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THE NEW YORKER

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DRAWINGS Victoria Roberts, Asher Perlman, Frank Cotham, Charlie Hankin, Christopher Weyant, Liana Finck, Maggie Larson, Dan Rosen, Roz Chast, P. C. Vey, Lisa Rothstein and Hal Ackerman, Emily Bernstein, William Haefeli, Justin Sheen, Jon Adams **SPOTS** Janik Söllner



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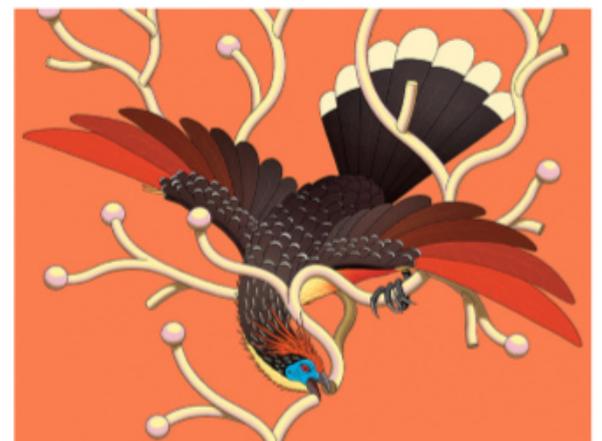
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LETTER FROM THE SOUTH

Casey Cep on the booksellers who nurtured generations of writers and readers in Oxford, Mississippi.



ELEMENTS

Ben Crair writes about the hoatzin, a bird that’s challenging our understanding of evolution.

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THE MAIL

CONSIDERING PINOCCHIO

I enjoyed Joan Acocella's piece on the many lives of Carlo Collodi's character Pinocchio (Books, June 13th). Yet I must quibble with the notion, perhaps suggested by comparisons made in the introduction to the new translation of "The Adventures of Pinocchio," that both Collodi's book and Miguel de Cervantes's "Don Quixote" are picaresques. As Acocella notes, these two books are often slotted together because they go "from episode to episode." But the picaresque novel, as Cervantes would have understood it, is characterized by the first-person narration of a poor individual—the picaro—who relates his own misadventures and misdeeds. Picaresque works have a retrospective episodic structure that justifies the protagonist's dishonorable actions. Though "Don Quixote" possesses some of these elements, it's an oversimplification—unfortunately common in the Anglophone academy—to categorize it as a picaresque. In fact, the book is Cervantes's satire of literary tropes (including the novel of chivalry, epic poetry, the pastoral novel, and, to a lesser degree, the picaresque). His careful plotting and his self-conscious reflections on the authorial enterprise are what make "Don Quixote" a classic of Western literature.

Samuel Amago
Professor of Spanish
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Va.

Acocella's enchanting essay about Pinocchio brought back memories of my visit to the puppet's "birthplace"—Collodi, the town in which Carlo Collodi spent part of his childhood and from which he took his pen name. The dramatically situated medieval Tuscan hamlet has much to engage tourists, including an ancient fortress and the impressive Villa Garzoni. Pinocchio lovers will be delighted by the town's souvenir shops (which sell Pinocchios in every imaginable size) and especially

by the Parco di Pinocchio. Although the park has recently undergone some transformations, it retains a bamboo grove, intense and enveloping, with a meandering pathway punctuated by sinister bronze figures which leads visitors along the wooden puppet's journey. In the nineteen-eighties, my family took two trips to the park with our young sons, so that they could wander the grove. It's a mysterious and wild place that any admirer of Pinocchio would appreciate.

Richard Wertime
Merion Station, Pa.

LISTENING TO ANIMALS

I appreciated Elizabeth Kolbert's piece about animal consciousness, and her discussion of Roger Payne's pioneering work, in the sixties, on humpback-whale vocalizations ("Contact," June 13th). Although Payne became the most well-known scientist to publish on the whale's "song"—a term used to describe the patterns of sounds visualized on sonograms—the discovery of the musical qualities of whale vocalizations was the fruit of Payne's collaboration with Katy Payne, an acoustic biologist, and also his former spouse. Katy interpreted the plots of frequencies and the distributions of sound events over time as pitches, phrases, melodies, rhythmic patterns, and formal musical structures. For years, she was not credited in collaborative publications, but her contributions are now widely acknowledged—including at a joint presentation at Cornell University in 2021. This was a necessary corrective to history's habitual neglect of the groundbreaking work of women, particularly male researchers' spouses.

Bob Gluck
Mount Kisco, N.Y.

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JULY 20 – 26, 2022

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Since the late eighties—long before the invention of Twitter—the American artist **Barbara Kruger** has been using mass media’s aphoristic language and provocative tone to address such charged subjects as abortion rights (“Your Body Is a Battleground,” 1989) and craven consumerism (“I Shop Therefore I Am,” 1987). Through Jan. 2, Kruger fills MOMA’s soaring atrium with her latest trenchant critique, pictured above during its installation process: the site-specific “Thinking of You. I Mean Me. I Mean You.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC HELGAS

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

MUSIC

Berkshire Opera Festival

OPERA In 2021, Berkshire Opera Festival supplemented its usual choice of a work from the canon with a contemporary chamber opera. The 2022 lineup follows that structure, opening with Jake Heggie's "Three Decembers," a three-hander, from 2008, in which the AIDS epidemic and the often fraught holiday season act as accelerants for a combustible family drama. Adriana Zabala stars as Madeline, a self-regarding Broadway actress and an absent mother, in a production directed by Beth Greenberg and conducted by Christopher James Ray. Mozart's "Don Giovanni," this season's main-stage show, follows, in August, at Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center, in Great Barrington, Mass.—*Oussama Zahr (PS21, in Chatham, N.Y.; July 21 and July 23.)*

Camp Cope

INDIE ROCK The Australian trio Camp Cope made its name as nothing short of a revolutionary force. If emo has traditionally been the domain of embittered young men, then this explicitly feminist band arrived in 2015 to burn that script. The group's new album, "Running with the Hurricane," is twangier and poppier than previous releases, yet just as bold. Empowerment emerges in ruminative conviction and glints of humor, even as Camp Cope asserts ever more agency and vulnerability. The front woman Georgia Maq, whose fevered, folk-tinged singing can reach toward a scream, has said that the record's gentler instrumentation, inspired by Taylor Swift and the Chicks, reflects a band that "refused to let the world harden us." With a modified lineup—Lou Hanman is filling in for the bassist Kelly-Dawn Helmrich, who is expecting her first child—Camp Cope returns to the U.S. on its own terms.—*Jenn Pelly (Webster Hall; July 20.)*

Claire Rousay and Matchess

EXPERIMENTAL The fast-blooming sound artist Claire Rousay has unleashed a torrent of recordings that employ samples ripped from the workaday realm to uncanny effect, setting captured conversations and ephemeral noise against scratchy ambient instrumentals. Her work suggests varied predecessors—a potent one being the sound-installation star Janet Cardiff—while nestling into a strange corner of its own. The musician's mushrooming catalogue pulls from different emotional poles; it's united by the sensation of stumbling onto a secret radio wave in the gap between frequencies. At Public Records, Rousay shares a bill with Matchess, the sneakily captivating musical designation of Chicago's Whitney Johnson. Matchess's recent album "Sonescent" was dreamt up at a California meditation retreat, a background that surely qualifies as its own genre. Her drones sound like nothing—until, suddenly, they become handsome and imposing, gifting listeners a shortcut to enlightenment.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Public Records; July 22.)*

Duke Robillard and Scott Hamilton

JAZZ Few tenor saxophonists can make a horn purr like Scott Hamilton, an old-soul stylist who has upheld the verities of traditional swing since bursting onto the scene in the late seventies. Shortly before he gained wider attention, Hamilton was hooting it up with Duke Robillard, a stellar guitarist who co-founded the spirited Rhode Island combo Roomful of Blues and later went on to play with the Fabulous Thunderbirds and Bob Dylan. For this welcome stint, Hamilton reunites with Robillard in a romping outfit that also includes the trumpeter Jon Erik-Kellso. The joint, as they say, will jump.—*Steve Futterman (Birdland; July 20-23.)*

Fabio

ELECTRONIC Drum and bass has been spiking in visibility in America during the past year, as pent-up young dancers have craved faster tempos and heavier bass lines—two things the music has in abundance. The London d.j. Fabio, born Fitzroy Haslip, was one of

the key actors in the style's development. Alongside his frequent d.j. partner Grooverider, he helmed the decks at the pivotal early-nineties party Rage, where the genre began germinating, and the two still play a monthly show on Rinse FM, as good a place as any to keep up with the form's ongoing developments. This week, Fabio headlines a daytime party in Brooklyn.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Sovereign; July 24.)*

Freddie De Tommaso: "Il Tenore"

OPERA Last year, Freddie De Tommaso won glowing notices from the British press when he stepped in, mid-show, for an indisposed colleague in "Tosca," at Covent Garden. He devotes much of his new album, "Il Tenore," to Puccini's red-hot melodrama, singing two arias and a love scene with Lise Davidsen's lusciously voiced heroine. The performers make sure you hear just how wonderful his voice is: Paolo Arrivabeni conducts the opening of "Recondita armonia" slowly, drawing translucent textures from the Philharmonia Orchestra, as De Tommaso unleashes his molten tone and a few glottal stops (tenor shorthand for uncontrollable ardor). Excerpts

AFRO-POP



The Nigerian pop sensation Burna Boy has been one of African music's preëminent experimentalists since the release of his colorful breakthrough album, "Outside," in 2018. He emerged as an international star in the years after, with his statement record, "African Giant," and the more personal "Twice as Tall," which won him a Grammy. His new release, "**Love, Damini**," is looser and less conceptual than the previous two, but just as wide-ranging and vibrant, seeking an intersection of global pop. He comes close to finding one. Throughout the album, he marshals a sublime array of dance sounds alongside a cosmopolitan group of performers—the reggaeton idol J Balvin, the dancehall phenom Popcaan, the R. & B. sage Kehlani, and even the English singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran. Sampling everything from Toni Braxton to the Netflix smash "Squid Game," he keeps reimagining the limits of his songs. But, no matter how far out he pushes, the music never loses its distinctly Nigerian groove.—*Sheldon Pearce*

OFF BROADWAY

Fathers, as Prince Hamlet learned, are hard to shake, even after they're gone. Aya Ogawa, a nonbinary writer-performer born in Japan and based in Brooklyn, lost their father around fifteen years ago, but didn't honor his death in any formal way. The two were distant, for reasons both emotional (the father was withdrawn) and cultural (Ogawa, brought up in California, became an assimilated American). **"The Nosebleed,"** which Ogawa wrote, directs, and acts in, is a belated mourning rite of an inventive sort, involving reenactments from the reality show "The Bachelorette" and uncomfortable questions posed to the audience ("Who here hates their father?"). After warmly received runs at the Public's Under the Radar festival and the Japan Society, the play (in previews, opening on Aug. 1) comes to Lincoln Center Theatre's Claire Tow.—*Michael Schulman*

from "Turandot," "Madama Butterfly," and "Carmen," also featuring guest artists, likewise display the muscular heft and handsome finish of De Tommaso's spinto tenor, but the album lacks specificity—Cavaradossi sounds indistinguishable from Calaf, Pinkerton, and Don José. Still, if the intention behind presenting scenes was to whet listeners' appetites for a live opera performance, then mission accomplished.—*O.Z. (Streaming on select platforms.)*

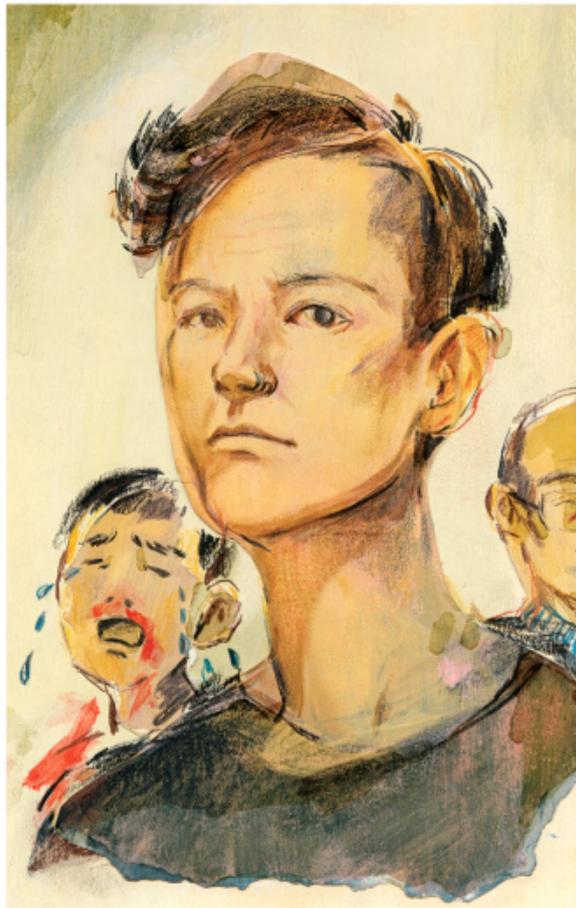
DANCE

Ailey Moves NYC!

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre heads out into the city for a series of free, outdoor events. On July 23, at the Coney Island Amphitheatre, as part of City Parks Foundation's SummerStage, the company presents a knockout show, combining Rennie Harris's searching "Lazarus" with the evergreen "Revelations." On July 28, Ailey II, the always impressive junior troupe, graces Bryant Park Picnic Performances with a program that includes Yannick Lebrun's touching duet "Saa Magni."—*Brian Seibert (alvinailey.org)*

Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival

Tap and Brazilian music may not be synonymous in people's minds, but they are natural companions. Both have roots in the African diaspora and are built on complex rhythms, and both exude cool and ease with an exuberance of expression. The Brazilian-born tap artist Leonardo Sandoval and his musical partner Gregory Richardson (a wizard of the bass) bring these two worlds together in their ensemble, Music from the Sole. Along with a group of excellent tap dancers (many of whom have,



like Sandoval, collaborated with Michelle Dorrance), they present "I Didn't Come to Stay," a program of Brazilian-inspired dance, on the Pillow's outdoor stage, July 20-24. At the Ted Shawn Theatre, the venerable modern-dance troupe Limón Dance Company performs a seventy-fifth-anniversary program that combines classic modern-dance works by José Limón and Doris Humphrey with a new work by the Burkina Faso-born choreographer Olivier Tarpaga.—*Marina Harss (Becket, Mass.; July 20-24.)*

Little Island Music and Dance Festival

This festival—curated by the producer Torya Beard, the actor Michael McElroy, and New York's unofficial ambassador of tap-dance joy, Ayodele Casel—saves its Friday- and Saturday-evening slots for a solid lineup of percussive dance. A few tap adepts—the uninhibited Brinae Ali, the super-skilled Luke Hickey, and Max Pollak, a veteran expert in Afro-Cuban rhythms—join the kathak dancer Barkha Patel and the appealing multiform trio Soles of Duende, July 22-23. The following weekend, July 29-30, Maurice Chestnut, a serious hooper, shows his love for A Tribe Called Quest.—*B.S. (Little Island; July 20-31.)*

Ragamala Dance Company

Ranee Ramaswamy and her daughter, Aparna, are the artistic directors of this excellent Minneapolis ensemble, which specializes in dance theatre based in the language of the classical Indian dance form bharata natyam. In their evening-length works, they explore large philosophical themes: life, death, our place in the universe. "Sacred Earth," part of BRIC Celebrate Brooklyn!, performed to live musical accompaniment in the South Indian Carnatic style, is a meditation on the rituals

and the rhythms of nature, as reflected in the Tamil literary tradition. The show's projections are of indigenous Warli paintings, from western India.—*M.H. (Prospect Park's Lena Horne Bandshell; July 22.)*

THE THEATRE

Between the Lines

Delilah (Arielle Jacobs), neglected by her divorced, overworked mother and a social outcast at her new school, crushes on Prince Oliver (Jake David Smith), the hero of a children's fairy-tale book. Based on a young-adult novel by Jodi Picoult and her daughter, Samantha van Leer, this musical, directed by Jeff Calhoun ("Newsies"), paints Delilah as a wide-eyed innocent, so much so that she comes across as being seventeen going on twelve—making her flirtation with Oliver occasionally awkward. An unwieldy mashup of "Dear Evan Hansen," "Mean Girls," and a defanged "Jagged Little Pill," the production is held together by a solid cast (with Vicki Lewis, in multiple roles, as the M.V.P.) and an inventive use of Caite Hevner's projections. Oddly, the supporting characters tend to land the best tunes in Elyssa Samsel and Kate Anderson's score, such as the pounding, techno-esque "Inner Thoughts," while the leads are saddled with bland ballads.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Tony Kiser Theatre at Second Stage; through Oct. 2.)*

Mister Miss America

In spite of its title, this play is, in fact, about Mister Miss Smithville, a.k.a. Derek Tyler Taylor, a contestant in the Miss Southwestern Virginia Pageant. Derek, the event's first male participant, dazzlingly played by Neil D'Astolfo, refuses to let hecklers or a competitor's God-mongering deter him from pursuing the crown that he's fantasized about since he was nine. This solo show could easily lapse into caricatures of Southern or gay culture, but D'Astolfo, who also wrote the script, roots his humor in humanity. Derek may swear "hand to Gaga," but he speaks to the dreaming child in all of us. He speaks to us as adults, too, elucidating the difference between "winnin' and beatin' someone." Opening up the narrative's meta-theatrical dimension are Travis McHale's lighting and Sun Hee Kil's sound design, which sometimes turn the play's audience into the pageant's audience. The sequin-encrusted costumes, by Hunter Kaczorowski, sparkle as brightly as Derek's wit.—*Dan Stahl (Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre; through Aug. 7.)*

ART

Geles Cabrera

In the nineteen-sixties, this modernist sculptor opened a museum near her home in Coyocán, Mexico City, to exhibit and preserve her own work—a bold move for a woman sidelined in a male-dominated medium (and world). The first solo presentation of Cabrera's art in New York, "Museo Escultórico," is named for her self-founded institution, evoking its back-yard

garden space with the inclusion of leafy potted plants. Cabrera, now ninety-five, worked primarily with terra-cotta, volcanic rock, and bronze to carve and mold the sculptures on view in this Edenic atmosphere. Abstracted bodies—usually female, often maternal—are seen seated and supine, in casual but never languid poses. Their sloped and simplified forms have the fluid strength of dancers, appearing alert and engaged. The modestly sized figures seem to be gathered in friendly conversation in groups scattered throughout the gallery, arranged on platforms of various heights or on concrete-brick plinths. Hanging on the surrounding walls are archival photographs of both the artist’s museum and her public projects. A digitized scrapbook of Cabrera’s press clippings adds historical and personal detail to this lovely portrait of a remarkable life and oeuvre.—*Johanna Fateman (Americas Society; through July 30.)*

“Dakota Modern: The Art of Oscar Howe”

This overdue retrospective of the remarkable Yanktonai Dakota painter Oscar Howe, who died in 1983, at the age of sixty-eight, graces the always enthralling New York branch of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian. (Housed in the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House, a prodigy of Beaux-Arts architecture designed by Cass Gilbert in 1907, the exhibition is admission-free.) Howe is a frequently misunderstood American master who bridged ethnic authenticity and internationalist derring-do, although condescension from establishment institutions and proprietary tribute from some sectarian advocates have hindered his recognition as a straight-up canonical modernist. Crisply curated by Kathleen Ash-Milby, the show consists almost exclusively of works in tempera, watercolor, gouache, or casein on paper. The execution is phlegmatically deliberate. The upshot is a channelling of sheer, visionary imagination, as if the artist were taking dictation from an unseen demiurge. Do some of the effects seem cartoonish, with figuration that anticipated popular styles of graphic fiction which took hold in the nineteen-seventies? Perhaps. Still, generic characters in melodramatic poses strategically depersonalize subjects to the benefit of thematic punch and decorative finesse. The results exalt audacity and breathe beauty. Howe seldom repeated himself. Each work can feel one-off, fulfilling a special mission to a fare-thee-well. If any quality is consistent, it’s suddenness.—*Peter Schjeldahl (National Museum of the American Indian; through Sept. 11.)*

“To Name a Place”

In this eight-artist exhibition, the curator Anna Stothart invigorates the perennial summer-show subject of landscape. The most imposing work on view is Mel Chin’s “Safe,” from 2005: a lush painting of the Congo River on Belgian linen, in a gaudy gilt frame, is nearly obscured by battered wooden planks leaning against it, through which the artist has driven thousands of rusty nails, an allusion to both the brutal treatment of the Kongo people by King Leopold II and to their *nkisi nkondi* power figures. Arnie Zimmerman’s tabletop tableau in clay teems with laborers—min-

ing, building, and wrestling with the earth in various ways. Miya Ando’s indigo-and-micronized-silver works on paper are more topical than they might appear; based on the artist’s observation of the moon, a hundred and sixty-nine days into the pandemic, they are velvety meditations on fugitive beauty. Justine Fisher’s enigmatic oil painting, simply titled “space,” offers a twinkling view of a garden path leading to a door that beckons with an Henri Rousseau-like promise of fantastic escape.—*J.F. (Alexander Gray; through Aug. 6.)*

“Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet as It’s Kept”

This startlingly coherent and bold exhibition is a material manifesto of late-pandemic institutional culture. Long on installations and videos and short on painting, conventional sculpture, and straight photography, it is exciting without being especially pleasurable—geared toward thought. The innova-

tive, intimately collaborative curators David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards ignore rather than oppose pressures of the ever-romping art market, which can see to itself. Delayed for a year by COVID-19, the show consolidates a trend that many of us hadn’t suspected: a sort of fortuitously shared conceptual sensibility that suggests an in-group but is open to all who care about art’s relations to the wide world. My favorite work in the show is the indelibly disturbing and enthralling “Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word” (2021), by the veteran Cuban American artist and singularly plainspoken social activist Coco Fusco—a gorgeous twelve-minute video exploration of Hart Island, New York’s potter’s field for unidentified or unclaimed corpses. Shots of the artist laboring in a rowboat along its shores alternate with drone overviews of a really quite lovely place, where rows of small stone markers perfunctorily memorialize innumerable lost lives. Beauty stands in for unconsummated mourning.—*P.S. (Whitney Museum; through Sept. 5.)*

IN THE MUSEUMS



The Lakota expression *mni wičóni*—“water is life”—was heard around the world during the Standing Rock protests. Now it echoes through the American Wing of the Met, thanks to a small but momentous exhibition on view through April 2. Titled “**Water Memories**,” the show was organized by Patricia Marroquin Norby, the museum’s first curator of Native American art; as a woman of Purépecha heritage, Norby is also its first full-time Indigenous curator. The show traverses six centuries in a scant forty art works and artifacts by both Native and non-Native creators. An exquisite oil of a foamy wave by the American modernist Arthur Dove, from 1929, assumes a mournful edge in the company of a shimmering sculptural installation by the Shinnecock ceramicist Courtney M. Leonard, from 2021, that eulogizes the decimation of the sperm-whale population off Long Island’s East End, where Dove made his painting. Poetry and protest are inseparable in all of the contemporary pieces here, including the Chemehuevi photographer Cara Romero’s oneiric 2015 scene (pictured above) of Pueblo corn dancers reckoning with a collective water memory: the flooding of thousands of acres of tribal land by the construction of the Parker Dam.—*Andrea K. Scott*

MOVIES

Before Sunrise

The hip ennui that Richard Linklater conjured up in “Slacker” and “Dazed and Confused” seemed rooted in Texas, but it transplants beautifully to Vienna, where his fourth feature, from 1995, is set. The movie is provocatively plotless: Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and Céline (Julie Delpy) meet on a train, decide to get off together, and have themselves a fine, sleepless time before parting the next day. That’s it: various threats loom up and fade away, and the only suspense comes from wondering whether the two characters (who are pretty much the only characters) will stop talking long enough to have sex. The extended takes and lazy conversations bring the movie within inches of boring, but there is real audacity in the casual bookishness of the script (by Linklater and Kim Krizan) and in the shrugging rhythms of the direction. The charm—the midsummer enchantment—never

feels forced; it steals up and wins you. A true romance.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 1/30/95.) (Streaming on Prime Video, the Criterion Channel, and other services.)

Los Angeles Plays Itself

Thom Andersen’s nearly three-hour essay-film, from 2003, joins his trenchant and polemical voice-over commentary to a rich and alluring selection of clips from movies shot on location in Los Angeles, ranging from “The Big Sleep” and “Rebel Without a Cause” to “Chinatown” and “Clueless.” This kaleidoscopic portrait of the city is both a powerful work of film criticism and a personal story of living in Los Angeles. Andersen traces the falsification of the city’s geography and history in Hollywood movies to the shoddy narrative and ideological conventions in run-of-the-mill productions; even the habitual display of architectural landmarks and styles comes in for scathing analysis. He gets beneath the surfaces of dramas to reveal the realities that they re-

flect—including racial prejudice, police brutality, real-estate depredations, and economic inequities—spotlighting their insidious endorsement of such political perversions. He concludes with a grand tribute to the legacy of great local independent filmmakers who discovered truth by way of fiction, in such movies as “The Exiles” and “Killer of Sheep.”—*Richard Brody* (Playing through July 27 at IFC Center and streaming on MUBI, Prime Video, and other services.)

Meet Marlon Brando

During the New York press junket for the film “Morituri,” in 1965, its star, Marlon Brando, received a series of journalists for brief interviews at a table in the Hampshire House hotel and toyed with them gleefully and mercilessly. Albert and David Maysles’s 1966 documentary of that commercial event captures Brando’s transformation of it, through the sheer force of his personality, into a grandly ironic variety of performance art. Brando brazenly flirts with several female journalists, complimenting them on their appearance, and aggressively questions male interviewers about their looks, too (with particular attention to their fingernails and their clothing). Challenging the interviewers’ willingness to work as “hucksters,” Brando mocks the blatantly promotional conversations with sly or flamboyant sarcasm and disarmingly sincere reflections. In a street-side interview, he responds to a political question about the circumstances of Black people in the United States by beckoning to a Black woman who’s passing by and posing the question to her. The resulting portrait of Brando—sexual, intellectual, aggressive, vulnerable, seductive, rebellious—shows him creating a greater character than any ever written for him: himself.—*R.B.* (Playing at BAM July 22.)

WHAT TO STREAM



Humphrey Bogart, who died in 1957, at the age of fifty-seven, was already enduring the effects of cancer when he appeared in his last film, the boxing melodrama “**The Harder They Fall**,” from 1956 (streaming on the Criterion Channel and other services). His role in it, as the down-and-out sportswriter Eddie Willis, is one of his toughest. Yet Eddie never brandishes a gun or raises a fist. Rather, he uses his words and his wiles to shill for a shady boxing promoter (Rod Steiger) who is trying to sell American audiences on a lumbering Argentinean carnival strongman named Toro Moreno (Mike Lane) as a contender for the heavyweight championship. Brokering fixed fights and using his press connections to legitimize them, Eddie is complicit in the death of a fighter and in the scamming of Toro himself; then the former newspaperman’s crusading conscience kicks in. The movie, directed by Mark Robson and based on a novel by Budd Schulberg, packs the ambient violence of a sports world and a media scene that are infested with gangsters; it’s an exposé not just of boxing but of the American way of business.—*Richard Brody*

Thor: Love and Thunder

The playful spirit of Saturday-morning cartoons inspires this puckish yet sentimental Marvel concoction, directed by Taika Waititi, but the whimsy is inhibited, and the humor rarely lands. An intergalactic villain called Gorr the God Butcher (Christian Bale) targets Thor (Chris Hemsworth) by kidnapping children from the hammer-wielder’s reconstructed home town, New Asgard, and luring him into a trap. Just then Thor’s ex, the astrophysicist Dr. Jane Foster (Natalie Portman), who has terminal cancer, arrives in New Asgard in the hope that the magical hammer can heal her, and she joins Thor, the bereaved heroine Valkyrie (Tessa Thompson), and Korg (Waititi), a quippy giant made of rocks, in the battle to defeat Gorr and save the children. The blandly functional plot gives rise to a colossal yet sluggish set piece in which the quartet penetrates the vast gilded palace of Zeus (Russell Crowe) in quest of his help. In the movie’s one inspired scene, New Asgard is portrayed as a tourist attraction where the legend of Thor is staged for visitors as a threadbare skit; it comes off as a knowing nod at the bare-bones histrionics underlying this C.G.I. extravaganza.—*R.B.* (In theatrical release.)

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TABLES FOR TWO

Laser Wolf

97 Wythe Ave., Brooklyn

On a recent evening at Laser Wolf, a new restaurant on the rooftop of the Hoxton hotel, in Williamsburg, a friendly but authoritative woman zipped dutifully from table to table, pausing at each. “We clap for the sunset,” she announced. “Don’t panic.” For a moment, service seemed to halt. Bodies shifted westward as the collective gaze settled on an unimpeded view of the Manhattan skyline. Phones were drawn. As the gleaming orb sank behind the Con Ed clock tower, blue sky melting into gold, dramatic rays backlighting cotton-ball clouds, applause went up, accompanied by cheers.

With a vista like this, food and drink could easily be secondary, not to mention a total ripoff. At Laser Wolf—an outpost of the beloved Philadelphia restaurant of the same name (a cheeky reference to “Fiddler on the Roof”), from the Israeli American chef Michael Solomonov and the restaurateur Steve Cook—it’s the setting that feels negligible. The last time I had eaten at a Solomonov-Cook restaurant was in 2018, just before they closed a Chelsea Market location of

Dizengoff, their Philadelphia hummus counter. The windowless-corridor seating never deterred me from the exquisitely silky whipped hummus, a meal in itself, topped with ground lamb and pomegranate molasses, and the za’atar roast chicken.

What a relief to have that hummus back, as the centerpiece of Laser Wolf’s *salatim*, a bountiful array of salads and dips delivered to the table as soon as you order any of the menu’s grilled items, in the style of an Israeli *shipudiya*, or “skewer house.” Choose a cocktail—my party gasped at the beauty of the Saz-Arak, two cold, crisp fingers of rye and arak, an anise-flavored spirit—and a skewer, and you’re done with decisions; dessert is also included. There’s a small array of à-la-carte add-ons, too, but let me make it easy: get the double-cooked thick-cut French fries, sparkling with salt, and the gently spicy, sticky-sweet date-harissa wings, served with tahini ketchup and tahini ranch, respectively.

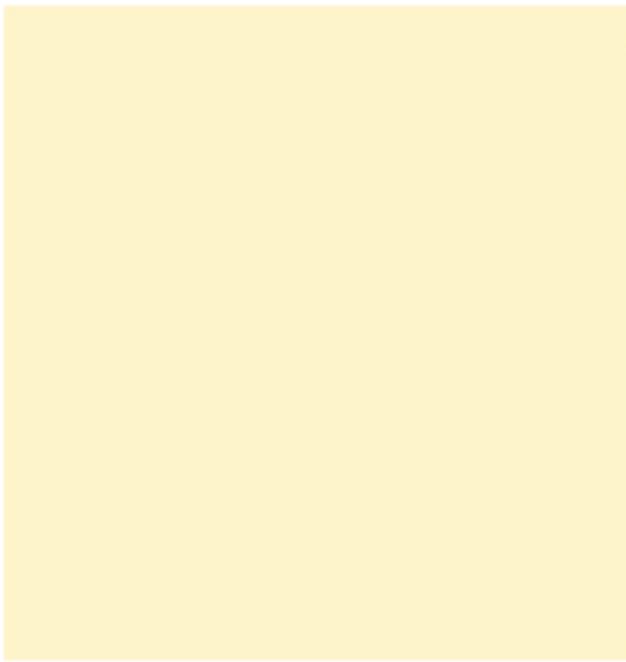
The *salatim* are uniformly excellent, a roulette with only lucky slots: creamy white gigante beans strewn with torn Castelvetrano olives; a surprising, refreshing combination of diced pineapple and shaved celery tossed in smoked-pineapple purée; earthy roasted mushrooms with ruffles of kale and a smidge of sour-cherry juice. The warm, pillowy pita is perfect, especially for swiping through baba ghanoush and the hummus, a generous whorl finished with olive oil, za’atar, and parsley.

After an opener so complete, the adjective “main” doesn’t quite apply to the

next course, which is not to say it’s not an event. Luscious, shaggy short rib is braised in passion-fruit *amba*, an Iraqi Jewish sauce traditionally made from pickled green mango, before its edges grow crisp over smoldering charcoal. Velvety chunks of tuna are crusted in coriander and caraway seeds and glossed in a North African-style chili paste called *harif*. The chicken *shishlik* (Hebrew for “skewer”) can’t compete with the wings, but the gamy tang of the steak *shishlik* comes up from behind; it’s much simpler but no less exciting than the *koobideh*, made with house-ground beef and lamb seasoned with sumac, turmeric, and dill and celery seeds.

The tantalizing perfume of fried garlic and *amba* wafting off a grilled eggplant turned me into a cartoon character, poking my nose into the air, straining for another whiff. One night, I was disappointed to realize that I had inadvertently made my hard-won reservation for the counter, where I was perched on a stool looking at the open kitchen instead of the view. But I came to see the upside: a front-row seat at the ballet that produced that eggplant; a close look at a lineup of whole cauliflower on a trolley, dry-rubbed in shawarma spices and waiting their turn to be coaxed into collapse. I watched, mesmerized, as neat coils of brown-sugar soft serve emerged from a dispenser, to be topped with pistachios, cherry preserves, and minuscule puffed-rice pearls. I clap for the kitchen. (*Grill items, including salatim and soft serve, \$43–\$175.*)

—Hannah Goldfield



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT WALKER'S RUN

A week ago, the Republican Party's nominee for the United States Senate from Georgia explained his opposition to the Green New Deal. Given the decades of Republican denials, obfuscations, and outright falsehoods on the subject of climate change, it would be difficult for nearly any G.O.P. candidate's erroneous comments to stand out. It was a challenge Herschel Walker, a former N.F.L. star, was ready to meet. He explained, "Since we don't control the air, our good air decided to float over to China's bad air, so when China gets our good air, their bad air got to move. So it moves over to our good air space. Then, now, we got to clean that back up."

Fighting climate change, in Walker's telling, is as productive as trying to sweep sand off the beach. Amid the tide of criticism that his remarks generated, his campaign resorted to a dodge that Donald Trump's team had often used in response to his most indefensible campaign comments: they were just a joke. If there is a joke being told, though, Walker almost certainly is not in on it. Yet in some polls he currently trails his opponent, the Democratic senator Raphael Warnock, by just a few points, and it seems that, no matter the final outcome, Walker will receive the votes of millions of Georgians this fall.

The tale of how Walker came to be the Republican nominee is a clear example of the warping effect that Trump has had on the Party nationally. Having lost Georgia in the 2020 election,

he launched a crusade to invalidate the results there, famously pressing the secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger, to "find" him more than eleven thousand votes—an act that is now the subject of a criminal probe—while he insisted to supporters that the state's election had been rigged. He did so irrespective of the impact that such claims could have on other Republican candidates, including Georgia's two incumbent senators, Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue, who faced runoff elections against their respective Democratic opponents, Warnock and Jon Ossoff. A Trump supporter in Marietta asked Ronna McDaniel, the Republican National Committee chair, "Why should we vote in this election when we know it's already decided?" After Warnock and Ossoff won, Trump, in a fit of internecine score-settling, pushed Perdue, a viable contender to take on Warnock this November (Warnock's victory was in a spe-

cial election), to run as a primary challenger to Brian Kemp, the Republican Governor, who had also rejected Trump's entreaty to throw out the 2020 results. Kemp easily beat Perdue, and Trump's grievance left an open lane for Walker to pursue the Senate seat.

During three seasons with the University of Georgia Bulldogs, Walker, who is now sixty, recorded more than five thousand rushing yards. In 1982, he won the Heisman Trophy. These are his primary qualifications for representing Georgia in the Senate. He has also cited his work in law enforcement, his graduation from U.G.A. in the top percentile of his class, and his success in running businesses, including one of the largest minority-owned food-service companies in the country. These claims would be impressive, if they were accurate. (The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* found that he had never worked in law enforcement, that he did not graduate from college, and that he has exaggerated the size of his various business ventures.) The state G.O.P. had a long list of potential candidates to challenge Warnock. Walker, however, had effusively praised and diligently defended Trump during the 2020 election and after it. Trump looked at the unqualified newcomer, who was prone to rambling disquisitions on subjects he knew little about, and saw in him a winner. Game recognizes game.

Trump's endorsement helped Walker become the nominee despite a devastating ad from a primary opponent pointing to Walker's alleged history of domestic violence, including an incident



years ago in which he is said to have pointed a firearm at his now ex-wife. (He has said that he does not remember that episode, citing a struggle with dissociative-identity disorder, and has denied accusations from other women.) His personal life has continued to prove complicated. A frequent commentator on the perils of “fatherless” households in Black communities, he has highlighted the role he has played in the life of his twenty-two-year-old son, Christian. In June, though, the *Daily Beast* reported that Walker was also the father of a ten-year-old son, whom he had not publicly acknowledged, and that the boy’s mother had sued him for child support. Walker then admitted that he had fathered a daughter during his college years, and also that he had another child, a thirteen-year-old son. Hypocrisy has seldom been less of a political liability than it is now, so it’s not particularly shocking that a candidate

for high office would rail against men shirking their paternal responsibilities while evidently evading his own. Yet Walker also appears not to have told his campaign staff the truth when he was asked directly how many children he has; an unnamed adviser told the *Daily Beast* that Walker lies “like he’s breathing.”

Walker has not spoken much on matters of policy, but his statement about air quality was not an outlier. (At the same event, he said that China had created the coronavirus, which he had previously said could be killed by a “dry mist.”) Asked how he would prevent needless gun tragedies such as the Uvalde massacre, he said, “What I like to do is see it and everything and stuff.” In response to a similar query from Fox News, he replied, “What about getting a department that can look at young men, that’s looking at women, that’s looking at social media?”

We have learned the hard way that,

in American politics, integrity is optional. We’ve seen the wreckage that unqualified leadership yields. Yet Walker’s deficits are not the only cause for concern here. Warnock and Ossoff were elected on January 5, 2021. The next day, a Trumpist mob laid siege to the United States Capitol. We are not yet beyond that moment. Trump will reportedly announce a 2024 run for the Presidency ahead of this year’s election, when a Walker victory could return control of the Senate to the Republicans. A number of state legislatures have made their systems less amenable to fair elections, and next year the Supreme Court may assist those efforts. No one in the G.O.P. leadership can possibly believe that Walker is fit to hold a Senate seat, but the hope—as dangerous as it is cynical—is that he may be able to win one. And that joke would most certainly be on us.

—Jelani Cobb

HERE TO THERE DEPT. BIODYNAMIC



It’s been a rough few years for the supply chain. Last spring, as the world watched, a huge container ship loaded with bicycles, dildos, and IKEA furniture blocked the Suez Canal for six days. In February, a cargo vessel carrying four hundred million dollars’ worth of Audis, Porsches, Bentleys, Lamborghinis, and Volkswagens caught fire and sank in the North Atlantic. Ports are crowded, consumers are cranky, and the glaciers are still melting. But maybe the tides are turning. Not too long ago, Olivier and Jacques Barreau, twin brothers from France, who had no experience with export or with wine, founded a company that ships biodynamic wines across the Atlantic. Their aim: ninety-nine-percent-carbon-neutral shipping. (The global shipping industry creates almost as much CO₂ as the entire continent of South America does.) Their method: the world’s first modern cargo sailboat.

“We’re trying to implement this new wording, so people understand that it’s a

cargo ship *and* a sailboat,” Matthieu Riou, who is the company’s export director, said the other day, stepping aboard *Grain de Sail*, a two-masted aluminum-hulled schooner. He wore a backward baseball cap, dirty white sneakers, and a T-shirt with an illustration of a woman drinking wine and smoking a cigarette. “The goal is to bring some new stuff to the U.S., wines that have never been distributed in New York City. New types of grapes, new types of techniques.” After twenty-four days at sea, the cargo sailboat, which is registered as an official merchant vessel by the French government, had arrived in New York Harbor, with eight thousand bottles: Château Maris grenache, Ferme de la Sansonniere Chenin Blanc, Charles Heidsieck champagne. A sailor named François Le Naoures said, “This is the first time since Prohibition that we import so much alcohol by sail.”

Riou, who is twenty-eight, said, “It’s a dry boat, so there’s no alcohol consumption on board. Only when we’re docked are the sailors free to drink.”

“It’s been fun!” Le Naoures, who wore polarized sunglasses, Botalo sailing boots, and a beaded bracelet made by his two-year-old daughter, said. “We went to a jazz concert and to many, many bars. Probably all the bars on Atlantic Avenue.”

“Fifteen days in port is good,” the

ship’s captain, Goulwen Josse, said. He was unshaven, like Le Naoures, with dirty clothes, greasy hair, and bright-blue eyes. “But the sea is a quiet place.” The horn of the Staten Island Ferry blared in the distance. Josse, who is forty-eight, continued, “Living on earth is not for me. I don’t like the way it works.” He laughed. “At sea, what happens on earth doesn’t have any importance. You just have to take care of your boat and the people on board.” He went on, “If I stayed on earth, I would have to do political things.” Instead, he said, he has decided



to ship cargo with the wind: “I feel like I’m doing something intelligent.”

Around noon, Josse’s crew set sail. Destination: Boca Chica, in the Dominican Republic. Cargo: twenty pallets of syringes, surgical tubing, bedpans, wheelchairs, and wound-irrigation kits. (Grain de Sail partnered with the Afya Foundation, in Yonkers, to ship medical supplies to Boca Chica, where the crew will pick up thirty-seven tons of cocoa and head back to France.) The sailors made a quick toast (Maestral White, Domaine des Maravilhas, 2019)—“To Grain de Sail! To New York City!”—before Julia Guerin, who wore waterproof sailing pants and carried a wood-handled knife in a leather holster, climbed onto the ship’s boom and unfurled the mainsail. The sail rose up the mast like a squirrel climbing a flagpole. Then the ship started to whine. Josse shouted, “There’s something wrong!”

The electric motor, which usually lifts the mainsail into place, had malfunctioned. “We’ll have to dismantle it at sea,” Josse said, instructing Guerin and Le Naoures to hoist the sail by hand, using rope. Le Naoures was out of breath in minutes.

Josse shouted, “*Continuez! Continuez!*” (“Keep going! Keep going!”)

Le Naoures shouted, “*Putain! Putain!*” (“Fuck! Fuck!”)

