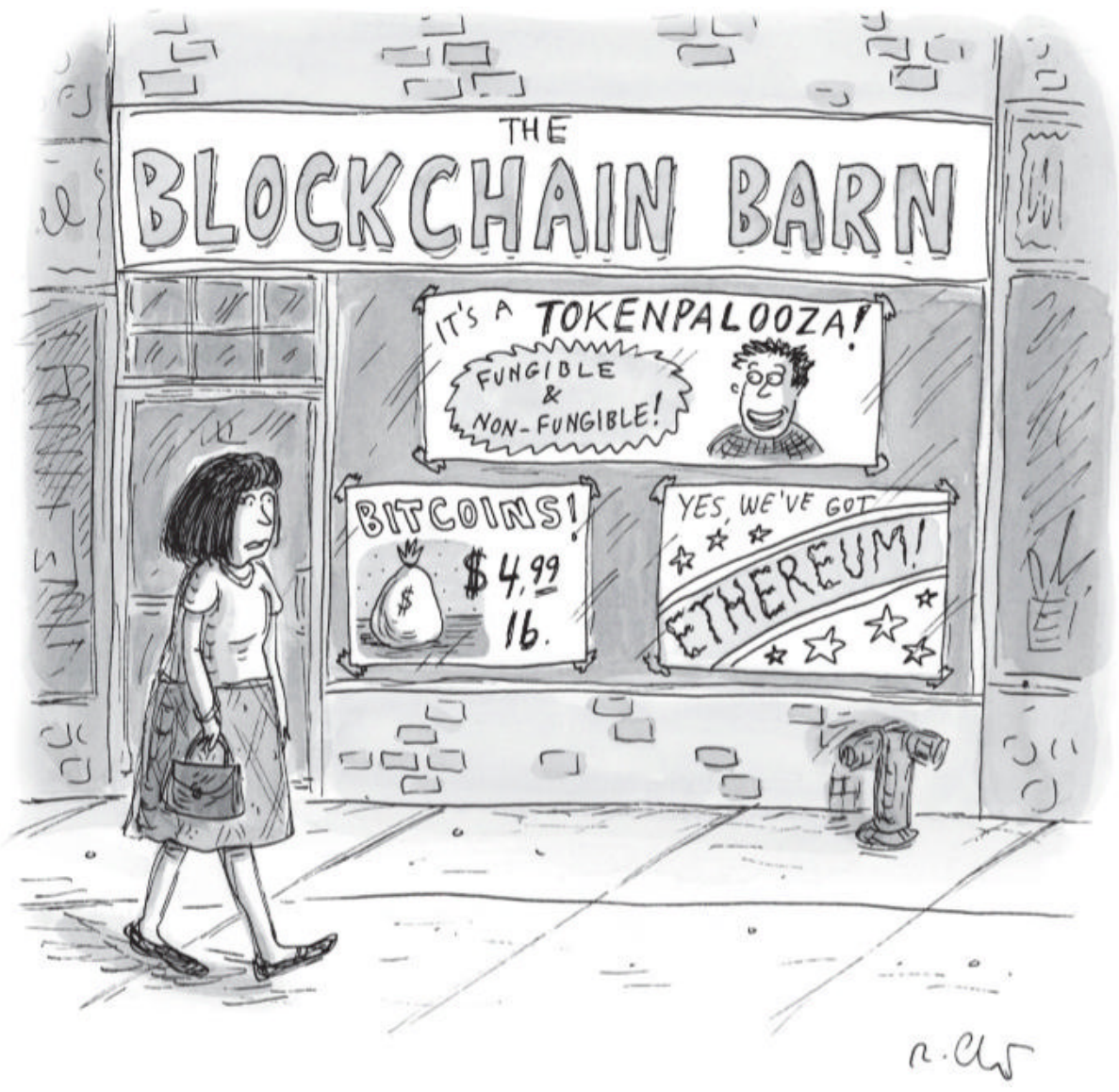
thousand dollars," he recalls, and he saw this as a down payment on what had become his overriding ambition: to bring large-scale Black faces and Black bodies into places, such as museums, where their almost complete absence had troubled him since he was a child. "Once I made those two pictures, I understood clearly how to move forward," he told me.

Knowing what to do and how to do it is the cornerstone of Kerry James Marshall's existence. When he was in the seventh grade, at the predominantly Black George Washington Carver Junior High School in Los Angeles, he took every shop class that was available—the school offered a wide range of options. During summer vacations, when the shop facilities were open to the public, Marshall spent one summer learning about plastics—how to laminate, cut, sand, and polish earrings, ashtrays, and other objects. "I sometimes use plastic now, because I know what I can do with it," he told me. "The new D.I.Y. culture is so behind what we had. Parents spoiled it by suing schools if anybody got hurt in shop class, and so you have a whole generation of kids who don't know how to make anything." Today, the workshop in his studio is three times as big as the area where he paints. When the overhead lighting there needed rewiring a few years ago, he rented a hydraulic lift and fixed the problem himself. "There isn't anything I can't do," he said. "I am not going to be found not knowing how something works." He is bone-certain that knowing how things work gives him a freedom and an independence he would not otherwise have. Marshall once told a group of doctors, only half joking, that with a couple of weeks' study he could do brain surgery.

How someone with Marshall's depth of knowledge, confidence, and self-reliance escaped being somewhat insufferable is a good question. His alert and amused approach to the world has brought him many close friendships, and no discernible detractors. I sometimes wonder how much of this is related to the remarkable woman he married. They met in 1985, when Marshall came to New York for a one-year artist residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. He had driven from L.A. in a Volkswagen van packed with all his belongings, and he arrived two weeks early, planning to store his things at the museum while he explored the city and found a place to stay. Cheryl Bruce, the museum's public-relations director, had to tell him that he couldn't do so, because the three outgoing residents hadn't left yet. Bruce had grown up in Chicago. She was seven years older than Marshall, she had a thirteen-year-old daughter, Sydney, who lived with Cheryl and spent summers with her father, in Los Angeles, and she was already launched on an acting career. That fall, when she was offered a role in a series for children, starring a very young Ben Affleck, which would be filmed on location in Yucatán, she quit her job at the museum. At her going-away party, Bruce struck Marshall as "the strangest girl I'd ever seen, because she was just crying her eyes out. I had never seen anybody do that. She was also extremely beautiful and vivacious, with personality in excess."

Four months later, after Bruce finished working on the series, she returned to visit her friends at the museum. Mary Schmidt Campbell, the director, asked if she wanted her job back, and she said yes. Marshall called her the next day. Would she be interested in going with him to see Orson Welles's "The Magnificent Ambersons," which was playing at the Thalia on upper Broadway? Bruce said she did not date artist residents or people who worked at the museum. "But I felt badly about turning him down, and I asked him to my place in Brooklyn for dinner with me and my daughter, Sydney," she recalled. "I was making a salad when all of a sudden he kissed me. I thought, Oh, man, he is really misconstruing this. But then we talked for a long time. Sydney went to bed. As Kerry was getting ready to leave, he said, 'You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.' And I remember—maybe this was another night—I looked out the window and saw him walking under a tree, playing his harmonica."

The no-dating rule lasted for six months. Marshall had stayed in New York after his Studio Museum residency ended, living in Harlem and



working for a Manhattan print publisher. He was in the early stages of his career, making small abstract paintings and collages, some of which he had shown in 1985 at the Koplin Gallery in Los Angeles. He and Bruce started dating, but they didn't live together. They were best friends. She kidded him a lot, and they made each other laugh. Sydney thought he was cool, because he talked to her the same way he talked to her mother, and was "incredibly comfortable about going his own way." One night, when Marshall and Bruce were in the Union Square subway station—she was headed for Brooklyn, he was going uptown—he asked if she'd like to get married. "I had already put my token in—that was when you still used tokens—and I said . . . 'Kerry, you can't ask me something like that going through a turnstile. I can't answer you. Give me some time to think about it.' He asked me again a couple months later—we were in a playground somewhere in Manhattan—and I hadn't thought about it. I'd promised to give him an answer, though, and I said O.K. We didn't set a date. And then my sister Vicki got very sick with multiple sclerosis, and my mom said she needed me home in Chicago."

Marshall drove her there in a U-Haul. They dropped her belongings off at her mother's garage, explained that they would be back as soon as possible, then turned around and went to South Carolina. Both of them had agreed to work on an independent film, written and directed by Julie Dash, called "Daughters of the Dust," about three generations of Gullah-speaking people living on an island off the coast. Marshall had been recruited as the film's production designer by Arthur Jafa, its cinematographer and Dash's husband, whom he had met a few years earlier in Los Angeles. Bruce would play one of the key roles. They had come to South Carolina to make a "proof of concept," a few scenes to help raise money for the film. Shooting the footage took several weeks. Marshall provided all the props—if he couldn't find them in stores on the mainland, he made them himself. Although Dash and Jafa broke up a few years later, the four of them have remained close, and "Daughters of the Dust," released in 1991, is considered one of the classics of independent cinema.

After driving back to Chicago with Bruce, Marshall returned to New York and his job at the print publisher. "When I left L.A., I had planned to stay in New York," he told me. "But I felt confident that I could go anywhere on the planet and do what I had to do." As soon as he had some money in the bank, he moved to Chicago permanently. Bruce's acting career was thriving—she was in two plays, one at the Northlight Theatre, in Evanston, and the other at Steppenwolf, in Chicago. She also landed a film role that allowed them to sublet an apartment in Hyde Park. They got married in April, 1989, at the South Side Community Art Center, in Chicago. By 1992, Marshall had made enough money to buy, for fifteen thousand dollars, the house they live in today.

James Marshall, Kerry's father, didn't graduate from high school. He served in the Army during the Korean War, then went to work as a dishwasher at the veterans hospital in Birmingham, Alabama, his home town. His wife, Ora Dee, had hoped to be a singer-songwriter; she made a record with a doo-wop group in Birmingham, and co-wrote a song called "Lovin' Feeling," which paid her royalties for years, but that was the extent of her musical career. Kerry, their second child, was born in 1955. Birmingham then was so rigidly segregated that the only white people he and his brother Wayne, who was a year older, came into contact with were the Italian family that ran the corner store and the Catholic nuns who taught at the Holy Family school he attended, where the students were all Black. Marshall's most vivid early memory was of looking through a scrapbook of pictures—Christmas cards and Valentine cards, photographs from *National Geographic* and other magazines—that belonged to Miss Hill, his kindergarten teacher and the only Black teacher in the school. She rewarded well-behaved children by letting one of them have the book during nap time. "I was captivated by those images," Marshall told me. "I remember saying to myself, This is what I want to do, I want to make pictures."

The family moved to Los Angeles in 1963, first to a public-housing project in the Watts area and later to a rented house elsewhere in South Central, the heart of the Black diaspora. They were part of the Great Migration of more than six million Black people who left the South during the Jim Crow era, to find better jobs and more humane treatment. James worked for the U.S. Postal Service, and Ora Dee ran a secondhand shop, selling objects she bought at auction. Racial tensions were building in L.A. The Watts riots erupted in 1965. By then, Kerry and his family were a few miles north, but the rioting spread throughout the area; Kerry and Wayne saw a supermarket on fire and bricks being thrown through store windows. "It looked like a carnival," Kerry recalled. Gang warfare was on the rise. Neither Wayne nor Kerry joined a gang. Wayne had gained respect at their public school as someone you didn't mess with, and, because he looked out for his younger brother, Kerry didn't have to fight. They both did well in school, and became avid readers—their mother had read Aesop's Fables and other classics to them, and she signed up for a subscription to receive the Dr. Seuss books—as a bonus they were given a "Children's Guide to Knowledge." "I also became obsessed with comic books," Kerry said. "When I was in the fifth grade, my brother and a friend and I rode our bikes to a used-magazine store in Huntington Park, just south of L.A., which had back issues of Marvel Comics. I wanted to go again by myself, so one day, after lunch, I climbed the fence at school and walked there." It took him four hours. He arrived just in time to buy three comic books before the store closed, and he didn't get home until nine-thirty. "I told my mother I'd been helping a teacher at school."

Kerry and Wayne both liked to draw images of comic-book superheroes and

*Marshall and his wife, the actress Cheryl Lynn Bruce, in Dawoud Bey's "Kerry and Cheryl I," from 1993.*

other characters. "Kerry was just sketching all the time," his younger sister Jennifer, who was born in Birmingham the year before they left, told me. She remembers lying on the floor in front of the TV, with Wayne and their youngest brother, Travis, "and Kerry would be drawing us." In 1965, the same year Kerry played hooky from school, his class made a field trip to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which had just opened at its current location. "I didn't know there was such a thing as a museum," Kerry told me. "Once I learned how to get there, you couldn't keep me away." What he remembers vividly from that first visit are two huge allegorical paintings by Veronese and a wooden tribal figure from Mali, a Senufo executioner with feathers on the head and two sticks for arms. ("That thing scared me to death.") He didn't know art schools existed until several years later. A teacher at his junior high school had noticed that Kerry was more interested in drawing than any of the other students were, and he recommended him for a summer drawing class at the Otis College of Art and Design. This was where Marshall discovered the work of Charles White. Born in Chicago in 1918, White was a great but largely unrecognized Black artist. Marshall had read a biography of him when he was in the sixth grade, and he had written a paper on it, but he had no real conception of what White's work looked like until the Otis instructor George De Groat projected reproductions from "Images of Dignity," a book of White's drawings. The pictures were all of Black people, and they had a depth and a power that astonished Marshall. White was teaching at Otis then. De Groat took the class upstairs to see his studio, and later that afternoon White himself walked into their classroom. "He was shorter than I was, but he had a big voice," Marshall told me. "That's when I decided Otis is where I want to go after high school."

Otis required that applicants to its B.F.A. program have two years of college credits. Marshall graduated from high school in 1973, and spent the next year washing dishes, parking cars, and finding other odd jobs. He lived with Wayne for a while, after Wayne's girlfriend moved out of his house, and he learned to subsist on five dollars a week. In 1975, he entered Los Angeles City College. By the time he became a full-time student at Otis two years later, Marshall had taken evening and weekend classes with Charles White and Sam Clayberger, both of whom knew how to analyze a painting and build visual structures. "Charlie White just adored him," the veteran Otis teacher Arnold Mesches told Ian Alteveer, the curator who installed Marshall's retrospective at the Met. "Charlie would say, 'He's a bit obnoxious, isn't he? . . . He's good, but he's opinionated.'" To Marshall, though, the Otis program was a bitter disappointment: "By the time I got there, conceptual art was the dominant force in a lot of art schools, including Otis. Anything that looked like conventional painting and drawing and sculpture was dismissed. Charles White was still there, but the Old Guard had been pushed aside. There was no rigor." Except for White and a few others, Marshall said, "it just seemed like a colossal waste of time."

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Soon after he graduated from Otis, his abstract collages were in a group show called "Newcomers" at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. A Los Angeles couple had bought four of them, but Marshall was losing interest in abstraction and collage—like Otis, they both now seemed too forgiving, lacking in rigor. His life was opening up in other ways. He went to New York for the first time, to see the monumental 1980 Picasso retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art—more specifically, to see "Guernica," which he called "one of the greatest history paintings in modern art," and which would be repatriated to the Prado Museum in Madrid after the show ended. Around that time he read Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, "Invisible Man," which changed his approach to representation in art. "It allowed me to set a path away from those abstract collages and mixed-media work," he told me. Ellison's piercing insight, that Black people were invisible because white people refused to see them, was a revelation. It also made Marshall realize that he could use the human figure to explore the phenomenon of being present and absent at the same time.