Once the sails were in place, the boat glided past the Statue of Liberty, and Josse took his hands off the wheel to roll a cigarette. “The autopilot is really useful,” he said. Nearby, a tugboat pushed a barge, piled with garbage, toward New Jersey, and a few deckhands aboard an oil tanker waved from across the harbor. Le Naoures FaceTimed his daughter, pointing the camera at the oil ship. His daughter said, “*C’est un gros bateau!*”

After passing under the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge, the cargo sailboat drifted alongside the Mathilde Schulte, an old-fashioned diesel-engine cargo ship. “Most of the things in those containers aren’t useful,” Josse said. “Most could be produced here in America!” The Mathilde Schulte was loaded with almost nine hundred shipping containers (cargo: perfume, heavy machinery, cheese) bound for Brooklyn’s Red Hook Terminal. Josse lit another cigarette and sailed into the afternoon sun.

—Adam Iscoe

MAD SCIENTIST DEPT. BERRY BERRY



Consider the strawberry: red, ripe, an ephemeral pleasure as fleeting as a summer fling. What if that fling could last? “Our strawberries are always in season,” Hiroki Koga, the co-founder and C.E.O. of Oishii (pronounced oy-she, Japanese for “delicious”), a company that specializes in vertical farming, said the other day. “I am in love with them,” the chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, who uses the berries in a haute lemon drop served at his vegetarian restaurant, abcV, said. “They’re completely delicious.”

Love comes at a price: originally, Oishii charged sixty dollars for a plastic case of six heart-shaped “jumbo omakase” berries, each one tucked into its own plastic cradle.

“That’s our special lineup,” Koga said. “Our first-flower berries, probably the top one or two per cent of our production.” The jumbo berries now cost twenty dollars for a tray of eight, which can be ordered through Oishii’s Web site for delivery in New York and New Jersey, or for pickup in Los Angeles; the berries are also available at a handful of Whole Foods locations around New York. They regularly sell out.

“There are customers who buy multiple trays every week,” Koga said. “That’s,

like, thousands of dollars, just on strawberries.” Demand is so high that he has stopped selling to most restaurants.

Koga grew up in Japan and came to the U.S. in 2015, to get an M.B.A. at U.C. Berkeley. Among his first stops: the grocery store. “I was really excited to try the produce,” he said. “I expected everything to be good and cheap, compared with Japan.” He was disappointed. “Everything *looked* glossy. Everything *looked* good,” he said. “But then I’d take a bite, and I wouldn’t be able to taste the flavor.” He learned that most American growers are geared toward mass production and long-distance transport, rather than toward flavor.

He’d previously worked on indoor vertical-farming technology as a consultant at Deloitte. He wondered if he could engineer an indoor climate to grow the kinds of strawberry that he remembered eating as a child: coral pink with tiny seeds, a rare breed from the foothills of the Japanese Alps. He found a fellow agriculture enthusiast in Brendan Somerville, a former Marine intelligence officer getting his M.B.A. at U.C.L.A. “He was running an avocado-oil company in Africa, remotely, from L.A.,” Koga said. “I convinced him that this was going to be bigger.”

In 2017, they found their version of alpine Japan in a warehouse in Kearny, New Jersey. “We convinced this landlord to lease us a small building when we had no money,” Koga said. Now they have more than fifty million dollars in funding, inroads into tomatoes and melons, and four indoor farms,



“Howard?”

three near the New Jersey Turnpike.

"I'm going to have to ask you to change your shoes," Koga told a visitor on a recent morning. He wore jeans, a zip-up sweatshirt, and freshly sanitized slip-on sandals. "We have a very strict disease protocol." He pushed open a door, revealing a warehouse full of trailers. "We call them 'small farm units,'" he said. Some are used for cloning—"not G.M.O. It's all natural, strawberries clone themselves." Others are used for R. & D. In one trailer, two workers in hazmat suits poked purposefully at green seedlings lined up on Q.R.-coded racks. The scent: strawberries on steroids.

Koga declined to say which Japanese town his simulated environment is based on. His researchers are tinkering with growing conditions, varying levels of humidity and of carbon dioxide. "Right now, our Brix level is as sweet as it would be if they were grown in Japan," Koga said. "But we can shoot for something that's even better."

More trailers, more plants, more technicians. "We have robots running around," Koga said. "They collect data from every seedling." The last stop was at a ten-foot-tall glass-walled grid of plants. "Our main production arm," he said, with pride.

A lone bee buzzed from one curl-cued runner to the next. "To grow anything beyond leafy greens, you need to pollinate the flowers," he said. "Bees normally don't operate well in a vertical farm, but we figured out a secret recipe to make them happy. They are the core of our technology."

Even more so than the robots? "The thing is the bee's butt," he said. "They have so many small brushes, and the way they rub their butt against the flower—it works so well. With a robot, you can't replicate that precise movement, and if you don't pollinate perfectly the fruit will grow in a really weird shape. We call them mispollinated berries."

The R. & D. department occasionally produces these by accident, the result of pollination by human hand. Koga walked over to the trailer and procured one of the rejects: bulbous, with a Jay Leno chin and spots that looked like sores. "They're not sellable," Koga said. "It's not the flavor. It just looks really, really ugly."

—Sheila Yasmin Marikar

POP-UP SCREEN SOUNDS



This spring, the comedian Wyatt Cenac and the rapper Donwill reintroduced "Shouting at the Screen," their pop-up Blaxploitation-film experience, at Nitehawk Prospect Park. There were technical difficulties. What do comedians and rappers know about A.V. setups? Turns out, not a lot. At one point, the screen went blank. "We had to explain that this wasn't part of the movie," Cenac said, the other day. The film restarted but shut off again minutes later.

"So we had a sing-along," Donwill said. "I'm not sure why, but we sang 'September.'"

Alcohol and food helped mollify the crowd. "I have to imagine there were some people who were, like, 'We paid for a babysitter. I don't care how long this takes, we are not going back to those children,'" Cenac said.

Cenac, who is currently working on animated television and film projects for Warner Bros., and Donwill, who recently released a quarantine-inspired album called "SPACE," have been friends for twelve years. They were sitting on a mid-century-modern couch at the record store Legacy Dumbo, where they were shopping for music to play at the next installment of "Shouting at the Screen," at the end of July. "It started more than a decade ago, at an event space in Dumbo," Cenac said, of the screening series. "But then that place got shut down for questionable business practices." (The owner was convicted of tax fraud and grand larceny in 2014.) The show moved on to a spot in Williamsburg, then to the Bell House, in Gowanus; the Alamo Drafthouse, in downtown Brooklyn; South by Southwest, in Austin; and Sketchfest, in San Francisco, before the pandemic put it on hiatus. For the first movie screening since lockdown, Cenac and Donwill chose "Willie Dynamite," from 1974, which stars an actor named Roscoe Orman.

They typically pair a movie with drinking games; for "Willie Dynamite," each time Willie wore brightly colored attire

members of the audience took a drink. "The guy who plays Willie was hired to play Gordon on 'Sesame Street' the same year, so, looking at a lot of Willie Dynamite's outfits, we kept trying to tie them to 'Sesame Street,'" Cenac said. Bernard Johnson, the film's costume designer, who later worked on "New Jack City," dressed Orman, in one scene, in green bell-bottoms, a fur coat, and an oversized Cossack hat, making him look a little like Oscar the Grouch.

The movie follows pimps and prostitutes as they weigh the pros and cons of unionizing. "The social worker in that movie turns out to be the hero, because she is trying to provide the sex workers with alternatives," Cenac, who wore a bucket hat with two Charlie Brown pins and a vintage Malcolm X T-shirt, said. The plot bore a resemblance to a recent viral Reddit post about college women forming what they called a "hoe union." (Among other things, the students vowed to leave any party if they couldn't mix their own drinks, if the hosts were sexual harassers, or if male-to-female ratios were enforced.) Cenac and Donwill discussed.

"The first thing I thought was, Is it like something with OnlyFans?" Donwill, who wore a Basquiat T-shirt, said. "But I think the concept is on point."

They started to riffle through records. They wouldn't say what film they would be playing at the next screening, but they were looking for albums that honored the Blaxploitation era. Cenac gravitated toward a drawer labelled "R. & B. Soul/Funk." He picked out a 1989 LP called "Stay with Me," by Regina Belle. "I haven't seen this album since I was a teen-ager," he said, and reminisced about listening to requests come in on late-night radio. "Those always felt like these awkward, tension-filled cliffhangers. Does the crush listen to the radio at night?"

Donwill, perched on a red stool, peered at "Right On Be Free," from 1970, by the Voices of East Harlem. He began spinning the stool in circles. "The typography is really cool," he said. He found a trumpet resting on a Fender Rhodes piano and posed for a picture with it.

Talk turned to the films. "Blaxploitation gets looked at in cinema as this sort of outrageous time, but it was also really a hotbed of independent filmmaking, and it doesn't get credited that way," Cenac said. Filmmakers compensated for meagre



Wyatt Cenac and Donwill

production budgets with catchy soundtracks, and by taking advantage of an untapped pool of talent. Cenac brought up “The Thing with Two Heads,” a 1972 film about an experiment in which a white man’s head is surgically attached to a Black man’s body. “Rick Baker, who would go on to be an Oscar-winning special-make-up-effects artist, that’s the first movie he ever worked on,” he said. He flipped through a drawer of records and paused at a Herbie Mann and Bill Evans album. “There’s a chase sequence in ‘Cleopatra Jones’ that takes place in the L.A. River basin,” he said. “Everyone says ‘Bullitt’ is the movie that has the best car-chase scene. But maybe there’s an argument to be made for ‘Cleopatra Jones.’”

The pair gathered up their haul, which included “Wild and Free,” by Dazz Band, and “Joy,” by Teddy Pendergrass. Donwill showed Cenac the cover of another of his selections, “Steamin’ Hot,” by the Reddings. “Look, it’s T.L.C.!” he said.

—Natalie Meade

POSTSCRIPT JOHN BENNET



What would John Bennet do? He’d keep it brief. Bennet, who died, of cancer, earlier this month, a few weeks short of seventy-seven, inspired the kind of devotion among

his writers that often made other editors (and their writers) jealous. Through some rare mix of taste, judgment, candor, composure, selflessness, and insubordination, he earned that measure of trust and affection which makes it possible for editors to deliver cold, hard feedback, and for writers to be open to it, and grateful. I once asked him why he’d cut a joke I was fond of. “Because it’s lame,” he said. It must have been.

Bennet’s autobiographical short story “Flat Creek Road,” published in these pages, in 1986, gave a glimpse of his hardscrabble childhood in rural East Texas. He didn’t write much else, which is too bad, though there were a couple of essays, a decade ago, about Bob Dylan and Sid Caesar, and what became known as the Impossible Sentence, which he composed, with Nancy Franklin, in the eighties, made up of words (or usages) that were effectively banned from the magazine: “Intrigued by the massive smarts of the balding, feisty, prestigious workaholic, Tom Wolfe promptly spat on the quality photo located above the urinal.”

He came to New York City in the late sixties and got his start at *The New Yorker*, in 1975, in the copy department, and worked as a collator—he copied out each reader’s edits onto a master proof. “I got to see everybody’s style, and I got to steal everybody’s moves,” he recently told a friend. His own style, as it matured, was deft, intuitive, but not heavy-handed. He believed, for better or worse, that, as he put it, “Anything great about a piece is because of the writer. Don’t fuck it up.” This, anyway, is what he told the writers. He also said, “An editor is like a shrink. And if the writer doesn’t think his editor is great, he’s totally fucked up.” By that measure, none of us were. He knew that writers rarely give editors the credit they deserve. Although that didn’t seem to trouble him at all, like anyone he did appreciate praise.

One traded Bennetisms: “Only shitty writers need transitions.” “A writer is a guy in the hospital wearing one of those gowns that’s open in the back. An editor is walking behind, making sure that nobody can see his ass.” One of his writers, John McPhee, said last week, “John was a protector of

writers, a protector of writers’ time.” The master collator fielded the incoming paper and swatted away unwelcome meddlers. “He was, therefore, also, an excuse exterminator, removing from a writer’s day reason upon reason for not writing.”

Bennet edited, among so many others, Elizabeth Kolbert, Connie Bruck, Seymour Hersh, Oliver Sacks, and William Finnegan, and mentored (or taught, in his magazine-writing classes at the Columbia Journalism School) generations of young people, whose opinions and incipient talents he cared for deeply. Another Bennetism: “Here, take a look at this.” When he thought a young writer had promise, he’d say, “There’s film in the camera.” (One more: “A piece with a nut graf is like a documentary with a voice-over—it means you haven’t got it all on film.”)

He was more sophisticated and guileful than he let on, but he perpetually aspired, with better results than most, to utter non-pretension. Kolbert still regrets overruling Bennet’s insistence, fourteen years ago, that she remove the phrase “mutatis mutandis” from a story about Rudy Giuliani. He thought it sounded pompous. Above my desk I have a galley tacked to the wall. It’s page 30, version whatever-million, of a Profile I’d written, and Bennet has deleted just about every paragraph on it, as well as all of pages 31 and 32. Three columns, on the floor. In the margin, his chicken scratch provides the explanation: “Blah Blah Blah.” Who can argue? This isn’t to suggest he couldn’t be expansive or deeply patient. A tally of the happy hours that colleagues and acolytes spent in his office, chewing over the work, or plucking one of his guitars, would add up to a life span of its own. His company, his attention, was a kind of embrace.

I once made a reporting visit to the home of a subject who I suspected might be dangerous, and John—less than a year away from his retirement—stood guard just down the road in his pickup truck, in case things went sour. Making sure. If they had, what would he have done? I doubt he knew. But it would have been the right thing.

—Nick Paumgarten

ONE MORE GAME

Pickleball goes pro.

BY SARAH LARSON



Given its moneyed origins, pickleball has a surprisingly egalitarian culture.

As in politics, a few famous families dominate pickleball, the fastest-growing sport in America. One is the Johnsons, of Florida. In January, on a breezy afternoon in Boca Raton, J. W. Johnson, a strapping nineteen-year-old with short brown bangs and a leather necklace, took to the court for a semi-final match at a tournament. Johnson is taciturn, with an often impenetrable expression. He was seeded second in the tournament; his opponent, Zane Navratil, a twenty-six-year-old former C.P.A. from Wisconsin, was seeded first. Pickleball, a tennis-like sport played on a smaller court, places a gentle strain on the body, and both men had the oxygenated flush of a long day of exercise. They began by dinking—softly bounc-

ing the ball back and forth—before Navratil, with gazelle-like grace, executed two snazzy moves at once: an Erne (which involved a flying leap) and a body shot (which involved hitting Johnson in the gut). He chuckled with contentment. Then, as a storm front moved in, the tide began to turn. “Wow, what an inside-out dink there from J. W. Johnson!” a commentator at a nearby media booth said. Johnson, jaw slack with concentration, took control.

Pickleball, which is played with paddles and a Wiffle-like ball, has exploded in popularity in recent years. During the pandemic, more than a million Americans began playing it, bringing the total to around five million. Stars and athletes play pickleball (Michael Phelps, Leo-

nardo DiCaprio, the Clooneys); so do grandparents, parents, and children, often together. It’s simple to grasp—“easy to learn, hard to master,” many told me—and is social and inexpensive. Its design, which includes a no-volley zone near the net, minimizes running, as does the vast popularity of doubles. For these reasons, it can blur the lines between sport and hobby, amateur and pro, celebrity and mortal. In June, at a court near Pittsburgh, a petite grandmother named Meg texted her daughter a photo of herself with three burly strangers. “The guy in the green shirt and I whooped the other two,” she wrote. “Then everybody else there wanted to take our photo.” All three were Pittsburgh Steelers.

The Boca Raton tournament was held at a tennis center, and it displayed the sport’s particular brand of homespun giddiness. People played pickup games on mini courts by an arepa stand; kids posed with a smiling yellow pickleball mascot. A small village of vendors’ booths sold refreshments (restorative CBD drinks, fresh fruit salads) and pickleball products (a self-massager, pickleball vacations). Two wiry middle-aged women passed me in matching shirts that said “ENERGY”; one, nearly skipping, was talking about how happy she was. At a nearby match, a man, apropos of nothing, hollered, “Pickleball!” He seemed to speak for everyone.

The event was sponsored by the Association of Pickleball Professionals (A.P.P.), whose founder, Ken Herrmann, a kind-eyed fifty-six-year-old, reminded me of the tube-sock-wearing summer-camp director of my youth. “You come to tournaments and he’s handing out iced teas,” one player said. Amateurs and pros play in the same tournaments. “You would never have amateurs at a tournament at Flushing Meadows with Agassi and Connors and Roddick,” Herrmann told me. “But, here, you as an amateur can play on the outer courts, and then you’re standing in line to get lunch and you’re right behind J. W. Johnson—‘Hey, J.W.!’ That’s kind of neat.” He thinks of J.W.—“a clean, handsome, polite young man”—as “the Pete Sampras of pickleball.”

Johnson, like many other players, came to the sport from tennis. A Novak Djokovic fan, he once dreamed of going pro; in 2018, his family moved to Flor-

ida from Kansas to advance his career. His mother, Julie, fifty, thought she'd "play tennis every day," she told me. "Then I started playing pickleball. I just—I don't know what it was." She smiled, looking wistful. Soon, J.W. and his sister Jorja, then thirteen, began accompanying Julie to her matches, taping pickleball lines on their driveway, and signing up for tournaments. Now all three are nationally ranked champions. J.W. is taking a year off before college to focus on pickleball; Jorja, for the same reason, attends school online. Their dad, "more of a tennis guy," Julie said, is a recent convert.

Pickleball can be snappier than tennis, as when dinking escalates into frenetic, close-range volleys known as "hand battles." In Boca Raton, spectators had the quick, frenzied head movements of a cat ready to pounce on a toy. The game offers pleasures familiar from tennis—rallies sustained amid startling attacks; stunning angles overcome, or not—but very little drama in the way of serves, which are underhand. (A bedeviling underhand spin serve, the Navratil chainsaw, has proved controversial.)

Most of the sport's popularity is in the recreational realm, in public parks, converted tennis facilities, and the expanding zone of party-friendly pickleball restaurants. But, since 2020, a burgeoning pro scene has been accelerated by two tours in the U.S., the A.P.P. Tour and the P.P.A. (Professional Pickleball Association) Tour, which, combined, run more than fifty tournaments a year. The prize money isn't huge, but sponsorships augment it, and hundreds of players have restructured their lives in order to follow the circuit. Some earn a living—Ben Johns, the sport's biggest star, estimates that he made two hundred and fifty thousand dollars last year—but many lose money. Members of the pro-am community and the economy surrounding it (the picklesphere, as one pro called it) hope that this will change as the sport grows.

Wind in pickleball heightens the drama—the ball, which is light and holey, becomes unpredictable—and it had been a windy week, at the tournament and in the sport itself. Shortly before the Boca event, a major shakeup had rocked the picklesphere: the Texas billionaire Tom Dundon, the owner of the N.H.L. team the Carolina Hurricanes, had taken over

the P.P.A., and immediately got top pros to sign exclusive three-year contracts, which guaranteed them money but banned them from most non-P.P.A. tournaments. Several pros suddenly had to drop out of the Boca tournament, including Ben Johns. Doubles pairs scrambled to adjust; the pickleball podcast and blog scenes erupted in anxious reaction. Overnight, the small and tight-knit pro community had been divided into camps.

Pickleball is known for good sportsmanship; Zane Navratil has a theory that its intimacy has something to do with that. "In tennis, you're a hundred feet from your opponent, and if you cheat on a call you can sort of look at the court," he told me. "In pickleball, you're fourteen feet away, and you've got to look 'em in the eye." The A.P.P.'s head referee, Byron Freso, told me that bad behavior is actively discouraged. "You'll hear comments like 'That's tennis. Don't bring your tennis here,'" Freso said. "What kind of tennis attitude is that?" (That week, the losing player in a men's singles match had refused the handshake of his opponent, and the crowd gasped in horror. "That's not nice!" a woman said.) From this perspective, the P.P.A.'s actions could seem a bit *tennis*.

On the semifinal court, J. W. Johnson volleyed with Navratil, and then, stone-faced, in point after point, methodically delivered the ball to an unreachable back corner of his opponent's side. In victory, Johnson looked wildly happy, as when Tiger Woods, after a stoic putt, finally allows himself to smile. Julie and Jorja cheered him on. (All three would win golds.) Navratil quietly greeted his girlfriend, at that time the reigning Miss Wisconsin. They walked off, looking a bit sombre, before a chipper young woman popped up and asked for a selfie. "I'm a fan of you *both!*" she said.

Pickleball was invented in 1965, on Bainbridge Island, Washington, by three dads—Joel Pritchard, a Republican state representative and later a U.S. congressman; Bill Bell, a businessman; and Barney McCallum, a printing-company owner. The men and their families, who lived in nearby Seattle, summered on Bainbridge, and they wanted to amuse their bored kids after returning from a game of golf. The Pritchards' house had a badminton court, but there wasn't

enough functional equipment to yield a game, so the dads used paddles and a Wiffle ball, and lowered the net to three feet. They wanted the game to be equally playable by kids and adults; the area close to the net was restricted, to deter smashes. "We had it pretty much worked out in four or five days," Pritchard told a reporter in 1990. "What makes it such a great game is that the serve isn't so dominant, like it is in tennis." The court was small—about a quarter the size of a tennis court—and the rules further minimized the unfairness of height and strength disparities. "We got pretty fussy about the rules," Pritchard said.

Pritchard also wanted to keep it fun, with a "nutty" name. Soon, they were all honing strategies: aiming toward a pair of fir trees, which forced opponents into a backhand, "was considered one of the ace shots," McCallum recalled. Their friend Bob O'Brien, a wealthy industrialist, built the first pickleball court on his property; Slade Gorton, a state attorney general and later a U.S. senator, built courts at his homes in Olympia and on Whidbey Island. The game spread across the northwest; to Washington, D.C.; and to Jakarta, where Bell introduced it, and watched with satisfaction as the Australian Davis Cup team got trounced by Indonesians on a court he'd installed.

In 1972, McCallum founded Pickle-Ball Inc., a marketing and production company, to produce paddles and punch holes in balls imported from Ohio. They were shipped around the country, and the game grew, especially in school athletic programs. (By 1990, Pickle-Ball Inc. was selling about a hundred and fifty thousand balls and thirty thousand paddles a year, mostly to schools; in 2016, it was sold to the sport's biggest equipment retailer, Pickleball Central.) In 1976, *Tennis* published a story about "America's newest racquet sport," and the first known pickleball tournament was held, in Washington. (It is now the official state sport.)

Pickleball is ideal for snowbird couples looking to befriend their new neighbors, and in the late seventies and the eighties its popularity soared in retirement communities. In 1978, Charlie Penta, of Haverhill, Massachusetts, introduced pickleball to the Villages, a Brooklyn-size retirement hamlet in

central Florida. It caught on like wildfire. “As Village snow birds returned home,” one resident devotee observed, “they brought back pickleball and spread it throughout the land.” A friend of Joel Pritchard’s owned a nationwide network of R.V. parks and outfitted each with a pickleball court; a player named Sid Williams, of Tacoma, Washington, co-founded the U.S.A. Pickleball Association in 1984. Its first honorary member was President Ronald Reagan, to whom Williams sent a complete pickleball set. (“I don’t think he ever played,” Williams said. “He wasn’t very athletic.”) The U.S.A.P.A. became the sport’s governing body; in 2002, the Villages hosted the first national championship.

As pickleball fever has intensified, so have confrontations. “The residents presented us with a petition,” a board member of an active-living community outside Hartford, Connecticut, told me. “We want pickleball and we want it *now*.” In Sonoma County, tennis courts central to a pickleball turf war were vandalized with motor oil, presumably by an angry tennis player. And, in communities from Provincetown to British Columbia, the sport’s distinctive “pop-pop-pop” has become the new leaf blower. On a peaceful, rural island in the Salish Sea, a pickleball noise dispute—involving elderly neighbors, players who use a hard ball and players who use a soft, quieter ball—has led to a rift unlike any the community has seen. “At music-trivia night, the hard-ballers and soft-ballers sat on opposite sides of the room,” a resident told me. “What is it about pickleball that does this to people?”

Robert D. Putnam’s book “Bowling Alone,” from 2000, mourns the loss of beloved community groups—a bridge club in Pennsylvania, an N.A.A.C.P. chapter in Roanoke, a sewing charity league in Dallas—which, for decades, fostered norms of reciprocity, trustworthiness, and general good will. A craving for such feelings is a key part of pickleball’s popularity. At one tournament, a senior pro told me, “The most important thing about this sport is the friendships. I just lost my husband a week ago, and the only reason I’m here today is because of my pickleball community lifting me up.” She got teary. “There’s no other sport like that. Ten-

nis isn’t like that. You go to a tennis tournament, it’s them against you.”

People tend to have vivid stories about their first games, can tell you the exact moment it all clicked. “I called my wife and I said, ‘Hon, I found my new sport,’” Raul Travieso, the president of the Boca Raton Pickleball Club, said. Its blend of challenge and accessibility makes it addictive—one of the sport’s mantras is “One more game”—and the common experience of being taught to play by senior citizens, and then being walloped by them, only heightens the intrigue. Byron Freso and his wife, Marsha, started playing pickleball after retiring to Florida, in 2011. “I heard a pop-pop-pop sound,” Freso told me. They went to investigate, and met a couple in their seventies who showed them the basics. “They proceeded to spank us, 11–3, 11–1,” Freso said. “I never forget the score.” The Fresos practiced hard and watched helpful YouTube videos, and “a month later we gave them a drubbing.” Now they officiate thirty tournaments a year, driving around the country in an R.V.

In Boca Raton, I talked to one of the most beloved figures on tour, J (Gizmo) Hall, a thirty-six-year-old with dreadlocks and huge, insectile sunglasses. “Pickleball actually saved my life,” he told me. Hall was wearing his usual off-court event uniform: an orange jumpsuit covered in handwritten words like “ANXIETY” and “ALONE.” He had spent his youth shuttling between worlds—hardworking single mother in Virginia; private school; selling drugs. In 2006, he was shot twice in the leg and twice in the hand, which resulted in the loss of a finger. (“And that’s my pickleball hand,” he said.) In 2018, when he was working as a firefighter in Virginia, he heard a Ping-Pong-like sound while working out at a local community center. Soon, “two sixty-year-old ladies were putting a paddle in my hand,” he told me. The sport immediately offered a sense of belonging. “I left the fire department,” he said. “I felt so free.” He and his wife started a nonprofit, the Pickleball Farm, where they live with their two children, host visiting school groups, and raise crops and livestock, including a donkey named Gizmo. On pro tours, Hall brings pickleball equipment to juvenile-detention centers and teaches residents and staff how to play. “My goal this year is

to get to a hundred centers,” he told me.

The game’s ethos is fundamentally democratic. “You sign your name up on the board, and you have a blast,” Sherry Scheer, a former tennis coach and a pickleball senior pro, told me. Scheer lives on Cape Cod; during the pandemic, she and her wife had a court installed in their yard. One day, a man in a hat and sunglasses cycled by, saw her playing, and stopped to call out, “What is that?” She taught him to play, and only belatedly realized that he was a famous TV personality. “That’s just how pickleball is!” she said. Pickleball doubles partners tap paddles between every point, win or lose, and skilled players have tended to be generous about playing with less skilled players. But that’s been changing.

“There’s drama and cliquiness,” Scheer’s wife, Beth, said.

“That’s exactly right,” Scheer said—some young players won’t play with you if you’re a little less skilled, or at their skill level “and a little bit older.” “At community courts, you put your paddles in, four paddles at a time, randomly, and you play with different people—that’s the social aspect. But all of a sudden you have people who will only play with *their* players. It’s happening all over the country. It’s a real problem.”

“That’s how tennis is,” Beth said.

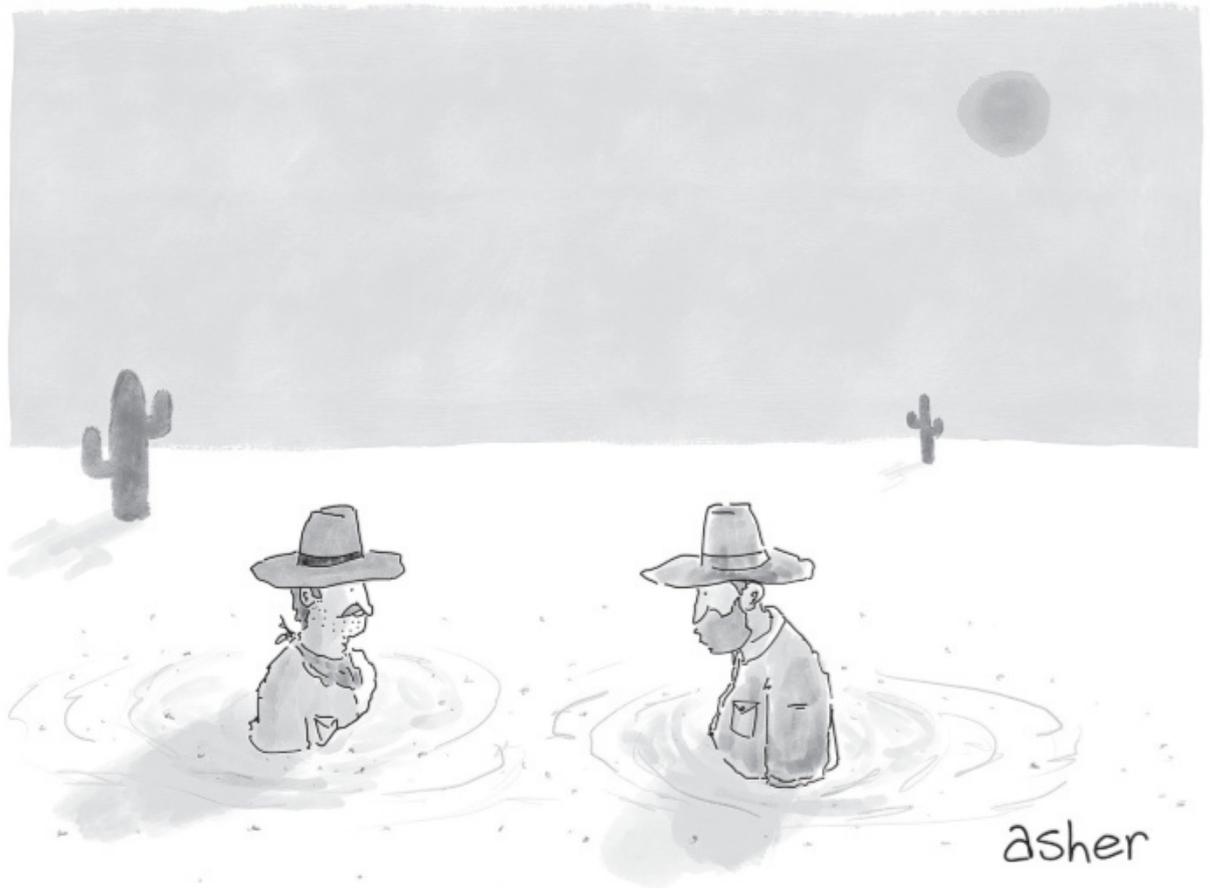
The big-timing of pickleball began, in part, with the growth of the tour scene. In 2019, Herrmann, a former tennis-club owner, was helping to design a new venue in Evanston, Illinois, near where he lives. “I took the designs over to Wilson’s headquarters, in Chicago,” he told me. “And they said, ‘Beautiful tennis courts. Where are your pickleball courts?’ I’m, like, ‘What are you talking about?’ They said, ‘It’s coming. You need to put pickleball courts in here.’” Herrmann learned to play, then to teach; soon, he was organizing a pro tour. “For the next few months, I locked myself down in my basement and just thought about how I could do it,” he said. “And a big inspiration for me was Billie Jean King.” He’d met her while serving on the U.S.T.A.’s national coaching staff. “I would hear her talk about how, in 1972, she told Jack Kramer to take a hike and started the women’s tour. It really resonated with me.” In 2019, he announced the A.P.P.’s 2020 season, and

got the tour sanctioned by U.S.A. Pickleball. “The whole vision is making sure everyone has an equal playing experience,” he said. “I try to treat the pros the same way I treat the senior pros and the same way I treat the amateurs.”

Around the same time, Connor Pardoe, the jockish young scion of a family of Utah real-estate developers, announced his own pickleball venture, the P.P.A. The tour, Pardoe told me, is where you “can come play at your own skill level, stick around, get a beer, and watch the best players in the world play.” Though the P.P.A. uses the standards established by the U.S.A.P.A.—its rules, equipment specs, and referees—Pardoe chose to forgo official sanctioning by the organization. “We’re self-sanctioned,” he said.

The P.P.A. and the A.P.P. both set their tour schedules not long before the pandemic, and several pro players, including Ben Johns, saw a chance to draw on a certain frontier energy. Johns started playing pickleball in 2016; a year later, he won the singles gold medal at the U.S. Open. (He also designed his own paddle with a sponsor, Franklin.) His brother, Collin, then a touring tennis pro, joined the action. Instead of being a little-known tennis player, “sharing hotel rooms in Third World countries,” Collin told me, he could be a top pro, with a career that could last indefinitely.

The sense of possibility skyrocketed further when, in 2021, a garrulous former hedge-fund manager named Steve Kuhn unveiled a pickleball mecca in Dripping Springs, Texas, called Dreamland, as well as a standardized pickleball rating system he’d developed, called DUPR (Dynamic Universal Pickleball Ratings), and a new league, Major League Pickleball, which grouped players into teams. Kuhn’s innovations made a big and immediate splash. Dreamland, a sixty-four-acre “mission-driven playground,” as Kuhn has called it, has mini-golf, pickleball, cornhole, a beer garden with solar panels, a live-music venue, a graffiti park, enormous psychedelic paintings on captured-rainwater silos, and, flapping above it all, an American flag roughly the size of a pickleball court. “I originally named it after the American Dream,” Kuhn said. He came to pickleball in 2016, by way of a nephew, and he likes its democratizing qualities.



“If I knew it was gonna be this slow, I would have waited to say goodbye.”

Dreamland has special events almost every day—a recurring cops-and-firefighters pickleball competition is called Guns & Hoses—all of which are open to the public, and mostly free. Major League Pickleball has drafts and team owners; many players called its inaugural event, a half party, half tournament held at Dreamland, their favorite of the year.

For a while, all of this—the A.P.P., the P.P.A., M.L.P.—was generally seen as heartening by the pickleball community. Then Dundon came along. Dundon is lean and bestubbled, and made his fortune in subprime auto loans. He’s a pickleball fan, but also an outsider, who often talks about “feeding the masses”—moving the sport from its folksy niche into the realm of TV, gambling, and big-time sponsors. In December, when he pledged to buy the P.P.A., he also bought Pickleball Central, a.k.a. the Amazon of pickleball, and the sport’s sole tournament-organizing Web site, pickleballtournaments.com, whose I.P. includes almost two decades’ worth of player and event data. The takeover was familiar: Dundon had been the controlling owner of a pro football league, the A.A.F., which went bank-

rupt in 2019. (Dundon ended the season early; players didn’t receive severance until a settlement was reached in court.) The P.P.A.’s exclusive contracts excited some but put others, who had relationships with the A.P.P. or Kuhn, in a bind. In December, shortly after a brief summit between Dundon and Kuhn, attended by Ben Johns—“They were on two completely different roads,” Johns later said—Major League Pickleball allied itself with the A.P.P.

Some of the pros who didn’t sign with the P.P.A. did so out of self-protection. The Johnson family works with a sports agent, who looked over the contract that the P.P.A. had offered J.W. “He said, ‘This is fascinating, because this is hands down the worst sports contract I’ve ever seen in my life,’” Julie told me. “He said, ‘You basically give up your rights to everything for three years: your image, what you do, what tournaments you can play, meet and greets, everything. And they have control.’” (Pardoe disputes this characterization.) Many of the players, Julie added, were young—inexperienced in contracts, maybe even in paying taxes.

Dundon, who tends to avoid the press, recently called me from Colorado. “I’m hoping that we can get past the noise

and talk about the fun stuff,” he said. (“Sorry it’s windy, I’m riding my bike.”) “We’re in the entertainment business,” he said. “I went through this in hockey—people forget that the fans are who pays.” The P.P.A. contracts, by securing top-quality pickleball content and sponsors, would provide fun to viewers, and heighten the sport’s popularity. “You’ve got to feed the masses,” he said. Personally, he went on, he likes pickleball because, more than competition, it’s about enjoyment—“life experiences,” like taking a picture on a family vacation.

During the New Year’s holiday, Dundon had played pickleball with Ben Johns at a resort in Cabo San Lucas. He tried to beat Johns using his own, “jungle” rules, which failed, and by replaying him on New Year’s Day, after a late night of partying, which also failed. Later that month, he appeared on “The Freestyle Boys,” a podcast that the pro Rob Nunnery used to co-host with Johns. Johns said that he had “a bit of a hot take”: the A.P.P. could be a good place for “second- or third-tier pros,” a training ground for the P.P.A. Dundon agreed, and added that the A.P.P. did “a great job with the senior tour,” a realm considered less desirable for TV. He concluded on a note

of idealism: pickleball, he said, “is a really good thing that’s happening in the world. . . . It’s perfect, right? It’s like, if someone really, really smart had come up with this six years ago, they’d be winning the Nobel Prize or something.”

“Well, hopefully that’s where we are in five or six years,” Johns said.

Nunnery laughed. “What, you winning the Nobel Prize?”

“Sure,” Johns said. “Nobel Prizes all around.”

Steve Kuhn is fifty-three, with a cheery demeanor. He’s also a huge fan of “Bowling Alone,” near-obsessive about encouraging community. In March, I contacted him, and he called me from Dreamland. He talked about pickleball’s ability to transcend “socioeconomic lines,” and cited pickleball-induced harmony among Somali immigrants and their neighbors in Minnesota, where tensions had been high. “It’s bringing Americans out to meet other Americans in ways they normally wouldn’t,” he said. In the background, revelry could be heard, and bhangra. “We’re celebrating Holi today!” Kuhn said. “So there’s Bollywood music playing.”

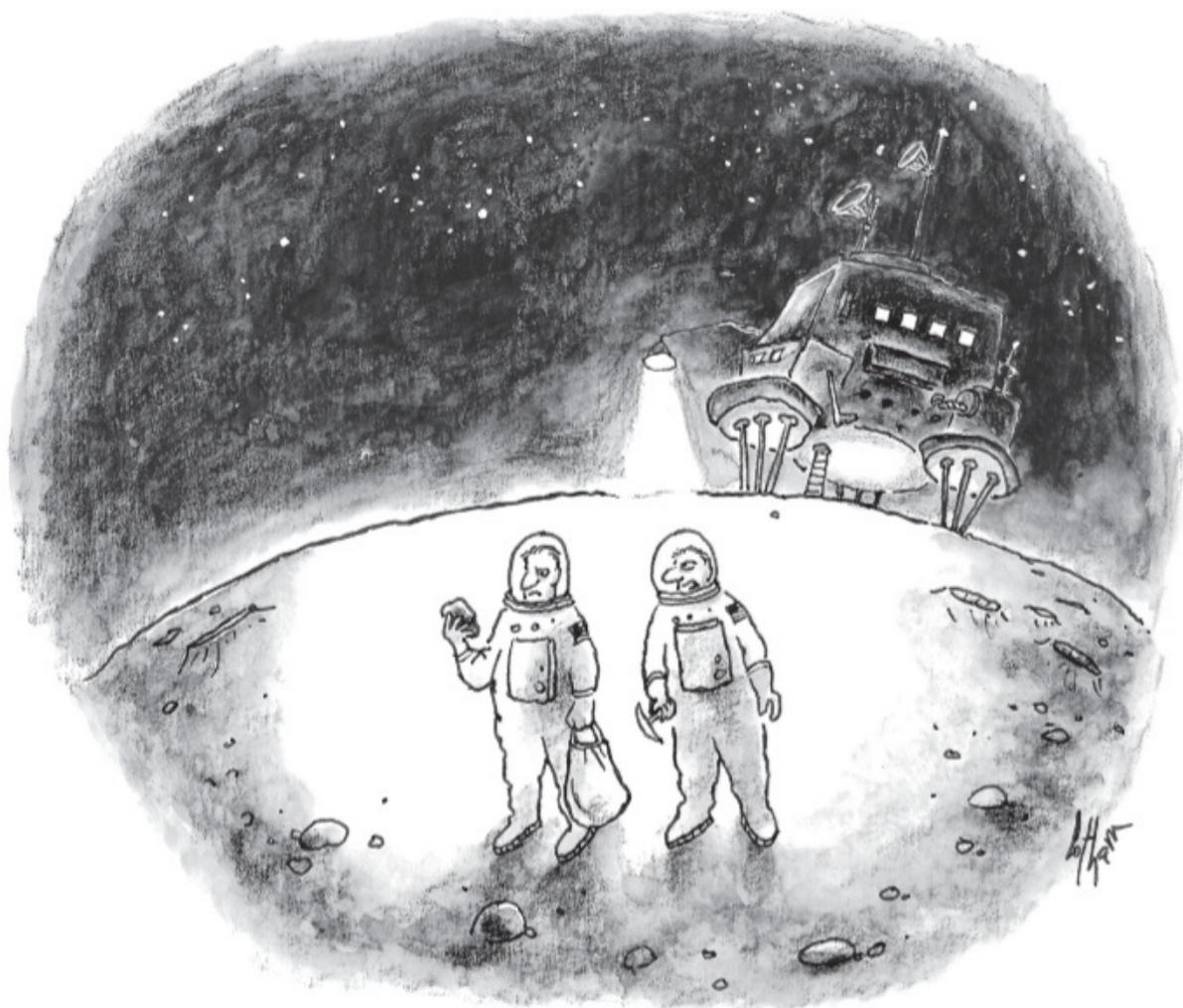
I was planning a trip to a P.P.A. event

in Austin, and Kuhn encouraged me to visit while I was in town. He was in the process of building housing for pros on site, but the process was taking a while. “So in the meantime I just bought them a big house,” he told me. “Five bedrooms, a swimming pool, a hot tub, on the edge of the property.” He asked me to come to a Tuesday-night event called the Battle of the Sexes. Four male pros—“the biggest chauvinist pigs in the sport,” he said—would play four of the top women, à la the Billie Jean King–Bobby Riggs match, in 1973. The men and the women would have equal DUPR ratings, and thus be evenly matched. I said I’d be there. After we hung up, Kuhn texted me pictures of Holi revellers covered in multicolored powder, dancing under the American flag.

The P.P.A. tournament was held at a tennis club near Lake Travis. It featured many of pickleball’s biggest stars: Leigh and Anna Leigh Waters, a mother-daughter doubles juggernaut; Tyson McGuffin, a tattooed Idaho father of three; the Johns brothers. (Their sister, Hannah Johns, the P.P.A.’s main on-air personality, frequently interviews them.) Dundon was absent, but Connor Pardoe sat in the only shaded viewing area, alongside an announcer with the rile-’em-up growl of a monster-truck-rally m.c. After a fan made a nifty catch, the m.c. growled that three pros had signed a hat for her, and the crowd cheered. Between matches, a musician named Pickleball Wall, the son of a P.P.A. sponsor, performed a customized rap.

Famous players were approached constantly by fans. Dave Weinbach, a fast-talking investment manager who calls himself the Badger, was greeted by several, including a couple from Cape Cod, fresh from their first tournament match. Within minutes, Weinbach had persuaded them to buy his new signature paddle, available nearby (“I’ll sign it!”), and invited himself to stay with them on the Cape. (“That’s what I do!” he told me. “It’s a pickleball thing.”) Weinbach was instrumental in developing the P.P.A., and is a minority owner. His shorts said “Badger” on them—“I have a sponsor that embroiders my brand on things”—and his hat said “Pickle and Social,” a forthcoming chain for which he is a brand ambassador.

There were occasional glimpses of



“I’m pretty sure I’ve already seen a rock like that in some museum back on Earth.”

tour-rivalry tensions. The pro Riley Newman, while explaining the P.P.A.'s exclusivity contracts to me—"They can talk to the TV sponsors and be, like, 'Hey, we've got the best players on this tour'"—looked up and saw Dekel Bar, of the A.P.P., who was eating a protein bar nearby. "Obviously, both tours, they have high-level players and stuff," Newman went on. Bar smiled politely and ambled off. "That was awkward," Newman said. Another pro, Rob Cassidy, told me that he chose not to sign with the P.P.A. "I'm trying to do anything I can do to maintain the sanctity of the game," he said. "There's growth—but growth can be malignant, right?"

In this quietly fraught climate, I was startled, while waiting in line at a taco truck, to see a familiar braces-wearing, A.P.P.-affiliated teen. A fan approached her: "Excuse me, are you Jorja Johnson?" It was. Johnson had flown in as an emergency women's-doubles substitute, and won bronze. Ben Johns—looking intense much of the weekend—won almost everything else.

That Tuesday, I met Johns at a sunny café called Prim and Proper, which had a "Jetsons"-like aesthetic. He ordered basil fizzy water and avocado toast, and chose a table that was partially obscured by a leafy philodendron. Johns had just played pickleball with his brother; after breakfast, he planned to work out, followed by a float in a saltwater tank (a Christmas gift from his sister). Pickleball was everywhere. "Did you notice the display in front?" he asked—a pastel array of paddles from a brand he had never heard of. "They might just be art," he said.

Johns moved to Austin for the weather, the pro community, and a deal he'd accepted with a forthcoming pickleball complex called Austin Pickle Ranch. Scheduled to open in 2023, Austin Pickle Ranch, the brainchild of Tim Klitch, a commercial banker, will be one of the biggest pickleball facilities in Texas: thirty-three dedicated courts, with room to expand, plus food, drinks, concerts, and so on. Johns will be "a touring pro who plays out of Pickle Ranch," an arrangement for which he will be paid. For now, he and Collin practice at Klitch's house, on his private court. Videos of them can be seen on TikTok and Insta-

gram; Collin's girlfriend, Sydney Steinkaker—"Pickleball Barbie," on Instagram—has a video called "The Perfect Pickleball Date Night," in which she and Collin play there, under a string of lights.

Johns is a fervent admirer of Elon Musk—"I just think as far as the change in the world, he's probably accomplished more than anybody"—and he thought Dundon, too, was a force for good. "Whenever something is growing super rapidly, you can't really control the way it grows," he said. "And massive growth is better than controlled small growth." Johns had wanted standards to be raised—better venues, prize money, amenities—and Dundon was paving the way. Would all this new money and competition disrupt some of the harmony that pickleball tends to foster? I asked. "Yeah, it will," Johns said. Did it bother him? "No. You've got to take the good with the bad."

Unbeknownst to the public, Johns told me, the Austin P.P.A. tournament had been the last time he'd play with the Ben Johns Signature Franklin paddle. He had a new sponsor, JOOLA, a table-tennis company that was coming out with a pickleball line. "They have a big presence in Asia," he told me. He hoped that they would grow the sport there. One of the paddles in the new line, the Ben Johns Hyperion, sells for more than two hundred dollars.

In Boca Raton, I had asked Zane Navratil about pickleball players he'd met who were unlike people he might have met in his day-to-day life. "J Hall, who goes by Gizmo," he said. "He lives on a pickleball farm." When I asked Johns that question, he said, "Tom Dundon." I asked about Cabo San Lucas—the jungle rules, the New Year's Day gambit. Was Dundon expecting him to be hung over? "Yes, he was," Johns said, smiling. "I was not." Then, having finished his avocado toast and basil fizz, he said goodbye, and headed off to his float tank.

That week, at an outdoor café in Bee Cave, Texas, near Austin and Dripping Springs, I overheard three men having a business meeting. "Welcome to Texas!" one said, and then pro-

ceeded to zealously pitch something, which I tried to ignore. Then I had an idea: what if this was about pickleball? I started eavesdropping. A minute later, I heard the evangelist say, "That's our jam. We don't want money. We want *pickle*. We want pickle *partners*." I began writing down phrases: "once you pickle" and "let's just assume that you're not pickled yet" and "gonna change the fuckin' *world*! Excuse my language." The next night, I saw them at Dreamland, pulling pickleball pros aside to talk between matches.

I arrived at Dreamland at dusk. The property, set back from the road, was dotted with art: murals of staring eyes, a glowing Statue of Liberty, a meditating-figure sculpture the size of a tree. The enormous flag flapped above a group of lighted yurts. Kuhn named the venue for the American Dream, but the product of that dream, American capitalism, presented a challenge for pickleball. Kuhn believes that the sport can go mainstream without losing its egalitarian spirit. He claims that his DUPR system rates everyone fairly, irrespective of age, gender, "hair color, or wingspan," and the Battle of the Sexes was meant to prove it.

The pickleball building was an open, hangar-like space. Inside were several courts, a pub, and billboard-size banners of the 2021 M.L.P. teams, many of whose beaming players were contractually prohibited from returning. ("If I had known I wouldn't be able to play in M.L.P., I never would have signed," one told me.) A diverse group of spectators milled around, armed with beers and hard seltzers. The smell of free pizza was in the air. Beneath one of the banners, Kuhn chatted with Tim Klitch and the proprietor of a roll-out pickleball-court-surface business. Kuhn was talking about another democratizing idea: reforming pickleball's scoring system, which intimidated beginners. "It's a barrier to entry," he said.

On the main court, the Battle of the Sexes had the spirited goofiness of a slightly drunken flag-football game. The event featured a five-thousand-dollar prize, team polos—pink for men, blue for women—and occasional mock



tennis grunting. But the match was epic and skilled, with stunning lunges and sprints that elicited roars from the crowd. The spectators, arranged on bleachers, were very loudly on the women's side. Dreamland pros and friends sat on barstools, content to be kicking back; one of them hugged a big golden retriever like a toddler on his hip. At intermission, the "Austin Powers" theme played while audience members tried to win a thousand dollars by hitting a pickleball into a barrel.

As the night progressed, the match got loonier, and the crowd tipsier. At one point, one of the men went for an unlikely return, and somehow lost control of his paddle, which sailed over a wall; while he scrambled, a guy in the pro section, laughing, yelled to the women, "Hurry up and serve!" You almost felt bad for the biggest chauvinist pigs in the sport. The teams were closely matched, and victory could have gone either way. But, in the end, shortly after a man recovered from a powerful smash to the crotch, the men prevailed. Everybody hugged, looking triumphant in victory and in defeat.

Kuhn's assurance about DUPR's accuracy had been right: the men's combined average was 1.063 higher than the women's, and they won by almost that differential. Before I left, I ventured into the house that Kuhn had bought his pros. It turned out to be in a gated community, with a façade that featured grand columns. I got a brief tour from the pickleballers within—foosball table; hot tub; hockey stick for warding off goats—and returned to Bee Cave, pleased that the experience had been even stranger than I'd imagined.

On a Saturday in early June, I went to a pickleball event at a paved lot at the corner of Sixth Avenue and Houston Street, in New York. David Kass, an architectural-lighting designer, wore a hat and shirt imprinted with the logo of NYC Pickleball Manhattan. Kass, who spends his spare time doing street-tree-pit beautification, got hooked at a city recreation center, and, soon afterward, met Katherine Hedden, a retired TV-news editor who'd established the group. It now has more than a thousand members on Facebook. That day, the Houston lot had eigh-

teen makeshift pickleball courts, with painted lines and portable nets. "Right after us, the kickball people come in," Kass said. Three hundred people had registered for the event, which NYC Pickleball Manhattan had coordinated with the Parks Department. At least half the players were in their twenties and thirties—"whippersnappers," an older player said, laughing—and I overheard younger passersby ask how they could play, too.

New York City lags conspicuously behind much of the U.S. in pickleball accommodations. Lessons are offered at city rec centers, which require a membership; city tennis courts are strictly off limits. Most New York City pickleball occurs on asphalt or concrete spaces created for other things—handball, soccer, skateboarding—and are B.Y.O.N.: bring your own net. Hedden, who is a Manhattan U.S.A.P.A. pickleball ambassador, and Eric Ho, a Queens pickleball ambassador, have been lobbying the city for the holy grail: dedicated courts. Meanwhile, players are making do. "Katherine's group started taping lines wherever they could," Ho told me.

Most of the people I talked to at the Houston Street event, like most pickleball players I talked to everywhere else, cited the appeal of community. Players can show up alone and take part in open play; the short games and smaller spaces are conducive to conversation. A popular postgame hangout is a nearby Italian restaurant, which started a recurring event for players, called Pickle and Pasta. Kass, though quite busy (planting and watering street-tree pits; theatre four nights a week), said, "My life revolves around this. I don't drink or stay out late Saturday so I can play pickleball on Sunday. I keep in shape so I can be in shape for pickleball."

In May, the pro-tour scene swept into the city. The A.P.P. hosted a tournament at the Billie Jean King Tennis Center, where tennis's U.S. Open is played. Steve Kuhn rang the bell at the New York Stock Exchange, and a few pros played pickleball in the gilded N.Y.S.E. boardroom. Later, M.L.P. threw a fancy party for its draft reveal; team owners include Brené Brown and the Milwaukee Bucks co-owner Marc Lasry. The tournament itself, in the

Tennis Center's grand space full of monuments to Sampras and the Williams sisters, hovered somewhere between gate-crashing and benediction. (In a selfie on Instagram, J. W. Johnson, looking joyful and a little sly, posed next to a plaque that says "R. Federer.") Hedden brought two members of the Parks Department, who seemed impressed. "I think the tournament in Queens helped legitimize it," she said. In turn, the events bolstered the legitimacy of the A.P.P. and M.L.P.

The tournament drew more than a thousand people, from several states. On the court, players seemed happy to play; spectators seemed happy just to feel happy about something. In the pro final rounds, J. W. Johnson and Zane Navratil played against each other in mixed doubles and in singles, and together as a doubles team. Johnson, whose mixed partner was Jorja, won gold in nearly all his events. ("Great job, kids!" Julie Johnson yelled from the stands.) At the end of the mixed-doubles match, Ken Herrmann wheeled out a championship cup the size of a ten-year-old and presented it to the siblings, who beamed.

"Pickleball will save America," Kuhn told me, as I drank from a can of his personal brand of rainwater. "A lot of people think we're going to have a civil war if this election is close. We've got to get people out there playing pickleball with people who will vote the other way, so they don't want to kill each other. It sounds ridiculous and dramatic, but I kind of mean it. Pickleball can save us, and we need to be saved." Meanwhile, the sport continues to unite, divide, and take over. In Encinitas, California, during the pandemic, a local racquet club became a pickleball hot spot. "At first, you had to reserve courts by calling," a player told me. "Then the calls overwhelmed the staff, so they moved it to a Web site, and then that got overwhelmed. You could try again every hour on the hour, so you'd set an alarm on your phone." The facility began to convert tennis courts. As of August, all but one of the courts at Bobby Riggs Racket & Paddle—named for the tennis champ who challenged Billie Jean King in the Battle of the Sexes in 1973, and lost—will be pickleball courts. ♦



LETTER OF RESIGNATION

BY ROBERT CARLOCK

Dear Global Liberal Cannibalistic Pedophile Conspiracy:

Please accept this letter as my resignation from the Conspiracy. As of today, my bar tab has been fully paid and I have returned my ceremonial cloak of deepest-red velvet, so deep as to be black, to Glen at the front desk.

I write this with a heavy heart. Joining the G.L.C.P.C. was a dream come true, and yet just last year I was starting to think that maybe there was no global leftist cabal that ate babies as part of a satanic rite in order to gain immortality and, through control of the media and the banks, impose a New World Order and also run child-prostitution rings. I had been working in Hollywood for years, intentionally producing youth-corrupting garbage TV in the hope of getting noticed by the Conspiracy. From a networking standpoint, you guys are next level, and, at the time, I was trying to make the pivot into feature films.

So I was relieved to wake up one midnight, unable to move, to find a sulfurous imp (aglow on its forehead the Greek letter eta: “H,” for “Hillary”) crawling into my mouth. After that, of course, I was able to understand the coded messages you were sending through C-SPAN, pop culture, and Wordle. A few weeks later, I was listening to “All Too Well (Taylor’s Version),” and there, hidden in the part about the refrigerator, was my invitation to the 2021 Feast of the Innocents-slash-orgy in the crypt under the Lincoln Memorial!

Since then, I have been an active and

involved member of the G.L.C.P.C. It was my idea that we stop using “cheese pizza” as code for “child prostitute” at the pizzerias that we own around the world as fronts for child prostitution. I’m proud to say that incidences of confused Little League teams accidentally being given child prostitutes are way down. I also was the one to suggest that maybe “Q” from QAnon is that guy Quentin who was always taking pictures with his phone. And, later that evening, I helped Oprah and Pope Francis drown him. I got a high five from Oprah!

And yet I never felt entirely welcome. Clearly, my choice not to participate in the rite of eating human babies and drinking their blood has held me back. Which I find hypocritical. As I said during the interview process, it shouldn’t matter what I eat; isn’t the whole point of the Conspiracy to create a better world, one of tolerance and inclusion? Where a dog can marry a car and there are zero guns and the Thought Police punish Wrong-Think®? At the time, Hillary Herself stood and applauded those sentiments (I was quoting her, but still), and then everyone started clapping and then it turned into an orgy.

In reality, those noble ideals go only so far. I soon came to feel like a pariah. I was frequently left out of inside jokes about ritualistic baby-eating. At dinners, I somehow always found myself seated next to fucking Mark Zuckerberg. I was Mop Boy at *three* orgies in a row. And then, at the Gathering of the Cabal last Wednesday, as the line

was forming before the Slaking Altar, Tom Hanks (he was wearing a brass goat head, but I’m pretty sure it was Hanks) noticed me standing off to the side and said, “What a *baby*. I guess we should eat him next!” This got a big laugh (although it was kind of a kissing-ass, I-think-that’s-Hanks-under-there laugh). Needless to say, I left early, even though the Rothschilds had brought a “special surprise” that turned out to be solid-gold live birds.

As I walked back home through the secret tunnels under the Denver airport, I found myself wondering, Is this really how we’re going to make a better world? By worshipping the Devil and eating babies? Yes, I know that eating babies and drinking their blood grants us immortality. Except . . . does it? Since I joined the G.L.C.P.C., so many people have told me about Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s “epic” final Feast and Slaking. How she ate “*so much baby*” and drank “*so much blood*.” And then *the next day she died*. The other night, Senator Feinstein basically had to be carried up the schist steps to the Basin. She did not look super immortal. And President Biden wasn’t even there, because he’d fallen off a couch earlier that day.

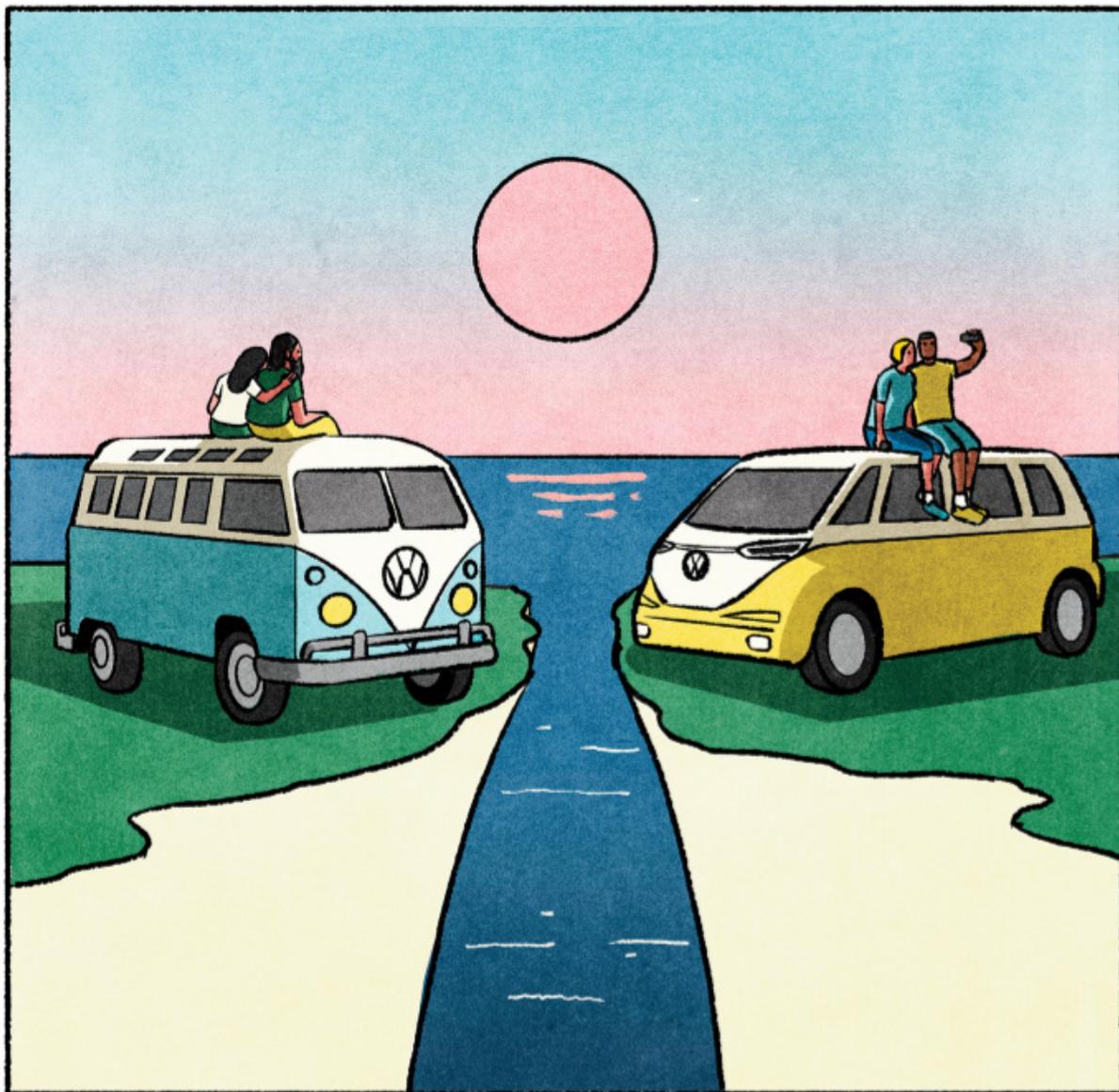
Which brings me to the real reason I have to resign. I don’t think *any* of it is working. Not just the “immortality by way of cannibalism.” The whole damn thing. Are we any closer to a socialist-plutocratic New World Order than when we started? The Gathering was a chance to reassure members that the Conspiracy is not completely off the rails, but even the Treasurer’s report was alarming—why does the portfolio have so much crypto?! Do we control the economy or not? And the video highlighting our recent achievements was flat-out depressing. I’m glad that cigarette use in movies is down and soccer continues to gain in popularity, but that really doesn’t convince me that all the baby-eating is worth it. And, if we’re just spinning our wheels despite the direct support of Satan Himself (who frankly seemed pretty rattled about our progress), then maybe we should all be rethinking the G.L.C.P.C.

In closing, I do hope you’ll keep me in mind for any future global conspiracies. And please let me know when you might have time to discuss my screenplay. ♦

MOVING RIGHT ALONG

Volkswagen's electric boogaloo.

BY JILL LEPORE

*The new version of the VW bus, the Buzz, is about plugging in, not dropping out.*

In 1976, at the tail end of the Ford Administration, hippies no longer hip, Sue Vargo and Molly Mead decided that they wanted to drive to the Florida Keys in a Volkswagen bus. They were best friends, in their twenties, living in a women-only commune in Massachusetts: muddy boots, acoustic guitars, mercurial vegetarians. They bought a beat-up VW bus, circa 1967, red and white, with a split windshield, a stick shift that sprouted up from the floor like a sturdy sapling, a big, flat, bus-driver steering wheel half the size of a hula hoop, and windshield wipers that waved back and forth—cheerful and eager, like a puppy—without wiping anything away. The bus had no suspension. “You just bounced along,” Vargo said, bobbing her head. “Boing, boing, boing.”

This year, Volkswagen is bringing back the bus—souped up, tricked out, and no longer bouncy—as the ID. Buzz. “ID.” stands for “intelligent design,” and “Buzz” means that it’s electric. It might be the most anticipated vehicle in automotive history. Volkswagen has been teasing a return of the classic, iconic, drive-it-to-the-Grateful-Dead bus for more than two decades. (I’m one of the people who’ve been counting the days.) The company keeps announcing that it’s coming, and then it never comes. Finally, it really is coming, and not only is it electric but it can also be a little bit psychedelic, two-toned, in the colors of a box of Popsicles: tangerine, lime, grape, lemon. It’s on sale in Europe this fall and will be available in the United States in 2024. (One reason for the wait is that Volkswagen is

making a bigger one for the U.S. market, with three rows of seats instead of two.) Volkswagen expects the Buzz, which has a range of something like two hundred and sixty miles, to be the flagship of a fast-growing electric fleet. The C.E.O. of Volkswagen of America said that the demand for the Buzz in the U.S. is unlike anything he’s seen before. “The Buzz has the ability to rewrite the rules,” *Top Gear* reported in April, naming it Electric Car of the Year.

Bus nuts are busting out of their pop-tops. “I want one!” is more or less the vibe online. But not all bus nuts are on board. Sue Vargo is dubious. The Buzz, in the way of new E.V.s, is more swoosh than boing, less a machine you operate—pulling levers, cranking wheels, pumping brakes—than a computer you ride around in while its screen flashes officious little reminders at you. This is what new cars do, what they are. It’s not what old cars did, or what they were. The bus was cheap; the Buzz is pricey. (The base U.S. version is expected to cost around forty-five thousand dollars.) Also, the front end of the bus, famously, had a face, a loopy, goofy, smiling face: the eyes two perfectly round, bug-eyed headlights, the nose a swooping piece of chrome trim, the mouth a gently curving bumper. The Buzz has a face, too, but its eyes, hard and angular, look angry, as if beneath a furrowed brow, and its smile is a smirk. “If this is the future,” someone on the VW Bus Junkies Facebook page posted, “I’d rather live in the past.”

The future of the automobile is, undeniably, swoosh and buzz and smart—smart this, smart that. But is it appealing? VW’s pitch for the Buzz marries nostalgia with moral seriousness about climate change, a seriousness that, for VW, is a particular necessity. Volkswagen dominated the diesel-vehicle industry with its “clean diesel” cars and trucks until, in 2015, it admitted to tampering with the software on more than ten million vehicles in order to cheat on emissions tests. The scandal shattered the company and led to the resignation of Martin Winterkorn, then the VW Group’s C.E.O. He still faces criminal charges in Germany; another VW executive was given a prison sentence by an American court. Civil suits are ongoing. Just this May, Volkswagen agreed to pay nearly two hundred and

fifty million dollars to settle claims filed in England and Wales.

Sue Vargo and her wife used to own a diesel VW Golf. “After the scandal, we brought it back to the dealer and traded it in for a new, gas Golf, for basically nothing,” she told me, but she doesn’t trust VW. A lot of people feel that way. The scandal likely sped up Volkswagen’s plans to go electric. Last year, the company launched its Way to Zero initiative, gunning for Tesla and pledging net carbon emissions of zero by 2050 at the latest. The pledge involves not only the cars that it makes but how it makes them: VW is investing in wind farms all over Europe and one of the largest solar plants in Germany. By 2030, half of Volkswagen’s U.S. sales are expected to come from E.V.s. No carmaker is investing so much in the jump to electric. Even Elon Musk has conceded that although Tesla leads the E.V.-tech race, Volkswagen places a very respectable second.

The Volkswagen ID. Buzz, then, isn’t just any electric car. It’s a bid for Volkswagen’s redemption. Is it also the car that can usher in an E.V. revolution, a true turn of the wheel in the long history of the automobile?

In April, I went to see the Buzz at the New York International Auto Show, at the Javits Center, a glass-and-steel K’nex box of a building that has exactly as much charm as an airport. Walking there, down West Thirty-eighth Street, I passed a four-story brick stable, with thirty-six horses housed on the second floor and a carriage parked out front, near a sign that read “SHARE THE ROAD: Horses paved the way.” Actually, when road paving began, it was for bicycles. The New York auto show didn’t start out as an auto show; it started out, in the eighteen-nineties, as the New York bicycle show. Bicycles, at the time, were known as “silent horses,” just as cars became known as “horseless carriages.” Then cars drove bicycles off the road. Many of those cars were electric. In 1899, when the bicycle show became the bicycle and automobile show, nearly every automobile it displayed was electric. The *Times* predicted that every vehicle in the city would soon be “propelled by the wonderful motive power which was discov-

ered as controllable, years and years ago, by the ever illustrious Benjamin Franklin.” In 1900, the tens of thousands of New Yorkers who turned up for the bicycle and auto show got a chance to see more than twenty electric cars—manufactured by firms that included the American Electric Vehicle Co., the General Electric Automobile Co., and the Indiana Bicycle Co.—alongside two gasoline-powered runabouts, two steam-powered carriages, one gas-run wagon, and one Auto-Quadricycle. The first New York auto show, held later that year, featured an indoor track, made of wooden planks, that you could race the cars around, and General Electric’s coin-operated “electrant,” or electric hydrant, a four-foot-tall charging station, where, for a quarter, you could get a twenty-five-mile recharge. The *Times* reported, “It is expected that these automatic devices will be installed in suburban villages and places on the main lines of travel between important points where an electric vehicle might otherwise become stalled for lack of power.” (Today, there still aren’t anywhere near enough charging stations around.)

By the turn of the century, one of every three motorcars in the U.S. was electric. As an electric-car manufacturer remarked, gas engines “belch forth from their exhaust pipe a continuous stream of partially unconsumed hydrocarbons in the form of a thin smoke with a highly noxious odor.” He couldn’t fathom anyone tolerating them for long: “Imagine thousands of such vehicles on the streets, each offering up its column of smell.” Electric cars didn’t pose this problem; they were also quieter, easier to drive, and simpler to repair. The problem was the storage capacity of the battery. A lot of people put their faith in a collaboration between the Edison Storage Battery Company, founded in 1901, and the Ford Motor Company, founded in 1903. “The fact is that Mr. Edison and I have been working for some years on an electric automobile which would be cheap and practicable,” Henry Ford told the *Times* in 1914. But by 1917 the collaboration had fallen apart, and by 1920 the gas engine had won. The E.V. dark age had begun.

That dark age may be ending. At the 2022 New York auto show, half the

floor space was devoted to E.V.s. Downstairs, on an E.V. test track powered by Con Edison, you could ride around in more than twenty-five different electric cars; upstairs, you could test-drive Ford’s new electric pickup truck, the F-150 Lightning. It was as if the marriage between Edison and Ford had, at last, been consummated. Still, there was plenty of shtick. Subaru had the greenest display—fake pine trees, fake rocks, potted evergreens, hanging vines, a real dog run, ferns, fake logs, “bear-resistant” trash containers, and a new S.U.V. called the Outback Wilderness—but only one actual electric car, the Solterra, parked in a fake forest. (The Wilderness runs on gasoline, twenty-two city miles to the gallon.)

Volkswagen displayed its gleaming fleet in a back corner of the main show floor, where the Buzz was parked on a platform behind a plastic half wall and roped off, like a work of art. It was one of the few cars at the show that you couldn’t climb into or touch. People were curious about it, took pictures, pointed it out to their kids. “I think it’s sharp,” they’d say. “Is it a Bulli?” (That’s what the VW bus is called in Germany.) Or, “Oh, a Kombi!” (what it’s called in much of Latin America). Technically, the Buzz is the start of a whole new line, but sentimentally it’s the eighth generation of a very old car.

Volkswagen’s first car, the Type 1, is better known as the VW Beetle. It dates to the company’s origins in Nazi Germany. Hitler wanted a “people’s car,” and in 1934 the Reich commissioned the designer Ferdinand Porsche to develop it. The Type 1 was manufactured at a factory in Wolfsburg, whose workers, in the early nineteen-forties, consisted mostly of *Dienstverpflichtete*, forced laborers, including Polish women; Soviet, Italian, and French prisoners of war; and concentration-camp prisoners. (In the nineteen-nineties, Volkswagen paid reparations.) After the war, the Volkswagen factory in Wolfsburg was one of the few sites of industrial production not razed by bombing, and the Allies set about supporting its operation as a way to bolster West Germany’s economic redevelopment. The first postwar Beetles were sold in 1945. Not long afterward, a Dutch importer

noticed that workers at Wolfsburg had used spare parts—Type 1 chassis, piles of boards, steering wheels—to put together makeshift *Plattenwagen*, flatbed carts, to carry their tools. He had the idea that if you put a box on top of the chassis, instead of just a platform, you'd have a pretty neat little bus. This became the Type 2, the original VW bus, also known as the T1, the first-generation Transporter. It was first sold in 1950, and six years later VW opened a factory in Hanover that was entirely dedicated to building the new model. In the argot of kids' flicks, the Type 1 is Herbie, from the 1968 Disney movie "The Love Bug"; the Type 2 is Fillmore, from the 2006 Pixar film "Cars." (George Carlin did Fillmore's voice.)

The T1 and T2 sold like crazy. In Europe, the VW bus could do anything: it was used as a fire truck, an ambulance, a delivery vehicle, a taxi. It didn't have a lot of power, but it could go anywhere and park in any spot, and it could carry a lot more than you'd think. People loved it for camping, especially if they got the Westfalia, a model that came with two beds, a hammock, a refrigerator, a stove, a kitchen cabinet, and a dining table. *Motor Trend* wrote, "More a way of life than just another car, the VW Bus, when completely equipped with the ingenious German-made Kamper kit, can open up new vistas of freedom (or escape) from humdrum life." In the U.S., the bus wasn't at first called a bus—it was called a station wagon—and was marketed as the ideal car for the suburban family. The hippie part came later. You get the sense that something was changing, a mood shifting, in a TV ad from 1963. The camera pans around a VW Samba, a model with twenty-one windows, while a man's voice asks:

If your TV set broke down right now, could your wife find something to talk about? Is she the kind of wife that can bake her own bread? Does she worry about the arms race? Do the neighbors' kids wish they had her for a mother? Will your wife say yes to a camping trip after fifty straight weeks of cooking? Will she let your daughter keep a pet snake in the back yard? Can you show up very late for dinner without calling first, with two old friends? Will your wife let the kids eat frankfurters for

breakfast? Would she name a cat Rover? Would she let you give up your job with a smile and mean it? Congratulations. You have the right kind of wife for the Volkswagen station wagon.

A year or so later, the VW bus had become the iconic image of the counterculture. You could go to concerts in it, or to protests. You could smoke pot in it, or fool around. You could sleep there, on the cheap. You could plot a revolution, or you could store your surfboard. Still, for all the cult of the counterculture, the fate of the VW bus, starting in the nineteen-sixties, mainly had to do with the price of chicken.



Here's where I need to explain about the Chicken War. In the nineteen-fifties, the factory farming of poultry by Big Agribusiness exploded, leading to a plunge in the price of

chicken and a boom in the market for it. American farmers exported staggering numbers of cheap, frozen chicken parts to Europe, so many that chicken became one of the most valuable U.S. exports—much to the distress of German farmers. "In Bavaria and Westphalia, protectionist German farmers' associations stormed that U.S. chickens are artificially fattened with arsenic and should be banned," *Time* reported in 1962. "The French government did ban U.S. chickens, using the excuse that they are fattened with estrogen. With typical Gallic concern, Frenchmen hinted that such hormones could have catastrophic effects on male virility." Members of Europe's Common Market raised tariffs on imported chicken. "Everyone is preoccupied with Cuba, Berlin, Laos—and chickens," one German minister reported after a visit to the U.S. The German Chancellor, describing two years of diplomatic talks with President Kennedy, said, "I guess that about half of it has been about chickens." Americans were furious: there was talk, for a time, of pulling U.S. troops out of NATO unless the chicken tax was dropped. Instead, in December, 1963, President Johnson, eyeing the next year's election and needing the support of the United Auto Workers, not least for his civil-rights agenda, retaliated in kind. Volks-

wagen had started selling a Type 2 pickup truck that was becoming popular. The U.A.W. was threatening a strike. Johnson, whose Secretary of Defense was Robert McNamara, the former C.E.O. of Ford Motors, imposed a twenty-five-per-cent tax on imported light trucks. It was aimed at Volkswagen, but it applied to everyone. It has never been lifted.

Because of the tax, Volkswagen couldn't sell the Type 2 in the United States as any kind of truck—not as a pickup, not as a panel van, not as any vehicle that could be construed as commercial. It could only be a passenger van, a family car. Although Dodge is usually given credit for inventing the minivan, if "credit" is the word, it's really Volkswagen that invented it, out of necessity. As the nineteen-sixties wore on, though, driving around a pile of people came to mean something different, something about community. There's the faded-green rusted rear door of a 1966 Type 2 in the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture: it was used by civil-rights activists in South Carolina to take Black children to school. Painted on it, in wobbly white letters, are the words "LOVE IS PROGRESS."

Sue Vargo got her first car, a used VW Beetle, in 1973, the year she graduated from Michigan State. The bus and the Beetle have the same engine, toylike and in the back, and she learned how to fix it by reading "How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive: A Manual of Step by Step Procedures for the Compleat Idiot," a guidebook with R. Crumb-style illustrations. "It told you what six wrenches you needed, and how to make a timing light out of a twelve-volt bulb and some alligator clips," she told me. "You had to set the valves every six thousand miles." Anyone could do it.

Vargo's friend Molly Mead got her first VW bus, brand new, all blue, in 1971. The next year, she and a friend added a cooler, a two-burner propane stove, an eight-track player, and a transistor radio and camped in that bus for four months, with two golden retrievers in the back, driving through Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and

Vancouver, and over to Vancouver Island and back, then down the West Coast, while Richard Nixon ran for reelection. "In Seattle, I cast my mail-in ballot for McGovern," Mead told me. They listened to Led Zeppelin, Cream. The VW bus was famously underpowered. Thirty horsepower. (The ID. Buzz has more than six times that.) Two dogs, two women, the Rockies: the bus could barely make it, creeping uphill like a slug.

Volkswagen made millions of T2s, including an electric model. It stopped making T2s in 1979. My first Volkswagen bus, which was made in 1987, was a T3, known in the U.S. as a Vanagon. It was almost twenty years old when my husband bought it. ("You have the right kind of wife for the Volkswagen station wagon.") It was rusty and brown, with a stick shift, and the locks didn't work and it smelled like smoke, except more like a campfire than like cigarettes, and we took it camping and pushed down the seats to make a bed and slept inside, with two toddlers and a baby and a Great Dane, and we all fit, even with fishing poles and Swiss Army knives and battery-operated lanterns and binoculars and Bananagrams and bug spray and a beloved, pint-size red plastic suitcase full of the best pieces from our family's Lego collection. It was, honestly, the dream. If you took it to the beach, you could just slide open the door and pop up the table—the five seats in back faced one another—and eat peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches while watching the waves or putting a baby down for a nap. The carpet would get covered with sand and crushed seashells. Weeks later, the whole van would still smell like a cottage by the sea.

After the Vanagon engine stopped turning over, we got a ten-year-old 2002 Volkswagen Eurovan, a camper with a pop-top. Technically, it's a T4. It's also the last bus that Volkswagen sold in the U.S. (That decision was mainly due to the decline of the dollar against the Deutsche mark in the nineteen-nineties. In much of the rest of the world, you can still buy a T5, a T6, or a T7, which is a hybrid, and the fact that you can't buy any of these in the U.S. is one reason for all the pent-up American demand for the updated

bus.) We bought our T4 in California, at a place called Pop-Top Heaven. The day we drove it off the lot, half the dashboard warning lights came on. Check engine! Brake failure! Check tire level! Engine overheating! The T4 is a lot harder to fix yourself than the T3. We had to make an emergency stop at AutoZone for a gadget called an on-board diagnostics detector. We plugged it in and most of the lights went off, and so we drove the bus across the country, camping with three boys, who slept below, with the two of us sleeping in the pop-top. Or not exactly sleeping. Resting. Or watching the first four seasons of "The Simpsons" on a portable DVD player. Or listening to "The Penderwicks" on audiocassette. One of our kids had taken a vow not to listen to a single piece of music produced after the year 1985, and he's the one who gets carsick, so he got to sit in front, which meant that he controlled the radio, so there was a lot of Fleetwood Mac, the Ramones, the Beatles, the Police. Just past Death Valley, we needed a jump start. At the Grand Canyon, we dug the first-aid kit out from under the spare tire to treat lacerations from tumbling down a trail. In Cleveland, we rolled up to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame blasting

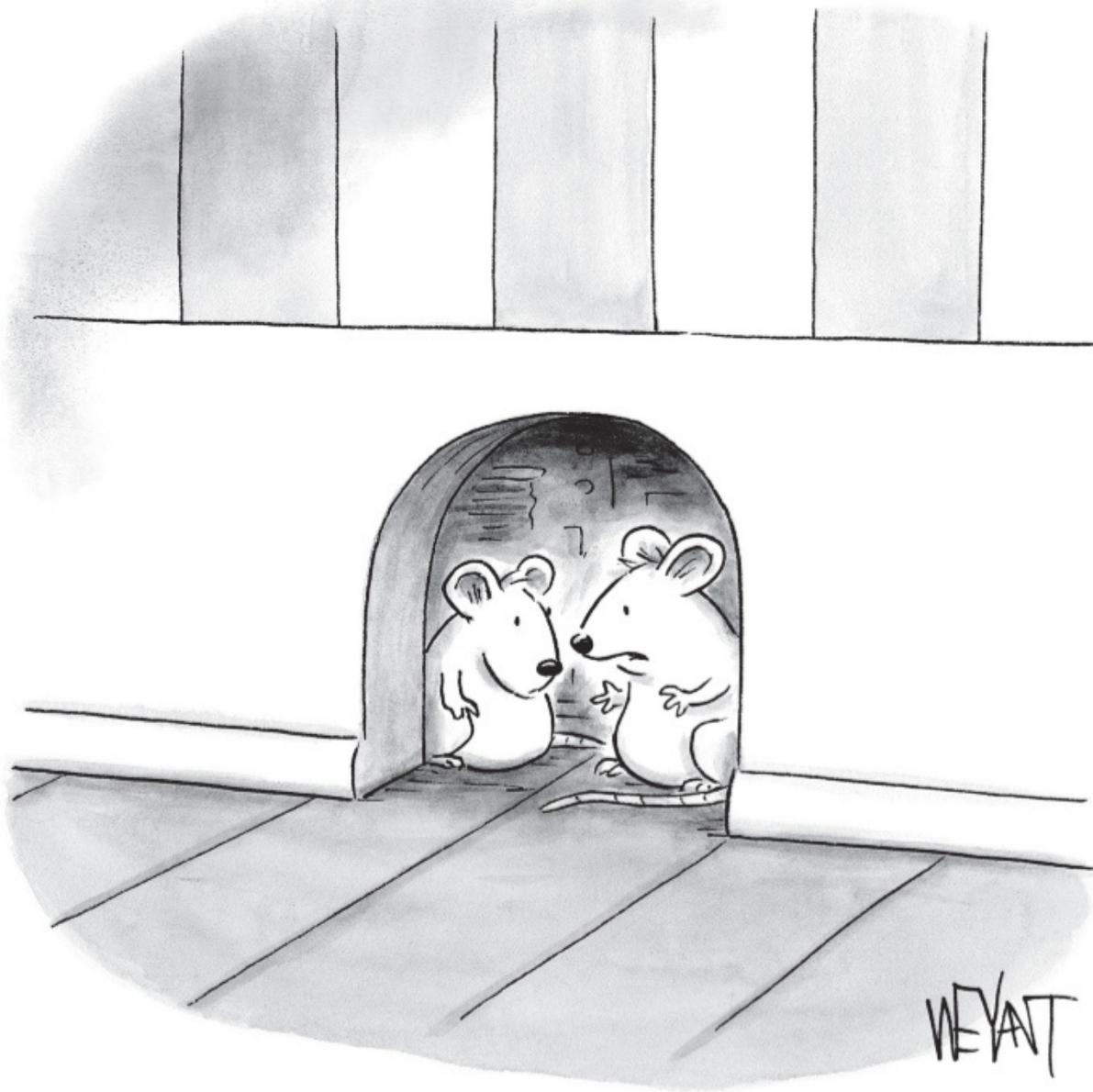
Little Richard. And then we were home—filthy, unbroken, proven.

It still runs. The locks keep getting stuck; the heating doesn't work; three seasons out of four, the sliding door won't budge. We can't bear to sell it. We've taken out all the seats. We just use it to haul stuff around, not so much an empty nest as an empty shell.

Every VW bus ever owned by Sue Vargo and Molly Mead, every VW bus I've owned: they were all built at the factory in Hanover, Germany. The ID. Buzz is being built there, too. Production started this spring. I flew to Germany and drove to Hanover in a rental car, a Volkswagen Tiguan. New Volkswagens have more than thirty different "driver-assistance programs." On the Autobahn, if I tried to change lanes without signalling, the car balked. Driver assist is different from power locks and power steering and an automatic transmission. It's more like having another driver in the car. It's like when, in a driver's-ed car, the teacher has his own brake pedal in the front passenger seat, and if you roll through a stop sign he pumps the brakes himself. Your onboard computer can park your car. It can tell you when it's safe to pass. You get the feeling you're not



"What's hilarious is I'm an Aquarius with, like, strong fire-sign energy."