This idea is embodied in "A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self" (1980), the first figurative painting Marshall had done in several years. Only eight inches tall by six and a half inches wide, on paper, it shows the head and torso of a Black man in a wide-brimmed black hat, against a dark-gray background. His skin is so dark that all we see at first are the dazzling whites of his eyes, a triangle of white shirt, and eighteen teeth in a comically wide, gap-toothed grin. "There's a joke about people being so black that you can't see them at night unless they're smiling," Marshall told me. "Being Black was a negative, and for me this was the starting point from which I could build an image of Blackness without those negative associations."

Instead of oil paint, he used egg tempera, which he mixed according to the formula in a fifteenth-century treatise by the Renaissance artist Cennino Cennini. This gave his Black figure an uncanny depth and richness of tone. "With egg tempera, as with fresco painting, you have to know what you're doing because the medium dries so quickly," Marshall said to me. "It allows you to be deliberate in your approach." Marshall had no interest in chance or the sort of random order that many contemporary artists used to give an effect of spontaneity. He wanted total control of everything that happened in his work. He also wanted to be a painter of social and political history, and the question he asked himself was: "How do you address history with a painting that doesn't look like Giotto or Géricault or Ingres, but without abandoning the knowledge that painters had accumulated over the centuries?"

The key to "A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self," Marshall told me, "is that every single shape you see in it was calculated in a way that exercises a certain force against the edges. The angle and the crease of the hat, the location of the shirt, the gap in the teeth, all those things are lined up on vectors that either stabilize or add tension to the direction those shapes are going in—it's plotted like a mathematical equation." The result is shockingly vivid. He had turned a racist caricature into a powerful, disturbing, and complex work of art. Martha Koplin, who opened her L.A. gallery in 1982, heard about Marshall and asked him to bring in some of his work. He brought "A Portrait," and she sold it the next day, for eight hundred and fifty dollars, to a Los Angeles collector who donated it, three years ago, to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Several more "Invisible Man" paintings followed. In each one, the Black figure's outlines are barely visible against the black background, but the longer you look the more you see. The figure is simultaneously there and not there.

After they married in 1989, Marshall and Cheryl Bruce went back to South Carolina to shoot "Daughters of the Dust." Marshall was the production designer for two more independent films after that, one of which was Haile Gerima's "Sankofa." Filmmaking usually required working with other people, though, and Marshall preferred to be alone in his studio. In the early nineties, he painted tender visions of Black lovers in domestic interiors, and strange, surrealistic works that borrowed images from African folklore and Haitian voodoo. The breakthrough came in 1993, with "The Lost Boys" and "De Style." The next year, he began work on the "Garden Project," a series of large paintings that confirmed his new direction as a history painter.

His subject was the public-housing projects that had been introduced in the nineteen-twenties to get low-income families out of urban slums—a well-intentioned experiment that poor planning, spreading poverty, and the drug wars turned into a nationwide disaster. Marshall and his family had lived in one of these developments, called Nickerson Gardens, when they moved to Los Angeles in 1963. "This was before the projects were overloaded with people who were out of work," he said. "I would mark the transformation to sometime after the 1974 recession, when the cycles of poverty set in. After that, nobody wanted to live in the projects, but when we were there everybody did." Marshall's tapestry-like paintings, which are on unstretched canvas, with grommets to hang them by, show well-maintained buildings, neatly dressed Black people gardening and enjoying one another's company, children running or biking to school, and lots of songbirds, blue sky, and green lawns. "The Garden Project paintings are overabundant, particularly lush, particularly rich in surface and mark-making," Marshall wrote in a 2000 essay. "[The] sky is always just a little too bright a blue; the sun is always beaming just a little too gaily; there are bluebirds of happiness and flowers bursting out all over the place." Why all the too muchness? "I wanted to evoke some of the hope that the projects started with, but also to demonstrate a little bit of the despair," he told me. "And the way I did that was to go over the top, with the Disneyland fantasy and the bluebirds." The gangs and the drugs and the poverty that overwhelmed the projects are what we remember, not the utopian dreams that inspired them. As his work would demonstrate again and again in the years to come, Marshall was not interested in depicting Black trauma. He wanted to show that there has always

been more to the Black experience in America than oppression and humiliation—that somehow, in spite of everything, Black lives have been and can be rewarding, diverse, and full of joy.

The dense, matte, ultra-black skin that he gave to everyone in these paintings is a rhetorical statement about Blackness itself—not realistic but didactic. "When you say Black people, Black culture, Black history, you have to show that," he remarked, in one of our conversations. "You have to demonstrate that black is richer than it appears to be, that it is not just darkness but a color." Marshall worked with the three black pigments that can be bought in a paint store—ivory black, carbon black, and Mars black—and he mixed them with cobalt blue, or chrome-oxide green, or dioxazine violet. The result, which is fully visible only in the original painting, not in reproductions, is something entirely his own. "That's what got me to the place I am now, where the black is fully chromatic," he said.

The "Garden Project" paintings were shown at the Art Institute of Chicago, in a 1995 group exhibition called "About Place," curated by Madeleine Grynsztejn, and soon afterward they appeared at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. Shainman had become Marshall's New York dealer, working in collaboration with Martha Koplin in Santa Monica. All five paintings sold quickly, four of them to museums and one to a private collector. "Kerry had a waiting list from then on," Shainman recalls. It was a limited one, and buyers had to be patient, because Marshall worked slowly. As Shainman explained, "Kerry told me right at the beginning that every painting he did had to have a reason for existing, and he never, never produced for the market."

In 1997, recognition "was just raining on me," Marshall said. He was invited to show at the Whitney Biennial and at Documenta X, the big international art exhibition in Kassel, Germany, and the MacArthur Foundation awarded him one of its "genius" grants: sixty thousand dollars a year, for five years. He used the money to buy the building his studio was in—to buy it outright, with no mortgage. Being debt-free has always been important to him. Until quite recently, he did all the maintenance work and improvements on the two-story brick house that he and Bruce had bought in 1992, on Chicago's South Side. Their neighborhood, called Bronzeville, had once attracted successful Black professionals—doctors, lawyers, musicians—but by the nineteen-sixties most of them had left, and the area had been in decline for many years. The house, which he saw in a local listing, had been abandoned and occupied by squatters, and it was in bad shape. Marshall bought it because the price was low and he could make the necessary repairs himself—putting in new bathrooms and a new roof and shoring up the floors, with help from Bruce. "He referred to me as unskilled labor," she said, and added, "Our kitchen window was shot out one New Year's Eve. The next year, we heard a similar noise. No windows were broken, but a week later I was sweeping the second floor and I found a bullet."

Marshall stopped a police car one day, described the shootings, and asked what could be done about them. "Stay away from the windows," he was told. "About eight years ago, when our neighbors threatened to harm us, I did go shopping for a firearm, but I didn't buy it," Marshall said. "Guns are really expensive. I knew that if I got one I was probably going to use it, so we had to find a better way." Moving to a safer neighborhood was not an option. Aya-Nikole Cook, a former student of Marshall's who became his first (and last) studio assistant, from 1995 to 2013, told me that she often felt nervous because he and Bruce would confront their neighbors for playing too-loud music at night. The house was their home, and they refused to be pushed out. Bruce was attached to her substantial garden in the back yard. The greeting on her answering machine, updated regularly, always began with a horticultural note: "Peonies are blooming. Please leave a message." As Cook explained, "They both felt very strongly that once you achieve a level of success you have a responsibility to the neighborhood. . . . They expanded my view in so many ways." The Bronzeville neighborhood has improved considerably in recent years, and in 2017, to Bruce's utter amazement, Marshall agreed to a complete renovation of their

## NOTES TOWARD AN ELEGY

The Cypriot sun is impatient, a woman undressed
who can't spare the time to dress, so light
like a vitrine holds even a storm.
One day in the Old City, a pineapple rain.
And I'm on my way home from the pharmacy, carrying my little bag
of cures.
Refuge at the café in the nameless square.
Nihal brings espresso poured over ice, turns off the music.
We listen to rain fall through the light until the end.

White wine greening in a glass.
Lion rampant in the sky. Moon reclined gorgeous in her silver shift.
Polished newels. Door askew in its frame.

Hot mornings. Hot apple tea, honeyed.
The mountains a fist knuckled on the horizon.
Dust is coming, dust is not yet here.

Whenever her hands dance, I tell her how beautiful.
She says there's so much other movement I do not perceive.
And I accept the presence of dances invisible to me.

Figs in the tree, figs on the stones.
Stains of rotting fruit spread and shadow at the sun's whim.

That steady dissolution of body into form that signals the progress
of a masterpiece.

Copper bowl in her hands. In the bowl in the hands, olive leaves burn.

I ask her to read to me. I like the way her voice handles words.
What will she read? First she laughs.
It's a good day to laugh. The coffee is strong. And the light.
Why read when we can talk? When all our friends are here?

My perversity is silence, a shudder stopped
in the throat. When all the time I hear her voice:
I am glad my soul met your soul.

—Examples of what, I do not know. It's just that
for a time I took Love out walking
with me everywhere and sometimes I thought Child, whose is this child?
when it played in the square. A sunshine creature, terrifying,
yet still I looked at it like I've never looked at a stranger
who promises water to the waterless for nothing.
And now I lie awake pretending
everyone in the world lies still the way the living are still:
not entirely, never entirely.

—*Elisa Gonzalez*

house, which involved an architect and a contractor. The job took two years, during which they lived on the twenty-first floor of an apartment building overlooking Lake Michigan.

Marshall never had creative blocks or fallow periods. He explored a wide range of media, including photography, video, and sculptural works such as the 1998 "Mementos"—vastly oversized stamps and ink pads scattered around a room, with their printed messages ("Black Is Beautiful," "Black Power," "We Shall Overcome," "By Any Means Necessary," "Burn Baby Burn") on the wall. The "Garden Project" was followed by "Souvenir," a series that memorializes the civil-rights struggles in the sixties. Violence and trauma are present in them, but not on view. In a painting of a middle-class living room, a woman with mysterious golden wings bends to move a vase of flowers, wall hangings mourn the martyred Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the faces of the four girls who were killed in the 1963 Birmingham church bombing and other victims of white supremacy float near the ceiling. (The Marshall family had left Birmingham a month before the bombing.) "Heirlooms and Accessories," a later work, shows three open lockets on chains, each one bearing a photograph of a different white woman. The women were part of a large and festive audience that gathered on August 7, 1930, in Marion, Indiana, to watch the lynching of two young Black men. Marshall had singled them out from a photograph of the event, which is reproduced in the background, but so faintly that the other celebrants and the victims are hard to see. The three white women are "accessories" to the crime, ready to hang from someone's unsuspecting neck.

"Kerry has such a whimsical, quizzical mind," Arthur Jafa told me. "His paintings take on the whole weight of Western civilization, but I don't know another person with whom I laugh as much when we talk." In the years since Jafa and Marshall worked together on "Daughters of the Dust," Jafa had become an artist as well as a cinematographer, but his career in art had developed more slowly than Marshall's. "He is amazingly generous," Jafa said. "He tried fiercely to get me into Documenta in 1997. He's not just a friend but a comrade."

"Rythm Mastr," Marshall's visual Black superhero narrative, started in 1999 as a comic strip. Images from it were shown at the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh that year, on newsprint, and it had a limited run in the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* while the show was on. Since then, the evolving concept has appeared, in different forms, at the David Zwirner gallery, and, this summer, in a large group exhibition of comic-strip art at MCA Chicago. Marshall is now working on a new version in the form of a graphic novel, which will become the basis for an animated film, and then a live-action feature film.

We talked about this hugely ambitious project one morning. Marshall was in his studio on Michigan Avenue, an eighty-by-twenty-foot building that an architect was commissioned to build, to Marshall's exact specifications, in 2011. (Architecture, like brain surgery, is one of the rare disciplines that he hasn't had time to master.) He was sitting at his desk on the mezzanine, where the walls are covered with drawings, prints, and images of all kinds. One section is devoted to his meticulously organized art library, and another to dozens of small action figures, dolls, furniture, and other objects that he often makes himself and uses as models for things that will appear, enlarged and altered, in his paintings. Genial and self-contained, as always, Marshall took pictures on his iPhone to show me the rest of the studio—the twenty-by-twenty-foot area on the ground floor where he does his painting, and the adjoining, much larger workshop space, filled with machinery and tools to make whatever he needs. "I'm in the midst right now of developing the graphic novel," he said, "but I also paint every day. I'm always doing several things simultaneously—they overlap, and become completely integrated. I hate to have people drop in on me here because it breaks my concentration. Cheryl gives me a courtesy call before she comes, and"—laughing—"she has to call before she gets to the corner of my block."

Through the decades, Marshall said,

a lot of people have tried to introduce Black superheroes. One of the first was the Black Panther, who appeared in Marvel Comics' "The Fantastic Four" in 1966. "But none of them got the kind of traction that Superman or Batman or Spider-Man had, and that gave me a challenge." Marshall saw no point in a Black superhero who was created by a white artist, and for that reason he has little interest in the new Black Panther series that was developed by Marvel, and written by Ta-Nehisi Coates. "If all you can do is take characters that already exist, it's a failure to me," he said. Marshall wanted to invent his own characters, and a narrative and a world in which they could function. He found his narrative in two things that were happening simultaneously in Chicago in the late nineties: the "explosion of violence" that the gang wars were inflicting on young people, and the demolition of public housing, "which moved kids into neighborhoods where the gangs didn't want them." His superhero is dual—Rythm Mastr, an old man who teaches his young protégé, Farell, the ancient secrets of drumming that can activate the powers of African tribal objects on display at the Art Institute of Chicago. There are echoes of Obi-Wan Kenobi and Luke Skywalker here, but the characters are different, and, anyway, why not? " 'Star Wars' is more than a trilogy," Marshall said. "Those characters are iconic—there isn't a person on the planet who doesn't know who Darth Vader is." What Marshall has in mind is a film on the scale of the Steven Spielberg and George Lucas epic. "My goal is to match the iconic level of 'Star Wars,'" he said.

Marshall clearly sees this magnum opus as both an art work and a cinematic blockbuster. "I think it can be as complex as anything I've done as a painter," he said recently to Arthur Jafa, who shares Marshall's love of comics, and, in particular, of Jack Kirby, the comic-book artist who collaborated with the writer Stan Lee to co-create the Fantastic Four, Iron Man, the Incredible Hulk, and other Marvel Comics superheroes. "Jack Kirby was the man, the king," Jafa told me. "A Jewish guy from the Lower East Side invented all this stuff. You think of the ten biggest-selling movies of all time, and several of them are Marvel Comics adaptations, right? And they all come out of this one guy Jack Kirby. He had a bigger visual impact on me than anyone. I think he's up there with Charlie Parker and Picasso and Miles Davis."

Kirby's drawings, Marshall said, have an artistry that goes beyond technical skill. "He was a great storyteller with pictures—looking at one of his comic books is like watching a movie. The page layout and the way the action is drawn is really dynamic. There's a kind of electric plasma that he did with dots—they're called Kirby dots—to show something that's been charged with radiation. I always saw the absence of Black superheroes in comic books as a failure of Black imagination that needed to be resolved, and I wanted to be an inventor, like Kirby, rather than a follower."

In our mezzanine conversation, Marshall told me that the "Rythm Mastr" story line has become increasingly complex. There are now two different groups of people trying to stop the gang violence—Farell and his crew of Afrocentric drummers, and a posse of wheelchair-bound tech wizards, victims of drive-by shootings, who use weaponized robots against gangs. He also said that Chicago is no longer where it happens. "I've substituted a city and a world that I created myself," he said. "It's invention the whole way. And I don't think it will take another ten years. It's possible within the next five."