"I hate to admit it but now that the cat's away I don't know what to do with all of my free time."

needed anymore. You might like that feeling, or you might not.

The Hanover factory is the size of a hundred and fifty-two soccer fields, or the size of a small town. Its gray concrete-and-metal floor is painted with white and yellow traffic stripes, and, to the right, there's a lane for pedestrians. I took a tour riding in the back seat of a T6 with its top cut off, painted a royal blue that I think of as VW blue. It felt like riding in the Popemobile. The factory's fourteen thousand workers—mostly men, mostly wearing bluejeans and VW-blue T-shirts—use bicycles to get around, as if (the genius of German engineering!) they'd reinvented the bicycle as the best and easiest mode of transportation. Everything and everyone was on the move, an exploded version of Richard Scarry's "Busy, Busy World." Workers would bike by, eyeing us a little suspiciously. Parts are moved from place

to place not with *Plattenwagen* but with autonomous vehicles, R2-D2-ish beeping carts—the ugly, clumsy ancestors of a new species of sleeker, prettier driverless cars, the dinosaurs to those birds. They stopped, politely, at every intersection, their cameras looking both ways before crossing the road.

Thomas Hahlbohm runs the plant. He's got a graying beard and wears his curly red hair pulled back in a bun. Improbably, he's a Pittsburgh Steelers fan. His father worked in this factory decades ago, and Hahlbohm started out on the assembly line. During my tour, he stood in the front of the T6, turning around to talk to me over a never-ending thrum of metal hammering metal. The basic project of building a car is unchanged. A car starts out, in the press shop, as a roll of sheet metal, unfurled into a press that stamps out parts: side panels, front panels. Those get put together in the body

shop, to form a ghostly husk, which is sent to the paint shop and dipped in a series of pools, then rolled around to the assembly shop, where everything else is fitted into it. At a spot called the wedding station, the chassis comes up from the basement and is screwed to the body.

But, if the basics remain unchanged, every detail is different. Most of Hahlbohm's job involves overseeing ceaseless adjustment: replacing software; installing new, more fully automated equipment; and retraining the workforce. "This is the old body shop of the T6," he said, as we wheeled past. It was built twenty years ago. "And, as you know, if you try to use now a computer from 2000?" He rolled his eyes. You can only replace the software for so long; after a while, you just need a new computer. Volkswagen will retire this body shop soon and build a new one. The art of automotive innovation is the acceleration of evolution.

This year, the Hanover factory is making three different cars, the T6, the T7, and the Buzz, all on the same assembly line and all at the same time. (Volkswagen's electric S.U.V.s, the ID.4, 5, and 6, are built all over the world, including in Wolfsburg and at its U.S. factory, in Chattanooga.) When I visited, the workers had a target of forty Buzzes a day. We stopped to watch one of the trickiest parts of assembly: attaching the hatchback. It's plastic, instead of metal, to help keep the vehicle's weight down. Plastic is unforgiving. As a Buzz is rolled along the conveyor belt, a worker wearing gloves climbs inside the back, and three workers on the belt help a robot arm nudge the hatchback into place. It's a ballet, and a big challenge for an aging workforce. "We have to bring the people from the past to the future," Hahlbohm said. He's trying to get his workforce excited about the vehicles. One is on display in front of the factory; soon, workers will be able to take them out for rides.

Everywhere in the plant, the machinery is color-coded: orange for the T6, green for the T7, and yellow for the Buzz. Volkswagen will phase out the T6 before long, and introduce other variations of the Buzz, including the bigger, American version. Starting this

year, in Europe, especially in smaller cities, the Buzz will be used as a police car, a school bus, a delivery van, a postal truck, and an actual bus, something between public transport and a multi-passenger ride-hailing service. Eventually, a version of the Buzz is intended to establish the first fleet of self-driving taxis and shuttles. But the chicken tax means that, in the U.S., the Buzz can't be sold as anything but a passenger car. If the Buzz is the vehicle of the future, its future in the U.S. is shackled to a deal L.B.J. brokered with the U.A.W. more than half a century ago.

Once you're set up to make E.V.s, they're easier to build than combustion-engine cars. "Because it's simpler, we will save ten hours per car," Hahlbohm said. With every new iteration of the production cycle, more parts of the process are automated. Every change is also meant to make the work less physically demanding for humans. The cars are on a conveyor belt, and so are the workers, riding along it on rolling chairs. The key to production, Hahlbohm said, is reduction of effort. Reduction of effort has lately become the key to driving, too.

To picture the Buzz, imagine that a Toyota Sienna got pregnant by a Tesla. At the New York auto show, I sounded out people staring at the Buzz on its pedestal. Kenneth Pearl, a New Yorker in fleece and jeans, who comes to the show every year, told me that his sister used to have a VW bus. He's not sure the Buzz will capture the attention of young people. And he'd never get an E.V., he said, because he'd have no way to charge it. I asked Sonya Fitzmaurice, a jewelry designer from River Vale, New Jersey, if she thought it looked like the bus. "Sort of?" she said. "Like the Scooby-Doo van. The Mystery Van." She was wearing an embroidered motorcycle jacket. She figures she'll get an E.V. at some point, but when she does she won't buy the Buzz. It's too big, she said. "And we're downsizing."

It struck me that the sort of people who go to auto shows might not be the sort of people who are on the verge of buying a high-fashion E.V., nostalgia or no. Tesla often doesn't bother with auto shows. Instead, Elon Musk stages

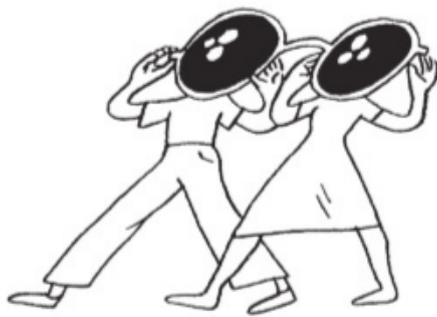
his own shows. For better or worse, Volkswagen doesn't have a Musk. But the launch of the Buzz has been a little Teslish. In March, the Buzz made its world première in Paris, and since then Volkswagen has been trotting it around to all the swankiest places, the tech-début equivalents of the Met Gala: South by Southwest, in Austin, Texas; the World Economic Forum, in Davos, Switzerland. I asked to test it, and, amazingly, the company brought one to me, in my home town. It was loaded onto a semi, along with a 1969 bus, and driven to the parking lot behind Harvard Stadium. Then I was sent a photo, and a message: "Your chariots await."

I pulled into the parking lot in my beat-up, emptied-out, pine-green Eurovan. I eyed my chariots.

The difference between driving the bus and driving the Buzz is the difference between beating eggs with a whisk and pressing the On button of a mixer. There's just very little to do. The accelerator has a triangle on it, a Play button; the brake has two vertical lines on it, for Pause.

I shifted into reverse, hit Play.

I began pulling out, but a physicist I know walked by and waved me down. She was with a friend, a German biologist, who'd been waiting for the Buzz for well over a year. I pulled over so they could look inside. "I'm totally in love with it," he said. They wanted a ride. It was as if I'd shown up in a space-



ship. Heads turned. Everyone waved, everyone honked. Everyone wanted a ride. We didn't have room. I'd brought some teen-agers along.

"This is insane, dog," one said to another.

"We got so much cred right now."

There were a lot of gadgets to investigate.

"Are there, like, a hundred U.S.B. ports?"

"It's crazy quiet in here."

I drove around the block, gliding, almost floating, noiselessly, effortlessly. I hit Pause.

In 1976, when Sue Vargo and Molly Mead decided to go on a road trip together, Mead saw an ad for that '67 VW bus and showed up with cash. They named their bus Billie Jean. "We dyked it out, built a platform in the back with two-by-fours, put in a bed, parked it by the side of the road at night, and got rousted out of places where we weren't supposed to camp," Vargo said. "It was a blast." It was also the ideal lesbian-road-trip car. You never needed to check into a hotel. It made it down to Florida—boing, boing, boing—and almost back, before the engine nearly sputtered out.

For a while in the seventies, Vargo worked as a mechanic, a wrench, at a four-bay shop called Mecca Motors. Her other car was a motorcycle, a Honda 350. Later, she got a doctorate in psychology. For years, she worked part time at the auto shop and part time at her psychotherapy practice. "They were both fixing things," she said. "But the time frame in the garage was way shorter. Something came in, it was broken, you fixed it, and it went back, same day."

For the Buzz that's coming to the United States in 2024, you won't need to tighten the distributor cap or jury-rig a timing belt in a pinch. There will be no quirkily illustrated, "Whole Earth Catalog"-style "How to Keep Your Volkswagen Buzz Alive." You won't recognize the innards, and you won't be able to fix them, not even with an onboard diagnostics detector. In the new world of cars, only machines learn.

Molly Mead once had a minivan, a Dodge Caravan, when her kids were little. Sue Vargo used to have a Prius. Mead thinks she might get an E.V.—her wife's a pastor, and has a long commute—but, she says, "I'm not going to be buying a Tesla." Neither of them wants a Buzz; it's too big for them, and they don't think it looks fun to drive.

I still want one, though. Or maybe I just want those road trips back, the Ramones, "The Simpsons," the fishing poles, the sleeping bags, and that pint-size red plastic suitcase full of Legos. Only love is progress. ♦

THE FLOATING WORLD

Outrageously luxurious superyachts are attracting political scrutiny—and buyers in record numbers.

BY EVAN OSNOS

In the Victorian era, it was said that the length of a man's boat, in feet, should match his age, in years. The Victorians would have had some questions at the fortieth annual Palm Beach International Boat Show, which convened this March on Florida's Gold Coast. A typical offering: a two-hundred-and-three-foot superyacht named Sea Owl, selling secondhand for ninety million dollars. The owner, Robert Mercer, the hedge-fund tycoon and Republican donor, was throwing in furniture and accessories, including several auxiliary boats, a Steinway piano, a variety of frescoes, and a security system that requires fingerprint recognition. Nevertheless, Mercer's package was a modest one; the largest superyachts are more than five hundred feet, on a scale with naval destroyers, and cost six or seven times what he was asking.

For the small, tight-lipped community around the world's biggest yachts, the Palm Beach show has the promising air of spring training. On the cusp of the summer season, it affords brokers and builders and owners (or attendants from their family offices) a chance to huddle over the latest merchandise and to gather intelligence: Who's getting in? Who's getting out? And, most pressingly, who's ogling a bigger boat?

On the docks, brokers parse the crowd according to a taxonomy of potential. Guests asking for tours face a gantlet of greeters, trained to distinguish "superrich clients" from "ineligible visitors," in the words of Emma Spence, a former greeter at the Palm Beach show. Spence looked for promising clues (the right shoes, jewelry, pets) as well as for red flags (cameras, ornate business cards, clothes with pop-culture references). For greeters from elsewhere, Palm Beach is a challenging assignment. Unlike in Europe, where money can still produce some visible tells—Hunter Wellies, a Barbour jacket—the habits

of wealth in Florida offer little that's reliable. One colleague resorted to binoculars, to spot a passerby with a hundred-thousand-dollar watch. According to Spence, people judged to have insufficient buying power are quietly marked for "dissuasion."

For the uninitiated, a pleasure boat the length of a football field can be bewildering. Andy Cohen, the talk-show host, recalled his first visit to a superyacht owned by the media mogul Barry Diller: "I was like the Beverly Hillbillies." The boats have grown so vast that some owners place unique works of art outside the elevator on each deck, so that lost guests don't barge into the wrong stateroom.

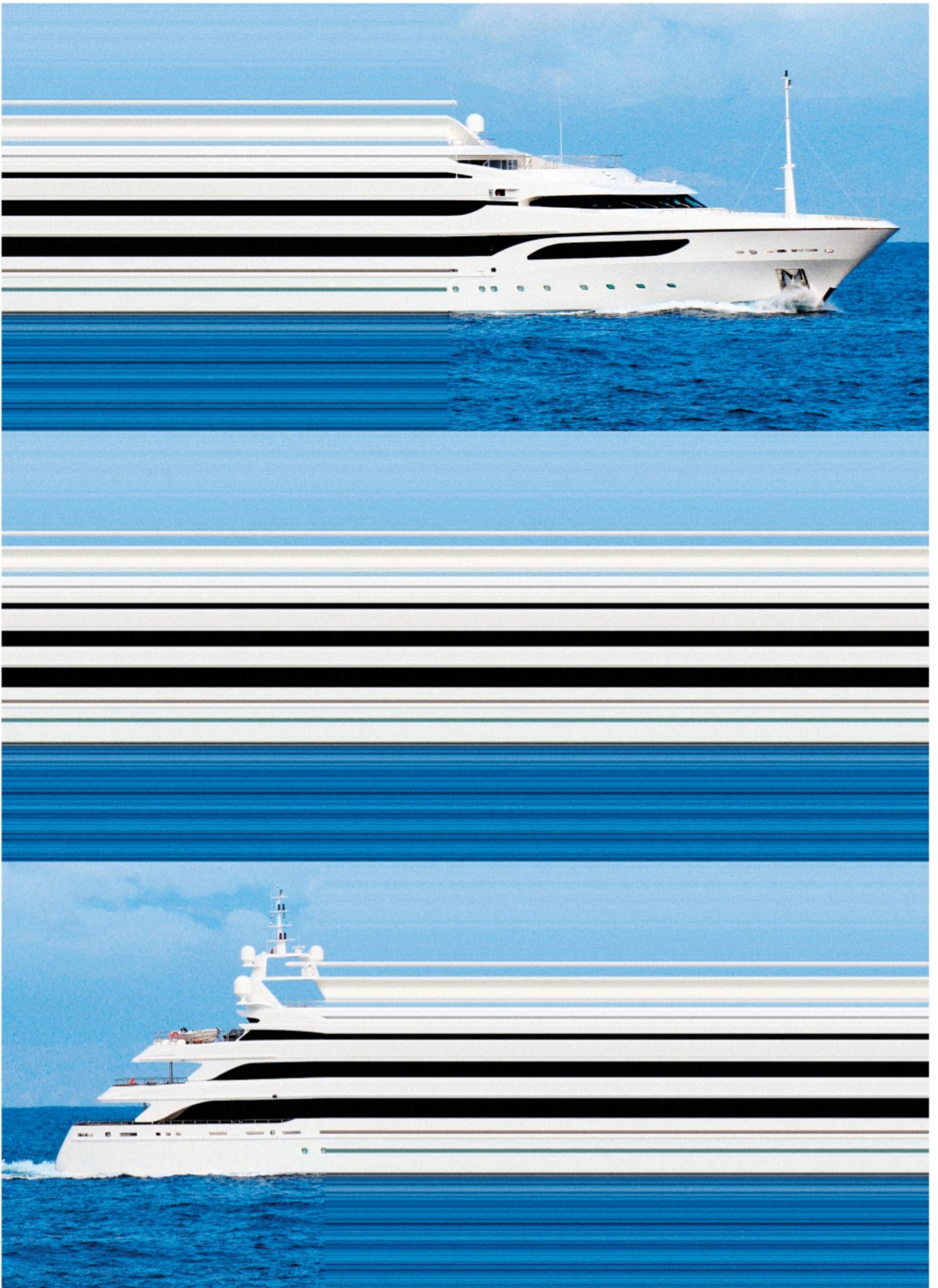
At the Palm Beach show, I lingered in front of a gracious vessel called Namasté, until I was dissuaded by a wooden placard: "Private yacht, no boarding, no paparazzi." In a nearby berth was a two-hundred-and-eighty-foot superyacht called Bold, which was styled like a warship, with its own helicopter hangar, three Sea-Doos, two sailboats, and a color scheme of gunmetal gray. The rugged look is a trend; "explorer" vessels, equipped to handle remote journeys, are the sport-utility vehicles of yachting.

If you hail from the realm of ineligible visitors, you may not be aware that we are living through the "greatest boom in the yacht business that's ever existed," as Bob Denison—whose firm, Denison Yachting, is one of the world's largest brokers—told me. "Every broker, every builder, up and down the docks, is having some of the best years they've ever experienced." In 2021, the industry sold a record eight hundred and eighty-seven superyachts worldwide, nearly twice the previous year's total. With more than a thousand new superyachts on order, shipyards are so backed up that clients unaccustomed to being told no have been shunted to waiting lists.

One reason for the increased demand for yachts is the pandemic. Some buyers invoke social distancing; others, an existential awakening. John Staluppi, of Palm Beach Gardens, who made a fortune from car dealerships, is looking to upgrade from his current, sixty-million-dollar yacht. "When you're forty or fifty years old, you say, 'I've got plenty of time,'" he told me. But, at seventy-five, he is ready to throw in an extra fifteen million if it will spare him three years of waiting. "Is your life worth five million dollars a year? I think so," he said. A deeper reason for the demand is the widening imbalance of wealth. Since 1990, the United States' supply of billionaires has increased from sixty-six to more than seven hundred, even as the median hourly wage has risen only twenty per cent. In that time, the number of truly giant yachts—those longer than two hundred and fifty feet—has climbed from less than ten to more than a hundred and seventy. Raphael Sauleau, the C.E.O. of Fraser Yachts, told me bluntly, "COVID and wealth—a perfect storm for us."

And yet the marina in Palm Beach was thrumming with anxiety. Ever since the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, launched his assault on Ukraine, the superyacht world has come under scrutiny. At a port in Spain, a Ukrainian engineer named Taras Ostapchuk, working aboard a ship that he said was owned by a Russian arms dealer, threw open the sea valves and tried to sink it to the bottom of the harbor. Under arrest, he told a judge, "I would do it again." Then he returned to Ukraine and joined the military. Western allies, in the hope of pressuring Putin to withdraw, have sought to cut off Russian oligarchs from businesses and luxuries abroad. "We are coming for your ill-begotten gains," President Joe Biden declared, in his State of the Union address.

Nobody can say precisely how many



SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH FROM SHUTTERSTOCK

The yachting life style awes even the wealthy. "Boats are the last place that I think you can get away with it," an owner said.

of Putin's associates own superyachts—known to professionals as “white boats”—because the white-boat world is notoriously opaque. Owners tend to hide behind shell companies, registered in obscure tax havens, attended by private bankers and lawyers. But, with unusual alacrity, authorities have used subpoenas and police powers to freeze boats suspected of having links to the Russian elite. In Spain, the government detained a hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar yacht associated with Sergei Chemezov, the head of the conglomerate Rostec, whose bond with Putin reaches back to their time as K.G.B. officers in East Germany. (As in many cases, the boat is not registered to Chemezov; the official owner is a shell company connected to his stepdaughter, a teacher whose salary is likely about twenty-two hundred dollars a month.) In Germany, authorities impounded the world's most voluminous yacht, Dilbar, for its ties to the mining-and-telecom tycoon Alisher Usmanov. And in Italy police have grabbed a veritable armada, including a boat owned by one of Russia's richest men, Alexei Mordashov, and a colossus suspected of belonging to Putin himself, the four-hundred-and-fifty-nine-foot Scheherazade.

In Palm Beach, the yachting community worried that the same scrutiny might be applied to them. “Say your superyacht is in Asia, and there's some big conflict where China invades Taiwan,” Denison told me. “China could spin it as ‘Look at these American oligarchs!’” He wondered if the seizures of superyachts marked a growing political animus toward the very rich. “Whenever things are economically or politically disruptive,” he said, “it's hard to justify taking an insane amount of money and just putting it into something that costs a lot to maintain, depreciates, and is only used for having a good time.”

Nobody pretends that a superyacht is a productive place to stash your wealth. In a column this spring headlined “A SUPERYACHT IS A TERRIBLE ASSET,” the *Financial Times* observed, “Owning a superyacht is like owning a stack of 10 Van Goghs, only you are holding them over your head as you tread water, trying to keep them dry.”

Not so long ago, status transactions among the elite were denominated in Old Masters and in the sculptures of the Italian Renaissance. Joseph Duveen, the dominant art dealer of the early twentieth century, kept the oligarchs of his day—Andrew Mellon, Jules Bache, J. P. Morgan—jockeying over Donatellos and Van Dycks. “When you pay high for the priceless,” he liked to say, “you're getting it cheap.”

In the nineteen-fifties, the height of aspirational style was fine French furniture—F.F.F., as it became known in certain precincts of Fifth Avenue and Palm Beach. Before long, more and more money was going airborne. Hugh Hefner, a pioneer in the private-jet era, decked out a plane he called Big Bunny, where he entertained Elvis Presley, Raquel Welch, and James Caan. The oil baron Armand Hammer circled the globe on his Boeing 727, paying bribes and recording evidence on microphones hidden in his cufflinks. But, once it seemed that every plutocrat had a plane, the thrill was gone.

In any case, an airplane is just transportation. A big ship is a floating manse, with a hierarchy written right into the nomenclature. If it has a crew working aboard, it's a yacht. If it's more than ninety-eight feet, it's a superyacht. After that, definitions are debated, but people generally agree that anything more than two hundred and thirty feet is a megayacht, and more than two



hundred and ninety-five is a gigayacht. The world contains about fifty-four hundred superyachts, and about a hundred gigayachts.

For the moment, a gigayacht is the most expensive item that our species has figured out how to own. In 2019, the hedge-fund billionaire Ken Griffin bought a quadruplex on Central Park South for two hundred and forty million dollars, the highest price ever paid for a home in America. In May,

an unknown buyer spent about a hundred and ninety-five million on an Andy Warhol silk-screen portrait of Marilyn Monroe. In luxury-yacht terms, those are ordinary numbers. “There are a lot of boats in build well over two hundred and fifty million dollars,” Jamie Edmiston, a broker in Monaco and London, told me. His buyers are getting younger and more inclined to spend long stretches at sea. “High-speed Internet, telephony, modern communications have made working easier,” he said. “Plus, people made a lot more money earlier in life.”

A Silicon Valley C.E.O. told me that one appeal of boats is that they can “absorb the most excess capital.” He explained, “Rationally, it would seem to make sense for people to spend half a billion dollars on their house and then fifty million on the boat that they're on for two weeks a year, right? But it's gone the other way. People don't want to live in a hundred-thousand-square-foot house. Optically, it's weird. But a half-billion-dollar boat, actually, is quite nice.” Staluppi, of Palm Beach Gardens, is content to spend three or four times as much on his yachts as on his homes. Part of the appeal is flexibility. “If you're on your boat and you don't like your neighbor, you tell the captain, ‘Let's go to a different place,’” he said. On land, escaping a bad neighbor requires more work: “You got to try and buy him out or make it uncomfortable or something.” The preference for sea-based investment has altered the proportions of taste. Until recently, the Silicon Valley C.E.O. said, “a fifty-metre boat was considered a good-sized boat. Now that would be a little bit embarrassing.” In the past twenty years, the length of the average luxury yacht has grown by a third, to a hundred and sixty feet.

Thorstein Veblen, the economist who published “The Theory of the Leisure Class,” in 1899, argued that the power of “conspicuous consumption” sprang not from artful finery but from sheer needlessness. “In order to be reputable,” he wrote, “it must be wasteful.” In the yachting world, stories circulate about exotic deliveries by helicopter or seaplane: Dom Pérignon, bagels from Zabar's, sex workers, a rare melon from the island of Hokkaido.

The industry excels at selling you things that you didn't know you needed. When you flip through the yachting press, it's easy to wonder how you've gone this long without a personal submarine, or a cryosauna that "blasts you with cold" down to minus one hundred and ten degrees Celsius, or the full menagerie of "exclusive leathers," such as eel and stingray.

But these shrines to excess capital exist in a conditional state of visibility: they are meant to be unmistakable to a slender stratum of society—and all but unseen by everyone else. Even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the yachting community was straining to manage its reputation as a gusher of carbon emissions (one well-stocked diesel yacht is estimated to produce as much greenhouse gas as fifteen hundred passenger cars), not to mention the fact that the world of white boats is overwhelmingly white. In a candid aside to a French documentarian, the American yachtsman Bill Duker said, "If the rest of the world learns what it's like to live on a yacht like this, they're gonna bring back the guillotine." The Dutch press recently reported that Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, was building a sailing yacht so tall that the city of Rotterdam might temporarily dismantle a bridge that had survived the Nazis in order to let the boat pass to the open sea. Rotterdammers were not pleased. On Facebook, a local man urged people to "take a box of rotten eggs with you and let's throw them en masse at Jeff's superyacht when it sails through." At least thirteen thousand people expressed interest. Amid the uproar, a deputy mayor announced that the dismantling plan had been abandoned "for the time being." (Bezos modelled his yacht partly on one owned by his friend Barry Diller, who has hosted him many times. The appreciation eventually extended to personnel, and Bezos hired one of Diller's captains.)

As social media has heightened the scrutiny of extraordinary wealth, some of the very people who created those platforms have sought less observable places to spend it. But they occasionally indulge in some coded provocation. In 2006, when the venture capitalist Tom Perkins unveiled his boat



"You're not the carefree woman I married."

in Istanbul, most passersby saw it adorned in colorful flags, but people who could read semaphore were able to make out a message: "Rarely does one have the privilege to witness vulgar ostentation displayed on such a scale." As a longtime owner told me, "If you don't have some guilt about it, you're a rat."

Alex Finley, a former C.I.A. officer who has seen yachts proliferate near her home in Barcelona, has weighed the superyacht era and its discontents in writings and on Twitter, using the hashtag #YachtWatch. "To me, the yachts are not just yachts," she told me. "In Russia's case, these are the embodiment of oligarchs helping a dictator destabilize our democracy while utilizing our democracy to their benefit." But, Finley added, it's a mistake to think the toxic symbolism applies only to Russia. "The yachts tell a whole story about a Faustian capitalism—this idea that we're ready to sell democracy for short-term profit," she said. "They're registered offshore. They use every loophole that we've put in place for illicit

money and tax havens. So they play a role in this battle, writ large, between autocracy and democracy."

After a morning on the docks at the Palm Beach show, I headed to a more secluded marina nearby, which had been set aside for what an attendant called "the really big hardware." It felt less like a trade show than like a boutique resort, with a swimming pool and a terrace restaurant. Kevin Merrigan, a relaxed Californian with horn-rimmed glasses and a high forehead pinked by the sun, was waiting for me at the stern of *Unbridled*, a superyacht with a brilliant blue hull that gave it the feel of a personal cruise ship. He invited me to the bridge deck, where a giant screen showed silent video of dolphins at play.

Merrigan is the chairman of the brokerage Northrop & Johnson, which has ridden the tide of growing boats and wealth since 1949. Lounging on a sofa mounded with throw pillows, he projected a nearly postcoital level of contentment. He had recently sold the

boat we were on, accepted an offer for a behemoth beside us, and begun negotiating the sale of yet another. “This client owns three big yachts,” he said. “It’s a hobby for him. We’re at a hundred and ninety-one feet now, and last night he said, ‘You know, what do you think about getting a two hundred and fifty?’” Merrigan laughed. “And I was, like, ‘Can’t you just have dinner?’”

Among yacht owners, there are some unwritten rules of stratification: a Dutch-built boat will hold its value better than an Italian; a custom design will likely get more respect than a “series yacht”; and, if you want to disparage another man’s boat, say that it looks like a wedding cake. But, in the end, nothing says as much about a yacht, or its owner, as the delicate matter of L.O.A.—length over all.

The imperative is not usually length for length’s sake (though the longtime owner told me that at times there is an aspect of “phallic sizing”). “L.O.A.” is a byword for grandeur. In most cases, pleasure yachts are permitted to carry no more than twelve passengers, a rule set by the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, which was conceived after the sinking of the Titanic. But those limits do not apply to crew. “So, you might have anything between twelve and fifty crew looking after those twelve guests,” Edmiston, the broker, said. “It’s a level of service you cannot really contemplate until you’ve been fortunate enough to experience it.”

As yachts have grown more capacious, and the limits on passengers have not, more and more space on board has been devoted to staff and to novelties. The latest fashions include IMAX theatres, hospital equipment that tests for dozens of pathogens, and ski rooms where guests can suit up for a helicopter trip to a mountaintop. The longtime owner, who had returned the previous day from his yacht, told me, “No one today—except for assholes and ridiculous people—lives on land in what you would call a deep and broad luxe life. Yes, people have nice houses and all of that, but it’s unlikely that the ratio of staff to them is what it is on a boat.” After a moment, he added, “Boats are the last place that I think you can get away with it.”

Even among the truly rich, there is

RESISTANCE

The sunset earlier, the sky spooky as the nineteenth century, skeletal trees, a brief orange glow before the blues and grays darken in a landscape that lasts for an hour before the shapes dissolve into the dark of All Hallows’, a night as sacred as would scare us, the guiltless ones, who maintain our belief in metaphysics, which French *philosophes* declared dead in 1970 or so. As the last branches disappear into the heavenly darkness, what remains is what resists and what clings to the oblivion of a fallen world that exists in memory only, and poetry.

—David Lehman

a gap between the haves and the have-yachts. One boating guest told me about a conversation with a famous friend who keeps one of the world’s largest yachts. “He said, ‘The boat is the last vestige of what real wealth can do.’ What he meant is, You have a chef, and I have a chef. You have a driver, and I have a driver. You can fly privately, and I fly privately. So, the one place where I can make clear to the world that I am in a different fucking category than you is the boat.”

After Merrigan and I took a tour of Unbridled, he led me out to a waiting tender, staffed by a crew member with an earpiece on a coil. The tender, Merrigan said, would ferry me back to the busy main dock of the Palm Beach show. We bounced across the waves under a pristine sky, and pulled into the marina, where my fellow-gawkers were still trying to talk their way past the greeters. As I walked back into the scrum, Namasté was still there, but it looked smaller than I remembered.

For owners and their guests, a white boat provides a discreet marketplace for the exchange of trust, patronage, and validation. To diagram the precise workings of that trade—the customs and anxieties, strategies and slights—I talked to Brendan O’Shannassy, a veteran captain who is a curator of white-boat lore. Raised in Western Australia, O’Shannassy joined the Navy as a young

man, and eventually found his way to skippering some of the world’s biggest yachts. He has worked for Paul Allen, the late co-founder of Microsoft, along with a few other billionaires he declines to name. Now in his early fifties, with patient green eyes and tufts of curly brown hair, O’Shannassy has had a vantage from which to monitor the social traffic. “It’s all gracious, and everyone’s kiss-kiss,” he said. “But there’s a lot going on in the background.”

O’Shannassy once worked for an owner who limited the number of newspapers on board, so that he could watch his guests wait and squirm. “It was a mind game amongst the billionaires. There were six couples, and three newspapers,” he said, adding, “They were ranking themselves constantly.” On some boats, O’Shannassy has found himself playing host in the awkward minutes after guests arrive. “A lot of them are savants, but some are very un-socially aware,” he said. “They need someone to be social and charming for them.” Once everyone settles in, O’Shannassy has learned, there is often a subtle shift, when a mogul or a politician or a pop star starts to loosen up in ways that are rarely possible on land. “Your security is relaxed—they’re not on your hip,” he said. “You’re not worried about paparazzi. So you’ve got all this extra space, both mental and physical.”

O’Shannassy has come to see big boats as a space where powerful “solar

systems” converge and combine. “It is implicit in every interaction that their sharing of information will benefit both parties; it is an obsession with billionaires to do favours for each other. A referral, an introduction, an insight—it all matters,” he wrote in “Superyacht Captain,” a new memoir. A guest told O’Shannassy that, after a lavish display of hospitality, he finally understood the business case for buying a boat. “One deal secured on board will pay it all back many times over,” the guest said, “and it is pretty hard to say no after your kids have been hosted so well for a week.”

Take the case of David Geffen, the former music and film executive. He is long retired, but he hosts friends (and potential friends) on the four-hundred-and-fifty-four-foot Rising Sun, which has a double-height cinema, a spa and salon, and a staff of fifty-seven. In 2017, shortly after Barack and Michelle Obama departed the White House, they were photographed on Geffen’s boat in French Polynesia, accompanied by Bruce Springsteen, Oprah Winfrey, Tom Hanks, and Rita Wilson. For Geffen, the boat keeps him connected to the upper echelons of power. There are wealthier Americans, but not many of them have a boat so delectable that it can induce both a Democratic President and the workingman’s crooner to risk the aroma of hypocrisy.

The binding effect pays dividends for guests, too. Once people reach a certain level of fame, they tend to conclude that its greatest advantage is access. Spend a week at sea together, lingering over meals, observing one another floundering on a paddleboard, and you have something of value for years to come. Call to ask for an investment, an introduction, an internship for a wayward nephew, and you’ll at least get the call returned. It’s a mutually reinforcing circle of validation: she’s here, I’m here, we’re here.

But, if you want to get invited back, you are wise to remember your part of the bargain. If you work with movie stars, bring fresh gossip. If you’re on Wall Street, bring an insight or two. Don’t make the transaction obvious, but don’t forget why you’re there. “When I see the guest list,” O’Shannassy wrote, “I am aware, even if not all names are

familiar, that all have been chosen for a purpose.”

For O’Shannassy, there is something comforting about the status anxieties of people who have everything. He recalled a visit to the Italian island of Sardinia, where his employer asked him for a tour of the boats nearby. Riding together on a tender, they passed one colossus after another, some twice the size of the owner’s superyacht. Eventually, the man cut the excursion short. “Take me back to my yacht, please,” he said. They motored in silence for a while. “There was a time when my yacht was the most beautiful in the bay,” he said at last. “How do I keep up with this new money?”

The summer season in the Mediterranean cranks up in May, when the really big hardware heads east from Florida and the Caribbean to escape the coming hurricanes, and reconvenes along the coasts of France, Italy, and Spain. At the center is the Principality of Monaco, the sun-washed tax haven that calls itself the “world’s capital of advanced yachting.” In Monaco, which is among the richest countries on earth, superyachts bob in the marina like bath toys.

The nearest hotel room at a price that would not get me fired was an Airbnb over the border with France. But an acquaintance put me on the phone with the Yacht Club de Monaco, a members-only establishment created by the late monarch His Serene Highness Prince Rainier III, whom the Web site describes as “a true visionary in every respect.” The club occasionally rents rooms—“cabins,” as they’re called—to visitors in town on yacht-related matters. Claudia Batthyany, the elegant director of special projects, showed me to my cabin and later explained that the club does not aspire to be a hotel. “We are an *association*,” she said. “Otherwise, it becomes”—she gave a gentle wince—“not that exclusive.”

Inside my cabin, I quickly came to understand that I would never be fully satisfied anywhere else again. The space was silent and aromatically upscale, bathed in soft sunlight that swept through a wall of glass overlooking the water. If I was getting a sudden rush of the onboard experience, that was no accident. The clubhouse was designed

by the British architect Lord Norman Foster to evoke the opulent indulgence of ocean liners of the interwar years, like the Queen Mary. I found a handwritten welcome note, on embossed club stationery, set alongside an orchid and an assemblage of chocolate truffles: “The whole team remains at your entire disposal to make your stay a wonderful experience. Yours sincerely, Service Members.” I saluted the nameless Service Members, toiling for the comfort of their guests. Looking out at the water, I thought, intrusively, of a line from Santiago, Hemingway’s old man of the sea. “Do not think about sin,” he told himself. “It is much too late for that and there are people who are paid to do it.”

I had been assured that the Service Members would cheerfully bring dinner, as they might on board, but I was eager to see more of my surroundings. I consulted the club’s summer dress code. It called for white trousers and a blue blazer, and it discouraged improvisation: “No pocket handkerchief is to be worn above the top breast-pocket bearing the Club’s coat of arms.” The handkerchief rule seemed navigable, but I did not possess white trousers, so I skirted the lobby and took refuge in the bar. At a table behind me, a man with flushed cheeks and a British accent had a head start. “You’re a shitty negotiator,” he told another man, with a laugh. “Maybe sales is not your game.” A few seats away, an American woman was explaining to a foreign friend how to talk with conservatives: “If they say, ‘The earth is flat,’ you say, ‘Well, I’ve sailed around it, so I’m not so sure about that.’”

In the morning, I had an appointment for coffee with Gaëlle Tallarida, the managing director of the Monaco Yacht Show, which the *Daily Mail* has called the “most shamelessly ostentatious display of yachts in the world.” Tallarida was not born to that milieu; she grew up on the French side of the border, swimming at public beaches with a view of boats sailing from the marina. But she had a knack for highly organized spectacle. While getting a business degree, she worked on a student theatre festival and found it thrilling. Afterward, she got a job in corporate events, and in 1998 she was

hired at the yacht show as a trainee.

With this year's show five months off, Tallarida was already getting calls about what she described as "the most complex part of my work": deciding which owners get the most desirable spots in the marina. "As you can imagine, they've got very big egos," she said. "On top of that, I'm a woman. They are sometimes arriving and saying"—she pointed into the distance, pantomiming a decree—"O.K., I want *that!*"

Just about everyone wants his superyacht to be viewed from the side, so that its full splendor is visible. Most harbors, however, have a limited number of berths with a side view; in Monaco, there are only twelve, with prime spots arrayed along a concrete dike across from the club. "We reserve the dike for the biggest yachts," Tallarida said. But try telling that to a man who blew his fortune on a small superyacht.

Whenever possible, Tallarida presents her verdicts as a matter of safety: the layout must insure that "in case of an emergency, any boat can go out." If owners insist on preferential placement, she encourages a yachting version of the Golden Rule: "What if, next year, I do that to you? *Against* you?"

Does that work? I asked. She shrugged. "They say, 'Eh.'" Some would gladly risk being a victim next year in order to be a victor now. In the most awful moment of her career, she said, a man who was unhappy with his berth berated her face to face. "I was in the office, feeling like a little girl, with my

daddy shouting at me. I said, 'O.K., O.K., I'm going to give you the spot.'"

Securing just the right place, it must be said, carries value. Back at the yacht club, I was on my terrace, enjoying the latest delivery by the Service Members—an airy French omelette and a glass of preternaturally fresh orange juice. I thought guiltily of my wife, at home with our kids, who had sent a text overnight alerting me to a maintenance issue that she described as "a toilet debacle."

Then I was distracted by the sight of a man on a yacht in the marina below. He was staring up at me. I went back to my brunch, but, when I looked again, there he was—a middle-aged man, on a mid-tier yacht, juiceless, on a greige banquette, staring up at my perfect terrace. A surprising sensation started in my chest and moved outward like a warm glow: the unmistakable pang of superiority.

That afternoon, I made my way to the bar, to meet the yacht club's general secretary, Bernard d'Alessandri, for a history lesson. The general secretary was up to code: white trousers, blue blazer, club crest over the heart. He has silver hair, black eyebrows, and a tan that evokes high-end leather. "I was a sailing teacher before this," he said, and gestured toward the marina. "It was not like this. It was a village."

Before there were yacht clubs, there were *jachten*, from the Dutch word for "hunt." In the seventeenth century,

wealthy residents of Amsterdam created fast-moving boats to meet incoming cargo ships before they hit port, in order to check out the merchandise. Soon, the Dutch owners were racing one another, and yachting spread across Europe. After a visit to Holland in 1697, Peter the Great returned to Russia with a zeal for pleasure craft, and he later opened Nevsky Flot, one of the world's first yacht clubs, in St. Petersburg.

For a while, many of the biggest yachts were symbols of state power. In 1863, the viceroy of Egypt, Isma'il Pasha, ordered up a steel leviathan called El Mahrousa, which was the world's longest yacht for a remarkable hundred and nineteen years, until the title was claimed by King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. In the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt received guests aboard the U.S.S. Potomac, which had a false smokestack containing a hidden elevator, so that the President could move by wheelchair between decks.

But yachts were finding new patrons outside politics. In 1954, the Greek shipping baron Aristotle Onassis bought a Canadian Navy frigate and spent four million dollars turning it into Christina O, which served as his home for months on end—and, at various times, as a home to his companions Maria Callas, Greta Garbo, and Jacqueline Kennedy. Christina O had its flourishes—a Renoir in the master suite, a swimming pool with a mosaic bottom that rose to become a dance floor—but none were more distinctive than the appointments in the bar, which included whales' teeth carved into pornographic scenes from the Odyssey and stools upholstered in whale foreskins.

For Onassis, the extraordinary investments in Christina O were part of an epic tit for tat with his archrival, Stavros Niarchos, a fellow shipping tycoon, which was so entrenched that it continued even after Onassis's death, in 1975. Six years later, Niarchos launched a yacht fifty-five feet longer than Christina O: Atlantis II, which featured a swimming pool on a gyroscope so that the water would not slosh in heavy seas. Atlantis II, now moored in Monaco, sat before the general secretary and me as we talked.

Over the years, d'Alessandri had watched waves of new buyers arrive



"Shut up and play the hits!"

from one industry after another. “First, it was the oil. After, it was the telecommunications. Now, they are making money with crypto,” he said. “And, each time, it’s another size of the boat, another design.” What began as symbols of state power had come to represent more diffuse aristocracies—the fortunes built on carbon, capital, and data that migrated across borders. As early as 1908, the English writer G.K. Chesterton wondered what the big boats foretold of a nation’s fabric. “The poor man really has a stake in the country,” he wrote. “The rich man hasn’t; he can go away to New Guinea in a yacht.”

Each iteration of fortune left its imprint on the industry. Sheikhs, who tend to cruise in the world’s hottest places, wanted baroque indoor spaces and were uninterested in sundecks. Silicon Valley favored acres of beige, more Sonoma than Saudi. And buyers from Eastern Europe became so abundant that shipyards perfected the onboard *banya*, a traditional Russian sauna stocked with birch and eucalyptus. The collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991, had minted a generation of new billionaires, whose approach to money inspired a popular Russian joke: One oligarch brags to another, “Look at this new tie. It cost me two hundred bucks!” To which the other replies, “You moron. You could’ve bought the same one for a thousand!”

In 1998, around the time that the Russian economy imploded, the young tycoon Roman Abramovich reportedly bought a secondhand yacht called *Susurro*—Italian for “whisper”—which had been so carefully engineered for speed that each individual screw was weighed before installation. Soon, Russians were competing to own the costliest ships. “If the most expensive yacht in the world was small, they would still want it,” Maria Pevchikh, a Russian investigator who helps lead the Anti-Corruption Foundation, told me.

In 2008, a thirty-six-year-old industrialist named Andrey Melnichenko spent some three hundred million dollars on *Motor Yacht A*, a radical experiment conceived by the French designer Philippe Starck, with a dagger-shaped hull and a bulbous tower topped by a master bedroom set on a turntable that pivots to capture the best

view. The shape was ridiculed as “a giant finger pointing at you” and “one of the most hideous vessels ever to sail,” but it marked a new prominence for Russian money at sea. Today, post-Soviet élites are thought to own a fifth of the world’s gigayachts.

Even Putin has signalled his appreciation, being photographed on yachts in the Black Sea resort of Sochi. In an explosive report in 2012, Boris Nemtsov, a former Deputy Prime Minister, accused Putin of amassing a storehouse of outrageous luxuries, including four yachts, twenty homes, and dozens of private aircraft. Less than three years later, Nemtsov was fatally shot while crossing a bridge near the Kremlin. The Russian government, which officially reports that Putin collects a salary of about a hundred and forty thousand dollars and possesses a modest apartment in Moscow, denied any involvement.

Many of the largest, most flamboyant gigayachts are designed in Monaco, at a sleek waterfront studio occupied by the naval architect Espen Øino. At sixty, Øino has a boyish mop and the mild countenance of a country parson. He grew up in a small town in Norway, the heir to a humble maritime tradition. “My forefathers built wooden rowing boats for four generations,” he told me. In the late eighties, he was designing sailboats when his firm won a commission to design a megayacht for Emilio Azcárraga, the autocratic Mexican who built Televisa into the world’s largest Spanish-language broadcaster. Azcárraga was nicknamed *El Tigre*, for his streak of white hair and his comfort with confrontation; he kept a chair in his office that was unusually high off the ground, so that visitors’ feet dangled like children’s.

In early meetings, Øino recalled, Azcárraga grew frustrated that the ideas were not dazzling enough. “You must understand,” he said. “I don’t go to port very often with my boats, but, when I do, I want my presence to be felt.”

The final design was suitably ar-

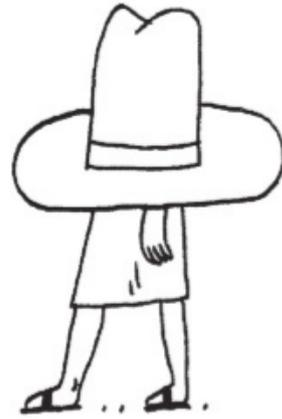
resting; after the boat was completed, Øino had no shortage of commissions. In 1998, he was approached by Paul Allen, of Microsoft, to build a yacht that opened the way for the Goliaths that followed. The result, called *Octopus*, was so large that it contained a submarine marina in its belly, as well as a helicopter hangar that could be converted into an outdoor performance space. Mick Jagger and Bono played on occasion. I asked Øino why owners obsessed with secrecy seem determined to build the world’s most conspicuous machines. He compared it to a luxury car with tinted windows. “People can’t see you, but you’re still in that expensive, impressive thing,” he said.

“We all need to feel that we’re important in one way or another.”

In recent months, Øino has seen some of his creations detained by governments in the sanctions campaign. When we spoke, he condemned the news coverage. “Yacht equals Russian equals evil equals money,” he said disdainfully. “It’s a bit tragic, because the yachts have become synonymous with the bad guys in a James Bond movie.”

What about *Scheherazade*, the giant yacht that U.S. officials have alleged is held by a Russian businessman for Putin’s use? Øino, who designed the ship, rejected the idea. “We have designed two yachts for heads of state, and I can tell you that they’re completely different, in terms of the layout and everything, from *Scheherazade*.” He meant that the details said plutocrat, not autocrat.

For the time being, *Scheherazade* and other Øino creations under detention across Europe have entered a strange legal purgatory. As lawyers for the owners battle to keep the ships from being permanently confiscated, local governments are duty-bound to maintain them until a resolution is reached. In a comment recorded by a hot mike in June, Jake Sullivan, the U.S. national-security adviser, marvelled that “people are basically being paid to maintain Russian superyachts on behalf of the United States government.” (It usually costs about ten per cent of a yacht’s



construction price to keep it afloat each year. In May, officials in Fiji complained that a detained yacht was costing them more than a hundred and seventy-one thousand dollars a day.)

Stranger still are the Russian yachts on the lam. Among them is Melnichenko's much maligned Motor Yacht A. On March 9th, Melnichenko was sanctioned by the European Union, and although he denied having close ties to Russia's leadership, Italy seized one of his yachts—a six-hundred-million-dollar sailboat. But Motor Yacht A slipped away before anyone could grab it. Then the boat turned off the transponder required by international maritime rules, so that its location could no longer be tracked. The last ping was somewhere near the Maldives, before it went dark on the high seas.

The very largest yachts come from Dutch and German shipyards, which have experience in naval vessels, known as “gray boats.” But the majority of superyachts are built in Italy, partly because owners prefer to visit the Mediterranean during construction. (A British designer advises those who are weighing their choices to take the geography seriously, “unless you like schnitzel.”)

In the past twenty-two years, nobody has built more superyachts than the Vitellis, an Italian family whose patriarch, Paolo Vitelli, got his start in the seventies, manufacturing smaller boats near a lake in the mountains. By 1985, their company, Azimut, had grown large enough to buy the Benetti shipyards, which had been building enormous yachts since the nineteenth century. Today, the combined company builds its largest boats near the sea, but the family still works in the hill town of Avigliana, where a medieval monastery towers above a valley. When I visited in April, Giovanna Vitelli, the vice-president and the founder's daughter, led me through the experience of customizing a yacht.

“We're using more and more virtual reality,” she said, and a staffer fitted me with a headset. When the screen blinked on, I was inside a 3-D mockup of a yacht that is not yet on the market. I wandered around my suite for a while, checking out swivel chairs, a modish

sideboard, blond wood panelling on the walls. It was convincing enough that I collided with a real-life desk.

After we finished with the headset, it was time to pick the décor. The industry encourages an introspective evaluation: What do you want your yacht to say about you? I was handed a vibrant selection of wood, marble, leather, and carpet. The choices felt suddenly grave. Was I cut out for the chiselled look of Cream Vesuvio, or should I accept that I'm a gray Cardoso Stone? For carpets, I liked the idea of Chablis Corn White—Paris and the prairie, together at last. But, for extra seating, was it worth splurging for the V.I.P. Vanity Pouf?

Some designs revolve around a single piece of art. The most expensive painting ever sold, Leonardo da Vinci's “Salvator Mundi,” reportedly was hung on the Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman's four-hundred-and-thirty-nine-foot yacht Serene, after the Louvre rejected a Saudi demand that it hang next to the “Mona Lisa.” Art conservators blanched at the risks that excess humidity and fluctuating temperatures could pose to a five-hundred-year-old painting. Often, collectors who want to display masterpieces at sea commission replicas.

If you've just put half a billion dollars into a boat, you may have qualms about the truism that material things bring less happiness than experiences do. But this, too, can be finessed. Andrew Grant Super, a co-founder of the “experiential yachting” firm Berkeley Rand, told me that he served a uniquely overstimulated clientele: “We call them the bored billionaires.” He outlined a few of his experience products. “We can plot half of the Pacific Ocean with coordinates, to map out the Battle of Midway,” he said. “We re-create the full-blown battles of the giant ships from America and Japan. The kids have haptic guns and haptic vests. We put the smell of cordite and cannon fire on board, pumping around them.” For those who aren't soothed by the scent of cordite, Super offered an alternative. “We fly 3-D-printed, architectural freestanding restaurants into the middle of the Maldives, on a sand shelf that can only last another eight hours before it disappears.”

For some, the thrill lies in the en-

gineering. Staluppi, born in Brooklyn, was an auto mechanic who had no experience with the sea until his boss asked him to soup up a boat. “I took the six-cylinder engines out and put V-8 engines in,” he recalled. Once he started commissioning boats of his own, he built scale models to conduct tests in water tanks. “I knew I could never have the biggest boat in the world, so I says, ‘You know what? I want to build the *fastest* yacht in the world.’ The Aga Khan had the fastest yacht, and we just blew right by him.”

In Italy, after decking out my notional yacht, I headed south along the coast, to Tuscan shipyards that have evolved with each turn in the country's history. Close to the Carrara quarries, which yielded the marble that Michelangelo turned into David, ships were constructed in the nineteenth century, to transport giant blocks of stone. Down the coast, the yards in Livorno made warships under the Fascists, until they were bombed by the Allies. Later, they began making and refitting luxury yachts. Inside the front gate of a Benetti shipyard in Livorno, a set of models depicted the firm's famous modern creations. Most notable was the megayacht Nabila, built in 1980 for the high-living arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi, with a hundred rooms and a disco that was the site of legendary decadence. (Khashoggi's budget for prostitution was so extravagant that a French prosecutor later estimated he paid at least half a million dollars to a single madam in a single year.)

In 1987, shortly before Khashoggi was indicted for mail fraud and obstruction of justice (he was eventually acquitted), the yacht was sold to the real-estate developer Donald Trump, who renamed it Trump Princess. Trump was never comfortable on a boat—“Couldn't get off fast enough,” he once said—but he liked to impress people with his yacht's splendor. In 1991, while three billion dollars in debt, Trump ceded the vessel to creditors. Later in life, though, he discovered enthusiastic support among what he called “our beautiful boaters,” and he came to see quality watercraft as a mark of virtue—a way of beating the so-called elite. “We got better houses, apartments, we got nicer boats, we're smarter than they

are,” he told a crowd in Fargo, North Dakota. “Let’s call ourselves, from now on, the super-élite.”

In the age of oversharing, yachts are a final sanctum of secrecy, even for some of the world’s most inveterate talkers. Oprah, after returning from her sojourn with the Obamas, rebuffed questions from reporters. “What happens on the boat stays on the boat,” she said. “We talked, and everybody else did a lot of paddleboarding.”

I interviewed six American super-yacht owners at length, and almost all insisted on anonymity or held forth with stupefying blandness. “Great family time,” one said. Another confessed, “It’s really hard to talk about it without being ridiculed.” None needed to be reminded of David Geffen’s misadventure during the early weeks of the pandemic, when he Instagrammed a photo of his yacht in the Grenadines and posted that he was “avoiding the virus” and “hoping everybody is staying safe.” It drew thousands of responses, many marked #EatTheRich, others summoning a range of nautical menaces: “At least the pirates have his location now.”

The yachts extend a tradition of seclusion as the ultimate luxury. The Medici, in sixteenth-century Florence, built elevated passageways, or *corridoi*, high over the city to escape what a scholar called the “clash of classes, the randomness, the smells and confusions” of pedestrian life below. More recently, owners of prized town houses in London have headed in the other direction, building three-story basements so vast that their construction can require mining engineers—a trend that researchers in the United Kingdom named “luxified troglodytism.”

Water conveys a particular autonomy, whether it’s ringing the foot of a castle or separating a private island from the mainland. Peter Thiel, the billionaire venture capitalist, gave startup funding to the Seasteading Institute, a non-profit group co-founded by Milton Friedman’s grandson, which seeks to create floating mini-states—an endeavor that Thiel considered part of his libertarian project to “escape from politics in all its forms.” Until that fantasy is realized, a white boat can provide a start.

A recent feature in *Boat International*, a glossy trade magazine, noted that the new hundred-and-twenty-five-million-dollar megayacht Victorious has four generators and “six months’ autonomy” at sea. The builder, Vural Ak, explained, “In case of emergency, god forbid, you can live in open water without going to shore and keep your food stored, make your water from the sea.”

Much of the time, superyachts dwell beyond the reach of ordinary law enforcement. They cruise in international waters, and, when they dock, local cops tend to give them a wide berth; the boats often have private security, and their owners may well be friends with the Prime Minister. According to leaked documents known as the Paradise Papers, handlers proposed that the Saudi crown prince take delivery of a four-hundred-and-twenty-million-dollar yacht in “international waters in the western Mediterranean,” where the sale could avoid taxes.

Builders and designers rarely advertise beyond the trade press, and they scrupulously avoid leaks. At Lürssen, a German shipbuilding firm, projects are described internally strictly by reference

number and code name. “We are not in the business for the glory,” Peter Lürssen, the C.E.O., told a reporter. The closest thing to an encyclopedia of yacht ownership is a site called SuperYachtFan, run by a longtime researcher who identifies himself only as Peter, with a disclaimer that he relies partly on “rumors” but makes efforts to confirm them. In an e-mail, he told me that he studies shell companies, navigation routes, paparazzi photos, and local media in various languages to maintain a database with more than thirteen hundred supposed owners. Some ask him to remove their names, but he thinks that members of that economic echelon should regard the attention as a “fact of life.”

To work in the industry, staff must adhere to the culture of secrecy, often enforced by N.D.A.s. On one yacht, O’Shannassy, the captain, learned to communicate in code with the helicopter pilot who regularly flew the owner from Switzerland to the Mediterranean. Before takeoff, the pilot would call with a cryptic report on whether the party included the presence of a Pomeranian. If any guest happened to overhear, their cover story was that a



“It’s summer! We should be at the beach dreaming about air-conditioning.”



customs declaration required details about pets. In fact, the lapdog was a constant companion of the owner's wife; if the Pomeranian was in the helicopter, so was she. "If no dog was in the helicopter," O'Shannassy recalled, the owner was bringing "somebody else." It was the captain's duty to rebroadcast the news across the yacht's internal radio: "Helicopter launched, no dog, I repeat no dog today"—the signal for the crew to ready the main cabin for the mistress, instead of the wife. They swapped out dresses, family photos, bathroom supplies, favored drinks in the fridge. On one occasion, the code got garbled, and the helicopter landed with an unanticipated Pomeranian. Afterward, the owner summoned O'Shannassy and said, "Brendan, I hope you never have such a situation, but if you do I recommend making sure the correct dresses are hanging when your wife comes into your room."

In the hierarchy on board a yacht, the most delicate duties tend to trickle down to the least powerful. Yacht crew—yachties, as they're known—trade manual labor and obedience for cash and adventure. On a well-staffed

boat, the "interior team" operates at a forensic level of detail: they'll use Q-tips to polish the rim of your toilet, tweezers to lift your fried-chicken crumbs from the teak, a toothbrush to clean the treads of your staircase.

Many are English-speaking twentysomethings, who find work by doing the "dock walk," passing out résumés at marinas. The deals can be alluring: thirty-five hundred dollars a month for deckhands; fifty thousand dollars in tips for a decent summer in the Med. For captains, the size of the boat matters—they tend to earn about a thousand dollars per foot per year.

Yachties are an attractive lot, a community of the toned and chipper, which does not happen by chance; their résumés circulate with head shots. Before Andy Cohen was a talk-show host, he was the head of production and development at Bravo, where he green-lighted a reality show about a yacht crew: "It's a total pressure cooker, and they're actually living together while they're working. Oh, and by the way, half of them are having sex with each other. What's not going to be a hit about that?" The result, the gleefully seamy "Below Deck," has been

among the network's top-rated shows for nearly a decade.

To stay in the business, captains and crew must absorb varying degrees of petty tyranny. An owner once gave O'Shannassy "a verbal beating" for failing to negotiate a lower price on champagne flutes etched with the yacht's logo. In such moments, the captain responds with a deferential mantra: "There is no excuse. Your instruction was clear. I can only endeavor to make it better for next time."

The job comes with perilously little protection. A big yacht is effectively a corporation with a rigid hierarchy and no H.R. department. In recent years, the industry has fielded increasingly outspoken complaints about sexual abuse, toxic impunity, and a disregard for mental health. A 2018 survey by the International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network found that more than half of the women who work as yacht crew had experienced harassment, discrimination, or bullying on board. More than four-fifths of the men and women surveyed reported low morale.

Karine Rayson worked on yachts for four years, rising to the position of "chief stew," or stewardess. Eventually, she found herself "thinking of business ideas while vacuuming," and tiring of the culture of entitlement. She recalled an episode in the Maldives when "a guest took a Jet Ski and smashed into a marine reserve. That damaged the coral, and broke his Jet Ski, so he had to clamber over the rocks and find his way to the shore. It was a private hotel, and the security got him and said, 'Look, there's a large fine, you have to pay.' He said, 'Don't worry, the boat will pay for it.'" Rayson went back to school and became a psychotherapist. After a period of counselling inmates in maximum-security prisons, she now works with yacht crew, who meet with her online from around the world.

Rayson's clients report a range of scenarios beyond the boundaries of ordinary employment: guests who did so much cocaine that they had no appetite for a chef's meals; armed men who raided a boat offshore and threatened to take crew members to another country; owners who vowed that if a young stew told anyone about abuse she suf-

ferred on board they'd call in the Mafia and "skin me alive." Bound by N.D.A.s, crew at sea have little recourse. "We were paranoid that our e-mails were being reviewed, or we were getting bugged," Rayson said.

She runs an "exit strategy" course to help crew find jobs when they're back on land. The adjustment isn't easy, she said: "You're getting paid good money to clean a toilet. So, when you take your C.V. to land-based employers, they might question your skill set." Despite the stresses of yachting work, Rayson said, "a lot of them struggle with integration into land-based life, because they have all their bills paid for them, so they don't pay for food. They don't pay for rent. It's a huge shock."

It doesn't take long at sea to learn that nothing is too rich to rust. The ocean air tarnishes metal ten times as fast as on land; saltwater infiltrates from below. Left untouched, a single corroding ulcer will puncture tanks, seize a motor, even collapse a hull. There are tricks, of course—shield sensitive parts with resin, have your staff buff away blemishes—but you can insulate a machine from its surroundings for only so long.

Hang around the superyacht world for a while and you see the metaphor everywhere. Four months after Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the war had eaten a hole in his myths of competence. The Western campaign to isolate him and his oligarchs was proving more durable than most had predicted. Even if the seizures of yachts were mired in legal disputes, Finley, the former C.I.A. officer, saw them as a vital "pressure point." She said, "The oligarchs supported Putin because he provided stable authoritarianism, and he can no longer guarantee that stability. And that's when you start to have cracks."

For all its profits from Russian clients, the yachting industry was unsentimental. Brokers stripped photos of Russian yachts from their Web sites; Lürssen, the German builder, sent questionnaires to clients asking who, exactly, they were. Business was roaring, and, if some Russians were cast out of the have-yachts, other buyers would replace them.

On a cloudless morning in Viareggio, a Tuscan town that builds almost

a fifth of the world's superyachts, a family of first-time owners from Tel Aviv made the final, fraught preparations. Down by the docks, their new boat was suspended above the water on slings, ready to be lowered for its official launch. The scene was set for a ceremony: white flags in the wind, a plexiglass lectern. It felt like the obverse of the dockside scrum at the Palm Beach show; by this point in the buying process, nobody was getting vetted through binoculars. Waitresses handed out glasses of wine. The yacht venders were in suits, but the new owners were in upscale Euro casual: untucked linen, tight jeans, twelve-hundred-dollar Prada sneakers. The family declined to speak to me (and the company declined to identify them). They had come asking for a smaller boat, but the sales staff had talked them up to a hundred and eleven feet. The Victorians would have been impressed.

The C.E.O. of Azimut Benetti, Marco Valle, was in a buoyant mood. "Sun. Breeze. Perfect day to launch a boat, right?" he told the owners. He applauded them for taking the "first step up the big staircase." The selling of the next vessel had already begun.

Hanging aloft, their yacht looked like an artifact in the making; it was easy to imagine a future civilization sifting the sediment and discovering that an earlier society had engaged in a building spree of sumptuous arks, with



accommodations for dozens of servants but only a few lucky passengers, plus the occasional Pomeranian.

We approached the hull, where a bottle of spumante hung from a ribbon in Italian colors. Two members of the family pulled back the bottle and slung it against the yacht. It bounced off and failed to shatter. "Oh, that's bad luck," a woman murmured beside me. Tales of that unhappy omen abound. In one memorable case, the bottle failed

to break on Zaca, a schooner that belonged to Errol Flynn. In the years that followed, the crew mutinied and the boat sank; after being re-floated, it became the setting for Flynn's descent into cocaine, alcohol, orgies, and drug smuggling. When Flynn died, new owners brought in an archdeacon for an onboard exorcism.

In the present case, the bottle broke on the second hit, and confetti rained down. As the family crowded around their yacht for photos, I asked Valle, the C.E.O., about the shortage of new boats. "Twenty-six years I've been in the nautical business—never been like this," he said. He couldn't hire enough welders and carpenters. "I don't know for how long it will last, but we'll try to get the profits right now."

Whatever comes, the white-boat world is preparing to insure future profits, too. In recent years, big builders and brokers have sponsored a rebranding campaign dedicated to "improving the perception of superyachting." (Among its recommendations: fewer ads with girls in bikinis and high heels.) The goal is partly to defuse #EatTheRich, but mostly it is to soothe skittish buyers. Even the dramatic increase in yacht ownership has not kept up with forecasts of the global growth in billionaires—a disparity that represents the "one dark cloud we can see on the horizon," as Øino, the naval architect, said during an industry talk in Norway. He warned his colleagues that they needed to reach those "potential yacht owners who, for some reason, have decided not to step up to the plate."

But, to a certain kind of yacht buyer, even aggressive scrutiny can feel like an advertisement—a reminder that, with enough access and cash, you can ride out almost any storm. In April, weeks after the fugitive Motor Yacht A went silent, it was rediscovered in physical form, buffed to a shine and moored along a creek in the United Arab Emirates. The owner, Melnichenko, had been sanctioned by the E.U., Switzerland, Australia, and the U.K. Yet the Emirates had rejected requests to join those sanctions and had become a favored wartime haven for Russian money. Motor Yacht A was once again arrayed in almost plain sight, like semaphore flags in the wind. ♦

FERTILE GROUND

Can an artists' collective repair a colonial legacy?

BY ALICE GREGORY

In January, 2020, two young men from Lusanga, a village in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, flew to New York. Cedart Tamasala had never been to the United States before; Mathieu Kasiama had, a few years earlier, and, during a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he had been scolded by employees for touching a Congolese artifact. Together, they went to Times Square and ate Big Macs. Then, donning winter outerwear, they took the train to New Haven. They had been invited to address a tropical-forestry conference at Yale, a gathering that brought together, among others, a Puerto Rican ecologist, a Uruguayan photojournalist, a Kenyan agriculturist, an Indonesian lawyer, and a Malagasy lemur conservationist.

Tamasala and Kasiama are founding members of the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League (C.A.T.P.C., as its initials are rendered in French), an artists' collective established in 2014 with grand, sometimes surreal-sounding ambitions. Aided by images projected onto a screen behind him, Tamasala described the group's work, which is informed by the legacy of a former palm-oil plantation, once owned by the giant consumer-goods company Unilever, where many of them lived.

A convoluted schematic appeared on the screen; many arrows were involved. Tamasala explained that corporations such as Unilever have used the profits from plantation labor in Africa to fund the cultural enrichment of wealthy Western populations. A photograph of depleted farmland dissolved into a Pre-Raphaelite painting of the sort collected by the founder of what would become Unilever. "Nothing of all this investment goes back to the plantations," Tamasala said. "It doesn't benefit the place where the money comes from."

Explaining that the Lusangans "had thought about this situation and about how we might detach ourselves from its

grip," he described the C.A.T.P.C.'s sly, absurdist approach. The collective, which is made up of some thirty local artists of all ages, creates figurative sculptures using river clay, which are then scanned in 3-D. The files are sent to Amsterdam, where they are cast in chocolate, which until recently most members of the C.A.T.P.C. had never tasted, despite the fact that many of them harvested the ingredients from which it is made. The finished sculptures—technically edible, symbolically fraught—are sold in art galleries, mostly in Europe. With the proceeds from their art work, and with help from a European nonprofit, the cooperative buys back land—more than two hundred acres so far—and farms it using ecological methods, to replenish soil devastated by Unilever's monocultural farming techniques. The C.A.T.P.C. calls the project a "post-plantation."

The process, with its dreamlike logic, has transformed life in Lusanga. Plantation workers there earn twenty or thirty dollars a month; as artists, they make much more. The collective has brought in more than a hundred thousand dollars since its creation, and it has had shows in cities including Berlin, Warsaw, Amsterdam, Tokyo, New York, Copenhagen, and Jeddah.

Tamasala showed a photograph of a man working on a sculpture. "Here you'll recognize my colleague Mathieu," he said, and smiled at Kasiama, who had remained seated. Kasiama appeared in one of the following images as well—a portrait accompanying a rave review in the *Times* of a 2017 C.A.T.P.C. exhibition at SculptureCenter, in Queens.

A short video began to play. In it, a tiny figure rapidly climbed a tall palm tree. "That's me," Kasiama said. He explained that, before becoming an artist, he had fallen some five times while harvesting palm nuts and on at least one occasion almost died. A man at the back of the auditorium asked Kasiama how, after



Mbuku Kimpala, center, and other collective



members, on what used to be a Unilever plantation. With the proceeds from its art work, the group is slowly buying back land.

so many accidents, he had been able to keep climbing. Kasiama appeared baffled. “I do not understand your question,” he said, in French. The moderator repeated it: “What enabled you to go back up this palm tree, after falling several times?”

“You can’t just decide to stop doing the job,” Kasiama explained, patiently.

Tamasala said that the collective had recently built a museum near the village, called the White Cube. “If a museum can create a whole economy around it in London or in New York City, then it could do the same thing on the plantation,” he said. “The goal is to change this reality that has been imposed on us for decades—on us, on our parents, and on our grandparents.” Appearing on the screen was a large, pale wedge of a building, shining in its modernist geometry amid a field of green. Later, Tamasala revealed two miniature chocolate figurines. They were self-portraits, made by colleagues. Kasiama popped one into his mouth, and everyone cheered.

The talk lasted an hour. At no time did anyone say the name Renzo Martens. The omission was striking. Though Martens, a forty-eight-year-old white artist from the Netherlands, refers to himself only as a humble servant or an administrator of the collective, it was he who facilitated its creation, with the prominent Kinshasa-based environmentalist René Ngongo, and who helped to devise its early economic and artistic strategy. It was Martens who commissioned the White Cube museum; it is Martens who arranges funding. Though the collective now runs largely independently of him, he remains, with a certain ostentatious reluctance, its interpreter to the Western art world.

Martens’s work proposes that capitalist tools—selling art, buying land, establishing museums—can be used for anti-colonial ends. But is eliciting and then peddling the creativity of an impoverished population just another form of extraction economics? Can we exonerate vanity and pretension if they improve the lives of the poor? To whom do scruples belong? Can a white man in Africa ever actually do good?

These are the types of question that

vex those who assess the project, which has been called “ethically troubling” and an example of “colonial missionary zeal.” A reporter for the *Guardian* said that Martens’s attempt to “gentrify the jungle” sounded like some sort of “sick joke.” A critic for the *Times* commended it for being “politically problematic on almost every level.”

Martens, whose actions, he insists, are peripheral to the work being done

on the plantation, acknowledges the controversial nature of his role. The project in Lusanga—which at a glance can look like some uneasy combination of art, aid, and penance—has become something far larger and more interesting than the moral outrage and white guilt from which it seems to have been forged. In a

world of inconceivable inequality, Martens’s efforts to distance himself from a situation of which he is integrally a part are as admirable as they are impossible.

The sanitized language of politicians and N.G.O.s is unable to properly convey the outlandish misery of the D.R.C. Fiction is better equipped. “Fucked” is how a British mercenary in John le Carré’s 2006 novel, “The Mission Song,” puts it. “Fucked by the Arab slavers, fucked by their fellow Africans, fucked by the United Nations, the CIA, the Christians, the Belgians, the French, the Brits, the Rwandans, the diamond companies, the gold companies, the mineral companies, half the world’s carpet-baggers, their own government in Kinshasa, and any minute now they’re going to be fucked by the oil companies.”

Abused by outsiders for five centuries, the region now known as the D.R.C. has become a sort of geographical shorthand for every variety of human suffering: slavery, Ebola, famine, dictatorship, AIDS, malaria, corruption, rape, civil war. And yet it has remained a romantic obsession of the West for hundreds of years—an imagined Africa at its most extreme. Crocodiles and gold, impenetrable forests, trees the size of castles, mythical creatures, black soil and neon fruits. The metaphors it inspires tend to be grandiose and consumptive. King Leopold II of Belgium

called Congo a “slice of this magnificent African cake.” The nineteenth-century explorer Henry Morton Stanley described “banqueting” on the sensual pleasures of its jungle.

The juxtaposition of abundance and exploitation is glaring in the area surrounding Lusanga, which lies at the confluence of two rivers in the center of the country. By the time that William Lever, a British soap tycoon, arrived in the Belgian Congo, as the D.R.C. was then known, hundreds of thousands of Congolese had been forced into labor, and millions had been killed as a result of Leopold’s regime. In 1911, Lever signed a contract with the Belgian government which allowed his company, Lever Brothers, rights to the cultivation and harvesting of the country’s palm oil. A year later, when the first batch of Congolese palm oil was exported to Antwerp, an inaugural bar of soap was produced, placed in a tiny ivory casket, and delivered to the King. By then, Lever had centralized his operations in Lusanga and renamed the village for himself.

Conditions at Leverville’s plantations were atrocious. Fires were set at the base of palm trees to force harvesters to climb faster; quotas were enforced with whips made from rhinoceros hide. Children were put to work. A Belgian medical officer visiting the site in 1923 called it “deplorable.” Six years later, Lever Brothers merged with a Dutch company to form Unilever.

Today, much of the area is in decay. What was once a regional airport is now jungle; vines grow through the windows of an abandoned hospital. Though Unilever effectively ceased operations in Lusanga thirty years ago, the company continues to haunt the area. People live in houses built by Unilever, those who can afford it eat margarine produced for Unilever, and members of the C.A.T.P.C. often make art that reacts to the impact of Unilever.

Like many artists, Martens is happy to dispense with the causal logic that regulates the rest of us. He talks compulsively, qualifying everything, and tends to frame peculiar and radical choices as though they were self-evident. He ascribes his decision to work in the D.R.C. to a belief that the country is



“the best place to unravel the mechanics of our age.”

Martens, who was born in a small Dutch town near the Belgian border, attributes his early concern with inequality to the fact that his mother came from a family of landowning farmers and his father from a family of land-leasing farmers. He went on to demonstrate this interest in occasionally jarring ways. Once, in high school, he attended a tiki-themed party carrying a bag emblazoned with the words “Most People in the Tropics Can’t Go to Beach Parties.”

Martens went to art school in Belgium before moving to Los Angeles, supported by a modest grant subsidized by the Dutch government. He was interested in American celebrity and wanted to see where and how it was fabricated. He rented a room above a strip mall, and he met the artists Mike Kelley and John Baldessari, who made more of an impression on him than the actors and the supermodels who ate in the upscale restaurant where he had taken a part-time job. It was a productive period: Martens got a driver’s license, met the woman he later married, bought a car. Then he drove four thousand miles, to South America. He wanted to interrogate his own relationship with Dutch colonial history and thought the best way of doing so would be to spend time on plantations in Suriname. He figured he might even build a studio on one of them. But he didn’t last long. He returned to Europe, settling in Brussels, where he read Foucault for the first time and learned Russian from a Moldovan asylum seeker. “It’s when I invented what I am still doing today,” he told me.

It was 2000. Russia’s war in Chechnya was at its bloodiest, and Grozny was under siege. With his halting Russian-language skills and a handheld video camera, Martens travelled alone, without a press permit, to what was soon called the most destroyed city on earth. He spent a couple of weeks parading through rubble and Chechen refugee camps, playing the part of the self-aggrandizing misery tourist, asking local women what they thought of him—was he handsome?—and filming their puzzled reactions. The resulting film, “Episode I,” is a bracing, almost unwatchably uncomfortable forty-five-minute

meta-documentary that both enacts and mocks the male vanity that so often seems to motivate combat reportage.

In 2004, Martens flew to the D.R.C.’s capital, Kinshasa. For the next two years, he lived between there and Brussels, shooting what would become “Episode III: Enjoy Poverty.” (There is no “Episode II.”) The film, which is audacious and genuinely radical, earned him museum exhibitions, spots at prestigious film festivals, and art-world infamy. For ninety minutes, we watch as Martens trudges around the country, wearing a straw hat and a deadpan persona, attempting to persuade farmworkers, N.G.O. staff, plantation owners, and development bankers that the D.R.C. should commodify its poverty, a notion inspired by his time documenting the economy of conflict imagery. At a World Bank meeting in Kinshasa, Martens asks whether the development aid that the D.R.C. had received—almost two billion dollars one year, a sum that nearly equalled all of the country’s exports—might not be considered “an important natural resource.” From there, he goes to the interior of the country, where he persuades rural photographers to stop taking pictures of weddings and birthdays and instead to focus their lenses on the images the world actually wants

from Africa. “They don’t come to film parties—they come to film misery,” he says, referring to the international photojournalists who can earn hundreds of times more than the local photographers. Having explained the visual vocabulary demanded by Western media and aid organizations—find corpses, always include the UNICEF logo—Martens takes the photographers to a dilapidated clinic. “Choose the worst cases,” he reminds them. They settle on a baby with mouth sores and ribs that can be seen through the skin. Later, Martens tells the photographers without apology that the film he’s shooting will be screened only in Europe. Then he thanks them. “Experiencing your suffering makes me a better person,” he says.

The film premiered in Amsterdam in 2008 and was subsequently aired on television around the world. A critic for *Variety* wondered if Martens was a “prankster, a genius or a fool.” *Artforum* called his work a “one-man theater of cynicism.” Allusions to “A Modest Proposal,” Jonathan Swift’s satirical economic treatise proposing that poor Irish children be fed to English landlords, were frequent. So were comparisons to “Fitzcarraldo,” Werner Herzog’s epic about a rubber baron’s attempt to build



*“First of all, I’d like to thank you for coming tonight.
But out of an abundance of caution I’m leaving.”*



Recently, the White Cube hosted an installation by Ibrahim Mahama in which the building was covered with jute cocoa bags.

an opera house in the Amazon. Though the Nigerian curator Azu Nwagbogu said that “Enjoy Poverty” was “the ‘Guernica’ of our time,” others considered it unethical and cynical. One critic deemed it a human-rights violation; another said that it was the kind of work that made him want to leave the art world. Many thought that the film merely recapitulated what it sought to incriminate.

“I agree with them,” Martens told me. “It *does* do that, but that wasn’t an *accident*.” Martens—“an approval-seeking provocateur,” as one curator put it to me—said that, though he stood behind the piece, he would never want to make such a film today, or ever again: “It was a horrible role for me, personally, to incarnate extractive capitalism and be the fall guy for it.”

In 2010, Martens was invited to present “Enjoy Poverty” at Tate Modern, in London. Many of the film’s most brutal scenes were shot on plantations like those once owned by Unilever, whose logo, Martens remembers, was all over the galleries’ walls. “The mu-

seum was funded by the fucking *company*,” he told me recently, sounding a bit like someone in a horror movie. The call, he seemed to be saying, was coming from inside the house.

Martens’s anxiety about the civic utility of his work grew acute. Why did the intellectual and economic benefits of even the most sophisticated social critique accrue only in wealthy cities with robust arts programming? What about the places where not just minerals are extracted but—for so many liberal Western media consumers—meaning itself? These concerns came to undergird the Institute of Human Activities (I.H.A.), an organization founded in 2012 at Martens’s behest, whose mission is “to prove that artistic critique on economic inequality can redress it—not symbolically, but in material terms.” In a career that had previously rested on constant and deliberate self-centering, it was a corrective attempt at self-erasure.

He returned to the D.R.C. and, with members of the I.H.A., formed ties with Feronia, a Canadian agribusiness, which allowed them to set up near one

of its palm-oil plantations. Generators and satellites were brought in, and the I.H.A. refurbished an abandoned store to use for workshops. They paid plantation workers to build bamboo huts for visitors: academics, artists, and trauma therapists. They hosted a conference, complete with tote bags and a Skype call from the urbanist Richard Florida, and, later, art workshops. “The atmosphere was innocent and friendly,” René Ngongo, the environmentalist, who became the president of the C.A.T.P.C., recalled. “I believe we started becoming popular, which led to our misfortune later on.” As seen in Martens’s most recent film, “White Cube,” which was released in 2020, an apparent dispute with Feronia resulted in the project’s forced departure from the area. Onscreen, Martens bursts into tears.

Operations were relocated south, to Lusanga, where the I.H.A. rented an empty field, erected a thatched structure, and sent out an open call for participants in an art workshop, promising money for lunch—five thousand Congolese francs (roughly three dollars and fifty cents, close to what peo-

ple made each week from farming). Three artists (one from France, two from the D.R.C.) were brought on to run the workshop sessions. In the course of a few days, close to a hundred people showed up, but only eleven remained. “Many people weren’t technically very good at the beginning,” Eléonore Hellio, one of the artists running the workshop, told me. “But they were clearly the ones who wanted the free time to think and create.”

Hellio, who is white, taught at an art school in Strasbourg before moving to Kinshasa, in 2012. She compared the workshops that sprang from the initial one to Gestalt therapy. They were “intense,” she said. For many, “it was the first time in their lives they didn’t have to spend the day really fighting—to find money, to feed children, to go to the hospital.”

It was Martens who suggested that the members of the C.A.T.P.C. make sculptures that would then be reproduced in chocolate—a luxury good wrought from local toil. As they molded and scored and slipped, Hellio remembers, discussion often turned to Martens himself, who visited regularly with a cameraperson to film “White Cube.” “We needed to explain what Renzo was doing—and also question it,” she said. “It doesn’t mean that everyone understood at the same level. Some people have never even been outside of their village. A lot of art vocabulary doesn’t exist in Congo.” Hellio recalled spending “hours” as a group trying to find translations of the word “concept.” The I.H.A. initiated a “critical curriculum,” which included group discussions, art-history lectures, and screenings of video work by such artists as John Baldessari, Martha Rosler, and Bruce Nauman.

“We felt like we were being instrumentalized, since he had this camera on us all the time, and we didn’t know how he would use the images,” recalled Hellio, who understood, of course, that she was not quite in the same position as the other artists. There was worry at the time, she went on, that all of them were “just characters on a set that served a discourse.” Sometimes, art-making would stop, to allow for discussion; arguments about how the C.A.T.P.C. members were or were not being exploited were frequent. Hellio said that

one challenge was “to set up a context in which people were not afraid to question the project.” The colonial past, she added, is still very present. “You don’t talk about the master. We were constantly trying to deconstruct that fear.”

With Martens acting as its unpaid agent, the C.A.T.P.C. began showing abroad. (His name does not appear in much of the publicity material that accompanies exhibitions.) When a gallery sells a sculpture, it takes a commission of fifty per cent, the industry standard; of the remaining money, half is divided between the artist responsible for the sculpture and the other members, and the rest is earmarked for collective land acquisition. The process is a complex one, facilitated in large part by Ngongo. Colonial legal systems put in place more than a century ago continue to affect people’s lives, enabling foreign companies and Congolese élites to access land and resources in the D.R.C. to the detriment of ordinary people. As a result, the I.H.A. purchases the land, then immediately transfers it to the C.A.T.P.C. Ngongo, who told me that the environmental component of the collective’s endeavor was a condition of his participation, has optimistic visions for the area: a carbon sink that will one day operate as an “ecologic village,” where agroforestry techniques and renewable-energy strategies could be demonstrated for a curious public. “Why not make it a touristic site?” he said.

In 2015, a year after the first tract of land was purchased, a friend of Martens’s introduced him to a managing partner at the architecture firm OMA, co-founded by the Pritzker Architecture Prize winner Rem Koolhaas, which is responsible for many of the flashiest museum redesigns of the past half century. A year later, OMA sent a project manager to Lusanga to survey the land, choose a site, and take measurements. With some three hundred thousand dollars from a Dutch foundation, a team of Congolese architects and engineers was hired. Ground was broken in 2016; the country’s tourism minister laid the first stone. The next year, the White Cube—not yet fully finished—opened with what was called, in a press release, a “festive and solemn inauguration.” Two thousand people attended the ceremony

and subsequent party. Since then, the museum has, among other things, hosted a residency for the Congolese-Belgian rapper Baloji and served as the site of a monumental installation by the Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama. (Mahama has also showed at the blue-chip gallery White Cube, which has multiple locations and which is unrelated.) When questioned about the logic of the White Cube’s modernist design—why couldn’t it have been built in a more vernacular style?—Martens appeals to history: it is not bamboo huts that plantation labor has financed so much as monumental cultural institutions that look, so often, like this one.

The C.A.T.P.C.’s exhibition in Queens opened in 2017. Though a critical success, the show disquieted many viewers. Ruba Katrib, its curator, attributes the uneasiness surrounding the C.A.T.P.C. to a suspicion that the members “are being misled, or that their sentiments are somehow inauthentic because they aren’t a hundred per cent self-generated.” These apprehensions, Katrib believes, reveal “highly problematic expectations around a state of innocence for the poor and assumed global fluency for the rich.” Tamasala thinks that part of the problem is that people can’t imagine that plantation workers could become artists.

My attempts to travel to the D.R.C. were thwarted for many months. First, there was an Ebola outbreak, and then a volcano erupted, followed three days later by an earthquake. Flights were suspended; it took forever to secure a visa. Finally, in February, I flew to Kinshasa. People there laughed when I told them that the drive to Lusanga was supposed to take eight hours. In the end, it took fourteen. Martens and I sat in the back seat; a local translator with political aspirations rode shotgun. There were spurious traffic violations to negotiate, World Food Programme trucks to slow for, person-deep potholes to navigate around, wandering livestock to avoid. Our Land Cruiser was not without its issues. At one point, an officer pulled us over for an obscure offense and asked where we were headed. “Lusanga,” Martens said. “Ah,” the officer replied. “*Leverville.*”

Vegetation grew denser, and veldt

became forest. By the time we arrived on the outskirts of the village, it had been dark for hours. A figure ran in front of the car. We stopped, and he stood frozen in the headlights. It was Mathieu Kasiana. He wore rubber sandals and carried a handwoven bag. He insisted on helping us navigate two ravaged bridges, and, for the next forty-five minutes, he walked backward in front of the car, making alternately encouraging and panicked hand gestures in the manner of a person helping a driver to parallel park in a tight spot.

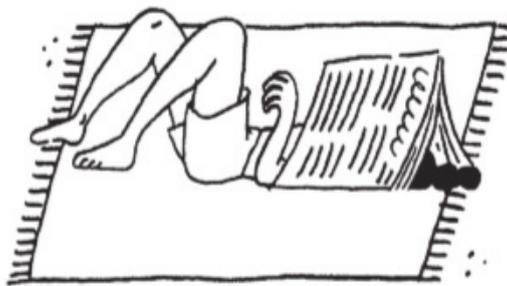
The terrain revealed itself in the morning light: lush shrubbery, a handful of ancestral homes made of mud, a few brick dwellings built by Unilever. Atop a modest elevation, the White Cube loomed, not unlike a church. A two-story open-air workshop stood on the near bank of the Kwenge River, gray and sluggish. Inside, elevated on wooden pallets and shrouded in damp rags, were the clay sculptures. Expressive and eerie, with an obscure sense of suffering, they seemed to be looking at one another and reacting—wide eyes, grimaces, tortured positions. Each had been created by a member of the collective and then critiqued by the others in a process they refer to as *kinzonzi*, which roughly translates as “family meeting.” The group decides whether a sculpture is good enough to be made at a larger scale before scanning. The clay from sculptures that are deemed unworthy, for either aesthetic or conceptual reasons, gets reused.