In the early two-thousands, a few perceptive curators started to think about giving Marshall a mid-career survey show. Elizabeth Smith, the chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago at the time, approached him about doing one. Marshall didn't want a survey. What he wanted was a show of existing and new works of his that dealt with Black identity and Black culture in white society. This led to "Kerry James Marshall: One True Thing, Meditations on Black Aesthetics," which opened in Chicago in 2003 and travelled to museums in Miami, Baltimore, New York (the Studio Museum), and Birmingham. Five years later, though,

*"School of Beauty, School of Culture," from*

Madeleine Grynsztejn, who had recently become the director of MCA Chicago, proposed doing a full-scale retrospective of Marshall's work there and he said yes. At Grynsztejn's suggestion, they decided to wait until he turned sixty. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles signed on to take the show when Helen Molesworth became its chief curator in 2014. The Metropolitan Museum of Art had already agreed to do the same, a decision that helped make the exhibition a major art-world event.

© KERRY JAMES MARSHALL / COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

*2012, channels Marshall's earlier work "De Style," as well as Velázquez's 1656 painting "Las Meninas."*

Marshall gave Grynsztejn and Molesworth complete freedom to do the kind of show they wanted, a chronological survey that concentrated on his paintings. They wanted to call it "Kerry James Marshall: Old Master," but he balked at that. "Kerry didn't like the word 'old,'" Molesworth confided, smiling. "He came back with 'Mastry.' I think he liked playing with the word—what it meant to have mastery, and to misspell it and make it colloquial, and put it in the tradition of African American wordplay." "Mastry" opened at MCA Chicago in April, 2016. I saw it a few months later in New York, where its seventy-two paintings filled two floors in the Met Breuer, at that time the Met's modern and contemporary branch. (The building had formerly housed the Whitney Museum of American Art.) For me and for many others, the exhibition placed Kerry James Marshall in the pantheon of great living artists. "One might have thought it impossible for contemporary art to simultaneously occupy a position of beauty, difficulty, didacticism, and formalism with such power," the artist Carroll Dunham wrote, in *Artforum*. "There really are no other American painters who have taken on such a project."

Painting after painting bore witness to the fusion of image and idea, and to the subtle, not so subtle, and sometimes hilarious references to art history. The "Vignette" series (2003-12) shows mostly young Black people in antique clothes enjoying the rococo charms of Fragonard's "The Progress of Love." "Do Black people seek out pleasure?" Marshall asked me. "Of course. So let's have some of it."

In "Black Painting," whose blackness

is so deep that it takes a minute or more to make out the image, two people are in bed, one of them a woman who has just heard something that prompts her to raise herself up on one arm. Marshall's junior high school was a few blocks from the Black Panther headquarters in Los Angeles, and he remembers the police raid on it in 1969. His painting shows "the instant when nothing has happened yet, but it's about to happen," he said. "It's not Fred Hampton and his wife; it's meant to evoke the whole range of police raids on the Black Panthers." The painting is dated 2003-06, because Marshall was not satisfied with its first incarnation; he took it back from his New York gallery and continued to work on it, off and on, for three years.

Marshall's paintings often have inexplicable elements. "7am Sunday Morning"—the title refers to Edward Hopper's "Early Sunday Morning"—is divided down the middle. The left half is a precise, almost photo-realist rendering of a street crossing near Marshall's studio, with red brick storefronts, a pedestrian in a yellow jacket, and a flight of birds overhead. The only unclear object is a blurred gray car, speeding across the space and linking the left side of the painting to the right side, where nothing is clear. I asked Marshall what was going on there. "It's like a lens flare," he replied. "It's the sun reflected in the glass of that building on the corner, an optical phenomenon that lets you introduce into the space something that's not there, a mirage." His aim was to catch "a moment that's miraculous in the context of a mundane, ordinary day." There are several such moments in his huge, 2012 "School of Beauty, School of Culture," which channels his earlier "De Style" and also Velázquez's "Las Meninas." Here we are in a hairdressing salon, where eight or nine women talk or preen or stand and watch. The critic Peter Plagens described it as "one of the most complex orchestrations of color in contemporary painting." A large poster of a woman with a flower in her hair, on the wall at the far right, is from Chris Ofili's 2010 show at Tate Britain in London. ("I was absolutely floored when I saw that image," Ofili told me. "I'm still honored when I think of it.") Two toddlers are in the foreground, one of them a boy, who is peering at a distorted yellow-and-white shape on the floor, which no one else seems to have noticed; it is an image that can be seen only from an extreme angle, an anamorphosis, like the skull in Hans Holbein's "The Ambassadors"—in Marshall's painting, it is Walt Disney's Sleeping Beauty. The idea of white female beauty as the impregnable standard in Western art is only one of the questions raised by this endlessly evocative painting.

Marshall's craftsmanship and free-ranging imagination make his later work as unpredictable as "A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self." The "Painter" series shows confident, sumptuously dressed women and men, several of whom pose in front of their unfinished, paint-by-number canvases. Anyone can paint, they seem to say; their absurdly oversized palettes are abstract paintings in themselves. There is a series of imaginary portraits, most of them of historical figures such as Nat Turner, the rebel slave, who holds the hatchet he has used to kill his master, and Harriet Tubman, portrayed as a young woman, with the man she just married, who has vanished from the historical record. The exhibition at the Met also included an example of Marshall's photographs of people—himself, his wife, and several close friends—in black light, which is ultraviolet light. "What

this does is to give this beautiful dark tone to the skin, and a kind of blue wash over everything," Naomi Beckwith, the Guggenheim Museum's chief curator, and one of the sitters, said. "Kerry has always been interested in the question 'What would art history look like if we had saturated it with Black American cultural history?'"

The most indelible painting in the show, to me, was his 2014 "Untitled: (Studio)." It shows four people and a yellow dog in a room where radiant color and magically calibrated design make it feel like the most desirable place on earth. It's hard to imagine a painting more mysteriously seductive than this, but Chris Ofili is convinced that Marshall's best work is yet to come. Comparing him recently to a Formula One racing driver, Ofili said, "For quite some years, we've been watching Kerry doing warmup laps to get his tires sticky. Now he's ready to assert his authority on the contemporary history of painting. His tires are sticky, and he knows he can take the corners a little bit tighter than before."

A big retrospective can derail an artist's career, but Marshall took his in stride. When "Mastry" was about to close at the Met, the museum gave him an informal party in the Temple of Dendur which was one of the most joyous gatherings I have ever attended. Something magnificent had happened, and was being celebrated. Soon afterward, Marshall went to the opening in Los Angeles, and then returned, with a sigh of relief, to his studio and his unrelenting work schedule. Only a few people were aware that he had undergone successful surgery for prostate cancer early in 2016. In the past two years, Cheryl Bruce has had a pulmonary embolism and a second knee replacement. They are both in good health now, and they have decided to move to Los Angeles. It won't happen for a few years—they are too busy with ongoing projects and obligations—but the bitterly cold Chicago winters and a yearning to spend more time with their families are too strong to resist. Marshall's brothers and sisters and their children live in or near L.A., and so does Bruce's married daughter, Sydney Kamlager, who went into politics and was recently elected to the California State Senate. (Marshall, her godfather as well as her stepfather, now calls her Senator Godchild.)

In the meantime, their Chicago life continues as before. Marshall gets up at five-thirty or six every morning and is in his studio by eight-thirty. Before her knee operation, Bruce was performing several times a week in "Theater for One," a production, in Chicago, for a solo actor and a sole audience

member. In the evening, Bruce cooks dinner, and they argue and spar amiably. She makes fun of his erudition, calls him El Jefe, and threatens to beat him up. Years ago, they had talked about having a child. "The timing was always wrong, and somehow it didn't work out," Bruce said. After dinner, they watch classic films from Marshall's extensive collection, and at eleven-thirty they tune in to "NHK World-Japan," a Japanese channel (in English) that Marshall, who discovered it, describes as being devoted to explaining what it means to be Japanese. "You see craft traditions that are hundreds and sometimes thousands of years old," he said. Lately, they've been glued to the sumo-wrestling tournaments that are shown for fifteen days every other month. "Cheryl has become obsessed with sumo wrestling," Marshall said.

Since his retrospective, the prices paid for Marshall's work embarrass him. "Past Times" sold at Sotheby's in 2018 for twenty-one million dollars, the highest auction price yet registered for a living African American artist. (The buyer was Sean Combs.) David Zwirner, the mega-dealer who represents Marshall in Europe, told me that his new paintings can sell for seven or eight million dollars. Marshall is a semi-celebrity: his name turns up in rap songs, including "Vendetta," by Vic Mensa, and "One Way Flight," by Benny the Butcher. He is working on a new series of paintings, called "Black and part Black Birds," which will eventually include all the species in John James Audubon's "The Birds of America" that are black or have black markings. Using Audubon's images as a starting point, he depicts each species in a fanciful environment, perched on trees and posts adorned with brilliant flowers. Marshall is a longtime birdwatcher. A few years ago, he captured a juvenile crow in his bare hands—the bird was sitting on a low limb of a tree near his property, and he managed to sneak up on it from behind. He tied one of the bird's legs to a milk crate on the second-floor deck of his house, took photos and videos, set out water and mulberries for it to eat, and released it the next morning. "I'd always had a fantasy about a crow that was my friend, and would come to my call," he told me.

*"Ultimately, my goal is vengeance, but I'm still very much in the research phase."*

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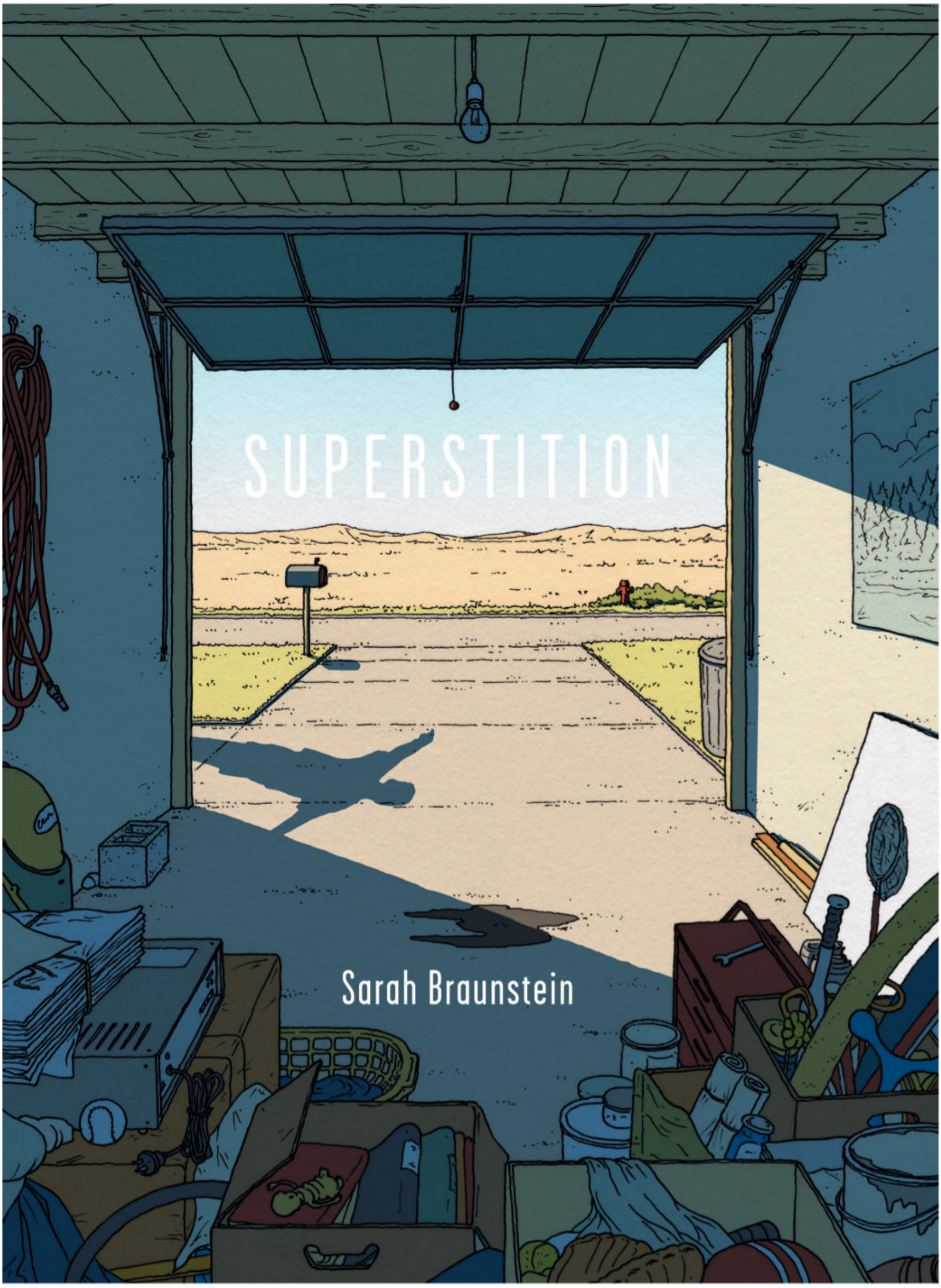
"London Bridge," which he painted in 2017, is his most recent history picture in the grand manner. The famous landmark was judged unsafe for traffic in the early sixties, and an American entrepreneur named Robert P. McCulloch bought it from the city, dismantled it, and used the parts to create a replica, as a tourist attraction, on the shore of Arizona's Lake Havasu. "The picture is about dislocation," according to Marshall, who obviously had a fine time painting it. Among the tourists strolling near the bridge is a Black man, dressed in the Beefeater costume of the guards of the Tower of London. He's wearing a sandwich board that advertises "Olaudah's Fish and Chips," which refers to another dislocation. "One of the earliest slave narratives was by Olaudah Equiano," Marshall explained, smiling broadly. "He and his sister were sold into slavery as children, and Olaudah ended up as a servant to a British sea captain. He eventually became free, settled in England, married an Englishwoman, and got rich from his book." In the painting, Marshall said, "the staff he carries has a picture of Queen Victoria, and the song he's singing"—it's notated on a scroll—"is the Rolling Stones' 'Sympathy for the Devil.'" The painting was bought by the Tate, where it quickly became a crowd favorite.

Marshall's determination to know more than anyone else about whatever he does is unabated. "Kerry is like Goya, you know," Madeleine Grynsztejn told me. "He's a political, social, emotional, intellectual powerhouse. There's a drawing that Goya made in his last years of an old man, bent over, leaning on two sticks, who says '*Aun aprendo*'—I'm still learning. That's Kerry." ♦



# SUPERSTITION

Sarah Braunstein



ILLUSTRATION BY OWEN D. POMERY

They were born to the cul-de-sacs of the Arizona desert, hose-drinking boys, allowed to run loose provided they came when called, and they did, these two. James and Lenny. Obedient and clever. Garages packed with scooters, go-carts, arsenals of water guns, each machine-gun soaker more elaborate than the last. They'd outgrown the toys only yesterday, but the rift was total. Now they were sixteen and spent afternoons in the food court dreaming up pranks, or sprawled on the carpet watching sitcoms. Their aimlessness was permitted—not a mark against their future. They had been in Gifted and Talented. Lenny was funny and good at math; James was an ace mimic. Sometimes he was in the school plays. James wanted to become an actor, a theatre rat in Manhattan; Lenny wanted to write for "The Simpsons."

Lenny told James about all the best things. Snoop and LimeWire and "Eraserhead."

Now eBay. Lenny was one of those people, tapped into a certain frequency, knew everything first. He had an idea, he said, wanted to sell something. A fish mounted on a wooden plaque, which he'd bought a couple of years ago at a Goodwill for three dollars and hung in his bedroom to annoy his mother, for whom fish were not décor.

Your fish? You want to sell *that*? James didn't understand.

The fish meant nothing. It was only ironic. But on eBay he called it "LUCKY TROUT! (WORKS IN THREE-MONTH CYCLES ONLY.)" Starting bid: fifteen dollars.

No one will pay fifteen for that, James said.