Among the works on display were a horned creature choking on a man who symbolized greed, a bearlike monster standing in a pool of small fish meant to signify his financial debts, and a female plantation worker buckling under the weight of the palm nuts she carried. Two artists, Philomene Lembusa and Huguette Kilembi, were dunking scraps of cloth in water and tenderly daubing them on a large sculpture whose creator described it as being “about a man sucking the intelligence out of a woman.” Discussing the selection process, Lembusa said that not having a sculpture chosen can be bitterly disappointing. Each one, she said, takes “so much energy and heart and good will.” Kilembi added that, to be chosen and scanned, a sculpture must have a compelling story behind it. Just

then, Kilembi’s sister (and Cedart Tamasala’s wife) Irene Kanga appeared. I was told that she had spent the first part of the day transporting manioc to a nearby mill. Kanga, the artist behind one of the most striking C.A.T.P.C. works to date—a depiction of sexual assault that she calls autobiographical—listened to the conversation for a moment. “You need to go deep,” she said. “It needs to be completely yours.”

By the time I arrived, the sculptures had been scanned and the files sent to Amsterdam. Soon, the chocolate versions would be cast. Once they were sold, the profits would be wired to Kikwit, a small city down the river that was the site of an Ebola outbreak in 1995. Kasiana would drive a motorbike some twenty miles to the bank, where he would withdraw the cash and place it in a locked metal box. He prays to his ancestors and to a prophet for help in carrying out these missions, for which he dresses simply and returns home without delay.

With money brought in by the project, people eat more, and better. Houses have been repaired. The White Cube itself has created jobs: it needs to be maintained and guarded. When people visit for events, they must be fed and housed, and sometimes they contribute money to the collective in return. There is a new school nearby, which teaches children an arts curriculum as well as traditional fishing and



building techniques. Ngongo dreams that one day the collective might produce and sell its own branded fruit juice and soap.

Kasiana and Tamasala are the most vocal members of the C.A.T.P.C. They are the ones who travel the most, the ones who most often speak to journalists. They are the ones to whom Martens defers when asked questions about the C.A.T.P.C. “I don’t know,” he says. “Ask Cedart. Ask Mathieu.” I spoke to

a handful of C.A.T.P.C. members who felt that their voices were often sidelined. One, a woman who named her youngest son Renzo—a customary honor that comes with implied responsibilities—complained about not getting to travel to the exhibitions. (Later, after I had left Congo, the woman helped this magazine contact some of her colleagues, for which she was paid a small fee.) Another, whose draftsmanship has improved so much since he joined the C.A.T.P.C. that his family now suspects him of having supernatural abilities, told me he was disappointed that his prospective sculpture of a snake eating a man had been deemed cliché. The project’s prominence—and the physical novelty of the White Cube—has brought a new kind of attention to the area. Among the people who visited while I was there were a historian of Ebola and a man who said he was an agent of the D.R.C.’s intelligence agency.

The introduction of new frictions makes it tempting to blame Martens for sowing discord that did not exist before. But in mounting an art project that appears to masquerade as development work—or is it development work that masquerades as art?—Martens both compels criticism and inoculates himself against it.

The questions to be asked of the project are the same ones so often posed to the Western governments and corporations it seeks to criticize: Are Martens’s interventions effective? Sustainable? Will they create dependency? How will he withdraw, and when, and what will happen once he’s gone? Martens has no imminent exit strategy. Autonomy, he believes, is an unrealistic goal. “Nothing is independent of anything else,” he said at a screening of “White Cube” last year in New York, pointing out his clothing and cell phone and computer, none of which could be made without the work of unknown people living very far away.

The C.A.T.P.C. office occupies a small room that smells, alarmingly, of both cigarette smoke and gasoline. There is a cluttered desk and a shelf that holds oil canisters and the locked metal cash box. I met Cedart Tamasala there on a stormy afternoon; the en-

MIXUP

In a cosmic mixup,
the wife switches bodies with her husband.
Nothing like this has happened before, she cries
as she pulls on his pants, minds the crotch,
barrels down the long staircase to an office where they call her
Bud & How About Those Steelers.
It's upsetting, the whole charade,
except at lunch when she orders fries and no one says,
We're so bad,
or at the meeting when she gives the room all her best ideas
and they say, *Man, where have you been?*

We have to fix this, her husband begs
when the wife returns for dinner.
Come here, she says, slipping off her shoes
and drawing the curtains
before she makes love to another life.

—Kate Baer

ergy supplied by the collective's solar panels had given out hours earlier, so we sat in the dark. As we spoke, Tamasala gestured repeatedly to the wall behind him. Against it leaned a framed portrait of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of the D.R.C., whose assassination, in 1961—famously tied to the C.I.A.—made him a pan-African martyr.

Before joining the C.A.T.P.C., Tamasala attended a university in Kinshasa for a semester but then had to return home, to work on his uncle's farm. His interests are erudite, far-ranging, and political. They include the Black Lives Matter movement, the far-right French pundit Éric Zemmour, and the etymology of the word "fetish," whose Portuguese origins, he feels, fail to account for aspects of Indigenous thought.

That it is Tamasala with whom Martens most often communicates seems all but inevitable, and I was curious to know how Tamasala perceived the dynamic. Did he feel gratitude? Resentment? Some combination of the two? But Tamasala seemed agitated by that line of inquiry: my very interest in the question was evidence of the problem. His frustration echoed the sentiments of other people I had spoken to, artists and anthropologists who questioned my writing this piece at all.

Tamasala said that Martens's involvement with the C.A.T.P.C. was undeniable. He later used several words to describe Martens's role—"collaborator," "bridge," "partner"—but he said that it was "unacceptable to say that Renzo is the only one." He called the relationship an "exchange," adding, "We are not his pupils." But Martens "is a victim of this, too," he specified. "Every time something interesting happens, people assume it's Renzo. It's not his fault." He insisted that cooperative members are "trying now to tell a different story"—their own—but pragmatically they would accept help when offered, whether from Martens or from foundations in Europe.

This help also includes that of Western academics, whose access to Congolese art and artifacts typically exceeds that of anyone in the D.R.C. I asked Tamasala how he felt about this, referring to a meeting he and Kasiama had had with an art historian at Columbia University a few days after their lecture at Yale. Sitting in her office, surrounded by flat files and ceremonial masks, she had told them about the history of various art works by the Pende people of Congo. Recalling the conversation with some bitterness, Tamasala cocked his head toward the portrait of Lumumba and said, his chin in his hand, "We have

lost so much." He went on, "These are things we should know. I felt sad and enraged. Something is not right. *We* should be the ones teaching the world about us."

Earlier in the day, I had joined Martens on the upper level of the workshop. Typing furiously on his computer, face glowing blue from the screen, he took a few moments to register my presence. I asked what he was doing, and he said he was sending e-mails. It was still unclear to me what, exactly, Martens considered his art to be. It was the films he made, certainly, but was it also this, the prosaic work associated with supporting the C.A.T.P.C.? "No," Martens said. "I don't consider the sending of e-mails to be art."

It wasn't an unreasonable question. Helping to direct real and creative capital to a Central African plantation and calling it art isn't necessarily any more far-fetched than developing affordable housing in Houston and calling it art, or building a travelling community center in a mobile home and calling it art, or creating an interactive TV station for the elderly and calling it art—all of which have been done in recent decades to great acclaim. The German artist Joseph Beuys might have called it "social sculpture," the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud might call it "relational aesthetics," and critics call it "social practice."

Claire Bishop, a professor of art history at the CUNY Graduate Center, was one of the first to write skeptically of the genre, which dates back to the early twentieth century and has roots in experimental theatre. "It's extremely hard to pin down," she said, since it tends to prioritize process over discrete objects. "It will have multiple identities. It can be an institution, it can be an infrastructure, it can be a workplace situation." Bishop told me that she was "infuriated by this slipperiness" when she first started working on her book "Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship" (2012). "You can't really grasp it," she said. "You don't know what you're looking at. You're only ever seeing a fragment of the work at any one time—nobody gets a full overview of it. The artist is probably the only one, and



"He's not that smart. I just took his queen with a biscuit."

this makes it really hard to talk about."

As is the case with many social-practice projects, she went on, judging Martens's work in Lusanga on aesthetic terms can feel impossible: there is real money circulating, and people's livelihoods are at stake. "What does one get by saying they are an artist?" she asked. "Funding, primarily, but also freedom." An academic would need approval from an ethics board, an aid worker demonstrable proof that his efforts were successful. "It takes some of the pressure off of making something succeed," Bishop said. "Being an artist, you could say, gets you off the hook."

Martens was finishing a series of six short videos documenting Kasiama and Tamasala's attempt to secure the loan of a small wooden sculpture, made in Congo, depicting Maximilien Balot, a Belgian colonial officer. His killing, in 1931, not far from Lusanga, sparked a revolt of the Pende people, hundreds of whom were subsequently killed by gunfire. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, which owns the sculpture, had declined to lend it to the White Cube for the foreseeable future, supplying low-resolution images instead. With the help of some Web developers in Berlin, the C.A.T.P.C. decided to

create a non-fungible token. In February, members waited outside the White Cube at dusk while ghostly images of the sculpture—taken from a photograph on the Museum of Fine Arts's Web site—were minted on the blockchain. The N.F.T. was the collective's arch attempt to take back the sculpture under the doctrine of fair use and, in Kasiama's words, "reclaim its powers," which were originally to protect the land and its people. Shortly afterward, the museum responded, calling the N.F.T. "unacceptable" and "unprofessional." The museum is no longer considering a loan.

In June, Tamasala and Kasiama attended Art Basel, where some three hundred more N.F.T.s related to the Balot sculpture were minted. Tamasala told a reporter that, though the museum's loan refusal was "a form of violence," the N.F.T.s were not meant as an act of retribution. "We come from a country that has perpetual war," he said. "We don't want war. We do not want to oppose the museum. We are not here to have a conflict with them. The only thing we want is to rekindle a relationship with the sculpture." When I spoke to Tamasala and Kasiama two weeks later, they were in the Netherlands with Martens, preparing to fly back to Lu-

sanga, where they hoped to buy more land with funds raised from the N.F.T.s.

A short article about the project appeared in the *Guardian*, and one morning the community's solar panels were working well enough to provide electricity for Martens to read it. He and I convened near the riverbank. A package of Tanzanian cigarettes sat on a table, and Martens struggled to light one with a damp match. The yoke of his shirt, which had been threadbare the day before, was now torn. (A performance artist even when off duty, Martens wears his hair long and tends to sport the same button-up shirts and leather shoes to traipse around Lusanga as he does when popping into Berlin art galleries. But what on film looks like an ironic embodiment of an antiquated trope—the European gentleman in Africa—in person comes across as something more like self-flagellation. In the course of the week, Martens's costume deteriorated rapidly: collars frayed, holes appeared.)

Martens seemed both distressed and delighted by the framing of the article, which inflated a terse e-mail exchange into what sounded like an international court case. He was struck by the sensationalism of the headline—"ROW ABOUT CONGOLESE STATUE LOAN ESCALATES INTO LEGAL BATTLE OVER NFTS"—and unhappy about an accompanying photograph of himself, which was almost a decade old.

"I don't associate with the guy in the picture," Martens told me. It had been taken in 2014, at an opening in Cardiff. There had been a cocktail reception with champagne, he remembered. He furrowed his brow for a moment, unsure how to proceed. He said that, since the photograph was taken, he had changed. Though he had first visited the D.R.C. almost twenty years ago, only now was he beginning to allow himself to actually experience the grief—"Yes, 'grief' is the word"—that he felt during his initial trip. "The guy that I see in the picture is a little bit jaded," he said. "He's performing, he's quite armored."

He lit another cigarette and continued, "I encountered what you could consider, if you're ignorant—what I considered, because I *was* ignorant, to some degree—'traditional rural villages.'"

Martens spoke of thatched huts, manioc patches, a lack of consumer products. "You could consider it natural," he said. "You could think, This is just how people live here." Impersonating his naïve former self, he went on, "It's sad, sure, but the children smile when they see you. They run to you—'Hey, *mun-dele!*'—they want a picture with you. So maybe it's just the way it is, you think. Maybe they're *happier* than you. Maybe there's so much to *learn* from these people, because they are in touch with nature, with their ancestors, the earth, with the gods above. Maybe you think they're outside of capitalism. Maybe they have more empathy, more love, maybe they're actually closer to the state that we should all be in."

Then Martens arrived at a plantation. "The atmosphere is completely different," he said. "The people are *desperate*." He described fathers pleading for him to come to their children's funerals, women approaching him and finding themselves too upset to speak. "They don't know how to even voice their emotions," he said. "It's here." Martens pointed to his throat and gagged in what began as an imitation of despair but quickly became the real thing. "So I'm *the* guy, in their eyes," he went on. "I'm the skin color, I'm the passport, I'm the U.N. It's imaginary, I know that, but, still, it's all the same—I'm the boss of the plantation to them, somehow. Because why else would I be there? Why would I be there if I wasn't included in their lives? Why would I be there if I wasn't somehow in cahoots? And I *am* in cahoots." Martens was crying by this point. "This apparatus just disposes of people's lives so easily," he said. "It's devilish, the way it consumes people's lives."

We had been talking for a few hours when an intermittent banging began. Martens excused himself and peered over the balcony, which was heaped with drying mosquito netting. Below us, a man was making repairs to a dug-out canoe. Martens asked the man if he wouldn't mind taking a short break from his work. It was the sort of appeal I'd make of a stranger at home, politely but without anxiety. Here, though, the chasm in circumstances between me and the banging man made such a request feel impossible, and I was

impressed with Martens's willingness to impose, which seemed to demonstrate more good faith and genuine camaraderie than any effusive kindness ever could.

When he sat down again, he began to talk about the anger he felt upon returning from Africa to Europe for the first time. His family was on vacation in France, and he joined them by way of Brussels, whose gleaming, perfumed airport now struck him as menacing. He had malaria, and was disturbed by the order and the abundance of the French hospital, and by the perfect conditions of the roads he took to get there. An existential crisis of sorts set in. What was all this infrastructure worth, he thought, if not everyone had access to it? Just as nobody deserved unclean drinking water or drug-resistant tuberculosis, he did not deserve the circumstances of his own life. He wasn't any better or nicer than anyone else; he didn't work any harder. "Actually, you're not worth it," Martens said he realized. "Actually, you're not worth it," he repeated. His voice caught. "Your luck is not even your own, because you didn't even roll the dice yourself. It's because generations upon generations fixed the dice."

Hellio appeared at the top of the stairs. "We're having an in-depth interview about my emotions," Martens told her. His affect was flat. Hellio expressed interest in observing the conversation, but Martens refused. "Go away," he said. "I feel too shy." Hellio hesitated. "She's a journalist," Martens said, pointing at me and pronouncing the word like a slur. "She knows how to employ empathy." Reporting, he meant, was performative and necessarily predatory; only because ours was "an equal power relationship," as he put it, could I extract emotions from him and leave without guilt. "But do this with a person on the plantation," Martens said, smiling, "and it's completely fucked. You will feel completely fucked."

A few days later, beneath the shade of an acacia tree, some thirty people sat in a neat arrangement of plastic chairs. It was morning. Nobody spoke, but it was not quiet. Roosters crowed, goats bleated, mosquitoes buzzed, a kingfisher darted by like a flung jewel. Though the rainy season

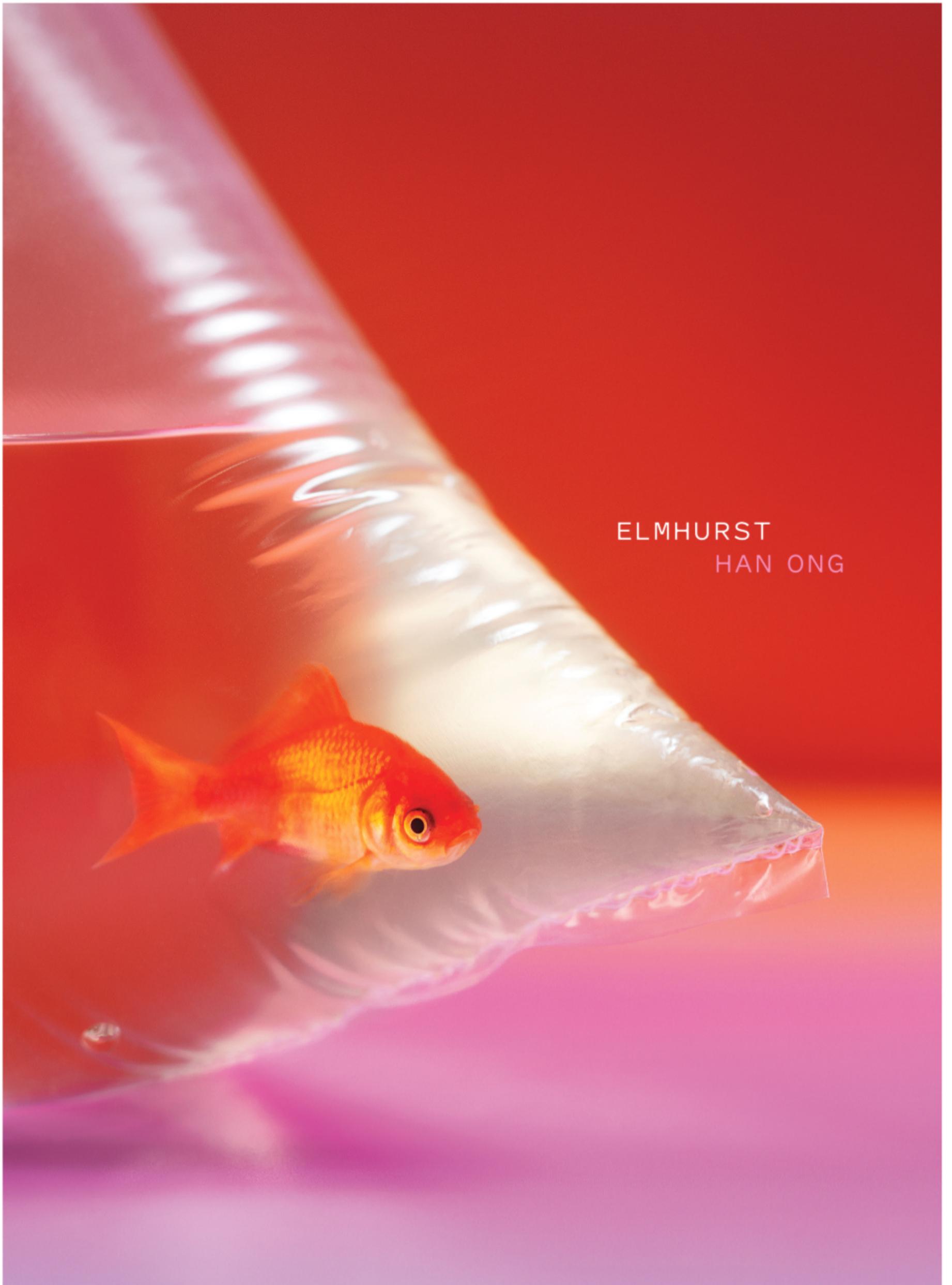
had been under way for months, the temperature was rising. People were growing impatient. The White Cube towered overhead.

Then a murmuring began, which coalesced into threats. Plantation workers dressed as policemen stepped forward, brandishing sticks as though they were weapons. A theatrical production, taking the form of a mock trial of the White Cube, was beginning. Tamasala had written the script with the collective. Kasiama approached the bench, and the judge asked him to state his name for the record. Speaking in Lingala, he explained that he would be representing himself for the time being, since his lawyer had been delayed by the region's derelict roads and bridges.

"Your Honor," Kasiama said, "I have come before this court to file a complaint against the White Cube." He pointed up toward the blinding cliff of concrete behind him. "This White Cube owes us, the inhabitants and workers of the plantations, whom I represent here, a huge debt." He looked out across the surrounding land, which was planted thickly with fruit trees. "This debt," he continued, "often ignored by the art-loving public, camouflages the ugliness and cruelty behind these cleanly washed walls." Kasiama's speech was impassioned. He spoke of colonialist regimes, slavery, forced labor, and the seeming impossibility of reconciliation. "Your Honor," he said, "we have faith that, at the end of the process, justice will be done and our rights restored."

At the periphery of the proceedings, Martens cleared his throat and began to pace. The production had taken shape in the previous months, with only his dim awareness. The White Cube, as he could see, was playing the role of museums in Europe and America, where violence and dispossession had for so long been laundered. It was a performance of restorative justice, and it was all being video-recorded. The collective hoped to turn the play into a film. It was hot, and Martens seemed impatient. He thought that the cameraman was not moving around enough, that his shots were too tentative—he was failing to capture so much. Martens stood close, whispering directions, sometimes dodging the camera, trying to stay out of the frame. ♦

ELMHURST
HAN ONG



Is the boy in the window attempting telepathy with Shara? If not, why won't he look away? His head is three floors up, a postcard. But he's found the sun. Solo, while the other windows on all sides of him feature multiple scowlers, some holding out their cell phones to record.

As above, so below: Shara, on the sidewalk, stands amid scowlers, too. Ranters and chanters. Giving everything they have to this mass protest. On one side of her is her mother, and on the other her seven-year-old sister, Rosie.

Shara and her sister are their mother's hostages. At least her sister is too young to be entrusted with a placard. There is no such exemption for Shara. The sign her mother carries is in Mandarin. She doesn't understand or care that carrying those foreign characters is worse than being housed in the repurposed hotel they are gathered in front of. It marks her as even more alien and fugitive than those whose presence here she and her friends and, by extension, Shara, are protesting this afternoon in Elmhurst, where Shara lives a dozen blocks away with her mother, her father, her sister, and her grandfather.

Elmhurst is majority Chinese and Latino immigrants, head-to-the-ground people, but overnight dozens of homeless families were moved into the TransAmerica Hospitality Suites, a two-star hotel whose heyday was in the nineteen-nineties. The city skirted the expected protocols of tipping off the local councilman and the community. Soon afterward, neighborhood businesses publicized an uptick in vandals and thieves. Now drunks cavort in the medians, and their numbers only increase when the sun goes down. A group called the Good Neighbors of Elmhurst is responsible for tacking to telephone and light poles xeroxed cell-phone shots of offenders which say at the bottom "110th Precinct, Why Don't You Do Something?"

Shara's mother's sign says "Kick the Devils Out of Our Neighborhood!"

Thank God it's in Mandarin.

Shara's own sign is in English: "Safety First for Elmhurst." Someone leaving the picket line handed it to her when they arrived. After an hour or so, the sign lay aslant on her shoulder, and, when she was sure that her mother wasn't looking, she turned the wording side down, but

her reprieve lasted no more than ten, fifteen minutes. Eagle-eyed aunties and uncles from her mother's church—all of them Chinese—were there to flip the sign around.

Go home to China, voices shout down from opened windows above.

The other window dwellers hoot, clap, beat their hands against the glass panes. But the boy is silent, and he doesn't look away from Shara. Maybe he's blind? No, he leaves and then returns with a burrito, which he eats very slowly while continuing to monitor her.

Shara believes in telekinesis. She believes in the willed explosion of heads. This is per the movie that she sneak-views on her grandfather's VCR, when nobody's home. In the movie, you can tell when the real head has been switched for a special-effects head, just before the fake blood and brains burst through the face and the top of the skull—a satisfying spectacle. But the tape and her grandfather's VCR are both old, so she can't press the Rewind button as often as she'd like. Still, if the boy is trying to explode Shara's head, he is not very good at it. She has not felt even the slightest headache.

And her? Is she trying to explode *his* head? She has attempted to, once or twice. Because he is the enemy, even though she hates this misguided protest by her mother and her mother's friends. But she herself is not very good at it. And, besides, if the boy's head burst, everyone would know that it was Shara's doing. Her mother followed the line of Shara's gaze yesterday, and told her to knock it off. Still, there is no thought of sexual attraction, even though Shara is fourteen years old and the boy looks to be around the same age. Everyone knows what a studious girl she is. She will be a doctor, a lawyer. She will transcend Elmhurst.

At night, she hears her mother crying. Pounding the dresser and the walls. She hears her father trying to placate his wife. He assures her that he's stopped seeing other women. That the money he gives her at the end of each week is nearly his entire paycheck from the Chinese restaurant where he works as one of two cooks, minus the fee from the check-cashing place and fifty dollars for his expenses, mainly beer and his cell phone. And he offers her empty promises of increased church atten-

dance, of an improved relationship to God. Her mother goes to sleep soon afterward. Or maybe she lies awake beside him until the morning.

Lately, her mother has taken to crying over the TransAmerica Hospitality, using language that Shara has not heard from her mother's church—God only knows whom she's parroting this time. Her talk is of how Asians will always be at the bottom of American society unless they open their mouths in protest; only then will those infringing on their rights reconsider. Because we quiet and keeping to ourselves, her mother has said, that's why they think they can do this thing to us!

Shara's antipathy toward her mother has been perfectly understood without her having to utter a word, and yesterday her mother cornered her in their building's back lot, where Shara goes to do her homework, or to get away from the household tumult. You come home from school and talk-talk about civil rights! So, this is *our* civil rights! We are stopping others from picking on us! If we don't say nothing, they will keep sending people like *that* to our neighborhood, and we will be living for fear!

What her mother doesn't need to say: she is talking about Black people.

Black and Latino—but the wrong kind of Latino. Not the recent immigrants from Mexico and South America, who make up the hardworking Elmhurst crowd, but Bronx Latino: job absconders, benefits abusers, drug addicts, drunks. Whose first and most enduring response to a new neighborhood is desecration, plunder.

Two nights later, her mother is crying again. She has been *ambushed!* She doesn't wait for the middle of the night this time. As soon as she gets home, and before Shara's father is back from the restaurant, she is turning on the kitchen tap, throwing even already washed dishes into the sink, to scrub and scour, and to abrade her skin under the hot current.

Outside the TransAmerica yesterday, a church with which her mother's church has friendly relations and has co-hosted many events invited everyone to a social. But this afternoon, within an hour of the start time, new people, strange people, walked into the hall. One of them revealed that he was being put up at the

resurrected hotel, and said that he wanted to present, as he called it, one face of homelessness. He was the father of three children. His downfall had started when his wife had a heart attack in the middle of an operation; he was soon in rent arrears. His name came last: Call me David, he said to the passive crowd.

He was followed by a South Asian man whom Shara remembered from outside the hotel—speaking to the protesters, though clearly apart from them. We belong to an organization—he gave a name—here in Queens, and we are trying to foster good relations among some members of the shelter population and the communities they are going to be residing alongside for a while, before hopefully moving on to a more stable life, with housing of their own. There are more Davids in the TransAmerica. Each with his or her own story of hardship and unexpected bad luck. They do not want money from you—that is not what they are asking. Like you, they want to be left in peace. It's important to know that they do not intend to be threatening or intimidating. Their appearance that puts people off? It's the face that struggling and sadness will give anyone. There is a Christian saying: There but for the grace of God go I.

Every single member of her mother's church who had shown up was cowed by the young social worker's eloquence.

Who here has had firsthand experience with the homeless families? Can you raise your hand?

Only a couple of respondents.

Were you mugged?

Both volunteers shook their heads.

Threatened?

All eyes in the room were on the two, who gave off the abashed air of letting down the team, because once more they had to respond in the negative.

So where are these stories coming from? the South Asian man asked.

The silence in the hall was ringing. No one able to look their neighbors in the eye. Could it be this easy to undo five days of chanting in unison, of rowing in the same swift current of outrage and purposefulness?

This was particularly embarrassing for Shara's mother because she knew she had the power to stop the flow of supposed good will from the social worker. She was the mother of two vul-

nerable girls who had to walk to school.

But she could not speak, and her muteness was contagious.

But what about . . . was the thought bubble above each reticent head. *What about . . .* the graffiti? The broken beer bottles? The lewd propositioning of passing females? But to ask would be to fall into the South Asian man's trap, because he had a refutation for every complaint and was only waiting to be given the opportunity to pounce.

Shara's mother is mid-haranguer before she realizes that she has been speaking only to herself. She soon remedies her aloneness in the kitchen. Shara is dragged in, by the hair. Her mother pulls and pulls. She doesn't even notice her hands bleeding, from where her daughter has tried to loosen her hold by scratching and clawing. They used to have these fights every so often, but Shara's turning fourteen had put a stop to it—so she thought. This resumption reawakens Shara's incomprehension, shame, and—something that first emerged two short years ago—her animal instinct to fight. Shara punches her mother's arms away. She leaves her hair dishevelled from her mother's pulling. She won't speak first. And she most definitely won't cry. The two of them stand glaring at each other, both panting.

You think I'm wrong, her mother says. You don't know nothing. I doing this for you. You and Rosie. Shara's mother is going to have to wait an eternity for the expected rebuttal because Shara will not say anything. Only breathing. Only the telekinesis of your-head-will-be-on-fire-in-a-second. She is prepared to stand there until her mother understands that she is not going to win. For one thing, Shara is now taller than her mother. What? her mother says. You think you not going to do the things I do. Ha. You wait. Until it is your turn to have children. And God hope you do not have daughters—daughters are worst.

Only when they hear Shara's father outside the front door does Shara's spine relax. Her mother will recount the injustices of the early evening and how not merely has there been no support from Shara but instead secret laughter, secret hatred—not so secret, given how well her mother knows Shara. And, as expected of him, Shara's father will take the belt from his pants and welp his daughter. Five, six, seven strokes, until he and his

wife finally hear the yielding cry of pain that will bring the evening to a satisfying close for everyone, including Shara, because at least she no longer has to stand in the kitchen and stare and stare at the person she hates most in the world.

Her grandfather has been seeing the world through the milky eyes of glaucoma for five, six years. Too poor to have it remedied, and, besides, he doesn't trust American doctors and hospitals. Also, how much longer will he have to endure? He doesn't know his exact age, but one look at his hairless head, his toothless mouth, the slits for eyes, and you know there is no question of his going on for too long.

Before even Shara's mother is up, he is sitting in the kitchen, in the dark. He needs only four or five hours each night, and sometimes, to send himself to sleep, he downs a bottle of beer. He eats one meal a day, and it's Shara's duty and pleasure to feed him. Everything has to be gummable—soft tofu, hard-boiled eggs that have been crushed with the tines of a fork, oatmeal, jook. Breakfast is usually when he does all his gumming, and, as a reward for her filial devotion, Shara receives a pat on the arm and her grandfather's version of a smile. Also, Shara is the only one her grandfather allows to touch his ancient twelve-inch TV and his VCR. On them, she watches his collection of kung-fu and sword-fighting tapes, copies of copies made by an enterprising video-store employee who ran a movie-subscription business in Manhattan's Chinatown, where her grandfather lived as a widower for thirty years, before failing health forced him to move in with the family of his sole child, Shara's father. He has English-language movies, too, all of them obscure.

Her grandfather never utters a word, to her or to anyone else. And he doesn't leave the apartment in Elmhurst, except to go to the back lot. Like the boy in the hotel, he can be counted on to find the spot of sun in their living room, which he monopolizes for the entire time it is there. It was from glancing up at him while doing her homework that the thought of telepathy first entered Shara's mind. No words were exchanged between them—but how about thoughts? Once or twice, it seemed to work, and her grandfather interrupted his fogged

appraisal of the window to nod at her. The thoughts she'd beamed to him did not require assent or approval, so the communication was imperfect at best. Still, the validation it gave her to continue these experiments was electric. The first time it happened, she went over to reward him with White Rabbit candy—a semisoft toffee with a sweetened-milk taste. He opened his mouth for her to pop the thing in, and once more he gave her a toothless smile and patted her on the shoulder, before returning his nearly blind gaze to the Elmhurst street below.

The boy is no longer at the window. The protest campaign has taken only seven days to work. A few faces are left—stragglers waiting to be reassigned. There are no more attitudinous cries of “Go home to China!” No boisterous one-upmanship with the crowd of people below, who have persisted and won. And then, suddenly, a school bus pulls up to the curb, and the disembarking passengers begin filing into the Trans-America. Uncomprehending protesters look to Pastor Teo and a middle-aged white woman named Eileen, who fronts the Good Neighbors of Elmhurst, although there have been rumors that she doesn't live in Elmhurst but comes in to the protests from Staten Island—and both are now on their phones.

But the crowd no longer needs outside confirmation. The windows once more fill up, and the protesters understand that their celebration was premature. Verification comes soon enough from Pastor Teo: the homeless were merely taken on an excursion.

City money funded a bus ride to and from New Jersey, where not only did some shopping take place but everyone was treated to lunch at an Olive Garden.

Shame! Shame! Shopping for free! Have you no shame!

We work hard! You should, too!

Rewarded for being lazy! The city must be crazy!

Amid the renewed vituperation, Shara's heart makes a louder than usual sound when her frenemy appears once more at his window. There is no direct, too bright sun to obscure him. He has a Styrofoam shell of food, which he starts eating with his hands. Once again, it's unmistakable. He has eyes for nobody but Shara.

Which one was he in the bus queue?



“I don't cook much, so I replaced it with a void to scream into.”

Shara had missed her chance for a closer look because, like everyone else, she hadn't known what was happening.

Then the boy walks off. When he returns, the Styrofoam shell is nowhere to be seen. He has on a black T-shirt, logoless, creased with recent unfolding. Shara thinks of a prison-release outfit and then bats the thought away. This is her mother's poison, and she will be different. But not only is she not rewarded for this—fate has a laugh at her expense. The boy puts his fingers to his eyes and pulls sideways. She quickly masters her face. She has learned to do this at school, where she is part of the majority-Asian student body, neither popular nor unpopular, not much picked on but not entirely shielded, either. She doesn't look away. She will not give him that pleasure. She tries to explode his head. Very quickly, he gets tired of the stalemate and disappears.

When he reappears, maybe an hour later, he is holding a clear plastic bag, tied at the neck. She vowed she would never look at him again, but here she is, staring and staring. Like a fucking moron. There are no Black boys in her classes, but two of her school's most popular male students are Black, one from Cameroon and the other Senegal. They are distinguished by their soccer skills and the accompanying uniforms, whose neon plumage turns them into vivid anime

heroes. The boy in the window is holding, for her to see, a goldfish inside a bag, turning and kicking. He's pressed it right against the windowpane. Is it an apology?

Before he does it, she has a premonition, but too late for her to look away. The knot in the bag is undone, and the fish is tipped into his mouth, his face splashed. He tries to smile, but his full mouth won't allow it. She can't stop looking, and, thank God, because otherwise she would miss his bluff, as he spits the contents of the bag back in. Even with the bag pressed against the pane, she can't trust her impression of a dazed goldfish turning itself around and around, making a small tornado in the water.

Another fight between her parents. Her mother doesn't care if Shara can hear. As for her sister, nothing can rouse her from sleep. Her grandfather doesn't even factor into the equation. What would you have me do? her father asks her mother. A question with no satisfactory answer. The restaurant where her father works is hosting a meal for the homeless families, an event instigated by Shara's mother's nemesis, the South Asian community organizer, and backed by Shara's father's boss, who is comping the evening's costs. The protesters have been invited, too. A brokering of peace, if the protesters want it. Shara's mother knows all about her husband's boss, that

traitor. He had turned a deaf ear to her church, being one of the few neighborhood-restaurant owners who did not provide for the protesters—the other proprietors made an occasion of their donations, transforming the otherwise grim gatherings into sidewalk festivals, with heaping portions of restaurant fare scooped out of giant aluminum trays and onto flimsy paper plates that necessitated speedy eating. These businessmen understood that their rights, too, were being fought for by the church. Meanwhile, her husband's boss declared that his loyalty was with the TransAmerica families. During his first years as an immigrant from China, he himself had been homeless, and no one had helped him. He knew what such abandonment felt like.

Shara knows what her mother is holding back from saying to her father: *Quit*. The word a stone in her throat. Because how can she ask that of her husband, who plugged away at his restaurant job in Manhattan's Chinatown for nearly ten years before Empire Chinese opened nearby and a mutual acquaintance facilitated an introduction to the owner? He received a considerable bump in pay at

Empire Chinese, thanks to his Chinatown pedigree, and his taxing commute became a leisurely walk. To forsake this job, when he held nothing equivalent or better in reserve, would be to spit on the idea of good luck.

Eating bitter, chewing it every single hour. No letup even in her sleep: once, when Shara's mother was unconscious on the couch, her jaws kept moving. Dream-speaking, listing her grudges, her grievances. Even though she was silent, Shara could tell what she was saying.

It's not so strange that Shara's mother has let her go out into the night. The corporal punishment by Shara's father a few nights back exhausted not just Shara, who hides the welts and the red lines on her legs by wearing pants, but also her mother.

And it's only eight blocks one way, and then another two once she's made the turn.

The young female cashier knows who she is, and Shara spends a not unpleasant few minutes being grilled about school and her ambitions for college. Asked what she's doing at Empire Chi-

nese, she lies and says that her mother has tasked her with walking her father home. She doesn't care about the implication of family trouble.

The dining room is packed. No one is Chinese except the waiters, with that aggrieved air they all seem to have, the unhappiness of their lives taken out on the customers. The kitchen is different. No grievance but instead grim fellowship among the two Chinese cooks, the Mexican dishwasher and general third hand, and, sometimes, the fourth hand, also Mexican. They may be just as harried as the waiters on such a frantic night, but the kitchen, as her father has explained, is a clock; each tick is money—money earned or money wasted.

Shara could go back there and whoops would go up: money can be squandered every so often. Her father's colleagues would holler as much to tease her father as to celebrate her. She is his toil paid back. None of the other men have children; none want the burden or have the optimism. Each socks his money away for a future that is different from her father's. Different excitements, different calamities. Because he has her and her sister, her father no longer has a future. *She* is her father's future, much more so than her sister, who is understood to be the pretty one and that is enough. With Shara, fear undergirds his glances, his admonitions. Now that she's fourteen, there is every danger of her falling off course. She is his excitement. She is his calamity.

The South Asian man can't be missed, moving between tables for handshakes and whispered conversations, picking up food with his fingers along the way. At some point, he spots Shara and goes over to welcome her. No, the cashier tells him. She is daughter of cook. She come take her father home.

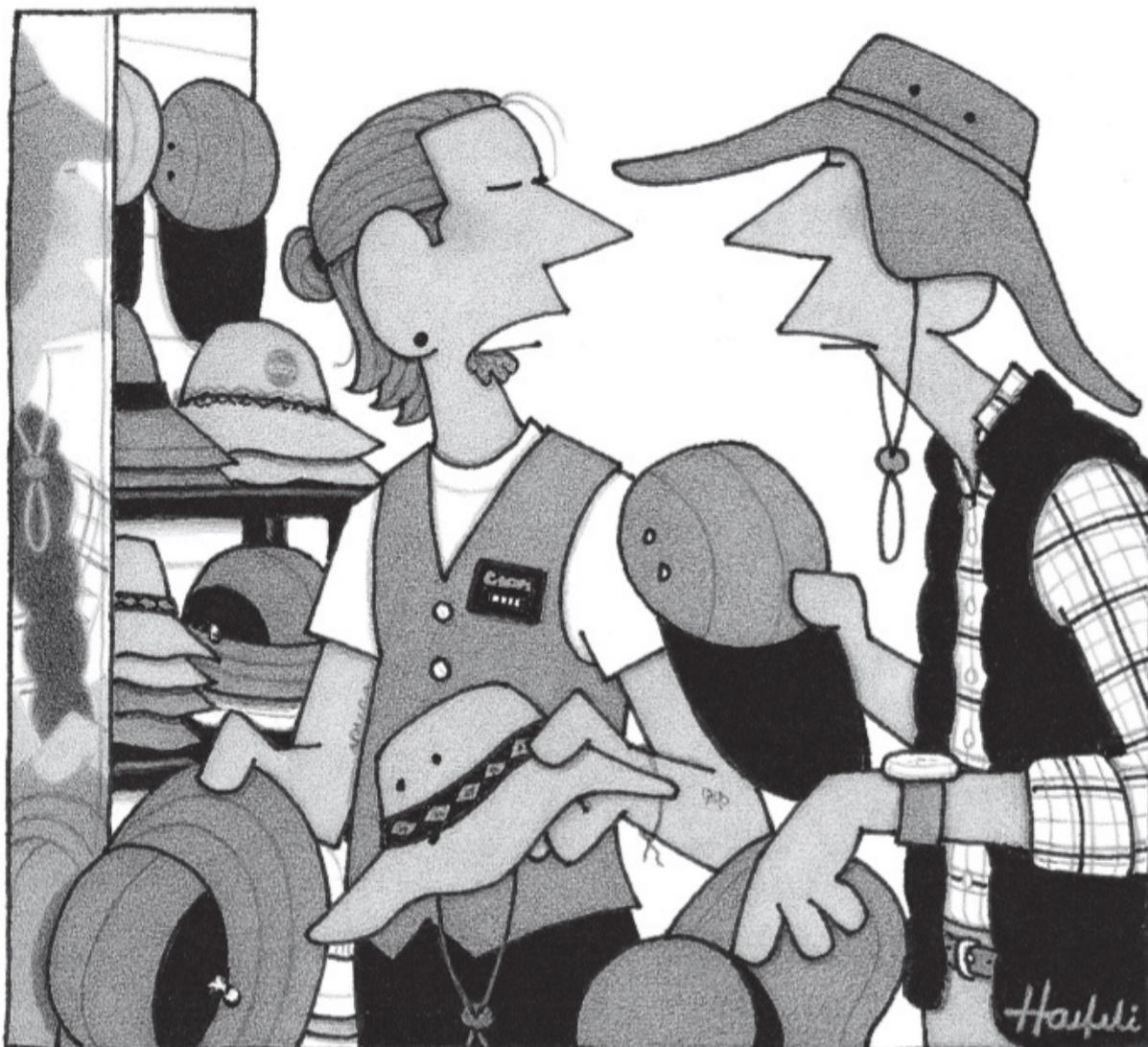
Already? He's smiling. You can join us. There are free seats.

Shara says no, thank you.

I know you from the protests, don't I? He doesn't wait for a reply. Come. Join. Meet some of the families. Or are you still on the clock?

Shara repeats her no, thank you. So close to her goal, and now she's having second thoughts. Will the boy in the window recognize her? She has on the same outfit she wears outside the TransAmerica.

The social worker tells her she's free



"There's a trade-off. The more a hat protects you from the sun, the more vulnerable it makes you to ridicule."

to change her mind, and he goes back to his people.

You know him? the cashier asks Shara. No.

He say you part of protest? Is true?

My mother. That's all Shara needs to say.

Do you know what I think? I agree your mother. The cashier tells Shara that, ever since the change at the TransAmerica, her boyfriend has had to pick her up from work. The reports of muggings and near-rapes prompted her mother to ask if she could quit her job at Empire Chinese. On nights when her boyfriend is unavailable, the boss or his son drives her the eight blocks to the subway stop.