But he watched the whole thing happen—saw Lenny's fingers punching the keyboard, spinning a yarn, commanding money from a fool. In the description, he said that after he'd caught and mounted the fish all these unusually lucky things began to happen—he was the seventh caller to Power 92 and won concert tickets, then won fifty bucks on a scratch-off, then his mother's doctor called to say the tumor was benign. After three months, he had a dream. In the dream, the fish spoke to him. It said, Share the wealth. At this point his luck started wearing off. He got a parking ticket, and other annoying things happened, until he gave the fish to his sister, at which point she got a spot on the gymnastics team, etc., and then after three months she had a dream, the fish gave her the same message, and now they are selling it and hope the lucky winner respects its commands.

A minor bidding war ensued. A person in Philadelphia won the trout for ninety-three bucks.

Ninety-three! Ninety-three! Lenny jerk-danced around his bedroom like Elaine Benes, whom they both loved.

People are strange, James observed.

Lenny said they were going to be rich. He was certain. He sat down on the bed. The dark, newly shaved follicles on his checks awed James. He was so hairy already, like a hobo in a comic strip. So far Lenny had used the Internet only to steal movies and music. He hadn't understood. Cash! He rammed the heel of his palm to his forehead. Duh, he said.

James wanted to sell something, too. He could sell the mirror in which he watched his body grow. He could sell his pants that no longer fit. He could sell his appendix or a kidney. Everything extra. His gallbladder. He was unclear on whether you really needed a gallbladder.

Do you need a gallbladder?

Me personally?

Does *one*.

No one really knows, Lenny said.

The next day, they surveyed the objects on James's dresser. He had a trophy commending his participation in a recreational soccer league, and a black comb, and a framed photograph of his parents from before he was born, nineteen, twenty, Ivory-soapy. His mother had been dead for a decade. All his life, that picture had sat there—his father would notice if it was gone. The comb, maybe, he could say that it had been used by someone important.

None of my clothes fit, James said. I can sell my clothes.

He was in the midst of what was called, disgustingly, a *growth spurt*. He feared he was becoming problematically tall, that he would never stop growing, his ankles and wrists narrowing like a paraplegic's. Fatigue often rushed over him, as if he'd taken a handful of pills. Growing, *spurting*, did that, like some sick medicine reaching his blood, like the weighted cape for an X-ray. Lenny liked to tease: Need a nap, baby Jimmy? But Lenny was jealous because he was short, chubby, handsome but vaguely disproportioned, with an ass that he called his rump.

Both boys were of the impression that they were somehow grotesque. This was part of their bond. There was a children's book called "Big Dog, Little Dog," about a friendship between different-sized dogs, and Lenny had given it to James for Christmas with a clever inscription.

James would not sell that.

No one wants your old clothes, Lenny said.

They opened plastic bins in the garage, went through games and puzzles and plastic trash, the same shit that Lenny and every other kid they knew had, all the batteries dead, screens scratched. He felt sorry for his father for paying for all this shit, sorry that whatever money his mother had earned—she'd been a fourth-grade teacher during the period she was able to work—had gone to purchasing trash. He had not ardently wanted any of this. Or had he? He certainly didn't think so, had no memory of wanting it, and, even if he had, they should have told him no. They should have had the foresight to give him better things, though what was better he couldn't say.

Then James remembered that in his underwear drawer, in a velvet box that opened like a clamshell, was his silver cross. He got it out, showed it to Lenny, who pumped his fist and made slot-machine noises. Say it was used in an exorcism, Lenny said. Don't polish it. Keep it tarnished.

It's my First Communion cross, James said.

Huh, Lenny said.

Theirs had been on the same day.

James set it on the dresser.

Maybe—Lenny began.

James didn't want to hear.

Yeah, he said. I guess I shouldn't.

But why not?

He didn't ask.

Because of his mother? Because of God?

That cross would sit in that box for the next seventy years. He was supposed to keep it tucked in his underwear forever, like a hedge against the Devil, a thing to pass on, to live in his own kid's underwear drawer. He didn't want a kid

to waste money on. He knew that already. Why couldn't he send this supposedly precious thing into the vastness?

He looked at Lenny's face, that distracted, squinty expression which meant he was working on a joke, and for some reason James didn't say anything. He wanted to do it alone.

Later that night, after Lenny left, he began to make up a story: This cross has been in my family for many, many years. It once . . .

What did it once? The exorcism was good, but he didn't want to use Lenny's idea. He was tired again. This time he embraced his fatigue, got into bed even before Conan. His mind dove into blankness like a bird off a cliff.

It would always be in his nature to get rid of things. He'd vowed it early. After his grandparents died, his father had to hire a special company to clear out their house. Men in white suits like astronauts shuffled in and out. They had kept everything, Nana and Pops, every piece of mail that came through the slot, decades of birthday cards, church newsletters, public notices, each one of his report cards and his dead mother's report cards, nothing locatable but everything there, somewhere, lost in plain sight. Then it all got put in a white van and taken to be incinerated. The empty house smelled like chemicals, a burning lemony air, and James vowed that he would never have more than he needed. He would keep the fat trimmed off his life, always; whoever had the job of cleaning up after James died would feel only relief when they opened the door to his room, only a sense that their day wasn't spent after all.

He woke with a thing in his head, as if he'd dreamed it, though he remembered no dream: a Pope. A man in a hat on a balcony.

He sat up, knowing what he was going to do.

In a spirit of rebellion he went to the school library at lunch to do some research. At the only computer with an Internet connection he wrote, This cross was blessed by Pope Pius XII. It has been in my family since 1915. My great-great uncle got to meet him at an important council in Vienna. One of the controversial Popes, this particular Pius had been reluctant to intervene as a genocide unfolded in Europe—but James didn't include that detail.

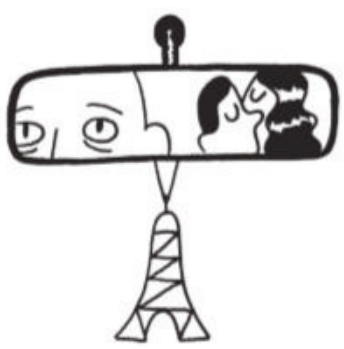
He was pleased by the story. Writing it made him feel alert, subversive. Anyone who would be moved by that Pope, or by any Pope, anyone for whom such an object had meaning deserved to be misled. Whether the buyer was Nazi or Catholic, he would feel no remorse taking that fool's money.

He learned in the coming days that there were people who collected anything a Pope has touched or blessed. The glove a woman was wearing when she shook his hand. The very fly that irritated His Holiness while he breakfasted one morning in Lisbon—you could buy that bug in a clear plastic box. The number of watchers of his cross startled him; then, as it rose, began to disturb him. He was tempted to call Lenny, but he just sat still, growing fearful, certain he was committing a crime.

Fifteen people. Twenty-three. Fifty-seven. A hundred and two.

He sat in his bedroom, on the computer his uncle had given them and that his father permitted James to keep in his room. His father did not know about all these eyes, all over the world, seeing the laminate wood grain of his dresser top, the cloudy tarnish on the silver cross. The number of watchers rose, and he felt a shiver down his back, as though someone had actually stepped behind him. He turned off the monitor.

Atheism flooded his veins as if from a spigot he'd opened. It was another kind



of religion, almost, nonbelief. A kind of moral fierceness. What's worse than an atheist? What's more repugnant to the faithful? He wanted to be that.

He should kill a spider. He should say it landed on another Pope. Or on someone better, more powerful. Michael Jackson. He'd had it preserved, but now his mother had cancer and they needed the cash to pay for her treatment. She might die, he could write. Unless this Michael Jackson spider saves her. He imagined a life in which he supported himself with this kind of fraud.

The auction ended at 5 P.M. the following Tuesday, but he wasn't at the computer to watch. He was eating dinner with his father. Pork chops, applesauce in individual-serving cups for dipping. As he ate he found himself growing nervous, for now the crime would have a victim, and who would that be? His father said, Sheila wants us to go hiking with her this weekend. Saturday. Three, four miles. Nothing too strenuous. Papago Park. What do you think?

She was his father's girlfriend, a special-ed teacher. Most of his father's girlfriends were teachers, though not all from the same town. He was a school psychologist, rotated through the district. The new one drove a yellow Beetle. Once she had been married to a ceramicist.

You want to come along? Sheila and I would love it if you'd join us.

James did not want to hike or bike or admire the crags in the earth or do any of their Saturday activities. He wanted to be still, like a lizard. He said that he and Lenny had plans to go to SunSplash on Saturday. Sure thing, his father said. He never took it personally, never forced James to do anything. That was the unspoken policy.

James went back to worrying about the cross. Perhaps the new owner would have it examined by an expert, a jeweller or a priest. His grandmother probably bought it at the church bookstore or ordered it from her angel catalogue—it couldn't be old enough to have been blessed by that Pope. He wanted to check the computer. He put down his fork.

Sometimes having to sit at a table with his father, listening to him eat, was unbearable. James hated when he was hard on his dad. His father was the most decent person James knew. The lock on James's door, for example.

When James was six or seven they put him on Santa's lap, and when Santa asked what he wanted he had said, My own apartment. He had meant it, hungered for privacy in a way that felt bodily. From his earliest memories that's what he'd wanted—a compartment, really. A cubby. His own air. Of course this was a story

everyone loved telling. His grandparents: an apartment! His own place! A knee-slapper. But his father had known not to make fun. His father had the next day installed a small lock, a hook and eye, on the inside of his bedroom door, at a level where James could reach it. He said, I want you to know I respect your privacy.

His father chewed his pork chops loudly, cleaned the applesauce cup with his index finger, licked his finger, and finally James excused himself. Tonight he locked himself in.

The winning bid was two hundred and ninety dollars.

Good Christ.

The number frightened him, a siren went off in his head, conspiracy, conspiracy, red syllables spinning. Should he tell his father?

No.

He called Lenny and confessed. He expected Lenny to chide him, or to be mad that James hadn't told him, but Lenny only said, A *Pope*? That's genius, man, that's sick! and James felt a pop of regret and went cold all over.

It's fraud, James said.

Lenny laughed. My fish was fraud, too.

It feels different.

Lenny said it wasn't a big deal. If James got caught he should claim to be an idiot who believed a stupid story—a gullible kid who'd only passed on what he'd been told. It's not illegal to sell bullshit, not in America. You could not be arrested for holding a false belief.

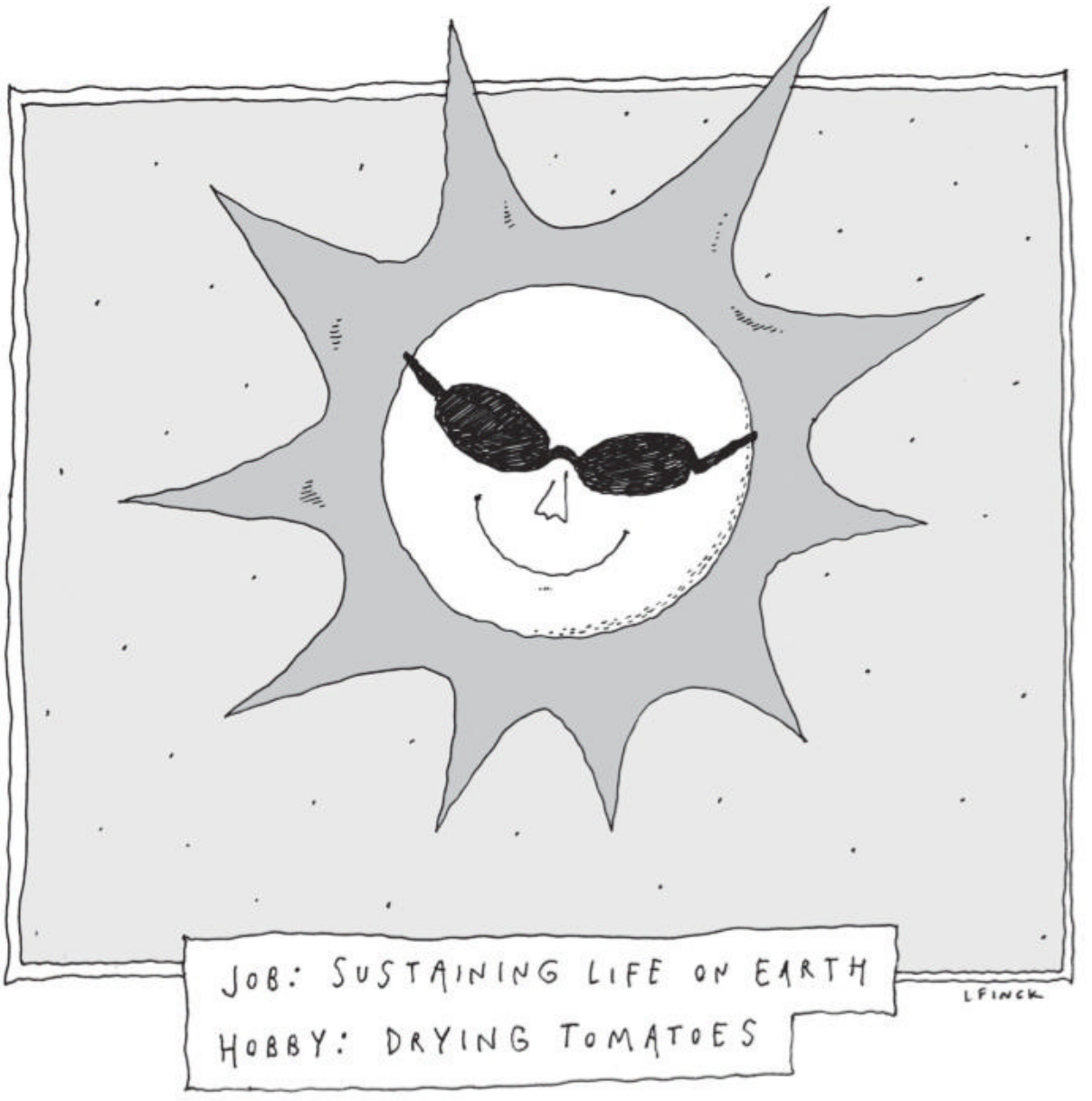
They talked about things one could buy with two hundred and ninety dollars.

I'm sorry I didn't tell you, James said before they hung up.

And Lenny said, You're cold-blooded, man. I respect that. I don't think I could sell mine.

James received an e-mail:

> Quite the showdown! I am the lucky winner. My name is Steven. Please share your address and I will send a check promptly by postal service. I prefer to use checks. I hope this is acceptable to you. I am old-fashioned (in most things, when I can be). When you send the cross, it would be kind of you to include a detailed writeup. Anything you know is appreciated—its provenance, ownership, travel history. For posterity. I will take great care of it, you can be sure. Yrs sincerely.




That night James dreamed of a fish on a plaque, a mechanical bass, one of those singing novelties, but no words came out, no command, just screeching, metal on metal, a mouth gasping for air, and after he woke he lay in his bed for a long time. Lenny would say it was a funny dream but it was not. He wouldn't tell Lenny.

The sunrise made his curtains red. He pictured the desert around him. In his mind he lifted its top, like the lid off a pot, and underneath, in a million divots and tunnels and burrows, every manner of bug fretting away, full of poison. Not just bugs. People, too. Bugs and people, toiling out of sight. A suffering class, an army of workers, always out of sight. He tried to remember them. He was supposed to be grateful he was not them; he had received this message from a young age, but you had to remember them to be grateful.

He knew he had made a mistake. He couldn't take the money. Taking that man's money made him feel sick. Steven's money. Bad luck. Nonsense, but there it was, suddenly clear. He was ashamed of his irrationality but would not compound it with denial. Before he left for school he made a decision, and he wrote an e-mail, simple and to the point:

> I've thought about it and I feel uncomfortable taking money for something of spiritual significance. You obviously care a lot about this. Please send me your address. I need no money. It's yours for free.

He felt better.

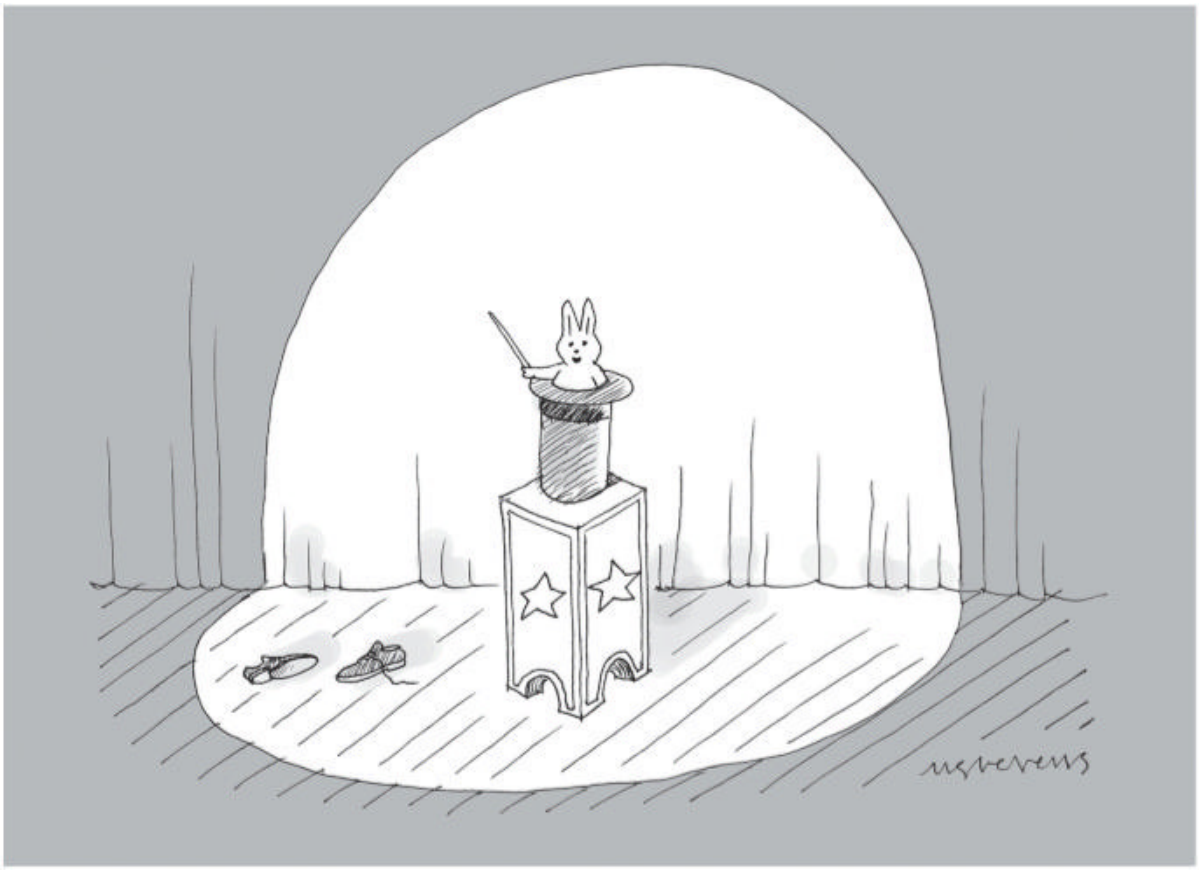
He was going to tell Lenny at lunch, but Lenny was busy talking about some girl who had apparently spent almost the entirety of typing period painting her nails with Wite-Out, and then, at the end, aced the unit test. A girl like that, Lenny mused. She commands respect.

Then the girl joined them, and Lenny introduced them.

That was quite a stunt in typing.

She tossed an arm like whatever.

Her name was Claudine. She had dyed black hair and a loud, zingy voice. Her fingers were long and skinny, and with the Wite-Out on her nails they reminded James of Q-tips. He said



*"And voilà! The magician disappears!"*

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this. She laughed and wiggled her fingers.

Lenny had math team that day, so James went home alone. The first thing he did was go to the computer, where he found another message:

> You're telling me you want to donate this object to me? Am I to believe what I'm hearing? Faithfully, Steven

The interrogative mood annoyed him. As did the sign-off. He did not want to say it again. He could not. Yes, send me your address, James wrote. He didn't put his name. It was three o'clock. He made himself a snack. He turned on the television. He watched bloopers, then an infomercial for the last piece of exercise equipment he'd ever need, a kind of pulley that would do miraculous things to both the male and female posterior, gravity defiance. When he went back to the computer, he found:

> I believe I am in the presence of a soul who has taken King Solomon's advice to heart. My willingness to pay such an exorbitant sum proves I am the rightful owner—is this my lesson, dear friend? If I read too much into your generosity, I would appreciate you not to dissuade me of my suspicion. It is a gift upon a gift. The cross has found a good home. I will cherish it! In gratitude, Steven

He included an address in Michigan.

James read it twice. Take my Nazi cross. That's what he wanted to write. But he didn't write anything. He got on his bike and rode to the post office, mailed the cross. No note, no information, no posterity, just the thing in its box. He swore he grew during this ride. He was a freak. It would not stop. By the time he got home, the bicycle seat was too low.

Sheila and his father made plans to go river rafting the next Saturday. Did he want to come along? They'd love it if he would. Couple hours. Nothing too serious.

Lenny and I have plans.

O.K., his father said.

But Lenny had math team, and James decided to stay home alone, watch some TV, read a magazine, shave his downy lip and the underside of his chin. Then he would nap. Or he would just sit by a window, sunlight streaming on his face, his limbs goose-bumped from air-conditioning, which he set at fifty-five when his father was gone. Fifty-three. Fifty. He wanted a freezer, loved being punched by heat when he stepped outside, which he did on the hour, letting the hot air blast his face. Immense, dangerous air, even in springtime. Then inside again to get cold. He was preparing to go. Titration. In and out.

It was the early days of sending pictures on the Internet. So when the e-mail came from Steven a week later, which said only, in the subject line, "THANK YOU," James almost didn't see the attachment, and then he almost didn't open it—he wasn't sure how to, or what he was opening. Finally he clicked on the right spot, certain his eyes would land on something awful. A penis, likely. A mutilated body. Or a category of horror he'd not yet been exposed to, something even Lenny hadn't prepared him for. But it was only a picture of a room. A twin bed, neatly made. A blue blanket, a white pillow, a window with its shade pulled halfway down, an expanse of unbroken gray sky in the glass. The bed had a plain wooden headboard. Above it, on the wall, his First Communion cross. Someone had pounded it into the wall with a nail. That was all the picture showed.

He didn't audition for the play that spring, even though the drama teacher had picked it specifically for him, and spent more time at home. His father grew concerned. Are you unhappy, James? His father had steady, warm eyes. They radiated goodness, like a horse's eyes, like a wise animal's.

Not at all, James said. And it was true, he realized. He was not unhappy. This was different from unhappiness. He simply felt that he owed no one anything. But he saw that his father was worried about him, so he went back to drama club.

He really was an excellent actor, had a kind of vacancy in his face that could be filled by anything. His movements were small, and he didn't try to do too much, didn't push. He was knobby, androgynous. He had the elegant slouch of a Frenchman. Unless he played a soldier, or a dignified prisoner, and then his spine was steel. He'd missed a month of rehearsal, but the teacher, Mr. Casey, gave him the role he'd wanted him to play all along—the lead—and the second choice got demoted to play the banker, and the banker went to the chorus.

When summer came he napped as much as possible. His limbs ached. His legs cramped at night. It helped to swim laps in the city pool. To kick. To hang

off a rubbery kickboard and motor dreamily until the lifeguard made him give up the lane for the geriatric club. He saw Lenny less. Lenny met a girl: Essie. She was a friend of Claudine's.

Did this wound James? He thought about it. He told himself no. Lenny was allowed to be normal. He did not want the things other people wanted, but Lenny should.

Lenny began calling him the Monk whenever he turned down plans.

He gave all his childhood junk to Goodwill. He lived in his cold, empty room. He grew in there, his bones. In the middle of summer vacation, he came home from an afternoon of swimming to find his father at the kitchen table, holding a piece of paper, mail spread out before him.

James, his father said. You've got to tell me what's going on.

James was damp, shirtless, a towel across his shoulders. The air-conditioning slammed him. The tiles on his bare feet sent scalding cold into legs. He'd forgotten to adjust the temperature before he left; he assumed the paper his father held was the electric bill.

Is it expensive? I'm sorry. I like it cold. I'll stop turning it down.

But it was not the electric bill; it was a card. The card stock was thin and glossy. It had a floral meadow on the front. Inside it said that a donation had been made in James's name to a monastery in Michigan in the amount of two hundred and ninety dollars. Blessings on his soul, and prosperity in the Lord.

Oh, James said.

His father read aloud: Following the example of St. Benedict, our monastery is isolated in the country. In solitude and silence, we seek to deepen our relationship with the Lord.

His father blinked.

I don't understand, his father said. You gave money to this place?

It's a long story.

Michigan?

It was a prank, James wanted to say, but he found he could not.

Help me understand?

James felt a pulse behind his eyes. He was going to cry.

His father saw. He said, It's O.K. You don't have to explain.

James took a breath. Another. The pulse quickened.

His father said, We'll start going to church again.

James made the start of a protest, but his father said, I'm putting my foot down. It'll be good for me, too.

No.

It's all right. We'll go again. I was wrong to stop. I let my doubt affect you. I owe it to myself to examine my doubt. I owe it to you, too.

No, you don't.

End of discussion, son. Which was as firm as he got.

James didn't say anything more. His father would change his mind. He would not allow this breach in protocol. There was raspberry-ripple ice cream for dessert, and some sort of low-fat topping Sheila had recommended, a pale-pink viscous froth that it turned out neither of them liked very much. She says it grows on you, his father said.

His father did not relent, and the next Sunday they went to the early Mass. Sheila came along, wearing a blue dress, blue sandals, carrying a straw purse, primly hippie. Church was as he remembered—the blood was embarrassing in the same way, and the vaginal gashes in Christ's torso, too.

When does a preoccupation with wickedness become wicked itself? This was what he wished he could have asked his grandfather. The question had not occurred to him in time. He hated it here, he decided. These were hucksters. He would never come again. But he did all the things you do, the bowing and kneeling and murmuring—they were in his body, like manners, and probably not even dementia can undo that programming. Afterward, just as when he was a child, they went for brunch at Eggington's and ate pancakes and bacon, and here they told him he did not have a choice, sorry kiddo, they were kidnapping him and taking him hiking on one of their favorite trails.

You'll love it, Sheila said. I know you will. It's a very deep place. Deeper than church, even. A different kind of deep.

I think you mean high, his father said, wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

High *and* deep, she sighed. She nuzzled in for a kiss.

James looked down at his lap. When he looked up again they were blushing and smiling and sitting conspicuously apart.

You want to invite Lenny? Sheila said. You can invite Lenny. But you, sir, are going. It's final. If you hate it, you never have to do it again.

Lenny's busy.

So you'll come? I'm really of the belief that all this air-conditioning is bad for the lungs. We need to get up higher.

It was the first time she had made any play for his time.

She wore two big turquoise rings,

*"A sandbar formed during the night."*

one on each middle finger, and her mouth was slick, coated in Vaseline, on account of the dryness. She applied it constantly, always offered it to James and his father, even though neither availed himself. How chapped would his lips have to be to take a smudge of it from her mouthy tube?

What do you say, James? his father asked.

In his father's eyes was the softest beseeching thing. Barely there. James could plausibly deny having seen it.

Oh, James thought. Oh.

He had missed something. He looked back to Sheila, saw her glistening lips, her sunny force, and understood: she was going to become his stepmother. Nothing was spoken, but it was so clear that he couldn't believe he hadn't seen it before.

He was fine. It's true there was a moment, just one, a stabbing sense of separation—but it passed.

He did the math. She was too old for babies.

Well, he was disappointed in his father for needing a wife, but people were allowed to do normal things.

I'll hike, he conceded. Once.

She clapped her hands.

But I'm never going to church again, he said. Just to make that clear.

His father raised an eyebrow.

He'll come back to it when he needs it, Sheila said, patting his father's hand.

I won't, James said.

You'll decide, his father said. When you're ready.

I've decided.

I thought I'd decided, Sheila said. Many times.

I'm not as susceptible as you are, he began to say, but he felt queasy from caffeine and dropped it. They left the diner. It was so hot. The heat was never not a metaphor for death. This dry, hot air which preserved everything, which made him fear he would not get out. Now Sheila would live with them. He knew it. She rented a studio apartment downtown; naturally she'd move in with them, into their three-bedroom in the safety of a cul-de-sac.

He saw what would happen. She would install a better shower curtain. She would paint the walls. She'd bring her macramé plant holders and the set of dishes made by her ex-husband the ceramicist, whom she still loved, who loved her, it was only that he was gay. One day, she said, they'd all have a meal together.

They made their way up. The three of them climbed into the cragginess, up and up, to the lookout, to the next lookout, until the parched, dangerous ground was very far away. The sweetness in the air fell away. It became harder and harder to breathe. Sweat slipped down his spine.

She was giving up her apartment, the best thing in the world, and taking James's spot.

May all that have life be delivered from suffering, Sheila was saying. I say that every time I despair. It's amazing how much comfort it gives me. Which I know isn't the point, my comfort. But I can't help it. She gave a happy sigh, two notes, like a flute. I say it when I despair, and I say it when I see any creature despairing. I'm always saying it.

It's very generous of you, his father said.

Sweetie, don't tease! When we state our intentions in the simplest way we come closest to our divine nature.

I'm dizzy, James said, for the world had gone faintly gauzy, but he spoke too softly for them to hear. Then Sheila was saying, Oh, my *God!* Look—! Look at that—! and from her tone they couldn't tell if it was something sublime or dangerous—a flowering bush? A snake poised to strike?

Something glistened on the ground, near James's foot. No, it was not alive. Not going to bite. It was a necklace, half under his sneaker, a gold necklace with a charm.

She bent down to pick it up.

A sombrero! she cried. How marvellous! I told you. I told you about this place.

A sombrero, his father said. Well, look at that.

She held it up to the sun.

Brass, she announced, not gold, but that did not detract from its luckiness. His father pretended to be a prospector, put it between his teeth, but Sheila grabbed it back from him.

It's James's, she said. She put it in his hand, which was damp, shaking a little. James found it, she said, getting close to his face, speaking tenderly. Didn't he? James was standing right on top of it.

I wasn't, he said, but he was. He had been. He didn't want to be. He felt sick. Her face near his face wobbled like a hologram.

Did you have too much coffee, honey?

Maybe, he said. He was always doing this, bringing himself to nausea with caffeine.

Darling, Sheila said, stroked his cheek.

You O.K. there, pal? You need some water?

Did you see him drink a single glass of water at Eggington's?

He saw in his mind's eye a cold, clean, anonymous place. An apartment. The word itself was a riot of happiness. It was all he'd ever wanted, to be alone in a simple place, a room. Privacy. A bed. A window. He could have it. His father could have a family, a new twosome in their house.

His father's kindness spun around him like a lasso. Not like a lasso. A reverse lasso. It was letting him go. O.K., he thought. O.K.

I'm happy for you two, he said.

They laughed in a way he didn't like—laughed as if at a child who says something unwittingly cute.

He wanted to throw the sombrero into the wilderness, get rid of it as fast as he could. It seemed only a bad omen, though he didn't believe in omens.