And yet she seems to feel no alarm at the fact that the supposed perpetrators are massed so close to her now.

Nobody at the gathering looks like the boy in the window. This comes after a second sweep of the room. No light-brown skin and tufty hair; she doesn't see those googly eyes and downturned mouth, whose over-all affect, from a distance, is that of a ghost, as still and just as malign.

An ugly ghost—you can tell even from far away. *I am ugly, too*: this is part of what she tries to say to him. Two ugly youngsters staring at each other from across a distance: no wonder there is no room for sexual speculation. Instead, there is mutual pity, mutual hatred. Stoicism beamed back and forth.

When she first noticed him, he was already looking at her. He started the conversation, but, as they say, it takes two to tango. Telepathically, she had asked him, What do you want? And she is waiting for his reply.

She dares another peek into the dining room. Putting herself in view. But he is not present. Not among the ecstatic eaters, the freeloaders with their bulging cheeks, which do not stop them from conversing, from laughing and laughing.

Shara's mother used to patch together a second family income through her church. Members circulate news of short-term jobs, which are often first-come, first-served, and also frequently pay below minimum wage, with the understanding that it's Christian charity. But it's been six months since her mother last had work, and the family's increased economies show up at the dinner table. The same rotation of vegetables, tofu, ground pork.

Shara doesn't complain. For her, eating has long been a chore—both the act of shovelling food into her mouth and the obligatory time with the family, everyone glum because of the lack of money, because of the squabbling between husband and wife. On the evenings when her father works, Shara eats a second dinner of restaurant leftovers. Though that food is much more to her liking—pork cracklings, chicken nuggets—this is also an obligation, to appease her father's worry that she is not taking in enough nutrition to excel in school. Her grandfather sits silent, and her father drinks the first of a handful of cold beers, stolen from work, while she finishes her fifth hour of homework.

Two weeks at the TransAmerica, and neither side has yielded.

Shara is allowed to play truant from the protests. It is exam time, a sacred period, and, to honor it, her parents even stop fighting. Her sister is told not to bother her. A hush descends on the household, a collective holding of breath. It's like standing outside a locked door with a set of keys: the question is not whether Shara can master the lock but how quickly.

The church feeds the protesters, and it's understood that the task of providing the evening meals for the family will fall to Shara's father for as long as the protests go on. Some nights, her mother doesn't come home until nine. Maybe she's hoping that the pastor will take note of her perfect attendance and help her with another short-term job.

The flush of pride at having mastered her tests is what preoccupies Shara the following week, and when she looks up her mother has been home after school for the third straight day. The protests are finally over. The families have been moved out. Her mother's easy volubility is the first shock, and it delays Shara's understanding of the words coming out of the woman's mouth. Too late to keep the disappointment off her face. That boy—no longer there, her mother says. What boy? Shara says. No use pretend-pretend, her mother says. Not to me. You like that boy? You like homeless? You gonna marry homeless, so two of you can be homeless together?



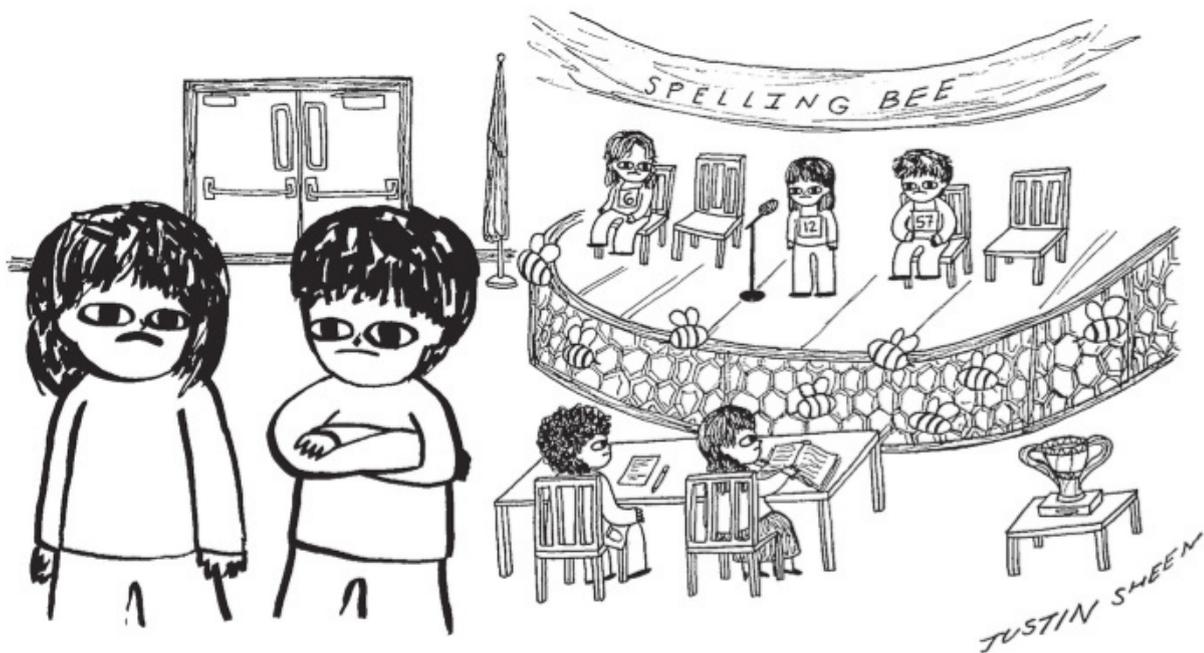
So why you study so hard, why good grades, if only going to throw away by going with homeless? Trust me, I know all about bad marriage. I don't know what you're talking about, Shara says. It's not like her mother to leave things alone, to let such blatant lies go unchallenged, but there is more good news to reveal. Now her mother's congregation is on to the next campaign: to block usage of the TransAmerica as a warehouse for future homeless and also drug rehabbers, domestic-abuse victims, and those just freed from prison—the very bottom of society.

Shara has to wait until the next morning to verify her mother's claims. Each window of the TransAmerica is like her grandfather's milky eyes: no stirring behind the surface, no acknowledging stare. It's hard to remember which was the

boy's square. Well, she has to remind herself, didn't she give up on him the night of the Empire Chinese dinner, anyway? If he had mind-reading talents, he would have shown up, he would have intuited the occasion's connection to the girl on the sidewalk. But he didn't have any. Or maybe he did and just didn't care to see things through. She will do the same.

She gets one hundreds on all her tests, as expected. For a day or two, she is the prized offspring. Copies of her scores are brought to the attention of the Empire Chinese owner, whose three children have all graduated college, one on full scholarship, the other two nearly full. Two nights later, while Shara's father is in the restaurant kitchen, Shara and her mother, her sister, and her reclusive grandfather are guests of honor, with a central table in the dining room and more food than they can reasonably finish piled on the red lazy Susan.

The owner comes over to shake the hand of the "future famous scholar." He has a proposition: his nephew is coming over from Taiwan to spend the summer with him and his wife, and the boy needs English lessons. The boss knows that Shara's summer might already be spoken for, what with the need to fill her extracurricular C.V. for a possible Ivy League future. But—for maybe fifteen



"No one spells just for fun these days."

dollars an hour—can she find time to tutor the nephew?

This kind of deference and fuss lets Shara know where her lane in life is. As a show of good faith, the boss writes out an advance check: two hundred and fifty dollars.

The summer comes, and the sessions with the Empire Chinese owner's nephew start, conducted in the dining room of the restaurant between the lunch and dinner rushes, three times a week. The boy is a runt, with thick glasses that he has to take off for close reading.

Customers or maybe the waiters leave old copies of the *New York Post* lying around, and Shara studies them while waiting for the boy to show up, flips the pages as he completes a written assignment. The waiters, seeing her concentration, encourage her to take the papers home, and she has begun to do so, hiding them from her mother, although her mother wouldn't know whether reading the *Post* is a sign that Shara is being a good or a bad Chinese. Shara, on the other hand, knows all too well the meaning of the *Post*: it's for spiteful, poor people, like the Chinese waiters, but she exempts herself because she is skimming with a purpose. She is looking to read news of a tragic death—by fire, shooting, vehicular smashup. The cascade of bad luck that follows someone who is bounced from one temporary home to another, at fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. Of course, she is thinking of the boy in the window. Now that she has the time and the space,

the boy is free to haunt her, torment her.

She thinks of what might have happened if she'd gone to the pet store on Broadway and left with a goldfish in a plastic bag. If she'd stood under his window and proved to him that his stunt was so laughable that even a girl wouldn't think twice to spit it back at him. Never mind her mother, who would not dare hit her in public. Never mind the whipping she would have earned later, once their apartment door was closed. She shares with him, despite their mutual stillness, a mutual recklessness. She wishes she had proved it to him, in shameful defiance of her mother, right in front of her mother's friends.

The *Post*, it turns out, is shocking. She doesn't expect to find what she's looking for in such abundance—an embarrassment of horrors. So many Black boys dead. Could this one be him, could that?

In the absence of photos, how is she to tell?

A flash of insight: that the boy in the window was a true ghost, already dead by the time of their meeting. How else to explain that nobody resembled him among the passengers disembarking from the bus and walking back to the hotel on the day of the Olive Garden excursion? Also, is it possible that the housing agency would give a room to an unparented teen-ager? This would also explain why he didn't partake in the communal free meal at Empire Chinese. Who doesn't want a comped Chinese banquet? Whose appetites are so spartan?

With the nephew, it's on to words that begin with "ex," which, for some reason, he has trouble pronouncing. His problem is lack of force, his "x"s sound like "s"s. She goes through the vocab list with him: *express*, *exterior*, *excavate*.

Free-form conversation rounds out their last ten minutes together, and, though it's meant to be a back-and-forth, Shara tends to monopolize the talk. She holds forth on E.S.P., telekinesis. When it's his turn, he surprises her. Yes, he knows all about E.S.P., because his grandfather in Taiwan communicates with the family dog by just such a method. Shara takes this in. She and the boy have something in common: significant grandfathers.

Also, a day later, this: using his grandfather's method, the boy was not successful with the family pet, but, to his surprise, he could make the neighborhood dogs sing at will, and, more impressively, he could make them stop. All without opening his mouth.

Would the boy like to help Shara contact someone she's lost? she asks him one afternoon. Is this a friend? the boy asks. Sure, she says.

She tells him about the people who moved into the TransAmerica. Was it only six months ago? She describes the boy in the window—the unruly hair, reedy body, and remarkable eyes, although she could not tell their color. Is he fourteen, like her? Would it be crazy to think that he could be much older? Eighteen, or even older than that? Though it's becoming clear that this person is not really a friend, as Shara had claimed, Shara's young student doesn't say anything. Shara has him close his eyes. She says she will do the same, but how can he tell if she does or not? Picture the boy, she says. Again, she recites this "friend" into being: skinny figure, not so tall, light-brown complexion, crazy hair sticking out in all directions, gangly arms, calm face, never not studying you. A face poised between youth and old age. Sometimes his gaze is sorrow; other times it's malice. Mostly, it's like looking into a mirror and being asked what you think of yourself. Sometimes, too, it has to be said, his gaze is a dare, although it's hard to tell what exactly he's daring her to do. To match him in inscrutability while all the time screaming inside? And only now is another possibility occurring to her, as she talks him alive, bringing him back

from the brink of an exploded skull, as per her intentions, or from the even more horrifying assaults in the *New York Post*. That gaze is pure exhaustion. Shunted from one hole to another, greeted outside each arrival by shrieking unwelcomers. Who wouldn't be weary? The gaze says, "I don't give a shit." Just look at his hair, which it appears he has not bothered with for weeks. Is the picture clear? Does the student need more description? He shakes his head no.

After a few minutes, she asks if he is getting any vibrations, any signals. He is quiet at first, and then he gives the barest nod. Why disbelieve him now? Can you tell where he is? He shakes his head, and then a moment later says, A basketball court? You see him on a basketball court? He shrugs. His eyes are now open. He plays basketball? she asks. No, the student says. He is just standing. Just standing and what else? Just standing, and looking. O.K. She is nodding, chills. Can you close your eyes again? Since you are better than me, I want you to transmit this message to him. Do you know what transmit is? He nods. Tell him that he is very lucky. She waits. And waits some more. Did you tell him that? He nods. Tell him that he is lucky that I'm no longer around. Again she waits. Then says, Tell him that if he wants, he can come find me. Come find me and we will finish our talk. From her voice, the threat behind the words "finish" and "talk" is clear. Some "friend." The student's face shows the effort of messaging, of trying to please Shara. Was he still standing and looking, on the basketball court, after he got my message? This is a test. The student will probably lie and say that the boy-in-mind had finally broken his statue pose, maybe shown some emotion like fear, the better to gratify Shara. But, no, apparently there was no change in the boy-in-mind even as he received Shara's threats. He remained standing. He remained staring in front of him. But you could tell that he was no dummy, because the eyelids moved, and there was the slightest rise and fall under his black T-shirt, just below his throat and shoulders.

The next thing she does is make good on acquiring a goldfish.

Shara and her student have not tried to repeat their telepathic transmission. She asked him if he'd felt anything since

their one attempt, if the boy-in-mind had passed along a reply to Shara, and her student said no.

The afternoon she has him over to the family apartment, the only two people present are her sister and her grandfather. Both parents are at work. Her mother is cashiering at a place in Flushing that sells bolts of cloth, Indian saris.

Shara takes her goldfish out into the living room, where the boy awaits, where her grandfather sits in his usual spot, head turned toward the window. Who knows where her sister is. Lately, the girl has been locking herself in the bathroom right after school, taking long and mysterious showers. She comes out looking no different, despite copious applications of hair products.

The goldfish has learned to stay in one place in its small home, previously a pasta jar. But being transported out of its usual spot on Shara's work desk has tipped a switch inside the creature, and now it moves up and down, over and over. It does this for a while before returning to its passive state, the only movement the opening and closing of its gills, and a periodic sweep with its dishrag tail.

She tells the boy to observe her. To keep in memory what she's about to do. As if he were a phone, recording. Able to play back the scene.

She reduces the water in the jar by pouring more than half of it onto the soil of the potted plants by the window, and her grandfather does not move. Nothing compels his attention away from the sun on his face. Her grandfather lives in a place that none of his family can touch.

Now, she says, and then she tips the goldfish mouthward. The goldfish resists the pull of gravity and she has to fountain some water before achieving the desired result. She lets the creature sit inside her mouth for what feels like a full minute. It could be the fish flopping on her tongue or she could be simply hopped up by the energy, the electricity. Then she spits the fish back into the jar. There is not enough water for the fish to make any meaningful move, and, before its google eyes can snap back into place, it finds itself tipped over and into Shara's mouth once again. And, once again, there are suspenseful seconds before Shara opens her mouth to release the goldfish.

The young student knows that he is not expected to say anything. E.S.P., goldfish swallowing—it's all part of the curriculum.

She tells him to close his eyes. Time for the next transmission to the boy-in-mind. Again, she talks him through the process. She is patient, because he doesn't see the boy as quickly, or even as fully, as before. But once he gets a tingling—maybe it's nothing more than his fear of Shara's impatience—she begins her calm recitation: Show the boy what I just did. Show him every little thing. You saw it, now see it again, play it back for him. She says the same thing over and over, for the next few minutes. And then: Tell him I am waiting to hear back from him. She is quiet for a long while, but he knows he mustn't open his eyes. Tell me what to do. Say that to him: Tell me what to do. There is sorrow in her request, and she cuts this with the brusqueness of her tone.

Shara has been silent a long while, longer than usual. When the boy opens his eyes, he's surprised to find that he no longer has Shara's attention. He can see only the back of her head.

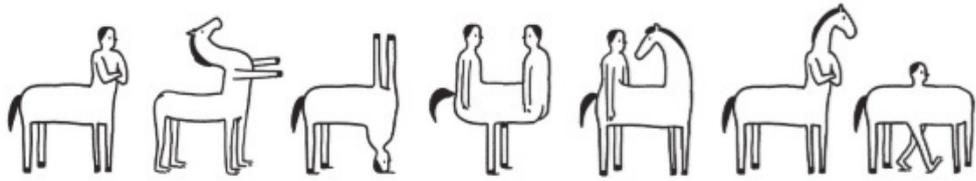
She and her grandfather are looking at each other.

Shara felt something behind her—more substantial than a breeze, less forceful than a prod. She turned to find her grandfather facing her squarely. It's habitual with him, but what can he *see*? Or maybe the telepathy has found an unintended respondent in him, and he is telling her what to do, per her request. What is it? She wills the message to clarify. But there is only his face—slightly amused, maybe making a joke of the afternoon. Then she sees briefly, persuasively from behind his glaucoma: the sunlight in the living room had fired a blob of gold that had gone in, then out, then back in, then back out of his granddaughter's mouth, and he had been delighted. Gold, for the Chinese, is even more golden—it is everything. His granddaughter is someone who can eat fire, money, the sun, but only halfway. She lacks the courage to fully assimilate these things and has to spit them back out. A fool, or, even worse, a coward. She must be encouraged. Maybe that is his message for her: *Go all the way, go all the way.* ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Han Ong on heartbreak and exploding heads.

THE CRITICS



BOOKS

BY BLOOD

What does it mean when a tribal nation purges its Black members?

BY PHILIP DELORIA

In 1979, an Oklahoma woman named Johnnie Mae Austin stopped getting mail from the Muscogee Nation. There were no more announcements of meetings, notices of elections, or news of monetary settlements. The problem wasn't postal. Austin's Muscogee citizenship had been erased by a new Muscogee constitution in which citizenship was defined "by blood," words that named a fraught crossroads in Native and African American histories. The Muscogee people, also referred to as Creeks, were among the tribes that once enslaved people of African descent and that were required, in the wake of the Civil War, to accept them as tribal citizens. A tribal-enrollment census around the start of the twentieth century split the Muscogee citizenry into groups that were separate but by no means equal. One roll—the "by blood" roster—listed people of Creek heritage, while a second, "freedmen," roll named Black Creek citizens, the formerly enslaved and their descendants. Austin's ancestors appeared on the second roll. With the new constitution, Muscogee citizenship was reserved for those on the first roll, or their lineal descendants. And so Austin, after forty-seven years of being Creek, found her tribal identity legally and politically erased.

As the journalist Caleb Gayle recounts in "We Refuse to Forget: A True Story of Black Creeks, American Identity, and Power" (Riverhead), Austin had filled the walls of her home with pictures of Black Creek aunties and uncles, interspersed with the teaching licenses of family members who had once led Black Creek schools. Her people,

she recalled, grew up on Creek land, sang Creek songs, picked up curse words and jokes in the Muscogee language, and felt that they were "Creek to the bone." You'd hear similar stories from other people of African descent who had grown up among the so-called Five Civilized Tribes—Muscogee, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole. Yet the Muscogee "by blood" decision was followed by similar restrictions issued by other tribes. Here were people whose ancestors had been enslaved by, married to, and emancipated from Native Americans. Many of them settled among Native communities and shared language, culture, and children across multiple generations. They had been accepted as members of those communities, even recognized as such by the federal government. How could their expulsion possibly be justified?

The nineteenth-century white Americans who designated the Five Tribes as "civilized" cited, in support of the honorific, the fact that the groups maintained long-standing trade relations, had an interest in education and Christianity, adopted formal constitutions—and enslaved African people. The tribes, which came from the Southeast, had long occupied a realm of warfare and captivity, exacerbated by English settlers' encouragement of an intertribal raid-and-trade slave economy that hurled Indigenous bodies into the world of Atlantic slavery. When Africans were dragged into the picture, the English paid Indians to hunt those who escaped. Sometimes Black fugitives sought to go Native, with varying



OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY; ABOVE: CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

Tribal censuses around the start of the



twentieth century split people living among Native communities into groups that were separate but by no means equal.

results: tribes incorporated some, killed or enslaved others. Born out of existing practice and new Colonial impositions, slaveholding among the Five Tribes developed hybrid forms. Though the familiar Southern plantation was surely part of the picture, enslavement typically operated at a smaller and more intimate scale. In the terse summary of Buddy Cox, a twenty-first-century Creek (and the nephew of an influential chief), “We owned some, we were some, and we slept with some.” Black people could be chattel, socially integrated kin, marriage partners, or participants in emerging Native groups such as the Seminole.

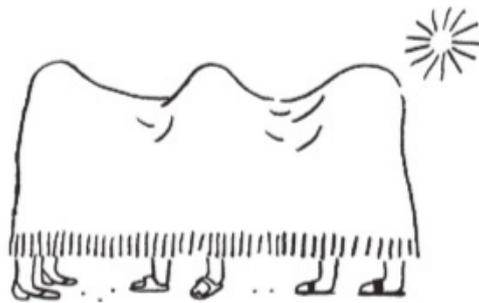
Being deemed “civilized” didn’t protect the Five Tribes from forced displacement. As American planters sought to expand their empire of unfreedom across the South, the Five Tribes stood in the way, and the United States embarked on a devastating series of land clearances. The tribes were forced to swap extensive areas in the Southeast for newer and smaller parcels in what was later called Indian Territory, today’s Oklahoma. With the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, tribes were driven west to Indian Territory on the deadly journeys now commonly referred to as the Trail of Tears. As the historian Alaina E. Roberts recounts in “I’ve Been Here All the While: Black Freedom on Native Land” (University of Pennsylvania), the Five Tribes were effectively compelled to become settler colonists themselves, displacing Native groups in the West. They also brought with them enslaved Black people, thus further extending the reach of American chattel slavery beyond the Mississippi. In Indian Territory, what had been a set of highly varied, sometimes kin-adjacent forms of enslavement began to harden, and Indian attitudes and practices edged closer to those of white Americans.

The Civil War intensified divisions among the Five Tribes, several of which fought civil wars of their own, imperfectly aligned with the American struggle between North and South. After the war, the United States pointed to a series of Confederate treaties that the tribes had entered into (necessitated, perhaps, by the Union’s early withdrawal from Indian Territory), and declared all previous agreements null and void. In 1866, the federal government demanded

that each of the Five Tribes sign new treaties, which reduced Indian lands by half. The treaties also followed the logic of Reconstruction in the South, freeing enslaved people while requiring tribes to establish new political relations with them. The Seminoles proved most open to Black citizenship, the Chickasaws and the Choctaws the least, with the Cherokees and the Creeks somewhere in between.

In this postwar landscape, Roberts suggests, citizenship may not have mattered as much as belonging—affective ties to community, family, and geography. For instance, Chickasaw freedpeople, though never recognized as citizens of the Chickasaw Nation, nonetheless remained committed to living among its members and places; it’s where they felt they belonged. The Five Tribes made room for freedpeople on their lands, while the federal government opened much of the land ceded in the 1866 treaties to the formerly enslaved. As members of tribal nations, freedpeople may not have received a mule, but many acquired much more than forty acres in what amounted to the first and most effective reparations program in American history.

The practice of Native dispossession often proceeded under the theory of Native protection; even the 1830 Indian Removal policy was justified as an effort to safeguard Native people from rapacious whites, distancing and segregating them for their own good. The same went for



the General Allotment Act, of 1887. Humanitarians such as its author, Senator Henry Dawes, believed that they could save Indians by making them assimilate into American society as Jeffersonian yeoman farmers working their own patch of ground. In Dawes’s scheme, collectively held reservation lands were divided into parcels ranging from forty to three hundred and twenty acres and distributed to individual Indians and to Indian families; the remainder was sold at cut-

rate prices to white settlers who would live among them. Dawes meant both to disaggregate Indian land and to desegregate it, bringing in farmers who would model civilized agrarianism for their Indian neighbors. Although the Five Tribes were initially exempted from the allotment law, Senator Dawes himself showed up in Indian Territory in 1894, leading what was unsurprisingly called the Dawes Commission, which successfully pressured them to accept the policy.

The net result of Dawes’s allotment campaign was that some ninety million acres passed out of Indian control—not in large-scale treaty concessions but in small increments, as private Native parcels ended up in white hands, often through fraud or coercion. It’s no coincidence that the campaign arrived during the era of boarding schools, in which Indian children were forcibly removed to be educated away from their cultural roots. Or that it overlapped with the “Civilization Regulations,” imposed on Indian peoples between 1883 and 1934, which criminalized everything distinctively Native—including dancing, ceremonies, and long hair—and punished infractions with starvation and imprisonment. If some measures of the allotment age were later reversed, others continued to exert an influence generations later. Among them were the separate membership rolls that the Dawes Commission produced—and that, eight decades on, stripped Johnnie Mae Austin of her Creek citizenship.

It might seem perverse that in 1979, with the memory of the civil-rights movement still fresh, Indian tribes began to restrict citizenship on the basis of racial difference. But in 1983 the Choctaw Nation joined the Muscogee in excluding the descendants of freedpeople, and in 2000 the Oklahoma Seminoles imposed racially restrictive rules as well. The Cherokee Nation followed suit in 2007. (The Chickasaws had never recognized freedpeople as members at all.) The exclusions cast a harsh light on anti-Black racism among the Five Tribes, whose members seemed all too ready to formalize racial distinctions in tribal policies, constitutions, and legal decisions.

These striking inequities shape Gayle’s account of the Black Creeks. Where Roberts draws upon a complicated per-

sonal heritage—including Chickasaws, Choctaws, freedpeople, African Americans, and whites—to explore a post-Civil War reconstruction situated in Indian Territory rather than in the South, Gayle, drawing on his experience of growing up Black in Oklahoma, offers an account that celebrates African American success. “We Refuse to Forget” narrates a family history, sketching a series of individual stories that will lead to Johnnie Mae Austin.

Genealogical histories thrive on founding figures. In Gayle’s story, that founder is Cow Tom, a Black cattle drover and a translator for Creeks who refused to speak English. During the Civil War, as the leader of a group of Black Creek refugees, Cow Tom stepped out of the translator role and into tribal leadership, negotiating with Union Army officers and later travelling to Washington, D.C., to advocate for the rights of Creek freedpeople. Steadily establishing himself as a prosperous farmer, rancher, and mill owner, Cow Tom left behind the kind of accumulated wealth seldom seen among Black families of the nineteenth century. Nor was he alone in his eminence. His relative Legus Perryman, a large landowner, served as a district judge and as a member of the Creek House of Warriors and the National Council. From 1887 until 1895, he was the “principal chief,” taking up the burden of negotiations with the federal government.

Cow Tom’s grandson Jake Simmons prospered as a rancher, and his son Jake Simmons, Jr., used his hundred-and-sixty-acre allotment to establish himself as an oilman and a land broker, leveraging “the benefits of his Creek identity,” in Gayle’s words. Working with Frank Phillips (a founder of what is today ConocoPhillips) and other businessmen, he crafted deals for oil leases, made land acquisitions across the region, and represented American oil interests in Ghana, Nigeria, and Liberia. Jake, Jr., also became a major Black voice in Oklahoma race politics, chairing the state N.A.A.C.P., sponsoring legal challenges to segregation, and eventually suing the local board of education. Because Austin was the granddaughter of Jake Simmons, Sr., Gayle can neatly trace a line back to Cow Tom. At the other end of this two-century-long genealogical chain is Austin’s grandson



“Let me just find one more thing to do before we go.”

Damarío Solomon-Simmons, an attorney who represented Black Creeks, Austin among them, seeking to restore tribal citizenship.

But how to reconcile citizenship claims with tribal-sovereignty claims? A constitutive element of being a sovereign nation, after all, is having control over citizenship criteria. And, as tribal nations have developed economic resources and political standing in the course of the past several decades, wannabe Indians have appeared on their borders. In Canada, people have claimed to be “Eastern Métis,” on the basis of a single Indigenous ancestor several centuries ago. In the U.S., an African American “tribe” calling itself the Washitaw has invented fantastic genealogies issuing from the lost continent of Mu. Bogus Cherokee tribes have proliferated, asking for state and federal recognition. Meanwhile, individual ethnic impostors seek tribal citizenship by means of vague assertions of ancestry; others brandish results from DNA tests. Tribes have responded with restrictions and occasional purges of membership rolls.

Gayle and Roberts capture the tumultuous sound of two “one-drop rules”

clashing. Indians have reason to exclude Americans—both white and Black—who amplify a drop of “Indian blood” to claim Indigenous authenticity and perhaps tribal benefits. But then there’s the troubling “one drop of Black blood” logic of the Dawes Rolls, which defined both Black freedpeople and mixed-blood Black Creeks as unequivocally Black, but allowed mixed Creeks who had white ancestry to remain among the “full-bloods.” And Creeks have clearly played on the difference, wielding the word “Estelusti”—“Black man”—to speculate about who among them did or did not have a drop or two. The result is akin to an optical illusion: look at the situation one way, and you see Native people affirming the significance of their ancestry; look at it another way, and you see anti-Black racism.

There are further complications. Any remedy imposed by the federal government would represent a frontal attack on tribal sovereignty. The recent Supreme Court decision in *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, which upheld the Muscogee Nation’s criminal jurisdiction over the tribe’s official territory, rests on the same 1866 treaties that insisted tribal nations accept

as citizens the Black people they had enslaved. There's nothing new in the clash between civil rights and tribal rights, but the questions it raises have gained urgency during the past generation. Can sovereignty ever justify race-based exclusion? Have tribes themselves failed to meet their treaty obligations? Does the United States, with its own sketchy record, have the moral authority to pass judgment on tribal decisions?

Gayle's response to these challenging questions amounts to a series of oft-asserted maxims: one can be both fully Black and fully Creek; white supremacy is the causal force that drives the histories he presents; telling Black Creek stories today can help us see the American racial landscape differently. And so Austin's family story appears in the heroic mode we've come to associate with school lessons focussed on Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks. It's a celebratory case for Black Creeks, alert to the practical benefits of Muscogee citizenship and the Oklahoma opportunities for Black migrants from the South. Indian Territory provided a range of Black people what the United States could not: a secure place for a new American dream.

Absent from the celebration, though, are non-Black Muscogee people, with their own tangle of beliefs and ambitions. The few who appear in Gayle's book stand on the wrong side of racism: Cat Yargee, the purported owner of Cow Tom; Alexander Posey, an acclaimed Muscogee writer whom Gayle cites for a vicious racial slur aimed at Legus Perryman; and Claude Cox, the tribal leader who pushed through the 1979 constitution. Despite Gayle's insistence that one can be at once "fully Black and fully Creek," his account roots itself in Blackness. Its subjects are Black people who happen to be Creek, rather than Creek people who happen to be Black.

In Gayle's account, anti-Black racism among the Muscogees originates in white supremacy, and in mindless Indian capitulation to its edicts. "Whether or not he tried," Gayle writes, "Cox couldn't avoid the allure of white supremacy to determine citizenship in the Creek Nation." The fact that Alexander Posey "aimed to stain Legus Perryman's reputation by maligning his Blackness" only demonstrates that "white supremacy holds unfettered sway in America."

Just get past that white supremacy, Gayle suggests hopefully, and everything will be well. It all sounds like a progressive move toward an anti-racist alliance. Yet white supremacy offers up multiple forms of negation—targeting Blacks, Jews, Natives, immigrants—that can be pitched against one another. And Native arguments and attitudes can't be reduced to a photocopy of an overlord's ideology.

Parse the stories carefully and one can see conditions conducive not only to cultural crossings but also to anti-Black sentiments among Native peoples and anti-Native sentiments among Black people. An 1832 census counted about twenty-three thousand Creeks and, living among them, nine hundred enslaved people of African descent. By 1890, thanks to war, land loss, strife, and disease, the Creek population had been halved, while the population of Black people in Muscogee territory had more than quadrupled. That demographic trend was visible across Indian Territory. As Roberts points out, between 1890 and 1907, the Black population there soared, to more than eighty thousand, exceeding the Indian population by twenty thousand. The white population, unsurprisingly, boomed to more than half a million.

The pressing issue was land. In the post-Civil War years, Black-freedom advocates such as Edward P. McCabe proposed flooding Indian Territory with Black towns, establishing the demographic foothold for a future Black-majority state. As the chronicler A. G. Stacey wrote at the time, "There is a secret political society in existence . . . which is based upon the principles of Negro advancement, mentally and morally, and the future control of Oklahoma whenever it shall become a state." The creators of such plans were blind to the concerns of Indians and did not hesitate to align Black and white settlers against them. Frederick Douglass assured a crowd in 1869, "The negro is more like the white man than the Indian, in his tastes and tendencies, and disposition to accept civilization." Where the Indian "rejects our civilization," he went on, "it is not so with the negro. He loves you and remains with you, under all circumstances, in slavery and in freedom."

Gayle is not wrong to name Claude Cox and Alexander Posey as anti-Black

racists. The more interesting question, however, is how their racism was shaped by concerns for their people, their politics, and their dwindling land. At the Sequoyah Constitutional Convention of 1905, several tribes sought to establish an Indian state from Indian Territory, bringing a petition to Congress that was swiftly rejected. The secretary to that convention was Posey, a complicated, sometimes contradictory thinker who was devoted to the politics and the aspirations of his tribe. To see his racism clearly is to see a desperate collision between the ambitions of Black and Native peoples.

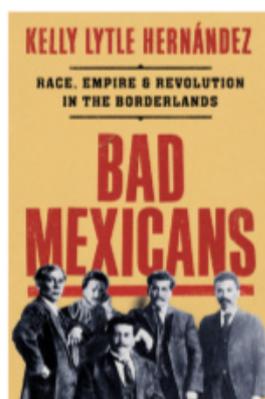
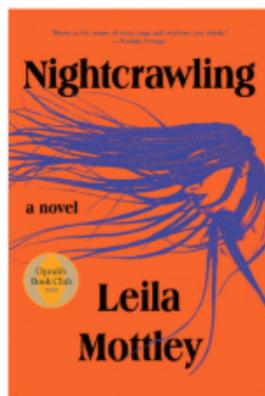
Indian Territory reconstruction, as Roberts suggests, could not be anything other than ironic: seeking to advance Black freedom, progressive white people forced the issue on Indian nations in ways that they did not dare to do within the United States. In a place where the limited resources of land and political power were contested, the consequences proved instructive. On the one hand, the twin entities of Oklahoma and Indian Territory did in fact emerge as sites of racial tolerance and experimentation. On the other, the varied aims of Black and Native peoples (and those who were both) ran up against those of white settlers who refused to accept even a whiff of racial egalitarianism. Neither Indians nor African Americans had reason to welcome the coming of Oklahoma statehood, which could not fulfill the dreams of citizenship—or even basic equality—for either. White settlers, in short order, imposed a Jim Crow racial order on Black Oklahoma, even as Indians began to double down on the "by blood" distinctions visible in the Dawes Commission's rolls.

Johnnie Mae Austin died in 2019, the year a suit filed by the Muscogee Creek Indian Freedmen Band was dismissed in federal district court. The family legacy now reposes with Damario Solomon-Simmons, the attorney whose coming to consciousness—from African American to Black Creek—poses hard questions about citizenship and belonging. He was once simply Damario Solomon, a Black football player, until he heard from a member of the Simmons family and began what Gayle calls a "journey to understanding himself." That journey has almost inevita-

bly led him to a mission aimed at justice under American law.

When it comes to belonging, two cultural problems intertwine. Black Creek claims to Creek identity—at least in Gayle’s account—tend to be genealogical, full of blood essentialisms, and sometimes disengaged from the ongoing vitality of Muscogee culture. Figures such as Jake Simmons, Jr., for instance, seem to care most about leveraging Black success out of Native citizenship, leasing and selling Creek land to corporations. At the same time, the historically rooted culture of Muscogee anti-Black racism is not merely abhorrent but unsustainable, offering no path to the future for anyone involved. When it comes to citizenship, two *political* problems intertwine. Native sovereignty, in the American context, rests upon the legal authority of treaties. So, too, do Black rights to Native membership. The various arguments about Native identity bounce between cultural ties and political claims, all exuding moral authority but none fully authoritative. In this sense, one of Gayle’s maxims proves compelling: Black Creek stories, rich with both the subtleties and the crudenesses of America’s racial history, force us all to contemplate new forms of reckoning.

Last year, the Cherokee Supreme Court ruled that the Cherokee Nation must remove the phrase “by blood” from its constitution and its laws. In the court’s opinion, Justice Shawna Baker wrote, “Freedmen rights are inherent. They extend to descendants of Freedmen as a birthright springing from their ancestors’ oppression and displacement as people of color recorded and memorialized in Article 9 of the 1866 Treaty.” The ruling followed a 2017 U.S. district-court decision that affirmed freedpeople’s rights under the same treaty. Despite continued controversy, many heralded the change as a manifestation of Cherokee sovereignty, expressing an Indigenous political will to attend to a troubled past. Certain members of the Five Tribes have quietly voiced similar sentiments, and a comparable decision may lie in the Muscogees’ future. Such a reversal can no longer provide solace to Johnnie Mae Austin, but there are others who share her experience of exclusion—others who still check their mailboxes for the return of a tribal newsletter. ♦



BRIEFLY NOTED

Nightcrawling, by *Leila Mottley* (Knopf). Kiara, the narrator of this searing novel, is a seventeen-year-old high-school dropout in East Oakland, California, who has to take care of the boys in her life—an immature older brother, an addict-neighbor’s young son—despite not having anyone to take care of her. After a man forces himself on her, she reasons that her body will be used with or without her consent and turns to sex work. Her johns range from men as destitute as she is to the local police. Careful not to portray Kiara as a victim, Mottley shows us the pleasures of family, friendship, and love. The result is an intimate portrait of a young Black woman searching for autonomy and fulfillment in a society designed to deny her both.

One’s Company, by *Ashley Hutson* (Norton). A random moment of luck sets this novel in motion: Bonnie, a thirtysomething grocery-store worker plagued by a persistent sense of “wrongness” and by memories of a traumatic robbery, wins the lottery and gets the chance to leave her old life behind. She decides to exist in her favorite TV show, “Three’s Company”—by moving alone to a rural locale, re-creating all the show’s sets, and the characters’ lives, one after another. “So many people wanted to solve their problem of self,” she thinks. “I wanted to trash it entirely.” When external forces intrude—in the form of storms, urban explorers, an old friend who’s determined to save her from herself—Bonnie is forced to reckon with the controlled world she has created.

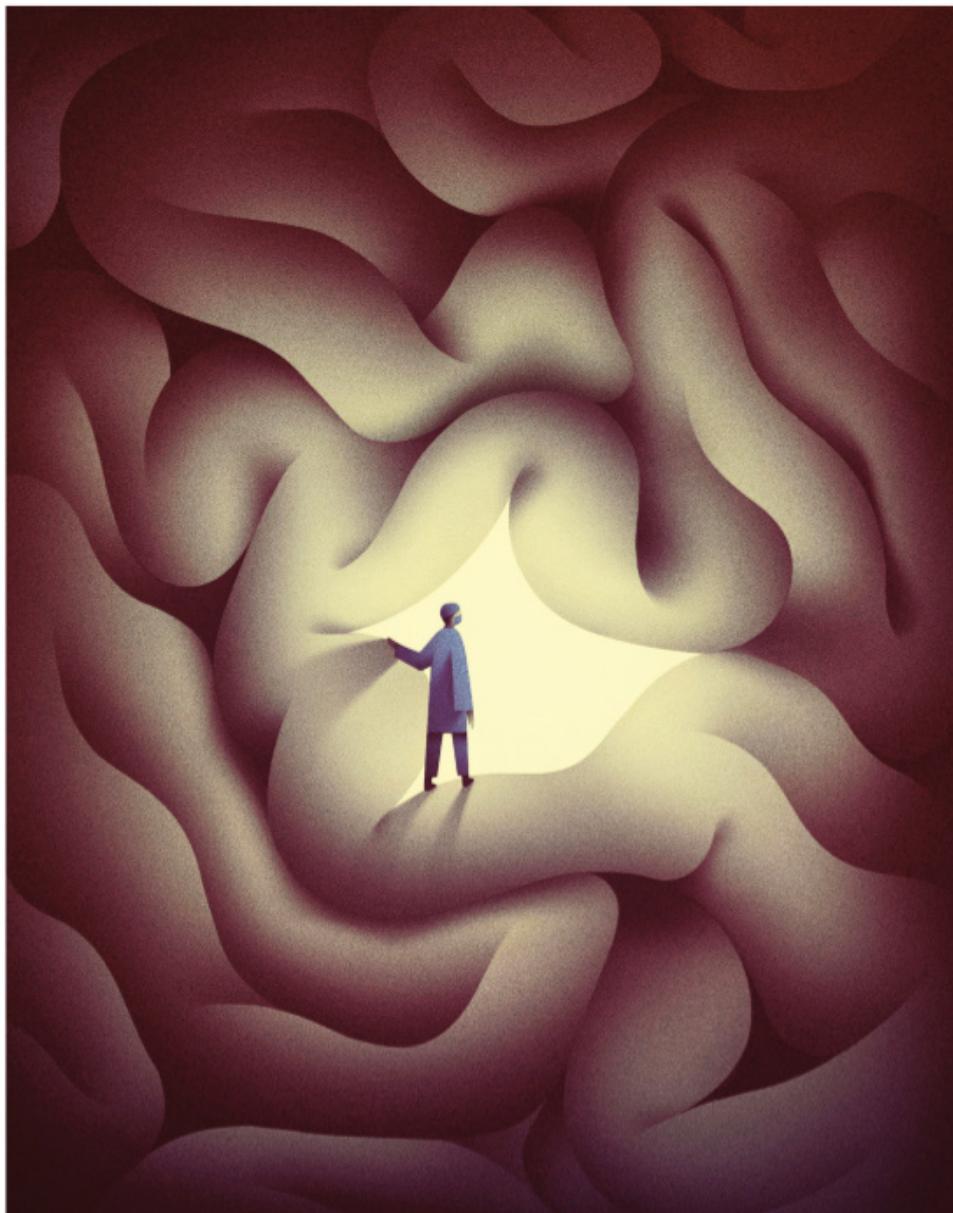
Pig Years, by *Ellyn Gaydos* (Knopf). In this evocative memoir of working as a seasonal farmhand in upstate New York and Vermont, Gaydos offers what, at first, reads like a straightforward catalogue of farm life: how pigs are raised and slaughtered; how radishes are harvested; where farmhands sleep. But the tranquil simplicity belies a deeper purpose. The farms where Gaydos works are independent, their output extremely vulnerable to the whims of nature; she has seen crops fail and “worms rot a flock of sheep from the hooves up.” And people are scarcely less vulnerable than livestock: a farmhand contracts Lyme disease; Gaydos has a miscarriage. Our dominion over nature, it becomes clear, is incomplete. The reason Gaydos likes farming, she writes, is that “one simply must accept the outcome.”