They were talking about coffee. They were saying that a body in the desert needs a certain amount of water. Fuck it! he thought. One last wish before he'd slide forever into disbelief. One last try. And he closed his eyes so that he would not see it land, so that it was still in the air and would always be in the air, and threw the necklace overhand, expelling the thing. He did not mean to step off the ledge. But he threw it hard, and his foot slipped into crumbling earth, and he stumbled and then—as if in the same spot where he'd been standing—he was falling. Is falling. He cannot find anything to grip. His limbs are not in his possession any more; there is nothing to hold. James! But then there are hands around his arm, pulling him back. His wrist is being held. He feels the hands, trying. They are trying their hardest, beginning to lift him. He hears a plane shoot across the sky. He hears a woman screaming. He makes a face for the back of the house. ♦

**NEWYORKER.COM**
Sarah Braunstein on the early Web's magic.

THE CURRENT CINEMA

# FUNNY GAMES

*"The Green Knight" and "John and the Hole."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

Among the highlights of David Lowery's latest film, "The Green Knight," are the crowns. As worn by King Arthur (Sean Harris) and his queen (Kate Dickie), they come with built-in halos, which are attached to the back at ninety degrees, like the open lid of a tin can—handy for reminding your subjects that you rule by divine right. Students of Arthurian custom will also note Lowery's take on the Round Table, which is more of a ring, with room in the middle for capering jesters, blackjack dealers, and the like. Watch this space.

Into Arthur's hall, without an invitation, comes a figure on horseback—the Green Knight, played by the splendid Ralph Ineson, who starred with Dickie in "The Witch" (2015). Nothing but his voice, which makes a bass drum sound like a piccolo, tells us that this *is* Ineson, for his features are clad in rough bark; he is part tree, like an Ent in "The Lord of the Rings," and he creaks as he moves. (In a film full of noises, which is worthy of savoring

*David Lowery's film of the medieval Gawain poem stars Dev Patel, Alicia Vikander, Joel Edgerton, and Ralph Ineson.*

ILLUSTRATION BY DANI CHOI

with your eyes shut, the most resonant is the steely, clattering hiss that greets the intruder when Arthur's men draw their swords.) It is Christmas, wreathed with pagan ritual and Christian piety alike, and the Knight bears an axe and a branch of holly. He is armed with a festive wager, too: Who will strike him with a single swing of a blade, and then, a year and a day hence, accept a blow in return? As Arthur remarks, in a sinister whisper, "Remember, it is only a game."

"The Green Knight" is described onscreen, in suitably antiquated fonts, as "A Filmed Adaptation of the Chivalric Romance by Anonymous." The romance in question is a long English poem, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," which was most likely written in the late fourteenth century. The poet promises to tell his tale "as hit is stad and stoken / In stori stif and stronge"—or, as rendered by J. R. R. Tolkien, "as it is fixed and fettered / in story brave and bold." If the language of the original, thorny with alliteration, has proved as tempting and as testing to modern translators—including the poets W. S. Merwin and Simon Armitage—as the challenge thrown down in Arthur's court, how much tougher is the task of conveying, in a movie, even scraps of so distant a legend?

One option is to snap the whole thing awake. Thus, the sleeping Gawain (Dev Patel) gets a bucket of water tossed over him by his low-born lover, Essel (Alicia Vikander), whose accent wanders like a travelling minstrel. Somebody calls out to him, "You a knight yet?" "Not yet," he says. "Better hurry up," comes the reply. Here, we gather, is not Gawain the paragon of gallant virtues, as he is hymned in the poem, but Gawain the lad—lusty, hasty, and unsure of his noble vocation. Later, though, it is he who responds to the Green Knight's dare; who decapitates him; who looks on as his victim calmly retrieves the head (which gives a defiant laugh) and departs; who is therefore honor-bound to embark on a quest, enduring many perils en route; and who, as the year dwindles, meets the woody stranger once again, and awaits the axe's bite.

In short, the film is an uneasy blend of the bygone and the new. Gawain fulfills the demands of his Yuletide pledge, and, as in the poem, he takes refuge on his journey at a lonely castle, where the lord (Joel Edgerton) supplies a warm welcome and his wife (Vikander again, now with improved elocution) makes it warmer still, much to Gawain's discomfort. Yet what we witness in his chamber is, if anything, less carnally candid than what we read on the page—"Hir brest bare bifore, and bihinde eke"—and the bloodshed, too, is diluted. The hunting scenes on which the poet lavishes great care, sparing no detail of gutting and butchering, are nowhere to be seen. (Lowery is a longtime vegan.) What we *do* have is a talking fox, imported from Lars von Trier's no less arboreal "Antichrist" (2009), plus an introduction to Gawain's mother (Sarita Choudhury), a sorceress of many charms, and a cameo appearance from a gang of passing giants. Above all, we get to hear the line "You'll be my lady, and I'll be your man," which would have surprised Tolkien, one of the poem's most distinguished editors, and which suggests that the culture of courtly love was au fait with the work of Celine Dion.

Yet "The Green Knight" wields a peculiar magic, the reason being that Lowery—as he showed in "A Ghost Story" (2017), which ranged with ease over centuries—is consumed by cinema's capacity to measure and manipulate time. Observe the marvellous sequence in which Gawain, trussed up by bandits, lies on a forest floor. The camera pans around through three hundred and sixty degrees; finds him reduced to a skeleton; circles back in the opposite direction; and finally alights on him, now alive and about to break free of his bonds. What might happen and what does happen are thereby fused within one shot, and the fusion recurs toward the movie's end, when Gawain, to his shame, flinches from the axe and runs away. As in a vision, we see him returning home, inheriting the crown, losing all joy, and watching his reign collapse. Such, we understand, is what *would* befall him were he to fail in his chivalric duty, and such is the irony that fires this film: it is when the director follows his own path that he finds himself on the overgrown track of the poet from long ago, whose name we shall never know.

Without wishing to point the finger at witchcraft, I'd say that the kinship between "The Green Knight" and "John and the Hole," a new movie from the Spanish director Pascual Sisto, surpasses mere coincidence. Sisto picks up the spell that is cast by Lowery's tale, verdant with danger, and continues to weave.

"John and the Hole" is set in the wilds of New England; not the deepest wilds, because a short drive brings you to a town, but deep enough. Here, in a quiet and fancy house, live Brad (Michael C. Hall), his wife, Anna (Jennifer Ehle), and their children, Laurie (Taissa Farmiga) and her younger brother, John (Charlie Shotwell). John is thirteen, with days to fill and Lord knows what on his mind. Expressively blank, like a handless clock, he sports a long lock of hair that flops over his brow; so did the youth who teamed up with the cyborg in "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" (1991), but John can boast no such adventures. He has to invent his own. One night, for no reason that he is willing to share, he uses his mother's sleeping pills to drug his family, then hauls them outside, into the woods, and lowers them into a pit. And there, for most of the story, they remain.

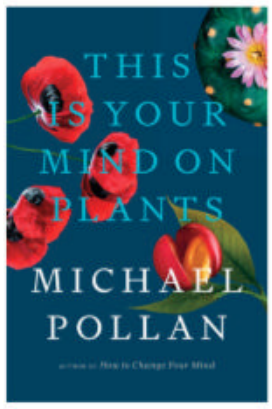
The pit, we learn, is a bunker, dug as part of a construction project that was started by persons unknown but never finished. Other remnants of the project lie nearby: stone-gray chunks that resemble a Neolithic dolmen. In line with that sense of historical vertigo, the captives seem to fall out of the here and now; exposed to the elements, for the hole has no cover, they grow filthy and then sluggish, slumbering as if in hibernation. Later, when John lets down a bucket of food, they scrabble at it with bare paws. Brad, in particular, after an initial protest—"You are in *so* much trouble, little man," he says to his son—begins to slump. How swiftly and with what docility, according to Sisto's film, the prosperous American male is unmanned. "I've never been hungry before," Brad admits. The creature without his comforts scarcely exists.

Anna and Laurie, as you'd expect, make more of an effort to engage with John, yet the movie is largely unconcerned with them—a real pity, with performers as strong as Ehle and Farmiga in the frame. It's almost as if Sisto were allowing John's indifference, and his torpor of spirit, to infect the entire proceedings. Shotwell is scarily plausible in the role, presenting us not simply with a sociopath but, below that, with a bored boy who searches for kicks and rehearses an adulthood that he both craves and dreads. He drives the family car; he cooks a risotto, following a recipe from a laptop; and, when a friend of his mother's, Paula (Tamara Hickey), shows up, he tells her that his parents are away and, at his creepiest, entreats her to stay. He also inquires into her age: "How does it feel?" he asks. "To be fifty?"

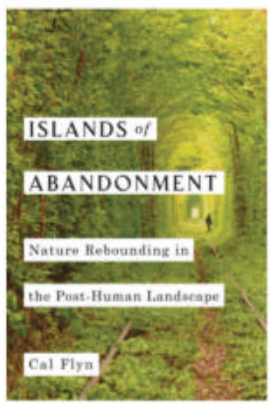
John has a pal of his own, Peter (Ben O'Brien), who pays a visit. They play video games and try to discover how close they can come to drowning in the swimming pool, courting death in a bid to shock themselves into sentience. Here, as elsewhere, you feel the touch of Michael Haneke, whose films are a roll call of anesthetized souls; the image of a Ping-Pong player, endlessly repeating his forehand, in Haneke's "71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance" (1994), is echoed in closeups of John, who is gifted at tennis, hitting ball after ball. "This is your life, John," the coach says to him. "This could be who you are." What a prospect.

In case you aren't sufficiently chilled by this icy fable, Sisto wraps it inside a second, semi-connected scenario. "John and the Hole" is also the title of a story that is requested by a girl named Lily (Samantha LeBretton), who is twelve but looks younger. Without warning or explanation, in a scene that typifies Sisto's nonviolent yet emotionally bruising approach, Lily is left to fend for herself by her mother, who, much like the tennis coach, declares, "This is your life. You get to make your own decisions now." Lily's face is a picture of devastation, and we realize, comparing her experience with John's, that one child's freedom is another's utter abandonment. Either way, kids, the grownup world is coming to get you. Good luck. ♦

# BRIEFLY NOTED

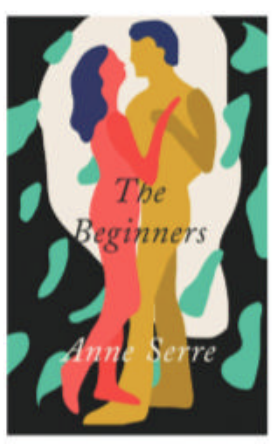



**This Is Your Mind on Plants**, *by Michael Pollan (Penguin Press)*. The plants of the title furnish three consciousness-altering drugs—opium, caffeine, and mescaline—and this thoughtful study traces their effects not only on our brains but also on our culture and history. Coffee and tea consumption in Europe may have paved the way for the Enlightenment; the peyote cactus, which produces mescaline, is central to Native American Church ceremonies that help participants process Colonial traumas. Pollan, experimenting himself, discovers that opium "lightens the existential load," while mescaline brings about "a tidal wave of awe." As the U.S.'s drug policies become less punitive, he argues, we should think more clearly about substances we've come to depend on, "both allies and poisons at once."




**Islands of Abandonment**, *by Cal Flyn (Viking)*. Travelling around the world to places blighted by human activity, Flyn, a writer from the Scottish Highlands, witnesses "the consequences of human folly, hubris, of deals made with the devil." Visiting such wastelands as the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, a burial site for chemical weapons from the First World War, and Cyprus's no man's land, she is struck not so much by desolation as by the capacity of ecosystems to adapt to change, with primal, elemental creativity. Flyn does not absolve us of pillaging the planet, but sees hope for redemption in nature's ability to persist. Her travelogue captures the dread, sadness, and wonder of beholding the results of humanity's destructive impulse, and she arrives at a new appreciation of life, "all the stranger and more valuable for its resilience."

**Virtue**, *by Hermione Hoby (Riverhead)*. Luca, the protagonist of this novel, set in the aftermath of Donald Trump's electoral victory, is an intern at a New York literary magazine. Educated at Dartmouth and Oxford, he feels he "had no voice" and is drawn to those who do: a brilliant Black colleague who skewers liberal bourgeois pieties; a pair of esteemed, wealthy artists who entangle him in their theatrics. Actual events, such as the white-supremacist rally in Charlottesville, flood the book, but Trump is never mentioned by name. The novel is most poignant when it reflects on the irreversible passing of time. "I'd never be that young again," a future Luca tells us. "You only realize this when you're old."




**The Beginners**, *by Anne Serre, translated from the French by Mark Hutchinson (New Directions)*. On the first page of this wry, unconventional novel about a woman's desire, Anna, a middle-aged art critic in an exceptionally happy twenty-year relationship, falls abruptly in love with Thomas, a near-stranger. Overwhelmed by the affair, but wanting to believe she loves both men, Anna searches for her "true life," reckoning with the selfishness of her passion and a sadness at her core that Thomas seems to share. "It's not about, on the one hand, a man, and on the other, another," Serre writes. "It's about a life—beating, quivering, like an organ laid bare—to which both men belong."

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BOOKS

# COMING AND GOING

*In Sunjeev Sahota's "China Room," immigration divides stories and selves.*

BY JAMES WOOD

Is it hyperbolic to suggest that the 747 has been more world-changing than the Internet—that the supercharged mobility of people, rather than of bits, has mattered most? Consider immigration in the decades after the Second World War, and the rich literature it produced. A world in which it was practically impossible to return to the country one had left resulted in a kind of immigration close to the idea of exile. The journey from birthplace to adopted country—the journey that V. S. Naipaul called, in "The Enigma of Arrival," the "great movement of peoples that was to take place in the second half of the twentieth century"—took on an arrowlike terminality. Life in the old country receded into vivid memory, while the immigrant's daily focus had to shift to the sometimes bitter novelties of life in the new country. It is hard to live in two places at once: with a few notable exceptions, émigré fiction and the fiction of early post-colonial immigration tended to be set either in the old country or in the new one, but not, during the same period, in both.

In the past three decades or so, with the advent of cheaper air travel and a further "great movement of peoples," a new literature of displacement has arisen, whose structure is often characterized by a freer and continuous movement back and forth between the country of origin and the country of destination. I'm thinking of writers as diverse as W. G. Sebald, Amit Chaudhuri, Taiye Selasi, Aleksandar Hemon, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Francisco Goldman, and Yaa Gyasi. It's not unusual to find their books structured around several narratives set in different countries, and to find the author as the narrating self who binds together these disparate journeys. Mental travel—the work of memory—is replaced, to some extent, by actual travel. I don't know if this is World Literature, but it's certainly a worldly literature: the enigma of arrivals and departures. The anguish of irreversibility—of journeys that can never be redone—is replaced by the more expansive unease of liminality, of journeys that are constantly being redone.

This simple point has complex consequences. Significantly, an identity that was somewhat complacently called hybrid or hyphenated ("British-Indian," "Bosnian-American," and so on) is now producing stories whose very form is structurally hyphenated. The picture of immigration, in turn, shifts a little. The literature of immigration edges closer to a literature of migration. The heavy modernity of travel may have introduced a new type of liquid modernity.

Sunjeev Sahota's new novel, "China Room" (Viking), is a fine example of this emerging form—a split narrative, alternating between India and Britain, controlled by the self-conscious presence of the author, who appears as himself in different guises. One strand, set in India in the late nineteen-twenties, tells the story of Mehar Kaur, an illiterate girl who is married off at fifteen to a wealthier, somewhat older man named Jeet, and is kept like chattel on Jeet's family farm, which he shares with his tyrannical mother, Mai, and his two married brothers. The novel's title refers to the dark room where Mehar and her two sisters-in-law spend much of their circumscribed lives: Jeet's mother keeps a set of china plates there, originally part of her wedding dowry.

Forty pages into this engrossingly bleak tale, we shift to the summer of 2019, somewhere in the English Midlands. Sahota, who was born in Derby in 1981, and is here apparently writing as himself, or as a near alter ego, tells of

*Sahota traverses a family's history, from India to Britain and back.*

ILLUSTRATION BY SIMONE NORONHA

*"I always feel fat when we play in Los Angeles."*

his father's knee surgery, and of returning to the "house and shop where I grew up," in order to help out. He brings some books with him, but finds it hard to read or write. Memories swarm. As he sits at the family dining table, his attention is drawn to a framed photograph of his great-grandmother, who came all the way to England to meet him when he was born. "China Room" reproduces this same photograph, in which a white-haired lady, "her chunni sliding off her head," smiles down forgivingly at the yelling baby on her lap. We will learn that the woman is Mehar, whose story we have just begun. The photograph reminds our writer of a visit he made to a farm in India when he was eighteen and recovering from heroin addiction. The account of this convalescent visit now alternates with Mehar's tale from the early twentieth century.

Sahota is an enormously gifted writer. His last novel, "The Year of the Runaways," which was short-listed for the 2015 Booker Prize, is a detailed epic of immigration, one of those works that renew realism's charter by illuminating realities that had previously been shadowy, with a generous mimetic innocence that brings to mind the great realist chroniclers. It concerns the lives of three young Indian men and a British Indian woman, Narinder, who marries one of them. Tochi, Randeep, and Avtar are new immigrants to Britain, desperate for money, living together with other workers in the dilapidated former industrial powerhouse of Sheffield. They must take whatever jobs they can pick up—doing construction, working at a takeout shop. Sahota is a bold storyteller who seems to have learned as many tricks from TV as from Tolstoy, and has a jeweller's unillusioned eye for the goods.

Detail after detail gleams in that novel: Tochi, standing in the office of the travel agent who will arrange his arduous passage from India to Europe, sees a map on the wall and asks him where France is. "Oh, no," the agent replies. "France is in Europe. That is South India." Randeep, arriving by train from London at Sheffield, is impressed by the softness of the countryside and the cleanliness of the railway station: "This Sheffield must be a good city. He wondered why he'd never heard of it." Randeep tells a friend, who is meeting him at the station, that Sheffield seems beautiful. The friend looks surprised, and flatly replies, "Hold that thought." They drive out of the city on roads that "wound through narrow, boarded-up, wretched-looking streets." Avtar, who finds a job at a fried-chicken outlet, is warned by other employees to make himself scarce during the nightly "Drunk Rush," when the pubs close and the racist white youths come out. When several of those youths spit at him, Randeep is gently consoled by a white colleague, who tells him how sorry she is. Sahota writes, "He nodded, though perhaps even worse than the spitting was the quietness in her voice, the sense of someone being embarrassed for him."

"China Room" is smaller, trickier, and more artfully constructed than "The Year of the Runaways"; it lacks the hospitable grasp and ample onrush of that big work. But Sahota's gifts as both storyteller and stylist are undiminished. Lovely phrases glitter. In India, "the asphalt of the road was giving off rags of steam." A sunny day is described as "bright as parrots." Also in India: "Around him the lane is greasy with sun." And in contemporary England? The author remembers growing up there, the menace of racism all around him, and compacts it into this eloquent trace: "older kids, with their grey threatening noise."

Sahota's ability to shine a phrase is not bought for the usual steep formalist price, at the expense of simplicity, intimate feeling, and solid representation. He's both camera and painter, in a literary world that often separates those novelistic tasks. In one of the opening scenes, for instance, the five-year-old Mehar is being appraised for marriage by Jeet's horrible mother, Mai. Mai acts with the license of a woman who has the wealth of three marriageable sons. Mehar's shy, nervous mother apologizes to Mai for her daughter's unformed looks: "I think she has a nice face . . . and, god willing, I'm sure she'll grow into her forehead. Rest assured, I apply downward pressure on it most mornings." She smiles anxiously. "She's adequate," Mai brusquely replies. "In any case, an agreement was made."

Mehar's story has the brutal elegance of folklore. Three women, Mehar, Harbans, and Gurleen, strangers to one another, have been married off to Mai's three sons, Jeet, Mohan, and Suraj. The brothers, who are Sikhs, spend their time out in the fields at work, or elsewhere, but the three women are largely confined to the china room, where they prepare food and where they sleep, lying next to one another on two parallel string beds. Mai controls every detail of the lives of her sons and daughters-in-law, and runs the household like the madam of a brothel, with a prurient interest in the sexual activity of the residents and a businesswoman's stake in producing male heirs. Whenever one of the husbands wishes to sleep with his wife, the relevant woman is ordered by Mai to a windowless room at the back of the farm, a sort of dedicated sex chamber. Since the women are veiled, and cast their eyes down in the presence of their husbands, since they only ever make love in the dark, and since Mai chooses to ration all their knowledge, none can identify which brother is her husband. The women are curious, of course. But the brothers look alike: "The same narrow build, with unconvincing shoulders and grave eyes; serious faces that carry no slack, features that follow the same rules. The three are evenly bearded, the hair trimmed short and tight, and all day they wear loose turbans cut from the same saffron wrap."

The premise becomes a plot when, with the inevitability of a fairy tale, Mehar identifies the wrong brother, Suraj, as her husband. Suraj is under no such illusion, but what begins, for him, as exploitative sex deepens into passion. The lovers meet in a nearby barn, in the fields, wherever they can escape Mai's surveillance. These scenes are fraught with obvious danger; the threat of exposure and punishment is close by. Suraj knows that if the news ever emerges Mehar's life will effectively end. But these are also moments of tender liberation. Sahota delicately brings alive the lovers' awakening, especially Mehar's, as she develops a steady erotic confidence, a language to express her desire for the man she thinks is her husband. Suraj imagines that the world is changing, that they might be able to flee the farm for a big city, like Lahore. A Sikh revolutionary is at large in the countryside, and talk of "self-rule" is in the air. Perhaps the political can become the personal.

It's possible that Sahota inherited a version of this story as family lore, and was drawn to the extraordinary gap between the misogynist purdah of his great-grandmother's experience in 1929 and the photographic evidence of an old woman free to travel from an independent India to visit her descendants in the former seat of colonial power. The distance might be fifty years or five hundred; the story of switched lovers and the threat of retribution clearly belongs to ancient literature. This must be part of the reason that Sahota decided to disrupt the old tale with modern interventions—measuring progress made and not made. The narrator, at the age of eighteen, arrives in the village of Kala Sanghian, in Punjab, which is "at least a twelve-hour drive from the nearest city anyone would have heard of." He is staying with his uncle and aunt, who are trapped in an unhappy arranged marriage. The teen-ager from England is on the lip of change—feverish from heroin withdrawal, sent away for the summer to recover, he is awaiting the start of his first university term in London. Much hangs on his healing. Eventually, as part of his convalescence, he decides to spend some time alone at a nearby family farm, now derelict. It is, of course, the farm where Mehar was confined, and, indeed, the young man finds the china room, bolted shut and with iron bars over the window. He spends about two months here, his isolation sporadically interrupted by visits from a brilliant and alluring physician, Radhika Chaturvedi, who has divined what "illness" he is really recovering from. The teen-ager falls promptly and fruitlessly in love with her. In time, he also hears a garbled account of his great-grandmother's story. "She strayed with a brother," a local tells him. "He went away and left her behind."

The two story lines are neatly, perhaps too neatly, counterposed: a modern arranged marriage is paired with the older one; the young man's voluntary purdah on the farm glances off the earlier imposed version. Sahota's novelistic intention here, it would seem, is ultimately curative: the recovering descendant must open the dread room where Mehar was once kept, and "recover" the past by admitting a cleansing contemporary illumination. The alternation between Mehar's tale and the narrator's, we see, is one between a religious and a secular dispensation. On one side, there is confinement, prohibition, and antique punishment; on the other, there is mobility, license, and contemporary forgiveness. The old tale is written in a locked-up third person, the contemporary one, with its nice timbre of autofiction, in a free first person. And a third presence hovers, the present-day narrator, who, one assumes, got beyond his teen-age problems and flourished into the author of this novel. Contrasting versions of belonging, of being in the world, face each other as well. Had the young Mehar been able to immigrate to England, her narrative would likely have gone in one irreversible direction, scored with a tragic note of exile and homelessness: maybe a liberation of sorts, but one with its own aspects of imprisonment.

That is precisely the shape of the immigrant lives represented in "The Year of the Runaways": the novel pictures their impoverished Indian existence as before, and their bleak English existence as after. But the narrator of "China Room," for all his experience of gray, racist little Englanders, doesn't inhabit a before and after in quite the same way. Born in England, the relatively fortunate child of immigrants who have already made their difficult journey, and have done so, in part, for him, he has no personal knowledge of before and after. He inhabits something closer to a kind of secular homelessness, shorn of the religious echo of exile. For him, belonging has become complex and continuous—a state of movement, an identity always being worked out and worked at. In this way, Sahota's implied presence in his own text seems necessary and also perhaps hopeful: a difficult recovery and healing beyond the dimension of a single summer. ♦

BOOKS

# LOST FOR WORDS

*Kaveh Akbar's "Pilgrim Bell" finds meaning in misunderstanding.*

BY ANDREW CHAN

When the poet Kaveh Akbar was a young child, his father taught him to recite Muslim prayers in Arabic, a language Akbar didn't understand, and which his family spoke only during worship. Mimicking those incantatory sounds, he briefly embodied a foreign tongue. He could inhabit the lyric beauty of the words, he discovered, even without grasping their meaning. Akbar, who was born in Iran, arrived in the United States when he was two, a transition that imparted another lesson in linguistic gain and loss: while he picked up English, Farsi began to fade. In a poem called "Do You Speak Persian?," Akbar writes, "I have been so careless with the words I already have. //I don't remember how to say *home*/in my first language, or *lonely*, or *light*."

Poetry requires the opposite of such carelessness, and Akbar is exquisitely sensitive to how language can function as both presence and absence. In his most recent collection, "Pilgrim Bell" (Graywolf), words assume physical, palpable form—as reverberations in the mouth and ear—but can just as easily take on a spectral aura, reminding us of worlds and selves no longer within reach. "The Miracle," written in short, parable-like paragraphs, opens with a story from the life of Muhammad, in which the Prophet, then an illiterate merchant, is visited by the angel Gabriel, commanded to "read," and given his first revelation. In Akbar's retelling, this gift of knowledge isn't benevolently bestowed; it's thrust upon the recipient without his consent, the angel "squeezing out the air of protest, the air of doubt, crushing it out of his crushable human body." Language can illuminate the world, but it can also destroy a self. It may be both good and bad fortune, then, that no grand truth will be elucidated for the poet: "Gabriel isn't coming for you," Akbar tells himself.

In "the absence of cloud-parting, trumpet-blaring clarity," these poems ask what meaning can be found—or made—through partial revelation, in a world so often defined by misunderstandings: with others, with God, with ourselves. Sometimes the lack of clarity is literal. Flip through this book and you'll notice formal and stylistic strategies that play at the edges of decipherability. One poem is printed backward, forcing us to either hold it up to a mirror or patiently decode it letter by letter. (Farsi is read right to left, a reminder that our notion of backwardness is always arbitrary.) The six enigmatic poems that share the book's title are studded with periods that keep interrupting the speaker midsentence, as though his hurtling train of thought required speed bumps.

This illegibility, in Akbar's hands, becomes a site of creativity. "Reading Farrokhzad in a Pandemic" begins with an admission:

> The title is a lie;
> I can't read Farsi.
>
> ما هر چه را که باید از دست داده باشیم از دست داده ایم
>
> I can make out:
>
> "we lose,
> we lose."
>
> I type it into a translation app:
> "we have lost everything we need to lose."
>
> In between what I read and what is written:
> "need," "everything."

Akbar's writing, like his halting translation, depends on resourcefulness, a surrender to a given set of materials, even those which elude understanding.

*Akbar captures how total, and totalizing, the physicality of language can be.*



PHOTOGRAPH BY RAFAEL MARTÍNEZ

The words he assembles are like so many puzzle pieces, and meaning is created even when they don't fit.

In Akbar's poetry, what the mind strains to interpret the body often feels viscerally. "Pilgrim Bell" is strewn with throats, lungs, teeth, clavicles. In Akbar's first full-length collection, "Calling a Wolf a Wolf," from 2017, about struggling with drug and alcohol addiction, he writes, "every step I've taken / has been from one tongue to another," a nonsensical collision of body parts—feet and mouths—that captures just how total, and totalizing, the physicality of language can be. "Wolf" overflows with compulsive speech, a frenzy that replaces, or relives, the mania of intoxication. The reader moves through the narrator's sensorium like a pinball, ricocheting between strange visions and exuberant riffs:

> I need to be broken like
> an unruly mustang
> like bitten skin supposedly people hymned
> before names their mouths
> were zeroes little pleasure portals for taking
> in grape
> leaves cloudberries the fingers of lovers today
> words fly
> in all directions

And yet alongside this wordplay we sense that Akbar's concern with language is deadly serious: to speak is to survive.

In "Pilgrim Bell," claustrophobic monologues open up, making room for other sympathetic characters. "Reza's Restaurant, Chicago, 1997" revolves around a joke Akbar's father told him as a child about how to differentiate Persians from Arabs and white people: "*we're just uglier*," the punch line goes. This is a lesson in yet another type of legibility, the kind written on the human face. It isn't, at first, a comfortable lesson: for an eight-year-old, it's a recipe for self-consciousness. Still, this poem is also full of sensual texture and nostalgic pleasure. Akbar's father's smile is "a warm nest / of lip"; his voice, "the first sound I ever heard." If the fraught question of beauty within communities of color can sometimes inspire generic calls for self-esteem, a corrective to society's othering gaze, this tongue-in-cheek ode to "ugliness" offers something possibly deeper: a sense of self that is truly sensory.

Just as pain and pleasure vie in Akbar's search for identity within his family, so, too, do they shape his reckoning with divinity. Like another transcendentally inclined chronicler of addiction, the late poet Franz Wright, Akbar suggests that pain's intensity thrusts us into the sublime—or, at least, replaces God's untouchability with something that we can feel in our flesh. In "Vines," Akbar's description of a divine encounter echoes John Donne: where Donne implores the Lord to "batter" and "ravish" him, Akbar imagines that God has "bricked up my mouthhole." Elsewhere, he speculates that faith, rather than originating in the unknown, "passes first through the body / like an arrow."

When divine wisdom is violently imposed, the poet responds by forging his own knowledge. "I live in a great mosque," he writes,

> Built on top of a flagpole.
> Whatever happens happens.
> Loudly. All day I hammer the distance.
> Between earth and me.
> Into faith.

What he hammers and builds—this book—is beautiful, but it isn't always durable, or endurable. He laments that his "savior" is often a "no-call no-show. Curious menace." In "My Empire," he caustically observes, "The prophets came to participate in suffering / as if to an amusement park, which makes / our suffering the main attraction."

The question of who suffers and who watches is inevitably a political one. "Pilgrim Bell" builds up to "The Palace," the longest poem in the book, and its most explicit take on power in America. Here the singular images that distinguish many of Akbar's poems occasionally give way to more predictable symbols: "There are no doors in America. / Only king-sized holes." Indeed, Akbar himself seems aware of this derivativeness. "It is absurd to say anything now / (much less anything new)," he writes. But his practice of taking language apart, and harnessing the empty space around it, makes even the most familiar words seem eerie and unexpected. Beneath the hyperbole of politics, Akbar uncovers a simpler, awkward humanity. His discoveries may not always be "new," and may not always feel right, but they're the truth:

> Mistyping in an email I write,
> I lose you so much today,
>
> then leave it. ♦

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POP MUSIC

# MAINSTREAMING

*How online playlists took hyperpop from subculture to pop culture.*

BY CARRIE BATTAN

In 2014, music fans and critics began paying close attention to a mysterious group of artists who'd started releasing tracks online. They were part of PC Music, a loose electronic-music collective that functioned more like a conceptual-art project. Led by a young, inventive producer from London named A. G. Cook, PC Music, and its affiliates, rejected a dark, murky strain of underground electronic music that was beloved at the time. Instead, they latched onto the most exuberant and absurd elements of pop, making cutesy, theatrical songs that sounded a bit like children's music, but with an unsettling aftertaste. If mainstream pop is designed to make people feel as if they're on common ground with all of humanity, this music made listeners feel like they were in on a very specific joke. In a Pitchfork article titled "PC Music's Twisted Electronic Pop: A User's Manual," one critic wrote, "The shadowy operation and its bewildering brand of hyper-pop have been everywhere in the past few months . . . and its influence seems to be growing on a daily basis."