Bad Mexicans, by *Kelly Lytle Hernández* (Norton). The nickname *malos Mexicanos*, translated in the title of this captivating history, is what the Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz called the followers of the radical Ricardo Flores Magón, who, in 1911, helped depose him. The author, a U.C.L.A. historian and a MacArthur Fellow, writes that Magón and his band of *magonistas* “changed the course of history both north and south of the border.” She shows how their revolution fundamentally transformed the United States, as more than a million Mexicans migrated north. Although few Americans know about the event or the people behind it, Lytle Hernández argues powerfully that “you cannot understand U.S. history without Mexico and Mexicans.”

THE SCALPEL AND THE PEN

What medical narratives teach us.

BY JEROME GROOPMAN



It wasn't until my mid-forties that I began to write about the world of medicine. Before that, I was busy building a career as a hematologist-oncologist: caring for patients with blood diseases, cancer, and, later, AIDS; establishing a research laboratory; publishing papers; training junior physicians. A doctor's workload tends to crowd out everything but the most immediate concerns. But, as the years pass, the things you've pushed to the back of your mind start to pile up, demanding to be addressed. For two decades, I had seen my patients and their loved ones face some of life's most uncertain moments, and I now felt driven to bear witness to their stories.

After writing and revising three chap-

ters of what I envisioned as my first book, I showed a draft to my wife, an endocrinologist. She read them, and then looked at me squarely. "They're awful," she said. I was taken aback. I'd felt pretty good about what I had produced. "They're overwritten, with run-on sentences, filled with fancy words," she explained. I stayed silent, absorbing her criticism. "I can't really figure out what you're trying to say here."

I reread my words and concluded that she was right. What's more, I realized that many of the problems with my draft reflected the conditioning that occurs during medical training. I had used technical jargon, as if communicating with colleagues, rather than addressing a gen-

eral reader. And I had removed myself from the stories, a result of the psychological distancing needed to remain steady while helping a patient coping with a life-threatening disease. Finally, I'd focused on the clinical details of the cases, instead of exploring patients' emotional and spiritual dilemmas—the very thing that had moved me to write in the first place.

What I needed was a new kind of training, analogous to my medical training but very different. So I reread some of the physician writers whom I most admired: Oliver Sacks, Richard Selzer, Sherwin Nuland, William Carlos Williams, Anton Chekhov. I started to appreciate how they used their individual perspectives and styles to illuminate the experiences of those struggling with illness. They made their own reactions part of the story and, in doing so, immersed the reader in a fundamental struggle of the profession: balancing the ego required to take responsibility for another person's life with the humility to acknowledge our capacity for catastrophic error.

Today, my library shelves are filled with books by doctors, spanning the whole arc of a medical career—from "A Not Entirely Benign Procedure," a memoir of medical-student life by the N.Y.U. pediatrician Perri Klass, to the self-lacerating retrospect of the British surgeon Henry Marsh's "Do No Harm," which broods on mistakes made during a long and outwardly illustrious career. Somewhere between these, I can now slot in Jay Wellons's vivid mid-career memoir, "All That Moves Us" (Random House). Wellons is the chief of pediatric neurosurgery at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center, in Nashville, and has begun to write, as I did, after some twenty years in medicine.

His book unfolds in a harrowing series of operating-room vignettes, explaining the work of his hands while also evoking the tension in his mind and his heart. Before his medical training, Wellons was an English major at the University of Mississippi, where he took writing classes with the novelist Barry Hannah and the poet Ellen Douglas. It shows, both in his narrative control and in the freshness of his descriptive touches. Here he is on the first glimpse of a brain—with its tissues and blood vessels and crevices—once the skull is opened:

A new memoir takes the reader into the world of pediatric neurosurgery.

You peer forward into the eyepieces, and your gaze is directed straight down onto the surface of the brain, to a scene the likes of which only few have encountered, initially as alien as the moonscape must have been to its early visitors. Except instead of desolate grayness all around, the brain's surface is bursting with color and light, with dimension and depth. It takes a moment for your eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness.

Wellons's journey into medicine was influenced by his father, who had wanted to be a doctor, but whose family couldn't afford the training. Instead, he became a businessman, and his early ambitions were transferred to his son. Then, just as the younger Wellons was graduating from medical school, his father received a diagnosis of the neurodegenerative disease A.L.S. "For all my uncertainty about how I would spend my life in medicine, it is but one irony that I would spend my days trying to understand the mysteries of the anatomical system that had failed my father," he writes. "I know now that I would come to see him in the patients that I cared for, and also see myself in the families' grief."

Wellons writes unsparingly of his chosen specialty, and "the nearly unbearable pain that we must at times unleash upon our patients." For parents, merely hearing him introduce himself as a pediatric neurosurgeon can be traumatic. ("As I did, his chin dropped to his chest," Wellons writes of one father.) He recalls acquaintances who implored him to avoid this line of work, citing stereotypes of neurosurgeons as grouchy, egotistical workaholics whose patients usually die. But he persisted, inspired by a series of charismatic and contrarian mentors. Eventually, he came to see the severity of the situations he confronts in a positive light, as an opportunity to prevent the direst outcomes—"not always, but most of the time." The extraordinary plasticity of the juvenile brain, its ability to recover and adapt, offers hope. He rejoices in seeing young patients grow into adults and reflects that his field offers "the opportunity to fundamentally improve, or even bring back, a child who is pure potential, for whom nothing is truly determined and all possibilities exist." In the moments when he decides that surgery is necessary and feasible, he writes, he "can see just the haziest version of a life to be lived."

We see Wellons operate on patients

with tumors, blood-vessel malformations, brain swelling, developmental problems, and damage from trauma, including gunshot wounds. He also works on the peripheral nervous system, sewing and grafting damaged nerves, and closes up the exposed spinal cords of infants with spina bifida. Although most of his patients range from neonates to teen-agers, he has also become a specialist in a new medical frontier: operating on fetuses in utero. In one chapter, he and his Vanderbilt colleagues travel to Australia to teach a team at the Mater Mothers' Hospital in Brisbane how to operate on fetuses with spina bifida. The challenge for the surgeon is to work in a biological dimension never encountered before, he writes: "The tissue was entirely different at twenty-three weeks of gestation, akin to sewing wet tissue paper. The slightest wrong move would tear the fragile skin."

In Richard Selzer's short story "Imelda," an American plastic surgeon named Hugh Franciscus, a cold and imperious perfectionist, goes on a charity mission to Honduras. There he prepares to operate on a young girl, Imelda, with a cleft palate. But Imelda suffers a complication from anesthesia, dying before Franciscus even makes an incision. That night, he sneaks into the hospital morgue and performs the planned surgery on Imelda's corpse, so that her mother can bury a repaired child. He has saved face, in more ways than one, but he is shattered by the experience, unable to recover from an imperfect outcome.

Wellons tells a number of stories in which he takes responsibility for irreparable mistakes. He relates a case in which he had to operate on a pair of conjoined twins, who were connected at the back of the head and had been born very prematurely. The intestines of one twin were becoming necrotic, as sometimes happens after extremely premature birth, and toxins were spreading through shared circulatory systems to the other twin. Normally, separating conjoined twins involves weeks of preparation and planning, but here the infection necessitated emergency measures—"a Hail Mary if ever there was one." The operation starts off well: "Through the skin exposure and the craniotomy and then the dural opening, we'd lost less

than a thimbleful of blood." But suddenly, more than three hours into the operation, heavy bleeding issues from deep within the two brains. Attempts to stanch the flow don't work, and Wellons finds himself "cutting the joined skull with scissors, all hope of delicacy abandoned, trying to get them separated so that my partner and I could each take one and stop the bleeding." There is a moment of relief when the bleeding stops, then a terrible realization:

It stopped because *all bleeding stops*. They had both died, and I remember that I couldn't see to sew and tears were falling on the twin in front of me. I was sewing them up so that the parents could at least hold their babies one time, separated. We should have sacrificed the one for the other but we went for both and they were both gone and I still remember standing there unable to see.

Like Selzer's Dr. Franciscus, Wellons ends up producing, postmortem, a poignant approximation of the hoped-for result. But he is more fortunate: rather than becoming isolated by perfectionism and imperiousness, he has mentors and colleagues who help him through the agony and reconcile him to human imperfection. Indeed, he is skeptical of our tendency to heroize surgeons, and he specifically rejects the "testosterone-driven" culture that has long typified the field. Noting that, among pediatric neurosurgeons in the U.S., a higher proportion are women—twenty per cent—than in any other subspecialty of neurosurgery, he writes, "That number continues to grow, and we are clearly better off for it."

Wellons's healthy sense of his limitations includes an understanding that such limitations will never be easy to accept. One of the most surreal stories in the book recounts a fetal surgery that, after the placenta detaches from the uterine wall, turns into the emergency delivery of a baby girl, three months premature. A "wall of blood" suddenly blocks the view through Wellons's microsurgical loupe. "Jay, you have to let go," a maternal-fetal surgeon tells him, after she "matter-of-factly" announces that the baby must be delivered. Stepping away is so alien to Wellons that she has to say it twice. He remains briefly frozen, still holding the fetus, and then looks on redundantly as a neonatology team and maternal-fetal surgeons wage respective

fighters to save baby and mother. He hears the surgeons call for “large instruments with unfamiliar names” and boggles at the scale of bleeding—“beyond anything we dealt with in neurosurgery. The blood loss here was audible, a low rush below us.” The incident could almost have been designed as a check on surgical hubris. “I realized that I was standing there still holding my tiny micro-instruments in the air,” he writes. “Utterly useless. In an instant, I had become only a spectator.”

In Anton Chekhov’s short story “A Doctor’s Visit,” a young physician is sent to treat the twenty-year-old daughter of a factory owner. The factory, some distance from the city, seems to the doctor a benighted place, its impoverished workers beset by “drunkenness, nervous exhaustion, bewilderment.” The young woman’s mother anxiously tells him that her daughter, Liza, suffers from heart palpitations, but when he examines the patient little seems wrong. During his stay, he comes to attribute her misery to the exploitative atmosphere of the factory and the idleness of capitalism’s rentier class. Furthermore, he senses that she knows this. “You in the position of a factory owner and a wealthy heiress are dissatisfied,” he tells her. “That, of course, is better than if you were satisfied, slept soundly, and thought everything was satisfactory. Your sleeplessness does you credit.”

Illness and its treatments, Chekhov is telling us, do not exist independently from socioeconomic and cultural factors. In a freshman seminar on the literature of medicine which I teach at Harvard, we address the social determinants of medicine. We study, for instance, the way that William Carlos Williams’s story “The Girl with a Pimple Face” depicts the medical establishment’s casual denigration of impoverished immigrant communities—the very patients whom Williams himself served for four decades, as a family doctor and pediatrician in New Jersey.

Reading Wellons, I thought about social context when I came to this devastating passage:

In the spring of my fifteenth year of practice, I found myself looking down at a three-year-old reaching around blindly with his right arm as his sedation began to wear off. His left arm lay at his side, unmoving. A large wad of

gauze, placed in haste by the ambulance medics, was held against the right side of his head by a loose, bloody head wrap. Underneath, a fist-sized area of skin and skull was missing. His right pupil was larger than his left, a sign of brain pressure, but still reacting to light because the normally constraining box of the skull had been blown open by the bullet passing through.

The operation is a race to stanch the flood of blood from the bullet hole in the child’s skull, and it is successful, partly because of the ghastly nature of the injury: the missing portion of skull “allowed the pressure to go out, not in.” By the end of the chapter, the child is embarking on a long process of rehabilitative therapy, and can even say his name: KJ.

Wellons understandably wonders about KJ’s future, what kind of life he’ll lead, what job he might have. But if he wonders about the events that brought him to the operating room, he does not share this with us. Perhaps he didn’t get the details in the understandable rush to the O.R., but the reader pauses nonetheless, because KJ is clearly a victim of the relentless problem of gun violence in America. Wellons is evidently aware of this, too: the chapter’s title, “GSW to head,” is forceful precisely because this abbreviation for a gunshot wound is so common in emergency medicine. Yet the issue passes without comment, both here and in other episodes involving guns, including one in which Wellons discusses the specific mechanics of such injuries—the way that the pressure wave surrounding a bullet can do more damage to tissue than the bullet itself. When Wellons recalls being unable, early in his career, to save a young man struck by “a stray falling bullet, fired into the sky by some excited reveler at an early-morning party,” he examines his overwhelming sense of failure, and the way a senior colleague counselled him to overcome it—first by acknowledging that the patient received the best care possible and then by focusing on his responsibility to give his next patient his full attention. An important lesson in coping, to be sure, but not the only lesson to be drawn.

Politics is a fleeting presence elsewhere in Wellons’s book. In a coda, he discusses his dismay at the spread of anti-vaccination activism during the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that his home state, Mississippi, is one of the least vaccinated in the country. He is at pains to say that

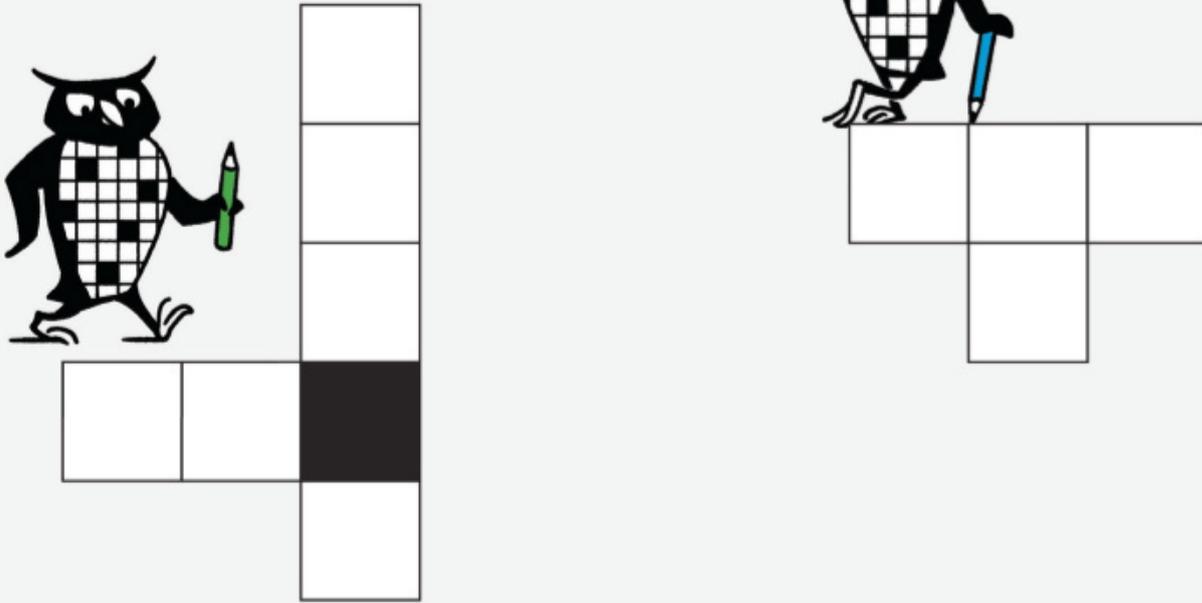
the science skeptics are the people he grew up among—*his* people. Perhaps it is this conciliatory impulse which prevents him from discussing the question he must surely have pondered: How many more young Americans’ lives will be destroyed by our unsafe use of guns?

Both of Oliver Sacks’s parents were doctors—his mother one of the first English women to qualify as a surgeon, his father a general practitioner. In his autobiography, Sacks recalls being enthralled listening to the stories his parents told at home about their patients. Part of being an adept physician, one senses from reading Sacks, is being an adept storyteller. This insight has developed into a discipline within medical education, “narrative medicine,” which Wellons brought to the pediatric-neurosurgery department at Vanderbilt. Raised in the Episcopal Church, he phrases its application in religious terms: “Telling stories about the things that most affect us is a redemptive act and will help us all—patient and practitioner—in the push to heal.”

Wellons relates that after he published a couple of newspaper op-eds, his first nonspecialist writing, “a few of the residents mentioned to me that they had some experiences of their own they wished to share with one another.” He decides to host a narrative-medicine evening at his home, with food and beer. The young doctors are invited “to talk about a case that taught them something or that stays with them, or perhaps even haunts them.” Beforehand, he is apprehensive; the residents are so busy that they have any number of plausible excuses not to show up. He is pleasantly surprised when his back porch is thronged with people reading out their stories.

“What was clear to me was that these young doctors *needed* to tell their stories to one another,” Wellons writes. “To process the significance of what they were doing every day, to reckon with the feelings that they were coming home with every night.” Identifying this drive to narrate—to tell stories as a human once the doctor’s work is done—is perhaps the key insight of Wellons’s book. After all, the word “doctor” comes from the Latin “to teach.” By writing stories, we as doctors aim to teach others about our patients while learning about ourselves. ♦

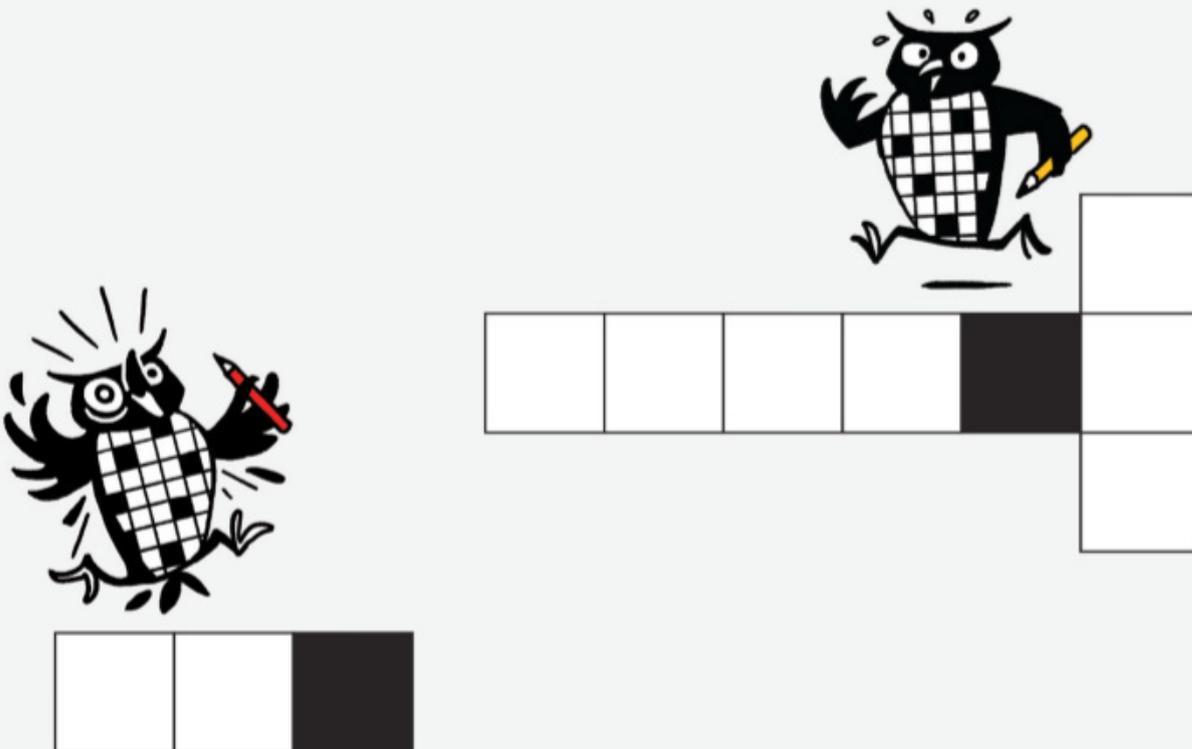
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CONFRONTATIONS

A Robert Colescott retrospective, and “Women at War.”

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



“Art and Race Matters: The Career of Robert Colescott,” a clamorous retrospective at the New Museum, bodes to be enjoyed by practically everyone who sees it, though some may be nagged by inklings that they shouldn’t. For more than three decades, until he was slowed by health ailments in the two-thousands—he died in 2009, at the age of eighty-three—the impetuous figurative painter danced across minefields of racial and sexual provocation, celebrating libertine romance and cannibalizing canonical art history by way of appreciative parody. He was born in California, the son of musicians from New Orleans. His mother, certainly, and possibly his fa-

ther, who worked as a railroad waiter, had enslaved ancestors, but both of them—and Colescott—could pass for white. As Matthew Weseley, the co-curator of the show with Lowery Stokes Sims, recounts in the splendid catalogue, Colescott’s mother insisted on the ruse, which he adopted. The mild-mannered modernism of his early works, sampled at the New Museum, affords no hints to the contrary.

This changed explosively when Colescott turned forty during a spell, between 1964 and 1967, of sojourns in Egypt, where he imbibed old and new African cultures. From that epiphanic moment on, he went all-in on the complexities of his

racial identity. Being an American Black man, whatever else he was, became the dominant conceit—and license—of his subsequent art, which he imbued with perhaps penitent, palpably vengeful irony, for the rest of his life. By not sparing himself from a pageant of caricatural mockeries, he offered no distance, let alone escape, from the fault lines of race in American democracy. As a bonus, he was freed to burlesque, with terrific energy, motifs of past Western art that he had always revered.

In a mood to be rattled? Contemplate “Eat Dem Taters” (1975), an all-Black recasting of van Gogh’s early tableau of impoverished Dutch peasants sharing a frugal meal, “The Potato Eaters” (1885), with an aura of minstrelsy. How could Colescott—or anyone, really—have expected to get away with that or, from the same year, with a race-switching pastiche of Emanuel Leutze’s nationalist chestnut “Washington Crossing the Delaware” (1851)? A bespectacled George Washington Carver, the pioneering botanist, stands in for the nation-founding hero of the Revolutionary War. A gleeful fisherman at the bow of the boat reels in a catch. A banjo player strums in the stern.

Not yet sufficiently affronted? Throw in “A Winning Combination” (1974), in which a perky white majorette, backed by a rippling Stars and Stripes, is naked from the waist down. Add “Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder” (1979), a self-portrait of the artist distracted by a disrobing white model while repainting Matisse’s hedonist masterpiece “Dance,” from 1910. Still with me? How about “The Judgment of Paris” (1984), in which a clothed Black protagonist is lasciviously vamped by a nude white Venus, to the disgruntlement of white and Black rival goddesses? Rather than angrily or mournfully critiquing racist stereotypes and associated taboos, Colescott shot the moon with them.

A lot goes on in these pictures, starting with how they are executed, in a fast and loose, juicy Expressionist manner and by means of a blazing palette that runs to saturated pink and magenta and thunderous blue. Along the way, Colescott pillages the distinctive hues of Willem de Kooning’s iconic “Woman I” (1951) with “I Gets a Thrill, Too, When I Sees De Koo” (1978), in which the face

Colescott’s self-portrait, “Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder,” takes on Matisse.

of a grinning Black woman wearing a head scarf replaces that of the Dutchman's generic white female. (The title kidded a redoing of de Kooning the previous year, "I Still Get a Thrill When I See Bill," by the Pop artist Mel Ramos.) Colescott shrugged off abstract and conceptualist fashions of the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies, guaranteeing himself a marginal status in the mainstream art world as a special taste or, let's say, anti-taste. As if in sweet revenge, his atavistic style and what-the-hell nerve began to influence younger artists of many backgrounds in the late seventies and continue to do so today. Without the spur of his breakthrough audacity, it's hard to imagine the recent and ongoing triumphs of, among others, the fearlessly satirical artists Kerry James Marshall and Kara Walker.

The choice of Colescott to represent the United States at the 1997 Venice Biennale initiated a general surrender to his ineluctable power, though most of America's upper-crust institutions have yet to capitulate. The New Museum's presentation of "Art and Race Matters" is a previously unplanned addendum to a tour that debuted in Cincinnati and, having travelled to Portland and Sarasota, was set to end in Chicago. Roberta Smith, who reviewed the show in the *Times*, properly declared the implicit squeamishness a disgrace to our major New York museums, whose lip service to diversity characteristically stops short of anything that isn't respectably theorized and may be just too roguishly irreverent.

As freewheeling in life as on canvas, Colescott married six times, twice to the same woman, whom he accordingly twice divorced, while studying and then teaching at a series of West Coast and Southwest schools and colleges. After wartime service in the Army, he attended a class in Paris led by Fernand Léger and, in 1951, earned a master's degree from the University of California, Berkeley. In the catalogue, erudition, wit, and wisdom mark a lively selection of his occasional writings, in which he proves to be his own most discerning critic. His last position, before retiring, in 1995, was as a tenured professor at the University of Arizona, Tucson.

Is there something to be said against Colescott's untrammelled temerity? If

you wish—I, for one, am hospitable to argument—but resistance isn't easy while you're feeling delightfully knocked about like a sensitized pinball in rooms crowded with the artist's most aggressive creations. The effect is comic in a key beyond outrageous. Inrageous? Metarageous? I'm reminded of the liberating shock of Mel Brooks's flabbergasting movie "The Producers," which happened to coincide, in 1967, with the onset of Colescott's painterly insurgency. Undeniably, while trashing American iniquities and insulting compensatory inhibitions, he let—or, more accurately, made, at a volume to wake the dead—freedom ring.

"Women at War," at the Fridman Gallery, astounds. I wish everyone could see it. The show assembles drawings, photographs, paintings, a print, and video installations by a dozen excellent Ukrainian artists, none familiar to me. All are women, many of them young. Several hail from the ravaged Donbas region. Two remain in Ukraine. Others have only recently left the country. Apart from one historical piece—a linocut portrait from 1963 of the nationalist poet Ivan Svitlychny by Alla Horska, an artist and activist who was murdered, reputedly by the K.G.B., in 1970—everything postdates the Russian seizure of Crimea, in 2014. Throughout the show, instances of steely discipline ennoble dramas of suffering and defiance.

An outsized oil painting made by Lesia Khomenko in March of this year, "Max in the Army," tenderly depicts the partner whom, in her flight first to Poland and then to the U.S., she has had to leave behind. Looking both resolute and terribly vulnerable, he is lovable. She loves him. To behold three beautiful watercolors of sylvan landscapes by Anna Scherbyna—one painted per year from 2016 to 2018 and almost inconspicuously featuring ruins in the Donbas, of an airport and two hospitals—you must lift little dun-colored curtains. Olia Fedorova's photograph "Defense" (2017) shows a row of white anti-tank obstacles, or "hedgehogs," ranged along a snowy slope. They are made of paper, which bespeaks both a presentiment of futility—premature, as it has turned out, impressively—and a lionhearted will.

These are tough-minded creators

whose moral fibre should humble those of us who are cozily remote from a cataclysm that adapts repertoires of international art to the lived truths of a convulsed, actual place. Some disturb. The most unsettling, by Dana Kavelina, are deliberately crude pencil drawings executed on crumpled white paper punctuated by internal rips colored blood red. A number of them allude to rape. A sketch of a woman using a fetus's own umbilical cord to hang it is titled "woman kills the son of the enemy" (2019). A climactic image suggests the birth of an assault rifle.

But the versatile Kavelina, a rising star in her late twenties, has also created an elegiac, desperately moving video projection. The nearly twenty-one-minute, wide-screen "Letter to a Turtledove" (2020) montages archival film footage of coal miners in the Donbas with expressive women's faces and hypnotically stylized, almost meditative, fiery explosions. The work engulfs the viewer in a sort of minor-key visual cadenza that sounds the heart and very soul of a nation that has come to awareness of itself—past, present, unknowable future—under unspeakable conditions. Its beauty becomes a Ukrainian weapon as bestirring, if not as practicable, as a donated howitzer.

Nothing in the show is either hortatory or sentimental but only hard-won, such as a series of drawings by Alevtina Kakhidze that begin in 2014 and narrate her contact with her mother in the occupied territory of Donetsk. The mother died of a heart attack in 2019 while crossing the frontier to secure a Ukrainian government pension. Reminiscent in spirit of Kavelina's video, a suite of ink-jet prints by Yevgenia Beloruset, "Victories of the Defeated" (2014-17), seeks melancholy solace in nocturnal or befogged views of workers who labor at various tasks amid dismal circumstances. The subjects could be anybody, even ourselves if our existence entailed an interminable state of emergency.

The show is elegantly and, above all, eloquently installed by Monika Fabijanska, an independent art historian and avowedly feminist curator who hereby does her native land, and any of us who willingly pay attention, a cathartic service. ♦

LOVE, ACTUALLY?

Pam Tanowitz's "Song of Songs."

BY JENNIFER HOMANS



“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.” How do you translate this, the first line of the Bible’s Song of Songs—or the rest of this ancient collection of erotic poems—into a dance? And how do you do it in pure dance, without kissing or acting? This is the task that the choreographer Pam Tanowitz has set herself in her new work, “Song of Songs,” which recently premiered at Bard’s Fisher Center. The poems, with their sensual exchanges between lovers, famously make no mention of God, and have attracted centuries of commentary—Jewish, Christian, allegorical, feminist. But what about viewing the poems through dance; that

is, through the body, which is, after all, their subject?

For Tanowitz, who is Jewish, making “Song of Songs” was deeply personal. She began in 2019, a year after her father died, having found herself wanting to create a dance in his memory, one that would honor their family’s heritage. She asked the composer David Lang to build a score for her dance around his 2014 composition “Just (After Song of Songs).” The piece took three years to make, time that Tanowitz spent “shopping for steps,” as she has called this part of her process. She looked at old films of Jewish folk dances and works by Jewish choreographers, and

she became especially interested in the hora, a circle dance popular at Jewish weddings. She made a short film, which juxtaposes archival footage, family history, and clips of her trying out steps she has found in her research—soon to be “spliced,” as she puts it, with her own steps and style.

Splicing is a big part of Tanowitz’s process. She likes to mine steps from past choreographers—George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Martha Graham—stripping them of their emotional content and intercutting them with her own steps until they meld. (She also once took a solo by Graham and “deconstructed” it, distributing its parts among several dancers.) When Tanowitz settled in New York, in the nineties, she began combing archives for material to use in the dances she was showing. She founded her company, in 2000, at a time when contemporary dance was moving increasingly toward conceptual and political concerns, but she went her own way and spent the next two decades drilling into formalism. Her early pieces were sometimes tough to follow, but you always knew there was a rigorous, independent mind at work.

Tanowitz’s style is often likened to Cunningham’s for its linear purity, but her process may be closer to that of Twyla Tharp, who also draws on a wide range of past material and delights in formal play. But, if Tharp plays, Tanowitz purifies, and her fragmented dances feel oddly whole, a world of abstracted form. Or, as her father liked to say when talking about mistakes he made in his life, “In the end it all gets pressed out, like a dry cleaner, everything gets pressed.” So, too, in Tanowitz’s dances, raw materials are pressed out. The result may be something fabulous and new, but splicing and pressing can also be a way of hiding: where is Pam Tanowitz in all this formal manipulation?

Recently, she has been exploring older texts. “Song of Songs” is the final dance in a trilogy, which began with “New Work for Goldberg Variations” (2017). “Four Quartets” (2018), to T. S. Eliot’s poem, is the most popular, but I found it overstuffed, its abstract dances vying for attention with a recitation of the text, images by Brice Marden, and music by Kaija Saariaho. The show required a distracting kind of multitasking,

Tanowitz’s new piece is the last in a trilogy of dances responding to classic works.

whereas “New Work for Goldberg Variations” felt less freighted, with dance and Bach fully joined in a simple and beautiful exposition.

The acclaim of “Four Quartets” made Tanowitz, at forty-eight, one of the most sought-after choreographers in New York. Commissions have flowed in, including from American Ballet Theatre, London’s Royal Ballet, and New York City Ballet. The most recent of these is “Law of Mosaics,” to a score by Ted Hearne. As the title suggests, the dance is made up of fragments—particularly of Balanchine—but Tanowitz combines them in a way that gives the body great geometric lucidity. The key to the piece comes at the end, in a solo for Sara Mearns, wearing light blue against a dark backdrop so that she almost seems illuminated from within. She moves back and forth in a long bourrée—a step best known from “Swan Lake” but also much used by Balanchine—which makes the body seem to skim the ground. As Mearns traverses the stage, her arms make gestures from old ballets: crossed in death, in prayer position, a finger pointing. This goes on until the repetition and the lack of context make us feel an almost Beckettian emptiness—*I can’t go on, I’ll go on*—and she simply lies down on the floor and the lights go dark: a beautiful statement of meaninglessness.

“Song of Songs” is a study in abstraction. It begins with the formation of a lyrical chorus in flowing costumes, perhaps the “daughters of Jerusalem” mentioned in the poems: a community of women. They perform a crossover step from a hora, but the folk character of the source material is gone. Something sim-

ilar is also at work in other elements of the production. Lang’s libretto takes words and phrases from the poems—we never hear a full verse—and sets them to a soothingly hypnotic minimalist score. And, in a pre-show talk, Tanowitz described how she, the light artist Clifton Taylor, and the costumers Reid Bartelme and Harriet Jung had looked at images of the Abuhav Synagogue, in Israel, with its striking bright-blue bimah, a dais from which the Torah is read, surrounded by benches. The production abstracts this setting to a utilitarian blue circular platform and bench, which demarcate the sacred space of dancing. The area is framed by walls made of fabric strips, allowing the dancers to poke through from the profane regions outside. Again, none of the religious context is there for the seeing. These are secret sources.

When a female lover (Melissa Toogood) appears, she wears a darker dress than her choral companions and collapses repeatedly to the ground mid-step, a sign of her weakened, lovelorn spirit. Upon this world of women come the disruptive men: as they race into the sacred space, a male lover (Zachary Gonder) joins the dark-dressed woman in an agitated dance of longing. As the first part comes to an end, we find the woman on her own, comfortingly circled by another community on the blue platform. Bent over, they look up at her in sympathy, but she cannot raise her eyes.

In the dances that follow, there is no overt eroticism. The most we get is the woman’s hand fluttering like a heart on her own shoulder. Even as the lyrics and the music move from “my head is drenched in dew” to “open to me,” Tanowitz holds back. When the woman re-

clines fleetingly on her lover, her neck gives way: a hint of passion, but no more. We realize that even love has been abstracted—pressed out. Emotion here comes from an intensity of restraint rather than from surrender or sensuality. At first, I admired Tanowitz’s decorum, but there was a sameness to the beauty, and I began to feel that her method stood in the way of her madness. How was all this suppression going to convey the overwhelming experience of losing yourself in physical love, or God, or both?

The piece’s strangest moment came toward the end. The woman suddenly disappears and a new woman replaces her, wearing a shiny unitard. A new man immediately swings this woman almost wildly into a flying circle—the way that parents do with small kids. Soon, everyone seems to be in a shiny unitard. Are we in another realm? Is this twirling excess the erotic release? A community celebration? Tanowitz seemed to be going for an emotional leap, but by renouncing her own language, so meticulous and refined, she left us stranded in cliché. The dance came to a too easy close: another collective, huddled on the blue circle.

As I left the theatre, I felt bewildered by this juxtaposition of rigor and cliché and by the paradox of Tanowitz’s physically exacting method—the source of her best dances and, for now, of her greatest emotional limits. Fusing so many voices makes getting inside the lovers’ experience harder, and the result is a dance that is more about community and peace than about erotic love. This is calming, but peace is not the same as love. I wanted more of the lovers—which may be a way of saying I wanted more of Pam Tanowitz. ♦

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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 Farley Katz, must be received by Sunday, July 24th. The finalists in the July 4th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the August 8th 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



“Did we forget anything?”
Joy Robinson-Lynch, West Tisbury, Mass.

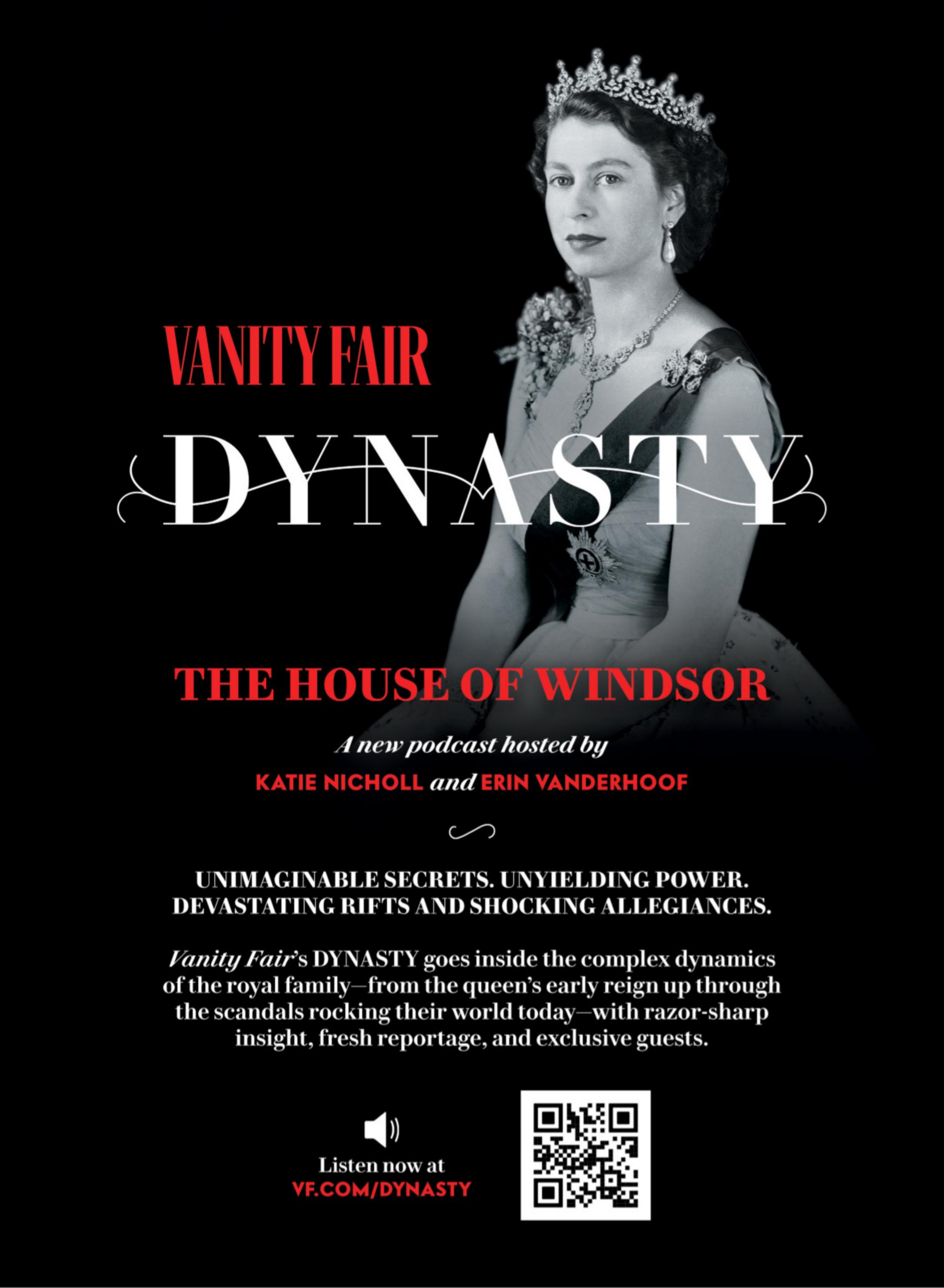
“Thanks for helping me move.”
Alexander Artiaga, Houston, Texas

“Why don't you ever leave the house?”
John F. Davis, Yonkers, N.Y.

THE WINNING CAPTION



*“The hardest part was teaching him
to use the hedge trimmers.”*
Jesse Horton, Westerlo, N.Y.



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THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY PAOLO PASCO

1	2	3	4		5	6	7		8	9	10	11	12
13				14					15				
16								17					
18													
		19						20					
21	22					23	24						
25					26		27				28	29	30
31					32	33				34			
35				36					37	38			
			39					40		41			
			42					43	44				
	45						46					47	48
49													
50							51						
52							53			54			

ACROSS

- 1 Dad, in Korean
- 5 Welcome sight for a guest?
- 8 Rhymes with rhymes
- 13 Standing-up-too-fast feeling
- 15 Like limousine windows
- 16 Oil cleanups, maybe
- 18 Time during which pupils adjust to a new environment
- 19 Studio warning
- 20 Industry ____ (label-backed musician who pretends to be independent)
- 21 Finish line in “The Tortoise and the Hare”?
- 23 Restriction in some Airbnb listings
- 25 Manuel Quezon in the U.S. and Kwame Nkrumah in Guinea, for two
- 27 Do with elegance
- 28 Abbr. next to a red circle
- 31 Dividers of *sepak takraw* courts
- 32 “Movin’ Out” creator
- 34 Liable to upset a gymnophobe
- 35 BTS song whose music video has choreography influenced by double helices
- 36 Go on and on
- 37 Like people who are beside themselves?
- 39 Hit with a smash-and-grab
- 41 Destructive hurricane of 2011
- 42 Gardner with the recurring “S.N.L.” character “Angel, Every Boxer’s Girlfriend from Every Movie About Boxing Ever”
- 43 Hong Kong democracy activist Chow
- 45 One with a job posting?
- 49 2021 horror film named for a song by the English band Dave Dee, Dozy, Beaky, Mick & Tich
- 50 Pickup classification
- 51 Teacher’s command to a rowdy class
- 52 Paragraph-ending line that spills over into a new column, in typesetting
- 53 Humanoid D. & D. character
- 54 Crime fighter for whom the atrium of the A.T.F. headquarters is named

DOWN

- 1 Triumphant outbursts
- 2 Father, in French

- 3 Subject of the documentary “More Than Miyagi”
- 4 Glands that secrete epinephrine and norepinephrine
- 5 “Is that terribly necessary?”
- 6 Away from the bow
- 7 The Mighty ____ (2022 role for Natalie Portman)
- 8 Data-transmission measure
- 9 They may help make a trade more lucrative
- 10 Mammal whose fur turns white in the winter
- 11 Watch over
- 12 Features of some Twitch streams
- 14 Act that people flip for?
- 15 Surface, e.g.
- 17 Bar server?
- 21 Put back together
- 22 Farm team
- 24 Eligible for an inheritance, say
- 26 Entered confidently
- 28 Bearer of a Viking inscription
- 29 Origin of the Tigris and the Euphrates, in Genesis
- 30 Officially give up
- 33 Really not into
- 34 “Just curious”
- 36 “Time’s a-wasting!”

- 38 Some wedding-registry purchases
- 39 Let have for a bit
- 40 One of two in “Promises, Promises”
- 42 Cheated
- 44 Theme of Michelle Zauner’s “Crying in H Mart”
- 45 “Pleeease?”
- 46 Last word of “O Canada”
- 47 ____ law (basis for Thévenin’s theorem, in circuitry)
- 48 Some deer
- 49 Synonym for “down” that can precede or follow “down”

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

Find more puzzles and this week’s solution at newyorker.com/crossword

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