That term, "hyper-pop," was such an intuitively accurate way to describe this scene that it eventually became a catch-all for the many subgenres, artists, and micro-communities that the PC Music movement helped give rise to. More recently, the experimental duo 100 gecs has honed a delirious, cleverly referential sort of hyperpop. Like PC Music, they confound the corporate centers of the music industry: their songs have drawn fervent fans, but the group is too brash and novel to be easily boxed into any preëxisting musical categories. Still, playlists are the bread and butter of streaming services, and they live and die by legible taxonomies. So in 2019, to address the quandary of 100 gecs' unlikely popularity and unwieldy style, Spotify launched a new playlist designed to give their sound a home on the platform. It was called "hyperpop."

Today, the hyperpop playlist serves many functions: it is a corporate branding exercise, a track list with an obsessive listener base, a constantly evolving document of a vital corner of music's digital underground, and an object of resentment among some of the artists it promotes. The micro-genre has become influential enough that Apple Music now has its own version of the hyperpop playlist, called "Glitch." Earlier this year, SoundCloud—the D.I.Y. streaming service where many hyperpop artists uploaded their earliest songs—published a short film about the scene, which it called "digicore." Incoherence is inherent to the genre, and the songs on Spotify's hyperpop playlist vary widely in style. A recent track-list update included songs that featured rapping in Chinese, vocals pitched to robotic or extraterrestrial tones, pure pop hooks, and even an adrenalized head rush of a dubstep song by the Russian activist group Pussy Riot, which seems to have taken a liking to the genre. (The update also included an ecstatic remix by A. G. Cook, the so-called godfather of hyperpop.) Most of the songs on the playlist, though, are unified by a bludgeoning irreverence, beats with breakneck tempos, and a maximalist electronic production style that sounds like it was designed to blow out speakers, or to be played on ones that are already damaged.

One artist often featured on the hyperpop playlist is a gangly, mop-headed sixteen-year-old named Ash Gutierrez, who performs as glaive, a name taken from the video game Dark Souls III. (It is technically inaccurate to say that he performs—Gutierrez has never performed live, nor has he ever even seen

*The artist glaive might expand the genre's boundaries, or he might outgrow them.*



ILLUSTRATION BY RAISA ÁLAVA

live music performed, as he said in a recent interview.) Gutierrez spent the early days of the pandemic in his bedroom, in a small rural town in North Carolina, acquainting himself with music-production software. Energized by artists like 100 gecs and a suite of emotional Internet rappers, Gutierrez began making beats and singing over them. Remote schooling had freed him from a fear of judgment by his classmates, and he gathered the courage to post some of his songs on SoundCloud. One of the first, called "sick," was clearly part of the hyperpop lineage. The one-minute-and-thirty-second track begins with a set of bleeps and bloops that recall a video-game soundtrack, and Gutierrez's voice is distorted, to sound high-pitched and alien. In a rapid patter, he describes the state of his brain: "I'm sick and I'm over-stimulated / Neurons in my brain filled with information."

Although amateurish and silly, the song is spellbinding. By the end of 2020, Gutierrez was appearing regularly on the hyperpop playlist and collaborating with other emerging talents of the genre, most notably an eighteen-year-old named ericdoa, whose music might be more aptly described as hyper-rap. Gutierrez also signed with Interscope Records and released a polished EP called "cypress grove," which culled textures from alternative emo rock, hip-hop, electronic, and pop.

Glaive's latest project, an EP titled "all dogs go to heaven," suggests that, although Gutierrez may have been birthed into the hyperpop scene, he could soon graduate from its ranks. Much of hyperpop uses cartoonish electronic effects to render human emotions foreign, but Gutierrez shows so many genuine feelings on this record that those digital filters would have been inappropriate, and these days he tends to forgo them. On the EP, which is laden with bluesy guitar arrangements and overcast hip-hop beats, he plays the beleaguered protagonist of his own teen-age dramas, conveying small-time conflicts in anguished, cinematic proportions. "There's a couple hundred people wanna end me / If you ever need a thing, promise you'll text me," he sings on "detest me," a confident pop song. He expresses his sense of betrayal with such intensity and charm that it feels impossible not to take his side.

"All dogs go to heaven" showcases a startlingly well-formed sound—not just a high-concept joke—developed by an artist who began recording music only a year ago. Although his work has matured quickly, Gutierrez inadvertently reveals his age with references to childhood preoccupations and high-school-level coursework, name-checking the Berlin Wall, Quidditch, and the Capulets and the Montagues. Most of these songs will be more at home on bigger, more mainstream pop playlists than on hyperpop, though the EP includes a few notable exceptions. On "i wanna slam my head against the wall," Gutierrez playfully inverts the dynamics of a conventional pop song. He sings sweetly, as if he were smiling, over a dizzying beat with the frantic rhythm of a drum-'n'-bass song.

The Internet has a tendency to transform subcultures into popular culture at a disorienting rate. Spotify's hyperpop playlist is a curious case: its success has shown how corporate entities not only glom onto cultural waves but also become instrumental in shaping their identities. It's a dynamic that can be vexing to artists. Last September, Spotify recruited A. G. Cook to do a "takeover" of the playlist, adding songs of his choosing. His selections included beloved, decades-old tracks by legacy artists like Kate Bush and J Dilla, a sign that perhaps he had misunderstood the nature of the playlist, or had taken a willfully broad approach. This rankled some of the musicians who were booted from the playlist to make room for Cook's selections. Playlists can act as financial lifelines for featured artists; one hyperpop act named osquinn told the *Times*, "There were people who were literally living off that Spotify check."

Other young artists have grown disillusioned with the hyperpop label, or resentful of its constraints. In a short time, hyperpop has already become a genre that performers wish to discard, deconstruct, or rebel against. A recent press release for an upcoming EP by the highly talented artist midwxst discouraged critics from tying him to hyperpop: "He's part of this group of young kids leading this new subset of music . . . [but] he's definitely not boxed into the hyperpop sound and on his new music he flows beyond the genre." (Later, another press release described midwxst as a "rising hyperpop artist.") As for Gutierrez, it is unclear whether he'll help expand hyperpop's boundaries or simply outgrow them. In an interview this year, he was asked about these classifications. He responded with a shrug, and said, "As long as people listen to the music, then I don't really care." ♦

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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 Mick Stevens, must be received by Sunday, August 8th. The finalists in the July 26th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the August 23rd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

"  "

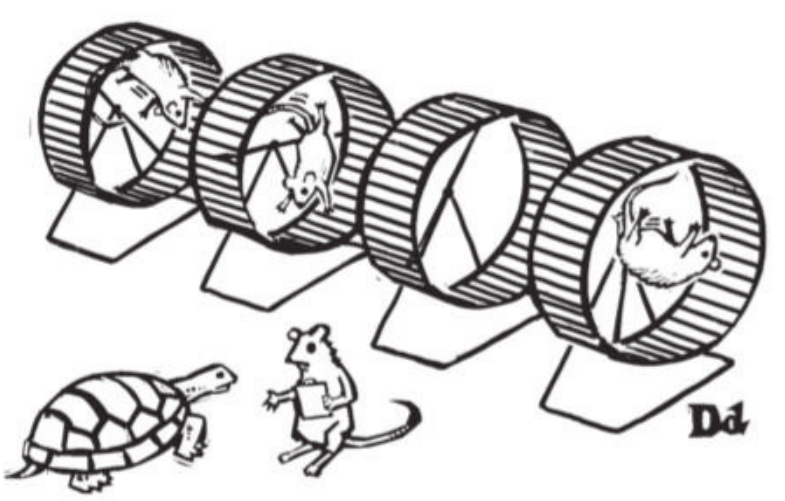
### THE FINALISTS

*"I hope you've come to change the water."*
Erica Sheen, Sheffield, England

*"The key to happiness? A three-second memory span."*
Mark Berkson, St. Paul, Minn.

*"If I had the answers, you think I'd be in this bowl?"*
Stephen Stiles, Indianapolis, Ind.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*"We're really looking for someone with more lab experience."*
Shaun Howell, Durham, N.C.

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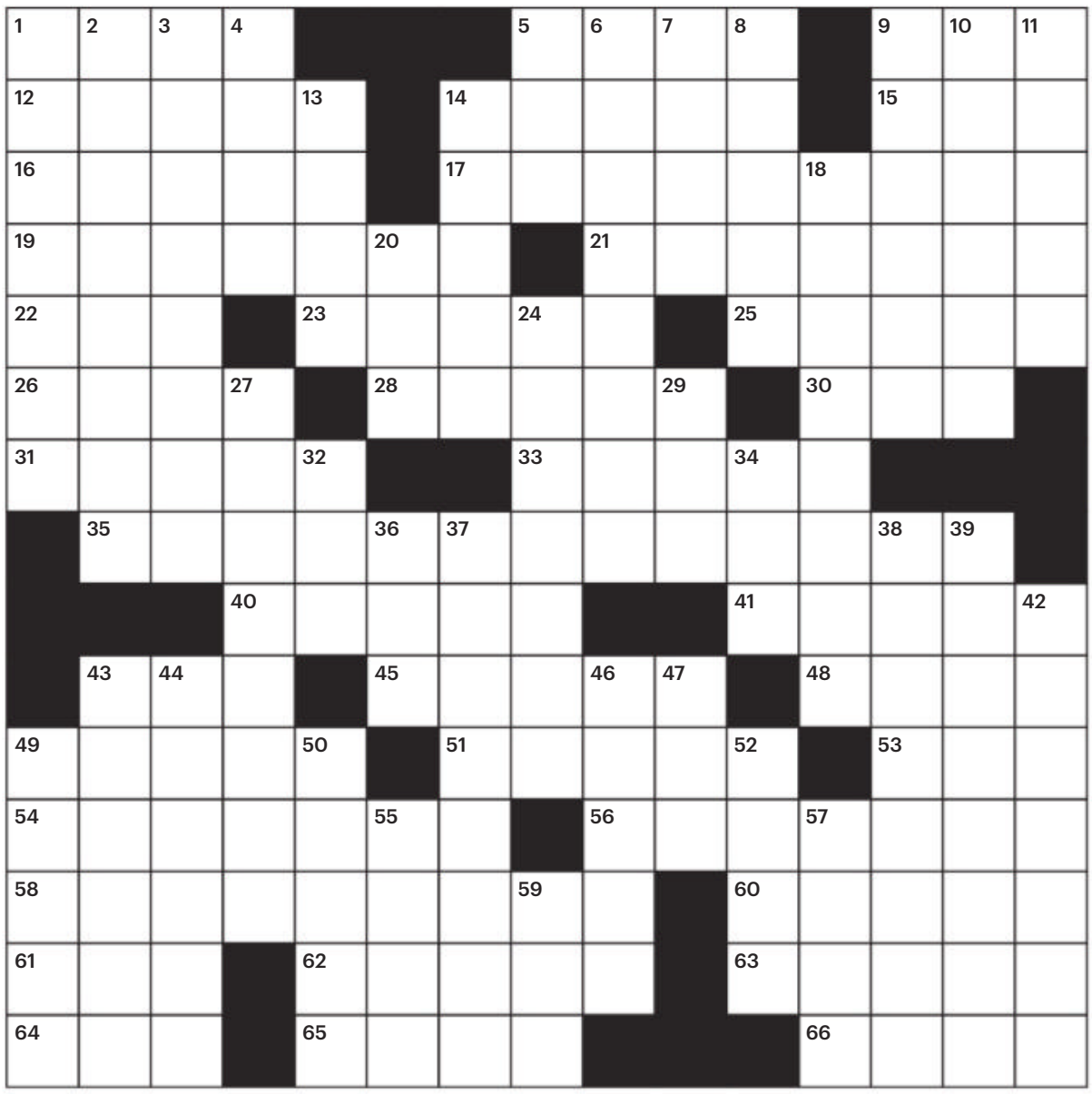
# THE CROSSWORD

*A lightly challenging puzzle.*

BY CAITLIN REID



## ACROSS

1 Lowest vocal range
5 Furtive "Hey!"
9 "Now I've got it!"
12 Edmonton N.H.L. player
14 Possessive sometimes confused with one of its two homophones
15 Fashion's Diane ___ Furstenberg
16 Support for an injured body part
17 Last one in, idiomatically
19 Cold-blooded creature
21 Rent payers
22 Uneven?
23 ___ orange
25 43-Across, e.g.
26 Lather maker
28 Unit on a screen
30 "Brokeback Mountain" director Ang
31 Actress Essman of "Curb Your Enthusiasm"
33 Explore thoroughly
35 "So not cool!"
40 River nymph of Greek mythology
41 Singer and actress Shore
43 Duet number?
45 Group with the adolescent rite of passage rumspringa
48 Funny Fey
49 Period pain
51 Buddies, in Brisbane
53 Bygone tape player, in brief
54 Pop star whose first U.K. No. 1 hit was "How We Do (Party)"
56 Tourney team deemed most likely to succeed
58 Kitchen counter?
60 "Pale blue dot" in a NASA photo
61 Title of honor
62 Smile smugly
63 Edible bow ties
64 Put into words
65 Trip around the sun
66 Best in a competition

## DOWN

1 Bushy-haired painter of "happy little trees"
2 Put on a clothesline, perhaps
3 Hastily and carelessly done
4 45-Across, e.g.
5 Soup often garnished with lime and bean sprouts
6 Colonists
7 Link destination
8 Thing that's in, for the time being
9 Right, as a wrong
10 Stymie
11 Feeling of deep dread
13 Strap held by a jockey
14 Rome's ___ Fountain
18 Sarcastic cry after an epic fail
20 Trip around the track
24 Online travel-booking service
27 Billy Joel tune that starts, "It's nine o'clock on a Saturday / The regular crowd shuffles in"
29 The "L" in U.C.L.A.
32 Uber info
34 Place to get some shut-eye
36 One-named singer of "Cheap Thrills"
37 Musical based on the songs of ABBA
38 Parallel ___
39 Salt-cured pork product that's similar to bacon
42 Bit of safety gear
43 Facts of little consequence
44 Like too-thin soup
46 Baby bird?
47 Mother bird
49 Grumpy
50 New York variant of hopscotch
52 Slowly flow
55 Coleridge's "The ___ of the Ancient Mariner"
57 Swedish automaker, once
59 Do wrong

*Solution to the previous puzzle:*

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | M | A | S | S | E | D | | | F | I | L | E | T | S |
| B | A | C | K | A | T | I | T | | A | D | E | X | E | C |
| A | F | R | I | C | A | N | A | | C | A | V | I | A | R |
| T | I | E | R | | T | E | R | R | E | | E | T | T | A |
| E | A | S | E | S | | D | O | H | | D | E | P | O | P |
| | | | S | I | R | | | E | V | E | | O | W | E |
| | | W | O | M | E | N | S | S | I | N | G | L | E | S |
| | M | A | R | I | Y | A | R | U | S | S | E | L | L | |
| L | I | T | T | L | E | S | I | S | T | E | R | S | | |
| E | S | E | | E | S | C | | | A | S | A | | | |
| A | F | R | O | S | | A | A | H | | T | L | D | E | F |
| V | I | T | A | | U | R | B | A | N | | D | E | L | I |
| E | R | A | S | E | D | | C | R | U | C | I | F | I | X |
| M | E | X | I | C | O | | S | U | D | A | N | E | S | E |
| E | D | I | S | O | N | | | M | E | T | E | R | E | D |

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